

'SWEET RELIEF': THE POLITICS OF EROTIC EXPERIENCE IN THE POETRY OF LESBIA HARFORD, MARY FULLERTON AND ZORA CROSS

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|| In a poem titled 'Lovers', Mary Fullerton writes:

To be unloved gives sweet relief;
The one integrity
Of soul is to be lone,
Inviolat and free

(*Moles* 34)

This poem may seem an odd choice for the beginning of a paper about erotic experience. After all, one might think that in an erotic situation being loved would give greater relief than being unloved. Fullerton herself might well have been horrified, or at least very surprised, to find her work figuring in a paper with the word 'erotic' in its title, since she felt that sexuality was an aspect of the individual's private life that was not meant to be written about: to do so was to transgress the boundaries of moral and personal decency. But Fullerton was not alone in her rejection of the desirability of desire. Lesbia Harford expresses a similar sentiment when she states that:

Sometimes I think the happiest of love's moments
Is the blest moment of release from loving.

(*Poems* 102)

Admittedly, the view expressed in 'Lovers' is more typical of Fullerton's broader perspective on desire than is the case for Harford. But in the same period Zora Cross, who became famous for her highly erotic love sonnets, was also writing poems that are overshadowed by a fear of death and its annihilation of the sexual body. Why, one might ask, are these poets so negative about the effects of erotic love on body and soul? And how does their status as women poets affect their points of view? We must also ask, what aspects of erotic experience are these poets positive about in other poems and why? How do social and literary traditions influence the ways Fullerton, Harford and Cross write about desire?

Undeniably, these writers' ambivalence toward erotic experience is influenced by the tradition of Eros as two-sided: as unifier and destroyer. According to tradition, Eros can strengthen and fulfil the individual's sense of self and give a deep sense of unity with another person, but it can also destroy individuality. Harford summarises this paradox very succinctly when she writes that,

. . . no two lovers are a single person
And lovers' union means a soul's suppression. (102)

A refusal to engage in sexual relationships is, therefore, one way of maintaining psychic freedom. However, where Fullerton saw freedom from love philosophically as an end in

itself and as an ideal state of being, for political activist Harford freedom from love had political implications. It permitted social action for the betterment of humanity. Once love has ceased,

... each poor heart imprisoned by the other's
Is suddenly set free for splendid action. (102)

Although Harford rejoices in the experience of love and in the beauty of the beloved in many of her poems, one gains the impression that these moments are merely asides from the real drama of changing the world. Cross's poetry provides an interesting contrast to that of Harford and Fullerton because in it, despite some ambivalence, the experience of love is all. Hers is a mystical eroticism detached from her lovers' daily lives.

When looked at in a cultural and historical context, it is not surprising that these poets felt ambivalent or even strongly negative about expressing their sexual identities in their writing. For despite Foucault's argument for the increasing entry of sexual issues into the discursive practices of the first half of this century, the expression of female sexuality was problematic for women writers at that time, as it is even now. Most existing erotic poems dealt with desire from a male perspective with women as 'Muse but not Maker, (or) woman the Destroyer and Bitch Goddess', to quote Dorothy Hewett (50). And even these were not usually considered 'art' if they became explicit. How much more difficult it was for women poets. They were likely to be faced not only with the argument that erotic poetry from a female perspective was not 'art', but also that any poetry from a female perspective could only be verse, because the higher genre of Poetry was not within the capabilities of women, whatever the subject matter.

Moreover, the syndrome of 'damned if you do and damned if you don't' came into play. While contemporary morality suggested that public expressions of female desire were symptoms of immodesty and even of depravity, women such as Mary Fullerton who denied the value of their sexuality by remaining celibate felt themselves reproached by 'experts' such as Freud and Havelock Ellis for being 'frigid' or of having 'lesbian' inclinations. An even more extreme view was expressed by Walter Gallichan in 1929:

The erotically impotent women have an enormous influence upon the young, the conventions and regulations of society, and even upon sex legislation. These degenerate women are a menace to civilisation. They provoke sex misunderstanding and antagonism; they wreck conjugal happiness, and pose as superior moral beings when they are really victims of disease. (Gallichan 184)

Not surprisingly, society's attempts to define people in terms of their sexuality was resented greatly by the celibate Fullerton. She opposed all expressions of sexuality and refused to approve it even as a concept. In a letter to Miles Franklin she wrote that 'the whole process of reproduction is repulsive to me', which suggests a profound ambivalence particularly towards heterosexual love. Instead, Fullerton espoused a Platonic or perhaps even Manichean conception of the superiority of a transcendent love based on a denial of the body. To justify her dislike of sexual behaviour she also used a form of Social Darwinism, thus gaining pseudo-scientific authority for her personal and literary revulsion. She argued that the need for sexual satisfaction demonstrates a lack of self-control, and that a lack of self-control is a sure sign that the individual belongs lower on the evolutionary scale than those who manage to control their physical desires by being celibate. Writers such as Zora Cross and Jean Devanny who allowed desire to play an important role in their lives or their writing were condemned either as 'degenerate',

'depraved' or 'primitive' in Fullerton's correspondence with Franklin.¹

Not surprisingly then, there is little evidence of heterosexual sexuality in Fullerton's published poems. Where desire exists at all it is sentimental, elegiac and in the past tense, or experienced between members of the working classes, whose love affairs are treated with condescending if humorous detachment. There are vague, absent, usually ungendered lovers as in her poem 'Dearness' (*TBF* 52), or tentative, childish, rather comical caresses to which the adjective 'erotic' can barely be applied, as in 'Lyric':

On such a day as this
When the garden was sweet after rain;
We clung in our virgin kiss,
And stumbled apart again.
And that is the whole of the tale—
One kiss in a garden of flowers;
Were ever two lives so pale,
Or lyric so brief as ours?

(*TBF* 45)

Fullerton even disables some of her characters before allowing them to marry, thus making sexual relationships problematic if not impossible. This disablement has a comical/pathetic context in her poem 'The Red-Haired Chimney Sweep' (*TBF* 37) where the hero is only accepted by his lover after he has been wounded in WWI, but the same situation also occurs in two of her novels. In *Rufus Sterne* Helen can only be united with Rufus after being made a permanent invalid by childbirth, while in her anonymously-published novel *Clare*, Clare only agrees to marry Harry after he has become a paraplegic (though this does not, of course, necessarily prohibit sexual activity).

However, the distinction I made earlier between Harford as political activist and Fullerton as philosopher is too simplistic. Fullerton's views on the erotic, like Harford's, were tied closely to her particular political views about class and gender. Her belief in celibacy, for instance, was probably influenced by the strand in nineteenth-century feminism that felt that women should raise themselves above the carnality of men.² What makes Fullerton's idea of Platonic love an issue of class is her elitist belief that there are two kinds of people: those who have overcome sexual desire and those who have not. The former group roughly equated to Plato's guardians or the Perfecti of the Manicheans, and the latter to the Imperfecti of the Manicheans (de Rougemont 81). Translated into the twentieth century, the superior Perfecti included Fullerton and other like-minded people, the Imperfecti the lower classes who need to reproduce, along with other 'primitive' people who either need or want sex. In other words, she believed sex was acceptable for the working classes who knew no better, but not for her. Fullerton's valorisation of soul over body also suggests the influence of the Nietzschean concept of the Superman.

There is a marked similarity between Nietzsche's view that 'the man who has overcome his passions has entered into possession of the most fertile ground; like the colonist who has mastered the forests and swamps' (Nietzsche 233), and the view of Fullerton's speaker that, unlike the eel who lives in the swamp:

I have no heaven where the cool weeds wave,
My ethic is resisting much I crave;
And much I crave is not within this pond;
But in some far and murmured-of Beyond.

(*TBF* 16)

At first sight Lesbia Harford's views on the link between class and sex could not have been more different. Instead of distancing herself from the working classes Harford wanted to become like them, to the extent that she worked in a clothing factory. And instead of deprecating lower class sexuality she celebrated it. Poems such as 'The Improver', where Maisie shyly shows the speaker her lovebite, demonstrate a lack of artifice and a vitality in lower class people that Harford found very attractive. However, as I have suggested, Harford had difficulty reconciling her own need for passionate love with her faith in political action. Only in 'Revolution' does such reconciliation occur in her poetry, when revolution becomes a desirable woman, the most worthy object of passionate love in Harford's poetry:

She is not of the fireside,
My lovely love;
Nor books, nor even a cradle,
She bends above.
No, she is bent with lashes,
Her flesh is torn.
From blackness into blackness
She walks forlorn.
But factories and prisons
Are far more fair
Than home or palace gardens
If she is there.

(Poems 97)

This female love transcends domesticity and even maternity. She is like the idealised loves of the Troubadours and the courtly love tradition, though hopefully, Harford would have thought, much more attainable.

Where Lesbia Harford sought to change the world through political action, Zora Cross's work could only be called revolutionary in its choice of sexual subject matter. It is political primarily in the sense that 'the personal is political'. More than any other Australian poet of her period Cross can be credited with clearly, unambiguously and publicly depicting the perspective of woman as lover rather than beloved, the subject rather than the object of love poems, and a person capable of, and revelling in, erotic love. However, her radical speaking position is undermined by the deferential and submissive attitude her female speakers show toward the silent male objects of her sonnets.³ Which is probably why her first volume *Songs of Love and Life* was accepted for publication in 1918, in spite of its explicitly sexual subject matter.

The ambivalence in Cross's poetry toward erotic experiences can be read partly in terms of this conflict between her radical belief in female sexual freedom and a conservative deference to patriarchal sexual authority. The linguistic and structural conventions of her favourite form, the sonnet, further bound her to phallogocentric ways of writing about desire. Her treatment of the link between death and desire exemplifies the tension in her work between convention and the realisation that conventions cannot always be unquestioningly applied to female subjects. In accordance with the tradition that produced *Tristan and Isolde* and *Romeo and Juliet*, the threat of death overshadows and makes more poignant any moments of passion in Cross's poetry. Yet where in *Tristan and Isolde* marriage is the greatest threat to passion, in Cross's poetry death is far more dangerous. Commitment appears to have posed less of a threat to her than it has to many male writers who use similar themes. On the contrary, the verbs 'married' and 'wedded'

are used in a very positive way in her poetry to denote a joyous physical communion between lovers that transcends the legal definition of marriage (eg *Songs* 77, 136-37).

Cross's sonnets and other consummation poems can be read as linguistic attempts to resist the inevitable destruction of death, which we see given full rein in her rather terrifying poem of erotic violence 'Thou Shalt Not':

Woman, pausing on the marble stair,
Come down one . . . come down two;
Death is creaking through the doors of air,
And a red, red knife for you.

Woman, lying on the gleaming floor,
Warm the blade . . . cold your skin;
Love's a madman when he loves no more,
And a heart is hot with sin.

(*Songs* 103).

The end of the title 'Thou Shalt Not' is ambiguous. It could refer to murder or adultery depending upon whether it is directed at the woman or her male killer. Yet there is no suggestion that female sexual enjoyment, even extra-marital sexuality, is implicitly wrong in Cross's writing, as there is also none in Lesbia Harford's. In this they were quite radical for their period. In comparison, although Mary Gilmore in 'Down by the Sea' (Gilmore 35-36) and Mary Fullerton in 'Outcast' (*TBF* 47) could write with compassion about the mother of an illegitimate child, neither challenges the assumption that she is, at least in part, a victim of her own wrongdoing. Certainly, in Cross's poetry consummated desire has negative, even fatal consequences for women, such as death in childbirth (*Songs* 82-86), but these do not invalidate the desire itself. For Cross, the expression of desire is of utmost importance which leads her to an unconventional use of the language of Christian discourse. In 'Grief', for example, it is not the speaker's sexual activity itself that is sinful, rather it is her willingness to allow her body to be abused and exploited for temporary, insignificant pleasure and God is a grieving, sorrowful figure rather than a condemning, judgmental one:

'O woman that I made so very fair'—
The passion of his voice chained me to earth—
'Why hast thou crouched so constantly with care,
Bartered thy body for a meed of mirth?'

Answered I nought. O God, my very God,
How I have sinned! My body is a pool,
White as sweet wine, where multitudes have trod,
Sipping the cup and calling me poor fool.

Ultimately though, Cross's speakers' submission to God, and their submission to the masculine objects of her poems, are part of the same submission to patriarchal authority.

The uneasy combination of Cross's radical views on female sexual freedom, and her very conventional attitude of submission to patriarchal authority is reflected in the ambivalent reactions of many of her male critics. Unfortunately, it was easier to dismiss her poetry outright than to deal with the issues she treats. For although, according to Michael Sharkey, *Songs of Love and Life* was extremely popular, to the extent that '(Cross's) name was fashionably given to children born in subsequent years, and was even

bestowed upon a racehorse' (65), there is a marked contrast between the popular reaction to Cross's innovativeness that Sharkey describes and the dismissive reactions of male writers such as Kenneth Slessor and the Lindsays. These were based more on their personal artistic differences with Cross's de facto husband David McKee Wright (editor of the *Bulletin* Red Page between 1919 and 1926) than on the poems themselves. Cross was clearly the victim of the sexual and literary politics of her period. Her position on the literary periphery was guaranteed, not merely because she wrote of female desire, but because she was a woman and mother and because she did not live in Sydney. For example, in his autobiography *The Roaring Twenties* Jack Lindsay ridicules Cross's relationship with Wright and, in a way typical of many reviewers of women's writing, ignores any literary merit of her work extrinsic to her partner's influence. For instance,

(Wright) hated catching the train home to Glenbrook and always managed to find excuses for delay so that he just missed it. . . . He was married to Brisbane-born poetess Zora Cross who had had a brief period of fame with a series of sonnets full of sonorous terms of passion (along way after Rosetti's *House of Life*). The literary world had been highly excited to find a woman saying over and over again that she was passionate; and David had been proud to carry off the many-adjectived creature. But he still didn't want to go home. (143)

In one paragraph, this passage dismisses Cross's poetry as unoriginal, of short-lived success, repetitive and as having a limited use of language. But most significant is the fact that Lindsay dismisses her as having no lasting erotic attraction as a woman. She is the inconvenient disrupter of male mateship, as well as an impertinent claimant to the masculine territory of Poetry.

Lesbia Harford, like Cross, had to battle with the idea that marriage and domesticity are the destroyers of erotic love. Like Fullerton, she had to battle with the idea that erotic love, in leading to marriage and domesticity, is the destroyer of the capacity for psychic independence and engagement in other, more important activities. But as women writers, all three had to contend with the widespread belief that, far from being a disadvantage, marriage was a woman's destiny and the source of her greatest fulfilment and happiness, especially insofar as marriage also meant motherhood, a state which supposedly diminished the need for erotic experiences. In Harford's poetry not only marriage, but heterosexual relationships generally, come into question. Though her poems often exult in sexual pleasure and the body of a lover, very few of those dealing with heterosexual relationships express the joy so evident in the poems where a woman is the object of desire. On the contrary, many of her heterosexual poems are written from a sense of determination that is very distant from the rapture, yearning and joy expressed elsewhere. They often stress the importance of persevering with a relationship at the expense of ease of mind (eg *Poems* 123, 114). Such poems clearly contradict her belief in physical and emotional freedom. For example, the exultant tone of 'Lie-a-bed' where:

My darling lies in her soft white bed,
And she laughs at me.
Her laughter has flushed her pale cheeks with red.
Her eyes dance with glee.

(*Poems* 54)

is rarely evident in poems about male lovers (an exception is 118). Instead we see the exhaustion and pain of 'Grotesque' where the speaker tells her lover:

'Yes,
 I've hollow legs and a hollow soul and body.
 There is nothing left of me.
 You've burnt me dry.
 You
 Have
 Run
 Through all my veins in fever,
 Through all my soul in fever for
 An endless time.
 Why,
 This small body is like an empty snail shell,
 All the living soul of it
 Burnt out in lime'.

(Poems 102)

This negative physical love which is based on domination and possession of the other, and which makes excessive emotional and physical demands on the speaker's body and soul, is destructive and defiling. 'Grotesque' combines the bodily annihilation dreaded in Cross's poetry with the psychic annihilation feared in Fullerton's.

NOTES

1. E.g. complains that *The Well of Loneliness* is depraved and degenerate (18/11/29). Says of Zora Cross that 'She has been over-virile in *life* and in her *art* she is tired' (6/5/30). Claims that the explicit passion in Jean Devanny's novels makes her sick. Fullerton says instead she believes in love that is more sublime and distant from 'the jungle' (6/5/30) (ML MSS 364/16).
2. For a discussion of feminism and celibacy see Sheila Jeffries 'Spinsterhood and Celibacy' in her *The Spinster and Her Enemies, Feminism and Sexuality 1880-1930*, London: Pandora, 1985. 86-101.
3. E.g., Sonnet V in *Songs of Love and Life*, Sydney: Angus & Robertson, 1917, 5.

I give myself to you, to do whate'er
 You will with what is yours. This little hand,
 This cheek, this breast, are but a flowery land
 Where your two lips may pluck a garland fair.
 I'd have you take a rose from here, from there
 A sprig of jasmine, white and passion-fanned,
 And drop the precious wreath where I demand
 Upon the stream of my dark falling hair.
 For I account you dearer than all men,
 And bring my beauty to your waiting feet,
 As a young virgin her demure desire
 Unto the white shrine of her god again.
 For well I know our two wild souls will meet
 In incense of rich kisses chaste as fire.

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