

Thomas Travisano: On "For the Union Dead"

Lowell's "For the Union Dead" vastly expands the context of individual experiences of loss presented in more concentrated form in the previous poems. In a succession of subtly linked vignettes, Lowell probes the personal, intellectual, cultural, and political ramifications of an array of locally defined losses. Vanished buildings, displaced monuments, misplaced childhoods, crumbling traditions, frayed dignity, and annihilated cities are represented in successive quatrains through the eyes of a historically aware individual?apparently a dramatized avatar of the poet-reviewing the changes rapidly overtaking his native city and its once dominant Brahmin culture. The texture of the poem fluctuates between graphic, hypercharged super-realism and a curiously distanced, dreamlike reverie. It alludes to Lowell's childhood tellingly in its second stanza, and a "cowed," childlike confusion in the face of unfathomable experience is invoked again later in the poem.

But perhaps most tellingly, Lowell objectifies the process of loss by his persistent attention to visual objects. Often these visual objects are monuments of some public note. After an Latin epigraph that slightly but significantly alters the motto to the Saint-Gaudens statue dedicated to Colonel Shaw's regiment (the altered version translates as "They relinquished everything to serve the Republic" instead of "He relinquished . . ."), the poem proper begins by examining visual evidence of other forms of relinquishment. This examination starts with a public monument whose significance seems largely personal, the "old South Boston Aquarium." Not yet torn down, this structure has relinquished its old function. It "stands / in a Sahara of snow now. Its broken windows are boarded. . . . / The airy tanks are dry" (FUD 70). A diminished survivor, the aquarium is just the first of many attenuated monuments that populate the poem. Soon center stage shifts to Saint-Gaudens's "shaking Civil War relief," now "propped by a plank splint against the garage's earthquake," and to the neighboring Statehouse, another monument, that relinquishes its own traditional centrality and dignity. Braced and held upright by girders and gouged out underneath to make room for a parking garage, it appears as a symbolic victim of the modern, mechanical dynamism that persistently displaces the traditional past.

Such local cultural attrition provides the context for losses of a different order. These begin, of course, with reflections on the death of Colonel Shaw and his black regiment during the Civil War, losses that, despite their tragic nature, had a lofty social purpose. But this is balanced by modern destruction of a still more devastating order, represented by a advertising poster of "Hiroshima boiling." This visual object points with casual indifference toward two dominant postmodern fears that disturbed all four of these poets: the threat of nuclear holocaust and the onset of a devouring commercialism. For example, the nuclear destruction of Hiroshima and Nagasaki in 1945 dismayed Randall Jarrell as profoundly as the firebombing and massive destruction of Hamburg did Lowell (see also Jarrell's own quietly heartbreaking "The Angels at Hamburg" for his response to the destruction by firestorm of this German city, where the death toll, by some estimates, exceeded that of Nagasaki.) The age of nuclear anxiety that followed Hiroshima and Nagasaki (so vividly crystallized in Lowell's "Fall 1961") provides a backdrop for Lowell's mature poetry as well as for the poetry of Berryman and Jarrell. And there is evidence in the polemical essays of Jarrell's prose collection *A Sad Heart at the Supermarket* and in poems like "Next Day," as well as throughout Berryman's *Dream Songs*, of the degree

to which the burgeoning of a callous and triumphant commercialism in the fifties and sixties disturbed them. During these same years, Bishop moved to Brazil in part to evade the mass-production culture that was increasingly dominating her native land.

Just as Lowell's "For the Union Dead" presents its catalog of losses, so, too, does it present a peculiar, and parallel, catalog of survivors: almost nothing mentioned in the poem quite disappears. The aquarium stands in ruins, but it stands. Its "cowed, compliant fish" may be no more, but a "bronze weathervane cod" still sits atop the roof, even though it "has lost half its scales" (FUD 70). Later the fish reappear, in the angry final lines of the poem, having suffered metamorphosis into dynamic, mechanical monsters:

Everywhere, giant finned cars nose forward like fish; a savage
servility slides by on grease.

These two versions of the fish-as-survivor characterize the two opposing types of survivor in the poem. Survivors appear either as static and attenuated simulacrum of their former selves, or brutal mechanical transformations. Some of the poem's many figures have lost all but a vicarious existence, and live on in the form of monuments, statues, pictures, and other visual objects. These icons are static except in the sense that they suffer physical erosion and a parallel erosion of their dignity, through desecration, displacement, or neglect. But there is a different order of survivor, like the extinct dinosaurs, who reappear as devouring steam shovels, or the Mosler safe, whose commercial viability overshadows in the minds of its promoters the human losses at Hiroshima, or the new mechanical fish that end the poem. Each of these survivors embodies a new, aggressively commercial, mindless, and mechanistic order.

By contrast, the displaced Saint-Gaudens statue is the central image linking the first group of survivors. It preserves in vicarious stasis its "bronze Negroes," who maintain a curious simulation of life (William James could "almost hear [them] breathe"), a life mirrored by the "stone statues of the abstract Union Soldier[s]," who "doze over muskets / and muse through their sideburns." But the Saint-Gaudens statue differs from all the other static monuments in one sense: it "sticks like a fishbone / in the city's throat" because it is an uncomfortable survivor, reminiscent of such values as heroism, sacrifice, and racial equality, that no longer seem relevant in downtown Boston. This is true in part because racism and racial tension also survive, as does a replica of the ditch in which Colonel Shaw and his black Massachusetts volunteers were buried without the customary military honors by the Confederate soldiers who mowed them down at Fort Wagner. The form of that ditch is further replicated in the very "underworld garage" being gouged beneath the Statehouse. The continuing reality of racism reappears in "the drained faces of Negro school-children" whom the narrator observes on television attempting to integrate southern schools (FUD 70-72). But Colonel Shaw emerges finally as the poem's protagonist, seen largely in terms of the way heroic death is memorialized. His predicament bears more than a passing resemblance to the speaker's long dead "uncle Charles," of "Falling Asleep over the Aeneid"? another Union officer and leader of "colored volunteers," buried on that occasion in Concord and with full military honors, attended by "Phillips Brooks and Grant." Colonel Shaw is seen in terms of a culture that is on the verge of utter disappearance. His heroism is of a past order that seems uncomfortable even for an observer who mourns its passing. For this

Colonel is as lean as a compass-needle.

He has an angry wrenlike vigilance, a greyhound's gentle tautness; he seems to wince at pleasure, and suffocate for privacy.

His wincing at pleasure, his erect, and perhaps narrow moral rigidity ("lean / as a compass-needle") is derived from a culture growing from deeply rooted Puritan beliefs in public probity and Election, out of keeping with a pleasure-seeking and profoundly commercialized contemporary culture. He yearns to escape from history's spotlight. Understanding the value of sacrifice for a higher good, he remains inflexible in its pursuit, and this places him on the margins of contemporary culture.

He is out of bounds now. He rejoices in man's lovely, peculiar power to choose life and die? when he leads his black soldiers to death, he cannot bend his back.

Though Colonel Shaw represents an almost oppressive maturity, childhood remains a constant presence throughout the poem, and the gestures and wishes of childhood persist in the adult. The child's awareness is introduced in the second stanza, which generates much of the poem's continuing imagery, imagery persistently identified both with the poem's central observer and with the city's modern urban planners. The child whose "nose crawled like a snail on the glass" of the aquarium parallels the adult who "pressed against the new barbed and galvanized / fence on the Boston Common." The child's impulse "to burst the bubbles / drifting from the noses of the cowed, compliant fish" suggests a temptation toward violent gesture that is echoed throughout the poem. Of course, fish don't have noses or make bubbles, as the poet surely knew, so this must be a memory, that, like so many of the objects in the poem, has suffered metamorphosis. Though the impulse to violence is later transferred to other figures, we see it first in the speaker. His yearning for "the dark downward and vegetating kingdom / of the fish and reptile" reflects a yearning to reach back through the premoral awareness of early childhood to the amoral awareness of the lower vertebrates (FUD 70).

The body of the poem frequently echoes this yearning to escape from cognition and the pain of historical awareness and self-consciousness and responsibility, an escape that the leaders of Boston seem already to have achieved. It might also imply a yearning for the freedom to act on baser instinct, a freedom shared by the lower vertebrates but rejected by Colonel Shaw. The "Parking spaces" that "luxuriate like civic / sandpiles in the heart of Boston" suggest this lingering childishness in the minds of the city's urban planners. But the speaker of the poem is not exempt. When he crouches before his television set to watch the "Negro school-children," he is mimicking his own action as a child peering through the glass of the fish tank; the school children whose faces "rise like balloons" echo the bubbles the child saw in the fish tank and seem just as trapped as the fish (FUD 70-72). The child is thus complexly imaged as both aggressor and victim, in a separate world from the adult, yet inexorably linked to adult consciousness.

Dream textures weave in and out of the poem, despite its prevailingly gritty, realistic tone, and dream-logic knits the various strands. The poem's logic resembles the subtle, associational logic of dreams, with its many surrealistic images, its curious doublings and transformations. The "stone statues of the abstract Union Soldier" may be lost in a dream, as "they doze over

muskets / and muse through their sideburns," but the central dream-figure is Colonel Shaw himself. When last seen:

Colonel Shaw is riding on his bubble, he waits for the blessed break.

The bubble he rides survives, with typical dream logic, from the fish tank, and from the faces of the school children who "rise like balloons." Colonel Shaw yearns to escape the vicarious simulation of life in which he is trapped, to depart a world that has a stable place for him neither in its public environs nor in its collective awareness, and to achieve the "privacy" for which he continually "suffocates." Shaw's final heroism may be the fact that he lingers still, in spite of his yearning to depart.

In his review of Lord Weary's Castle, Jarrell noted that Lowell's "poems often use cold as a plain and physically correct symbol for what is constricted and static" in contemporary culture (P&A 210). In "For the Union Dead" Lowell uses the temporary displacement of Saint Gaudens's bronze relief of Colonel Shaw and his black regiment in a context awash in parking lots, finned cars, and crass commercialization, to create "a plain and physically correct symbol" for the violent yet barely conscious displacement of mourning in the postmodern world.

from *Midcentury Quartet: Bishop, Lowell, Jarrell, Berryman and the Makeup of a Postmodern Aesthetic*. UP of Virginia, 1999. Copyright © 1999 by UP of Virginia.

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