Lola Velasco’s poetry offers the critic no immediate “hook,” that is to say, no obvious point of departure for the elaboration of a critical argument. Indeed, critics have been remarkably silent about her work. While Velasco’s poetry is not incompatible with the “essentialist” tendency inspired by José Ángel Valente, it is free from obvious stylistic debts to Valente, or to any other contemporary Spanish poet for that matter. It appears to spring, in fact, from a desire to elude classifications, alignments, and ideological alibis of any kind. The epigraph to the 2003 work *El movimiento de las flores* is from twentieth-century poet and artist Henri Michaux, best known perhaps for his experiments with mescaline:

Soy de los que aman el movimiento, el movimiento que rompe la inercia, que emborrona las líneas, que deshace las alineaciones, me libera de construcciones. Movimiento como desobediencia, como remodelación. (17)

(I am one of those who love movement, that movement that breaks inertia, that blurs lines, that undoes affiliations, liberates me from constructions. Movement as a disobedience, as a reshaping.)

This refusal of affiliations, allegiances, and stable positions, of course, could also be seen as the ultimate rhetorical move in a certain poetic (or critical) game: a way of defining one’s position while seeming to reject positionality itself. Indeed, nothing is more frequent in the critical discourse surrounding contemporary poetry than the claim that a given writer is one-of-a-kind or uniquely resistant to classification. Often the poets in question fit quite comfortably within existing trends (or are frankly derivative of better-known poets). Michaux’s self-definition (“soy de los que...”) is as a member of a group,
in implicit binary opposition to those who actually do prefer clear-cut lines of demarcation. By citing Michaux, Velasco also signals her paradoxical allegiance to this group defined by its resistance to “alineaciones.”

I am not prepared to resolve this classic aporia. Nor will I be able to avoid using Lola Velasco to put forward a critical argument of my own: that the subtlety of this poetry makes it resistant to strategies of reading that depend on an Archimedean point outside of the text for critical leverage. What makes Velasco’s work particularly difficult to define is the way it continually blurs boundaries: between the literal and the figurative, the speaker and the addressee, even between constancy and variability. Despite this impulse to subvert poetic norms, however, this poetry also resists my efforts to read it as a deconstruction of Western metaphysics or a radical revision of the traditions of lyric poetry. It is not that theory has nothing to offer here, but that the lightness of tone—the “purity”—of Velasco’s poetry seem out of proportion to any theoretical metalanguage. From one perspective, in fact, her poetry might appear tame or unthreatening, despite its intellectual depth and formal rigor. I would like to be able to argue, for example, that her poetry transgresses certain conventions of poetry by blurring the line between the literal and metaphorical planes, complicating the relations between the poetic speaker and addressee, and subjecting the reader to a constant flux of sensations. Returning to the poetry itself, however, I am struck once again by the inadequacy of this language to describe a poetry that seems so unpretentious, so insouciant about its own power to disturb customary patterns of thought.

Velasco tends to write extended sequences rather than individual lyric poems. Her first book, *La frente de la mujer oblicua*, consists of several shorter sequences, while *La cometa o las manos sobre el papel* is an extended poetic dialogue between the two characters named in the title. The more recent *Intravenus* is another sort of dialogue: a poetic sequence composed in collaboration with the poet Amalia Iglesias. (Yet another sequence, *El sueño de las piedras*, has not yet been published as of this writing.) Lola Velasco’s poetry might seem rather ethereal or even insubstantial when read in anthologies or shorter selections. This impression disappears when the works are read as major long poems.

*El movimiento de las flores* is divided into seventy untitled sections of ten lines each. What gives *El movimiento de las flores* its overall unity is an extended metaphor: the movement of the flowers (named in the title) is equivalent to the poet’s consciousness of the flux of time. This equivalence depends, in turn, on what Lakoff and Johnson view as one of the most basic structures of thought, the metaphor “people are plants” (6). This metaphor is nearly ubiquitous in human thought and in poetry, appearing in Shakespeare’s Sonnet 15 (“When I consider everything that grows”) and countless other texts. This familiarity is conducive to the development of secondary metaphors, like blood = sap. In
Velasco’s treatment, the natural world, complete with bees, water, and sunlight, merges with a specifically human consciousness of time and language. The metaphorical and the literal planes of discourse, then, exist in a fluid, almost undifferentiated continuum.

This uncertainty is also evident at the level of poetic discourse. The speaker of these poems adopts an innocent, almost naive attitude at times. But who is this speaker anyway? The answer is rarely unambiguous:

Aguantaremos trombas de agua.
Otra vez,
aquellas confidencias tan frágiles.
en el invernadero
de la noche.
Así se venció la música
de los rayos.
Se tendieron,
y parecían luces
que todo lo ven. (19)

(We will withstand cloudbursts.
Once again
those too-fragile secrets
in the greenhouse
of night.
That is the way the music of the lightning
was vanquished.
They lay down,
and seemed to be lights
seeing everything.)

This section seems to be spoken by the flowers themselves, and the attribution of this utterance to them helps to explain the childlike innocence of the tone. It is easy to picture them suffering through rainstorms and exchanging their fragile confidences in the greenhouse of night. It would be a mistake, however, to jump to the conclusion that the entire book has a consistently defined speaker: at times, the flowers are referred to in the third person, or are the most probable addressees. Neither the yo nor the tú, in fact, maintains a consistent identity from poem to poem. As Marta López-Luaces has pointed out, with great critical acumen, Velasco nearly always complicates the relation between the poetic speaker and her addressee:

En la poesía de Lola Velasco se transgrede la representación habitual el tú habitualmente pasivo del poema lírico, siempre a la espera de que un “yo,” un sujeto activo, le imponga, le asigne, un significado. Velasco escribe desde una primera persona, desde un yo que no delimita, ni impone un significado al “otro” sino que reconstruye un yo que también es el “otro” y viceversa. De tal modo transforma,
Lola Velasco’s El movimiento de las flores

por metonimia, el cuerpo amado en cuerpo poético, el cuerpo como nombre común al que se le pueden dar múltiples significados. (‘Porque la tradición...’)

In Lola Velasco’s poetry there is a transgression of the representation of the habitually passive you of the lyric poem, which is always waiting for an “I,” an active subject, to impose or assign a signified. Velasco writes from a first person, from an I, that does not limit or impose a signified on the “other” but rather reconstructs an I that is also an “other,” and vice-versa. In this way she transforms, by metonymy, the beloved body into a poetic body, the body as a common noun that can be given multiple signifieds.

In a previous work, La cometa o las manos sobre el papel, Velasco writes a dialogue between two discrete speaking subjects, separated into clearly-labelled sections: “habla la cometa” and “hablan las manos.” In El movimiento de las flores, by contrast, it is difficult to assign any utterance to any given speaker with any degree of certainty. This generalized ambiguity obviously complicates any possible interpretation of the text, since the reader cannot depend on his or her ability to assign utterances to a unified subject of enunciation.

This indeterminacy, nevertheless, provides a key to the interpretation of the work: taking a clue from the Michaux epigraph, we might conclude that the poet’s aim is to avoid the inertia that comes from defining reality through a stable system of signs. In the following example, even the future, which normally would be seen as realm of radical uncertainty, becomes fossilized before the fact:

Hacia delante
ya se vislumbra
el esqueleto fosilizado
del futuro.
Cuando avanzo,
retrocedo.
En sus pétalos eternos,
el presente indomable.
Cada movimiento revela
un deseo de inercia. (29)

(Up ahead
I can already glimpse
the fossilized skeleton
of the future.
When I advance,
I fall backwards.
In their eternal petals,
the untameable present.
Each movement reveals
a desire for inertia.)
Inertia, of course, is not only the tendency of objects at rest to remain at rest, but also the tendency of moving objects to remain in motion. The conclusion of this poem, then, is ambiguous: does it speak of a desire to remain in motion, or to come to a stopping point?

There is a similar oscillation in the tone of this sequence, which alternates between an aphoristic, almost sententious desire to state abstract truths, and a more tentative, inconclusive tone. Many sections of *El movimiento de las flores* end with a definitive-sounding maxim: “Si nos separan, envejecemos” (If they separate us, we grow old) (21). “Y cuando estés a oscuras, / seré la curva / que desvíe la luz hacia ti” (And when you are in the darkness / I will be the curve / that deflects the light toward you) (47). “Perfecta, / ahora, / en su hexágono de miel” (Perfect, now, in its hexagon of honey) (76). These more conclusive endings serve to stop the movement of the poem in order to extract a meaning or a message, albeit temporarily. Even when their tone sounds quite assured, their interpretation is not necessarily automatic. Other sections end with enigmatic images that leave the reader somewhat suspended and thus further frustrate the desire for closure: “La incertidumbre / es un sonido / que no está entero” (Uncertainty is a sound that is not whole) (41). “El aliento del cazador / yacía en el círculo de agua” (The hunter’s breath lay in the circle of water) (61).

The binary opposition between movement and stasis in Velasco’s poetry entails an acute consciousness of poetry as an art form moving through time. While movement is seen to be preferable to stasis, yet the desire for order and regularity remains fairly strong. The rhythm of the sequence itself follows a fairly regular—although subtly varied—pattern. The ten-line stanzas tend to fall into three or four rhythmic phrases. The following example, for example, might be divided into three units:

[1] Volverá el crudo invierno,
la realidad
oculta
en su rotación de emociones.

[2] Tu corazón de abeja,
libre,
en su herida prodigiosa.

del vuelo
y diré que estuve allí. (65)

([1] The harsh winter will return,
reality
hidden
in its rotation of emotions.

[2] Your bee’s heart,
free,
in its prodigious wound.

[3] I will look toward the side
of flight
and say that I was there.)

Three sentences can be divided up among ten lines in variable combinations of lines: 4 3 3; 3 4 3; 3 3 4; etc. The verse form thus lends itself to seemingly infinite variability within the constant 10-line stanza. No two poems have the same rhythm, yet the three phrase structure repeats itself enough so that one feels a sense of rhythmic coherence in the structure as a whole.

In their thematic development, likewise, the individual sections of the sequence tend to present similar but never identical ideas. One could not go wrong emphasizing either the unity of the underlying concept or the variability of the individual treatments. To sum up the book in one or two sections might not do justice to this variability, yet this variability is ultimately finite. The rhythmic movement of the stanzas is, in fact, inseparable from this thematic variation, since the central poetic problem of *El movimiento de las flores* is the oscillation between movement and stasis. The flowers, rooted in a single location, never stop moving. The very idea of movement, of course, entails both a spatial and temporal dimension. Each individual poem (or stanza of the long poem) is another view of the flowers in this continual yet ever-changing relationship to space and time.

It is perhaps inevitable that this poetry will also comment on its own movement in metapoetic terms. The following poem, for example, speaks to the relationship between two dimensions of language, *writing* and *song*:

Escucha
la música cuadriculada
de los pulmones,
palabras
que se cruzan
como líneas
para apresar
el canto
incendiario
de tu vuelo. (45)

(Listen
to the squared music
of the lungs,
words
crossing
like lines
to capture
the incendiary
song
of your flight.)
The images of “música cuadriculada” and “líneas / que se cruzan” suggest graph paper (such as that found in student notebooks sold in Spain). The verbal music of words on the page attempts to capture another kind of song. The poem seems to contrast a more definable geometric pattern with the transcendent flight of an unspecified addressee: “el canto incendiario / de tu vuelo.” This contrast between rationality and transcendent music, however, is complicated by the suggestion that these squares are already musical. They are already vocalized as well, since they are the product of the writer’s lungs as well as of her pen. The complexity here does not arise from the use of unfamiliar comparisons but from the subtle deployment of familiar metaphors. *Song*, *fire*, and *flight*, for example, are all conventional metaphors for poetic inspiration; the concept of *capturing* (“apresar”), likewise, is normally associated with the effort to express the inefable.

Another set of familiar metaphors underlies this metapoetic text:

> El lenguaje construye tumbas
donde quedarse.
> Hombro con hombro,
también tú y yo nos perderemos
en lo infinitamente pequeño.
> No busques
la verdadera identidad de las cosas
en las palabras,
sino en los labios
que las pronuncian. (82)

(Language constructs tombs in which to remain.
Shoulder to shoulder you and I also will get lost in the infinitely small.
Don’t seek the true identity of things in words but in the lips that pronounce them.)

This poem combines two related suspicions about language, both of them deeply rooted in the literary tradition: language is a way of monumentalizing or preserving human life, but by the same token it constrains and limits: a monument is also a tomb. The final sentence of the poem revisits the idea that language is inherently deceptive; its authenticity is to be found only in the presence of the speaking subject, as in Claudio Rodríguez’s “Voz sin pérdida”:

> He oído y creído en muchas voces
aunque no en las palabras.
He creido en los labios
pero no en el beso. (285).

(I have heard and believed many voices
but not the words.
I have believed in lips
but not in the kiss.)

The subtle use of these relatively familiar metaphors makes Velasco’s poetry simultaneously accessible, since the metaphors themselves belong to a common stock, and difficult, since their actual deployment quickly becomes quite complex. In fact, this combination of simplicity and complexity is at the core of her achievement as a poet. The characteristics that have emerged in this reading of El movimiento de las flores include the following:

1) A slippage between metaphorical and literal meaning.
2) A related indeterminacy in the identities of speaker and addressee; a fluid relation between the yo and the tú.
3) An oscillation between movement and stasis.
4) A tone that is alternately apodictic and uncertain.
5) A rhythmic pattern that is regular, yet continually varied.
6) An ambivalence toward language itself: language lends itself both to constant motility and to the stasis of fixed meanings.
7) A use of metaphors that are at once familiar and defamiliarized, resulting in a style that is both accessible and intellectually complex.

Almost any generalization that could be made about El movimiento de las flores, then, must be expressed in the form of a binary opposition. Not surprisingly, the unsigned introduction to the book also emphasizes such oppositions: “En El movimiento de las flores se reconocen lo universal y lo concreto, la sencillez y la profundidad, la física y la metafísica, lo fugaz y lo permanente. Porque en él se resume la contradicción de la vida” (In The Movement of the Flowers there is a recognition of the universal and the concrete, simplicity and complexity, the fleeting and the permanent) (12). Considered together, these features are all manifestations of a single poetic problem: the impossible urge to remain in constant motion, to avoid fixed patterns, while at the same time creating a long, cohesive poem.

These contradictions and tensions at the heart of Velasco’s project make it difficult to classify her in the current literary climate. Her textual strategies do not seem as radical or transgressive as those of Henri Michaux or Concha García. She does not aspire, either, to the sort of hieratic authority and cultural prestige that Valente achieved in his later years. On the other hand, she is definitely at the opposite pole from the autobiographical tendencies of the “poetry of experience.” As I suggested at the beginning of this chapter, she
does not provide easy fodder for critical interpretation. Contemporary criticism favors projects that can be interpreted according to “hooks”: Leopoldo María Panero’s poetic madness, or Ana Rossetti’s ostentatious subversion of gender roles, for example, offer ready-made entries into critical discourse. Other poets become privileged objects of study by virtue of their exemplary status as leaders of particular tendencies. Velasco’s poetry, in contrast, has a sort of “purity” that makes it stubbornly resistant to readings driven by particular ideological agendas. There is probably no point in opposing such “instrumental” readings. The opposition to ideology is itself ideological, and critics who complain about the subordination of literary concerns to other questions have their own axe to grind. What is striking, nevertheless, is the muteness of criticism in the face of works that do not lend themselves to obvious uses.

I would like to argue that Lola Velasco deconstructs Western metaphysics, or employs écriture féminine, or brings to bear a specifically lesbian perspective on the act of poetic creation. I could imagine another critic making such arguments, but I feel I would be guilty of critical overreaching in doing so myself. While Velasco’s project is an aesthetically ambitious one, it is also eminently modest—unpretentious—in its claims for itself. Hence a heavy-handed critical approach would be tactless, placing the emphasis where it does not belong. Lola Velasco, in other words, is not the sort of poet about whom one would want to make inflated claims, since her poetry reclaims a space for itself by rejecting inflationary rhetoric.

What does the case of Lola Velasco tell us about the state of poetry at the beginning of the twenty-first century? For me, the lesson is that literary modernism, characterized by aesthetic ambition, formal rigor, and intellectual complexity, is still a viable mode for writing poetry, and can be accomplished with a sort of modesty and tact that deflates our preconceptions about the inherent pretentiousness of the High Modernist mode. Her work is more reminiscent of the great French avant-garde poet Pierre Reverdy than of the visionary mode of Rilke or the historical sweep of Neruda. It is perhaps in this more unassuming mode, perhaps, that modern poetry survives at the beginning of the twentieth century.

Note

1 I borrow this concept from Charles Bernstein’s similar remark about the poetry of Barbara Guest.