

Booster, Protester, or Both: The American Writer as Citizen

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One evening in July of 1846 Sam Staples, the constable, tax collector, and jailer of Concord, Massachusetts, arrested Henry Thoreau for refusing to pay his poll tax and locked him in the county jail. Much to Thoreau's chagrin, Staples released him the next morning because a third party had paid his tax (Harding 199-206). That same month Manhattan-born poet and newspaper editor, Walt Whitman, had one of his odes performed at a Fourth of July celebration; the lyrics included such lines as "O, God of Columbia! O, Shield of the Free!" (Kaplan 125-6). Nearly a hundred years later, Robert Lowell, a poet and Bostonian, was sentenced to a year in prison as a conscientious objector for refusing to serve during World War II. Despite many differences, all three writers struggled with how as citizens to respond to the events of their day.

Ralph Waldo Emerson, a friend and mentor to Thoreau and Whitman and a leading literary forebear for Lowell, suggests two poles of response. In his essay, "Self-Reliance," Emerson famously describes society as "a joint-stock company" that provides its members security in exchange for their "liberty and culture" and asserts that "whoso would be a man must be a non-conformist" (122). In such a view, citizenship threatens the self and one's best option is to resist society or opt out. By contrast in his essay, "The Poet," Emerson offers a different view of society, celebrating American place and culture, particularly its potential as artistic material: "America," he proclaims, "is a poem in our eyes" (196). Here citizenship involves embracing society's possibilities. In effect, Emerson presents two roles for the writer-citizen: the protester who resists society's threats and the booster who celebrates its potential.

Thoreau as Protester

As a friend, neighbor, and, to an extent, disciple of Emerson, Thoreau shared his sense that society threatens the individual. In his effort to “be a man” Thoreau refused to conform with much that his society expected of him. Best known for withdrawing from society to conduct an experiment in living at Walden Pond, Thoreau also refused, at times, to conform to the government’s requirements of him as a citizen. The issue that most troubled him was slavery, and in a series of jeremiad-like lectures-turned-essays, he denounced the government and his fellow citizens for failing to live by principles of truth and morality.

The first of these essays, “On Civil Disobedience,” was prompted by the night he spent in jail. Published in 1849, it begins with Thoreau quoting the motto “that government is best which governs least” and amending it “or governs not at all” (227). At first blush, this rejection of government seems so extreme and the individualism so radical as to preclude any claim to citizenship, but that is not quite the case. Instead Thoreau affirms that citizens have the right to give or withhold consent as they judge the government to be just and the responsibility to do the right thing even when the government is doing wrong.

As for granting consent, Thoreau agrees with the Declaration’s claim that governments derive their just powers from the “consent of the governed”; the catch is that he rarely offers his consent. Describing another instance in which he refused to pay a tax (in support of a clergy and church he never attended), Thoreau writes, “Know all men by these presents, that I, Henry Thoreau, do not wish to be regarded as a member of any incorporated society which I have not joined” (238). He goes on to say, “If I had known how to name them, I should then have signed off in detail from all the societies which I never signed on to; but I did not know where to find a complete list” (238).

Thoreau does not oppose government entirely; he just finds it limited. For example, he is willing to support government projects that benefit him (such as roads) and says he wants to be neighborly (242). Ultimately, he sees the state's jurisdiction as limited, since it governs only a portion of his life and not the portion he finds most valuable. As he makes clear, his greatest purpose is not to be a good citizen, that is, "not chiefly to make this [world] a good place to live in but to live in it, be it good or bad" (234). His highest purpose, as he suggests in Walden, is to pursue truth, spiritual understanding, and growth of the self.

In addition to the power of consent, the citizen has the responsibility to critique government. Thoreau does not advocate withholding consent on the basis of individual interest but on principle. For example, he refused to pay his poll tax because he believed the United States was wrong to wage war with Mexico, and more importantly, wrong to support slavery. By refusing to pay, Thoreau, in effect, seceded from the Union. In condemning the state, Thoreau invokes principles that he views as higher than human law and claims that the true moral majority consists of those who have "God on their side" (235) and that "any man more right than his neighbors constitutes a majority of one already" (235). To separate from evil is a moral act, and true citizenship involves defying the state when its laws and actions are unjust. "Under a government that imprisons any unjustly," he claims, "the true place for a just man is also prison" (236). He thinks such individuals should be "locked out of the State by her own act, as they have already put themselves out by their principles" (236). He also presses the urgency of his action; rather than continuing to support an unjust government in the hope that it might reform itself in the future, he withdraws immediately (234).

While Thoreau's refusal to pay his tax may seem to be simply an individual taking a principled action, his biographer suggests that Thoreau hoped his jailing might raise public

awareness and inspire others to similar protests against the government. Part of his frustration at his quick release was that it cost him the opportunity to raise much awareness (Harding 205). Though he might have failed in his effort to move his fellow citizens by his actions, Thoreau shifts his effort to moving them by his words, which he sees as a form of education. Expressing his willingness to back the government's support of schools, he claims he is doing his "part to educate my fellow-countrymen now" (242), presumably through his essay. As a citizen who writes, his responsibility is to educate his neighbors, or as he puts it in Walden, to be a chanticler "to wake my neighbors up" (5).

Much as he desires to educate his neighbors for the moral improvement of society, Thoreau's role as protester often separates him from them. He stands on a moral high ground, proclaiming truths that others have failed to grasp or live out. His night in jail deepens his sense of the distance between himself and his neighbors. When he leaves the next morning, the town is changed in his eyes, and he sees his neighbors in a new light; their "friendship," he concludes, is "for summer weather only," they do "not greatly propose to do right," and they are "a distinct race" from him (241).

Despite this disturbing distance, Thoreau resumes the errand interrupted by his incarceration (picking up a shoe that had been mended) and is quickly enlisted to lead a huckleberry party. Soon he finds himself on a hill two miles from town, where the State is "nowhere to be seen" (241). He has returned to his true business: the pursuit of true living and of spiritual growth, a pursuit conducted most successfully in nature. After resisting an unjust government that wrongly tried to coerce him, he has retreated to nature, a place free from society's corruption and capable of restoring the individual.

Such freedom from the state proves difficult for Thoreau to maintain, as his essay “Slavery in Massachusetts” demonstrates. Originally delivered as a lecture at an anti-slavery celebration on July 4, 1854, the essay makes clear Thoreau’s sense of an increase in the government’s immorality, society’s failure, and his willingness to secede. The essay was prompted by the Anthony Burns case in which the Massachusetts courts and militia aided Charles Suttle, a Virginia slave owner, by capturing and returning Burns, an escaped slave. In response, Thoreau offers a number of criticisms. He criticizes the state for becoming a slave catcher by using its power to support slavery rather than freedom (258). Its laws, he says, are based on tradition, politics, and expedience, but not on justice. He criticizes the governor for acting immorally. While acknowledging that a governor should uphold the state’s laws, Thoreau argues he should do so only if he can do so without doing something immoral (249). Finally, Thoreau criticizes his neighbors for being concerned with the spread of slavery in Kansas and Nebraska rather than in Massachusetts. Deriding their patriotic pride in being the heirs of Lexington and Concord, he suggests they are not true heirs since they are not fighting for liberty. Instead, they are among the “million slaves in Massachusetts” (247), enslaved to the state and its injustice, to tradition and law, rather than being citizens who live freely.

Thoreau’s disillusionment over this state of affairs runs deeper than what he expressed in “Civil Disobedience” and proves nearly impossible for him to overcome. Toward the end of the essay he describes a sense of loss and realizes that what he has lost is a country (257). Although he tries to cure himself by escaping to nature, it does not work: “The remembrance of my country spoils my walk” (259). Still, he persists and on one of his walks discovers a water lily. Surprised at this sign, he reads the flower typologically. It represents the purity that can arise even out of the mud and slime, which represent the evils of present society (259). Despite his

earlier discouragement, Thoreau ends the essay on a muted note of hope, trusting in nature and the future to bring moral purity out of the corruptions of society.

Such quiet trust in nature to bring change in the future is hardly a recipe for political action, particularly the kind undertaken by John Brown. And yet Brown became a hero for Thoreau. In October of 1859, while Brown awaited execution, Thoreau addressed his neighbors in a lecture later published as “A Plea for Captain John Brown.” In it he presents Brown as a man of principled action. He praises Brown’s Spartan-like lifestyle, his plain speech, his principles of justice and equality, his integrity of holding to those principles despite opposition, and most importantly, his action in living out those principles. A true descendant of Lexington and Concord, Brown surpasses those patriots because he stands for higher values (397). Thoreau even supports Brown’s ultimate form of protest in taking up arms against the government, and he admits that while he “does not wish to kill or be killed,” he can “foresee circumstances in which both these things would be by me unavoidable” (413). Even violent protest, then, can be an act of justice and, though some might consider it “high treason, when it is resistance to tyranny here below,” it “has its origin in [...] the power that makes and forever recreates man” (410-11). Like the founding fathers, Brown is exercising his divinely given right to resist tyranny.

Surprisingly, having established Brown as a hero, Thoreau admits his own lack of heroism. Brown “was not our representative in any sense,” Thoreau writes, “he was too fair a specimen of a man to represent the like of us” (408). Like his neighbors Thoreau has failed to reach the heights of integrity Brown attained. While still affirming a moral high ground, he presents himself not as a moral elite, like Brown, but like his fellow citizens, as an ordinary mortal struggling to live out his convictions.

In these protest essays, Thoreau responds to the pressing issues of his day. As citizen he exercises an Emersonian self-reliance, resisting a society and government that ask him to conform to an authority to which he has not consented and to laws that are unjust. As writer, he lays out the principles by which his society should live, condemns its failures, and, at times, admits his own shortcomings.

Whitman as Booster

Where Thoreau exercises his citizenship by denouncing the government's moral failings, by outlining the principles his society should follow, and by withdrawing from a corrupt society, Whitman takes a different tack. He exercises his citizenship by promoting a vision of democratic unity and trying to embody that unity in his poetic embrace of all of America's varied inhabitants. Though he never loses his faith that America will achieve a true democratic unity, his sense of threats to that unity increases over his career and he sometimes struggles to maintain his vision in the face of society's failures.

Whitman's optimism and booster spirit are evident in his Preface to the 1855 edition of Leaves of Grass, in which he advances several ideas he will explore throughout his career. First, he echoes Emerson's view of America as a poem (411). Second, he argues for a vital link between true poetry and democracy. True American identity results not from place or political affiliation but is a matter of poetic spirit. Further, true poetry is linked to liberty and the true poet is an egalitarian who unites the people (420). Rather than celebrating a unity already achieved (especially politically), the true poet helps create a vision of self, others, and society and of their interactions, a vision which makes true democratic unity possible and on which it rests (424).

One sees this vision of America being worked out in the content and form of many of the poems of the 1855 Leaves. Whitman repeatedly catalogs American people, places, and activities in an effort to celebrate the variety of America and to proclaim that this many are nevertheless one. His use of anaphora and of catalogs, hallmarks of his style, enacts on the poetic plane the unity that he envisions for the political realm. In doing so, he does not deny the individual self but balances it with society. In his first Inscription, for example, he writes, “One’s self I sing, a simple separate person,” a line whose affirmation of self-reliance would satisfy Thoreau, but he continues, “Yet utter the word Democratic, the word En-Masse” (5). In “Song of Myself,” whose title smacks of Emersonian self-reliance, he nevertheless seeks to enact a democratic equality. In fact, his persona models the true democratic self, assuring us that he is “No sentimentalist, no stander above men and women or apart from them, / No more modest than immodest” (#24). Speaking the “pass-word primeval” and giving the “sign of democracy,” he vows to “accept nothing which all cannot have their counterpart of on the same terms” (24). This balance between self and society is also reflected in his poetic stance. Despite his bardic voice, he does not stand apart from his hearers nor claim a moral superiority; instead, he reassures us, “What I assume, you shall assume, for every atom belonging to me as good belongs to you” (#1). Like Emerson’s poet, he speaks “not of his own wealth, but of the commonwealth” (184).

Despite his belief in and hope for unity, Whitman was certainly aware of the issues dividing the nation. He especially feared secession since it threatened the union. When war broke out, he enlisted his patriotic fervor in support of the Union Army, which he viewed as fighting to preserve the union. His war poems (collected in a section of Leaves called “Drum Taps”) chart his changing response. Over the course of the war his booster spirit waned in the face of war’s tremendous human cost and his experiences tending wounded soldiers.

In his early poems he mixes praise for the war with his hopes for a union that balances the individuality of many states with the oneness of nation. He praises the flag and its “new song, a free song” (204); he sings the “idea of all” and imagines flying bird-like throughout the northern states, “To sing first, (to the tap of the war-drum if need be.) / The idea of all, of the Western world one and inseparable, / And then the song of each member of these States” (204). Such hopes do not last. One of the poems that most clearly marks Whitman’s shifting sensibility is “The Wound-Dresser.” Its speaker admits to an initial pro-war stance (“Arous’d and angry, I thought to beat the alarum, and urge relentless war”), but that stance gives way before the war’s destruction: “But soon my fingers fail’d me, my face droop’d and I resign’d myself / To sit by the wounded and soothe them, or silently watch the dead” (221). These experiences of loss lead eventually to a hope for reconciliation. In “Reconciliation” the speaker calls it the “word over all, beautiful as the sky” and seeing that his enemy, a man “divine” as himself is dead, he stoops down and kisses his “white face in the coffin” (229). As the war ends and the soldiers return home, Whitman contemplates what will become of the nation. In another poem, the speaker bids adieu to a soldier whose “mission is fulfill’d” though the speaker finds himself on another campaign to “give expression” to “fiercer, weightier battles” (231), those battles for true democratic unity and “libertad.” In a poem addressed to Libertad, he encourages it to turn “To where the future, greater than all the past, / Is swiftly, surely preparing for you” (232). In the final poem of “Drum Taps,” Whitman celebrates the variety of soils of the states to which the soldiers return, even as he unifies those elements in his catalog-like poem and in his vision. He ends with an image of North and South being necessary to the ripening of himself, his song, and presumably the union: “The Northern ice and rain that began me nourish me to the end, / But the hot sun of the South is to fully ripen my songs” (232). Having come through the war, sobered by

loss and suffering and strengthened in his faith in the Union, Whitman looks to the future in hopes that this nation, which survived the threat of secession and the horrors of war, will someday achieve the full promise of America and bring into being its dream of liberty.

Unfortunately, Whitman saw that dream threatened by the failures and corruption of his post-war society. In his 1870 essay, Democratic Vistas, he acknowledges these failings and articulates what he thinks America needs to realize its dream of a true democratic society. As the title suggests, Whitman is not describing a democracy existing in the present but offering vistas of a democracy that might be achieved in the future.

Unlike in his more thoroughly optimistic works, in this essay Whitman frequently and severely criticizes American society. He sees America in the midst of a raging battle “between democracy’s convictions, aspirations, and the people’s crudeness, vice, caprices” (456). He acknowledges America’s achievements in politics, technology, and “materialistic advancement,” but he also characterizes society as “canker’d, crude, superstitious and rotten” (461). Continuing in a vein that would make Thoreau proud, he condemns society for having “more hollowness at heart” than ever before existed (461). No one believes in the “underlying principles of the States,” he claims, and he roundly denounces every aspect of society: a “scornful superciliousness rules in literature,” the churches are “dismal phantasms,” the “depravity of the business classes” is greater than “has been supposed,” all levels of “official service” are “saturated in corruption, bribery, falsehood, maladministration,” the “judiciary is tainted,” and business is reduced to the “sole object” of “pecuniary gain” (461). To sum up, he claims that “our New World democracy, however great a success in uplifting the masses out of their sloughs, in materialistic development, products, and in a certain highly deceptive superficial

popular intellectuality, is, so far, an almost complete failure in its social aspects, and in really grand religious, moral, literary, and aesthetic results” (461).

Despite America’s failings, Whitman still has hopes for the future, exclaiming, “For our New World I consider far less important for what it has done, or what it is, than for results to come” (455). And though he admits problems and dangers, he still maintains his “unshaken faith in the elements of the American masses” (463).

If, despite material prosperity and new forms of government, America has yet to achieve true democracy, what will bring it about? For Whitman the answer is great literature. He begins this argument by maintaining that true democracy involves more than material, technological, and political development. It needs something spiritual or moral: “The problem of humanity all over the civilized world is social and religious, and is to be finally met and treated by literature. The priest departs, the divine literatus comes” (457). The task of these authors is “permeating the whole mass of American mentality, taste, belief, breathing into it a new breath of life, giving it decision, affecting politics far more than the popular superficial suffrage, with results inside and underneath the elections of Presidents or Congresses—radiating, begetting appropriate teachers, schools, manners, and, as its grandest result, accomplishing [...] a religious and moral character beneath the political and productive and intellectual bases of the States” (457). Like Shelley’s “unacknowledged legislators of the world,” these writers work by “tingeing and often creating the atmospheres” out of which civilizations arise; such poets “must stamp, and more than ever stamp, the interior and real democratic construction of this American continent, today, and days to come” (459). Further, Whitman claims that “two or three really original American poets [...] would give more compaction and more moral identity (the quality to-day most needed) to these States, than all its Constitutions, legislative and judicial ties, and all its hitherto political, warlike,

or materialistic experiences” (459). Still haunted by the threat of division, Whitman believes that what is plainly needed is “a fusion of the States into the only reliable identity, the moral and artistic one” (460). This identity, this “genuine union” will hold the States together in the face of future threats, not “written law” or “self-interest” or “common pecuniary material objects,” but the “fervid and tremendous IDEA” (460). It is such an idea, such an identity, that literature can provide.

Ultimately, Whitman claims that what “really balances and conserves the social and political world is not so much legislation, police, treaties, and dread of punishment” as it is the “latent eternal intuitional sense, in humanity, of fairness, manliness, decorum, etc.” These inner qualities provide the “perennial regulation, control, and oversight” necessary to sustain democracy. Furthermore, he argues that the “highest, widest aim of democratic literature may well be to bring forth, cultivate, brace, and strengthen this sense in individuals and societies” (498).

In his prefaces, poems, and essays, Whitman, as booster, promotes American democracy. Aware of society’s flaws, he nevertheless praises his fellow citizens for the good they have accomplished in working toward a free, egalitarian, and unified society and proclaims America’s unrealized potential. For him writing is more than a form of cheerleading; instead, it can help society imagine (and thus, hopefully, realize) the possibilities of a more true and full union.

Both: Lowell

What of that union Whitman hoped for and believed would arrive in the future? The work of Robert Lowell, writing in the mid-twentieth century, suggests Whitman would still have to wait. Lowell shares much of Thoreau’s protest spirit and is as keenly aware of society’s failings

as Whitman. While he never expresses Whitman's boosterish faith in democracy, his involvement in war protest and political campaigns suggests some belief, however tentative, in the possibility of change. Unlike his predecessors he rarely takes an oracular stance, whether to denounce or extol. Generally he comes across as a human being, aware, certainly, of his society's failings but also aware of his own limitations and finding the two disturbingly similar.

One exception to this non-oracular stance is an early poem, "The Quaker Graveyard in Nantucket." In this elegy for a relative lost at sea during World War II, Lowell moves from loss to a critique of violence, not just the violence of the war-torn present but of all human history, a violence not only against man but also against nature, as exemplified by the Quaker whaling industry, and a violence that permeates all of nature.

By the end of the poem this pervasive violence causes Lowell to ponder God's relationship to it. The poem's sixth section describes a pilgrimage to a shrine of Mary (Our Lady of Walsingham). Rather than a figure of pity toward human suffering, this Mary lacks "comeliness" and "charm," and yet her "expressionless" face "expresses God," suggesting divine indifference (17). In fact, "She knows what God knows, / Not Calvary's Cross nor crib at Bethlehem"; in other words, she knows a world without incarnation and redemption. Furthermore, if the "world shall come to Walsingham," then society shall discover that this world's violence will remain unredeemed by an indifferent God (17). The seventh and final section pushes this idea even further, hinting that God Himself may be responsible for (rather than merely indifferent to) this violence. In language echoing Genesis, Lowell describes 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" (18). Those combers, bent on killing from the moment of creation (of human life), suggest the primordial violence of nature and intimate

that God may be the author. The poem's final and quite enigmatic line reads: "The Lord survives the rainbow of His will" (18). If the rainbow of His will recalls the Genesis promise that He will not destroy the earth by water, then one implication of His surviving that rainbow is that He may have withdrawn the promise. Destruction, by water or not, is bound to come, and God will not stop it. In this bleak poem, Lowell presents a world given to violence, both human and natural, and a divine being who will not stop it. He does so in oracular tones, from his Genesis echoes, to his clotted language, to his driving rhythms. All give the feel of a prophet on the mountain side condemning the failings of humanity, of nature, and, ultimately, of God.

That prophetic stance drops away in Lowell's later poetry. By Life Studies (1959), Lowell has left behind the formality, density, and traditional prosody of his earlier work. While numerous factors contributed to this change, especially significant was Lowell's having been diagnosed as bi-polar and hospitalized several times during manic episodes. His therapy involved autobiographical writing which contributed to an increase in more directly personal subjects in his work. In one of these poems, "Memories of West Street and Lepke," Lowell recalls his experiences in the West Street jail as a conscientious objector during World War II. He contrasts the violence of his younger self and of a nation at war with the seeming peace of the 1950s. Throughout the poem, personal reflection leads to insights about public life, and Lowell draws parallels between, and raises questions about, both.

The contrast between his past and present is clear. He begins by describing his situation in the 1950s. He is living a low key life of part-time teaching, of reading, of caring for his infant daughter who, he admits, is young enough to be his granddaughter. His neighborhood exudes conventional, conservative domesticity. Given the calm of his current situation, he wonders, when his thoughts turn to the past, if he should "regret his seed time" when he was a "fire-

breathing Catholic C.O.” who made his “manic statement, / telling off the state and president” (187). This younger self was so much more vital and engaged than his present one, but Lowell recognizes that his actions may have been motivated by illness (“manic”) as much as ideology.

His turn to the past reminds him of fellow inmates, and his memories reveal divisions and violence in American society. He recalls Abramowitz, a “fly-weight pacifist” who is “so vegetarian, / he wore rope shoes and preferred fallen fruit” and who contrasts with Bioff and Brown, the “Hollywood pimps” (187), who Lowell describes as “hairy, muscular, suburban,” indicating their connection to dominant society. When Abramowitz tries to convert them to his diet, they “beat him black and blue” (188). Another prisoner is Czar Lepke, the former head of *Murder Incorporated*, an organized crime syndicate. “Flabby, bald, lobotomized,” Lepke now spends his days on menial tasks or dawdles off to his “segregated cell” where he enjoys things “forbidden the common man” (188). These details point to inequities in American society in which the rich and powerful, even when members of the criminal class, enjoy special privileges. Even more significant is the detail that Lepke’s possessions include “two toy / American flags tied together with a ribbon of Easter palm” (188). This detail suggests a corruption in which church and state are inexplicably intertwined (civil religion with a vengeance), and even more disconcertingly, appear to be owned by a crime boss.

The poem’s ending suggests a similarity among Lowell and Lepke and the United States and calls into question the current peace. As Lepke drifts in his “sheepish calm,” no “agonizing reappraisal” will jar “his concentration on the electric chair” (188). His calm comes not from his having been transformed into a man of peace but from his lobotomy, his violence not eradicated so much as medically tamped down. Perhaps Lowell’s present calm is not a result of a changed self so much as a medically induced torpor. While the phrase “agonizing reappraisal” echoes

John Foster Dulles's threat that the U.S. might re-think its involvement in Europe, Lowell's use of it suggests that neither Lepke nor anyone else will re-assess their former violence. If the present moment is the "tranquillized *Fifties*" (187), Lowell suggests that the potential for violence still exists, in America and in himself, though currently both are sedated.

The tranquillizer would soon wear off and American society would erupt into the unrest of the civil rights movement and war protest. Lowell addresses some of this unrest in "For the Union Dead," where he takes issue with American society, particularly regarding race relations. Again, he contrasts the present with the past whose values are on the verge of being lost. He provides two main images of this past. The first is the Boston Aquarium, now closed, that he remembers from his childhood. Part of him longs for that world of childhood, which he calls the "dark downward and vegetating kingdom / of the fish and reptile" (376), a world where he watched the "cowed, compliant fish" held captive in the tanks. The second is St. Gauden's monument to Colonel Shaw and the "Negro infantry" he led during the Civil War. That memorial is being threatened by the construction of a parking garage. Implicitly Lowell asks if along with its new construction society has renovated itself morally. Does Shaw's moral vision still exist and what kind of progress America has made regarding race relations? Lowell's assessment is largely negative. The monument, he writes, "sticks like a fishbone / in the city's throat" and Shaw is "as lean / as a compass-needle" (377), which suggest that Shaw and his men (and the monument commemorating them) represent a moral ideal present society has yet to achieve and cannot swallow. Like John Brown, Shaw is a man of high principles who acted on them unwaveringly. Such principles cause tension within Shaw: he has an "angry wren-like vigilance," "he seems to wince at pleasure," and he "cannot bend his back" (377). His unbending morality also causes tension for society, not only in his own day but in Lowell's.

Despite its renovations, present society has declined in its morality. No monument commemorates the Second World War. Instead a “commercial photograph” shows “Hiroshima boiling // over a Mosler safe, the ‘Rock of Ages’ / that survived the blast” (377), revealing that nuclear destruction and religion have been co-opted for commercial gain. Racial inequality still persists, and Lowell observes the difficult struggle for civil rights as he leans into his television set to watch the “Negro school-children” with their “drained faces” (377). The poem’s final images crystallize the poor state of society: “Everywhere / giant finned cars nose forward like fish; / a savage servility / slides by on grease” (378). Those cars, emblems of twentieth-century American industrial society, recall the “cowed, compliant” fish of Lowell’s childhood, and they reveal that society, rather than being civilized, free, and noble, is servile and savage, its moral pollution matching its industrial pollution. Like Whitman, Lowell makes clear that material and commercial gains have not been matched by moral progress, but he does not, as in “Quaker Graveyard,” adopt a moral high ground. Instead, he, too, is shaken, crouching by his television set, longing for a simpler time from the past, as “cowed” and “compliant” before the “savage servility” of his day as the fish he watched in the aquarium.

Lowell carries this bleak vision into another poem of the 1960s. In “Waking Early Sunday Morning,” the first of the five sections of “Near the Ocean,” the savagery is pervasive, and yet Lowell connects the violence of the present-day to an age-old pattern of human violence. The poem explores the tension between the speaker’s desire for freedom, some kind of transcendence or exaltation, and his fear that such freedom might lead to madness. For Lowell the self is threatened by its capacity for madness, a truth that Lowell knows only too well (particularly the destructive potential of his manic phases). Likewise, the government is threatened by a national fervor whose visions of grandeur can fuel atrocities, as Lowell’s

reference to the Third Reich makes clear. Its “hammering military splendor” led to the holocaust: “when that kingdom hit the crash / a million foreskins stacked like trash...” (385).

The poem combines Lowell’s clear-eyed recognition of the flaws and failings in self, society, and humanity with his sense of hopeless vulnerability. The final stanzas sound a bleak note. In the penultimate stanza he suggests that the violence of his own time—war and assassinations—is destined to continue. Rather than signs of moral advance, he finds that “only man thinning out his kind / sounds through the Sabbath noon, the blind / swipe of the pruner and his knife / busy about the tree of life. . .” (386). The last stanza responds to this bleak vision, not with prophetic denunciation but with a prayer-like wish for pity and peace. “Pity the planet, all joy gone...,” he writes, “peace to our children when they fall / in small war on the heels of small /war—until the end of time / to police the earth” (386). The earth they are policing is “a ghost / orbiting forever lost / in its monotonous sublime” (386), a place beyond redemption, whose sublime (if one could break free and access it) offers no joy or salvation.

This sense of vulnerability continues in two poems Lowell wrote about protesting the Viet Nam war during a march in Washington, D.C. These unrhymed sonnets reflect Lowell’s moral response to the complex situation. In “The March 1,” which focuses on the beginning of the march, Lowell complains about “the remorseless, amplified harangues for peace” (545). “Lovely” as it is “to lock arms, to march absurdly locked,” he finds the protesters naïve in their idealism, likening them to “green Union Army recruits” on the way to the “first Bull Run.” When this “green army” encounters the “other army,” the troops sent to patrol the protest, he describes that army as an Other, hostile and less than human: “the Martian, the ape, the hero, / his new-fangled rifle, his green new steel helmet” (545). That representation changes in “The March 2.” Observing the protestors at the end of the march, Lowell recognizes that many are

“sadly / unfit to follow their dream.” He himself is “nursing leg- and arch-cramps” along with his “cowardly / foolhardy heart” (546). He laments having to listen to more speeches, which attempt to make the protestors’ weakness a sign of the rightness of their cause. The soldiers pass through the crowd carefully and then in a “second wave” trample the protestors “flat and back.” Despite this defeat, Lowell ends the poem with a wish for health to all those involved: “Health to those who held, / health to the green steel head . . . to your kind hands / that helped me stagger to my feet, and flee” (546). If his weakness and fear remind him of his humanity, they also help him recognize the humanity of the soldiers. No longer Martian or ape, this soldier is a fellow human being, one who compassionately assists his alleged enemy. The march does not change Lowell’s opposition to the war or to the government, society, and soldiers who support it, but it does help him see weakness, vulnerability, and humanity, both in himself and in his neighbor.

Through much of his career, Lowell focuses his poetry on the personal and yet the personal often intersects with the public. When it does so, he can be as critical of his society’s failings as was Thoreau, and, though he lacks Whitman’s optimism and faith, he does affirm a moral compass that points toward a better way for himself and his society.

Thoreau, Whitman, and Lowell represent a range of ways that writers might exercise their citizenship. Different as they are, they offer their country neither blind allegiance nor indiscriminate denunciation. Instead, it is their task to condemn an America that fails to live up to its founding principles, to create the moral and spiritual conditions necessary for such a society, and to confess that failure and evil exist not in some Other but within one’s society and one’s self.

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