

Notes on Ravelstein

Everybody knows that there is no fineness or accuracy of suppression; hold down one thing you hold down the adjoining.

Saul Bellow, The Adventures of Augie March, 1953

What should certainly be protested against, in cases where there is no authorization, is the mixing of fact and fiction in unknown proportions. Infinite mischief would lie in that. If any statements in the dress of fiction are covertly hinted to be fact, all must be fact, and nothing else but fact, for obvious reasons. The power of telling lies about people through that channel after they are dead, by stirring in a few truths, is a horror to contemplate.

Thomas Hardy, private correspondence, 1912.

In the now-remote year of 1974, John Berryman's publisher brought out Recovery, a novel the poet had left unfinished and hardly revised before committing suicide in Minneapolis two years before. No more than a fragment of what would have been a longer work, Recovery was an account of a patient in a psychiatric hospital, and Farrar, Straus and Giroux thought enough of the manuscript to publish it. Three years later, in 1977, the critic Joel Conarroe praised it as "an almost consistently readable...amalgam of conversations, confrontations, anecdotes, flashbacks and broodings on alcoholism." Conarroe went on to say that Recovery "provides a good deal of information about Berryman's life," and confidently argued that Severance, the center of the book who is identified as a microbiologist, is in fact Berryman himself. For better or worse, the novel includes a fair amount of derogatory material on the figure's mother, whom Conarroe not surprisingly identified as Berryman's mother. "It is possible," he concluded, "since Mrs. Berryman was still living, that the poet would have excised or

altered some of these passages...had he lived to see the book published. There are things one can say in one's journal, or to one's analyst, that ought not to get public exposure, though the portrayal of Robert Lowell's mother and father in Life Studies went far toward removing forever the traditional off-limits signs."

Conarroe's remarks appear in a book with the modest and unpretentious title of John Berryman: An Introduction to the Poetry. It does that job admirably well. Nevertheless, I found myself wondering if he was correct in assuming that Lowell's volume from 1959 truly had put an end to public discussion of the ethics of tell-all poetry and fiction. It is certainly true that the appearance of autobiographical poetry in the late 1950s startled readers and drew disapproving reactions. In an early, influential review, "Poetry as Confession," M.L. Rosenthal decided that the narrator of the poems was "unequivocally" Robert Lowell himself. "It is hard," Rosenthal remonstrated, "not to think of Life Studies as a series of personal confidences, rather shameful, that one is honor-bound not to reveal....About half the book...is essentially a public discrediting of his father's manliness and character, as well as of the family and social milieu of his childhood."

Not overly troubled by the reproach, Lowell reopened the subject--this time with a vengeance--by the publication in 1973 of The Dolphin, a set of poems drawing on his marriage to Elizabeth Hardwick. A volume edited by Jeffrey Meyers, Robert Lowell: Interviews and Memoirs, includes correspondence from Elizabeth Bishop to Lowell. A note that Bishop penned to Lowell shows that the debate over public disclosure of private affairs was by no means a settled matter, at least for some. Bishop, herself a major poet and by 1972 a friend of Lowell's for 25 years, emerges as a reluctant but staunch

opponent of at least some of the poems that appeared in The Dolphin. The cycle drew on details of Lowell's marriage, by then dissolved, to Elizabeth Hardwick, and included fragments of letters and conversation that passed between them during Lowell's sojourn in London during the early seventies. At the time, he was living with Caroline Blackwood, his third wife. For Bishop, this family material was all the more disturbing for having been rearranged or "adjusted" to fit into the cycle of poems; whether the citations were entirely factual was unclear. "It's hell to write this," she wrote Lowell, "so please first do believe that I think Dolphin is magnificent poetry...One can use one's life as material--one does, anyway--but these letters--aren't you violating a trust? If you were given permission--IF you hadn't changed them...[ellipsis in the original] etc. But *art just isn't worth that much*...It is not being 'gentle' to use personal, tragic, anguished letters that way--it's cruel" [emphasis in the original]. Bishop, who was spending a semester teaching at Harvard, quoted the lines from Hardy given above and enlisted Henry James as another defender of privacy. She added:

In general, I deplore the "confessional"--however, when you wrote Life Studies perhaps it was a necessary movement, and helped make poetry more real, fresh and immediate. But now--ye gods--anything goes, and I am so sick of poems about the students' mothers & fathers and sex lives and so on. All that *can* be done--but at the same time surely one should have a feeling that one can trust the writer--not to distort, tell lies, etc. The letters...present fearful problems: what's true, what isn't, how one can bear to witness such suffering and yet not know how much of it one *needn't* suffer with, how much has been "made up," and so on.

This was a private exchange, of course, and was not available to the public until long after both sides of the discussion were dead. In 1975, two years after The Dolphin made its way into print, Irving Howe published a hostile review of a new edition of

Joyce's letters, a selection that included extremely intimate ones from 1909, written to his wife. The material had not been part of the three-volume set of Joyce's correspondence that was published in the fifties. Publication of the letters, Howe asserted, was "still another instance of the relentless undermining of privacy which is one of the most disturbing features of American culture."

I found myself considering the issues of privacy because last year I was preparing to teach a course on the late stories and novels of Saul Bellow at the Newberry Library. The Newberry is a research facility near downtown Chicago, and it runs an adult education program for the public. I had taught there several years before, and I now committed myself to a course that I described as "late Bellow," a strictly personal designation that would involve the fiction published between 1980 and 2000, including Ravelstein. Ravelstein was Bellow's last novel, and as most readers know it is a memorial to Allan Bloom, Bellow's colleague and friend at the University of Chicago; when it was published in 2000, it powerfully resurrected the issues Lowell and Berryman introduced with their published work, issues that Conarroe in 1977 assumed had long been settled.

One of my qualifications for teaching a course on Bellow, I explained to the Newberry, was that I had come to know Bellow--and therefore Bloom as well--by attending for a number of years in the mid-1980s the seminars that they team-taught at the University of Chicago. That left me, I thought, in a good position to teach Ravelstein, because all of us at the university knew the principal characters of the novel and many of the minor figures as well. So in the weeks before the Newberry class was scheduled to begin, I found myself mentally rehearsing the opening session, when the students and I

would begin feeling our way into the subject. When Ravelstein was published, Bellow drew intense critical fire by discussing Bloom's homosexuality and by announcing further that he had either died of AIDS or of complications from it. The usual distinction of fact from fiction would not do, I believed, because the central figure, Abe Ravelstein, is more than simply modeled on Allan Bloom; he *is* Bloom, instantly recognizable to everyone who knew him, and virtually unchanged from the original. What attracted less attention is that the narrator's wife, Vela, is plainly a copy of Bellow's fourth wife, Alexandra, a former mathematician at Northwestern University, and that "Rosamund," the succeeding wife in the novel, seems a lot like Janis Freedman, at the time of the seminar Bellow's secretary and my classmate.

While the Newberry class did not run--too few students enrolled--my contemplation of the ethics of what Bellow had written continued, and the more I read on the topic, the less confident I was of my original conviction. When I read the novel the year it was published, in 2000, I believed that Bellow had written nothing that he imagined would discredit Allan Bloom, and that Bloom himself would not have cared what others thought of him after his death. His legacy would be his work as an educator and the scholarly volumes he published, the translations of Plato and Rousseau, and the world-wide fame-promoting bestseller The Closing of the American Mind. Irrelevant speculation about the way he lived and died would disappear while those achievements would last.

But even before Ravelstein was published, review copies in circulation provoked a sharp reaction. At the time the work was published, the journalist D.T. Max produced a long piece on the subject in the New York Times Magazine, and offered some of the

responses. Werner Dannhauser, a friend of both Bloom and Bellow whom I remembered from the seminar, claimed to have seen a draft of the novel (courtesy of Bellow) and to have objected to revelations it offered the public. But Bellow apparently decided not to remove offending material. Stories in the Toronto Star and the Washington Post fanned the flames by suggesting the not-yet-published novel was some kind of concealed biography of Bloom, and that, as one New York paper put it, Bellow had "outed" Bloom. But even before his story appeared in the Times Magazine, Max compared review galleys he'd read to the version of the novel the public found in bookstores and spotted some differences. According to Max, the published volume toned down the sexual nature of the relations between Ravelstein and Nikki, the younger man he lived with. A few references to Ravelstein's HIV-positive status were also removed from the text. A description of the homosexuality of a minor character in the story, Rakhmiel Kogon, was apparently based on Edward Shils, the University of Chicago sociologist who died before Ravelstein was published; this material too, according to Max, was pared away. But the oddity remains that the manuscript changes, if true, did no more than tone down the presentation; they did not meaningfully alter it.

Max further adds that Bellow decided, while the storm gathered speed, that he had misjudged the public reaction to material he considered relatively innocent. He says that Bellow confessed to regret describing Bloom as he did. "I don't like the feeling it brought with it and the sense of neglected responsibility and even recklessness on my part, because I didn't mean any harm to Allen," Bellow is quoted as saying. "He was so open about himself that you never thought of it as being harmful."

A further element added to the complexity of the issue, and that was whether Bloom really had died of AIDS or AIDS-related illness; neither the University nor the hospital where Bloom's life came to an end would confirm the rumors of HIV. Yet another issue is that in the novel, Bellow's narrator, Chick, asserts that Ravelstein had insisted that he prepare after his death a memorial volume of some sort, and Bellow seems to have confirmed after Ravelstein came out that "the real Bloom" had asked him to do the same. The last had always seemed to me the least factual dimension of the novel, because I never thought that Bloom would have cared what people thought of him after his death; he seemed to me too free of conventional opinion to worry about such things. I further assumed that he had read a lot of his co-instructor's work, and knew that Bellow's friends, enemies and former wives make striking appearances in the novels. Bloom also undoubtedly knew that people often surrender their privacy in the presence of a novelist. He would not in particular have had *to ask* for anything. My own sense is that while Bloom wanted his privacy respected while he was alive, he did not greatly care what Bellow (or anyone else) might say about him after his death.

I am not sure in any case how effective a request would have been. As most people who have written about Bellow point out, two important writers from the author's life, Harold Rosenberg and Delmore Schwartz, appear in his fiction, the first in the novella What Kind of Day Did You Have and the second in Humboldt's Gift. But a third major figure from Bellow's youth and early manhood, the critic Isaac Rosenfeld, never quite made the cut. Bellow is said to have labored intermittently for years on a manuscript of considerable length that presented Rosenfeld in detail. Reportedly unhappy with the results, Bellow discarded the product, leaving readers only with the

excellent fragment Zetland: By a Character Witness. Some figures, in order words, caught fire for him imaginatively and others did not; the product could not be made to order like a suit of clothes or a remodeling job.

I also reflected that the status of "secrets" in Bellow's life more generally is important and remains unexplored. I believe that he considered self-disclosure desirable, even therapeutic, a word he would have objected to, and I rather suspect that Allan Bloom felt the same way. A secret is a private fact, often shaming, something to suppress and withhold; being open with people, with the world, is a form of release, of emancipation. In an alcove next to the seminar room one day, a young visiting lecturer, I assumed a former student, remarked to Bloom that he "looked good." "I'm fat," Bloom bluntly replied, turning aside the banal, conventional untruth. That sort of palaver is masking and deadening, and impairs contact with reality.

"I was free to confess to Ravelstein what I couldn't tell anyone else," says Chick, the narrator of the novel, "to describe my weaknesses, my corrupt shameful secrets, and the cover-ups that drain your strength." Bellow, in other words, puts little stock in "secrets." They represent a kind of concealment separating one from the truth of oneself, and they need to be dismantled one by one, sometimes in public. There is an illuminating passage from Saul Bellow: Drumlin Woodchuck, the late Mark Harris' memoir of his friendship with Bellow. Harris had hoped to write a biography of Bellow and imagined that he needed his "permission." Bellow assured him in a conversation from 1967 that he was free to write whatever he liked. On hearing this, Harris sought to reassure him that he "had recently installed in my house in San Francisco a fireproof vault" where

sensitive material could be safely hidden away. Was there some revelation Bellow especially feared, Harris asked, perhaps naively. Sexual scandal, perhaps?

"Who would reveal more than I already have about *that*?" he quotes Bellow as saying [emphasis in the original]. "I have no fears about anything. You can write anything you want about me."

One of John Berryman's students from a University of Minnesota class in the early 1960s remembers the poet telling a class roundly, and repeatedly, "Whenever you write anything you run the risk of making a *fool* of yourself." Needless to say, Bellow ran the risk for nearly sixty years. Allan Bloom was a Falstaffian character, over-weight, more than six feet tall, a non-stop smoker, an avid eater. He relished candy, cigars, alcohol and lively conversation. Standing in a lecture hall once before a few hundred students, he paused and held up a piece of chalk. "I nearly lighted this," he said. Writing a book that excluded a discussion of his sexuality and the comment that he was "destroyed by his reckless sex habits" would be like writing a biography of Lincoln while omitting a discussion of the Civil War. Bloom, to borrow a platitude, was all of a piece. His avidity for life extended in many directions, and there is little about it requiring apology or explanation.

In one of his finest productions from the last decade, The Bellarosa Connection, Bellow describes the life and marriage of Sorella and Harry Fonstein. A refugee from Nazi-dominated Europe, Harry escapes to Cuba and ultimately to New Jersey, after Sorella flies down to the Caribbean in the post-war years looking for a suitable mate. Decades later they are killed in a car accident, and Bellow offers up this comment on the refugee's life:

Deeply experienced people will keep things to themselves. Which is alright for those who don't intend to go beyond experience. But Harry Fonstein belonged to an even more advanced category, those who don't put such restraints on themselves and feel able to enter the next zone. In that next zone, their aim is to convert weakness and secrets into burnable energy. A first-class man subsists on matter he destroys, just as the stars do.

Bellow argued that the opposition to publicizing details of Bloom's life was political; those who wanted Bloom's story hidden from view thought the details would prove damaging to their conservative cause. Bellow believed he had larger grounds, chiefly aesthetic, for opening the window. I think I understand the argument for the preservation of privacy in art more fully than I did before I wrote this piece. I see it is much more problematic and enigmatic than I had thought. But Bellow's aesthetic warrant seems to me as responsible and justified today as it did eight years ago, when the novel was published.

Addendum

This piece would be incomplete if I failed to mention Bellow: A Biography, by James Atlas. The book is a lively and well-written account of the author's life, and is the product of ten years of careful research. Material reproduced in the text, including letters, interviews, and snippets from unpublished work, is keenly interesting. The value of the book is badly undermined, however, by its derogatory tone; I find that Atlas bears a deep animus for his subject, which raises serious doubts about the accuracy and completeness of his picture.

I limit myself here to referring readers to a letter Bellow wrote to David Peltz, a childhood friend, which appears near the middle of Chapter 24. Peltz took offense when

his novelist-friend borrowed private stories for scenes in Humboldt's Gift. Bellow defended himself in a lengthy epistle that has the greatest possible interest for readers investigating the subject.

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