

# Again and Again and Flow Apart

Harry Thorne

On 12 September 1977, Robert Lowell died in the back seat of a New York taxicab. The poet's third marriage, to Caroline Blackwood, had been faltering, as had his physical and mental health. In the words of Blair Clark, a long-time friend: '[there were] two dynamos within him, spinning in opposite directions and tearing him apart'.<sup>1</sup> As the dynamos accelerated, falling from sync, Lowell succumbed to mania, frenzy, depression and alcohol and, in his final days, he reached for the few things that still felt known. Lowell died in transit from Kennedy International Airport to the 67th Street apartment of his second wife, Elizabeth Hardwick. He was found clutching a painting of Blackwood by her ex-husband, Lucian Freud.

Art and literature meet as commonly in life as in death, although death is more adept at holding our attention. Moreover, art and literature apply as commonly to life as death, although death is the more seductive life study. ('Dying / Is an art, like everything else',<sup>2</sup> wrote Sylvia Plath, Lowell's former student and one of few with authority to speak on the subject.) For the two mediums serve a similar function, in that each represents a means of escape from the world and, possibly, momentarily, mercifully, from ourselves. They are a channel: out, through, between, by way of, back; to nowhere in particular but somewhere other than this. A channel away from ourselves and closer to others. W.H. Auden writes of 'escape-art, for man needs escape as he needs food and deep sleep'.<sup>3</sup> Marcel Proust, in volume seven of *In Search of Lost Time* (1913), aligns this escapism with empathy: 'Through art alone we are able to emerge from ourselves, to know what another person sees of a universe which is not the same as our own.'

It is about what isn't seen. She stands, bare back to front, her head hung low and her left arm raised. The wall she faces is pale, pale like her, but is bisected by a dark boundary suggesting a door, an exit, a way out of all of this. Its shadow blurs with hers, with that of the figure turned away. 'Good paintings are incomprehensible', the artist writes. (Fig.1)

'The paintbrushes', Proust sighs, 'drunk with rage and love, paint and paint.'<sup>4</sup> While it would be foolish to maintain that some spectral Dionysiac is responsible for all creative offerings, as it would to perpetuate the myth of the suffering artist, one could suggest that artists and writers harbour a comparable openness to the artistic potential of emotional attachment and/or detachment. For what is art but the communication of a truth of emotion – even if, in some instances, it might preclude artists from living through that very emotion? Art requires distance, after all: it is formed by it, bound to it, cannot make sense of chaos without it. Emotion differs, demands closeness, intimacy; if emotion is not threatening to envelop, it is not being felt. Could it be said that, if artists feel too deeply, they cannot make great work? And, correspondingly: if artists make great work, they cannot hope to feel? Charles Baudelaire wrote that Eugène Delacroix was an artist 'passionately in love with passion'.<sup>5</sup> Which is not to say that he was a passionate man.

At the age of 26, the poet Rainer Maria Rilke travelled from Prague to Paris to write a monograph on Auguste Rodin. ('[He] has no equal among all artists now alive',<sup>6</sup> Rilke wrote in advance of the trip.) In a desperate letter directed to Rodin shortly after their initial meeting, Rilke revealed both the depth of his existential angst and the intense adoration he felt for the sculptor: 'It is not just to write a study that I have come to you, it is to ask you: how should I live?'<sup>7</sup> Rodin's advice was simple, frustrating, reiterated tirelessly: '*Travailler, toujours travailler*' (Work, always work). It was not a question of physical production, for Rodin, but of making work as a means to working past or through oneself. Working to work it all out. As Gertrude Stein wrote of Pablo

Picasso in 1938: '[He] was always obsessed by the necessity of emptying himself, of emptying himself completely, of always emptying himself.'<sup>8</sup> (Picasso, in response, dry as hell: 'She's confusing two functions.')

It is about what isn't there. The opposing wings of the concrete compound rise to three and four-storeys apiece, their windows set in deep recesses, their latticed framework exposed to the world. Abandoned, it is an architecture for nothing but nothing. If, indeed, it was for something, then that something has been and gone by now, become nothing again. (Fig.2)

Following a conversation with Rodin about the presence of love in an artist's life, Rilke wrote to his wife, the sculptor Clara Westhoff: 'One must choose either this or that. Either happiness or art.' Why opt for the latter? Rilke clarifies: 'To work is to live without dying.'<sup>9</sup> Which is to say, to work is to not live at all, for life is defined by its unbreakable contract with death. To work, in this regard, is to speculate as to an alternative framework for life; to confront that which has been, which will be, which is. As Henry James writes in the essay 'The Art of Fiction' (1884): 'The only reason for the existence of a novel is that it does compete with life.' And so, too, for the existence of painting. James continues, aligning the mediums: 'Their inspiration is the same, their process [...] is the same, their success is the same.' This is not competition by way of verisimilitude, nor replication, mimicry or record. It is propositional, parabolic: How to be the same but different, just? How to be, as Lily Briscoe reflects in Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse* (1927), 'on a level with ordinary experience, to feel simply that's a chair, that's a table, and yet at the same time, it's a miracle, it's an ecstasy'?

To 'compete', as James terms it, is to push back against the singularity and solidity and seriousness of life – to envision the 'thousands of floating existences' that Baudelaire invokes in his essay 'On the Heroism of Modern Life' (1846). But to compete is not to improve – not immediately. Just as easily, one can compete

with a stark ferocity, fatalistically obliterating one's adversary so as to reveal the fragility of its methodology. In the preface to J.G. Ballard's experimental novel, *The Atrocity Exhibition* (1970), William Burroughs writes of the manner in which Ballard transfigures the human body into a vast, devastated landscape: 'magnification of image to the point where it becomes unrecognizable'. This, he continues, 'is what Bob Rauschenberg is doing in art – literally *blowing up* the image'.<sup>10</sup> For Ballard, as for Rauschenberg, the competition with life is underwritten by deconstruction, dislocation, scatter. It is an attempt to pick apart all that there is so as to reveal that 'all that there is' is, in fact, not much at all. 'In the mirror of this swamp there are no reflections',<sup>11</sup> Ballard writes of his allegorical landscape, less a criticism of the mirror's functionality than the vapid reality that surrounds it.

It is about what isn't known. In corduroy trousers and a faded white top, the artist kneels, hand on thigh, in what could be an engine room, could be a studio, could be a set constructed for purpose. Either way, it is blue, blue like her eyes as they wander from the frame. In their wake is a sense of distrust, anticipation and some other dullness that might well relate to the monotony of it all. (Fig. 3)

Visual art does something to the writerly process: In its marked ability to be both closed and open, representative and symbolically riddling, it allows things to be seen in a new or *new-seeming* way. It sparks a momentary reconsideration of reality that might cause that very reality (or, more accurately, one's position in relation to it) to evolve. Auden extolled the old masters' ability to comprehend suffering, while William Carlos Williams roamed the icy mountains of Pieter Bruegel the Elder's *The Hunters in the Snow* (1565). Allen Ginsberg observed, in Paul Cézanne's ports, 'time and life / swept in a race'; in Van Gogh's *Starry Night Over the Rhône* (1888), Anne Sexton found an adequate place to die. Sexton's poem, 'The Starry Night' (1961), opens with an excerpt from a letter that Van Gogh wrote to his brother: 'That does not keep me from

having a terrible need of – shall I say the word – religion. Then I go out at night to paint the stars.' It is not religious faith that soothes this 'terrible need': it is paint and process. Some 73 years later, the product of Van Gogh's nocturnal labours facilitates Sexton's own release:

The town is silent. The night boils with eleven stars.  
Oh starry starry night! This is how  
I want to die.

It moves. They are all alive.

*He was found clutching a painting of Blackwood by her ex-husband, Lucian Freud.* Art, like literature, can give us an image when we need it most. Not the thing itself, nor a consolatory likeness, but an image that moves us in its own way – from ourselves and closer to others. An image that feels out an in-between space, an unspecific elsewhere that is at the same time departed from and a fundamental part of our own world. An image that gives shelter. As Rilke wrote to his former lover, Lou Andreas-Salomé, in 1903, wandering this zone: 'Still there is nothing real about me; and I divide again and again and flow apart.'<sup>12</sup>

1. Jeffrey Meyers (ed.), *Robert Lowell: Interviews and Memoirs*, University of Michigan Press, 1988, p.14.
2. Sylvia Plath, 'Lady Lazarus', *The Collected Poems*, Harper Perennial, 1992, pp.244–46.
3. W.H. Auden, 'Psychology and Art To-Day' (1935), *The Complete Works of W.H. Auden*, Princeton University Press, 1997, pp.103–4.
4. Marcel Proust, *Remembrance of Things Past, Vol. 2*, Wordsworth Editions, 2006, p.1186.
5. Hubert Wellington, *The Journal of Eugène Delacroix*, Cornell University Press, 1980, p.xiv.
6. Rachel Corbett, *You Must Change Your Life: The Story of Rainer Maria Rilke and Auguste Rodin*, Norton, 2016, p.112.
7. *Ibid.*, p.91.
8. John Richardson, *A Life of Picasso, Volume 1; Volumes 1881–1906*, Pimlico, 1992, p.406.
9. Corbett, pp.90–94.
10. William Burroughs, preface to J.G. Ballard, *The Atrocity Exhibition*, 2nd ed., Flamingo, 1993, p.10.
11. J.G. Ballard, *The Atrocity Exhibition*, 2nd ed., Flamingo, 1993, p.92.
12. Jane Bannard Greene and M.D. Herter Norton (eds.), *Letters of Rainer Maria Rilke, 1892–1910*, Norton, 1969, p.122.

Fig.1



*Cabinet d'amateur*, an oblique novel: "la Caixa" Collection of Contemporary Art, selected by Enrique Vila-Matas  
Featuring Gerhard Richter, *I.G.*, 2003  
Whitechapel Gallery, London, 2019

Fig.2



*Empty House of the Stare:* "la Caixa" Collection of Contemporary Art, selected by Tom McCarthy  
Featuring: Aitor Ortiz, *Destructuras 069*, 2002  
And Isa Genzken, *Bookshelves*, 2008  
Whitechapel Gallery, London, 2019



NINE QWERTY BELLS: Fiction for Live Voice: "la Caixa" Collection of Contemporary Art Selected by Maria Fusco  
Featuring Cindy Sherman, *Untitled #102*, 1981  
Whitechapel Gallery, London, 2019

## Una y otra vez y fluir alejándose

### Harry Thorne

El 12 de septiembre de 1977, Robert Lowell moría en el asiento trasero de un taxi neoyorquino. El tercer matrimonio del poeta, con Caroline Blackwood, llevaba tiempo tambaleándose, al igual que su salud física y mental. En palabras de Blair Clark, amigo desde hacía mucho: «[había] dos dinamos dentro de él que giraban en direcciones opuestas y lo desgarraban».<sup>1</sup> Cuando las dinamos aceleraban y se desincronizaban, Lowell sucumbía a la manía, la histeria, la depresión y el alcohol, y en sus últimos días recurrió a las pocas cosas que aún creía conocer. Lowell murió mientras viajaba del Aeropuerto Internacional Kennedy al apartamento de su segunda mujer, Elizabeth Hardwick, en la calle 67. Lo encontraron agarrado a un cuadro de Blackwood pintado por el exmarido de ella, Lucian Freud.

El arte y la literatura se encuentran con la misma asiduidad tanto en la vida como en la muerte, si bien la muerte es más hábil a la hora de captar nuestra atención. Es más, el arte y la literatura atañen con la misma asiduidad tanto a la vida como a la muerte, si bien la muerte es el estudio sobre la vida que resulta más seductor. («La muerte / es un arte, como todo»,<sup>2</sup> escribió Sylvia Plath, antigua alumna de Lowell y una de las pocas personas con suficiente autoridad para hablar del tema.) Pues los dos medios cumplen con una función similar, ya que cada uno representa una vía de escape del mundo y, posible, momentánea y afortunadamente, de nosotros mismos. Son un canal: hacia fuera, a través, entre, por vía de, hacia atrás; hacia ningún sitio en particular aunque hacia algún lugar distinto a éste. Un canal que nos aleja de nosotros mismos y nos acerca a los demás. W. H. Auden habla de «un arte escapista, pues el hombre necesita escapar tanto como el comer o el dormir bien».<sup>3</sup> Marcel Proust, en el volumen séptimo de *En busca*