

Melissa Bradshaw: On "Madonna Of the Evening Flowers"

The vagueness and imprecision with which Lowell draws her beloved suggests a reluctance to define, to reify her subject, marking hers as an infinitely queer poetics in which "a strategy of appearances replaces a claim to truth" (Case 304). "Venus Transiens" compares the beloved to Botticelli's Venus, but where the painting is immutable, a finite representation of beauty, Lowell's Venus is transient—fleeting, ephemeral. When John Livingston Lowes complimented Lowell on her representation of Ada Russell in "Madonna of the Evening Flowers," she wrote back "I am very glad indeed that you liked [the poem]. How could so exact a portrait remain unrecognized?" (qtd. in Damon 441). Lowell's word choice is important, for an "exact portrait" is precisely what she does not give her readers. In the poem the narrator wanders through her empty home searching for the beloved, a sensed, but always just-departed presence. She sees signs of her: books left open, her "scissors and thimble just put down." When the speaker finally finds the beloved, outside in the garden, we hear her, albeit second hand, as she describes the current state of the garden, but we do not actually see her.

You tell me that the peonies need spraying,
That the columbines have overrun all
bounds, That the pyrus japonica should be cut back and rounded. You tell me
these things. But I look at you, heart of silver, White heart-flame of polished silver,
Burning beneath the blue steeples of the larkspur, And I long instantly to kneel at
your feet, While all about us peal the loud, sweet Te Deums of the Canterbury
bells. (210)

The opacity of this "exact portrait" is doubly transgressive. On the one hand, it signals a challenge to realist modes of identity production. What does it mean, after all, to describe someone exactly? In a 1918 lecture Lowell outlines her belief that poetry should not be "truthful," explaining, "poetry cannot rise into its rightful being as the highest of all arts if it be tied down to the coarse material of bald, even if impassioned, truth. Truth has its own beauty, but it is not the beauty of poetry" (qtd. in Damon 446). Here Lowell rejects literary realism and embraces a modern poetics which "escape[s] the constraints of ordinary and prosaic reality" (Levenson 44). But at the same time, "Madonna of the Evening Flowers" resists a similarly limiting reification implicit even in the principals of Imagism, a threat present in Pound's call for a poetry "as much like granite as it could possibly be" (qtd. in Levenson 155); in T.E. Hulme's argument for a poetry that is "visual and concrete" that "always endeavors to arrest you, and to make you continuously see a physical thing, to prevent you gliding through an abstract process" (emphasis mine, qtd. in Levenson 44); and most explicitly, in Richard Aldington's explanation that "to write a poem about a beautiful woman would involve turning the woman into an 'image'; the poem would possess 'hardness, as of cut stone. No slop, no sentimentality' and might be compared to 'nicely-carved marble'" (Thacker 51).

Lowell's lyric stands in sharp contrast with the violence of this aesthetic. Her metaphoric image of the beloved—a whispered aside rendered breathless in soft consonants (w, s) and short vowels—is impossibly opaque. It does not show us the beloved, even as the poem's

present tense and use of the pronoun "you" create a sense of immediacy and urgency, putting us in the garden with Lowell, looking with her at the beloved. What we are "shown" is a "heart of silver, / White heart flame of polished silver" which obscures, rather than reveals the poem's central image: Amy Lowell's Madonna tending to her garden. Her whiteness, the whiteness of polished silver, is reflected light, as is that of the moon, another nearly-ubiquitous trope for the beloved in Lowell's lyrics. We do not see the beloved. We never see her. Though she is infinitely invoked, unlike Robert Herrick's Julia, or Petrarch's Laura, Lowell's beloved remains unnamed, unknown, in a sense, unwritten. Instead, through a series of poetic representations of parts, an amorphous, delectably intangible beloved—a queer beloved draped in "golds and purples," "murex-dyes and tinsel" whose brightness turns darkness "red-gold and crocus-coloured"—circulates promiscuously in erratic flashes of blinding white ("The Artist" 211, "Summer Rain" 213).

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