

Cary Nelson: On "The Weather-Cock Points South"

Amy Lowell's series of poems from 1919—including "Decade," "Opal," "Madonna of the Evening Flowers," and "Venus Transiens"—are among the most elegantly passionate love poems in modern American poetry. A reevaluation of her career might begin with a love poem like "The Weather-Cock Points South" (1919), whose reordering of the natural world in layers around a pursuit of intimacy we can now see as heralding the deep image poetry of the 1960s.

As we can tell from its first stanza, "The Weather-Cock Points South" is remarkable for the way it fuses an eroticized spirituality with explicit physical references.

I put your leaves aside, One by one: The stiff, broad outer leaves; The smaller ones, Pleasant to touch, veined with purple; The glazed inner leaves. One by one I parted you from your leaves, Until you stood up like a white flower Swaying slightly in the evening wind.

The leaves are put aside at once by a disrobing and by a probing embrace. The poem involves a pursuit of psychic intimacy—a drive to know and celebrate another's inwardness—and an explicit vaginal caress. The flower with its petals and bud is thus both body and spirit, but there is no severing the two. And the woman she describes seems both the object of her gaze and the flower of her own unfolding affection. The flower is both the center of the lover's body and the center of the self, for it becomes the site from which the subject seems to speak. It is also the center of the gardens coalescing in the poem and, implicitly, of nature as a whole. Her unwavering concentration on it gives it the transience of wax and the permanence of stone—"of jade, of unstreaked agate; / Flower with surfaces of ice."

"The stars crowd through the lilac leaves / To look at you," Lowell writes, so it is clear she would have no patience with a criminalized notion of the gaze. There seems little reason, indeed, to impose a contemporary prudishness either on her or on other modern poets. An objectifying tool or verbal representation does not preclude a variety of other perspectives; indeed it is both a form of celebratory play and a form of concentration that can be empathic.

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