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Post World War II Poetry

Robert Lowell's "For the Union Dead": A View from the Bridge

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Recollecting his childhood experiences in "91 Revere Street," Robert Lowell wrote,

> On bright spring days, Mr. Newell, a submerged young man from Boston University, took us on botanical hikes through the Arboretum. He had an eye for inessentials--read us Martha Washington's poems at the old State House, pointed out the roof of Brimmer School from the top of the Customs House, made us count the steps of the Bunker Hill Monument, and one rainy afternoon broke all rules by herding us into the South Boston Aquarium in order to give an unhealthy, eager, little lecture on the sewage-consumption of the conger eel.
>
> The old South Boston Aquarium stands
> in a Sahara of snow now. Its broken windows are boarded.

These two lines open Lowell's famous poem, "For the Union Dead," in which Lowell again surveys the Landscape of Boston. Somewhere in the heart of this city stands the boarded and weatherbeaten Aquarium, once a lively landmark, now a lonely, quiet sentinel. In the first three stanzas of the poem there is little hint of the other activities taking place in Boston. Instead, Lowell suspends time and place as we view the old aquarium, and he projects around us a feeling of loss, or emptiness, captured in the lonely images of a building surrounded by a "Sahara of snow" and its bronze weathervane cod that has lost its scales. The fish are gone. The tanks are dry. But the poet remembers them vividly. In his mind he peers into the fish tanks of the aquarium, watching the distortions of the water, and,

> my hand tingled
> to burst the bubbles
> drifting from the noses of cowed, compliant fish.

In this last long line, we can almost feel the fish gliding silently by, leaving a floating stream of tiny bubbles.

The poet is attracted to this form of life, but at the same time repulsed by it. The fish kingdom is an order of nature that

is mysterious and beautiful, with the potential for growth; yet at the same time it is primitive, without intelligence, and when unleashed can be a destructive force. But the fish seen in this tank have been haltered, trapped and isolated by man, suspended in time and placed out of their true element. As Lowell watches them there, gliding round and round their enclosure, they seem oblivious to anyother forms of life, inactive and myopic. In wanting to "burst the bubbles" perhaps Lowell wished to release them from the state of suspension man has imposed on them, or to jar them from their seemingly continual obliviousness to their condition. Yet Lowell still sees in the fish life something inviting or comforting, as he sighs for the "dark downward and vegetating kingdom/ of the fish and reptile." It is a silent world, a little eerie, a little unreal.

Suddenly Lowell's hand draws back, and we jerk through time, ejected into the activity of the present Boston, the aquarium forgotten. The city seems to be engaged in reshaping its past and changing its present features. Everywhere in the Boston Common there are signs of human activity and progress, but nowhere is there the sign of one human person; there are only machines, cropping up "tons of mush and grass/ to gouge their underworld garage." The evidence of progress is felt in the references to a tingling statehouse, luxuriating parking spaces, and barbed and galvanized fencing. New landmarks are being erected. But all the activity of this scene is essentially destructive, and the site is pocked with ugly excavations and splintered planks.

In the midst of this confusion totters the quiet Civil War monument of "Colonel Shaw/ and his bell-cheeked Negro infantry." Lowell also recalled this ancient historic relief in his memories from "91 Revere Street," saying,

> There I'd loiter by the old iron fence and gape longingly across Charles Street at the historic Boston Common, a now largely wrong-side-of-the-tracks park. In the Common there were mossy bronze reliefs of Union Soldiers, and a captured German tank filled with smelly wads of newspaper.

The monument is suspended or isolated much like the fish of the aquarium; Colonel Shaw has been frozen in time into the stone. But the Colonel is the only human, living or dead, to be seen in this busy Boston Square, and he is being encroached upon by dinosaur steamshovels and towering new buildings. This was once a quiet little park, ruled by a stern and lean statue, but it has been allowed to decay, and now it is being eaten up by girders of steel.

While the monument stands frozen and silent in this activity, it is paradoxically the only unenclosed, unfrozen object in this

scene. It reaches, unfettered and uncluttered, to the sky; the machines around it burrow into the ground to make cavelike garages. The garage is an enclosure like the aquarium, but you cannot see into it as you could through the glass tanks. It is designed to guard and to cover. The monument was once erected by man to be unveiled, to speak for all. But now, for some unspoken reason, it "sticks like a fishbone/ in the city's throat."

The true monument is also unenclosed in another way. It can never be trapped or captured or even boarded up, because it represents the soaring spiritual qualities of man, his mind and spirit. This is what Colonel Shaw in the monument stands for; he is a recognition and tribute to the species man, and the greatness and dignity man is capable of achieving. But, ironically, there is not one man in this square. We know that men exist somewhere in the background through Lowell's occasional hints of them in the lines of the poem: a glimpse of a car-- we know that there are people inside them driving back and forth; the words noting a t.v. -- we assume that people are inside their homes viewing them; and the mention of a photograph and a safe -- we register that people must be out in banks and stores, buying and selling, following routine.

But what are the directions of the changing town and the changing people, and what do they mean? Obviously this urban society is now relegating to the past certain of its features, such as the historic monument, and the small countryside towns that Lowell mentions briefly. The aquarium once helped fulfill man's delight in exploring, in learning; the grassy park now being destroyed reflected man's love of the open and the natural, the isolated rural town preserved man's respect for the past, and for the virtues of the simple life. And the monument stood as the ultimate symbol of man's humanness.

But now we can see what are signs of a new man, if we contrast the old monument with what surrounds it. The garage houses man's car, which he is dependent upon for travel, enclosed in a bubble-like shield as he goes about his daily business. Parking spaces for the city are all-important. Looking back at the statue they surround, Lowell reminds us, ironically, that "two months after marching through Boston/ half the regiment was dead." The soldiers walked, in the open, unfettered by gadgets and equipment, and they walked to their deaths for others.

Looking farther, we see the photograph of a safe, presumably on a wall or in a window, with people somewhere not far behind it. Man has built another enclosure. Money has become a god to man, and he seals it and carefully protects it in the steel safe. If we look back to the monument, we see men who dared to give all they physically owned, and much more, for mankind. The

safe in the photograph is hailed as the "Rock of Ages." The soldiers' "Rock of Ages" was not physical like the safe, but rather the true, spiritual rock, and they looked to Him for protection for their souls, not their bodies or belongings.

If we look closer at the photograph, we see how Boston's man feels about war, the subject of the bronze relief. War has become a means to advertise safes. We don't see man looking to people who survived the Hiroshima blast; instead a silent photograph displays a hunk of metal. Before, as we see when we look back to Colonel Shaw, there has been courage in war, and despite the atrocities committed by men in war, it has still provided examples of true human greatness. But Lowell says, "There are no statues for the last war here." Man now erects sealed safes as monuments, and ignores the damning judgment that war imprints on his soul.

Lowell turns from this gruesome image to a note of hope. "Space is nearer." Space is still free, unenclosed, a challenge. And the poet turns to his television set. This is a symbol of the new man, invented for learning, for communicating, for breaking down enclosures between people. And here, at last, are people, children, signs of new life, with the potential for full manhood. But they are still enclosed, still cut off. Lowell is looking into his television set, now himself a part of the city he surveys. He looks into the screen as he once peered into the glass of the aquarium. And the helpless Negro schoolchildren he sees are swimming there in a sea of frustration. They open their mouths to cry for help, enclosed in unseen, suffocating ghettos, but like the fish separated by glass, no one will hear them. If we look back once again to the focal point of the poem, the stately monument, we see another grim irony. With the exception of Colonel Shaw, these were all Negroes who died for their fellow men. Now man is choking the Negro, shutting them off from his society. But, as the monument reminds, in the oblivion of death, possessions are meaningless and all men are equal. Boston, however, no longer recognizes what the men of the monument have proven.

Lowell makes the monument of Colonel Shaw and his men become increasingly human throughout the poem -- we can "almost hear the bronze Negroes breathe." The soldiers "doze over muskets and muse through their sideburns." We hear the toughts of Shaw's father, and watch Shaw himself, as he sits imprisoned, and yet free. But Shaw is alone, an exile. The humans of today are imprisoned in tvs, or enclosed in cars, their goods securely locked in steel banks. Each individual has so completely enclosed himself from the actions and thoughts of true humanness that now the entire society is suspended. The city is no longer a community, as Shaw and his men came to be. No one gives of himself to others now, and for this reason no one has identity in this society.

Only the men of the monument have preserved their identity, and through them, the artist who shaped their image, and consummated their act in his expression.

As Lowell closes his poem, he announces, "The Aquarium is gone." The old aquarium building has been boarded up, as we saw but there is now a new one. Human beings are now a primitive species like the fish; they are now the ones to be inside the walls of the aquarium, an enclosure that they have built up around themselves. And they seem oblivious to their condition, as the fish once were to their human observers.

We see the fish-like finned cars nosing around the monument, and we sense their activity. But there is no humanity here, only a smell of grease. Man has gone underground to garages. He moves through society enclosed in his car. He locks up his possessions. He views the rest of his species through a little box, or through an image on a paper. The men of the monument, at the heart of this city, are indeed out of time and place. The words "For the Union Dead," etched in that stone, are a tribute to the men of our nation who died for their fellow men, and who yet live on. Now these words carry yet another meaning. "For the Union Dead" is also a cry for a present Union, or society, that while physically living, is dead in life, mechanical, enclosed, unhuman. There are no humans here. This Boston is a ghost town.

The Expansion of Sensibility in the Poems of Theodore Roethke

By Dennis Doroff, St. John's University, Collegeville

Theodore Roethke has left his readers a careful, though often excruciating, analysis of the process of expanding sensibilities. He summarizes the process in three short lines from one of his later poems, Meditations of an Old Woman:

> The self says, I am;
> The heart says, I am less;
> The spirit says, you are nothing.

These lines seem to imply that, as being painfully expands its sensibilities, it paradoxically becomes more encroached upon by non-being.

To facilitate treatment of Roethke's handling of this expansion process, I have chosen three of his poems which together form a unit unusually representative. The first of the three is "The Lost Son."

Heralded as the epitome of Roethke's first successful sequence, "The Lost Son" relates the struggle of an unnamed child-protagonist to expand consciousness, as well as simply to survive. To explore this early struggle, Roethke has the protagonist, now a young adolescent, delve deep into his past in an attempt to discover a means to progress. This idea of regressing in order to progress was a favorite of Roethke.

The poem begins, according to Roethke himself, as "a terrified running away--with alternate periods of hallucinatory waiting... ." The lost son is indeed fleeing. He calls on his little friends in nature, specifically the bird, the snail and the worm, to aid him in this his "hard time." He fishes in "an old wound," apparently the repository of his primitive unconscious. He never hesitates to enter his past even to primordial times. Images of fish, water, the womb, all recur in the poem.

As the reader continues, he will notice that the poem deals with more than just a fleeing. There is also a searching involved. Looking everywhere, the child questions:

> Tell me:
> Which is the way I take;
> Out of what door do I go,
> Where and to whom?

Nature answers only with puzzling responses, like: