

ROBERT LOWELL: SECULAR, PURITAN, AND AGNOSTICAL

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The Aquarium is gone. Everywhere,
giant finned cars nose forward like fish:
a savage servility
slides by on grease.

"For the Union Dead" ends with this image of Boston in the middle of the twentieth century. The poem has previously referred to other images from the present and the past, one of them the public monument representing Colonel Shaw and a regiment of black infantry who fought in the Civil War. The speaker comments that:

their monument sticks like a fishbone
in the city's throat.

The impact of the poem's ending is heightened by reference to its epigraph: "Relinquent omnia servare Rem Publicam", almost meaning "they gave up everything to serve the Republic." Lowell links the debasement of language with other losses discerned in modern Boston, modern America, the modern world. The poem refers to "graveyards of the Grand Army of the Republic". Even a century ago, let alone in a Roman context, the notion of "republic" suggested a common commitment to the public realm, the common weal. Here is a society with no such focus, but one which has parodies of it, summed up as he implies elsewhere, by the values of the "Republican" Party, the dominant party in the USA of the 1950s. Likewise the notion of service is parodied by the grease-smooth "servility" of this consuming and greedy society; this people is neither truly free nor does it serve; neither does it want to know about those who have, those whose service was intimately linked with their religious commitment.

Lowell is often scathing about the actions and heritage of the Puritan founders of his nation, but he recognises their strengths: in his

eyes, Colonel Shaw:

rejoices in man's lovely,
peculiar power to choose life and die.

Shaw's inspiration is derived from a religious tradition that, for all of its stiffness and narrowness, gave strength to the notion of serving the Common Weal, of leading a black regiment in the face of scorn, in a War fought against slavery - successfully, even though, as the poem hints, black schoolchildren are still victims of authorised violence:

When I crouch to my television set,
The drained faces of Negro school-children rise like balloons.

One mark of this society is its ability to adapt symbols, pictorial or verbal, for its own ends:

There are no statues for the last war here:
On Boyleston Street, a commercial photograph
shows Hiroshima boiling

over a Mosler Safe, the "Rock of Ages"
that survived the blast.

The state of mind that can use this image of mass killing for commercial purposes is one that also turns "Rock of Ages", one of the richest expressions from its religious tradition, into an advertising slogan.

The Biblical theologian, Walter Brueggemann, sees the issue of idolatry in ancient Israel - and in the modern world - as one with profound political implications. He sees the prophets' battle against idols as also a battle against a technocratic and royal ideology that reduces the creative freedom which he sees as supported by the proper worship of Yahweh. That "royal" ideology can exist under an ostensibly republican guise, while the idols of any society can often be a parody of something truer. Lowell offers significant insights into the mechanisms of that royal ideology, especially in its corruptions of language and imagination. E.P. Thompson's recent book on William Blake uses the term, "Witness against the Beast", one that comes to

mind for Lowell who has also borne such witness.

Harder to find in Lowell is what Brueggemann sees as the other side of the prophetic impulse, the description, and the making, of a space for joy and freedom, but we can find some of this in his humour and in his creativity as a poet.

Lowell comments on a society whose past and present has serious "religious" implications, as one who is inward with both that society and with what it means to be moved by religious impulses, although his expression of these varied greatly during his life (1917-1977). In "Waking Early Sunday Morning", the occasion allows the speaker to contemplate contemporary attitudes - especially his own - to the traditional time and form of worship. He briefly mentions the unlikely option of Church attendance:

Better dressed and stacking birch,
Or lost with the Faithful at Church -
Anywhere, but somewhere else!

At best, it would be an escape from where he is. But he then hears the modern symbols of a communal faith:

And now the new electric bells,
clearly chiming, "Faith of our fathers",
and now the congregation gathers.

The electric bells are presented as ludicrous - partly through the verse-pattern, partly through the contrast between machine and a song meant to stress a tradition of direct and earnest commitment. The past offered a sterner creativity, but one of ambiguous value, even for believers:

O Bible chopped and crucified
in hymns we hear but do not read,
none of the milder subtleties
of grace or art will sweeten these
stiff quatrains shovelled out four-square -
they sing of peace, and preach despair;
yet they gave darkness some control,
and left a loophole for the soul.

In this poem Lowell expresses his own yearning for something other

than despair - despair aggravated by the imperial militarism that rules in his own country. Here again is the witness against the Beast, in the years of the VietNam War. His urge to freedom is symbolised by the leaping of the chinook salmon. But that freedom is not offered by a Church. It is supported by the creative power of an artist to explore language and symbols.

Lowell often presents himself as the detached, slightly envious observer: watching through car or train windows, a fence or a television screen. But he had his moments of public action. In "Memories of West Street and Lepke" he asks: "Ought I to regret my seed-time?". In 1943, he was sentenced to a prison term as a conscientious objector:

I was a fire-breathing Catholic C.O.,
and made my manic statement,
telling off the state and president, and then
sat waiting sentence in the bull pen.

One of the ironies of his situation was being in the same prison as a notorious murderer. Former prisoner, Jim Peck, tells: "Lowell was in a cell next to Lepke, you know, Murder Incorporated, and Lepke says to him: 'I'm in for killing. What are you in for?' 'Oh, I'm in for refusing to kill.' And Lepke burst out laughing. It was kind of ironic" (Quoted in Hamilton's *Biography*, p.91). A further irony is that Lepke has privileges, items that include the symbols of patriotism and the trappings of a conventional Catholicism:

or dawdling off to his little segregated cell full
of things forbidden the common man:
a portable radio, a dresser, two toy American
flags tied together with a ribbon of Easter palm.

None of this offers Lepke any vision beyond his moment of death:

Flabby, bald, lobotomized,
he drifted in a sheepish calm,
where no agonising reappraisal
jarred his concentration on the electric chair -
hanging like an oasis in his air
of lost connections ...

Lepke's state echoes that of the nation evoked in the poem's opening; almost embarrassed by his comfortable life, the speaker sees himself as part of "the tranquilized Fifties", symbolised partly by the man "scavenging filth in the back alley trash cans" who is a "young Republican". The Republic and its religious heritage have gone awry; their symbols are pathetic decorations in the cell of a lobotomized murderer.

Lowell's overtly Catholic phase did not last. In "Beyond the Alps", he describes a visit to Rome in 1950, the year of the proclamation of the Dogma of the Assumption, and looks at the Roman tradition, one that includes Mussolini, Caesar and an ancient Roman image of a god: "Minerva, the miscarriage of the brain". While his attitude to the proclamation seems largely one of ironical astonishment at Papal pretensions, his language suggests a feeling for the imaginative power that goes with such belief - and perhaps envy of the capacity for simple faith:

The lights of science couldn't hold a candle
To Mary risen - at one miraculous stroke
angel-wing'd, gorgeous as a jungle bird!
But who believ'd this? Who could understand?

The poem moves immediately to the brutality that links the Papal court with a city whose history is violently oppressive:

The Duce's lynched, bare, booted skull still spoke.
God herded his people to the *coup de grace* -
the costumed Switzers sloped their pikes to push,
O Pius, through the monstrous human crush ...

The tone is hard to pin down, but the responsibility for the people's ironically named death-stroke seems to be with God, not just the relics of Fascist Italy, or the Vatican guards. Those Puritan images of sinners in the hands of a punitive God don't seem far away! The train-journey from Rome also seems to symbolise a mental and spiritual departure:

Much against my will
I left the City of God where it belongs.

The move is hardly felt as freely chosen and liberating, especially when contrasted to the end of this journey:

Now Paris, our black classic, breaking up
Like killer kings on an Etruscan cup.

Much of his earlier poetry works with a pre-existing Christian framework; the result is often clumsy, but sometimes produces splendid lines and passages, as in "The Quaker Graveyard in Nantucket". Quaker whale-hunters are the main occupants of this graveyard and the poem's recurring references to whales link them to the Leviathan of the Old Testament, and the potential imagery of the world-corrupting Beast. This complex and often obscure poem ends this way:

... and cast up the time
When the Lord God formed man from the sea's slime
And breathed into his face the breath of life,
And blue-lung'd combers lumbered to the kill.
The Lord survives the rainbow of his will.

Some of the energy comes from the combination of Biblical language with the direct response to the sheer elemental power of the sea (the poem is an elegy for a relative who died at sea). But the simultaneity of the creative and destructive forces is important here, and whatever the final ambiguous statement means, it suggests that the rainbow, sign that there would be no more such floods as Noah's, does not limit the might of a God whose ways are inscrutable and destructive.

Another early poem, "Mr. Edwards and the Spider", through the mouth of the Puritan preacher, voices a conviction that stays with Lowell, our insignificance in the face of a superhuman power that can damn us for an eternity:

But who can plumb the sinking of that soul?
Josiah Hawley, picture yourself cast
Into a brick-kiln where the blast
Fans your quick vitals to a coal -
If measured by a glass,
How long would it seem burning! Let there pass
A minute, ten, ten trillion; but the blaze
Is infinite, eternal: this is death,
To die and know it. This is the Black Widow, death.

In "Skunk Hour", after describing a crumbling seaside town, he

describes his own mental disintegration:

One dark night,
My Tudor Ford climbed the hill's skull,
I watched for love-cars. Lights turned down,
They lay together, hull to hull,
Where the graveyard shelves on the town ...
My mind's not right.

A car radio bleats.
"Love, O careless Love ... "I hear
my ill-spirit sob in each blood cell,
as if my hand were at its throat ...
I myself am hell,
nobody's here -

"I myself am hell" recalls Milton's Satan:

Me miserable! Which way shall I flie
Infinite wrauth, and infinite despaire?
Which way I flie is Hell; my self am Hell;
And in the lowest deep a lower deep
Still threatening to devour me opens wide,
To which the Hell I suffer seems a Heav'n.

(*Paradise Lost*, IV, 73-78.)

Drawing on Milton's insight into Hell as a state of utter alienation and despair, Lowell confronts his own state. He later said of the poem: "This is the dark night. I hoped readers would remember John of the Cross's poem. My night is not gracious, but secular, puritan and agnostical. An Existential night. Somewhere in my mind was a passage from Sartre or Camus about reaching some point of final darkness where the one free act is suicide" (Quoted in Hamilton's *Biography*, p.267). Yet Lowell did not suicide, but chose instead to observe and to write.

One item in this town is the "chalk-dry and spar spire". Spires in other Lowell poems are signs of faith and dedication:

... the faith
That made the Pilgrim Makers take a lathe
And point their wooden steeples lest the Word be

dumb.

["Dunbarton"]

In "Skunk Hour", the dry spire is a contrast to the vitality of the mother skunk whose presence, while "rich" in the colloquial sense of being very smelly, also suggests vital energy, and enviable courage. But energy and courage are also features of the poem itself, and of poet who can step back and make this intricate and witty poem out of the state described here.

I used Lowell's enigmatic description of this poem in my title. How useful is it? The figure in "Skunk Hour" is secular in that he sees no prospect of a divine lover and saviour to give warmth and meaning to the desolation. Contrast John of the Cross (in Lynda Nicholson's translation):

O night, you were the guide!
 O night more desirable than dawn!
 O dark of night you joined
 Beloved with belov'd one,
 Belov'd one in Beloved now transform'd!

Remember Lepke who sees nothing beyond his moment of death; Lowell's perspective here is comparably earth-bound - one thing he can have in mind when referring to his own "dark night" as existential. This is the case for much of Lowell's "post-Catholic" poems. Yet the terms in which he writes, and in more subtle ways, the ways he feels about the world are often drawn from a Christian tradition.

"Skunk Hour", like much of Lowell's work, could be seen as "puritan" in the conviction that we are puny figures in a state of grievous loss and may well be destined to remain that way. There's guilt and anxiety, but also a saving alertness of mind to the ironies of the situation. In "Waking in the Blue", Lowell asks, "What use is my sense of humour?". In this poem at least, that sense of humour is a saving feature and perhaps a way in which the poet is not "puritan", however he presents himself in the poem. In his poetry overall is a conviction that, in spite of our small place among mighty and mysterious manifestations of good and evil, we have more space for freedom and responsibility in shaping our own lives - perhaps that belies the term "puritan".

Christian tradition points to human ignorance of what God is. In contrast to Philip Larkin in "Church Going", where the whole religious

enterprise seems a justly-discarded shell, he explores the mysterious possibilities of divine presence, directly in an early poem like "The Quaker Graveyard in Nantucket", more obliquely in the later ones. And if there is a divine presence, it may well be felt, as in *Job*, more as an oppression than an mercy. It might indeed bear some responsibility for evil. "After the Surprising Conversions", an early poem about outbursts of evil in a Puritan community, uses *Job* as a point of reference in seeing Satanic influence authorised by Jehovah. Without using those terms, Lowell comes back to such questions. In "Waking Early Sunday Morning" he echoes I Cor 13.12 in asking "When will we seem him face to face?" and comments immediately: "Each day, He shines through darker glass". He does not know, but does not dismiss the possibility and the yearning, even in the desolate state described in "Skunk Hour".

Lowell, perhaps like many of us, found that the practices of a church-community did not satisfy his religious needs; he maintains a religious impulse, and some features of a religious vision, but not the inherited forms for expressing this. If one task of the poet is to explore the adequacy of language and symbols, Lowell does this more profoundly when he is not writing from the perspective of an obvious Christian framework. Nevertheless, Christ is addressed with a simple directness as well as in an evocative comparison in these late lines quoted in Seamus Heaney's memorial address:

Christ
May I die at night
With a semblance of my senses
Like the full moon that fails.

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