

Helen Vendler: On "For the Union Dead"

Asked to participate in the Boston Arts Festival in 1960, Lowell delivered "For the Union Dead," a poem about a Civil War hero, Robert Gould Shaw, whose sister Josephine had married one of Lowell's ancestors, Charles Russell Lowell (who, like Robert Gould Shaw, was killed in the war). The poem is thus, though undeclaredly, a family poem; and in it, Lowell quotes from a letter that Charles Russell Lowell wrote home to his wife, Josephine, about her brother's burial: "I am thankful that they buried him with his niggers.' They were brave men and they were his men." "For the Union Dead" honors not only the person of Robert Gould Shaw, but also the stern and beautiful memorial bronze bas-relief by Augustus Saint Gaudens which stands opposite the Boston State House. It represents Colonel Shaw on horseback among the men of the Massachusetts 54th Regiment, a regiment entirely composed of Negro soldiers. By his own earlier request, Shaw -- who had the right, as an officer, to have his body brought home for burial -- was buried with his men in a mass grave after the battle of Fort Wagner, in which he and they had fallen. Far from criticizing the Brahmin past from the vantage point of the Catholic present, as he had done in *Lord Weary's Castle*, Lowell now criticizes Boston's Irish-American present in comparison with the New England past. It is not he, any longer, who illuminates the past; the past, with its noble but fading light, now illuminates the debased present, of which he is a part.

. . . .

Lowell now conceives of the events of public history as existing solely in commemorative art, on the one hand, and metaphysical "immortality," like that of Shaw, on the other. Past deeds of war have vanished into these aesthetic and virtual forms With the disappearance of history as firm past reality, the poem tails off into the abjectness of a Boston now ruled by the immigrant Irish, who, like the skunks of Castine, have taken over territory formerly belonging to the Lowells and their kind. The Irish have defaced the historical Common on which Emerson had his transcendental vision; they have undermined the State House and the Saint Gaudens relief in order to build a parking garage; they have abandoned civic responsibility in letting the Aquarium decline; everywhere, reduced to the synecdoche of their vulgar automobiles, their "savage servility / slides by on grease." Lowell's anti-Irish statement, though covert here . . . , shows a new commercialized history replacing an old ethical history. The bas-relief shakes, and the statues "grow slimmer and younger each year" so that they will, if the process continues, disappear altogether Christian language, the "Rock of Ages," is debased to gross advertisement, heartless in its appropriation of Hiroshima for commercial purposes. What saves the poem from Pharisaic superiority is the speaker's own confessed participation in the degradation he so scathingly observes: "When I crouch" -- he says as he offers the most startling image in the poem -- "When I crouch to my television set / The drained faces of Negro school-children rise like balloons."

Lowell has now realized that the inner life, even that of a prophet, cannot remain immune from the corruption it describes. The savage servility he observes, if it is that of the Irish politicians turning Boston into one long financial and ethical scandal, is also that of the poet, representing old Boston, servilely crouching to his television set as the savagery of long-standing segregation victimizes Negro children in the white Protestant South -- as though Shaw and the men of the Massachusetts 54th had died for nothing.

Publication Status:

[Excerpted Criticism](#) [1]

Publication:

- Private group -

Criticism Target:

[Robert Lowell](#) [2]

Author:

[Helen Vendler](#) [3]

Poem:

[For the Union Dead](#) [4]

Author Bio:

Tags:

[Boston](#) [5]

[Boston Arts Festival](#) [6]

[Robert Gould Shaw](#) [7]

[Augustus Saint Gaudens](#) [8]

[Boston State House](#) [9]

[Irish](#) [10]

[immigrant Irish](#) [11]

[Aquarium](#) [12]

[Boston Common](#) [13]

[burial](#) [14]

[aesthetic](#) [15]

[Massachusetts 54th Regiment](#) [16]

[Battle of Fort Wagner](#) [17]

Source URL: <http://www.modernamericanpoetry.org/criticism/helen-vendler-union-dead>

Links

[1] <http://www.modernamericanpoetry.org/category/publication-status/excerpted-criticism>

[2] <http://www.modernamericanpoetry.org/poet/robert-lowell>

[3] <http://www.modernamericanpoetry.org/creator/helen-vendler>

[4] <http://www.modernamericanpoetry.org/poem/union-dead>

[5] <http://www.modernamericanpoetry.org/category/tags/boston>

[6] <http://www.modernamericanpoetry.org/category/tags/boston-arts-festival>

[7] <http://www.modernamericanpoetry.org/category/tags/robert-gould-shaw>

[8] <http://www.modernamericanpoetry.org/category/tags/augustus-saint-gaudens>

[9] <http://www.modernamericanpoetry.org/category/tags/boston-state-house>

[10] <http://www.modernamericanpoetry.org/category/tags/irish>

[11] <http://www.modernamericanpoetry.org/category/tags/immigrant-irish>

[12] <http://www.modernamericanpoetry.org/category/tags/aquarium>

[13] <http://www.modernamericanpoetry.org/category/tags/boston-common>

[14] <http://www.modernamericanpoetry.org/category/tags/burial>

[15] <http://www.modernamericanpoetry.org/category/tags/aesthetic>

[16] <http://www.modernamericanpoetry.org/category/tags/massachusetts-54th-regiment>

[17] <http://www.modernamericanpoetry.org/category/tags/battle-fort-wagner>