

Remapping Urban Space as Identity in Lowell's *"For the Union Dead"*

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Abstract:

Writing "For the Union Dead" in the early months of 1960, Robert Lowell tries to position himself in relation to his previous poetry and in relation to important poetic developments going on around him. Life Studies, the volume of poetry published the previous year (1959) had made him both famous and notorious. The way in which, in "For the Union Dead," an important historical and architectural landmark (the State House) and its monumental neighbor (the memorial to Colonel Robert Gould Shaw, the Civil War hero) are perceived as being "pushed aside" in the remapping of public space in the Boston of the 1950s shows Lowell's position in the cultural narratives of the "city on a hill."

Key words: ekphrasis, confessional, dialogic, "raw" vs. "cooked"

In an 1843 essay published in the *Broadway Journal*, E.A. Poe ironically declared that he loved Boston, the city in which he had been born, for very peculiar reasons:

We were born there – and perhaps it is just as well to mention that we are heartily ashamed of the fact. The Bostonians are very well in their way. Their hotels are bad. Their pumpkin pies are delicious. Their poetry is no good ... But with all these qualities the Bostonians have no soul ... The Bostonians are well-bred – as very dull persons generally are (Gray 119).

He did not belong there: at the age of two, after his father had left the family and his mother had died, he was taken away and raised in Virginia, which explains why, although living above the Mason and Dixon line for the second half of his life, he considered himself a Southerner. His friend, the Bostonian poet James Russell Lowell and one of poet Robert Lowell's ancestors, would have disagreed: not about the Boston pumpkin pie, but about the quality of poetry in what is usually called "The Cradle of Modern America" or "The Athens of America."

Robert Lowell defined himself, sometimes in very contradictory terms, as an inheritor of Boston's rich history. This becomes obvious, not only in his poetry; the autobiographical piece he was writing in the mid 1950s starts from a statement that binds him to the symbolic center of

the “city on a hill,” Beacon Hill, with the Boston State House at its top: “Like Henry Adams, I was born under the shadow of the Dome of the Boston State House...”(Hamilton 3) More specifically, Robert Lowell was born in his maternal grandfather’s imposing house on Chestnut Street, the most exclusive, the most beautiful part of Boston at the time.

The way in which an important historical and architectural landmark (the State House) and its monumental neighbor (the memorial to Colonel Shaw, the Civil War hero) are perceived as being “pushed aside” in the remapping of public space in the Boston of the 1950s, announcing new developments in the 1960s in American culture, will be one of the aspects dealt with in what follows below.

Perceptions and “literary figments” of private, family and public spaces in Robert Lowell’s work can considerably contribute to a discussion of ways in which urban space, history and power relations acquire new dimensions in what we have come to see as a dynamic, ever changing cultural identity redefinition of what it means to be American, specifically historicized here as belonging to the “pre-countercultural age”(or, to further incite and intrigue the reader of these pages with peculiar phrases, “the post - James Michael Curley age” in Boston’s distinguished history, a phrase which will have to be justified in this text).

The poem focused upon here is the one giving its name to Lowell’s 1964 volume, *For the Union Dead*, and, somehow appearing to defy Bakhtin’s distinction in *The Dialogic Imagination* between more dialogic (the novel) and more monologic (poetry) genres, it engages in an extended dialog with a plurality of other texts, featuring a plurality of voices, conveying complex messages and expressing differing perspectives. Arguably, one of Lowell’s aims in this memorable poem is to out-Dostoyevsky Dostoyevsky’s, and to out-Rabelais Rabelais’s dialogic prose in his apparently very lyrical piece about the author, the author’s family’s history, Boston’s heroic past and its prosaic present.

Robert Lowell’s ancestors, on both his father’s and his mother’s side (the Winslows) had been members of that American elite which replaced the British nobility under the guise of such titles as the Boston Brahmins, prominent, influential statesmen, businessmen and their families, descendents of the Founding Fathers having come on board the *Mayflower* or the *Arbella* in the early 17th century. Boston Brahmins usually go to Harvard (where Lowell House features prominently) and so did Robert Traill Spence Lowell, IV (Robert Lowell the poet for short) for two years before he got into a Freudian, Oedipal, violent argument with ... Robert Traill Spence Lowell, III.

After the son knocked his father down in a manic fit (bipolar disorder would mark the poet’s life for many years to come), the latter sent the former not to a mental institution but to Kenyon College, where young Lowell met his literary father, his mentor, Allen Tate. The New Criticism southerner taught the budding poet the importance of controlled craft over the artistic material, so obvious in poems such as the one dealt with in the pages below. Tate also provided Lowell with a poetic statement to which “For the Union Dead” is an answer, in true, dialogic Bakhtinian fashion. Allen Tate’s challenge to Lowell is his “Ode to the Confederate Dead.” Once again, following in Oedipus’s footsteps, Robert Lowell answers back (more politely than in the

previously mentioned episode with his real father), an illustration of what Harold Bloom would call, a decade later, “the anxiety of influence.” Thus, the Civil War both unites and pits Tate and Lowell against each other. Another “poetic correspondent” to be acknowledged is Lowell’s good friend John Berryman, who had dealt in a very special way with the Shaw Monument in his first collection of poems, *The Dispossessed*, as far back as 1948. If Lowell commemorates the tragic story of a young and glamorous Boston Brahmin, a Civil War officer associated both with the Lowells’ and the nation’s history, Berryman focuses on a “dispossessed,” a “casual man,” who looks for shelter, on a cold February night, at the foot of the St. Gaudens Memorial that evokes Colonel Shaw’s gallant behavior. The homeless creature lies unheroically below the colonel’s horse: a pathetic figure, “The last straw of contemporary thought, / In shapeless failure...” (Berryman 42).

Writing the poem in the early months of 1960, Robert Lowell tries to position himself in relation to his previous poetry and in relation to other important poetic developments going on around him. *Life Studies*, the volume of poetry published the previous year (1959) had made him both famous and notorious. M.L. Rosenthal had coined the label “confessional poetry” to apply to the kind of work Lowell had just come up with. He identified in the volume “a series of confidences, rather shameful, that one is honor-bound not to reveal,” immediately going on to define Lowell’s poetic performance as “impure art, magnificently stated but unpleasantly egocentric, somehow resembling the triumph of the skunks [in the poem “Skunk Hour”] over the garbage cans.” (Rosenthal 231-232) Lowell himself publicly defines his art, in his acceptance speech on the occasion of his winning the 1960 National Book Award for poetry, in relation to “cooked” and “raw” poetry:

Two poetries are now competing, a cooked and a raw. The cooked, marvelously expert, often seems laboriously concocted to be tasted and digested by a graduate seminar. The raw, huge blood-dripping gobbets of unseasoned experience are dished up for midnight listeners. There is a poetry that can only be studied, and a poetry that can only be declaimed, a poetry of pedantry, and a poetry of scandal.

It is worth remembering here that, having this distinction in mind, and having witnessed the success of Allen Ginsberg’s declamatory poetry in California a few years before, Robert Lowell was writing “For the Union Dead” to be “declaimed” by himself at the Boston Arts Festival in July 1960. The stage on which he would perform (actually the event mainly promotes visual and performance art) would be close to the public places he evokes in special ways in his poem (Boston Common, the State House, Shaw’s Memorial, all on top of Beacon Hill). Would his poem be a good illustration of Rosenthal’s definition of confessional poetry, would it be raw or cooked? Having sketched part of the dialogic pattern in which the poem function, a reference to the way in which Marjorie Perloff views Lowell’s combination of confessional raw material that foregrounds the “I” of the poet, in true Romantic fashion, and of the “Tolstoyan or Chekhovian mode usually called realism,” the latter promoting Lowell as a significant poet, is also relevant:

In *Life Studies*, one concludes, Lowell is trying to fuse two modes: (1) the Romantic mode which projects the poet's "I" in the act of self-discovery, and (2) the Tolstoyan or Chekhovian mode usually called realism. I would posit that it is his superb manipulation of the realistic convention, rather than the titillating confessional content, that is responsible for the so-called "breakthrough" of *Life Studies* and that distinguishes Lowell's confessional poetry from that of his less accomplished disciples. (Perloff 476)

Another point of departure that serves to situate Lowell's poem in a significant context is provided by an essay written by his wife, Elizabeth Hardwick, published in the December 1959 issue of Harper's magazine, on the fall from grace, the decay of once glamorous Boston. Hardwick speaks about a beautiful figment of the American imagination which appears now to be a thing of the past: "There has never been anything quite like Boston as a creation of the American imagination, or perhaps one should say as a creation of the American scene. Some of the legend was once real, surely" (in Davison 283). Lowell will want to address this legend in relation to what was drastically changing Boston's cultural and political landscape at that time (the poem was composed from January to June 1960). What was happening in Boston will be hinted at in the way the poem juxtaposes public places associated with "the city upon the hill"'s traditional identity with the hidden forces that appear to undermine, even displace, important coordinates of this "creation of the American imagination."

Lowell's poem invites a number of questions, weaving together a number of Boston architectural landmarks and historical moments, which apparently serve as the background against which a central Boston monument, the Augustus St. Gaudens Memorial to Robert Gould Shaw, standing close to the hub of Boston, the Massachusetts State House, acquires a special significance. Is it a good example of *ekphrasis*, a rhetorical and poetic undertaking that amounts to a description and commentary of a work of art, and is it used to shed light on the past or on the present? Is it about the real person that the monument commemorates, the Civil War hero Robert Gould Shaw? If so, is this another instance of Lowell taking poetic advantage of his family's illustrious past, as an emblem of Puritan America (Robert Gould Shaw had married Charles Russell Lowell's sister, both young men then dying glorious deaths at the head of Union troops)? Is it about Robert Lowell himself reconsidering his own identity in relation to Boston, its urban space at the intersection of history and current contemporary issues? These and other questions are conjured up and then included in the fabric of a poem of a considerably dialogic nature, in which stated, implied and significantly left out things engage in complex cultural conversations, in which important urban spaces relate in various ways to the prevailing metaphor of Boston, "the city upon a hill," an emblem of the long and developing story of American Exceptionalism across the centuries.

The poem's epigraph ("Relinquit Omnia Servare Rem Publicam") challenges the different grammar of the Latin inscription on Robert Gould Shaw's monument at the heart of the poem and of Boston itself ("Relinquit Omnia Servare Rem Publicam.") The July 31st, 1863 anonymous letter announcing the young officer's death to his parents stresses his individual

gesture, to be compared favourably with the feats of ancient heroes: “He died well. Neither Greece nor Rome can excell his heroism.” This message is also clearly conveyed by the monument’s motto, “relinquit.” When the monument was unveiled at the end of the 19th century, it was obviously Shaw’s, even if the bas-relief on it featured the black soldiers as well. A young Boston Brahmin (like Lowell himself) had fought and died at the head of an all-black regiment (the 54th Massachusetts) for the abolitionist cause. The soldiers are anonymous, even if marginally present, in a historical bronze narrative focusing on a “great man.”

In Lowell’s poetical piece, the plural “they gave up” (relinquunt) replaces the singular verb form “relinquit”: “They (instead of he) gave up everything for the common good.” Is the pronoun “they” inclusive of “he” (Shaw as one of them), or is it exclusive (they, not necessarily him) in Lowell’s epigraph? Typical of the poet would be to create a tension between the two interpretations, and this piece is no exception, as its ending will show.

Although “For the Union Dead” was composed in the first half of 1960, the immediacy conveyed by the present tense and the adverb “now” - “The old South Boston Aquarium stands/ in a Sahara of snow now. Its broken windows are boarded./The bronze weathervane cod has lost half its scales.”¹ are contrived, proved wrong by documentary evidence. The desolate south Boston Aquarium “cityscape” pictured here in the present (1960) dates back to 1954 or even earlier. Significantly, Lowell had returned to Boston (1955) after the demolition of that Boston landmark. The demolition was largely due to the then mayor’s reluctance to appropriate funds for its rehabilitation, as the official site of the current New England Aquarium states:

After the war, the underfunded and neglected aquarium was in a pitiful state. Almost half the tanks were empty, the water in the occupied tanks was murky, only one seal of the colony remained, and the building was in dire need of structural repair. At the time, it was estimated that the rehabilitation would require \$300,000. Mayor Hynes refused to appropriate the money and ordered the building closed.

John Haines had been mayor of Boston (1950-1960) throughout what Lowell called “the tranquilized Fifties” in his “Memories of West Street and Lepke.” An Irish American, Haines succeeded another member of what was becoming the “Irish ascendancy” in Boston, James Michael Curley, a legendary figure of the Irish community there, the one mentioned in the “post - James Michael Curley age” hinted at above, very much still present in the late Fifties for Lowell and other Bostonians, which will become apparent and significant for the interpretation of the mysterious ending of the poem.

In the initial Old Boston Aquarium scene, the desolation of its pitiable present (actually, 1954) tinged with a reproach, or even an accusation, as the ending will show, stands next to the excitement experienced by Lowell the young child visiting the place around 1930: “Once my nose crawled like a snail on the glass;/ my hand tingled/ to burst the bubbles/ drifting

¹ All the subsequent references to R.Lowell’s poetry will consist of parenthesized page numbers pointing to the edition of Lowell’s *Collected Poems* volume listed in the **References** at the end.

from the noses of the cowed, compliant fish,”(376) and to the nostalgia the adult feels, “I often sigh still/ for the dark downward and vegetating kingdom/ of the fish and reptile (Ibid).

The next scene, no longer in the present, shows the speaker of the poem pressing against the fence of the Boston Common, on the other side of the central public space pictured in the poem (the State House on top of the Beacon Hill, close to the Shaw Memorial). It is no longer “now”(not 1960, not 1954) but “one morning last March,” and the urban development going on beyond the fence in Boston’s and America’s oldest park is pictured as the massive havoc wrought by prehistoric monsters: “Behind their cage,/ yellow dinosaur steamshovels were grunting/ as they cropped up tons of mush and grass/ to gouge their underworld garage” (Ibid.) Beacon Hill, the prominent core of Boston, is shown as trembling in the terrible earthquake that municipal work inflicts on the symbols of the past. The State House, on top of the hill, propped by “a girdle of orange, Puritan-pumpkin colored girders”(Ibid.) shakes, and so does Colonel Shaw’s monument: “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”(Ibid.) It appears that the “yellow dinosaurs” of the present are at the center, and that Boston’s proud monuments fade, shy away in an attitude reminiscent of the “cowed, compliant fish” at the beginning of the poem.

The next movement in the poem juxtaposes the tragic Civil War episode of the failed 1863 attack against the Confederates at Fort Wagner, in which the blacks are foregrounded and the ceremony of the inauguration of the monument, more than three decades later, during which William James feels the living presence of the black heroes: “Two months after marching through Boston, half the regiment was dead;/ at the dedication,/ William James could almost hear the bronze Negroes/ breathe”(Ibid.) Immediately afterward, the impression that the monument is dedicated to the black soldiers, not to Colonel Shaw, is confirmed: “*Their* [italics mine] monument sticks like a fishbone/ in the city's throat”(377). “Their” monument no longer belongs to the present; what is more, it is seen as unwelcome, sticking in some people’s throats. If it is *their* monument then, then this explains why Lowell changes the real monument’s epigraph, to foreground the anonymous black soldiers.

The next sequence deals with the young colonel, who, like his soldiers, appears to be out of place (“out of bounds”) in an unheroic present: “He has an angry wrenlike vigilance, / a greyhound's gently tautness; / he seems to wince at pleasure, / and suffocate for privacy. / 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”(Ibid.) Shaw’s portrayal evinces Lowell’s fascination with sublime, doomed figures. Like Captain Ahab, Colonel Shaw defies death, at the same time taking his men to certain destruction in a suicidal attack. He, like Ahab, “rejoices” in the power he has to choose death for the soldiers and for himself. What the poet says in an 1965 interview with Alfred Alvarez confirms Lowell’s fascination with such ambitious characters:

I always think there are two great symbolic figures that stand behind American ambition and culture. One is Milton's Lucifer and the other is Captain Ahab: these two sublime ambitions that are doomed and ready, for their idealism, to face any amount of violence (Alvarez 42).

There follow scenes of decay and oblivion associated with the past (old white churches with an air of "sparse, sincere rebellion," frayed Union flags, stone statues of Union soldiers "growing slimmer" every year). Since "the tranquilized Fifties" have not lost their impact on American consciousness, "there are no statues for the last war [World War II] here"(Ibid.) However, again in the very heart of Boston, near the State House and Shaw's Memorial, on Boylston Street, Lowell finds a grim reminder of one terrible World War II episode in a commercial photograph which shows a Mosler Safe. Tens of thousands of people in Hiroshima have been killed by the atom bomb, but the safe, in the middle of the utter destruction, has remained intact. Terrible advertisement indeed for the "Rock of Ages" that survived the atomic blast!

The brief scene which ensues - "When I crouch to my television set, / the drained faces of Negro school-children rise like / balloons" (Ibid.) - obviously refers to a distinct moment in the early stages of what would be called the African-American Civil Rights Movement: black children, scared by racist Southerners, insist on going to a desegregated school in the late fifties. The black faces of the African-American children appear to be drained of color, while the speaker feels embarrassed, crouching in front of his TV. Those Civil War black soldiers featuring on the Boston monument appear to have died in vain "now" in 1960, at a time when racism was still strong in the U.S.

At that time and in that place, Colonel Shaw, already shown as "out of bounds," is pictured not as a firm figure on the bronze bas-relief at the top of Beacon Hill, next to the State House, defying the elements and time itself, but as an evanescent, drifting, floating figure "riding on his bubble," in some sort of parallel universe. The South Boston Aquarium has disappeared, but its aquatic imagery returns in the shape of the "giant-finned cars" which "nose forward like fish" (378). Is there a connection between these huge limousines and the municipal executives of a city where Colonel Shaw, his black soldiers' heroism and the St.Gaudens monument are "out of bounds," and the image of the monument sticking in the city's throat? Are the people driving these "giant-finned cars" the ones who ordered the disfigurement of the historic Boston Common and the demolition of the South Boston Aquarium?

The poem's last words seem to refer to what is happening in the running of Boston at the time: in the large cars Lowell sees "a savage servility/ [which]slides by on grease"(Ibid.) "Grease" has many meanings but here it definitely refers to "bribery, corruption" (see "to grease one's palm"). In the apparently oxymoronic phrase "savage servility," the adjective evokes a predatory, brutal organization, while the very abstract noun goes with "corruption" very well, which might make a public servant "serve" private interests.

John Haines, the Irish American mayor of Boston who had the Boston Aquarium demolished seems to have been an honorable man ("so are they all, all honorable men," to quote

from Shakespeare's Mark Antony in *Julius Caesar*). He never went to jail for corruption, unlike his former boss, a prominent member of the same ethnic group, James Michael Curley, who had gone to jail twice, each time being re-elected by his Irish American voters for another term in office. He had been mayor of Boston four times, serving as Governor of Massachusetts once and as congressional representative twice. The son of a poor Irishman who had, after his early death, left him to fend for himself in a hostile world, James Michael Curley realized what his best option was: a political leader of the numerous, but very poor Irish community in Boston, in a political landscape that was changing fast. From the end of the nineteenth century onward, as a result of massive immigration, the Irish poor significantly outnumbered the Boston natives, their leaders becoming extremely rich and influential before long, although a mayor's salary, for example, was relatively modest.

Jack Beatty, in his biography *The Rascal King: The Life and Times of James Michael Curley* (1992), describes the developments that the poor Michael Curley, the father of the future Boston VIP, may not have noticed around him in his short and difficult life:

Michael could not have known it, but the Civil War was changing the social contract of Boston. In place of the open conflict of the forties and fifties², his generation of Irish immigrants would experience a new relationship with the Protestant establishment of Boston. One scholar calls it "deference democracy," a system under which Irish voters elected Yankee mayors and received tokenist patronage in return. (Beatty 21)

"Deference democracy" did not last long: when the demographics changed in their favor, the Irish poor created their own political "aristocracy," which dominated Boston public life in the first six decades of the 20th century. Then, in late 1960, after Robert Lowell had finished his poem, a member of the Irish elite would become the first Catholic president of the United States. JFK's great, but short American narrative was not the rags-to-riches story of the "rascal king," who had become immensely rich during his long terms as a top state employee with a moderate salary. The Kennedys had been prominent in Massachusetts and American political life for three generations, the Irish equivalent of the Lowells and of the Winslows, the Protestant Boston Brahmins.

When Lowell moved back to Boston in 1955, he did not fail to show, slightly self-ironically, his privileged position in "the city upon the hill" in such poems as "Memories of West Street and Lepke." He had been born close to the top of Beacon Hill, the center of Brahmin Boston; now he took up residence, not on Chestnut Street, but at another address, 239 Marlborough Street:

I hog a whole house on Boston's
"hardly passionate Marlborough Street,"
where even the man

² The forties and fifties of the nineteenth century.

scavenging filth in the back alley trash cans,
has two children, a beach wagon, a helpmate,
and is “a young Republican”(187)

If even the “filth scavenger” in the Protestant, highly privileged area of Beacon Hill was a Republican, Boston’s Irish voted Democrat. While Lowell was writing “Memories...” and “For the Union Dead,” Edwin O’Connor’s novel *The Last Hurrah*, first published in 1956, achieved tremendous success throughout America as the fictional rendition of James Michael Curley’s tumultuous, and very controversial, career. The protagonist’s name is Frank Skeffington, but everything else unmistakably refers to Curley. Skeffington, the offspring of poor Irish immigrants, serves, like Curley, four times as mayor of an imaginary New England town, in which he has to combine good intentions and good deeds with compromise and corruption in order to reach his goals: to defeat the opposition of the town’s elite, to be liked by the poor, to become immensely rich himself. Skeffington is painfully aware that politics is not the best place to look for people with high principles. He is seen by other characters as an engaging rogue, preferable to an utter fool or to an impractical idealist. The book’s impact was such that, two years later, it was soon turned into a John Ford film with Spencer Tracy as the protagonist. The complexities of a character that is obviously a rogue, but who has considerable redeeming virtues, appealed to large audiences in what was called above “the post - James Michael Curley age” Lowell was experiencing at that time.

Lowell was probably impressed by the ease and efficiency of the contemporary Boston “monster,” but still waiting, like the quixotic Colonel Shaw, for the “blessèd break,” the moment when heroism and the community spirit, whose emblematic images are linked to the public spaces of Protestant Boston, are recovered. In his book on Lowell’s public poetry, Patrick Cosgrave views the poem in positive terms, as conjuring up the virtues of the past: “In this poem, and generally in the volume, he re-discovers the contemporaneity of history .. in a positive sense, in that the past is encouraged to bring forward, not its sins only, but its virtues” (Cosgrave 149). The reading above seems to encourage another interpretation: although Lowell is keen on preserving the tension, ambivalence and ambiguity of the poem as verbal icon that he learned from his Modernist masters, there is hardly any piece of evidence showing that “For the Union Dead” is aimed at resuscitating the lost world of his Boston Brahmin ancestors. Even if his poem has brought to the fore again the figure of the Civil War hero, for Lowell, the world of the shaking State House and Shaw Memorial, of the disfigured and preyed upon Boston Common are meant to draw attention to what he sees as the dubious, unprincipled character of a world of giant-finned cars and of strained faces of black school-children. He realizes that the world is changing and that principles and notions, as well as the power of an author’s artistic imagination, are no longer as dependable as they appeared to be once, somehow anticipating such observations as Edward Said’s about author, work and identity in the postmodern, globalization age:

The notion neither of author, nor of work, nor of nation is as dependable as it once was, and for that matter the role of imagination, which used to be a central one, along with that of identity has undergone a Copernican transformation in the common understanding of it. Is it real, or is it only a discursive function? Where is it located? Is it individual or collective? Moreover, a new relation between the private and the public spheres, each interpenetrating and modifying the other, has shifted the ground almost totally... (Said 64-65)

Obviously, considering the text's highly dialogic pattern, it would be simplistic to see the poem as displaying a distinct agenda, the product of deliberate craft and absolute control over the texts, people and characters it engages with. In dealing with Boston's and America's "contemporaneity of history" Lowell is undoubtedly aware of the fact that he cannot faithfully capture the present and the past: he largely comes up with a subjective artistic vision in a complex dialog about solid and less solid private and public space, about himself as an inhabitant of several communities, of several worlds undergoing change.

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