

damentally conservative position . . . toward the political, social, and artistic movements of the 1960s," he argues, acknowledging

them in such a way as to place them in time and history and lay them—prematurely, he believes—to rest.

Mr. Lowell's Universe

"Robert Lowell's Poems and Other People's Prose" by Michael Milburn, in *New England Review* (Fall 1995), Middlebury College, Middlebury, Vt. 05753.

The poet Robert Lowell (1917–77) disdained the earnest critics "sleuthing down my plagiarisms," but the fact is that, to a very unusual extent, he persistently appropriated the prose of others for his own purposes. Throughout his career, writes Milburn, a poet who teaches in Connecticut, Lowell "would incorporate not only his own prose and that of his friends and family, but the words of writers as diverse as [Jonathan] Edwards, Herman Melville, Henry David Thoreau, William Cobbett, and Lord Kenneth Clark, into original poems by Robert Lowell."

In "The Quaker Graveyard in Nantucket" (published in *Lord Weary's Castle* [1947])—Lowell's "first fully realized and perhaps most enduring achievement as an artist"—the poet not only drew his setting and much of his imagery from Melville's *Moby Dick* but freely incorporated a shipwreck scene from Thoreau's 1865 travel book, *Cape Cod*. Thoreau wrote:

The brig St. John, from Galway, Ireland, laden with emigrants, was wrecked on Sunday morning; it was now Tuesday morning and the sea was still breaking violently on the rocks. . . . I saw many marble feet and matted heads . . . [and] the coiled up wreck of a human hulk, gashed by the rocks or fishes, so that the bone and muscle were exposed, but quite bloodless—merely red and white—with wide-open and staring eyes, yet lusterless, deadlights; or like the cabin windows of a stranded vessel, filled with sand.

Lowell wrote:

A brackish reach of shoal off Madaket,—
The sea was still breaking violently and night
Had steamed into our North Atlantic Fleet,
When the drowned sailor clutched the drag-net. Light
Flashed from his matted head and marble feet,
He grappled at the net
With the coiled, hurdling muscles of his thighs:
The corpse was bloodless, a botch of reds and whites,
Its open, staring eyes
Were lusterless dead-lights
Or cabin windows on a stranded hulk
Heavy with sand.

"No poet since [T. S.] Eliot has so successfully turned a taste for literature into literature," Milburn says. "For Lowell, reading, particularly the reading of history and the classics, was experience"—and as such, just "as worthy of mining for poetry as his own life." Lowell, whose mental health was precarious, seemed to need prose "to enable him to give full expression to his temperament. Prose released the visionary in him."

His prose appropriations "invigorated both the story and structure of Lowell's early poems." Alas, Milburn says, the technique crippled his later poetry, in such works as *For the Union Dead* (1964) and *Day by Day* (1977), "with inappropriate subjects, unmusical language, and an overabundance of factual data."

Deifying the Duke

"(Over)praising Duke Ellington" by Terry Teachout, in *Commentary* (Sept. 1996), 165 E. 56th St., New York, N.Y. 10022.

No one questions the greatness of Duke Ellington (1899–1974), but the nature of his greatness is now at the center of a debate that also touches on issues of race and culture in America.

On one side is a small band of critics, including essayist Stanley Crouch, who have challenged the critical consensus on the

composer and bandleader. The standard view is that Ellington's post-World War II output was much less successful than the music he produced during the late 1930s and early '40s, and that he was not at his best in extended compositions. Crouch argues that Ellington and his orchestra were at their peak in the 1950s and '60s, when he was chiefly