

Melissa Bradshaw: On "The Weather-Cock Points South"

As recent feminist and lesbian rereadings of Lowell's work bring her love lyrics to the forefront, this poem is often cited as an example of her "overtly and frankly erotic lyrics" (Heymann 250). Discussion of the lyric's eroticism seldom delves any deeper than this, however. Is the erotic symbolism so obvious that we can take it for granted, never actually articulating or explaining just what we think we are seeing in this poem? Mary E. Galvin comes closest when she notes that here we have "a flower-bud . . . so erotically drawn that it can easily be seen to replicate the female genitals" (29). But as Bennett's essay makes clear, Lowell's imagery is neither radical, nor shocking: in the nineteenth century, flower imagery, or the "Language of Flowers" constituted a "highly nuanced discourse of female erotic desire," and was a common, even ubiquitous, signifying system "through which woman's body and . . . women's genitals have been represented and inscribed" (242). What I believe makes Lowell's poem unique, and what Galvin's reading ignores, is the poem's sexual aggressiveness, as the speaker tells the beloved, in an active, dominating narrative voice "I put your leaves aside," "I parted you." As in "Aubade," the poem may very well encode female genitals through flower imagery, but it as well discursively replicates the sexual act of opening up a woman's genitals—an act that involves several openings and unfoldings: legs, outer-labia ("the stiff, broad outer leaves") and inner-labia, ("the smaller ones, . . . veined with purple"); an act that, presented as a discrete, sexual performance, not necessarily foreplay, might be described as lesbian. This is not to say that the sexual gesture is solely and specifically lesbian, but neither is it explicitly heterosexual: the beloved is "not a space to be entered but . . . a presence to be uncovered and adored" (Bennett 244).

Granted, this relentlessly sexualized reading of the poem risks defining and reifying the beloved. Certainly it goes against the more subtle aesthetic outlined in a letter Lowell wrote to an aspiring poet where she explained that "in true Imagistic poetry the method more often than not points like a weather-cock to the emotion it both conceals and reveals," a poetics of gesturing subtly towards a subtext (letter to Donald B. Clark 8/23/18). I understand why it may not be a good idea to read the poem so literally, but what are the costs of not extending Lowell's sexual metaphor this far? Of pausing for a moment, blushing, thinking about this reading, and then resisting it? Judith Halberstam describes this as symptomatic of queer theory's double bind—to make visible without universalizing, to focus on specifics without erasing difference. In the effort not to essentialize or exclude "we have become accustomed to talking sex and indeed thinking sex in increasingly abstract and increasingly symbolic ways" (4). According to Halberstam,

sex, as in sexual acts and practices, and particularly lesbian sex, seems eclipsed once more by discursive practice. Specifying sexual acts and their histories allows us to break with identity discourses which have a tendency to render some minority sexual practices completely unintelligible and to conflate still others with criminality. (4)

The ways in which "The Weather-Cock Points South" has been read (or rather, has not been read) bring this difficulty into focus. But Lowell's dazzle camouflage might, at the same time, offer a possible strategy for circumventing the pathologization and/or silencing of which Halberstam warns. When I read the poem, as a woman who identifies as a lesbian, the imagery seems obvious. But even so, in hearing a narrative voice which, to my mind, clearly employs flower imagery as a way of representing opening up and gazing at a woman's genitals—an act of sexual aggressiveness I do not expect to find in Lowell, whose few critics approach her with formulaic biases and therefore who I've been taught to read as an old maid, a frustrated spinster—my initial response is disbelief: that can't possibly be what she's doing. And this incredulity, which makes me hesitate over the poem, is critical: Lowell's imagery is not, cannot be, obvious, the poem's power is in its refusal of a stable, codifiable representation of sexuality. This plasticity authorizes multiple responses, from C. David Heyman's contention that her erotic poetry is "too graphic to be taken at face value" (251), to Glenn Ruihley and Richard Benvenuto's reassurances that the lyrics chronicle a purely platonic love, to Clement Wood's homophobic declaration that Pictures of the Floating World's lyrics demonstrate "the reverse of an ignorance of love-practices" (159), to Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar's confident assumption that they reflect Lowell's lesbianism. Whether it delights or repulses, titillates or confuses, "The Weather-Cock" resists what Scott Long terms "the straight interpretation" which "too often accepts . . . only representations it can take on the level of simple desire . . . a curious critical response in that it dreams of an ideal work to which it can submit in uncritical and complete self-cancellation" (88).

Late nineteenth and early twentieth century medical and psychological probings into the causes and origins of female desire focused on the clitoris as both the "source" of female sexual pleasure, and, inevitably, the site of failures of normative female sexuality. A desire for sexual activity not leading to coition, or as Freud put it, "the normal sexual aim" (21)—such as masturbation and/or inversion—were read as symptoms of a pathological hypersexuality and linked to an over-active clitoris. Even as it celebrates a non-phallic, non-coital, and, it would appear at first glance, clitoral sexuality, "The Weather-Cock Points South" adroitly skirts the issue. For the reader who would follow the narrator's gaze as she uncovers the beloved, peer at her nudity, discover the "truth" hidden beneath her layers, this poem frustrates: at the heart of these many partings is not a finite, knowable, quantifiable thing, but a slick, shining surface—"glazed inner leaves," a "flower with surfaces of ice." As in "Madonna of the Evening Flowers," a reflective surface (created by the wetness of sexual arousal?) deflects the onlooker's gaze, turning it back on itself, resisting legibility and classification. Further, the poem's languorous peeling back of layers foregrounds the fact that flowers exist in multiplicity. That is, a flower consists of petals, sepals, filaments, anthers, and so on. There is no ultimate originary point to the flower. In what might be construed as a nod towards Freud, Lowell (un)writes female pleasure through negation:

The bud is more than the calyx. There is nothing to equal a white bud, Of no colour, and of all, Burnished by moonlight, Thrust upon by a softly-swinging wind.

This stanza complicates the flower as cliched symbol of feminine beauty and revitalizes a tired metaphor. "A littleness that is paradoxically great," the bud is more than the calyx, the immediately visible outer whorl of petals, what we see and recognize as the flower. (Bennett 247). Lowell's phrasing deflects attention away from, even as it valorizes, the overscrutinized clitoris. Declaring that "there is nothing to equal a white bud," the speaker posits the allegedly not present as infinitely, even excessively, present in its "absence," or rather its refusal to confirm expectations, to satisfy curiosity. "Burnished by moonlight," (an evocative, sexy verb in this context) the shining surface of the "white flower" becomes even shinier as it is acted on, whether by the narrator/lover, who rubs against it sexually, or by the observer who would rub it in order to wipe away opacity and gain a clearer view. It becomes a mirror of the looker's desire rather than a decipherable text.

Galvin notes the paradoxical imagery of the last line, where the flower is "thrust upon" by a "softly-swinging wind": "lest the reader think this is the familiar heterosexual 'thrust,' . . . Lowell immediately contrasts the potential violence of this verb with the sonorant phrase "by a softly-swinging wind" (31). She explains that this phrase "carries lesbian implications" because Lowell, "by dint of authorship, associates herself with the speaker, who in turn is associated within the poem with the wind, as agent of erotic caresses" (31). The metaphor is even more suggestive than Gavin allows, however: if this is a perfect flower, such as a rose or a lily, with both a pistil and a stamen at its center, then the wind serves as agent not only of "erotic caresses," but of pollination as well. The poem, then, imagines a stigmatized (because non-reproductive) sexuality, as in fact, reproductive and creative, although not as understood within a heterosexual context.

Originally published in Vanity Fair in June of 1919 as "The Weather-Vane Points South," the poem appeared later that year in Pictures of the Floating World under its new title, "The Weather-Cock Points South." This change subtly alters the poem's intensity. Weather-cocks traditionally top steeples on Christian churches, as reminders of Christ's prophecy that the apostle Peter would betray him three times before the cock crows. In renaming the poem, Lowell resignifies the space and the action of the poem: if weather-cocks preside over holy, sanctified spaces, then the space of this love-making, Lowell seems to imply, is holy, this act of love-making sanctified.

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