Afterword

Monuments and Poetry of Place

Though monuments of different kinds occupy public spaces in every city and town, they are rarely written about in poetry. Monuments have a definite presence in our lives, and sometimes they become points of contention about history. Consider the recent efforts in southern states to remove or replace statues of Confederate heroes like Robert E. Lee—most of those monuments erected long after the Civil War—or the recent decision to remove sixty-seven statues from the halls of the US Congress. Monuments can be subject to historical revision, which is only fitting when we reevaluate past realities. With strong feelings today at the extremes of the political spectrum and cultural ambivalence about the appropriateness of monuments, poetry can serve to address the roles of particular monuments in our local places.

Monuments can become the objects of popular protest, as when in the summer of 2020 in Portland, Oregon, statues of presidents Abraham Lincoln and Theodore Roosevelt were toppled in the South Park Blocks. However, for the most part, public statuary remains in place to serve its purpose of presenting a particular way of seeing the past, as the 134 Doughboy statues that that were erected in American cities in memory of the fallen in World War I. Celebrating the heroic past may be the most common role of such statuary. In this poem by Italian poet Ugo Fasolo, translated by Ezra Pound, the poet speaks for those who honor the mythic heroic past and are alienated by any desecration of its monuments.

PIGEONS
To the Father of his Country (bronze)
Riva degli Schiavoni:
aloft on his helmet, on the top, the very top
a pigeon, as ever, a pigeon
comes to rest, looks down

and eases himself.
On the King's head and shoulders
on the head and rump of the horse
guano accumulates.
On the great cornices of civilized Istrian stone,
on the pinnacles against heaven
and on the brackets of streetlamps
there are pigeons, the sacred cows of Venice,
pure and cooing doves
freeing themselves of corrosive superfluities suddenly
on the head of pedestrians—
(On the Grand Canal and out over the Laguna, the gulls
moving seaward and landward
rest, white, on the green water;
hale and hearty, birds of a different feather.)
He-pigeon and hen-pigeon cavort on the pavement,
urban, outnumbering the citizens;
People! too many; they also besmirching crowned heads,
defiling brows and memorials. . . .
We demythicize, we raise our trophies of excrement.
Let no one impede us or affront pigeons—winged shapely,
having no talons—
Let no one contest our liberty to be empty,
regimented into dirty grey, mocking the monuments
which overshadow us.

Riva degli Schiavoni in the second line of the poem is the name of a waterfront promenade in Venice, originally built for unloading ships, but in modern times a crowded tourist site selling confections and souvenirs. In the middle of this promenade stands an equestrian statue of Victor Emmanuel II, who became the first king of Italy in 1861—hence "the Father of his Country" in the first line of the poem. Victor Emmanuel became king after a victory over the Papal forces in 1860, and spent much of his rule (to 1878) leading several other wars

of Italian unification. The statue portrays him rushing into battle on horseback, brandishing his sword.

The pigeons of Fasolo's poem are portrayed as dirty and unwelcome, since they defile the statue with their guano, as well as the heads of pedestrians. By contrast, the seagulls are seen as moving away, colored white (not grey), "birds of a different feather." In the subsequent lines, "People! too many; they also besmirching crowned heads / defiling brows and memorials. . . ," the analogy is clearly drawn between people and pigeons. The rest of the poem downgrades us people as dirty grey (like pigeons) and making mockery of monuments we don't understand.

Pound's translation of this poem appeared in the *Atlantic Monthly* in November 1970. That same year, Pound and his partner Olga Rudge were staying in Venice. In early spring, poets Ugo Fasolo and Robert Lowell came to visit. Rudge's biographer Anne Conover briefly characterizes the meeting:

> Olga and Ezra were in Venice for the rest of that summer with many visitors, some welcome and some unwanted. [Olga said,] "The filthiest of the hippies invading Europe . . . sit 'round here on dirty pavements, just like the pigeons. . . . I got rid of one hippie by the simple expedient of *turning the hose on him.*" Canaletto paintings, she observed, "portrayed a clean Venice—nary a pigeon."
>
> When Robert Lowell arrived, Olga "got in some other people," and Ugo Fasolo read his "Pigeon" poem, their grandson Walter followed with Ezra's translation. Then Lowell read from his recent collection, *For the Union Dead.*

Clearly Rudge's animus against the tourists crowding Venice, especially the "hippies" passing through, is reflected in Fasolo's poem. The scenic works of the painter Canaletto (1697-1768) by contrast, show many views of Venice (including *Riva degli Schiavoni*) as a pristine cityscape, devoid of pigeons and dirt. Rudge reads Canaletto's painting

realistically, as opposed to the idealized tableau it is. A similar contrast motivates the poem, wherein the idealized father of the country should never be "besmirched" by dirty pigeons or their human equivalents.

Robert Lowell on this occasion in Venice read from his book *For the Union Dead,* published in 1964. One wonders if he read aloud the title poem, which also concerns a monument, but takes a more nuanced perspective than Fasolo. Lowell wrote about a monument on Boston Common dedicated to Colonel Robert Gould Shaw, commander of the Massachusetts 54th regiment. Since Massachusetts had been the first state to free all slaves, and Congress had authorized President Lincoln to raise black troops, the 54th regiment consisted of a thousand black soldiers and a white commander, Colonel Shaw. On the evening of July 18, 1863, Shaw and his infantry led the assault against Confederate Fort Wagner. By dawn the next day, Shaw was dead and two-thirds of his officers and half of his men were killed, missing, or wounded. Though this particular assault failed, the resolve and sacrifice of the Massachusetts 54th were not forgotten.

Thirty-four years later in 1897, a bronze bas-relief by Augustus Saint-Gaudens showing a side view of Colonel Shaw and his men marching out of Boston was dedicated by speakers William James and Booker T. Washington. Sixty-five veterans of the regiment marched past the monument. Of the seventeen four-line stanzas in "For the Union Dead," Lowell honors the monument and its dedication in seven of them, starting with a stanza about nearby excavation for a parking garage:

> Parking spaces luxuriate like civic
> sandpiles in the heart of Boston.
> A girdle of orange, Puritan-pumpkin colored girders
> braces the tingling Statehouse,
>
> shaking over the excavations, as it faces Colonel Shaw
> and his bell-cheeked Negro infantry

on St. Gaudens' shaking Civil War relief,
propped by a plank splint against the garage's earthquake.

Two months after marching through Boston,
half the regiment was dead;
at the dedication,
William James could almost hear the bronze Negroes breathe.

Their monument sticks like a fishbone
in the city's throat.
Its Colonel is as lean
as a compass-needle.

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

He is out of bounds now. He rejoices in man's lovely,
peculiar power to choose life and die—
when he leads his black soldiers to death,
he cannot bend his back.
. . . . . .
Colonel Shaw
is riding on his bubble,
he waits
for the blessèd break.

Lowell identifies with the purpose behind the 54th regiment: to oppose slavery, even if it means death. He also identifies with Colonel Shaw, who was, like Lowell, a son of Boston gentry (Lowell and Shaw were distantly related by marriage). Lowell sees the stern and focused Shaw in the bronze relief as "lean as a compass-needle," pointed in the foreordained direction. He has angry vigilance and gentle tautness,

wincing at pleasure like his Puritan ancestors. Lowell valorizes Shaw's "power to choose life and die" for making that very choice.

Lowell writes, "their monument sticks like a fishbone / in the city's throat." Here Lowell hints at the message the remaining ten stanzas convey: that contemporary Boston in its modern degraded state is unworthy of the valor and purpose the monument memorializes. The stanza that begins this citation from the poem shows the area around the memorial is under excavation for a parking lot, which shakes the statehouse and requires that the monument be propped up by a plank splint. It's as if the monument is an inconvenient obstacle to progress, represented by building more parking space.

Why the "fishbone / in the city's throat"? For this we must return to the beginning of the poem, wherein Lowell, in the spirit of this poem of place, presents another image of ruin and decline in relation to the memorial:

> 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.
>
> Once my nose crawled like a snail on the glass;
> my hand tingled
> to burst the bubbles
> drifting from the noses of the cowed, compliant fish.
>
> My hand draws back. I often sigh still
> for the dark downward and vegetating kingdom
> of the fish and reptile. . . .

As a child Lowell wanted to burst the bubbles rising from the fish in the aquarium, but he refrains from doing so, perhaps out of sympathy for the creatures of the natural world (though the phrase "cowed, compliant fish" would suggest an analogy to people, as well). It is

almost as if Lowell in "the dark downward and vegetating kingdom" is prescient about the Sixth Extinction we are now living through. For Lowell's purpose in the poem, it is enough that the monument of high purpose is surrounded by chaos (excavation) and ruin (abandoned aquarium).

We also note that for Lowell's poetry, bubbles in all their fragility are symbols of mortality. Bursting the bubbles of the fish is reflected later in the poem when we see "Colonel Shaw /is riding on his bubble, /he waits /for the blessèd break." In the actual bas-relief, Shaw is riding on a horse, but metaphorically speaking, he rides a bubble, which will surely burst out from under him—a break which is blessed because he anticipates his forthcoming death.

In other stanzas, Lowell provides brief but powerful images of social decline, such as a photograph in a Boston street window of "Hiroshima boiling" in the nuclear blast, and on TV an image of the struggle for Civil Rights and the integration of schools: "the drained faces of Negro school-children rise like balloons." Balloons, after all, are as fragile as bubbles.

The poem closes with a stanza that harks back to the aquarium and parking garage excavations at the beginning:

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

Boston is overwhelmed with cars with their tall 1960s tail fins, which are compared to fish, previously characterized as "cowed" and "compliant." By this point in the poem, a "savage servility" takes over, car-fish reduced to sliding by unctuously on grease. By deploying vivid images of the surroundings of the memorial to Shaw and the Massachusetts 54th regiment, as well as the monument itself, Lowell generates a sweeping view of American history and its present condition.

Closer to home in the Pacific Northwest, in a poem about a statue of Sacagawea in Portland, poet Christine Colasurdo evokes the present condition of the nation by returning to the Lewis and Clark Expedition and its guide, Sacagawea.

Standing beneath the Statue of Sacagawea in Washington Park during the Racial Justice Protests of 2020

"a woman with a party of men is a token of peace"
—Captain William Clark, 1805

Bronze traveler with baby on your back,
twenty tons of Oregon copper were mined
to make you. You're looking beyond me.
From where I stand you're unreachable.

Across the world people are tumbling
statues, taking down old heroes (now pariahs)
and erecting new ones, renaming buildings,
mascots, boulevards, dreams.

Bird Woman, what do we do with you?
We aren't sure how to say your name,
we don't know when you were born or died,
but we know you, a chief's daughter, were never paid.

What if the Hidatsa had not kidnapped
you and forced you into slavery?
What if your Hidatsa man hadn't lost at gambling
and traded you to Charbonneau to pay the debt?

Young native sold to white man.
Small woman helping men.

Some might call you traitor.
Some might see you as victim.

You are the axis, pathfinder, key.
Without you there would have been
no horses, no foraging of forest food,
no otter robe, no shared language.

As a girl I played here years ago with my sisters.
On hot August evenings we ate barbequed chicken
on paper plates with sweet corn and coleslaw.
Barefoot, we ran circles around you.

Lemhi Shoshone woman, strong swimmer,
cooking camas, keeping peace,
when I walk alone in old forests
of ambiguous shapes, I almost see you.

Unlike Fasolo or Lowell, Colasurdo directly addresses the statue of Sacagawea. She devotes one stanza to the statue itself, which was sculpted by Alice Cooper for the 1905 Lewis and Clark Exposition in Portland in celebration of the centennial of the Expedition. After the fair, it was moved atop a large rock in Washington Park. The seven-foot figure of Sacagawea with her son Jean-Baptiste on her back points with her outstretched arm to indicate her value to the expedition as a guide. Sacagawea had become an honored figure to women at the turn of the century; suffragists present at the dedication of the statue included Susan B. Anthony and Abigail Scott Duniway.

The middle three stanzas recount the parts of Sacagawea's life that the speaker knows about. In this telling, Sacagawea was kidnapped, enslaved, given away for a gambling debt, and died in obscurity. This racist and misogynistic treatment relates to the timing of the poem stated in the title: "during the Racial Justice Protests of 2020." The second stanza too tells of the removal of statues in this summer of racial protest

after the death of George Floyd in 2020. However, in contrast the poem honors the statue of Sacagawea. Her contributions to the Expedition are summarized, as guide, horse-trader, expert on food sources, and speaker of indigenous languages.

The last two stanzas convey Colasurdo's personal relationship to both the statue, around which the speaker played during picnics as a child, and to the spirit of Sacagawea, encountered as ambiguous shapes in the forest. The whole poem is framed as direct address to Sacagawea. Such direct address is a technique that could be applied to many kinds of statues. What statues in your town relate to memories and stories you know well?

One of the most famous monuments in the US is the Vietnam Veterans Memorial dedicated on November 23, 1982, in Washington, DC. It consists of two black triangular granite walls engraved with the names of US service members who died in the Vietnam War from 1959 to 1975. The monument was designed by artist Maya Lin. Numerous songs have been written about it, but also a poem, "Facing It," by Vietnam veteran Yusef Komunyakaa:

> My black face fades,
> hiding inside the black granite.
> I said I wouldn't,
> dammit: No tears.
> I'm stone. I'm flesh.
> My clouded reflection eyes me
> like a bird of prey, the profile of night
> slanted against morning. I turn
> this way—the stone lets me go.
> I turn that way—I'm inside
> the Vietnam Veterans Memorial
> again, depending on the light
> to make a difference.
> I go down the 58,022 names,
> half-expecting to find

my own in letters like smoke.
I touch the name Andrew Johnson;
I see the booby trap's white flash.
Names shimmer on a woman's blouse
but when she walks away
the names stay on the wall.
Brushstrokes flash, a red bird's
wings cutting across my stare.
The sky. A plane in the sky.
A white vet's image floats
closer to me, then his pale eyes
look through mine. I'm a window.
He's lost his right arm
inside the stone. In the black mirror
a woman's trying to erase names:
No, she's brushing a boy's hair.

Komunyakaa's imagery relies upon one of the most notable features of the monument: The highly polished surface reflects the images of the people who are standing in front of it. Perhaps it was Maya Lin's intent for the living to see themselves in relation to the dead behind the names engraved in white. Komunyakaa's black face fades inside the black surface of the granite, and toward the end of the poem, the poet sees "names shimmer on a woman's blouse" and then what appears to be a woman erasing names but turns out to be a woman brushing a boy's hair. The poet also says of his reflection: "I turn / this way—the stone lets me go. / I turn that way—I'm inside / the Vietnam Veterans Memorial / again. . . ."

However, most of the poem evokes what it means emotionally for a veteran contemplating the names and recalling violent memories of the war. The poet resolves to be like stone, but then admits he is flesh. The line "I'm stone. I'm flesh." perfectly carries the complex feeling, as well as the reality of being both a reflection in the stone and at the same time a living human being. Maya Lin's genius at creating public

works of art allows each individual to participate in an act of mourning and remembrance.

Since 2001, Maya Lin has developed the Confluence Project, a series of six installations, five completed so far, along the Columbia and Snake rivers on the route followed by Lewis and Clark in 1805-1806. The sites are Cape Disappointment State Park, Vancouver Land Bridge (near Fort Vancouver National Historic Site), Sandy River Delta, Celilo Park, Sacagawea State Park, and Chief Timothy Park. Each installation is adapted to the nature of its location and the traditional lives of the tribal peoples who live in the area. These structures are not intended to be monuments, but public art landscapes to connect people to the history, living cultures, and ecology of the Columbia River system. These installations celebrate the living, rather than the dead, which makes of them a different kind of public art.

One of these six artworks is the Listening Circle in Chief Timothy Park, on an island ten miles west of Clarkston, Washington. Inspired by a Nez Perce blessing ceremony held in 2005, Maya Lin designed an amphitheater of six basalt benches that seem to rise from the grass above the Snake River.

"Listening Circle" by Maya Lin. (Photo by Bill Siverly)

Any of these installations, remarkable public places unique to the Pacific Northwest, would provide material for poems. Here's one possibility by Bill Siverly:

Maya Lin's Listening Circle
Chief Timothy Park, Washington

The sign reads *Caution Rattlesnake Area.*
I know, I grew up around here.
I watch my step and listen for sharp clicks.

Six basalt semicircle benches rise
above a bench of sagebrush, vetch, and dry grass,
above the tame Snake River gliding west.

Those seated in this circle must commit
to listen to the voices at the center,
to listen with respect for wisdom and silence.

The elders must be seated facing east,
the side left open to rising sun.
Wind in dry grass hushes to hear.

The only snake I see today dangles
like a rope from the talons of a hawk,
gliding west toward Lower Granite Dam.

—Bill Siverly and Michael McDowell

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