

1971

Purgatory

Robert Lowell

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Recommended Citation

Lowell, Robert. "Purgatory." *The Iowa Review* 2.3 (1971): 95-95. Web.
Available at: <https://doi.org/10.17077/0021-065X.1249>

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lous man's efforts at comprehension, the *contre-temps* of Jonah who refused to speak and was himself caught, and the inexorability of fate, "braining perch/ Against a bucket" in *Charles the Fifth*.

¹⁰ *Inferno*, XXVII, tr. J. D. Sinclair (Oxford, N.Y., 1961).

¹¹ Cf. "Mr. Edwards and the black spider." The "spitting" is the noise the spider makes on a hot brick, and the soul in hell. To stare at a spider is to contemplate "the Black Widow, death," with its hourglass image of an eternity of suffering at the hands of God.

¹² Robert Langbaum, *The Poetry of Experience* (N.Y., Norton, 1957), p. 77.

¹³ *The Paris Review*, "The Art of Poetry III: Robert Lowell" (Vol. 25, Winter-Spring, 1961) pp. 85, 75.

¹⁴ *Imitations* (N.Y., Farrar, Straus and Cudahy, 1961), Introduction, p. xii.

¹⁵ *The Paris Review*, p. 71.

¹⁶ *The New York Review*, May 12, 1966, p. 4.

¹⁷ Cf. "The whirl of easter eggs" in "At the Altar," and the skunks eating garbage in "Skunk Hour." The poet must find a symbol that can be eaten for his sacrament of reality, even if it turns out to be garbage rather than wafer.

PURGATORY

In his portrait, mostly known from frontispiece,
Dante's too identifiable—
behind him, more or less his height, though less,
a tower tapering to a palm's breadth point,
a snakewalk of receding galleries . . .
Purgatory and a slice of Europe,
less like the fact, more like the builder's model.
It leans and prays the builder for support,
insurance never offered this side of heaven.
The last fifty years stand up like that,
people crowd the galleries to flee
the second death, they cry out manfully,
for many are women and children, but the maker
can't lift his painted hand to stop the crash.

Robert Lowell