CHAPTER IV
ACTAEON'S NUCLEAR HOUNDS

"That experience is most interesting, when it is painful, when one experiences what one does not wish to experience."

Robert Lowell.

In For the Union Dead Lowell gives equal emphasis to both the inner and the outer worlds. Here Lowell reveals to us the struggle of an individual in bearing the double burden of his existence, social and personal. His point is, that the private and the public worlds are interrelated, each affecting and being affected by the other. Lowell as a private individual may be alienated from the hostile world, but is not isolated from it.

In For the Union Dead, he expresses the terrors of human life in the modern urban society, a society technologically advanced, but spiritually empty. He describes the experience of the contemporary waste land, a place of unprecedented wealth and pollution, where the individuals are powerless, faithless, isolated, and in inchoate rage, even antagonistic to one another, and where all stand threatened every moment by nuclear annihilation and industrial pollution.

Jonathan Raban commenting on Lowell's Notebook emphasizes the helplessness of the private individual in to-day's world:
The private character who lives through the verse - the father, husband, lover, cigarette-smoker, hypochondriac, rememberer, mediator, imaginer - is like us all an insecure inhabitant of the world of public events. Vietnam, the Middle East, race riots, political assassinations, party conventions, demonstrations, jostle in his consciousness against the fragmentary, perceived detail, the domestic incident, the nagging fear of the death-rattle in his lungs (191).

The single man who stands like a "bird-watcher" in the "Mouth of the Hudson" is one such insecure inhabitant of the world of public events. The setting is Williams’s industrial New Jersey, scene of Paterson, Whitman’s America gone wrong.

A single man stands like a bird-watcher,
and scuffles the pepper and salt snow
from a discarded, gray
Westinghouse Electric cable drum.

He cannot discover America by counting
the chains of condemned freight-trains
from thirty states. They jolt and jar
and junk in the siding below him.

He has trouble with his balance. (104)

American Industrialism has cluttered the landscape, with industrial rubble. According to Allen Tate,

a society of means without ends, in the age of technology, so multiplies the means, in the lack of anything better to do, that it may have to scrap the machines as it makes them; until our descendants will have to dig themselves out of one rubbish heap after another and stand upon it, in order to make more rubbish to make more standing room.
The surface of nature will then be literally as well as morally concealed from the eyes of men (10).

The junk of "condemned freight trains from thirty states" replaces natural greenery. And individuals caught in the wave of industrialism drift towards death aimlessly like wild ice drifting down the Hudson towards the sea.

His eyes drop,
and he drifts with the wild ice
ticking seaward down the Hudson,
like the blank sides of a jigsaw puzzle.

The ice ticks seaward like a clock. (104)

The sea here reminds us of the sea in Paterson as a place of merging where the individual river loses its identity. After the "ice" enters the "sea" the "puzzle" cannot be put together. Owing to industrialization human activities have become rationally organized around impersonal patterns in the place of ceremonial and traditional ones. And industrialization has also led to great disparities in wealth distribution. On the one side of the spectrum, there are summer millionaires leaping from "L.L. Bean's Catalogue" and heiresses who thirst for "the hierarchic privacy of Victoria's Century" and on the other, the transient Negro toasting wheat seeds over coke fumes. "A Negro toasts / Wheat-seeds over the coke fumes / of a punctured barrel."

Here Lowell's reaction resembles Goldsmith's when he makes this plea, "Why was this heart of mine formed with so much sensibility; . . . Tenderness, without a capacity of relieving, only makes the man, who feels it, more wretched than the object which sues for assistance" ("City Night Piece"). Lowell is definitely more wretched than the Black. America's inability to solve her social problems is exemplified in the poverty and near starvation of the poor and black people. Martin Luther King's heart, like Goldsmith's and Lowell's bleeds for the poor black:
But one hundred years later, we must face the tragic fact that the Negro is still not free. One hundred years later the life of the Negro is still sadly crippled by the manacles of segregation and the chains of discrimination. One hundred years later, the Negro lives on a lonely island of poverty in the midst of a vast ocean of material prosperity (385).

Across the river,
ledges of suburban factories tan
in the sulphur-yellow sun
of the unforgivable landscape. (104)

Axelrod calls this poem "a poem of powerful expression of outrage" at the "suburban factories" causing "chemical air" and "salt and pepper snow." Here one cannot but remember the havoc caused by the chemical air leakage at Bhopal. On the morning of December 3, 1984 while the workers at the Union Carbide India chemical plant in Bhopal fled in panic, a white cloud of methyl isocyanate, a toxic chemical used in pesticides escaped from a storage tank and shifted over the town. At least 2300 people died and more than 200,000 people were injured. Of these, perhaps 10,000 may endure some form of lasting damage. It was the worst industrial disaster in history. That was the fear of Lowell when he wrote "Chemical air / sweeps in from New Jersey / and smells of coffee." The physical pollution of the environment points toward society's interior moral and spiritual decay. The poem gains added depth and authenticity, because it is not simply a poem of political protest. It is one of the poems from For the Union Dead which Lowell intended to be "close to symbolism." Originally entitled "From the Presbyterian Hospital Windows (October 1962)," the poem objectifies his mental disturbance. At this level, the blighted external scene functions as a symbol of his own mind, alienated by society's baseness and betrayed by his
own failings as well. The "unforgivable landscape" is an inscape. In that half-observed and half-introspected scene, Lowell describes a man like himself, who "has trouble with his balance." "The Mouth of the Hudson," then is not merely an angry attack on American industry for polluting and wasting (though it is that) but more profoundly a vision of Hell that images the poet's inner being- -and in some measure the inner being of us all.

Lowell follows "The Mouth of the Hudson" with "Fall 1961," "his major poem of the cold war and one of the strongest political poems he ever wrote. Composed in the period it describes, this poem captures the sense of "nuclear anxiety" that overwhelmed America during the Berlin crisis of the autumn of 1961.

German "Berliner Mauer" barrier surrounding West Berlin was erected on the night of 12.13, 1961 as the result of a decree passed on August 12 by the East German Volkskammer (People's Chamber). This act commenced a prolonged confrontation between the American and the Soviet troops in Berlin and a psychological war of nerves that included the mutual resumption of nuclear testing after a three year moratorium. In Jawaharial Nehru's words, the air was suddenly blown by "the foul winds of war" and the political scientist Louis J. Halle seriously argued that "we are living today in a prewar period- -like those that led upto 1914 and 1939" (qtd. in Axelrod 146).

Back and forth, back and forth

goes the tock, tock, tock

of the orange, bland, ambassadorial

face of the moon

on the grandfather clock.

All autumn, the chafe and Jar

of nuclear war,
We have talked our extinction to death.
I swim like a minnow
behind my studio window.
Our end drifts nearer,
the moon lifts,
radiant with terror
The state
is a diver under a glass bell.
A father's no shield
for his child.
We are like a lot of wild
spiders crying together,
but without tears.
Nature holds up a mirror.
One swallow makes a summer.
It's easy to tick
off the minutes,
but the clockhands stick.
Back and forth!
Back and forth, back and forth -
my one point of rest
is the orange and black
oriole's swinging nest! (105)

The poem began to take form in late September, as Lowell sat in his studio and looked out across Central Park towards the Carlyle Hotel, where President Kennedy was staying in a suite nicknamed by the press "the little White House." Kennedy in a
speech on September 25 about the international crisis warned the United Nations General Assembly: "Today, every inhabitant of this planet must contemplate the day when it may no longer be habitable. Every man, woman and child lives under a nuclear sword of Damocles, hanging by the slenderest of threads, capable of being cut at any moment."

Oppenheimer, the nuclear physicist who was largely responsible for dropping the bomb on Japan gave a God-like status to the destructive powers of nuclear bomb. He quoted the Bhagavad Geetha to sing the praise of the nuclear bomb.

If the radiance of a thousand suns
were to burst at once into the sky,
that would be like the splendour of the mighty one . . .
I am become death,
the shatterer of worlds. (119)

Lowell understood the mighty power of the bombs, "the shatterer of worlds."

In the year 1961, the final "shattering of the worlds", the apocalypse, was not a mere religious myth, but an imminent historical possibility. During that autumn, phrases like "atomic holocaust," "atomic annihilation," "the very continuation of life on this earth," "the generation that turned this planet into a flaming funeral pyre," and "Armageddon" were commonly and even casually used. Prodded by Time, Life and billboard advertising, millions of Americans dutifully constructed family fallout shelters. The country was terrified and Yeatsian nightmares haunted the nation. Yeats in "The Second Coming" warns the people:

. . . : somewhere in sands of the desert
A shape with lion body and the head of a man,
A gaze blank and pitiless as the sun,
Is moving its slow thighs, while all about it
Reel shadows of the indignant desert birds.

The darkness drops again; ... (lines 13-18)

The beast is the "nuclear bomb" and the darkness is the "nuclear winter." Any nuclear exchange would be charged with far-reaching significance and then cause gigantic and long-lasting fires which would produce enormous quantities of smoke. The smoke would rise into the atmosphere and block out the sun's rays. That is the "darkness" that Yeats is terrified about. And Lowell echoes the same terror. "Our end drifts nearer / the moon lifts, / radiant with terror." His sentence includes several prevalent terms: "drift" (connoting the atmospheric movement of atomic fall out, as in the phrase "nuclear drift"); "radiant" (suggesting radio activity); and terror (a word on the lips of every editorialist that autumn appearing, for instance, dozens of times in New York Times editorials in such phrases as "Khrushchev's strategy of terror.") Lowell has assimilated the terms and preoccupations, the general "air" of the time, into the verbal texture of his poem.

Lowell had praised W.H. Auden for catching the "air" of the 1930s, the prewar period in "September 1, 1939." "He caught the air and it was air in which events were hovering over your shoulder at every point, the second war was boiling into existence" (qtd. in Axelrod 146).

Waves of anger and fear
circulate over the bright
And darkened lands of the earth,
obsessing our private lives;
The unmentionable odour of death
Offends the September night. (lines 6-11 p., 86)

Twenty three years later, "the odour of death" still pervades the atmosphere. Time magazine reported the fear of the people. "Across the nation last week, there was
endless conversation about the threat of nuclear war. There was apprehension and an edge of sadness as women looked at their children and wondered about their chances of survival" (qtd. in Axelrod 149). Lowell catches the "fear" in his verse. "All autumn, the chafe and jar / of nuclear war; / We have talked our extinction to death."

Private citizens were encouraged to build bomb shelters in their back yards. Some of John Cheever's stories in The Brigadier and the Golf Widow illustrate the theological conundrums of that time; for example, who should be invited into one's bomb shelter in the event of an imminent attack. The threat of death from nuclear attack was public, shared by all; the defence against such death was private, enjoyed by a few. The confusion of "public" and "private" was inevitable in the poetry of the early sixties. "A father's no shield" is a pun on the North American Air Defence Command's "Sky Shield," a defence against nuclear attack from over the North pole. A heavily publicized exercise of "Sky Shield" against simulated Soviet attack occurred on October 14. "A father's no shield for his child," anywhere in the nuclear bomb-threatened world of today. The Hindu on August 20, 1990, reports "Baghdad has threatened to create a 'human shield' and announced that Britons and Americans would be moved to key military installations and held there 'until danger of war was over'" (1). Lowell's "shield" proves to have far reaching meanings. It threatens the individual being, and the collective humanity. Hence like all Lowell's public poems, "Fall 1961" is also personal; its subject is the suffering of a private human being exposed to the horrors of the contemporary world. For political events could impinge on the individual's reality whether he wills it or not, and nuclear extinction is a reality an individual faces it as inevitably as death itself. In 1982, Galway Kinnell said:

A new fear has risen in the human consciousness. It cuts across all political view points and it has nothing to do with nationality. If we could tap the feelings of someone on the streets of Kiev we would no
doubt find exactly the same terror of nuclear war, that we find on some of the streets of New York. Indeed this fear may soon become a binding force (301).

This "fear" is the "binding force" in most of FUD poems; fear of the "nuclear hounds" waiting to devour their creator, man.

"One swallow makes a summer" is strongly reminiscent of the Emily Dickinson’s poem, "To Make a Prairie It takes a Clover and One Bee."

To make a prairie it takes a clover and one bee,
One clover and a bee,
And revery.
The revery alone will do,
If bees are few. (319)

And the "spider," image is a part of Lowell’s November letter to Jarrell. "We are right off the park, and I get a lot of nature taking Harriet to the amusements. The other day, Anton Webern’s music was on the radio--she heard it and said, "It’s like wild animals through the woods walking" and then "It’s like a lot of spiders crying together but without tears." (qtd. in Hamilton 296).

The spider image is reminiscent of the helplessness of the human condition—"What are we in the hands of the great God?"—but it is a helplessness beyond grief and lament. He cries "without tears." But his one point of positive thinking amid these negative reflections is "the orange and black / Oriole’s swinging nest." Orioles of the New World belong to the family Icteridae and among the icterids is the well known Baltimore Oriole (I. Galbula), breeding in North America east of the Rockies. It is black, white and golden orange (Encyclopaedia Britannica 583). The clock hands swing, and Oriole’s nest swings. Since everything in the world hangs and swings, history also swings one way or another. History has swung again now. There is no
longer a wall between East Berlin and West Berlin. Berlin was reunited after twenty-eight years of separation on Thursday, November 9, 1989.

Lowell ultimately finds relief from fear of total nuclear annihilation in the swinging of the Oriole's nest. The bomb and the clock represent a short mechanical life whereas the Oriole's nest with its natural rhythm belongs to the eternal cycle of life, and summons up comforting thoughts of renewal. Lowell often complained that "mechanical time is replacing organic time" (qtd. in Axelrod 151). Now the rhythmic Cycle of Nature gives him enormous hope that civilization may yet be saved. The world of nature gives him solace at a moment of intense human crisis.

Like the Oriole's nest in "Fall 1961", the decapitated head of the Gorgon swings "like a lantern" in the hand of Cellini's Perseus in "Florence." "Florence" is also a poem about history--where he sees the past through the lens of the present. Lowell is happy to have lived in Florence, the beautiful Italian city on the banks of the river Arno from October 1950 to May 1951. Florence is a place where writing, eating, politics, natural beauty and the erotic life are equally enjoyable, and bound together by a sense of spontaneity, tolerance, and acceptance. This, in a way, is an illustration of the "unified sensibility" which T.S. Eliot thought to be lacking in modern times.

But the real subject of the poem is the earlier heroic Florence, "patroness of the lovely tyrannicides." The Tuscans pride themselves among other things on their love of liberty and their distinguished and independent history. The independent city state Florence was the Crown of the Italian Renaissance. Artists prospered from the 14th century onwards, particularly under the patronage of Medici family. Monuments of art and architecture included master works, by Fra Angelico, Brunelleschi and Michelangelo.

Both Lowell and Elizabeth Hardwick were much impressed by the city when they first saw it. Elizabeth wrote, "We came here for a week, after we landed, decided
to stay permanently, goodness knows what influencing the decision besides the fact that Florence is interesting beyond the limits--the churches, the galleries etc" (qtd. in Hamilton 170).

Lowell borrowing an image from Mary McCarthy's *The Stones of Florence* wrote that "the tower of the Old Palace / pierces the sky / like a hypodermic needle" (106). The piazza in front of the old palace is decorated with several statues, including Cellini's *Perseus* a copy of Michelangelo's *David* and Donatello's *Judith and Holofernes*. Perseus, who rescued beautiful Andromeda from the captivity of the Gorgon, stands with one foot on the Gorgon's decapitated body while he holds a sword in one hand and lifts the Gorgon's head aloft with the other. David, the paragon of youthful beauty, stands holding the sling with which he has killed the giant Goliath and won a victory for the Israelites, Judith kneels over the body of the tyrant Holofernes, whose throat she has slit, gaining victory for her people and taking revenge for the loss of her virginity. Cellini's statue was once dragged into the piazza by the Florentines to symbolize the victory of their Republic and the fanatical puritan Savonarola over the Medici.

Perseus, David and Judith
lords and ladies of the Blood,
Greek demi-gods of the Cross,
rise sword in hand
above the unshaven,
formless decapitation
of the monsters, tubs of guts,
mortifying chunks for the pack. (106)

Many critics have pointed out that the Gorgon is one of the adverse forces necessary to the forging of heroes, and her death is thus indicative of the destruction of a
mythological system that assumed and nourished the concept of heroism. "Without monsters there can be no true men" (Mazzaro 122). And according to Yenser, the extinction of such monsters is a tragedy for both the imagination and the will, for what has been substituted is both inaccessible to description and incapable of defeat. On one level, the new enemy is the state with its unpredictable and invincible powers. . . . And on a higher level, the new enemy is the demythologized universe, whose forces are equally capricious and indomitable. The persona, thus is cut off not only from his family and his immediate past, but also from his traditional heritage (213).

If we view the statues from a different perspective we realize civilization always advances by destroying what it considers as lower forms. In the frieze of the Parthenon and the temple of Zeus at Olympia men are shown overcoming centaurs, half-animal, half-human creatures who are trying to rape Greek women. Before Aeneas (Western Civilization) could control the West, Indians had to be slaughtered; before it could control the East, Asians had to be slaughtered.

Hence, metaphorically speaking the subdued monsters are the Latins, the Red Indians and the Asians. And Lowell's heart exudes sympathy and pity for both the defeated monsters (Latins, Red Indians and Asians) and the indefatigable monster. (State)

Pity the monsters!
Pity the monsters!
Perhaps, one always took the wrong side -
Ah, to have known, to have loved
too many Davids and Judiths!
My heart bleeds black blood for the monster. (107)
In "July in Washington" the defeated monsters are the "electorate" and the indefatigable monsters are the "elected" representatives of the State. "Florence" is Lowell's searching attempt to understand history and culture, not in terms of economics or politics, but in terms of the human beings who live it and "July in Washington" is his attempt to see society in relation to permanent standards and realities that transcend civilization and make it possible. Lowell observes the social actualities of fragmented, pluralistic and individualistic modern America and finds much cause for lamentation, satire and fear. But he arrives at a simple truth. Very delicately, Lowell reminds the readers why we need politics, why that "Mausoleum of Washington" is inevitable and necessary. What will drag us back to Washington is the "slightest repugnance of our bodies / we no longer control." The free man on the farther shore returns to the world of edicts and laws motivated by that negative principle of distaste for uncontrolled liberation. "Man, in Lowell's work is always bad at being free, and this conviction saturates all his political writing" (Raban 174).

On 4th of July 1776, U.S. attained its independence from Britain. It was the first great republic of the modern world—tiny Switzerland being the only other Republic at the time. Holland, although republican, was controlled by the aristocracy. England was not only a monarchy, but its Parliament was in the hands of the small rich land-owning class. So the United States Republic was a new kind of country. It had no past, as the countries of Europe and Asia had. It had no relics of feudalism, except in the plantation system and slavery in the South. It had no hereditary nobility. The citizens had few obstacles to their growth and the country grew rapidly. George Washington became the first President of the United States. Other great men of this period were Thomas Paine, Benjamin Franklin, Patrick Henry, Thomas Jefferson, Adams and James Madison. But today the greatness of the country is on the decline. The elected representatives of the country do not rise up to the expectations of the
electorate. The system saps their energy. "The elect, the elected . . . they come here bright as dimes, / and die dishevelled and soft" (127). Whitman also revealed his dissatisfaction in his poem "To the States, To Identify the 16th, 17th or 18th Presidentiad." "Are those really Congressmen? are those the great Judges? is that the President? / Then I will sleep a while yet, for I see that these states sleep, for reason" (lines 5-6).

At midnight on August 14th, three quarters of a century of struggle culminated in India's Independence from Britain. The saffron, white and green flag of free India flew proudly from the Himalayas to Cape Comorin, fire-works lit the night sky, parades and mass assemblies filled a thousand towns and city squares and patriotic oratory was heard everywhere. But today like Lowell’s "sore spots of the earth" (Vietnam, Korea, Cuba) the country is spotted with sore spots (Kashmir, Punjab). "The stiff spokes of this wheel / touch the sore spots of the earth" (127). The divisive forces that are at work now, causing the "sore spots" were foreseen by Bharathiyar even before India attained its independence. He was realistic enough to see that what unifies is abstract and unseen and the diversity is demonstrable and can be exploited. Bharathiyar wanted to strengthen physically the unity that has continued over centuries in the cultural, traditional and moral planes.

The surplus waters of Bengal we take
And sustain the crops of the central state. ("Bharatha Desam" lines 7-8)
In the river Sind in Punjab shall we sail and play
with the young damsels of Kerala gay,
Singing songs in Telugu sweet. ("Bharatha Desam" lines 17-20)
America is no longer the great power that it once was; And India is no longer a unified country. And both America and India do not revere their leaders who made both the democracies possible. Just as Bharathiyar feared inner division, Lowell fears
that without proper leadership American civilization may sink back into wilderness from which it sprang. "... green statues ride like South American liberators above the breeding vegetation." As in "Inauguration Day: January 1953," the politicians are represented by their immobile statues, effigies of power without names, personalities or feelings. The meteoric rise and the inevitable decline of the public figures make Lowell say, "We cannot name their names, or number their dates; Circle on circle, like rings on a tree" (127). Yenser analyses these lines thus:

The implication is that the new era will be one in which American civilization will sink back into the wilderness from which it sprang. The reason for this retrogression is suggested by the mocking juxtaposition of "The elect" and "the elected", which points up the great disparity between virtue and political success even as it jeeringly identifies salvation with worldly power. The obsolescence of the concept of heroism implicit in this irony prompts the reference to the men whom the statues are supposed to commemorate: "We cannot name their names, or number their dates." If in "The Mouth of the Hudson" the poet-speaker contradicted Hart Crane's optimistic view of man's ability to transcend the apparent future of the New World, in these lines he declines the role that Yeats arrogated to the poet in "Easter 1916"--that of murmuring the "name upon name" of legendary political heroes. Neither meliorism nor mythology is possible in a world whose leaders are unctuous as otters that "Slide and dive and slick back their hair" and rapacious as raccoons that "clean their meat in the creak"

(230-231).

In the poem "To a shade," Yeats condemns the Irish for their ingratitude to Parnell, who was the leader of the Irish M.P.s in the House of Commons until he was
repudiated by many of them, because he was cited as a co-respondent in a divorce case.

. . . A man
Of your own passionate serving kind who had brought
In his full hands what, had they only known,
Had given their children's children loftier thought,
Sweeter emotion, working in their veins
Like gentle blood, has been driven from the place,
And insult heaped upon him for his pains,
And for his open-handedness, disgrace;
Your enemy, an old foul mouth, had set
The pack upon him. (lines 9-20 p., 123)

"July in Washington" though a poem of somnolent idle rumination, impressively shows the poet's mind finding a relation to public conditions, a place from which to see and ponder over the involvement of his own fate in the fate of a collective human order (Edwards 224). If the poem is titled as "August in Delhi," it would have fitted the Indian public conditions well. Politics is necessary; but great expectations from today's politicians, "the elected" can only lead to disappointments. The world forgets great leaders very soon, Abraham Lincoln, Mahatma Gandhi and Parnell are all mere "green statues" now. Washington is a well planned city; but the "elected" politicians are corrupt. Corrupt though the system of governing may be, it is necessary for collective living; hence the "electorate" have no choice.

"July in Washington" thus accepts the painful necessity of politics. Edwards finds,

the flawed public poem to be marked by a static attitude, by the indifference to development and redefinition that is so disastrous in
actual politics. Conversely, the successful public poem shows susceptibility to experience and learning; it is the record of a journey taken, a conflict met and faced . . . if the poet ends by being unsure about the value of opposing positions, this is only to say that he has reached the centre of politics and accepted its painfulness and its necessity (5-6).

Lowell is indeed unsure about the value of opposing positions. He has no great love for the elected politicians, but understands that society needs them.

"July in Washington," "Buenos Aires" and "Dropping South: Brazil" were written following a tour Lowell made of South America in 1962 sponsored by the Congress of Cultural Freedom. When Lowell subsequently discovered that the Congress was a conduit for Central Intelligence Agency funds, he was plagued by "unhappy thoughts" of his own gullibility, shallowness and opportunism. During his tour of South America, he flew to Buenos Aires to spend time with his poet friend Elizabeth Bishop. His impressions get recorded in "Buenos Aires." In "Buenos Aires" Lowell implies that the United States government is akin to the provincial dictatorships of South America. "Buenos Aires" is a poem of discontent and disenchantment: V.R. Parthasarathy, a contemporary Indian Poet writing in English exhibits the same sentiments.

The ochre air irritates
the tongue. Dust thickens it.
The squalid city groans
under the loo, familiar
as on ordinary afternoon in May.
It's a cemetery of stones
I see everywhere:
Khaljis, Tughlugs, Lodis, Mughals—
they stick to its face
like turds . . . . ("Delhi" lines 1-10 p., 71)

In Buenos Aires "the bulky, beefy breathing of the herds" can be heard. The "Cemetery of stones" mars the landscape of "Buenos Aires" too.

Along the sunlit cypress walks
of the Republican martyrs' graveyard,
hundreds of one-room Roman temples
hugged their neo-classical catafalques.

Literal commemorative busts
preserved the frogged coats
and fussy, furrowed foreheads
of those soldier bureaucrats. (128)

The city has as little life as the graveyard where a similar stiffness and decorum prevail. Argentina's Republican martyrs, like India's and U.S's died in vain. The commemorative graveyard art reflects the standardized respectability, anxiety and lack of inspiration which characterize the city of the living.

The South American / liberators of "July in Washington" are counterpointed in "Buenos Aires" by the "interocide" generals who exploit the "herds" of impoverished farmers and labourers. The military dictators alternatively "lead" and like "lumps of dough," seem hardly more human than the "lateral commemorative busts" of their predecessors. Futilly arranged against them are the marble statues of the goddesses, whose hard breasts, the poet-speaker's only source of comfort are emblematic of the paucity of the milk of human kindness in the country. But the poets have never found the conditions prevailing in their capitals acceptable to them. The paucity of human kindness has always pained them. William Blake found the streets
and rivers of London imprisoned and enslaved like every inhabitant of London, "Near where the chartered Thames does flow." And the weaker, naïve public (whether they are the Voters or the cattle growers) always get exploited by people who have power and authority. In "London," it is the church that soils its purity by profiting from the suffering of the child labourer and the state that makes its soldiers shed blood unnecessarily.

How the chimney-sweeper’s cry
Every black’ning Church appeals;
And the hapless Soldier’s sigh
Runs in blood down Palace walls. (lines 9-12)

Blake’s poem "London" follows the mind of a person who interacts with the landscape of London and is dismayed by what he sees. And Lowell’s poem "For the Union Dead" follows the mind of a person as he interacts with the landscape of modern Boston. But Lowell’s dismay is more intense, because he compares it with an older Boston. Unlike "London" which talks only of the present, "For the Union Dead" tries to show a relationship between the past and the present. As Lowell walks the streets of modern Boston he acts as witness to his own life and to the life of his country. Thus he again fuses personal and public experiences but on a bigger scale.

It was John F. Kennedy who said, "Ask not what your country can do for you, but rather what you can do for your country." The Latin inscription "Relinquunt Omnia Servare Rem Publicam" echoes Kennedy’s sense of self-sacrifice involved in traditional patriotism.

The epigraph is the motto of the society of Cincinnati which is correctly transcribed on the Shaw memorial, but has been changed by Lowell. "He leaves all behind to serve the Country" has been changed to "They leave all behind to serve the Country." The change may be to emphasize that the sacrifice at Fort Wagner was a
common one or to include the rank and file of Shaw's regiment and all of the Union Dead.

Colonel Shaw was one who gave up everything to serve the state. And "For the Union Dead" composed for and first read at the Boston Arts Festival in June 1960, in many ways repeated an earlier ceremony, the dedication of the Shaw Memorial in 1897. Robert Gould Shaw was twenty-five years old when he died. The only son of a wealthy and distinguished Boston family, he had everything to live for; he was later to be remembered as "the blue-eyed child of fortune upon whose youth every divinity had smiled." In 1863, he was serving as Captain in the 2nd Massachusetts Regiment having risen to the rank from a private; he had seen action at Cedar Mountain and Antietam. When the 54th Massachusetts was being formed, the Governor offered him its command because of his military record, his personal character and the strong and well known anti-slavery commitment of his parents which he also shared. Shaw hesitated to undertake the arduous responsibility partly because he doubted his abilities, but mainly because he loved the regiment he was serving. Indeed, his first decision was to refuse the Governor's invitation, but second thoughts led him to believe that it was his duty to accept; he trained the regiment, marched it through Boston in early 1863 and, within two months, led it into battle. The battle in which the regiment distinguished itself was the assault on Fort Wagner in South Carolina, an earthworks near the much more famous Fort Sumter in Charleston harbour. As there was no cover by which to approach it the fortification had to be attacked frontally, and the 54th Massachusetts Regiment attacked across an open space shooting at a crack in the fortification while they were open targets from inside. Shaw himself apparently reached the parapet, and was shot in the head. Virtually all the men were at least wounded and half of them died.
The custom in the Civil War was for the victorious side to bury the enemy, with mass graves for the common soldiers and individual graves for the officers. But since the soldiers of the regiment were black, the Confederate Commander of Fort Wagner refused Shaw the honourable burial to which his rank entitled him and instead had him buried with his men in a common grave. Northern public opinion was outraged, and there was considerable talk of recovering Shaw's body and reburying it. Shaw's father put a stop to it saying, "We hold that a soldier's most appropriate burial place is on the field where he has fallen. I shall therefore be much obliged, General, if in case the matter is brought to your cognizance, you will forbid the desecration of my son's grave, and prevent the disturbance of his remains or those buried with him. Lowell poetizes the event:

Shaw's father wanted no monument except the ditch,
where his son's body was thrown and lost with his "niggers." (136)

Ralph Waldo Emerson had spoken at a meeting, called to aid in raising the regiment, and had subscribed ten dollars in its support, a considerable sum of money at a time when a dollar was a good day's wage and the pay of a private in the Union was thirteen dollars a month. After Shaw's death he composed a poem "Voluntaries" in tribute both to Shaw and to his troops:

So nigh is grandeur to our dust,
So near is God to man,
When Duty whispers low, Thou must
The youth replies, I can. (207)

Emerson's poem expresses the faith and confidence of those who believed in the "righteousness" of the cause for which, after Emancipation, there was no longer any
doubt that union troops were fighting. Lowell’s Shaw and Yeats’s Robert Gregory are youths who responded to the whispers of duty with “We can.”

Robert Gregory was another blue-eyed child of fortune. Major Robert Gregory R.F.C., M.C., Legion of Honour, was killed in action on the Italian Front, on January 13, 1918. He was the only child of Lady Gregory who was Yeats’s life-long friend and patron. Robert Gregory was a man of great abilities, a Renaissance man whom Yeats describes as “Our Sidney, our perfect man.” Lowell writes of Shaw “He is out of bounds now. He rejoices in man’s lovely, / peculiar power to choose life and die.”

“Man, who alone has rational knowledge of death, alone can voluntarily accept it, philosophically as well as in particular circumstances, for the sake of a complete and life giving response to existence” (Williamson 110). The same sentiment is echoed in Yeats’s lines in “An Irish Air man foresees Death.”

I know that I shall meet my fate
Somewhere among the clouds above;
Those that I fight I do not hate,
Those that I guard I do not love;
Nor law, nor duty bade me fight,
Nor public men, nor cheering crowds,
A lonely impulse of delight
Drove to this tumult in the clouds;
I balanced all, brought all to mind,
The years to come seemed waste of breath,
A waste of breath the years behind
In balance with this life, this death. (Collected Poems 152)

Robert Gould Shaw, America’s “perfect son” rejoices in man’s peculiar power to choose “life” and “die.” And a lonely impulse of delight drives Gregory to the clouds;
carefully balancing life and death the Irish airman realizes that in balance with this "life," (death) mere living in the years to come seemed "waste of breath."

According to Paul Scott Stanfield,

a soldier's (be it Shaw or Gregory) immediate, natural and sincere terror at finding himself in circumstances which dictate that he kill, be killed or both might be wholly transformed, Yeats felt, by the assuming of a second self that embraced those circumstances as something deliberately chosen, an antithesis of one's instinct that paradoxically seemed more one's true self than had that instinct. Yeats's own attempt to place himself imaginatively in the Great War, "An Irish Airman Foresees His Death," turns on this kind of deliberate choice. The Irish Airman does not see himself as the victim of forces and fates that have compelled him to an early violent death. Knowing that action in a fallen world includes evil, he still chooses to act, and so freely affirms the accident that threw him into the fallen world. He turns his fate into a free choice a joyful choice, and makes his soul (97).

Similarly having chosen "death," Shaw made no compromise. It is because of his clear insight into the meaning and value of death in the cause of human freedom, that "when he leads his black soldiers to death / he cannot bend his back"- -he will jeopardize neither his own integrity nor theirs by a submissive compromise. A.R. Jones points out that the Colonel ironically recalls the motto of a branch of the Lowell family: "malo frangere quam flectere," which Lowell reads as "I prefer to bend than to break." "In the present of the poem, as in the past, Colonel Shaw stands out against Boston, with pride and with courage" (19), "he waits / for the blessed break."

Michael North sees a direct verbal parallel between Lowell's "He rejoices in man's lovely, / peculiar power to choose life and die . . . and Berryman's "flame-like,
perish and live" (283). "Dying" is "choosing life"; "perishing" is "living". Hence James Rambeau calls "For the Union Dead" "an elegy for the dead of the civil war." The poem according to him "is a celebration, as an elegy should be, 'of man's lovely, / peculiar power to choose life and die"' (174).

Bharathiya, the poet who evoked the patriotic fervour of the enslaved Indian masses with his sizzling poems also intensely longed to fill independent India with the likes of Shaw and Gregory. He sang:

Come, come, with victory in your grasp,
Come, come, modest in speech;
Come, come, full-grown to manhood,
Come, come, you of immaculate face.
Come, come, and translate thought into deed,
Come, come, whose will is equal to desire;
Come, come, take up the Herculean task
of forging the unity of our land. (lines 57-64 pp.66-67)

Bharathiya's audience of young men is imaginary; Shaw's was real. When his regiment moved into position, Shaw made them a speech reminding them how their behaviour would be watched and saying, "Now I want you to prove yourselves men" (qtd. in Hansen 749). Taking up the "Herculean task of forging the unity of America," the regiment and their leader successfully translated "thoughts into deeds," because their "wills were equal" to their "desires" but lost their precious lives in the process; they proved "themselves men."

The memorial itself is a bronze tablet: on it Colonel Shaw is riding a horse, and the men of his regiment press on in front of and behind him, on foot, carrying the regimental colours. An allegorical Angel of Mercy is represented above them. The Shaw memorial dedicated in 1897, is one of the major works of Augustus
Saint-Gaudens (1848-1907). He took thirteen years to complete this powerful memorial. William James giving the oration said, "There on foot go the dark outcasts, so true to nature that one can almost hear them breathing as they march." Lowell writes, "at the dedication, / William James could almost hear the bronze Negroes breathe" (135). The younger brother of William James, Garth Wilkinson James was also one of the wounded in the Fort Wagner assault.

The sculptor Saint-Gaudens recollected the dedication in his reminiscences:

The impression of those old soldiers, passing the very spot where they left for the war so many years before, thrills me even as I write these words . . . They seemed as if returning from the war, the troops of bronze marching in the opposite direction, the direction in which they had left for the front, and the young men there represented now showing these veterans the vigor and hope of youth. It was a consecration" (qtd. in Hansen 753).

Chadwick Hansen observes,

in the figure of Colonel Shaw and the figures of the black infantry-men, Saint-Gaudens had fused two very different perceptions of war: War as artists once saw it, exemplified in the person of the single hero, and war as the best artists have been apt to see it ever since Whitman’s and Brady’s, and Winslow Homer’s Civil war, war as exemplified in the ranks of anonymous private soldiers. And in these figures he had fused as well the upright New England Conscience and the aspirations of the American Negro (754).

Lowell recognizes that New England Conscience, Culture and Shaw are dead now.

On a thousand small town New England greens,

the old white churches hold their air
of sparse, sincere rebellion; frayed flags
quilt the graveyards of the Grand Army of the Republic. (136)
Shaw had all the qualities necessary for public life; he denies himself pleasure, accepts
a public role not for his own advantage but as a duty.

He has an angry wrenlike vigilance,
a greyhound's gentle tautness;
he seems to wince at pleasure,
and suffocate for privacy. (136)

India's great leader Gandhiji "wincéd at pleasure," and sacrificed his life for amity
between two religions. Both Gandhiji and Shaw received bullet wounds because of
their faith in anti-secessionist and abolitionist theories. But their sacrifices have been
in vain. The events of the day conveyed over the television prove the futility of their
lives. "When I crouch to my television set, / the drained faces of Negro school-children
rise like balloons" (137).

There is a historical comparison here between Shaw's black regiment and the
black students of the desegregation battles of the fifties. These students, non-violent
counter-parts of the Massachusetts Fifty-fourth, are the only unambiguous heroes in
the poem. Lowell has said of the political aspect of "For the Union Dead": "in 1959
I had a message here; since then the blacks have found their "break," but the
landscape remains." This landscape is one of continuing injustice and increasing
political terror. The flawed but very real idealism of Shaw and his celebrators has
given way to a "commercial optimism" which serves as a cover for mass murder, for
servility, for savagery.

According to Axelrod, "Yet however dark the prospects, the black school
children, lonely but determined disciples of Gandhi, provide reason for hope" (171).
The 'civic courage' exhibited by Shaw, and Ganchiji has now given way to "commercial optimism," and the result is

The ditch is nearer.

- There are no statues for the last war here;
  on Boylston Street, a commercial photograph shows Hiroshima boiling
  over a Mosler Safe, "the Rock of Ages"

that survived the blast. Space is nearer. (136)

Williamson sees the ditch as a many layered symbol, bringing together nuclear annihilation, the absolute zero of outer space, the blank terror in the faces of the Negro school children, and the hollowness of the ideals out of touch with real circumstances (110). The line a 'commercial photograph shows Hiroshima boiling over a Mosler safe' speaks volumes about our present day materialistic values. Hiroshima "boiled" on August 6, 1945. A few seconds after 8:15 a.m., two high-flying planes made tight, diving turns in opposite directions. As they turned, one plane dropped three parachutes carrying blast-recording equipment; the other dropped an atomic bomb that was set to detonate 1,850 feet above the city.

The bomb exploded in a brilliant flash of light followed by an expanding fireball so intense that it incinerated thousands of people near Hiroshima's centre and burned others as far away as two and a half miles. Then came the blast, carrying the impact of a five hundred-mile-per-hour wind and levelling almost everything within a radius of more than two miles. Loose bits of wood, brick, tile and glass became deadly missiles; the stone columns of a hospital directly below the explosion were driven straight into the ground. Water mains were ripped to pieces, and fires started by thousands of overturned charcoal stoves still hot from the preparation of the morning meal, finished the work that the heat and blast had begun. Every building
within five square miles of the hypocentre was destroyed. The City of Hiroshima was flattened. At least seventy eight thousand people and possibly many thousands more were killed or fatally injured in Hiroshima. Sankichi Toge, a survivor of the Hiroshima blast, who died in 1953, aged 36, wrote in his powerful poem "Morning":

That those swine in man's shape
Who do not know how to use the power
from the earth's center except for slaughter
Survive only in illustrated books for the little ones.
That the energy of ten million horse power
per gram, one thousand times as strong as high explosive,
Be delivered, out of the atom into the hands of the people.
That the rich harvest of science
Be conveyed, in peace, to the people
Like bunches of succulent grapes
Wet with dew
Gathered in
At dawn. (lines 27-45 p., 364)

But the world has forgotten the miseries of the hundreds of innocent victims who died in the nuclear holocaust. The "ten million horse power per gram" is not being conveyed to the people as a "rich harvest of science" but only to "slaughter innocent lives," hence the last ditch-the end of the world is "nearer." Lowell then shows the horror of the world-the total annihilation of the world possible because of the nuclear holocaust-and how that horror is trivialized, and made meaningless by the pressures of Commercialism. The shift from Shaw's monument commemorating an event in Civil War history to the "commercial" photograph which existed in a store window at 217, Boylston Street in the late 1950s is startling. Mosler safe is shown,
with a photograph of a mushroom cloud looming over it. It is a testimony to the safe. But there is a history to the display of the photograph. The Teikoku Bank Limited, Kawayacho, Hiroshima, Japan wrote on May 22, 1950 to the Manager, The Mosler Safe Co., Hamilton, Ohio, U.S.A.:

As you know in 1945 the Atomic Bomb fell on Hiroshima, and the whole city was destroyed and thousands of citizens lost their precious lives. And our building, the best artistic one in Hiroshima was also destroyed. However, it was our great luck to find that though the surface of the vault doors were heavily damaged its contents were not affected at all and the cash and important documents were perfectly saved. The superiority of your goods are completely verified as truly told to the whole world in the American Bankers, the July 13th issue of 1946. Your products were being admired for being stronger than the Atomic Bomb.

The letter unwittingly - and hauntingly - gives evidence of the very spirit of our age which Lowell finds epitomized in the "commercial photograph." James Rambeau points out, that there is first of all the ironic contrast between the bronze "Stele" produced in great labor by a possessed artist and the assembly of photographs by an anonymous adman. But at the same time there is a more complex irony at work, a reflection that what we deserve in our present state is exactly such a worthless and short-lived artifact (176.177).

The past may be measured against the present by the artifacts which commemorate events. And if we compare those artifacts, the evidence is plain. The past is celebrated by the actions of individual men, "with man's lovely, peculiar power to choose life
and die," reflected in the artifact of the Shaw memorial. The present is celebrated by the anonymous, state- dictated button-pushing of Hiroshima, reflected in the group-designed, product-selling, photograph-conflating advertisement. The Hindu dated 6.02.90 ran this advertisement for Paharpur Cooling Towers Ltd., "We had the courage to work in Iran during the war . . . And have just been rewarded for it: . . ."

"Thank you Tavaner. Thank you, Iran" (1).

Here again the horror of war is trivialized, reduced and made meaningless by the pressures of commercialism. A society that is completely materialistic and affluent which no longer understands Colonel Shaw or the values of one who leaves all to serve the state can only "slide by on grease" due to savage servility. According to Vivian Smith the Oxymoron 'a savage servility' points out some of the contradictions of modern life: the violence, the passivity. This is a poem sharply, accurately and subtly critical of society as a whole and its growing corruption. Vivian Smith also points out that there is the overtone of greasing the palm as well as the sense of sliding by, so different from the uprightness of Shaw who cannot bend his back (100).

And due to the growing corruption in society "the monument sticks like a fish bone in the city's throat." Fish are a unifying symbol in the poem, from the "bronze-cod" in the first stanza to the 'cat-fish' of the last one. The fish has long been an archetypal symbol of life. The poet Diane Wakoski finds in the fish an apt symbol of his own consciousness, and in the anguish of modern culture is likely to feel.

I am a fish swimming in mined waters
I am a fish in water that has been torpedoed
I am a fish in a volcanic ocean
Oh, the detritus, the confusion, the noise, the floating anger.

(qtd. in Mersmann 234)
Wakoski and Lowell long to "break loose" like the "Chinook salmon" (141) "jumping and falling back," "clearing the top on the last try," and just being "alive enough" to "spawn" and "die," but in today's modern world they can only travel by "giant finned cars" nosing "forward like fish" (137) doomed to lead a vegetable-like servile existence.

But if at one level "For the Union Dead" is a public poem, at another complementary level it is inner autobiography. At the same time as the poem contrasts America's past with its present, it also contrasts the poet's personal past with its personal present. Axelrod observes "that in "For the Union Dead" Lowell weaves its apparently dissimilar strands - the private and public, the historical and contemporaneous - into a seamless verbal fabric" (173). He achieves unity by meticulously ascribing personal happenings and national history in analogical language.

The poem actually begins with personal recollections.

The old South Boston Aquarium stands

in a Sahara of snow now. Its broken windows are boarded.

The bronze weathervane cod has lost half its scales.

The airy tanks are dry. (135)

For Lowell, the locus of his reflections always assumes great importance. When well was in school Mr. Newell, from Boston University used to take the Brimmer pool students to the South Boston Aquarium where "once Lowell's nose crawled a snail on the glass and his hand tingled to burst the "bubbles" drifting from the as of the "cowed, compliant fish." Later in the poem, Colonel Shaw is "riding on bubble, / he waits / for the blessed break." Certain critics have glossed the bubble as a "political bubble which drifts from the mouth of Leviathan," by the bursting which Shaw, and Lowell, are to be freed from the state (Martin 38) or as one the ring of which "might unveil truth" (Cosgrave, 191) or bring about "an annihilation Veil of Maya" and "a bursting of the amnion" (Cooper 99).
The "bubble" image is used in Tamil Poet Bharathiyar's poems too. He sings, "In the flood of Shakti the Sun is a bubble" (25). Lowell's "bubble" is one of illusion but Bharathiyar's is of energy. Like the tamed fish in their tank, the pedestrian compliant residents of Boston pursue a bubble of air—a worthless materialistic life. Closing the aquarium also is a sign that our culture with its increasingly advanced technology is losing touch with our fellow creatures, the vast world of ecology of which we are only a part, "fish and reptile" are replaced by "yellow dinosaur steamshovels." In "The Public Garden" the "bubble" denotes decline and disappointment: "... Everything's aground. / Remember summer? Bubbles filled the fountain and we splashed" (113). Boston's public garden implies its predecessor, Adam and Eve's private garden, Eden. The lovers of this poem are like Adam and Eve in a fallen state, and the park is also in a ruined state. Everything is drying up and the fountain is filled not with water but with dead leaves. For Lowell "happiness" in the materialistic world is just an illusory "bubble." Bharathiyar's "bubble" is energizing; Lowell's enervating.

The poem is literally born of time, focussing on various historical moments; Colonel Shaw and his regiment marching through Boston in 1863 and then dead at Fort Wagner two months later; William James dedicating their monument in 1897; Hiroshima "boiling" in 1945, the Boston Common being torn open "One morning last march"; the teeming city thoroughfares of time present. And the poem is a very personal one. Robert Gould Shaw was Lowell's kinsman. Shaw's sister married James Russell Lowell's nephew Charles Russell Lowell Jr. in October 1863. The poem "For the Union Dead," bearing the title of the book talks about the failure of the culture to create a union between a city's presence and the moral passion of the individual consciousness. But the title may also refer to his past relationships with other women as in the following poems "Water" and "The Old Flame."
Remember? We sat on a slab of rock.

From this distance in time,

it seems the color

of iris, rotting and turning purpler, (99)

Here Lowell remembers his friendship with the poet Elizabeth Bishop. "Water" hints that the two enjoyed a brief but failed romance following Lowell's divorce from Stafford and before his marriage to Hardwick. Hence it is a poem recalling a particular time and place when two people were together and something was wrong. It is about two people who love each other but who cannot become lovers. It is an expression of an agony experienced by countless men and women world over who can only romantically wish,

   We wished our two souls
   might return like gulls
   to the rock. In the end,
   the water was too cold for us. (100)

The poem that succeeds in transcending the gap between the past and the present and looks beyond earthly life itself, brings back the lovers to reality by the simple statement "the water was too cold for us."

   One night you dreamed
   you were a mermaid clinging to a wharf-pile,
   and trying to pull
   off the barnacles with your hands. (99)

The "you," his friend, the poet Elizabeth Bishop, who dreams of being a mermaid "trying to pull / off the barnacles," wants to be released from encrusted time. According to Stephen Yenser,
since barnacles are motile only when young, attaching themselves to rocks or logs when mature, and since they develop sharp shells that can lacerate those who would detach them, it seems that Lowell is suggesting the impossibility of, and the pain contingent upon, any attempt to oppose the natural course of events by refusing to accept the changes wrought by time (205.206).

"The Old Flame" extends the theme of the difficulty and necessity of relinquishing the past and accepting the natural course of events. "Water" looks back with a mixture of remorse and sadness at failed romance and "The Old Flame" at failed marriage. The title stylishly suggests the similarity between this poem and a kind of popular song.

My Old Flame,

I can't even think of her name

But it's funny now and then

How my thoughts go running back again

To My Old Flame.

Lowell borrowed the title from a passage in Vergil's Aeneid. The actual circumstances of the poem are a visit by the poet to the house in Maine where he and his first wife used to live. Jean Stafford and Lowell lived for a while in a simple farm house, an attached barn, and a tree shaded lawn at Damariscotta Mills on the coast of southern Maine. A fierce winter with two feet of snow at a time and only an antique oil burning stove and two small electric heaters made life in Maine difficult. Time magazine report published on June 2, 1967 says that many of his anti-war poems were written at Damariscotta Mills, Maine (72). Collected in LWC they won him at 29, the Pulitzer Prize. But they won him no peace of mind. In a rage with the world, Lowell found no balm in his religion, and he renounced catholicism. Nor was
marriage a solace, it was another theatre for his inner dissension. He and his wife wrote in separate rooms in the big old farm house.

how quivering and fierce we were,
there snowbound together,
simmering like wasps
in our tent of books! (102)

Now as he drives past the refurbished house, he observes the changes.

Now a red ear of Indian maize
was splashed on the door.
Old Glory with thirteen stars
hung on a pole. The clapboard
was old-red school house red.
Inside, a new landlord,
a new wife, a new broom!
Atlantic seaboard antique shop
pewter and plunder
shone in each room. (101)

The redecoration of the house includes the traditional autumnal corn hung on the door, a colonial American flag, and the new paint job on the house itself— all including the newly bought antiques, which according to Lowell's taste are overdone and in bad taste. The new inmates are "money-conscious" like the "Nautilus Island's hermit heiress" and the "decorator" of "Skunk Hour." The tenants do not realize that the American Dream cannot be renewed with flags and colonial antique bric-a-brac. The Kennedy slogan "The New Frontier" is jokingly applied to this artificial reconstruction of the old frontier, a frontier without the rawness and danger of the real frontier a mere exhibition of patriotism. According to Jonathan Raban, "Lowell
catches that crude belief in the possibility of the New Frontier with tender irony. Is the 'old flame' also the continuing flicker of optimism in the American character?" (171).

At first Lowell and Stafford were happy in Maine, exploring the country, preparing meals, washing dishes and tending the fires. Gradually the magic dissolved. The "new people" who are now living in the poet-speaker's home, "their old restored house on the hill" repeat the actions of the couple that preceded them. Will they also lose the charm of the marriage?

No one saw your ghostly
imaginary lover
stare through the window,
and tighten
the scarf at his throat. (101)

Jean Stafford's "A Country Love Story" was inspired by the country side of Maine state and as in the story Lowell here imagines a lover "Staring through the window," where that apparition "tightens" a scarf about his throat. The suicidal suggestions of his tightening the scarf at his throat do not appear in the story.

In one bed and apart,
we heard the plow
groaning up hill -
a red light, then a blue,
as it tossed off the snow
to the side of the road. (102)

In the story Miss Stafford wrote, "the ditcher on snowy nights rising with a groan over the hill, flinging the snow from the road and warning of its approach by lights that first flashed red, then blue" (133-145).
The two separate lights of the snow plough, red and blue are apparently disconnected, relating to the image of two in one bed and apart: the voice of 'flaming insight' keeping them awake is related to the image of clearing the road of snow with its suggestion of paths and new futures opening ahead (Smith 84).

Lowell was able to reconcile himself to his separation from his "Old Flame" and realized that "Everything's changed for the best," but he was not able to do the same later, when after his release from McLean's in June 1959 Elizabeth Hardwick deliberately kept at a "certain distance," and loneliness drove him to suicidal despair.

When Anne Sexton could not reconcile herself to her world, she tried to forget her miseries by an intake of innumerable capsules.

My supply

of tablets

has got to last for years and years

I like them more than I like me. (lines 26-29)

... of myself

Yes

I try

to kill myself in small amounts,

an innocuous occupation. (lines 33-38)

Anne Sexton's poetic persona plants "bombs" inside himself by consuming "tablets" whereas Lowell's and Roethke's resort to consuming alcohol. Lowell drinks away his domestic griefs as Roethke's "papa" does in "My Papa's Waltz."

The whiskey on your breath

Could make a small boy dizzy;
But I hung on like death;

Such waltzing was not easy. (lines 1-4)

Studies have shown that years of alcoholism can lead to Korsakoff's syndrome, a mental disorder in which the brain cannot establish new memories, and in which some victims confabulate or fill in memory gaps with "recollections" of events that never happened. The "drinker" cannot remember his neighbour's names. His thoughts are muddled. He fills up his mind with imagined events, which are dirty "like the mop and water in the galvanized bucket."

The poem "The Drinker" gives a graphic description of how the alcoholic "plants bombs" inside himself effectively. The "drinker's" body, like a whale's body has been harpooned by alcohol. The whale sinks into the ocean and dies when the lines of the harpoon tighten. The "drinker" is also sinking, slowly being drowned by the after-effects of immoderate drinking. "The barbed hooks fester. / The lines snap tight."

"Is he killing time? Out on the street,
two cops on horseback clop through the April rain
to check the parking meter violations -
their oilskins yellow as forsythia. (117)

Do the vehicles stand as metaphors for human lives? Is it time the "drinker" vacated his place on earth?

Vivian Smith calls the final stanza one of Lowell's most perfect endings:

The question leads back to the opening of the poem, but after what the poem has shown one wonders indeed if he is killing time--if time is the Baudelaarian enemy or simply an image or aspect of some larger despair. The cops checking the parking meter violations assert the
dominion of time: We are all living on borrowed time and time must be paid for, not violated; but by a brilliant reversal and extension of the idea the cops also represent the values and morality of public order opposed to the chaos and waste of private disorder; the human city can only be kept in order by the assertion and imposition of external values (92).

Both the following poems "Eye and Tooth" and "The Drinker" can only be understood as Baudelairean poems. They are painful examinations of the spiritual emptiness which afflicts the poet as representative man. Martin Turnell's description of Baudelaire's poems apply well to these two poems: "the drama of the exhausted mind unable to grapple with its problems and the shattered vibrating nerves which leave it no rest" (qtd. in Axelrod 268).

"Eye and Tooth" with its reference to the Old Testament law, "an eye for an eye / tooth for tooth," indicates man's unchangeable nature. Intellectual thirst always remains a part of man's nature.

Nothing! No oil
for the eye, nothing to pour
on those waters or flames.

I am tired. Everyone's tired of my turmoil. (109)

A letter Lowell wrote to Isabella Gardner, Allen Tate's wife, on the occasion of her first volume of verse, anticipated the conclusion of "Eye and Tooth," a forthcoming Lowell poem; "Writing's hell isn't it? I tire of my turmoil, and feel everyone else has, and long for a Horatian calm" (qtd. in Heymann 440). "I am tired. Everyone's tired of my turmoil!" (109). It is a line which in its wintry discontent, its restlessness is so very typical of the anguished Lowell of this book, and so very characteristically unheeding of Williams's advice in "Paterson." "Be reconciled, poet, with your world."
The image of "hawks" is closely related to a prose passage in Lowell's essay on William Carlos Williams. In his Hudson Review essay on Williams, Lowell wrote:

When I think about writing on Dr. Williams, I feel a chaos of thoughts and images... When I woke up this morning, something unusual for this summer was going on: pin-pricks of rain were falling in a reliable comfortable simmer. Our town was blanketed in the rain of rot and the rain of renewal... An image held my mind during these moments and kept returning--an old fashioned New England Cottage freshly painted white. I saw a shaggy, triangular shade on the house, trees, a hedge or their shadows, the blotch of decay... Inside the house was a bird book with an old stiff and steely engraving of a sharp-shinned hawk. The hawk's legs had a reddish brown buffalo fuzz on them; behind was the blue sky bare and abstracted from the world... (38).

Like Williams's poems, the poem "Eye and Tooth" reveals and justifies the consciousness that gave rise to it, but, unlike Williams's poem, it is agony-laden and the sharp-shinned hawk of the poem clasping the abstract imperial sky also connects the poem to the American eagle and the American people.

No ease from the eye
of the sharp-shinned hawk in the bird book there,
With reddish-brown buffalo hair
on its shanks, one ascetic talon (108)

The poet as a boy is fascinated by a hawk in a bird book, whose talon clasps the sky (rhyme : eye), offering a threatening castration symbol to a boy who feels guilty about masturbation and the unconscious incest fantasies associated with it.

Lowell in this poem represents the memory of that unpleasant experience as a tangible, physical object in his eye.
My whole eye was sunset red,  
the old cut cornea throbbled,  
I saw things darkly,  
as through an unwashed goldfish globe. (103)

Lowell’s painful memory is his boyhood Voyeurism.  
No ease for the boy at the key hole,  
his telescope,  
when the women’s white bodies flashed  
in the bathroom. Young,  
my eyes began to fail. (109)

The same sexual guilt is expressed in yet another poem "Art of the Possible" from Day by Day.

In my parents’ town house,  
a small skylight-covered courtyard,  
six feet by nine,  
lit two floors of bathrooms -  
their wanton windows clear glass above,  
and modestly glazed below.  
There for a winter or so,  
When eleven or twelve,  
one year short  
of the catastrophic brink of adolescence,  
I nightly enjoyed my mother bathing -  
not lust, but the lust of the eye. (36)

But Lowell implies that the key-hole peeping of the young Lowell is the guilt of all the young boys. It is the universal guilt. Lowell converts his personal guilt into
a public guilt and makes the reader share his pain. Pain ("Cornea throbbed")
insomnia ("Chain smoked through the night") ennui ("lay all day on my bed") and
even the drops of summer rain which could have been soothing are sharp painful
"pinpricks." Lowell is not able to release himself from his past. Even in maturity, he
pays for the sexual guilt of his boyhood. If one considers (as Freud did) intellectual
curiosity an extension or sublimation of sexual curiosity, it becomes clearer why
sinking one's teeth into the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge elicited such a sharp
response from our Heavenly father. Both the poems view universal problems
(alcoholism, sexual guilt) from a personal angle.

"It has been claimed that 'insensibly,' in Lowell's hands the tale of the world's
horrors, becomes a tale of the world's wonders, the catalogue of obscure absurdities,
a song of praise" (Fraser 1); yet this summation of For the Union Dead is hard to
justify. Although there is in the Lowell poems a sense of life as it could be lived, so
remote and unfeasible seems the possibility of its attainment that hopelessness prevails
as the dominant mood. The poet tries to integrate and harmonize his private, public
and historical concerns into an effective stance in the world; but where his
personality problems prove surmountable, the weight of contemporary history
overpowers him instead. In For the Union Dead, in his representative meditative
manner he looks for a solution against heavy odds; but fails; fails miserably. "The
poet" Reverdy says, "is a giant who passes effortlessly through the hole of a needle,
and at the same time a dwarf who fills the Universe" (qtd. in Cook 86). Lowell writes
about the universe as though it were a needle, a needle as though it were the
universe. But at the same time he achieves universality by coming to it through
particulars.

The poems in Life Studies written during or about crisis situations are valuable
in that an extraordinary, aberrant point of view can penetrate to greater insights than
the ordinary, working consciousness. But the poems in *For the Union Dead* are even more valuable because here by balancing and integrating his private and public concerns satisfactorily, Lowell reveals himself fully.
Works Cited


