

Lawrence Kramer: On "Syringa"

Singing accurately

So that the notes mount straight up out of the well of

Dim noon and rival the tiny, sparkling yellow flowers

Growing around the brink of the quarry, encapsulizes

The different weights of the things . . .

The poem's title authorizes us to surmise that the "sparkling yellow flowers" are syringa, which is a form of saxifrage. As its name suggests, saxifrage is a flower that breaks rocks, which it does here at the brink of the quarry. But Orpheus's lament breaks rocks, too; and the connection invests the lament with a sense of fecundity. The flower breaks rocks with its beauty, affirming life on a desolate terrain, which is the traditional burden of elegiac song. When song rivals the flowers, it turns the "fissure" of quarry into a generative source, "the well of dim noon." The poem presses the point by another play on "syringa," which is derived from "syrinx," the Greek word for panpipe. True, the meditative voice may make this generous acknowledgment of the power of song only in order to get beyond it, to say that "it isn't enough / To just go on singing." But that voice says so, precisely, as it does go on singing, making a poem, "Syringa," that is named for the rock-breaking flower and prompted by loss.

From Lawrence Kramer, "'Syringa': John Ashbery and Elliott Carter" in David Lehman, ed. *Beyond Amazement: New Essays on John Ashbery* (Ithaca: Cornell U P, 1980), 262-263.

Publication Status:

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Publication:

- Private group -

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