

Mary E. Galvin: On "The Weather-Cock Points South"

It is clear that the aesthetics and techniques of imagism provided a powerful vehicle for Amy Lowell's erotic vision. Like Pound, H.D., and others, Lowell was strongly influenced by oriental poetry. She, too, did translations (from the Japanese), and her lyrical style is modeled, in part, on the cool but detailed "objectism" of the haiku and similar forms. This is obvious in the first two sections of *Pictures of the Floating World*, which are subtitled "Lacquer Prints" and "Chinoiserie." While many of these poems are somewhat pretty and delicate in their construction, for the most part they are fairly shallow, dealing merely with the surface image, as in "Circumstance":

Upon the maple leaves The dew shines red, But on the lotus blossom It has the
pale transparence of tears.

All this changes, however, in the subsequent sections, particularly in the section of lyrical love poems addressed to or about Ada Dwyer Russell, subtitled "Planes of Personality: Two Speak Together." Here, the detached observation of surface detail signals an undercurrent of passionate emotion and eroticism, disguised yet explicitly drawn in the natural images Lowell creates. A good example is "The Weather-Cock Points South" in which the "word-painting" of a flower-bud is so erotically drawn that it can easily be seen to represent the female genitals, so that this descriptive exploration of the flower is transformed into a celebration of lesbian sexuality:

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 softly
in the evening wind.

Here is evidence of how the discipline of imagism taught Lowell to focus only on relevant detail and to use a nondiscursive language, one that relies on the sensory qualities of the experience. Through the precision of her word choice, Lowell achieves a vividness of expression that appeals to several senses: sight (broad, smaller, purple, etc.), touch (stiff, pleasant, glazed), and also an implication of sound (evening wind) and scent (white flower). Lowell is relying not only on the detail of image to convey a sensual experience, but also on the textured patterning of sound to suggest a deliberateness, but with delicacy, a tender caution. The alliteration and assonance, featuring soft consonants and short vowels (such as s, z, p, w, n and flat a of part, small, pleasant) add to this gentle tone. The repeated line "One by one" slows the pace considerably, as do the short but end-stopped lines. The repetition of "leaves" at or near the end of almost every other line indicates that while there is movement and action taking place here, it is slow and explorative, almost worshipful in tone.

The second stanza takes on a more overtly reverential tone:

White flower, Flower of wax, of jade, of unstreaked agate; Flower with surfaces of ice, With shadows faintly crimson. Where in all the garden is there such a flower? The stars crowd through the lilac leaves To look at you. The low moon brightens you with silver.

Here, the litany of attributes serves as a kind of invocation, a reverential, ritualistic form of address, leading to the awe-stricken question, "Where in all the garden is there such a flower?" This question is an assertion of the "flower's" unchallenged beauty. In the last three lines, the "flower" gains a majesty and splendor that cause the stars and moon to gaze and even bow ("low moon") with wonder.

In the last stanza, Lowell gives the most definitive clue that this white flower may represent something else altogether by the assertion in the first line:

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

The color white used to describe the flower also becomes associated with the moon here, carried over from the word "silver" at the end of the previous stanza. This association is developed further as the "white bud/ Of no color, and of all," is "Burnished by moonlight."

Many feminist critics today, learning to "read" women's poetry as encoded celebrations and explorations of female sexuality in non-patriarchal terms, have pointed out that some images predominate for this purpose: in addition to flowers, the moon and its cycles are used to signify female sexuality. While these images are rich with erotic possibilities, I don't quite believe that Lowell was interested in encoding the sexual message too deeply. If anything, it seems Lowell wants to be sure that the reader gets the sexual connotations of the poem by using the already heavily connotated words "Thrust upon" at the beginning of the last line. Lest the reader think this is the familiar heterosexual "thrust," however, Lowell immediately contrasts the potential violence of this verb with the sonorant phrase "by a softly-swinging wind." This final phrase carries lesbian implications not only in its reversal of expectations, but also in that it echoes back to the first stanza, where the wind is the only agent of motion besides the speaker, "I." Thus, Amy Lowell, who often read her poetry in person, 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.

Like Dickinson's, much of Lowell's work draws on nature, and even more specifically, on garden imagery. On the surface, this approach can seem to fit safely within the confines of the cultural expectations of "female versifiers," and much of Lowell's poetry, like Dickinson's, can be misconstrued as pretty little nature poems. Paradoxically, nature images are the perfect vehicle of expression for both of these poets' visions. It is familiar and readily accessible for both poets, yet they see in it an expression of their "deviant" beliefs and loves.

Lowell's poetics of imagism, with its preponderance of garden imagery, combined with her love for Ada Russell, allowed her to write extremely erotic lesbian poetry. However, because of Lowell's physical size and demeanor and the cultural invisibility of her erotic sensibility, the power of her lesbianism as a creative force within her work in particular, and within

modernism in general, has been largely disregarded. Being aware of this expectation of triviality, and the overlay of heterosexist assumptions placed on Lowell's erotic life, allows us to see how the vision of the "straight mind" can erase the significance of this lesbian work from its place in literary history.

There is further significance to the use of nature imagery in Lowell's overtly sexual lesbian poetics. Not unlike Dickinson's use of the hymn meter to offset her own cultural heresies, the juxtaposition of "natural" images with "unnatural" sexualities creates an ironic tension between these socially constructed polarities, which forces the distinctions to give way. By bringing these "oppositional" concepts together, not in conflict but in relation, the boundaries of this dichotomy begin to disintegrate. Thus, by thinking with a lesbian sensibility, she throws the logic of the heterosexist culture against itself, and creates a paradoxical legitimation for lesbian existence: if nature evidences these "unnatural" images of sexual expression, then the "unnatural" is perhaps more "natural" than we have been led to believe.

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