

# TRANSNATIONAL LITERATURE

## Memorials in Robert Lowell's Poetry: The Synthesis of the Public and the Private

Shanjida K. Boksh

Robert Lowell's work stands out as the pre-eminent example in recent years of a poetic rich enough to synthesise public and personal concerns in a distinctly literary manner. This compounding of psychological self-exploration and socio-political critique is not wholly unique to Lowell, yet it constitutes a modern example of how the personal and the public entwine. Throughout his career, Lowell attempts to 'move [his] poetry as close as possible to his experience' via aesthetic development.<sup>1</sup> That 'experience' was not merely his own, but that of post-war America as well. Hence his poems are a crucial index to the temperament and emotions of the era – 'the weak spots' of its age, particularly 'the tranquillized *Fifties*.'<sup>2</sup> He deploys the trope of monumental art in lyric forms, contemplating upon some historical facts of the United States as context for his personal experience. In different collections, memorials occasionally appear to reflect significant historical and political contexts and ideas. In fact, from the beginning of his career, 'Lowell sought to create his poetic identity out of an involvement with history,' and remained allied to 'humanistically oriented historicism' that generated and nurtured the amalgamation of his intensely personal and broadly public concerns in his poetry.<sup>3</sup> Lowell's poems on monuments reflect this 'historical sense' more explicitly in personal tone and intertwine the political and social problems as well as the private concerns to create a single aesthetic entity.

Though Lowell's biographers, Ian Hamilton and Paul Mariani, and critics, Steven Axelrod, William Doeski, and Terry Witek claim that much of his stylistic accomplishments rest on his use of family drama of psychology, the use of 'public history to articulate his inner struggle' is undeniable.<sup>4</sup> Lowell knew well his 'bondages to the past,' whether they are personal or historical.<sup>5</sup> He uses the past most frequently in his poems as a means of understanding the present. Reflecting her views on *Life Studies*, Marjorie Perloff has written that 'the typical lyric begins in a moment of crisis in the present, moves backward into a closely related past, and then returns to the present with renewed insight'; and what is true of *Life Studies* is true of Lowell's

<sup>1</sup> William Doeski, *Robert Lowell's Shifting Colors: The Poetics of the Public and the Personal* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 1999) xix.

<sup>2</sup> Robert Lowell, *Life Studies* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Cudahy, 1959) 86.

<sup>3</sup> Steven Gould Axelrod and Helen Deese, *Robert Lowell's Essays on the Poetry. Cambridge Studies in American Literature and Culture* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1986) 18-19.

<sup>4</sup> Michael Thurston, 'Robert Lowell's Monumental Vision: History, Form and the Cultural Work of Post War American Lyric,' *American Literary History* 12.1-2 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000) 81.

<sup>5</sup> Philip Rieff, *Freud: The Mind of the Moralizer* 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979) 334.

Memorials in Robert Lowell's Poetry: The Synthesis of the Public and the Private. Shanjida K. Boksh.

Transnational Literature Vol. 7 no. 2, May 2015.

<http://fhrc.flinders.edu.au/transnational/home.html>

whole career.<sup>6</sup> Lowell's poems on monuments reveal more emphatically his bondages to the past, and at the same time offer a new understanding of post-war America.

Immediately after the publication of *For the Union Dead* (1964), critics started to weigh up the historical connotations of Lowell's most personal experiences. In an essay in Jonathan Price's *Critics on Robert Lowell*, Richard Poirier praises *For the Union Dead* and lays down the cause that gives the collection an 'extraordinary air of personal authority.'<sup>7</sup> According to him, 'It is nearly impossible in Lowell's poetry to separate personal breakdown from the visions of public or historical decline ... The assurance that the poet's most private experiences simply are of historical, even mythical, importance' (92). This, obviously, dismisses the prior notion made by other critics of considering a Lowell poem an autonomous and self-sufficient verbal entity. Poirier's assessment is debatable taking into account the varied reviews that state Lowell had brought about certain advancement in *For the Union Dead*, and was 'making his way back into the world' to 'convey the universality of particular emotions and experience' (93).

Lowell's individual sensibility and feeling all along point to something else in the concrete realm of human social activity. His earlier collections contain some poems which realise different modes with different means at different times when they place an emphasis which excludes another correspondence. They respond either sensitively to the inner being – like the short dramatic monologue 'To Speak of Woe That Is in Marriage'<sup>8</sup> – or they present an obvious subject or theme revealing the unsympathetic nature of the wider external reality – like the fragmented sonnet 'Inauguration Day: January 1953,'<sup>9</sup> satirising America's political leaders and their commitment to a nuclear arsenal. Poirier contends that this affect perplexes readers 'whenever they expect his poetry to "earn the right" ... to the connections between private and the public significance which he chooses to take for granted.'<sup>10</sup>

Lowell has been known as the confessional chronicler of psychic disturbance in *Life Studies*, speaking bravely and with dignity about desperate personal feeling, and admired as the political poet of *Near the Ocean* who grapples with domestic and foreign threats to communal stability, such as cultural decline, racial injustice, and nuclear war. Yet both books have been read by some who felt they had a right to complain through a different lens: *Life Studies* disappointed for lacking the big issues and historical weight of *Lord Weary's Castle*; *Near the Ocean* drew adverse comment for its lofty pretension to statesmanship, lack of personal crunch and subjective account of *Life Studies*. Such claims and counterclaims provide the familiar experience of a jury of Lowell critics hanging itself on matters of principle.<sup>11</sup> Although supported by some half-truths about some of his work, each side of the

---

<sup>6</sup> Marjorie Perloff, "'Fearlessly Holding Back Nothing": Robert Lowell's Last Poems,' *Agenda* 18.3 (1980) 106.

<sup>7</sup> Jonathan Price, ed. *Critics on Robert Lowell* (Coral Gables: Miami University Press, 1972) 92.

<sup>8</sup> Lowell, *Life Studies* 82.

<sup>9</sup> Lowell, *Life Studies* 7.

<sup>10</sup> Price 93.

<sup>11</sup> Steven Gould Axelrod, *The Critical Response to Robert Lowell* (CT: Greenwood Press, 1999) 9-10.

Memorials in Robert Lowell's Poetry: The Synthesis of the Public and the Private. Shanjida K. Boksh.

Transnational Literature Vol. 7 no. 2, May 2015.

<http://fhrc.flinders.edu.au/transnational/home.html>

disagreement detracts from Lowell's acknowledged gift – an imagination which offers hospitality to the complex interplay and recognition of opposing forces. In fact, Lowell's poetry endures contraries and does often refuse to choose, as Poirier recounts, between the preconceived alternatives that some branches of academic literary criticism wish to keep apart, and 'the new historicism' aims to bring together again, which are conventionally described as public realities and private spheres, imagined either in public and historical, or personal and immediate, poetry. Poirier concludes his review by looking to the obligations Lowell's poetry takes on as it reaches across human endeavours. 'He is our truest historian. ... The form of any given poem emerges ... from a suffering spirit seeking not ease but a further confrontation with precisely those degradations in the self and in the times that are a challenge to form and to assurance.'<sup>12</sup>

Lowell reflects these declines 'in the self and in the times' more accurately in his poems on cenotaphs. Cenotaphs recur in poems with some traits and significance when *Lord Weary's Castle* (1946) brings Lowell instantaneous and widespread recognition. Many of these monuments are military and of precarious and weak significance. For Lowell and his country, cenotaphs most often are mounted generals, retired ordinance, and the like. Boston's statue of Joseph Hooker, the Union general disgraced at Chancellorsville is at the centre of 'Christmas Eve under Hooker's Statue,' one of Lowell's poems in *Lord Weary's Castle*.<sup>13</sup> As a descendant of the New England puritan tradition, Hooker embodies the moral and social hypocrisy that has 'blackened' the 'statehouse,' since his god is Mars, not Christ the redeemer. As twenty years ago the child 'hung [his] stocking on the tree, and hell's/ Serpent entwined the apple in the toe/ To sting the child with knowledge,' so Hooker's statue exudes the hellish knowledge that transforms boys ("All wars are boyish," Herman Melville said) into ironic, self-aware, and guilty men. While Christmas Eve is generally considered to foster commemoration of the origin of true religion, Lowell's poem seems to confound the birth of Christ with the American republic's loss of innocence as represented by a rusting and ineffectual 'cannon and a cairn of cannon balls,'<sup>14</sup> and Lowell's own twenty years of aging out of childhood into the chill of knowledge.

In monument as in life, Hooker is weak, threatened, paralysed. The medium of monument transforms human into impotent war god. A 'blundering butcher' perched perilously amidst a fraught and split landscape, Hooker's statue is Lowell's precise symbol for the nation and the time:

The war-god's bronzed and empty forehead forms  
Anonymous machinery from raw men;  
The cannon on the Common cannot stun  
The blundering butcher as he rides on Time –

---

<sup>12</sup> Price 96.

<sup>13</sup> Robert Lowell, *Lord Weary's Castle* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1946) 15.

<sup>14</sup> Lowell, *Lord Weary's Castle* 15.

The barrel clinks with holly. I am cold:  
I ask for bread, my father gives me mould.<sup>15</sup>

Hooker's forehead, 'bronzed and empty', made machines of men and his blunders sent them to destruction, but Hooker himself faces a fate somehow worse. Hollow, riding 'on Time', he alone inhabits a landscape desolate and unstable. The snow he stands upon is unstable, his 'heels/ Kicking at nothing in the shifting snow.' Even the night is filled with danger: a wartime blackout warns of destruction from the skies, and Lowell ends the poem with an expectation of apocalypse, the only resolution to the threat of overwhelming nature. A winter-dominated poem of age, collective guilt, and frustrated faith ('I ask for bread, my father gives me mould'), 'Christmas Eve Under Hooker's Statue' inscribes in its very title one aspect of the modernist dilemma – the relationships among competing bodies of iconography, none of which means any longer what they were once thought to mean.

However, the personal element of this poem, the memory of a bland and secularised Protestant Christmas with its childhood innocence poisoned by adult understanding, refutes the public element. The latter would extend this compromise of innocence by confronting Christian idealism with politics of expediency that led to the Civil War and perhaps to World War II. Hence, Lowell's first person voice in 'Christmas Eve under Hooker's Statue' carries a note of regret and nostalgia for the compromised iconography of religion and history. The tones of this insinuated private voice, coloured by distrust of the tradition it invokes, distinguishes Lowell's work from that of many of his contemporaries long before he fully accepted the voice and began to write openly autobiographical poems.

By contrast, the characteristic voice of high modernism in American, British, and a great deal of French poetry is discrete, distant: archetypal and ceremonial rather than personal, 'a kind of incantation,' as Mallarmé describes it.<sup>16</sup> It purports to be a voice of objectivity and impersonality, though recent critical thinking has cast doubt upon its actual distance from personal concerns. Certainly it places great faith in the incantatory power of language, sometimes even challenging representation with presence – a heresy in the Postmodern linguistic world. Eliot, Pound, Stevens, and Yeats generate almost infinite possibilities with this formal voice. Overawed by the achievement of the major modernists, yet not quite able to duplicate their successes, the subsequent generation would gradually return to the more personal lyric voice categorically rejected by Pound and Eliot. They associated that voice with the nineteenth century, particularly with Wordsworth, for whom their admiration was decidedly qualified, and with Tennyson, whom 'Eliot in the 1936 essay on "In Memoriam"' had just begun to rehabilitate after years of refusing him a suitable place in the tradition.<sup>17</sup>

---

<sup>15</sup> Lowell, *Lord Weary's Castle* 15.

<sup>16</sup> Stéphane Mallarmé, 'Poetry as Incantation,' translated by Bradford Cook, *The Modern Tradition*, edited by Richard Ellmann and Charles Feidelson (New York: Oxford University Press, 1965) 112.

<sup>17</sup> Doreski 46.

The Minuteman statue at Concord, the most cherished icon of New England's heroic past, is the subject of another memorial poem 'Concord.'<sup>18</sup> The soldiers who fought the British in the American Revolution (1775) in battles of Lexington and Concord do not provide spiritual inspiration. Lowell's exhaustive pessimism has been intensified by the 'tragedy of crucifixion which seems to lie not only in the death of the good (the child), which it symbolised, but also in the hopelessly perverse way in which the morbid power of its image appears to have infected and pre-occupied man's spiritual imagination – particularly, of course, the spiritual imagination of the founders of Lowell's nation and, through their influence, Lowell's own.'<sup>19</sup> Ralph Waldo Emerson's 'The Concord Hymn,' on the other hand, reflects an optimistic view and the responsibility of modern man: 'The shaft we raise to them and thee.' He says the 'embattled farmers stood,/ And fired the shot heard round the world' because they had the 'Spirit, that made those heroes dare,/ To die, and leave their children free.'<sup>20</sup> But here Lowell ridicules twentieth-century Americans who have substituted the Puritans' religious zealotry with commercial conformity:

Ten thousand Fords are idle here in search  
 Of a tradition. Over these dry sticks –  
 The Minute Man, the Irish Catholics,  
 The ruined bridge and Walden's fished-out perch –  
 The belfry of the Unitarian Church  
 Rings out the hanging Jesus. Crucifix,  
 How can your whited spindling arms transfix  
 Mammon's unbridled industry, the lurch  
 For forms to harness Heraclitus' stream!  
 This Church is Concord – Concord where Thoreau  
 Named all the birds without a gun to probe  
 Through darkness to the painted man and bow:  
 The death-dance of King Philip and his scream  
 Whose echo girdled this imperfect globe.<sup>21</sup>

The poem makes a more provocative use of American history through its contrast of New England's illustrious past and degraded present. The corruption of the province's past intellectual and mercantile vitality is clear enough in the poem's paraphrasable denunciation: exemplary American conduct has deteriorated into violence, ravenous capitalism, irreligious materialism, and empty leisure. This has been well supported by the effective amalgamation of epithets for images of wasted assets: 'idle', 'dry', 'ruined', 'fished-out'.

<sup>18</sup> Lowell, *Lord Weary's Castle* 27.

<sup>19</sup> Vereen M. Bell, *Robert Lowell: Nihilist as Hero* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1983) 25.

<sup>20</sup> Ralph Waldo Emerson, 'Concord Hymn,' ed. Thomas R. Lounsbury, *Yale Book of American Verse* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1912) 570.

<sup>21</sup> Lowell, 'Concord,' *Lord Weary's Castle* 27.

Generally perceived as the product of Lowell's attempt to resolve a personal aesthetic dilemma, *Life Studies* also responds to the situation of public discourse in Eisenhower's America. When Lowell gingerly returned to political engagement in the Eisenhower years, he was, ironically, more sceptical of the Cold War politics. The communal problems of discourse haunt all of *Life Studies* with a vivid imagining of 'the weak spots' of its age, 'the tranquillized Fifties.' Philip Larkin was among the first to welcome the poems in the book, which he respected because here 'Lowell's historical sense becomes autobiographical.'<sup>22</sup> The thought has been repeated by many subsequent reviewers and critics to become an opinion with wide currency in Lowell studies. Vendler says that history was Lowell's 'unasked-for *donne*', a subject he was obliged to treat in poetry (an obligation consummately honoured, we might judge, by 'For the Union Dead'), and that he 'spent his whole career defining public and private forms of poetic history.'<sup>23</sup> Like Pound, Lowell was always drawn to the historical, but the argument in this paper emphasises that he was merging public with the private forms much of the time. He differs from Pound, and looks more to Livy, Plutarch, Carlyle and Macaulay for the literary and subjective nature of their biographical perspectives on history.<sup>24</sup> Lowell seems to have believed that no one can know any history until he understands fictive writing, for he perceives history as a branch of literature and evokes the actions, personalities, attitudes and speech of a huge cast of characters: ancient and modern, famous and unknown, small and large examples of humanity, in trivial and significant acts, in public and private roles.

The sonnet 'Inauguration Day: January 1953'<sup>25</sup> presents an obvious subject revealing the unsympathetic nature of the wider external reality – America's political leaders and their commitment to a nuclear arsenal – through its subjective vein. The poem is a satirical cartoon and moves the Manichean battleground against the force of darkness from the Protestant New England and Catholic sites in Lowell's preceding books to the post-World War II America, which President Eisenhower termed the 'military-industrial complex.'<sup>26</sup>

The statue of Peter Stuyvesant in 'Inauguration Day: January 1953' vividly holds Lowell's political awareness and his struggle to address the social in and through the lyric. In this poem, Lowell brings in three historical and political figures covering the time span of three hundred years – Dwight Eisenhower, Peter Stuyvesant, and Ulysses S. Grant. The snowy and changing landscape in this poem has associations with both a 'numbing' psychological perception and a nuclear winter in which the beliefs of

---

<sup>22</sup> Philip Larkin, 'Collected Poems,' *Manchester Guardian Weekly* (21 May 1959) 6.

<sup>23</sup> Helen Vendler, 'Robert Lowell and History,' *The Given and the Made: Strategies of Poetic Redefinition* (Cambridge MA: Harvard UP, 1995) 5.

<sup>24</sup> Robert Lowell, *Collected Prose* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1987) 246.

<sup>25</sup> Lowell, *Life Studies* 7.

<sup>26</sup> The term 'military-industrial complex' was coined by President Dwight D. Eisenhower in his farewell address of 1961, 20 January 2014

[http://www.eisenhower.archives.gov/research/online\\_documents/farewell\\_address.html](http://www.eisenhower.archives.gov/research/online_documents/farewell_address.html).

American democratic principles no longer embrace any significance.<sup>27</sup> The poem begins with a bleak vision of a New York where ‘The snow had buried Stuyvesant,’ the seventeenth century governor of New Amsterdam who was forced to surrender the colony, and died in bitterness in the renamed English colony of New York. The image of the buried Stuyvesant, along with the mention of the inauguration ceremony, ‘also subtly hints that a similar fate may await the new president’ Dwight Eisenhower.<sup>28</sup>

The Lowell persona that emerges in the poem is the writer and the citizen Lowell, carried along by the outside forces, ‘The subways drummed the vaults. I heard/ the El’s green girders charge on Third,/ Manhattan’s truss of adamant,/ that groaned in ermine, slumped on want ...’<sup>29</sup> The person Lowell is present amidst the symbolic events surrounding the installation of Eisenhower, though in a different geographical setting. One does not expect a poem entitled, ‘Inauguration Day: January 1953’ to take place in New York City, though that is where the Lowells were on the day President Eisenhower was sworn in.<sup>30</sup> Rather, one expects the poem to have been situated in Washington, D.C. where presidential inaugurations normally occur. Lowell skillfully places himself in such a historical moment, though in a New York setting, and brings out significance and ideas represented through monuments.

The closing stanza develops the figure of paralysis through the frosty aspect of these cenotaphs. Like ‘Christmas Eve under Hooker’s Statue,’ this poem, through these lines suggests that it is a winter-dominated poem of age, collective guilt, and frustrated faith. Coming back to the image of winter, Lowell demonstrates the perception that America has just been numbed into stasis:

Ice, ice. Our wheels no longer move.  
Look, the fixed stars, all just alike  
as lack-land atoms, split apart,  
and the Republic summons Ike,  
the mausoleum in her heart. (*Life Studies* 7)

In his poem of the Eisenhower era, Lowell undermines the Cold War by parodying its discourse. The poem ironises the occasion, the language and its Cold War context through these concluding lines. Eisenhower, as a president whose crusade stressed the value of domestic security and suburban principles, symbolises the need for the mediation of oblivion at the core of American beliefs. In Lowell’s words, Eisenhower has taken oath to manage the administration of a republic with a ‘mausoleum in her heart,’ an image that again conveys the futility at the heart of American consciousness. Lowell perceives the ‘iced-over spirit of Ulysses S. Grant living on Ike, both the men have stepped into the presidency after serving as the country’s commanding officers

---

<sup>27</sup> Robert Jay Lifton and Greg Mitchell, *Hiroshima in America: Fifty Years of Denial* (New York: Putnam, 1995) 339.

<sup>28</sup> Sidonie Smith, *A Poetics of Women’s Autobiography: Marginality and the Fictions of Self-Representation* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987) 292.

<sup>29</sup> Lowell, *Life Studies* 7.

<sup>30</sup> Paul Mariani, *Lost Puritan: A Life of Robert Lowell* (New York: Norton, 1994) 222.

during two respective cataclysmic wars.<sup>31</sup> However, Lowell's analysis of monuments is comparatively more potent here. The poem works on both personal and public levels, since it appears as a self-critique as much as a social criticism. As stated by Von Hallberg, the poem typifies what would appear to be a '1960s period piece, the cultural critique poem.'<sup>32</sup>

In 'For the Union Dead,' the last entry into *Life Studies*' paperback publication which was subsequently published as the closing poem in the collection titled for it, we come across one of Lowell's most well organized reflections on cenotaphs. Commissioned by the Boston Arts Festival in 1960 and originally titled 'Colonel Shaw and the Massachusetts 54th,' this poem was read by Lowell to loud applause at the celebration on the Common in June of that year. At the Boston Arts Festival, Lowell would say of this most obviously monumental poem:

My poem, 'The Union Dead,' is about childhood memories, the evisceration of our modern cities, civil rights, nuclear warfare and more particularly, Colonel Robert Shaw and his negro regiment, the Massachusetts 54<sup>th</sup>. I brought in early personal memories because I wanted to avoid the fixed, brazen tone of the set-piece and official ode.<sup>33</sup>

The poem demonstrates how powerfully Lowell welds personal and public subject-matter through his monumental vision to craft a distinct artistic entity. It is this synthesis that makes the poem 'one of the very few American poems that can inspire genuine, unrhetorical patriotic emotion: Lowell treats history not as something official, but as a private possession.'<sup>34</sup>

In this, the poem seems to corroborate the spontaneous remark Lowell made in introducing it: 'We've emerged from the monumental age.'<sup>35</sup> The poem, however, works through the deteriorating and declining situation of the city's monuments, from the deserted South Boston Aquarium to the Saint Gaudens bas-relief of Shaw and his black soldiers, to the Statehouse that faces it, to all the thinning, dwindling Union soldiers on the greens of innumerable New England towns. The personal context is established at once in the second stanza, after a brief description of 'the old South Boston Aquarium' setting, with a childhood memory of the Aquarium, a memory later to be hideously distorted or parodied:

Once my nose crawled like a snail on the glass;  
my hand tingled  
to burst the bubbles

---

<sup>31</sup> Mariani 222.

<sup>32</sup> Robert Von Hallberg, *American Poetry and Culture 1945-1980* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995) 141.

<sup>33</sup> Quoted in Doreski 109.

<sup>34</sup> Adam Kirsch, *The Wounded Surgeon: Confession and Transformation in Six American Poets* (New York: Norton, 2005) 37.

<sup>35</sup> Mark Rudman, *Robert Lowell: An Introduction to the Poetry* (New York: Columbia UP, 1983) 132.

Memorials in Robert Lowell's Poetry: The Synthesis of the Public and the Private. Shanjida K. Boksh.

Transnational Literature Vol. 7 no. 2, May 2015.

<http://fhrc.flinders.edu.au/transnational/home.html>

drifting from the noses of the cowed, compliant fish.’<sup>36</sup>

William Doreski, in his *Robert Lowell's Shifting Colors*, explores this particular aspect of Lowell's extended range of poetic interests more explicitly, commenting on the evolution of 'For the Union Dead' from wooden impersonality ('brazen tone') toward a more vivid, more openly autobiographical moment. 'History and autobiography deeply and subtly mingle in Lowell's creative process, and perhaps we can now more fully appreciate that his public voice developed not out of megalomania but as the authentic speech of an artist whose aesthetic personality merged with the vagaries of history and the contemporary American social scene.'<sup>37</sup> In fact, Lowell recognized the dangers of writing occasional poetry, and in consciously resisting conventional pitfalls he cast his 'autobiographical-psychological study of historical self-presence (that is, a poem that places the self at the centre of history) within the framework of a Horatian ode.'<sup>38</sup>

Evidently, Colonel Shaw's 'picturesque and gallant death' inspired quite a number of poems before 'For the Union Dead,' all of them more or less occasional and commemorative, by well known poets such as Thomas Bailey Aldrich, Richard Watson Gilder, Benjamin Brawley, Percy MacKaye, Paul Laurence Dunbar, and William Vaughn Moody.<sup>39</sup> Among them, the most enduring are Dunbar's eloquent sonnet 'Robert Gould Shaw,' which laments the lack of racial progress since Shaw's time, and Moody's idealistic, angry 'Ode in Time of Hesitation.' Like Emerson ('Voluntaries') and James Russell Lowell ('Memoriae Positum') before him, Moody presents Shaw as a moral example whose heroism contrasts tellingly with prevalent civic corruption (specially, American imperialism). To this basic contrast, however, he adds a new historical dimension. He associates Shaw's 'heroic ideal with the past, and unheroic reality with the present, thus suggesting a pattern of moral degradation similar to that suggested by "For the Union Dead"' (124).

Besides, Lowell's descriptions of the statuary in 'For the Union Dead' echo phrases from William James' speech dedicating the Shaw memorial. He remarks of the Saint-Gaudens bas-relief that 'William James could almost hear the bronze Negroes breath,' an allusion to James' description of them as 'so true to nature that one can almost hear them breathing.'<sup>40</sup> Lowell deliberately turns James' words of hope and praise into lament. He comments that the Union Soldier statues 'grow slimmer and younger each year' in contrast to the increasingly fat and venal general populace.<sup>41</sup> And now, far from almost hearing Saint Gaudens' blacks breathing, the general public roundly ignores them; values them less than parking places; seeks half-consciously to rid itself of their symbolic reproach.

---

<sup>36</sup> Robert Lowell, *For the Union Dead* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1964) 70.

<sup>37</sup> Doreski 110.

<sup>38</sup> Doreski 96.

<sup>39</sup> Axelrod 124.

<sup>40</sup> Lowell, *For the Union Dead* 71.

<sup>41</sup> Lowell, *For the Union Dead* 72.

The Aquarium is gone. Everywhere,  
giant finned cars nose forward like fish;  
a savage servility  
slides by on grease.<sup>42</sup>

Heroic accomplishment, once numbed in commemorative bronze, is endangered by the 'present's new priorities but whoso would so easily forget their history, whoso would sell a heroic birthright for a few parking spaces, becomes inhuman, reptilian or fishlike, savage and servile.'<sup>43</sup>

Albert Gelpi recounts the poem as 'one of Lowell's most tightly written and most explicated poems; its ironies rise to prophetic outrage in seeing Boston's decline into barbarous materialism as part of a national and global declension.'<sup>44</sup> As in 'Inauguration Day: 1953,' modern America endangers the ennobled and ennobling past with its commercialism, its insensitive ignorance of history, its propensity toward industrialized annihilation:

A girdle of orange, Puritan-pumpkin colored girders  
braces the tingling Statehouse,

shaking over the excavations, as it faces Colonel Shaw  
and his bell cheeked Negro infantry  
on St. Gaudens' shaking Civil War relief,  
propped by a plank splint against the garage's earthquake.<sup>45</sup>  
(*'For the Union Dead'* 70-71)

Similar to Stuyvesant and Grant previous to him, Shaw is rigid and fragile: 'he cannot bend his back' since 'he is out of bounds.' But Shaw remains in some ways dangerous that the others do not. '[W]renlike,' holding the qualities of a greyhound, Shaw remains somehow animate:

Their monument sticks like a fishbone  
in the city's throat.  
Its Colonel is as lean  
as a compass-needle.

He has an angry wrenlike vigilance,  
a greyhound's gentle tautness.<sup>46</sup>

---

<sup>42</sup> Lowell, *For the Union Dead* 72.

<sup>43</sup> Thurston 99.

<sup>44</sup> Axelrod and Deese 66.

<sup>45</sup> Lowell, *'For the Union Dead'* 70-1.

<sup>46</sup> Lowell, *'For the Union Dead'* 71.

Yet in his lifeless state, Shaw both leads (as a 'compass needle') and threatens Boston's finned humanity.<sup>47</sup>

Lowell's vision through cenotaph reflected in the poems, discussed above, not only proffers an insight into America in some of its historical moments, but also provides the readers with a complex matrix of the country's national politics through the poet's lenses of personal poetics. Michael North considers monuments as the 'microcosmic summations of entire cultures' (30). Memorials represent history and culture of a society that it determines to remember and celebrate. Hence, Lowell's poems on monuments meditate to bring about socio-historical significance, particularly, of the postwar American milieu. Moreover, Lowell believes that no one can know any history until he understands fictive writing, for he perceives history as a 'province of literature' and evokes the actions, personalities, attitudes and speech of a huge cast of characters. The poet is frequently at centre stage in the cast, even when he overhears and then records the speech of others, for 'Lowell's historical sense becomes autobiographical.'<sup>48</sup> George Eliot's *Felix Holt, the Radical* offers a similar model of concept of such an amalgamation: 'There is no private life which has not been determined by a wider public life,'<sup>49</sup> and her *Middlemarch* further clarifies the fact, 'For there is no creature whose inward being is so strong that it is not greatly determined by what lies outside it.'<sup>50</sup> Many of the finest occasions in Lowell's work result from complex perspectives, combined in the same poem or the one book, of the private self and the public role.

---

*Shanjida K. Boksh is an Associate Professor in the Department of English at Shahjalal University of Science & Technology in Sylhet, Bangladesh. She earned her PhD in English from Jahangirnagar University, Dhaka, Bangladesh. Her research interests concern the process of psychoanalysis and influence theory in postmodern poetry.*

---

<sup>47</sup> Michael North, *The Final Sculpture: Public Monuments and Modern Poets* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985) 240.

<sup>48</sup> Larkin 6.

<sup>49</sup> George Eliot, *Felix Holt, the Radical* ed. P. Coveney (Harmondsworth: Penguin Classics, 1972) 129.

<sup>50</sup> George Eliot, *Middlemarch* ed. P. Coveney (Harmondsworth: Penguin Classics, 1972) 896.