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### WARS CIVIL AND UNCIVIL

#### Family, Culture, and the Child in Lowell's Poetry



When Robert Trail Spence Lowell IV was born on 1 March 1917 at his grandfather Winslow's Chestnut Street townhouse on Boston's genteel Beacon Hill, his father, a naval officer, was away on sea duty, and the United States, its Atlantic shipping the target of unrestricted attack by German U-boats, hovered on the brink of war. One month after Lowell's birth, on 2 April 1917, Woodrow Wilson asked Congress to declare war on Germany and Germany's allies, announcing that "the world must be made safe for democracy." Four days later, Congress passed the declaration, and the United States entered the Great War and made it global.

Lowell would later remark in an eloquent posthumous tribute to Randall Jarrell that this intimate friend's key subject was his "lost, raw childhood, only recapturable in memory and imagination. Above all, childhood! . . . For Jarrell this was the divine glimpse, lifelong to be lived with, painfully and tenderly relived, transformed, matured—man with and against woman, child with and against adult" (*Prose* 96). Lowell's preoccupation with childhood was as pervasive as Jarrell's, and Lowell's treatment of war, another key subject of Jarrell's, was if anything still more pervasive. Lowell's preoccupation with war, a cultural phenomenon that dominated both the public world of his growing-up years, and his own troubled childhood family circle, reached into every era of human history, and an engagement with the problem of war had a shaping influence on every phase of Lowell's artistic development. The themes of childhood and war are insistently linked in Lowell's poetry, which constantly sets images of war against images of domestic conflict, "man with and against woman, child with and against adult."

Lowell, in his poignant, early, neglected “Buttercups” from *Lord Weary’s Castle*, or in the vivid childhood passages in “Mills of the Kavanaughs,” would presage his own lifelong need to painfully and tenderly relive childhood experience, a need that led Lowell to write many published and unpublished autobiographical sketches in prose, to craft an autobiographical sequence in *Life Studies* that roots itself deeply in childhood, to write the many child-centered poems in *History* and *Day by Day*, and to weave frequent allusions to childhood through dozens of other poems throughout his oeuvre. These include the emotionally ambiguous opening of *Near the Ocean’s* “Waking Early Sunday Morning,” where the poet yearns “to feel the unpolluted joy / and criminal leisure of a boy / — no rainbow smashing a dry fly / in the white run is as free as I” (11-14) and the equally complex opening of “For the Union Dead,” where Lowell recalls the moment when, as a boy, “my nose crawled like a snail on the glass” of the “old South Boston Aquarium,” while “my hands tingled / to burst the bubbles / drifting from the noses of the cowed, compliant fish” (5-7). The yearning to return to the innocence and freedom of a remembered childhood is ironically— and characteristically— undercut in these famous poems by undertones of betrayal, violence, and imprisonment, and both “Waking Early Sunday Morning” and “For the Union Dead” soon drift toward inward encounters with the outward images of a world dominated by war.

Childhood experience reemerged powerfully as a subject of continuous exploration in the work of a wide range of poets born after 1910 including Lowell, Elizabeth Bishop, Randall Jarrell, John Berryman Theodore Roethke, Gwendolyn Brooks, Dylan Thomas, Philip Larkin, Allen Ginsberg, Sylvia Plath and many, many others for the first time since the first generation of English and American romantics. This startling reemergence goes unremarked in such conventional accounts of the poetry that followed modernism as M. L. Rosenthal’s *New Modern Poetry*, James E. B. Breslin’s *From Modern to Contemporary*, and David Perkins’s *History of Modern Poetry: Modernism and After*.<sup>1</sup> Yet this is a phenomenon of unusual importance and persistence: our leading poetry reviews remain full of poems that return memorably to scenes of childhood, recreated as the site of formative and (often) traumatic early experience. This recurrent preoccupation

with childhood in the several generations that have followed modernism demands more considered study. I propose to read Lowell's preoccupation with childhood through the lens of childhood studies, a newly emerging, multidisciplinary field of study of potentially enormous scope and importance that concerns itself with the ways cultures construct and have constructed childhood. Childhood studies aims to explore, among other things, the diverse ways that writers and other creative artists represent and have represented childhood. A diverse range of postmodern poets, including such first generation postmodernists as Robert Lowell, lend themselves to readings from the perspective of childhood studies because they display an extraordinarily persistent concern with exploring the processes and anomalies of individual childhood development.

The difference between modernist poets, who tend to elide childhood, and postmodernist poets, who richly and variously represent it, is quite marked. From the perspective of childhood studies, one feels compelled to argue that a renewed preoccupation with the marginalized child or adolescent as he or she passes through crucial stages in the painful and uncertain processes of individual human development emerges as a distinguishing feature of several of the most vigorous branches of postmodern poetry. In Lowell's case, this preoccupation with childhood links very strongly to an equally powerful and persistent preoccupation with war, perhaps because, in Lowell's imagination, the process of growing up was something very much like war, and because from childhood through adulthood the personal and cultural landscapes he inhabited were engulfed on the one hand by unresolved conflicts and losses from childhood or adolescence and on the other hand by the presence of war or the lingering threat of war.

In 1927 Robert Lowell, a ten-year-old boy growing up in a three-story brick rowhouse at 91 Revere Street on Boston's Beacon Hill, was facing many of the issues—loss, abandonment, emotional abuse, and feelings of powerlessness and moral confusion—that were simultaneously confronting such then-youthful colleagues-to-be as Jarrell and Elizabeth Bishop. On the face of it, Lowell's situation might seem safer and more stable. His parents remained together and would never divorce. He descended, on both sides, from prominent Boston families and

his future education was already marked out for him at such exclusive schools as St. Marks and Harvard University, each of which could claim an ancestor or living relation as president. Still, his first ten years had been haunted by feelings of marginalization and dispossession that would only intensify. In "91 Revere St.," Lowell recalled his feelings about attending

the boarding school for which I had been enrolled at birth, and was due to enter in 1930. I distrusted change, knew each school since kindergarten had been more constraining and punitive than its predecessor, and believed the suburban country day schools were flimsily disguised fronts for reformatories. (LS 28)

As Lowell recalled his life on 91 Revere Street, "I felt drenched in my parents' passions." These passions took the form of ongoing, nightly verbal warfare overheard by the young poet-in-the-making during "the two years my mother spent in trying to argue my father into resigning from the Navy" (LS 19). Lowell recalled the "arthritic spiritual pains" of this period, during which "Mother had violently set her heart on the resignation. She was hysterical even in her calm." The wrenching effect of this not-altogether-civil domestic combat went deep into Lowell's psyche, and his father's ultimate defenselessness, which led him to mumble "Yes, yes, yes," in nighttime conversations with his wife overheard by their eavesdropping son, made it clear that his father would not be able to defend his son in case of aggression from a mother whose threatening presence in various subtle forms was a daily reality for Lowell: "I grew less willing to open my mouth. I bored my parents, they bored me" (LS 19). When, in 1927, Lowell's father finally did resign from the Navy, the one institution in which he seemed to have a place, an identity, and a recognized history, Lowell saw this act as marking his father's voluntary renunciation of the last threads of his masculinity and personal identity. Of his father's attempts to explain his resignation to his naval friends, Lowell recalled "Those dinners, those apologies! Perhaps I exaggerate their embarrassment because they hover so grayly in recollection and

seem to anticipate ominously my father's downhill progress as a civilian and Bostonian" (LS 43).

Lowell's conflicted feeling about the military, about his native Boston and about his father's lack of authority— his moral and emotional absence— in the face of Lowell's threatening, all-powerful mother, are indirectly represented in "Christmas Eve Under Hooker's Statue," published in 1946, when the poet was twenty-nine and just after WWII came to a close. Lowell's ill-matched parents never divorced, but because of their emotional rejection of him— Lowell would learn from his first psychiatrist, the poet Merrill Moore, that, though an only child, he had been "unwanted" (Mariani 27)<sup>2</sup>— he experienced an early "expulsion from paradise" without ever leaving the Lowell hearthside. "Christmas Eve Under Hooker's Statue" begins with a modern scene darkened by the Second World War— "Tonight a black-out"— then moves immediately to an explicitly Biblical framing of the theme of expulsion from paradise, juxtaposed against the celebratory rituals of Christmas.

Twenty years ago  
I hung my stocking on the tree, and hell's  
Serpent entwined the apple in the toe  
To sting the child with knowledge. (1-4)

Here a hidden serpent lurks inside a childish token of reward and abundance, the Christmas stocking. But unlike the serpent in Genesis or Milton, Lowell's version of "hell's serpent" is under no obligation to argue a reasoning *adult* into sin. This lurking serpent can strike from a hidden point of vantage without warning, at a child innocently going about his business, and thereby "sting the child with knowledge." Lowell transforms a familiar figure associated with a child's playful and reassuring ceremonies of innocence— a Christmas stocking— and literally "loads" it with original sin, as emblemized by "hell's / serpent" which entwines "the apple in the toe." In this revisionary parable, then, the Christmas tree, conventionally associated with the birth and enduring life of the redeemer-child, is perverted into a bitterer tree: the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil whose fruit condemned men and women to labor, sin, and death. The gigantic and imposing bronze figure of General Joseph

Hooker, decked out in Civil War officer's tunic, sword, and broad-brimmed cavalry hat and mounted on an impressive stallion, stands on a lofty and massive granite platform, outside the Boston Statehouse, a few blocks up Beacon Hill from Lowell's 91 Revere Street. This visually imposing, yet martially hollow figure now enters the poem, with emphatic, ironic finality.

Hooker's heels  
Kicking at nothing in the shifting snow,  
A cannon and a cairn of cannon balls,  
Rusting before the blackened Statehouse, know  
How long the horn of plenty broke like glass  
In Hooker's gauntlets. (4-9)

Despite the massive statue erected in his honor, Hooker was a disaster in his most important Civil War role. For when Hooker, though an effective divisional and corps commander, was briefly appointed commander of the Grand Army of the Potomac, he was grievously mauled by Robert E. Lee's Army of Northern Virginia at the Battle of Chancellorsville on 1-3 May 1863 and forced to retreat, at the loss of 17,000 Union casualties, despite commanding more than twice as many men. Thus, under Hooker's leadership, the Union suffered perhaps its most humiliating defeat of the Civil War—and Lee won his most glorious victory. When, a month later, Hooker offered his resignation on the eve of the Battle of Gettysburg, it was promptly accepted by President Lincoln, to Hooker's surprise and chagrin. General George Meade, awakened in the field in the dead of night to receive his command, went on to win a decisive Union victory (Foote 450-51).

When the Union ultimately won the war, Hooker, despite his very public failure at the highest level of command, was given the monumental treatment by his native state—an irony by no means lost on Lowell, who positions Hooker as a hapless figure uncomfortably yet fixedly representing established cultural and parental authority. Held in apparent honor by society, he is really feckless, “kicking at nothing in the shifting snow.” Lowell's Hooker, by analogy to Lowell's father, is a “blundering butcher,” his butchery not the consequence of deliberate malice but of hapless incompetence in the face of a more brilliant and deter-

mined tactician. For, in Lowell's view, his father, as a naval officer, was overwhelmed and defeated by Lowell's mother as clearly as Hooker was outgeneraled by Lee and Stonewall Jackson, leaving Lowell to be "mowed down" like the Union volunteers at Chancellorsville. Lowell's father, firmly identified in Lowell's mind with "the mob of ruling-class Bostonians" ("Commander Lowell" 64), is inadequate, despite the apparent advantages resident in patriarchal authority, to match the insistence, will, and verbal adroitness of Lowell's mother Charlotte. In Lowell's world, as in Melville's, "all wars are boyish" and thus in Lowell's ironic critique of romantic myths of war, children are by no means exempt either as targets of violence or as perpetrators of violence. For figures of social or martial authority can themselves be shown to act from a truculent innocence or naïveté that results in human suffering on a massive scale. In this cold, dark world "I ask for bread, my father gives me mould." And, on the cold, dark Boston Common, alongside the "blackened Statehouse"—blackened to prevent Allied shipping from being silhouetted against a lighted skyline and thereby sunk, as many were, in the first year of US involvement in WWII, by prowling German U-boats—the threat of premature knowledge lurks much as the threat of a sinful fall had lurked for Lowell's Puritan forebears. In evoking the motif of expulsion from paradise in "Christmas Eve Under Hooker's Statue" in 1946, Lowell was deliberately placing himself at the end of a long tradition of Western literature and thought. In retrospect, one can also see that Lowell was placing himself amidst the still-emerging and intellectually radical mode of understanding childhood that had already engaged poets like Bishop, Jarrell, and Berryman and that would, in the next several decades, emphatically and decisively reconfigure the postmodern poet's mythic and personal encounters with childhood.

Lowell's "Hooker" alludes to Christmas as a time of anxiety and conflict, implicated in the knowing recognition of one's own inherent sinfulness and potential violence. Lowell's Christmas in 1936 marked a sharp turning point in his life and led quite directly to his meeting with Jarrell (and more indirectly to his meeting with Bishop, to whom Jarrell introduced him in 1947). In December 1936, the 19-year-old Lowell was halfway through his second year at Harvard, whose president was his

cousin Lawrence Lowell, and living in college rooms not far from his parents' townhouse at 170 Marlborough Street—a three story brick structure with plate-glass front doors on a quiet, tree-lined street in Boston's fashionable Back Bay. Lowell had been engaged in a running battle with his parents for years, and lately these relations had undergone steadily increasing strain. One bone of contention was Lowell's determination to become a poet. His parents intended that he graduate from Harvard, settle into a profitable business career, and marry a woman of the Boston social elite.

His mother Charlotte, who by all accounts focused almost entirely on externals and in the process persistently denied the emotional life of her son, claimed, as she wrote in a letter, that "Neither Daddy nor I wish in any way to force you into our way of life or behavior." Still, they would withhold any future financial support unless he complied.<sup>3</sup> In his late poem "Art of the Possible" from *Day by Day*, Lowell recalled his mother complaining of "Your profession of making what can't be done / the one thing you can do. . ." (1-2). Lowell resented that Harvard had been chosen for him by his parents, chiefly his mother, just as she had chosen his boarding school, St. Marks, and, before that, the Brimmer School—which was primarily for older girls. Lowell recalled that, while there, "I wished I were an older girl. I wrote Santa Claus for a field hockey stick. To be a boy at Brimmer was to be small, denied, and weak" (*LS* 27). Lowell would remark of his five months in prison as a conscientious objector in 1943, "I was thankful to find jail gentler than boarding school or college—an adult fraternity." Lowell noted that he "grew congenial with other idealist felons, who had homemade faiths" and added slyly that after reading Samuel Butler "and God knows what . . . a thousand pages of Proust[,] I left jail more educated—not as they wished *re-educated*" (*Prose* 279). Seven years before his imprisonment, Lowell, who had yet to publish a poem, had already developed his own homemade faith—in poetry. And he had already dedicated himself with an almost religious fervor to becoming a poet: a plan that, of necessity, and perhaps by intention, set him at odds with his family.

Not only did Lowell's parents reject Lowell's plans to become a poet. They moved to break up his "unsuitable" engagement to Anne Dick, a woman of middle-class origins, six

years Lowell's senior. (The engagement would burn itself out of its own accord in a few months.) On 22 December 1936, urged on by Charlotte Lowell, Lowell's father wrote a stiffly formal and disapproving letter to Anne Dick's father, objecting to her visits to his college rooms. "Such behavior is contrary to all college rules, and most improper for a girl of good repute." Paul Mariani observes that "If the letter was meant to wound, it certainly succeeded."<sup>4</sup>

Lowell, who had long displayed signs of the manic-depressive disorder that would remain undiagnosed into the 1950s, responded with bewilderment and rage when Anne Dick handed him the letter on 27 December. As a small child, Lowell had worried that "to judge from my father, men between the ages of six and sixty did nothing but meet new challenges, take on heavier responsibilities, and lose all freedom to explode" (*LS* 28). On that day, Lowell himself exploded. He asked Anne Dick to drive him to his parents' house and there he knocked his father down, after formally presenting him with the note his father had sent to the parents of Anne Dick. In a poem from *Lord Weary's Castle* explicitly titled "Rebellion," Lowell would make the first of a series of attempts to come to terms with this event, the symbolic and practical import of which would take him a lifetime to unravel.

There was rebellion, father, when the mock  
French windows slammed and you hove backward, rammed  
Into your heirlooms, screens, a glass-cased clock,  
The highboy quaking at its toes. You damned  
My arm that cast your house upon your head  
And broke the chimney flintlock on your skull. (1-6)

Despite the vivid tumble of nouns and active verbs that rescues the poem's initial sentence, the passively voiced clause—"There was rebellion"—at the poem's beginning may seem less than forthright. Does it reflect an implicit attempt on Lowell's part to relieve himself of responsibility for his own actions? The fact that the "mock / French windows" providing entrance to 170 Marlborough St. "slammed" before his father "hove backward" makes clear that in this version Lowell enters the house violently.

The poem, while still addressing "my father," then shifts to a dreamlike and wishful fantasy:

Last night the moon was full:  
I dreamed the dead  
Caught at my knees and fell:  
And it was well with me, my father. (5-8)

On this moonlit night, the speaker's dream seems to take him to a Vergilian underworld, where the dead reach out in supplication, "And it was well with me, my father." Is there a feeling almost of triumph here? Has the rebellion succeeded? And will the apocalyptic process continue?

Then  
Behemoth and Leviathan  
Devoured our mighty merchants. None could arm  
Or put to sea. O father, on my farm  
I added field to field  
And I have sealed  
An everlasting pact  
With Dives to contract the world that spreads in pain. (8-18)

Yet this wishful dream of personal beneficence, in which one tries to sign a pact with the great merchant (Dives) to shrink the world's spreading miseries, falls apart when the son contemplates his past action: "But the world spread / When the clubbed flintlock broke my father's brain." The poem now no longer addresses the father, and it moves ever farther afield from biographical fact and, perhaps more important, dramatic credibility. Lowell didn't hit his father with a "clubbed flintlock" but with his fist, and of course he did not break his father's brain. The sense of contrivance here is palpable in a way that has been completely eliminated in his later treatments of his relations with his father. This poem suggests an impulse to explore his own experience in verse, but he has not yet mastered a means of presenting such experience with a fully effective sense of scale. By sheer persistence and skill, Lowell would one day master this difficult art. In any case, this poem remains a remarkable docu-

ment of a son's ambivalent feelings toward a father who can rebuke but not protect him.

It is worth comparing Lowell's treatment of this incident in 1946 with his more artistically mature treatment in *Notebook*. In the first version of that volume, *Notebook 1967-68*, Lowell addresses his memories in an unrhymed sonnet spoken to his former fiancée, Anne Dick, exploring the crisis that would soon lead to his departure to Kenyon College and Ransom's tutelage. Lowell's poem opens with Proustian detail, quieter memory-traces that gather toward a traumatic center:

My father's letter to your father, saying  
tersely and much too stiffly that he knew  
you'd been going to my college rooms alone—  
I can still almost crackle that slight note in my hand.  
I see your outraged father; you, his outraged daughter. (1-6)

Then the scene shifts to Lowell's own deeply troubled isolation, to his memory of reciting Milton's "Lycidas," a poem he was already turning to in times of trouble. And, then, suddenly, a shift to irrevocable action:

myself brooding in fire and a dark quiet  
on the abandoned steps of the Harvard Fieldhouse,  
calming my hot nerves and enflaming my mind's  
nomad quicksilver by saying *Lycidas*—  
then punctiliously handing the letter to my father.  
I knocked him down. (7-12)

Lowell's great physical strength here frightens even him. As Jahan Ramanzani notes,

Because of its highly wrought form, the elegy ["Lycidas"] calms and cools the young rebel. But it is not merely a brake on his oedipal episode: it also plays the opposite role, "enflaming" the poet's restless imagination. . . . Far from pacifying him, the recitation of the elegy is an act of symbolic rebellion that prepares for and parallels the physical act. (227)

Yet the style of this passage is far from the floridly wrought diction of "Lycidas." Each image is like a little snapshot and together they form a disconnected sequence. The reader has to infer the transitions and the connecting motivations. As Ramanzani suggests, "whereas Milton displaces the struggle for power from the domestic realm to the literary, Lowell redomesticates and literalizes it" (227). But the action is by no means merely literal, and here the implied connections between the form and fire of poetry and of domestic rebellion are surprising and cogent. For Lowell's family viewed his devotion to poetry as an act of rebellion. And in Lowell's poem, the act of knocking down his father follows almost immediately upon the recitation of "Lycidas," interrupted only by the formal gesture of "punctiliously" handing over his father's offending letter. Lowell's phrasing suggests that in his own former mind he was acting as if presenting a gentlemanly challenge in a duel. Except, of course, one doesn't challenge one's own father and in fact this particular fight took place without the formal controls and courtesies of a duel. Here, the awkward and awful just happens, and there is no way to return to the consoling rhythms of social formality. Then Lowell has to deal with the immediate consequences of his impulsive violence: consequences for his father, his family, his planned marriage, and himself.

He half-reclined on the carpet;  
Mother called from the top of the carpeted stairs—  
our glass door locking behind me, no cover; you  
idling in your station wagon, no retreat. (11-14)

The carpet on which his father half-reclined links to the carpeted stairs his mother calls from. Then the objects seem to take over "our glass door locking behind me, no cover." His parents, now protected, can see out at him, exposed. Will he ever see his way back in to their house? And with "you / idling in your station wagon, no retreat"—his fiancée is also behind a glass shield—he alone is exposed. Her claims on him and her own function as a witness to this humiliating domestic violence actually cut off his immediate escape from humiliation. One encounters no claim to authorial privilege here; the author renounces both the grand style of "Quaker Graveyard," which had once been native soil,

and the privileges of implied moral superiority over the parents against whom he rebels. Whatever their own abuses, he knows this is an act that he cannot justify. This young poet may know "Lycidas" by heart, but his emerging command of poetic tradition does not help him deal with the stresses and conundrums of ordinary life. This poem may be read as a kind of elegy for the concept of the privileged author. Yet it is by no means what M. L. Rosenthal termed the "most naked kind of confession," either ("Poetry as Confession" 154). For all its elements of literalness, it may best be read as an exploration of memory rather than a confession of self, inquiring without sentimentality, rationalization, or posturing into an event that the reader might relate to his or her own awkward and impulsive actions, actions that he or she might review amidst the private watches of humiliation and grief. As Lowell puts it in *Notebook's* immediately subsequent poem, "I struck my father; later my apology / hardly scratched the surface of his invisible / coronary . . . never to be effaced" (12-14). Despite that ancestral relic "the chimney flintlock," Lowell's (now retired) father is not represented in these poems in the context of the martial or naval marks of rank and station that so largely defined him in "91 Revere St." or the "Life Studies" sequence. On the other hand, the domestic realm is presented both as "the scene of the crime," complete with station wagon serving as the most prosaic of getaway cars, and as an emotional battleground. And as is true throughout Lowell's poetry, the child or adolescent is here dramatized as an isolated and embattled individual, enlisted in a struggle toward selfhood and independence in a context fraught with peril, guilt, and uncertainty.

Lowell's impulsive explosion, his act of striking his father to the floor, would precipitate the first in the series of connections that linked Lowell with Bishop, Jarrell, and Berryman in an unofficial network. Lowell's conflict with his parents over his fiancée was only the most recent in a long line of mysterious and disturbing actions by a son who would not be diagnosed manic-depressive and treated for nearly two decades. Dr. Merrill Moore, a thirty-three-year-old psychiatrist and a member of the Nashville Agrarians who was already treating Charlotte Lowell, was called in to consult on Robert's case. Moore's diagnosis might be summed up as too much family, too much Harvard, too

much Boston. And his prescription, to send Lowell to visit Allen Tate and John Crowe Ransom at Vanderbilt University, would have lasting implications for literary history. Dr. Moore provided good personal and literary advice, but not much psychiatry; he didn't get at the root causes of Lowell's problems. But he set Lowell on a course that would shape his career and lead directly to his meeting with Jarrell at Kenyon College in the fall of 1937, where these young poets, both refugees from unwelcoming homes that were the scenes of emotional violence, would share the more welcoming upper story of Mr. Ransom's home at Kenyon.

Lowell's "For the Union Dead" vastly expands the context of individual experiences of loss presented in more concentrated form in the previous poems under discussion, exploring, in a succession of subtly linked vignettes, 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 Lowell himself—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 a Latin epigraph that slightly but significantly alters the motto to the St. Gaudens statue dedicated to Colonel Shaw's regiment (the altered version reads "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" (1-2, 4). A diminished survivor, the aquarium is just the first of many attenuated monuments that populate the poem. Soon center stage shifts to St. Gaudens' "shaking Civil War relief," now "propped by a plank splint against the garage's earthquake" (23-24), and then to the neighboring Statehouse, also a monument that has relinquished 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, mechanized 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, a loss that, despite its horrors, had a lofty social purpose. But this is balanced by modern destruction of still more horrifying proportions, represented by a picture of "Hiroshima boiling" (56), a visual object which points towards two central postmodern fears, the threat of nuclear holocaust and the onset of what the poem portrays as a devouring commercialism, anxieties that similarly disturbed such friends as Bishop, Berryman, and Jarrell. For example, the nuclear destruction of Hiroshima and Nagasaki dismayed Randall Jarrell almost as profoundly as the firebombing of Hamburg did Lowell. The age of nuclear anxiety that followed (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 commercialism of 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.

As the poem presents its catalogue of losses, it also presents a peculiar, and parallel, catalogue 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 "bronzed weathervane cod" (3) still sits atop the roof, even though it "has lost half its scales." Later the fishes

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 (65-68).

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 as brutal mechanistic 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, icons that remain static except in the sense that they suffer physical erosion and a parallel erosion of their dignity, whether 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, the commercial viability of which overshadows in the minds of its promoters the human losses at Hiroshima, or the new mechanical fish, already described, that end the poem. Each of these survivors embodies the new, aggressively commercial, but mindless and mechanistic order.

By contrast, the displaced St. Gaudens statue is the central image linking the first group of survivors. It exists, preserving its "bronze Negroes" in a curious simulation of life. William James could "almost hear [them] breathe" (28), a half-life mirrored by the "stone statues of the abstract Union Soldier[s]", who "doze over muskets/ and muse through their sideburns" (45, 47-48). But the St. Gaudens statue differs from all the other static monuments in one sense: it "sticks like a fishbone in the city's throat" (29)—because it is an uncomfortable survivor, reminiscent of values, such 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 soldiers were rudely buried by the Confederate soldiers who mowed them down at Fort Wagner, in the form of that very "underworld garage" (16) being gouged underneath the Statehouse. The

continuing reality of racism is imaged again in “the drained faces of Negro school-children” whom the narrator observes on television attempting to integrate southern schools. Colonel Shaw is the central figure in the poem and his predicament bears more than a passing resemblance to the protagonist of “Falling Asleep over the Aeneid.” He is seen largely in terms of the way heroic death is memorialized and in terms of a culture that is on the verge of utter disappearance, at least in its urban manifestation. His heroism is uncomfortable even for the narrator who mourns its passing. 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.

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. (31-40)

His moral intensity as well as his rigidity, his wincing at pleasure, derive from a culture that has its roots in Puritan beliefs in sobriety and election, beliefs that seem incongruous amidst the pleasure-seeking of contemporary culture. He understands the value of sacrifice for a higher good, inflexible though he may be in its pursuit. Ultimately, Colonel Shaw’s maturity and high-mindedness, as well as his moral certainty, seems “out of bounds now,” even to this peculiarly sympathetic contemporary observer.

Opposing the public representation of inflexible but purposeful maturity that appears in “St. Gaudens’ shaking Civil War relief” of Colonel Shaw and his “Negro infantry” (23, 24), the private world of childhood remains a constant presence in this urban landscape, 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 imagery of the rest of the poem. 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” (12-13). The child’s impulse “to burst the bubbles / drifting from the noses of the cowed, compliant fish” (7-8) suggests a temptation toward violent gesture that is echoed throughout the poem. Of course, fish don’t have noses or make bubbles, 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 himself. His yearning “for the dark downward and vegetating kingdom / of the fish and reptile” (10-11) is a yearning to reach beyond the pre-moral awareness of early childhood to the amoral awareness of the lower orders of vertebrates. The body of the poem frequently echoes this yearning to escape from cognition and the pain of historical awareness, self-consciousness, and responsibility, an escape into pre-consciousness 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 orders but rejected by Colonel Shaw. The “parking spaces” that “luxuriate like civic / sandpiles in the heart of Boston” (17-18) suggest this lingering childishness in the minds of the city’s urban planners. But the speaker of the poem is not exempt, for when he “crouch[es] to his television set” to watch “the drained faces of Negro school children” (59-60), he is mimicking his own action as a child peering through the glass of the fish tank, and the school children’s faces, as they “rise like balloons” (60), echo the bubbles the child saw in the fish tank. They seem just as trapped as the fish. The child is thus complexly imaged as both aggressor and victim, in a separate world from the adult and yet inexorably linked to adult consciousness by the power the adult world has over the child.

Dream textures weave in and out of the poem, despite its prevailingly gritty, realistic tone, and dream-logic knits together the various strands I have been discussing. The poem’s logic resembles the logic of dreams in its subtle, associational movement, its many surrealistic images, and its curious pairings and transformations. The “abstract Union soldier” is lost in a dream, but the central dream-figure is Colonel Shaw himself. He is last seen

riding on his bubble,  
he waits  
for the blessed break. (62-64)

The bubble he rides survives, with subtle dream logic, from the fish tank, and from the faces of the school children that “rise like balloons.” Colonel Shaw’s yearning is to escape the vicarious simulation of life in which he is trapped, to depart a world that has no stable place for him in its awareness, and to achieve the privacy for which he now suffocates. Shaw’s final heroism may be the fact that he lingers still, in spite of his yearning to depart.

Randall Jarrell revealed his understanding of Lowell’s pairing of war and the embattled child when he concluded his study of “Fifty Years of American Poetry”—delivered at the National Poetry Conference in Washington in October 1962 under the nuclear shadow of the Cuban Missile Crisis—with praise for such then-recently-published poems as Lowell’s “For the Union Dead.” Jarrell reads this poem as suggesting that for his intimate friend Lowell

his own existence seems to him in some sense as terrible as the public world—his private world hangs over him as the public world hangs over others—he does not forsake the headlined world for the refuge of one’s private joys and decencies, the shaky garden of the heart; instead, as in his wonderful poem about Boston Common, he sees all these as the lost paradise of the childish past, the past that knew so much, but still didn’t know. (Jarrell 333)

His friend saw clearly that Lowell understood the individual as a figure inextricably bound up both in public and private history, and particularly in the recovery of childhood. Jarrell suggests this and more in his magical yet elusive closing phrase. Clearly, for Jarrell—as for Lowell—war and the child remain inexorably linked, interwoven with several of the most intransigent problems of human history. In fact, Jarrell anticipates a childhood studies approach when he pairs the recurrence in Lowell’s work of the isolated and embattled child with the simultaneous recurrence in his work of a preoccupation with war and the relics of war which

dominate both Lowell's private world and the "terrible public world" that hangs over all of us.

Lowell's friend Elizabeth Bishop certainly shared these perceptions and preoccupations, and her case for the value of Lowell's poetry refers to the power with which Lowell explored such themes and problems. In "Some Notes on Robert Lowell," a 1962 introduction, in Portuguese, to the Brazilian publication of a selection of Lowell's poems (an essay recently discovered and translated by George Monteiro), Bishop explains to her Brazilian readers that the title of Lowell's first major collection, *Lord Weary's Castle*,

comes from the old ballad about a poor stonemason named "Lambkin" who built a castle for one Lord Weary, but who was deprived of his just payment. In this legend Lowell sees a parable for the modern world—the "castle"—the crushing superstructure of our civilization.

In her 1962 introduction, Bishop underlines Lowell's postmodern tendencies, noting for her Brazilian audience that although his artistic "means" may seem traditional, Lowell resembles "our 'action painters' " in that he

expresses, with the same energy and beauty, the problems that any citizen of the United States who is over forty, has already faced and continues to face: the Depression, the War (or Wars), the Affluent Society, the ethics of foreign relations, the Bomb.

Three years earlier, she had praised Lowell's *Life Studies* (on its book jacket), for its literary refinement and social insight, noting that "A poem like 'My Last Afternoon with Uncle Devereux Winslow,' or 'Skunk Hour,' can tell us as much about the state of society as a volume of Henry James at his best."<sup>5</sup> Bishop read Lowell, then, in terms of his complex response to how the "crushing superstructure" of a culture can weigh down the individual, and his analysis of the subtle demands domestic intercourse, especially through the family, places on that same

individual. She responds, that is, to the way his poetry explores with dramatic, yet probing psychological insight, the inextricable involvement of the individual with a problematic, frequently controlling, and violent culture.

The romantic poets may have aspired to transcend suffering, and the modernists may have raged to give it order, but Lowell and such colleagues of Bishop, Jarrell and Berryman sought chiefly to survive suffering with selfhood more or less intact, and, if possible, to “change.” For these poets, what Bishop termed in a letter to Lowell the “real real protest”<sup>6</sup> was directed not against any single public issue or injustice or institution, whatever the explicit or implicit references to these in their work, but at something possibly more terrible and strange and intractable and surprising: at the problem of selfhood in the postmodern world, a problem deriving both from life’s immemorial fatality and from “the crushing superstructure of our civilization.” This crushing superstructure, still under mortgage, has magnified certain aspects of human fatality even as it minimizes others. For Lowell, the struggle of the child to emerge from under the weight imposed by contemporary cultural norms and expectations, as required by both the family and the state, was the issue that most persistently engaged his imagination.

In poem after poem Lowell was attempting to recover and explore “the lost paradise of the childish past,” a world that remains forever outside the range of one’s certainties and that may only be recreated through the painful and elusive processes of memory and art. His explorations within, and his wide-ranging sallies beyond, the shaky garden of the individual human heart lead him to inquire into history, culture, politics, and gender, as well as into books, retrospection, observation, and dreams, and into childhood, parenthood, adolescence, aging, and death. And throughout these inquiries his work, at its exploratory best, loses neither its emotional acuteness, nor its piercing insight and unlikely compassion. It loses neither its dry, witty, and curiously unbridled respect for human frailty and courage, nor its faculty for continuing surprise. Jarrell, who recognized that Lowell “bullied his early work” into existence, noted that, despite the vigor of his friend’s intelligence and will, Lowell’s “own vulnerable humanity has been forced in on him” (Jarrell 333). It is the “vulnerable humanity” in the work of Lowell—and

of such colleagues as Bishop, Jarrell and Berryman—emerging sometimes with delicacy, sometimes with wit, sometimes with pathos, sometimes with “barbarous immediacy,” and embodied frequently in the experience of the embattled child, that provides the common ground across which they observed one another and frequently met. And this remains, for me, at least, the source and basis of their continuing relevance and value. ☞

## Notes

1. The best treatment of childhood's importance for a member of this generation is, without question, Richard Flynn's *Randall Jarrell and the Lost World of Childhood* (Athens: U of Georgia P, 1990).
2. See also Lowell's "Unwanted" (*Day By Day*).
3. Charlotte Lowell to Robert Lowell, n.d. but early August 1936. Cited in Mariani, 55.
4. Robert Lowell, Sr., to Evans Dick, 23 December 1936. Cited in Mariani, 56.
5. Elizabeth Bishop, book jacket blurb for Robert Lowell's *Life Studies* (New York: Farrar Straus and Cudahy, 1959).
6. Elizabeth Bishop to Robert Lowell, 25 June 1961, in Houghton Library, Harvard University, bMS AM 1095. Quoted from Victoria Harrison, *Elizabeth Bishop's Poetics of Intimacy* (New York: Cambridge UP, 1993), 30.

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