

“On Political Poetry: Robert Lowell’s ‘For the Union Dead’ and ‘Political Poetry’”

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“The same arts that did gain
A power must it maintain.”

—Andrew Marvell

Whenever the topic of “political poetry” is raised, I find myself reflexively grating my teeth. The term posits a sort of detention area in which a certain sort of poetry is carefully segregated from other sorts of poetry. The implication is that the political nature of life, the fact that human beings live in societies and that political decisions are being made daily in those societies, in war and in peace, is not part of poetry per se. Poetry has better things to do than parse politics. This viewpoint seems callow but attractively American in that the aura of self-expression reigns more or less supreme. To make the political, and, of necessity, historical side of life part of the natural fabric of a poem poses a distinct challenge. The lyric, declarative self has other things to do such as writing about mom and dad. Who can argue the importance of mom and dad?

To be sure, that self may run into all sorts of dangers such as wars and terrorist acts along with the subtle and not so subtle encounters that inform daily life. The American premise, however, is that the individual encounter is the sum of the political situation—what it meant to me (I am writing here of white America) that I participated in a protest march or became aware of segregation in the fourth grade. The American self tends to be the sum of all things. It is voracious. Its lens is the individual response to a situation—“I was indignant” or “I was saddened” or “I was confused.” Though the poet typically will use images to demonstrate these sentiments, the expression of the sentiments is what is crucial. The lens is a genuine one but it is not a very large one.

A modern, American poem I would offer as a crucial model of engagement with the political domain is Robert Lowell’s “For the Union Dead.” The poem takes on what seem to me to be some huge issues that perplex the republic. Foremost is the presence of a public history. This may seem something to be taken for granted. We agree that various events took place and that those events define our history—the Civil War, slavery and the Civil Rights movement would be three that figure in Lowell’s poem. However, the American psyche, as is stated in our political birth certificate, is fueled by the pursuit of happiness. The key player is the individual. The key identity is selfhood. Thus, history is what individuals make of it. To say at this maxed-out-credit-card moment that the personal is the political in America is a tautology. Closer to the mark would be that the personal subsumes the political: “I’m not happy with this war and I’m going to let the world (or at least those like-minded souls who actually read poetry) know it.”

Lowell does not scant the individual dimension. His poem is commemorative as it honors those soldiers who gave their lives to the Union cause. Lowell is an active participant in the public world in the sense that he inhabits an actual space. He is there on the Boston Common as the “dinosaur steam shovels” do their very American work of creating more parking spaces. Boston

is his city; he lives there and knows it well. In addition, Lowell is taking in what is happening at the time in his society. Thus, he sees the Little Rock students who are trying to attend the previously segregated high school. He is a citizen.

“For the Union Dead” is not written in opposition. It is written out of the complex belonging that Lowell felt for his native country. Because he was a Lowell, the United States was literally his country. His forebears had been important people in the development of the nation. That personal history is, however, not the genius of the poem. It is, to my mind, how much Lowell lets in. He combines personal history, public events—both past and present, details from contemporary daily life, architecture, public monuments along with the truest stuff of poetry—metaphor in its own right and metaphorical statement. Thus we have a child at an aquarium, the events associated with a regiment of Civil War soldiers, desegregation, the Massachusetts statehouse, “St. Gaudens’ shaking Civil War relief,” and the sheer deft power of “Their monument sticks like a fishbone / in the city’s throat.” Lowell’s ability to keep all these elements in active contradistinction is masterful.

This assembling may seem simple but one has to do much searching for a poem that allows as much in—in its own right—as Lowell’s poem does (Amy Clampitt’s “The Dahlia Gardens” and Audre Lorde’s “Afterimages” are other examples). Politics as it is symbolized in monuments recognizes that the public space of history matters to each private life. This public space is real. It is not a hypothesis on the part of the individual. It is not a fantasy or a wish. The body of poetry that has grown up around the Vietnam Wall, much of which is powerful and compelling, testifies to the reality of this public space. Whatever individual errands are at work when a person comes to the wall, there is the fact of the wall as a monument. There is a city in which the wall exists and the events going on in that city. There is the presence of this war among other wars the nation has fought. Though all this space and time can be reduced to what is going on in the poet’s head, the reduction comes at a price. The public space is scanted as the personal narrative pursues its personal destiny.

Public space can be evoked through public forms. Though Lowell wrote the poem in variously lined quatrains, it seems safe to say that behind the poem is the form of the public ode. A poem such as Marvell’s “An Horatian Ode upon Cromwell’s Return from Ireland” was well known to Lowell, as was the work of Horace himself. Such a form of the ode exists, as it were, to allow for themes and events to be presented in an orderly yet compelling fashion. The commodious form is itself a public occasion as it gathers up historical events and presents them—with implicit or explicit commentary. Such a form goes beyond public poems such as Emerson’s “Concord Hymn,” as it does not merely salute a historical event but presents the living current of history. Such a form attempts to engage how treacherous political judgments are and yet how necessary. In that ode Marvell was trying to think his way through an extraordinary series of events. As much as he was playing up to Cromwell, he was trying to gauge who this figure was. He was thinking about the depth of history as it presented itself in a national life and death situation: “and cast the kingdom old / into another mold.”

One of the ironies of which Lowell was aware is that history does not stop. Whenever we say we know or are sure about history, we are saying that we have stopped. Whatever failings Lowell may have had as a poet, he had the huge virtue of openness. This openness is not the same thing as the right thinking or correct attitudes or indignation or grievance or outrage that fuel much of what is considered political poetry in the United States. The problem with poetry that stems from those sources is that however morally and emotionally understandable such sources are they don't go anywhere. They insist on the attitudes the poet already has. Anyone who writes poetry or reads it with real interest knows that if there is no surprise, there is no poem. It is a rare so-called political poem that surprises because the poem is in a sense predetermined as it responds to some event—such as a war—that disturbs the individual. The individual artfully or not so artfully vents his or her displeasure and the poem occurs accordingly. It may be sardonic or angry or mournful but it remains in a bubble of a sort, that peculiarly American bubble of the self that must assert itself to its satisfaction.

This is not to say that the individual should not be disturbed. (As an American citizen I have spent my adult life being disturbed by the endless wars that have been pursued in my name.) It is to say that history, particularly in the modern forms of war and ideology, buries the self. We commemorate individual lives and individual lives should be commemorated but the awful weight of history is almost more than can be borne. People who have the opportunity are advised to look away and, indeed, most Americans do look away. We say that people are history “buffs” as if history were something to be taken up like ballroom dancing or roller-skating. Alas, history as it wears us down and polishes us to a sad sheen does the buffing. That is one of the grains of wisdom that Lowell embodies in his poem. He is not immune. Even when he is riding in one of those bubble cars, he is not immune. Even when he was a child staring at the fish in the aquarium, he was not immune. Even “Colonel Shaw / is riding on his bubble.” Lowell posits that Shaw “waits / for the blessed break.” That breaking is a remarkable emblem.

The people who perhaps know this best are African Americans. It seems no accident that Lowell's poem focuses in part on the African American experience. There is for African Americans no avoiding the public history of violent removal from Africa, slavery and the sanctioned racism and violence of the United States. As James Baldwin succinctly put it, “People are trapped in history and history is trapped in them.” Lowell's poem honors the white colonel and the black troops who died fighting for their freedom. He is not choosing one over the other. Rather he is open to the sacrifices both made. Those deaths form a bitter irony, when he looks at the “drained faces of Negro school-children” who simply want to go to a school—that is all they are trying to do, go to school. What is one to make of a society for which hundreds of thousands of people gave their lives that doesn't allow children to go to a certain school and for that matter continues to avoid integration in a thousand shifts and dodges?

This considering seems to me to be at the heart of the political poem as Lowell imagines it in “For the Union Dead.” Such a poem stems from uneasiness and from the search for a fullness that will shed some light on our dire confusions and avoidances. One premise of such a poem is that every individual participates in this condition. There are no exceptions based on a person's

voting for the right party or mouthing the right attitudes. Everyone is thrashing in the maelstrom of historical time. Everyone is being drowned in that maelstrom—whether they are rich Republicans living in gated communities or young radicals working in impoverished urban communities. Lowell does not exempt himself. He tries to be open to what is going on around him and within him. He is alive to history. He is neither above it as some sort of mythically privileged person nor below it as some sort of refusé who has permanently pushed history away.

Lowell's poem is a dramatic meditation. He is implicated in the events but he is not writing to vent his guilt. The historical world is much larger than the individual. Those are not grounds for subservience or fatalism. Those are grounds for admitting that history exists as a public entity. Before such an entity we need poems that make us aware how vast and deep the entity is. We need poems that delineate the place of the individual by neither aggrandizing it—"Look at my opinion"—nor debasing it—"I don't matter." We need poems that are aware of the terrible ironies of history—men dying in the sullied name of freedom—yet that don't collapse in ineffectuality before such ironies.

It seems very hard for Americans to admit there are limits on anything. Personal expression is the open road and the self is at the wheel. One of the benefits of allowing for history's presence in any situation—driving down the road to a poetry reading in a car that is fueled by gasoline that is the environmental product of international machinations fomented by mega-corporations and secret agencies—is that history can start to become real to us. This seems a huge virtue of a poem such as Lowell's because for most white Americans I don't think history is very real at all. Even those I have known who have experienced the first-hand grief of losing a loved one in a war tend to think of history as a hiccup in the progress of individual happiness. A man I knew in Maine whose brother died in Vietnam summed it up as "he [his dead brother] drew a bad card." In one sense I couldn't argue. In another, I wanted to protest that human beings make history and that it is more than rain falling in the night.

Lowell's poem acknowledges that we make history, that it isn't rain falling in the night. What I often wonder is how much we are willing to let such a poem into our midst. Lowell's poem would seem to be a crucial poem for all Americans to encounter, not as something to be studied for a test or theorized about but as something to consider and discuss. Americans are good at diminishing, ignoring and slotting poems because, however dimly, Americans fear letting the acute subjectivity of poetry loose in the workaday society. To ponder Lowell's poem is to ask what has happened and still is happening in this country that this poem speaks to. Do we dare to consider that? Isn't it easier to stick with the objecting or lamenting or angry self and let the hard work of consideration fall by the way? Or maybe it is our second nature as Americans to automatically indulge the anecdotal, ever-wanting self and its prerogatives—"This is how I see it" or "This is how it happened to me"—and forget that history is a public space we all live in. We don't tend to see history as happening in that public space. The United States remains a relatively new and very heterogeneous nation.

The youth cult in this nation highlights the American disposition—we tend to be born yesterday.

This amnesia is good for marketing purposes and the fervent interest in the new that such marketing thrives on but it is bad for thinking twice. As it turns over the various facets that it encounters, Lowell's poem proposes a species of thinking twice. That would not be a bad definition for a political poem—one that thinks twice about history and the individual. There is much to be said for the lone voice, particularly when it honestly engages its conscience. There, also, is much to be said for the voice that engages the frightening fullness of history. Such an endeavor puts poetry at the center of the society, if the society is willing to accept how central poetry can be. Lowell's poem acknowledges that possibility and makes good on it. It is political in the deepest sense—human actions have grave consequences. However much we may want to, we cannot escape.