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# **Amy Lowell's Appetites: Food, Consumption and Homoerotic Desire in Amy Lowell's Poetry**

## **Introduction**

Few early twentieth-century writers have suffered such a dramatic fall from favour as Amy Lowell. Between 1912 and 1927, Lowell published eleven volumes of poetry (including three posthumous collections edited by her life-long companion Ada Dwyer Russell), edited three volumes of Imagist verse (*Some Imagist Poets*, 1915-1917) and played a central role in promoting and defending the 'New Poetry' in America. By 1922, she was 'regarded as a "national institution" whose slow and labored approach to a speaker's lectern was the signal for the audience to rise' (Ruilhley, 1975, p. 141). She also used her wealth and influence, as a member of the famous Boston Lowell family, to financially support and encourage other significant modernist poets, including H. D., Richard Aldington, and D. H. Lawrence. At the time of her death, Amy Lowell was one of the most prolific and successful poets of her time; a revered American 'woman of letters' who graced the cover of *Time Magazine* in March 1925, just months before her death. She had recently completed yet another daunting project; a two-volume biography of John Keats. A transatlantic lecture tour was planned – a trip that Lowell, sadly, never took, due to her death from a sudden stroke at the age of fifty-one.

But despite her many achievements, a year later, the project of deriding and eventually forgetting Amy Lowell, was already underway. In 1926, Clement Wood published *Amy Lowell*, a barely veiled attack on the poet, which criticised her work as corrupted by her perverse desires (he complained that her love lyrics: 'do not word a common cry of many hearts') and willed her to disappear from cultural memory: 'We have much that, for Miss Lowell's sake, must be forgotten, and will be' (p. 173, p. 96). He also notes that '[h]er bodily

frame was excessively stout and ungainly' (p. 31) and perpetuates the rumour that her alleged self-disgust led her to demand that 'every large mirror...be swathed in black' (p. 33). This book was just the beginning of a series of so-called critical studies that denigrated Amy Lowell's considerable achievements, using her wealth, sexuality and body as weapons against her. Such biased portrayals culminate in Hugh Kenner's *The Pound Era* (1973), which dubs Lowell 'the hippopoetess' (a term coined by Lowell's enemy, the poet Witter Bynner) and describes her 'crossing like a big blue wave' to greedily 'appropriate' the Imagist movement 'since she had not been properly accepted' (p. 292).

Nonetheless, Lowell refused to disappear altogether from literary history. One fact about her remained, to be consistently repeated: the fact that Amy Lowell was fat. This fact might appear irrelevant in comparison to Lowell's innovative poetic output and vigorous support of modernist movements. But though her size has frequently been used to condemn and undermine her, it has also enabled Lowell to survive as a persistent presence in accounts of literary modernism. She lives on in bitchy biographical anecdotes: the fat woman as butt of the joke. Adrienne Munich and Melissa Bradshaw, editors of the essay collection *Amy Lowell: American Modern*, concede that: 'It is her corpulence ... (not her considerable literary contributions) that have kept Amy Lowell in literary memory' (2004, p. xxiii). Lowell's size, as far as her survival in literary history is concerned, has therefore proved to be both her blessing and her curse.

For this reason, Lowell provides an interesting and provocative focus for fat studies. Her life narrative and subsequent critical denigration (in terms that condemn both her fat body and queer sexuality) combines the concerns of both fat studies, literary studies, gender and queer studies. The project of reclaiming Lowell as a fat woman recalls Elena Levy-Navarro's work on the seventeenth-century poet and playwright Ben Jonson. Levy-Navarro argues that observing historical figures such as Jonson, who reconceptualises his weight in

terms of his integrity and worth as a friend, can offer us ‘a model of how a fat history can use the past to speak to the predicament of the present ... The past helps us reinterpret our fat in ways that are transformative’ (p. 21).<sup>1</sup> As with the reclamation of queer histories, Levy-Navarro claims that ‘we should come to see how [historical] figures who are defiantly fat speak directly to the present in ways that can sustain us’ (p. 20).

Amy Lowell certainly qualifies as such a figure. Lowell flaunted her fat body at a moment when the very associations of fatness were shifting from positive to negative: from a sign of prosperity to a marker of greed, laziness, and even criminality. As Laura Fraser notes, whilst earlier in the nineteenth century ‘a man with a thick gold watch swaying from a big, round paunch was the very picture of American propriety and vigor ... Between the 1880s and 1920s, that pleasant image of fat thoroughly changed in the United States’ (2009, p. 11). By the end of the nineteenth century, the European fashion for slenderness had taken hold. The shift from agricultural to industrial economies meant that even the poorest people were less likely to go hungry – being fat was therefore ‘no longer was a sign of prestige’ (Fraser, 2009, p. 12). Simultaneously, as women’s roles shifted away from the home and into the public sphere, the fashion for thinness intensified; by the 1920s, the stream-lined, boyish figure of the flapper had become associated with forward-thinking modernity, in contrast to the now passé and regressive figure of the fat woman.

Into the midst of this hostile environment marched Amy Lowell, whose body and behaviour visibly defied the expectations placed on American women during both the late-nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Lowell provoked scandal by smoking cigars in public; she lived extravagantly and unapologetically, co-habiting with a beloved female companion, and she did all this in a body which was defiantly fat. Moreover, through her live poetry readings, Lowell implicitly insisted that a connection be drawn between her body and her words, as the

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<sup>1</sup> For example. Jonson, who was attacked in his own day for being fat, humanises ‘weight’ as a positive quality, writing: ‘First weigh a friend, then touch, and try him too’ (qtd. in Levy-Navarro, 2009, p. 21).

site and expression of pleasure. For example, the poem 'Bath' (from her poem-cycle 'Spring Day', 1915) revels in the sensual enjoyments of the body in the bathtub: 'I lie back and laugh, and let the green-white water, the sun-flawed beryl water, flow over me' (*Men, Women and Ghosts*, 1955, p. 145)<sup>2</sup>. The connection was too much for some to handle: Lowell's live reading this poem at the annual meeting of the Poetry Society of America in 1915 led to outrage: 'because of her very bulk the effect of it was almost as shocking as if she had actually appeared in her bathtub in public' (Gould, 1975, p. 174). Some accounts even claim that audience members angrily charged the podium after Lowell's performance.

Both Lowell's body and her poetry defied the strict dictates of avant-garde modernism, which favoured a hard, concrete, pared-down aesthetic. Lowell was attacked by Ezra Pound for usurping the Imagist movement; he then dismissed the movement as 'Amygisme', condemning the 'mushy technique' and 'floppiness' of Lowell's poetry (qtd. in Bradshaw, 2004, p. 172). These terms suggest the fluidity and softness of the fat female body, which Pound also reviled, attacking Lowell both through public insults and in letters to his friends and associates. Pound's criticisms of Lowell's work recall what Leslie Heywood has defined as the 'anorexic aesthetic' of modernism: '[i]n both the high modernist artist and the anorexic there is a rejection and a will to eliminate the feminine ... to shape the "base material" into a "higher," masculine form' (Heywood, 1996, p. 61). Therefore, the modernist emphasis on 'hardness, paring down, and reducing the poetic body can be read as a corollary for the ... reduction or elimination of the female body' (Heywood, 1996, p. 101). With her fat body and her prolific poetic output, Lowell threatened to overwhelm the boundaries of Pound's neatly chiselled Imagism.

The reputation of Lowell's work and the pejorative connotations attached to the fat body are therefore intrinsically linked, affecting Lowell's reputation during her lifetime and

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<sup>2</sup> *Men, Women and Ghosts* (1916) will be hereafter referenced as *MWG*.

her posthumous reception later in the twentieth century. However, given that Lowell's poetry has received limited critical attention in comparison with her peers (such as H.D.), we might argue that analysing Lowell's corporeality is a distraction, preventing us from paying much-needed attention to her work. However, there is much to be gained from interrogating how Lowell chose to display, construct, conceal, or perform her own embodiment as a fat woman. In her extensive scholarship on Amy Lowell's body, Melissa Bradshaw argues that Lowell often used her bulk to her advantage, to announce her presence and to help her to promote her work. Surveying a range of biographies which cast Lowell as a tragic victim of a 'glandular disorder', Bradshaw concludes: 'Missing from the ubiquitous descriptions of Lowell's body is any sense of joy it may have given her, any sense that she believed in its integrity, in the rightness of her embodiment' (2011, p. 44). Such joy can, for instance, be detected in Lowell's poem 'Bath'. In contrast to portraits of Lowell as the victim of an obesity that robbed her of any pleasure in her fleshliness, in this poem Bradshaw argues: 'the body that soaks leisurely in the bathtub ... avow[s] the materiality of [Lowell's] experience and the erotic pleasures associated with that' (2004, p.182).

My chapter aims to re-read Lowell's *poetry* in light of Bradshaw's suggestive comments, exploring 'the pleasure [Lowell] takes in physicality' (Bradshaw, 2011, p. 45). I want to examine closely the connections between food, appetite and eroticism in Lowell's poetic work – looking at how Lowell frequently uses food imagery as a metaphor for sexual pleasure, and appetite as a metaphor for desire. We can see this especially in Lowell's most famous volume *Pictures of the Floating World* (1919) which contains love lyrics inspired by her relationship with her lifelong companion Ada Russell. This volume features numerous examples of cooking and eating; from the 'baked white cakes' of 'Interlude' to the honey, wine and baked bread of which symbolises 'A Decade' with her partner. It is worth noting here that my attempt to identify and reclaim the sensual pleasures of eating in Lowell's poetic

work in a sense works against the aims of fat studies scholarship, which often seeks to move away from notions of blame and culpability and associations of the fat body with excessive eating and ‘the individual’s lack of control’ (LeBesco, 2004, p. 30). However, in the spirit of Levy-Navarro’s call for an imaginative reclamation of past ‘figures who are defiantly fat’ (2009, p. 20), I want to present Lowell as a fat woman who revelled in her appetites, as a queer icon who was multiply transgressive, who defied attempts to apologise for or rehabilitate her stubborn body, and who insisted on the fat body as both the site and product of sensual pleasure. Ultimately, I argue that Lowell’s celebration of the sensual enjoyments of cooking and eating reaffirms both the pleasure she took in her embodiment as a fat woman, and the *jouissance* of same-sex eroticism that she experienced in her relationship with Russell.

### **Dining with Amy Lowell**

Amy Lowell’s voracious appetite and love of food is evident from her letters and biographical studies. One particular anecdote from her childhood crops up repeatedly in biographies, as the apparent ‘root’ of Lowell’s ‘obesity’.<sup>3</sup> This story is originally recounted in S. Foster Damon’s comprehensive *Amy Lowell: A Chronicle* (1935):

It was when she was eight years old ... that she went to a party, where a large plate of rice was set before her. Her brother dared her to eat a second plate – she did – but when they prepared to go home, her coat would not button across her stomach. ‘And

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<sup>3</sup> I use the problematic term ‘obesity’ (see Wann, 2009, pp. xi-xii) consciously here, to indicate the way in which Lowell’s biographers repeatedly interpret her fat body in pathologizing, medicalised terms – for example, as the result of a chemical imbalance, a glandular ‘problem’ or as a manifestation of psychological trauma. Melissa Bradshaw provides a comprehensive survey of these anti-fat biographical attitudes in ‘Remembering Amy Lowell: Embodiment, Obesity, and the Construction of a Persona’ (2004).

it never buttoned again', Miss Lowell said, describing the episode. It was the first manifestation of her physical maladjustment. (p. 51)

Despite this episode attesting to Lowell's considerable appetite, and her determination not be outdone by her brother, the final sentence also demonstrates how Lowell biographies often attempt to blame Amy Lowell's 'obesity' on a glandular problem or 'chemical imbalance', in order to absolve her of any charges of 'greediness' or responsibility for her condition. These insistent medical interpretations projected onto Lowell's body by her biographers reflect the twentieth-century tendency to pathologize fat as a disease, to portray the fat individual as a pitiable victim, and to seek to 'cure' the fat body – a tendency today manifested in the search for the 'fat gene', which, as Kathleen LeBesco observes, worryingly echoes the late-nineteenth and early twentieth-century eugenicist theories surrounding homosexuality (LeBesco, 2009).

Another Lowell biographer Jean Gould, builds a contradictory picture of a rapacious Lowell and the indulgent upper-class society in which she moved, but again concludes that glandular problems were to blame for Lowell's weight: 'Amy Lowell had always had a large appetite and loved to eat; one look at the menu of a typical dinner party of the day makes one wonder why the entire upper-class population did not suffer from obesity as Amy did ... It was obvious that her trouble was glandular, but most doctors believed the cure lay in diet alone' (1975, p. 67). Recounting the brief (and disastrous) episode in which Lowell, in her early twenties, tried a drastic 'reducing' diet pioneered by Dr William Banting (which involved travelling down the Nile, while surviving on a diet of asparagus and tomatoes), Gould however admits that: 'Amy Lowell was never one to do anything by halves. She was a person of extremes, and now ... she gave way indulgently to all the foods she loved' (1975, p. 72). Try as they might to ignore or downplay it, Lowell's biographers keep encountering the

fact that Lowell clearly enjoyed eating and – with the exception of the Egyptian trip – never tried to reduce her food intake during her adult life, despite being fully aware that she was fat.<sup>4</sup>

Unsurprisingly, food and dining played a central role at Lowell's home of Sevenels. Lowell's dinner parties, hosted with the intention of bringing together the diverse writers, artists, composers and actresses that she particularly admired, are legendary. Lowell shared her life at Sevenels with Ada Dwyer Russell, a former character actress, who became Lowell's lifelong partner (and sometime amanuensis) from 1914 onwards. Together, the two women worked out a daily routine that suited their preferred lifestyles and fostered Lowell's creative work. Lowell preferred to write throughout the night and sleep through the day, so Russell ran the household during the daytime, trying to preserve as much quiet as possible. In the evening, guests would be received by Russell, and Lowell would join the dinner party half-way through the meal, having just risen from her bed. Damon describes a typical Sevenels dinner party in detail:

The dinner was an old-fashioned one, with oysters, soup, fish, meat, salad, dessert, and fruit, accompanied (until Prohibition) with the appropriate wines... then the meal continued, while the vanished courses reappeared, miraculously fresh, for Miss Lowell's consumption. Although she usually had two plates of soup and was always the center of the conversation, the dessert was served almost simultaneously. Then,

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<sup>4</sup> Lowell's awareness of her weight, and her carefree enjoyment of eating are both revealed in a letter to her friend Eleanor Robson Belmont, thanking her for her gift of Sherry's chocolates: 'Your bounty is beyond words, and the worst of it is that I have, with the most meagre assistance, eaten it all up. I have been afraid to weigh myself since the deed was – Ah, but I do like Sherry's chocolates! ... The joy is only so much enhanced because it partakes of the nature of forbidden fruit. With every delectable drop, I feel a pound going on, and only when I recollect how short is life, how fleeting, do I reflect that it makes very little different whether a skeleton was once fat or thin. This consoles me greatly, and I eat on, unmoved and unmoving' (qtd. in Gould, 1975, p. 330).

after peppermints and ginger were passed, the party proceeded into the geniality of the library. (1935, p. 265)<sup>5</sup>

Following the meal, Lowell would lead the conversation whilst puffing away on one of her famous cigars. Damon writes that ‘The flavour of those conversations can never be communicated ... She could talk brilliantly on any subject’ (1935, p. 265). At eleven o’clock, Ada Russell would ensure that a cold supper tray was set out, ready for Lowell’s consumption during the night as she wrote. Guests would depart just after midnight, ready to catch the last car to Boston at 12.15.

From this brief description, we can observe the ways in which Lowell and Russell’s relationship dynamic resembled that of a conventional husband and wife. Russell ran the household, whilst Lowell was engaged in the ‘business’ of poetry. Though Russell did not actually undertake the cooking and cleaning herself, she did manage Lowell’s considerable staff, including cooks, servants and typists. Lowell’s vast wealth (inherited through the Lowell family’s cotton mill businesses) meant that food at Sevenels functioned as a sign of social power and conspicuous consumption, with Russell performing a role akin to ‘lady of the manor’ or society hostess. Occupying a position akin to the ‘lord of the manor’, Lowell clearly dominated the social gatherings at Sevenels, engaging in fierce discussions with (usually male) writers and artists, often her rivals. In this sense, the division of labour within Lowell and Russell’s relationship can be compared to that of the modernist writer Gertrude Stein and her partner Alice B. Toklas. Together for thirty-nine years, Stein and Toklas considered themselves ‘married’ and used the epithets ‘husband’ and ‘wife’. But as Catherine R. Stimpson notes: ‘the marriage was Victorian. The bluffer, bigger, more athletic Stein could do more, think more, say more ... The tinier, more ladylike Toklas was more restrained

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<sup>5</sup> We can find evidence of Lowell’s frequent social gatherings in ‘The Dinner Party’ (*MWG*, 1955, p. 146), a sequence of short poems in which a hostile social discussion takes place across six different courses, ‘Fish’, ‘Game’, ‘Drawing-Room’, ‘Coffee’, ‘Talk’ and ‘Eleven O’Clock’.

... As Gertrude talked with the men ... Alice talked to the wives' (1984, p. 130). This dynamic reflects Lillian Faderman's observation that professional women of the early twentieth century 'had no need for a husband but plenty of need for a wife' (1981, p. 213) – frequently, a close female companion fulfilled this role. Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar also note that modernist women writer's creative enterprises were often joint achievements, with one partner gaining most recognition what was, essentially, collaborative work. It is interesting to note that such unequal relationships are represented via differences in body size; Stimpson describes a 'bigger' Stein and a 'tinier' Toklas, associating the fat female body with certain masculine freedoms (to 'do more, think more, say more') in contrast to the comparative feminine 'restraint' of the thin body.

Despite their same-sex relationship, Stein and Toklas's domestic and professional life was therefore still divided along gendered lines, with one partner adopting the 'masculine' role of artist/genius, the other the 'feminine' role of caregiver and homemaker. One of the most obvious ways in which this dynamic played out was in terms of cooking and eating: 'Stein ate, and Toklas cooked and served. Such acts, which Toklas taught herself to do magnificently, were literally and symbolically nourishing' (Stimpson, 1984, pp. 129-130). Stein clearly valued Toklas's ability to conjure up delicious meals, whilst Toklas found that her culinary abilities gave her a degree of power and influence in the household of this 'genius'. Though Stein employed professional cooks (demonstrating the ways in which socioeconomic power shaped this same-sex relationship), Toklas's gastronomic contributions demonstrated her support and devotion to her partner in the early days of their relationship, and ensured that she became indispensable. Later in life, in *The Alice B. Toklas Cookbook* (1954), Toklas reflected on her early forays in the kitchen, which – tellingly – coincided with the beginnings of her relationship with Stein:

Before coming to Paris I was interested in food but not in doing any cooking. When in 1908 I went to live with Gertrude Stein on the rue de Fleurus she said we would have American food for Sunday-evening supper ... the servant would be out and I should have the kitchen to myself. So I commenced to cook the simple dishes I had eaten in the homes of the San Joaquin Valley in California – fricasseed chicken, corn bread, apple and lemon pie. Then when the pie-crust received Gertrude Stein’s critical approval I made mince-meat and at Thanksgiving we had a turkey. (2004, p. 29)<sup>6</sup>

Food also took on a symbolic role in the Stein-Toklas union. In Stein’s writings, food and eating are used to represent desire. For example, in ‘Lifting Belly’, Stein puns flirtatiously: ‘Here is a bun for my bunny. / Every little bun is of honey. / On the little bun is my oney. / My little bun is so funny’ (qtd. in Gilbert and Gubar, 1989, p. 243).<sup>7</sup> Stein’s speakers often adopt the roles of ‘husband’ or ‘baby’ – both of whom need to be fed by a doting mother/wife; a role fulfilled by Toklas. Stein’s voracious ‘baby’, as Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar note ‘frequently asks to eat or be eaten, to please or be pleased’ (1989, p. 243). Thus, erotic and gastronomic appetites are conflated in Stein’s work, and the lines between self and other become increasingly blurred. In a psychoanalytical sense, Stein might be said to have received a kind of pre-Oedipal gratification from indulging in repetitious, rhythmical language and by consuming the mother’s body – her work dramatises a kind of Semiotic banquet. In Lowell’s poetry too, we find that the pleasures derived from food and sex are collapsed together, reflecting Lowell’s enjoyment of her fat body, in defiance of the intensifying cultural dictates that insisted both fat bodies and homoerotic desires should be yoked with guilt, denial and self-hatred.

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<sup>6</sup> Stein also recounts Toklas’s discovery of cooking in *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* (1933), in this case adopting Alice’s voice: ‘I like cooking, I am an extremely good five minute cook, and beside, Gertrude Stein liked from time to time to have me make american dishes’ (Stein, 2001, p. 124).

<sup>7</sup> Stein’s *Tender Buttons* (1914) also contains an entire section entitled ‘Food’.

**Wine, Berries and Almonds: Consumption and Desire in Lowell's *Sword Blades and Poppy Seed***

As with Stein, we can find ample evidence of Lowell's enjoyment of food and eating in her poems. For example, the 'Bath' poem from Lowell's 'Spring Day' sequence is followed by a poem which celebrates the sensory joy of the 'Breakfast Table': 'the rolls of bread spread themselves in the sun to bask. A stack of butter-pats, pyramidal, shout orange through the white ... Coffee steam rises ... The day is new and fair with good smells in the air' ('Breakfast Table', *MWG*, 1955, p. 146).<sup>8</sup> Lowell repeatedly uses food imagery in her poems, from the sensuous, overripe fruits of 'Market Day' (*A Dome of Many-Coloured Glass*, 1912) to the Impressionistic 'Thomson's Lunch Room – Grand Central Station: Study in Whites':

Jagged green-white bowls of pressed glass  
Rearing snow-peaks of chipped sugar  
Above the lighthouse-shaped castors  
Of grey pepper and grey-white salt.  
Grey-white placards: "Oyster Stew, Cornbeef Hash, Frankfurters" ...  
Two rice puddings and a salmon salad  
Are pushed over the counter. (from 'Towns in Colour', *MWG*, 1955, pp.149-150)

As we can see here, food represented an ideal opportunity for an Imagist poet such as Lowell.

Food items provided the Imagist poet with strong, definite images that can be presented in

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<sup>8</sup> Lowell's breakfast, would, of course, have been enjoyed in the afternoon rather than the morning, due to her unconventional timetable (thank you to Helen Hester for pointing this out to me). This poem may therefore be an exercise of imagination, as with the poem 'Interlude' (analysed later in this chapter) when Lowell describes baking cakes.

themselves, yet described in such a way that they resonate with deeper significance. Lowell's presentation of this lunchroom table, with its sugar bowls and salt castors, can be likened to the still life of Post-Impressionist painting (e.g. a Cézanne or Van Gogh) in which motionless objects take on the characteristics of emotional states.

In Lowell's early work, food and drink often symbolise both erotic pleasure and the torment of unsatisfied desire. Several of the love lyrics published in Lowell's second volume *Sword Blades and Poppy Seed* (1914) associate desire with sensations of hunger and satiety. These poems were written when Lowell was trying to convince Russell to live with her. The two women met briefly in 1909, and again in 1912, but Russell continued to tour with her acting troupe, only staying with Lowell during the summer months. Lowell repeatedly asked her to come and live at Sevenels as her permanent companion (in June 1914, Russell finally relented). Lillian Faderman suggests that 'it is possible to conjecture Lowell's emotional state during these years from the apparently autobiographical poems' of *Sword Blades*, which present the speaker as 'imploring, apologetic, and entirely at the mercy of the beloved who ... is depicted as goddess, mother, healer, and holder of the sole and elemental power to rescue the speaker from alienation and pain' (2004, p. 59, p. 60).

A number of short lyrics in *Sword Blades* employ the motif of the overflowing wine-cup to represent the speaker's thirst for the beloved, and the intoxicating effects of quenched desire.<sup>9</sup> In a longer narrative poem entitled 'The Shadow' (SB, 1955, pp. 66-71), Lowell also connects the consumption of food and drink to physical tangibility and the possibility of fulfilled desire. 'The Shadow' is a fable that draws on elements of the Pygmalion myth: a poor watchmaker, Paul Jannes, toils to complete a watch for a wealthy customer. Working through the night, Paul becomes infatuated with what appears to be the shadow of a woman cast upon the wall: 'No woman was in that room! .../ What made / That beautiful, dreadful

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<sup>9</sup> See for example the following poems in *Sword Blades and Poppy Seed* (1914): 'Absence' (p. 41), 'A Gift' (p. 41), 'Anticipation' (p. 42) and 'Vintage' (p.42).

thing, that shade / Of something so lovely' (1955, p. 67). After offering the shadow an array of jewels and other gifts, Paul comes to believe that *feeding* the shadow will bring her into tangible existence: 'Man grows by eating, if you eat / You will be filled with our life, sweet / Will be our planet in your mouth. / If not, I must parch in death's wide drouth (1955, p. 70). The items Paul buys for this banquet – bread and wine – have Eucharistic significance. He watches over the baking bread: 'As rapt-souled monks watch over the baking/ Of the sacred wafer' (p. 70). But this holy communion is really an anticipation of erotic communion, as Paul hopes that eating will substantiate the shadow with a physical body:

... Red as blood  
Was the wine which should bring the lustihood  
Of human life to his lady's veins ...  
He put meat on her plate and filled her glass,  
And waited what should come to pass. (1955, p. 70)

The shadow, alas, remains a shadow, and Paul commits suicide from grief and disappointment. This poem, however, is significant for the connection it draws between nourishment and sexual fulfilment: here, Lowell places the body and its tangibility at the centre of her poem, explicitly connecting the act of eating with the act of making love. Lowell later returned to Eucharistic imagery in her poem 'In Excelsis' (1927); a poem that connects consumption with lesbian erotic communion.

In addition to the brimming wine-cup and Eucharistic imagery, another key image of consumption in *Sword Blades and Poppy Seed* is that of ripe fruit, particularly berries. Lowell had already described delicious fruits in an earlier poem, 'Market Day' in which 'bartering booths spread out their tempting shows / Of globed and golden fruit, the morning air / Smells

sweet with ripeness ... / A wicker basket gapes and overflows / Spilling out cool, blue plums’ (*A Dome of Many-Coloured Glass* [1912], 1955, p. 20). Lowell’s language here recalls Christina Rossetti’s *Goblin Market* (1862), in which fiendish goblins offer two innocent sisters an array of tempting fruits: ‘Apples and quinces, / Lemons and oranges, / Plump unpeck’d cherries, / Melons and raspberries, / Bloom-down-cheek’d peaches’ (2008, p. 67). *Goblin Market* has frequently been read as a metaphorical fable about female sexuality, the ‘forbidden fruit’ recalling Eve’s eating of the apple in the Garden of Eden.<sup>10</sup> Ripe fruit also represents the fecundity of the fertile female body. Isobel Armstrong describes *Goblin Market* as a ‘deeply, insatiably oral poem’ (1993, p. 348), both in terms of its subject-matter and its repetitive metre/rhyme scheme. The same could be said of Lowell’s poem ‘The Fruit Shop’ (from ‘Bronze Tablets’), in which a pushy fruitseller rhythmically promotes his succulent wares:

And those grapes! They melt in the mouth like wine,  
 Just a click of the tongue, and they burst to honey.  
 They’re only this morning off the vine...  
 Those oranges – Gold! They’re almost red.  
 They seem like little chips just broken away from the sun itself. Or perhaps instead  
 You’d like a pomegranate, they’re rarely gay,  
 When you split them the seeds are like crimson spray. (*MWG*, 1955, p. 111)

The pomegranate image appears again in Lowell’s poem ‘Miscast II’. The speaker, bursting with unfulfilled desire, declares:

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<sup>10</sup> See, for example, influential readings by Margaret Homans, “‘Syllables of Velvet’: Dickinson, Rossetti, and the Rhetorics of Sexuality’ (*Feminist Studies* 11, 1985, pp. 569-593) and Cora Kaplan, ‘The Indefinite Disclosed: Christina Rossetti and Emily Dickinson’ in *Women Writing and Writing about Women*, ed. Mary Jacobus (New York: Barnes & Noble, 1979), pp. 61-79.

My heart is like a cleft pomegranate  
Bleeding crimson seeds  
And dripping them on the ground.  
My heart gapes because it is ripe and over-full,  
And its seeds are bursting from it. (*SB*, 1955, p. 42)

The image of the ‘cleft pomegranate’ is strikingly erotic, suggesting a wet, glistening opening, and the ripeness of the fruitful womb. We find a similar image in a fin-de-siècle poem by Michael Field entitled ‘Unbosoming’ (1893):

The love that breeds  
In my heart for thee!  
As the iris is full, brimful of seeds,  
And all that it flowered for among the reeds  
Is packed in a thousand vermilion-beads  
That push, and riot, and squeeze, and clip,  
Till they burst the sides of the silver scrip (1893, p. 84)<sup>11</sup>

Though one poem concerns a pomegranate and the other an iris, both poems utilise the image of seeds bursting out of a heart overflowing with passion. Noting that references to small, round objects such as seeds, nuts and buds recur in nineteenth-century women’s poetry, Paula Bennett has suggested that such imagery can be read as clitoral symbolism: ‘identifying their “little hard nut[s]” – or their little flowers – with “something precious”, women are

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<sup>11</sup> ‘Michael Field’ is the collaborative pseudonym of Katharine Bradley and Edith Cooper, an aunt and niece who considered themselves ‘closer married’ than the Brownings.

expressing ... their conscious or unconscious awareness of the organic foundation of their (oxymoronic) sexual power’– oxymoronic in the sense that the clitoris is ‘little’ yet ‘tremendous force [is] nevertheless contained within it’ (1990, p. 172, p. 173).<sup>12</sup> Examples of clitoral imagery listed by Bennett include ‘peas, pebbles, beads, berries, nuts, buds, crumbs, pearls, pellets, dewes, gems, jewels, drops, and ... bees’ (1993, p. 236).

Small, round objects such as seeds, berries and nuts feature heavily in Lowell’s love lyrics, evoking not only Lowell’s own female embodiment, but also her homoerotic desires. It is significant that these objects are all *edible*, suggesting an oral eroticism at play in these poems. This eroticism that comes most clearly to the fore in Lowell’s poem ‘Aubade’:

As I would free the white almond from the green husk

So would I strip your trappings off,

Beloved,

And fingering the smooth and polished kernel

I should see that in my hands glittered a gem beyond counting. (*SB*, 1955, p. 73)

Here, Lowell uses the simile of unshelling an almond to describe undressing the beloved.<sup>13</sup>

The poem printed before ‘Aubade’, entitled ‘White and Green’ also addresses the naked beloved as an almond: ‘You are an almond flower unsheathed / Leaping and flickering between the budded branches’ (p. 73). In ‘Aubade’, love-making is implied through the reference to tenderly ‘fingering’ the ‘smooth and polished kernel’. The comparison of this small, smooth almond to a ‘gem’ only underscores the clitoral symbolism in this poem. A

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<sup>12</sup> Bennett notices such clitoral imagery is particularly prevalent in Emily Dickinson’s work. It is worth noting that Emily Dickinson is mentioned in Lowell’s most famous poem ‘The Sisters’ (1925) as a key female precursor.

<sup>13</sup> Gould recounts how Lowell once ‘told a shy young poet that unwrapping her little Manila [cigar] was like undressing a lady’ (1975, p. 119).

later poem, 'The Weather-Cock Points South' (*Pictures of the Floating World*, 1919), employs similar symbolism, though this time Lowell describes a flower-bud:

I put your leaves aside,  
One by one:  
The smooth, 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. (1955, p. 211)

Faderman identifies the flower image here as a 'descriptive symbol for female genitalia' and the act described as cunnilingus – suggested by the 'breath' of the wind on the flower (2004, p. 73). Such imagery, crucially, enabled Lowell to write about lesbian love-making without attracting censorship – something she experienced indirectly through her friend D. H. Lawrence, whose novel *The Rainbow* was banned in 1915, in part due to a lesbian love scene.

As with her notorious public reading of 'Bath', Lowell subtly draws attention in her poetry to her corporeality as a fat woman and her homoerotic appetites. One of ways she achieves this is by associating homoerotic desire with a *flavour*: an appetite for almonds in Lowell's work ultimately comes to stand in for homoerotic desire and lesbian identity. For example, in a later poem entitled 'To Two Unknown Ladies' (published posthumously in *Ballads for Sale*, 1927), Lowell considers her response to Somerville and Ross (Edith

Somerville and Violet Florence Martin) – nineteenth-century women writers whose close relationship and collaboration paralleled that of ‘Michael Field’ (see footnote 11). Reading their work, Lowell is unaccountably ‘haunted’ by these two dead spinsters: ‘I go back to you again, / Evening and evening, in a kind of thirst, / Surprising my tongue upon an almond taste’ (1955, p. 563). The significance of the almond flavour is never explained within the poem, though it is reaffirmed later on: ‘Almonds, I said, / Smooth, white, and bitter, wonderfully almonds’ (p. 564). If we read this poem in light of Lowell’s oeuvre then this ‘moment of recognition’ becomes clear (Donaldson, 2004, p. 38). Through the veil of their writings, Lowell spies the story of Somerville and Ross’s intimate relationship; a close companionship that parallels her and Russell’s: ‘Two lives which stare and twinkle on the page / So that I blind in looking’ (p. 565). Lowell provocatively figures this recognition of lesbian sexuality through taste – the flavour of almonds upon the tongue. Rather than being ashamed of her embodiment *or* her sexuality, Lowell’s poetry covertly celebrates and affirms such transgressive appetites.

### **The Domestic Goddess: Ada Russell in *Pictures of the Floating World***

In 1914, Ada Russell finally agreed to become Lowell’s permanent companion. Her presence in Lowell’s household can be detected throughout the series of love lyrics that Lowell published in *Pictures of the Floating World* (1919), particularly the section entitled ‘Two Speak Together’. *Pictures* has repeatedly been cited as Lowell’s most successful collection of love poems: Paul Lauter dubs it ‘the most fully articulated sequence of lesbian poetry between Sappho and the 1960s’ (2004, p. 5).<sup>14</sup> The volume is consistently associated with Russell as Lowell’s lesbian muse, a biographical reading supported by the fact that Lowell

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<sup>14</sup> For more on Lowell’s love poems in *Pictures*, see Faderman (1981, 2004) and Gilbert and Gubar (1989).

wanted to dedicate the volume to her partner (Russell refused to grant permission for such a public acknowledgement). The poem also features specific details of domestic life at Sevenels, including the presence of Lowell's dogs and the extensive garden which forms the setting for many of the poems.

Though Russell, unlike Alice B. Toklas, did not actually cook for her partner, she does repeatedly appear in the guise of a kind of 'domestic goddess' in *Pictures*, undertaking household tasks such as baking, gardening and sewing. For example, in 'Madonna of the Evening Flowers', the absent beloved is represented by: 'your books, / ... your scissors and thimble just put down' (1955, p. 210). She eventually appears in the garden: 'Standing under a spire of pale blue larkspur, / With a basket of roses on your arm' (p. 210). She gives the speaker a series of gardening instructions: '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' (p. 210). In 'A Sprig of Rosemary', Lowell depicts the beloved's hands, engaged in domestic tasks:

I cannot see your face.

When I think of you,

It is your hands which I see.

Your hands,

Sewing,

Holding a book,

Resting for a moment on the sill of a window. (*Pictures*, 1955, p. 216)<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Lowell's focus on the beloved's hands recalls the important role of hands and fingers in lesbian eroticism (see Blain, 1999, p. 137).

In another poem entitled 'Interlude', Lowell's speaker describes the baking and decorating of cakes:

When I have baked white cakes  
And grated green almonds to spread on them;  
When I have picked the green crowns from the strawberries  
And piled them, cone-pointed, in a blue and yellow platter;  
When I have smoothed the seam of the linen I have been working;  
What then?  
To-morrow it will be the same:  
Cakes and strawberries,  
And needles in and out of cloth. (*P*, 1955, p. 212)

I suggest that in this particular poem, Lowell actually adopts Russell's voice, in a comparable way to Gertrude Stein's ventriloquism of Alice B. Toklas. The daily domestic tasks described in the first half of the poem are more reflective of Russell's household role than Lowell's. As we know, Lowell kept to a strict routine of sleeping all day, and writing all night, so the day-time setting of the first half of the poem is more suited to Russell's timetable than Lowell's. Add to this the fact that Lowell was useless at household tasks and 'abhorred' needlework and the activities described at the beginning of 'Interlude' become less applicable to the poet herself and more an imaginary account of her partner's day.

Margaret Homans is the only critic to note that the speaker of 'Interlude': 'might be Ada addressing Amy (since the actual Amy probably never prepared food or sewed a seam), or the poem might represent a dialogue' (2001, p. 336). As I have argued elsewhere, Lowell's ventriloquism of Russell has a number of problematic implications – this seizure of another's

voice can be read as an act of appropriation, silencing her female partner in order to foster her own creative expression. Gilbert and Gubar, for example, read Gertrude Stein's *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* (1933) in this way: 'Usurping Alice's persona, appropriating Alice's voice, Stein ... turns collaboration into collusion ... the result is a kind of cannibalism, as Stein makes Alice into a character of her own devising' (1989, p. 251). It is interesting that these critics use the metaphor of consumption to signify such an appropriation of voice and identity – pejoratively linking this appropriation to the aggressive hunger of the fat lesbian body. But despite her apparent 'cannibalism' of Russell in 'Interlude', elsewhere Lowell demonstrates an anxious awareness of the ethical issues implicated in speaking for, or as, another woman – for example, in the two-part poem 'Anecdote' (*Ballads for Sale*, 1927) she voices both the male poet and the female muse, who stands, naked and objectified: 'Why do you strip me before all these people / ... are you so cynical that you expose me for a whim?' (Lowell, 1955, p. 577). 'Anecdote' reveals Lowell's anxious awareness that the masculine position of suppliant she occupied in many of her poems was predicated on a power-imbalance that sapped agency from the female muse whilst ostensibly exulting her and occasionally appropriating her voice.<sup>16</sup>

Whichever way we interpret it, what is perhaps most striking about Lowell's poem 'Interlude' is the careful sensuality with which the speaker describes her actions – spreading, arranging, smoothing and moving her needle in and out of cloth. The (previously discussed) almond image and 'cone-pointed strawberries' add to the subtle eroticism of this poem, meaning it functions doubly; as a delicate description of home-making and a covert celebration of love-making. In her later poems, Lowell increasingly appeals to religious imagery, particularly the Eucharist, to celebrate her physically and spiritually nourishing

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<sup>16</sup> For an expansion of this argument, see Sarah Parker, *The Lesbian Muse and Poetic Identity, 1889-1930* (2013), 'Amy Lowell' chapter.

relationship with Russell. The transformation of bread and wine into Christ's body and blood for Lowell comes to represent the transformative effects of her relationship. This is clearly seen in 'A Decade', a poem which marks ten years after meeting Russell:

When you came, you were like red wine and honey,  
the taste of you burnt my mouth with its sweetness.  
Now you are like morning bread,  
Smooth and pleasant.  
I hardly taste you at all for I know your savour,  
But I am completely nourished. (*P*, 1955, p. 217)

Returning here to the wine symbolism of *Sword Blades*, Lowell describes the change in her relationship. Russell has become the wholesome daily bread, rather than burning wine of passion. Desire – and the pain of absence – has now been replaced by contentment and commitment. Lowell affirms that although long-term companionship may lack a strong flavour, it nonetheless nourishes 'completely'.

These religious metaphors assert themselves most strongly in a triad of poems in the posthumously published *What's O'Clock* (1927). These poems inspired by the structures of Roman Catholic liturgical worship are entitled 'Prime' (morning prayer), 'Vespers' (evening prayer) and 'In Excelsis'. The latter poem – its title deriving from the Latin hymn 'Gloria in Excelsis Deo' ('Glory to God in the highest') – depicts the beloved as a fertility goddess who brings abundance with her every step:

You — you —

Your shadow is sunlight on a plate of silver;  
Your footsteps, the seeding-place of lilies;  
Your hands moving, a chime of bells across a windless air.

The movement of your hands is the long, golden running of light from a rising sun;  
It is the hopping of birds upon a garden-path. (*WOC*, 1955, p. 444)

Once again, floral imagery is abundant here: the beloved's fertility-giving powers are emphasised by the 'seeding-place' of lilies; she is later compared to 'the perfume of jonquils' (p. 444), a member of the Narcissus family and 'the flower symbolic of falling in love with likeness' due to their growing by water (Vanita, 1996, p. 51). Lowell uses metaphors of pollination to describe the beloved's inspirational powers: 'Your words are bees about a pear-tree, / Your fancies are the gold-and-black striped wasps buzzing among red apples' (p. 444). In 'The Poem', the speaker is completely reliant on the beloved to plant and water her 'green bud' (*P*, 1955, p. 227). This image recalls an earlier poem in *Pictures*, 'Flame Apples' which is an extended metaphor for the creation of poetry:

Little hot apples of fire,  
Burst out of the flaming stem  
Of my heart,  
I do not understand how you quickened and grew.  
And you amaze me  
While I gather you. (1955, p. 226)

Images of fruit and bees thus provide a metaphor that combines the quickening of creativity with sexual fulfilment. In 'April', this culminates in a kind of birth:

I will lie under the beech-trees ...  
In a blueness of little squills and crocuses.  
I will lie among the little squills  
And be delivered of this overcharge of beauty,  
And that which is born shall be a joy to you  
Who love me. (*P*, 1955, p. 213)

In 'In Excelsis', Lowell again utilises Eucharistic images, as the beloved is consumed by the speaker, filling her as water fills an empty vessel:

I drink your lips,  
I eat the whiteness of your hands and feet.  
My mouth is open,  
As a new jar I am empty and open.  
Like white water are you who fill the cup of my mouth (*WO*, 1955, p. 444)

The speaker represents herself as 'jar' and 'cup', recalling the wine-cup of *Sword Blades*. But in earlier poems such as 'Absence' and 'A Gift', Lowell's speaker figures herself as a vessel that fills for the beloved: masochistically giving her blood and her words 'for your drinking' until she risks running dry (1955, p. 41). In 'In Excelsis', the roles are reversed: the speaker is nourished by the 'white water' pouring from the beloved's lips like milk from a mother's breast. This lesbian union is figured as a restorative feeding, revealing the intimate

connection that Lowell draws between food and eroticism; pleasures experienced through her fat body. The empty fervour of wine is replaced by wholesome, life-giving milk. The nourishment pouring from the beloved's lips in 'In Excelsis', like her 'ripening' words, strengthens the speaker so that she can sing an ecstatic song of praise: 'I say 'Glory! Glory' and bow before you / As to a shrine/ ... I take you, / I live' (p. 445). The poem itself – and, as Lowell later stated, *all* her poems – was the result of Russell's nurturing presence.<sup>17</sup> The final lines confirm this: 'those things I say in consequence / Are rubies mortised in a gate of stone' (p. 445). The ruby, set in stone, can be read as an image of the permanence of poetry: the speaker and the beloved will perish, but the beloved's beauty will be immortalised ('mortised') in the form of the poem. The 'gate of stone' also hints at the immanence of death – lending an extra poignancy to the fact Lowell's poem was published posthumously in a volume edited by Russell.

## Conclusion

This chapter has shown that food played a number of important roles in Lowell's work. In Lowell's early love poems, particularly *Sword Blades and Poppy Seed*, hunger and thirst represent unsatiated desire. The over-flowing wine cup is used to signify the excesses of longing, which leads to desperation and a loss of self-control. Food items such as berries, almonds and seeds here (and elsewhere) function as clitoral symbols, enabling Lowell to allude to lesbian love-making without risking censorship. In the later love poems of *What's O'Clock*, the domestic goddess, sewing in the garden or baking, represents Russell, Lowell's beloved companion, and the life they shared together at Sevenels. The religious imagery of

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<sup>17</sup> Lowell was finally able to dedicate one book to Russell. The dedication to the *John Keats* (1925) biography reads: 'To A. D. R. / This and all my books / A. L.'

the Eucharist represents the sustenance Lowell received in this long-term relationship, culminating in the ecstatic praise-poem 'In Excelsis'.

Though a necessity at Lowell's time of writing, metaphorical descriptions of love-making and the female body later became an established convention of lesbian love poetry. For example, in *Twenty-One Love Poems* (1977), Adrienne Rich describes: 'your lovemaking, like the half-curved frond / of the fiddlehead fern in forests / just washed by sun' and 'your strong tongue and fingers / reaching where I have been waiting years for you / in my rose-wet cave' (1993, p. 83). Indeed, such imagery became so established that it took on the status of cliché. A 1981 drawing by cartoonist Jo Nesbit depicts a female folk singer announcing: 'I will now sing a short song comparing my lover's clitoris to a pearl, and her labia to a persimmon fruit and her vagina to a vanilla pod because quite frankly that's the only way I can cope with it all' (reprinted in Hennegan, 2000, p. 330). As Antje Lindenmeyer writes: 'The connection between food and sex can be a cliché ... the suggestive shapes and textures of fruit lend themselves very easily to this' (2006, p. 471). But, as Lindenmeyer also shows, for contemporary lesbian writers such as Jeanette Winterson, Dorothy Allison, Audre Lorde and Anna Livia, food continues to carry a symbolic weight. In novels such as Winterson's *Oranges Are Not The Only Fruit* (1985) and Lorde's *Zami* (1982): 'Food is seen as integral to lesbian existence, intimately connected to and involved in the shaping of sexual identities, personal histories and lesbian communities' (Lindenmeyer, 2006, p. 482).

Lowell's work is in many ways provides the foundation for this. Flying in the face of the biographies that cast her as a tragic victim of a 'glandular imbalance', Lowell's poetry expresses her radical, unashamed enjoyment of food, and affirms the delicious eroticism and sustaining fulfilment she experienced in her lifelong relationship with Russell. Following Lowell's death, the fat body through which she experienced such pleasures later became a

focus for vilification and a consequent rejection of her work and achievements, in keeping with the increasingly negative connotations of fat in a post-war American context. But, by viewing Lowell differently – by acknowledging her agency over her own body and recognising the pleasure she took in her specific embodiment as a fat woman – we can reclaim Lowell as an bold and inspirational figure who was (in Levy-Navarro’s words) ‘defiantly fat’, defiantly sensuous and defiantly queer.

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