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Robert Lowell: Setting the River on Fire, a Study of Genius, Mania, and Character

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The general sense that emerges from this volume is not just that nineteenth-century Ireland, despite its perceived peripherality and backwardness, conformed to a general trend towards globalisation. Various essays end up claiming Ireland as paradoxically central to the age's emerging global networks: by producing the travel narratives or popular novels that the age demanded, or by supplying the exiles and émigrés who easily fitted in transnational ideologies, Ireland often seemed to play a pivotal role in the creation of a global culture. This may sound familiar in our own more recent age where Celtic Tiger Ireland became a poster child for globalisation, and where River Dance, the Irish pub, Enya and U2 conquered the world. Yet the picture painted by *Traveling Irishness* is a different one. Indeed, several essays show how travelling Irish subjects and artefacts had to negotiate compromises that watered down their Irish dimension – for instance, the “regional” Irish fiction that lent itself most to translation was the kind of narrative that did not dwell too much on the details of Irish locale, but rather emphasised a sense of dislocation brought on by modernity that readily echoed with audiences in other countries. The travelling Irishness considered here thus points forward to, but also differs from the contemporary success of “brand Ireland”, which reflected a newly gained sense of national self-confidence. Cormican's essay on the visual culture of *fin-de-siècle* Ireland describes conflicts between internationalist ideals and the inward-looking art of the “racy of the soil” variety advocated by Revivalists. In the end, however, those same insular Revivalists were arguably responsible for the culture associated with the “brand Ireland” of more recent global fame, while the internationalists sometimes became mere footnotes in narratives about Irish identity, both within Ireland and abroad. It is not the least merit of *Traveling Irishness* that it has recovered many such footnotes from oblivion, and that it can prompt us to think further about different waves of globalisation.

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Robert Lowell: Setting the River on Fire, a Study of Genius, Mania, and Character,
by Kay Redfield Jamison, New York, Alfred A. Knopf, 2017. xii + 527 pp., \$29.95
(hardback), ISBN 978-0307700278


Kay Redfield Jamison's *Robert Lowell: Setting the River on Fire* is a tour de force. It was something of an event when it came out, eagerly anticipated by Lowell scholars as well as by admirers of Jamison's earlier work. The author of well-known textbooks on manic-depressive illness and of the iconic memoir *An Unquiet Mind*, Jamison's take on Lowell would always be out of the ordinary. Yet *Setting the River on Fire* has become a truly extraordinary book, and not just because Jamison was the first scholar to access Lowell's medical records. The most famous American poet after World War II, Lowell notoriously suffered from a bipolar condition, but the way that this disease controlled his life and art, we can now finally see was never properly understood. *Setting the River on Fire* is “a study of genius, mania, and character,” as the subtitle reads, but it doubles up as a revisionary biography of Lowell, with flourishes of memoir, and interspersed with terse cultural reflections on mania and melancholia, ranging from Ancient Greek writers to modern psychologists. Jamison also takes a profound interest in Lowell's ancestral history, as becomes luminously clear in the biography's evocative opening

pages, which traces Harriet Brackett Spence Lowell's carriage ride from Cambridge to McLean Asylum for the Insane in 1845, a place where Lowell too was hospitalised, a century later. Jamison's book never feels disjointed, however, as it is artfully woven together, with meticulous care and even love.

What ties together Jamison's book is a series of tropes that connect *Setting the River on Fire*. All taken from Lowell's own poetry, they form the anatomy of Jamison's reconstructive operation. Midway through her study, Jamison dwells, for instance, on Lowell's early poem "Mr. Edwards and the Spider." In his Puritan ancestor, Lowell recognised how he too was playing "against a sickness past [his] cure," was fighting "the treason crackling in [his] blood," and ultimately wonders: "How will the heart endure?" In previous biographies, by Paul Mariani and especially Ian Hamilton, Lowell was depicted as a boorish, womanising character whose poetry suffered from that. In *Setting the River on Fire*, Lowell rises as a sensitive and kind man whose exceptional fortitude made him succeed against all odds. Jamison catches how Lowell is caught in his own spider web, and she shows how he sought to overcome his own condition. In that remarkable attempt, Jamison manages to revive and deepen the readers' interest in Lowell's own poetry, which is perhaps her most laudable achievement. *Setting the River on Fire* is in the end a heartbreaking book tracing a heart and mind that could not endure long, but the book will revive Lowell's posthumous career for years to come.

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Rancièrè and Literature, edited by Grace Hellyer and Julian Murphet, Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press, 2016. xi + 272pp., £19.99 (paperback), ISBN: 978 1 4744 0258 3

Few philosophers have made literature as central to their writing as Jacques Rancièrè, who begins *Mute Speech* (1998) with an extended disquisition on Jean-Paul Sartre's 1948 question *What is Literature?*, and suggests in the introduction to *The Flesh of Words* (1998) that philosophy from Plato onwards "wants to separate its language from all the glamour of mimesis and its effect from all 'literary' vacuity" but "does so only at the price of uniting with the most radical forms by which literature mimics the incarnation of the word" (*FW*, p. 5). Such unavoidable imbrication of literature and philosophy is one of the topics explored in this valuable new essay collection, which reflects on the ongoing significance of Rancièrè's thought for readers of literature, both by revisiting such key Rancièrian ideas as the distribution of the sensible, dissensus and the relationship between the ethical, representative and aesthetic regimes (concepts helpfully and critically outlined in Hellyer and Murphet's "Introduction"), and through readings of specific texts by Milton, Gaskell, Melville, George Eliot, Joyce, Michel Houellebecq and Eli Yaakunah.

The book's contributors are divided roughly equally between those working in philosophy and English literature, giving a sense of encounter between disciplines that is perhaps inevitable given the "theoretical *indiscipline*" (p. 43) that Eric Méchoulan argues is a key feature of Rancièrè's thought. Méchoulan links this indiscipline to Rancièrè's interest in democracy and the avoidance of mastery, which for literary critics requires rejecting traditional