

**The Emancipation of Women and the Cultural
Elite at the Turn of the Twentieth Century:
The Case of Amy Lowell (1874–1925)**

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Declaration

I declare that this thesis has not been submitted as an exercise for a degree at this or any other university and that it is entirely my own work.

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Anna Lombardo

Summary

Using the case study of American poet Amy Lowell (1874-1925), this thesis explores the path Lowell chose to develop her narrative identity and find her own voice in the male-dominated art world at the turn of the twentieth century. It also illuminates the effects of the performances of Italian actress Eleonora Duse (1858-1924) on Lowell's artistic and cultural emancipation, and how Lowell negotiated her female desires in the face of the constraints of her time. Overall, this thesis provides novel insights into the rediscovery of lost female voices while exploring Lowell's share in the cultural debates of her time.

Lowell's exclusion from literary history soon after her death in 1925 and her rediscovery over half a century later provide a lens through which to reconsider her work. Feminist critics, from Lilian Faderman in the 1980s to Melissa Bradshaw (whose most recent work on Lowell was published in 2011), have often been guided in their debates by an arguably prejudicial queer theory perspective invited by the theme of lesbian desire in Lowell's love lyrics. In spite of Lowell's active participation in literary and academic fields during her lifetime, her own poetry and criticism have seen little substantial feminist discussion and there have been relatively few critical studies of her work. A kind of critical tunnel vision seems to have obsessed both male and female critics, who were intent on digging into Lowell's private life to find evidence of her sexuality reflected in her poems. This may explain why other aspects of her poetical and critical thought have been neglected.

Exploring both her poetic and critical achievements, this case study addresses aspects of Amy Lowell's life and work that remain insufficiently considered in feminist studies. Lowell's struggle to find her poetical voice and professional place in the arts is re-evaluated in light of the first wave of feminism in order to ascertain how she incorporated ideas of the New Woman that were quickly spreading throughout North America. Ultimately, this thesis explores to what extent Lowell's vision of the poet's role and poetry allowed her the opportunity to craft a uniquely feminist perspective that embraced artistic free-

dom and unveiled the status of female artists as second-class citizens in artistic circles.

In discussing the controversial critical reception of Lowell in literary history, this thesis also questions feminist critiques that narrowly categorise writers according to their gender or sexual orientation. It is imperative to consider Lowell's resistance to the various labels she received—feminist, lesbian, queer—when assessing her work and her struggle to popularise *vers libre* and Imagism among her American readers.

This thesis employs several multidisciplinary investigative and analytical tools, borrowing from both literary criticism and gender studies, to examine Lowell's texts and her active role in the cultural elite of her time, while also acknowledging wider theoretical debates regarding the role of gender, theatre, and poetry in this period, the early decades of the twentieth century. In weaving these strands together, this thesis argues that separating Amy Lowell from her claim to the right to explore every nuance of her womanhood is to read her work in fragments; it is to diminish her experiences as a woman and a female artist at the turn of the twentieth century, and thereby devalues her legacy and its relevance for women's ongoing struggle for equality.

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Introduction

At the turn of the twentieth century, women who wished to defy convention and establish an active role in society had to forge their own paths and both overtly and covertly challenge the rigid, patriarchal social structures and moral codes to which they were expected to conform. Their history is a complex one; their efforts are often misrepresented or even forgotten, and we are consequently left with an incomplete story. This thesis emerges from an interest in a literary studies approach to the exploration of marginalisation and gender issues in feminist debate. Written in the context of feminist studies dating back to the 1970s and 1980s that strove to retrieve lost female voices, it aims to offer fresh perspectives on the artistic career of the American poet, Amy Lowell (1874-1925), and the path she followed in order to assert her place in the artistic world in spite of the constraints working against her and other female artists at the time. Exploring the individual path she chose, which was admittedly affected by her culturally and financially privileged social position and did not include active involvement in the feminist movement, the thesis will also address the paucity of studies on Lowell's poetry and criticism.

This thesis will explore the extent to which certain influences that led to her artistic and cultural emancipation, such as poetry and the performances of the Italian actress Eleonora Duse (1858-1924), affected Lowell's growth. These influences both informed her vision of womanhood and encouraged her development of a narrative identity through poetic ideology and practice, giving her the means to speak for herself and other silenced women and to construct a love discourse through which she could negotiate her alleged lesbianism.

Lowell was a celebrity during her lifetime, but after her death in May 1925, she was dismissed from literary history and many male critics quickly focused on her physical appearance and lifestyle at the expense of careful critical consideration of her work. Both her marginalisation and subsequent rediscovery by feminist critics in the 1970s and 1980s warrant investigation, par-

ticularly in light of Mary E. Galvin's denunciation in *Queer Poetics: Five Modernist Women Writers* of the tendency to read 'women's poetry as encoded celebrations and explorations of female sexuality.'¹

Lowell's exclusion from and inclusion in literary history will serve as a lens through which to explore her dismissal and her precarious position as a lesbian poet in the context of feminist debate. The few available critical studies on Lowell, conducted primarily by American feminist critics and scholars, focus on Lowell's alleged lesbianism. They consequently miss other aspects of her poetry and her contribution to the cultural debate of the time. This thesis will explore those aspects of Lowell that remain in the shadows, even in feminist studies, by investigating both her poetic and critical achievements. Lowell's discovery of her literary vocation at the age of twenty-eight pushed her into the fight for recognition of women's authorship in literary culture and made her an avid defender of poetry. The study of Lowell's struggle to find her own voice in a male-oriented art world also raises the question of whether she embraced the ideas of the New Woman, which flourished in North America during the first wave of feminism, despite her lack of involvement in the movement.

This thesis explores the limitations and constraints faced by Lowell during her lifetime and their relevance to her life and career. A detailed analysis of the feminist movement or the relationship between the avant-garde and mass-culture of Lowell's time is beyond the scope of this study. Instead, a careful look at Lowell's artistic progress, which helped her to express her female desires, reveals her awareness of the stereotypes and constraints which limited her right to inhabit the literary world, and led to the strategies she adopted in order to free herself. Ultimately, Lowell's search for her own poetic voice to express her female desires also reveals a claim to citizenship in the art world. From such perspectives, this thesis also questions Lowell's inclusion in feminist studies. A rereading of selected work from Lowell's poetical and critical output, will serve to explore her active role in culture, her vision of sisterhood, her love discourse, and cast light on those aspects often overshadowed in the

¹ Galvin, Mary E. *Queer Poetics: Five Modernist Women Writers*. Westport: Praeger Publishers, 1999. pp. 31-32. Hereafter: *Queer Poetics*. Galvin also investigates the positions of Emily Dickinson, Gertrude Stein, Mina Loy, Djuna Barnes, and H.D. in literary history from a queer perspective.

feminist debate.

There are three stages to this thesis. The first outlines the stereotypes and prejudices of the period in which Lowell was writing, and provides a profile of her life and career with insights into her critical reception. The second stage, developed in two chapters, considers new trends in theatre, specifically those embodied by Lowell's living muse, Eleonora Duse. Lowell's artistic choice to re-narrate herself through poetry will be reconsidered by rereading some of her poems in the light of Duse's performances. The third stage, developed in five chapters, will discuss Lowell's contribution to the artistic and cultural life of her time through her articles and essays and her use of irony to mock prejudices about female creativity. It will also explore whether the use of gendered and ungendered 'I's in her poems helped her to develop her love discourse in order to confront her own sexuality, transcend gender binary, or both. Her literary identity will also be questioned in view of the position and role of the poet for which she advocated.

The conceptual framework of this thesis is largely informed by feminist critics and scholars, including Sandra M. Gilbert, Susan Gubar, Melissa Bradshaw, Bonnie Zimmerman, Celeste Schenk, Cheryl Walker, Mary E. Galvin, and Julia Kristeva. These critics have provided a new framework for understanding how female artists operated despite constraints, and will help shed light on what it meant to be a female artist carving out her own identity at the turn of the century.

0.1. Social and Cultural Context: The Cultural Constraints and Limitations Endured by Women at the Turn of the Twentieth Century

Amy Lowell was born in 1874, nine years after the American Civil War ended, when the country was engaging in economic and political efforts to establish its position internationally. She lived in a time that witnessed unprecedented political, technological, scientific, and artistic change in the Western world. New means and increased ease of transportation by rail, road, and air reduced physical distance and emotional isolation. For those living in the era, the advent of

such new technologies transformed both the experiences of everyday life and perceptions about the world.

Lowell was particularly enthusiastic about these changes; she expressed her interest in transportation from a young age, as evidenced by an early entry in her diary on January 3, 1889: 'I saw an ELECTRIC car [underlined and capitalised in the original] for the first time today.'² For her fifteenth birthday, she reported enthusiastically in her journal, 'Oh joy! Cousin Mary gave me 'Capturing a Locomotive' (February 9).³ After having seen a tandem tricycle with two men on it, she depicted them in her diary on February 24, and on March 11, she notes, 'Anna let me drive her buggy.'⁴ This interest of hers influenced her poetry as well. In her well known poem, 'The Sisters,' published in 1922, her child-like enthusiasm for such new means of transportations shines through, used by Lowell to acknowledge the change of the times and to emphasise her difference from her 'poetic Sisters.'⁵

The concept of 'movement' itself also altered attitudes, particularly of middle and upper-class women who were now presented with new opportunities to enrich their lives. Women now had opportunities to share the spaces that had previously been forbidden to them by the rigid codes of male-oriented society. Educational trips around Europe, rare for women of previous generations, became more common.⁶ For instance, starting at the age of six, Lowell travelled with her parents, through the United States and Europe. In 1882, she spent many months touring Northern Europe and Egypt by herself as part of the educational tours that were considered relevant for a girl of her social status. Two of Lowell's poet friends, Hilda Doolittle (H.D.) (1886-1961) and Edna Vincent St. Millay (1892-1950), similarly completed their 'education' with long tours around Europe, though not at as early an age as Lowell. Lowell's belief in the benefits of travelling in general is emphasised in one of

² Lowell, Amy. Journals. 1889-1890. Cambridge (MA): Houghton Library, MS Lowell 38 (1).

³ Pittenger, William. *Capturing a Locomotive: A History of Secret Service in the Late War*. Washington: The National Tribune, 1885.

⁴ In her adult life, she used to drive her cars and, according to her biographers, her problems with her hernia which caused her health troubles, originated from her effort to lift her car when one day, by accident, it went off the road.

⁵ The reference here is to Sappho, Emily Dickinson and Elizabeth Barrett Browning, the three poets she focused on in the poem 'The Sisters.' This poem will be examined in Chapter Five.

⁶ See in particular Chapters 4 and 7 in Wiesner-Hanks, E. Merry. *Gender in History: Global Perspective*. 2nd ed. London: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011.

her school essays which was titled ‘Is travel a better education than school life?’ Her answer was yes.⁷

At the turn of the twentieth century, new ideas also moved more quickly, leading to new questions, paths and ways of seeing; such ideas included Einstein’s theory of relativity, Madame Curie’s discovery of radium, Havelock Ellis’s study of sexuality, Freud’s psychoanalysis,⁸ Pavlov’s behavioural studies, and the discovery of the first genetic map. Across many fields, people also began to question traditional values and roles regarding women that were once deemed incontestable. This questioning developed into the female suffrage movement which prosecuted the battle for equal rights.⁹ Female suffrage bridged the period from the end of the nineteenth century to the beginning of twentieth century. As many feminist scholars argue, it aimed to subvert the idea of the ‘maternal submissive woman’ devoted to her race, country and family, which had confined women in the restricted ‘realm’ of their houses, limiting their experiences and the fulfilment of their potential.

According to Merry E. Wiesner-Hanks in *Gender in History: Global Perspectives*, although the issues raised by the first wave of feminism were international, the circulation of new ideas and demands for social change and equal rights ‘took different paths and forms in different parts of the world.’¹⁰ In the United States and the British Isles, the first wave of the women’s movement at the turn of the nineteenth century concentrated on the right to vote, while in Continental Europe, it also focused on child welfare and education for better access to the labour market.

The growing presence of women in the labour market during and after World War I, and their increasing participation in education, politics, and culture developed fertile ground for women to realise their strength and potential.¹¹ These new territories, which women could now inhabit, contradicted the

⁷ Vivid impressions of her tours are retraceable in Amy Lowell’s notebook. Cambridge (MA): Houghton Library, MS Lowell 38 10.5. p. 26.

⁸ Sigmund Freud delivered his first lectures in U.S. in 1909. His theories of psychoanalysis, in particular, his dream interpretation, were the object of many articles and discussion in the society of the time.

⁹ The first American wave of feminism began with the Seneca Fall Convention in New York in 1848.

¹⁰ Wiesner-Hanks, Merry E. *Gender in History: Global Perspectives*. 2nd ed. London: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011. p.156. Hereafter: *Gender in History*. The fourth chapter of this book is devoted to ‘Ideas, Ideals, Norms and Laws.’ pp. 83-100. See also Freedman, E. B. *The Essential Feminist Reader*. New York: The Modern Library, 2007. pp. 168-174.

¹¹ *Gender in History* provides an interesting bibliography on the contradictory aspects of gender division in the labour market linked with economic life, in the third chapter (pp. 78-82). For the woman’s eternal

notion that domestic space was the only safe and significant space for women—a contradiction that feminists and certain male writers started to highlight. In Henrik Ibsen's 1879 play *A Doll's House*, for example, the house was no longer considered a place of peace and joy but one of seclusion and loneliness experienced by the protagonist Nora.¹²

Yet the growing female presence in the public sphere was still perceived as a threat to motherhood. The claim of the right to a career was feared as a negative 'distraction' for young women from their 'natural scope,' the care of the family. According to Amy Kaplan in 'Manifest Domesticity' within *American Literature*, the prevailing thought in the United States of America, since before the Civil War, continued to promote the idea of women as a steady point of contact *between* the separate public and private worlds, excluded from the public one.¹³ It is understandable, then, that demands from the feminist movement to further participate in the public sphere were considered dangerous because they opened up a door for women to defy their tradition and their allocated role.

Many members of women's clubs began to echo these demands. These were groups convened by female intellectuals that flourished in both Continental Europe and the United States at the turn of the twentieth century.¹⁴ Inspired by the two first organizations of their kind, established early in 1868 (Soros and the New England Woman's Club), new literary women's circles began to blossom throughout the States. In *The Lively Audience: A Social History of the Visual and Performing Arts in America, 1890-1950*, Russell Lynes (1910-1991) confirms that at the turn of the twentieth century, culture became 'newly fashionable with groups of ladies, and one of the forms the struggle took was organised clubs for the discussion of what the ladies read.'¹⁵ They focused initially on the investigation of women's position in the arts and on the promotion

dilemma to follow her career or her 'natural' role of caretaker, see also Friedman, Betty. *The Feminine Mystique*. 5th ed. London: Penguin Modern Classic Books, 2010.

¹² Ibsen's work received considerable criticism but nonetheless influenced the tastes of the new generations of playwrights and actors. The Italian actress Eleonora Duse was one of the first who included Ibsen's play in her repertoire in 1891, with great success.

¹³ Kaplan, Amy. 'Manifest Domesticity.' *American Literature* 70.3 (1998): pp. 581-606.

¹⁴ In 1889, in the United States, a General Federation of Women's clubs was formed to give cohesion to the women's efforts in cultural and civic fields and put together the many cultural circles, ladies library's associations and other women's clubs of the country. See Winter, Alice Ames. 'The Clubwoman as Feminist.' *North American Review* 214 (1921): pp. 636-640.

¹⁵ Lynes, Russell. *The Lively Audience: A Social History of the Visual and Performing Arts in America, 1890-1950*. New York: Harper & Row, 1985. pp. 7-8. Hereafter: *The Lively Audience*.

of female participation in society and the arts.¹⁶ In ‘Manifest Domesticity,’ Kaplan adds that women’s clubs provided a foundation for many white upper-class women to explore and negotiate their Victorian identities without a marked political involvement (340-360).

Generally, women’s clubs had elitist features, as the majority of the participants were wives and/or sisters of influential and wealthy members of society (bankers, judges, senators). Literary clubs financed themselves through an annual fee; they used to meet once or twice a month in the houses of their members or in public places—primarily restaurants, churches, libraries or hotels—to discuss papers about plays or novels that they themselves had researched or written. Men were not usually admitted during the discussion sessions, although they were frequently included in the dinners that followed most of the sessions. The activities of these literary clubs helped women to organise themselves and raise female consciousness, leading to an awakening of dissatisfaction with their domestic role. This, in turn, led to the gradual involvement in the suffrage movement of many of their members, which brought more attention to the limited role of female in the public sphere. In *The Clubwoman as feminist. True Womanhood Redefined. 1890-1950*, Karen J. Blair highlights this shift in interest, acknowledging that these literary female clubs were particularly ‘useful for women in examining their place in society.’¹⁷

In the first decades of the twentieth century, although culture had been the prominent issue for the first two women’s clubs, Sorosis and NEWC, other topics began to enter into discussions in these female circles. These included female apparel, career and education, infant mortality, economic independence, and the right of a woman to keep her maiden name after her marriage. Among the new issues of the papers discussed in these clubs, Blair recorded the following: ‘The New Woman,’ ‘John Stuart Mill,’ ‘Margaret Fuller,’ ‘Legal Status for Women,’ ‘Women’s work in Agriculture’ (69).

¹⁶ Sorosis was founded by the English journalist Jane Cunningham Croly, whose family emigrated to the State of New York in 1841, and was very influential in New York, while the NEWC was formed in Boston by Caroline Severance, wife of banker and reformer Theodor Severance, in 1868, just six years before Lowell’s birth.

¹⁷ Blair, J. Karen. *The Clubwoman as Feminist: True Womanhood Redefined. 1868-1914*. New York: Holmes & Meier, 1980. p. 28. Beside the extensive bibliography, Blair’s book enlightens how these women’s clubs, in their differences, were not estranged from feminism.

The public visibility these clubs acquired over the years was evident from the attention given to them, not only by local and national newspapers (which usually offered more details about their ‘dresses’ or their refreshment than the topics discussed during their sessions), but more so by prominent contemporary writers. Henry James’s 1886 novel *The Bostonians*, for example, offers a satire of such clubs and of feminists in general. Their meetings are presented as a rendezvous ‘of witches and wizards, mediums, and spirit-rappers, and roaring radicals.’¹⁸

The recognition of these female literary clubs outside their female circles increased greatly when the female literary clubs started to focus on broader issues and ask prominent intellectual women, external to the clubs, to lecture on various issues, such as poetry, abortion, female education, religion or labour’s female condition. Well-known writers, poets, philosophers and reformers willingly travelled all around the country delivering speeches. In Greenwich Village, for example, where various women’s clubs were active on several different fronts, many accomplished women, from Harriet Monroe, (editor of *Poetry: A Magazine of Verse*) to the poets Eunice Tiejens and Jessie Rittenhouse, and the anarchist-activist Emma Goldman, were often invited to talk. Lowell, although not overtly engaged in the feminist movement, was invited to read and discuss poetry by Heterodoxy, one of the most radical clubs in Greenwich Village, New York.¹⁹ Some of Heterodoxy’s members were strong fighters for the suffrage cause, such as the social activist Crystal Eastman (1881-1928), the lawyer Inez Milholland (1886-1916),²⁰ and the social worker Doris Stevens (1892-1963) who authored *Jailed for Freedom*. Over half of the members sustained themselves through their intellectual and professional jobs: they were writers, actresses, playwrights, press agents, physicians, psycholo-

¹⁸ James, Henry. *The Bostonians*. London: Seven Treasure Publications, 2009. p. 3. According to Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, in his novel James, as well, ‘depicted the escalation in the battle of the sexes that marked the progress of the nineteenth century.’ Gilbert, Sandra M. and Gubar, Susan. *No Man’s Land: The Place of the Woman Writer in the Twentieth Century. Volume One: The War of the Words*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988. pp. 25-80.

¹⁹ Heterodoxy, founded in 1912, operated until the early years of World War II. Judith Schwarz offers a brief account of Lowell’s reading during one of the meetings of Heterodoxy in *Radical Feminists of Heterodoxy, Greenwich Village. 1912-1940*. Norwich (VT): New Victoria Publishers, 1986. pp. 19-22.

²⁰ Edna St. Vincent Millay in 1923 married Milholland’s widower, and her collection *The Buck in the Snow* (1928) contains a poem dedicated to Milholland (‘To Inez Milholland’).

gists, and educators.²¹ Among Heterodoxy's members, were the feminist writer Charlotte Perkins Gilman and the playwright Susan Glaspell.²²

The meetings of these literary clubs helped women develop valuable relationships with other women and give each other support—including support with regard to their creative works. The poet and musician Grace Hazard Conkling (1878-1958), for example, encountered Lowell in 1919 during a meeting held by the New England Poetry Club (based in Boston) of which Lowell was a member. Conkling subsequently became a frequent guest in Lowell's house and received steady encouragement from the Bostonian poet not only in regards to her own poetry, but also in regard to that of her young daughter Hilda. Lowell, in fact, willingly wrote the introduction to her daughter's first poetical collection, and assessed both their works in her long satirical poem *A Critical Fable*.²³ The meetings of these literary clubs did not only serve as social gathering places and as professional support, but also had significant implications within the personal lives of many of the women. Lowell, for instance, met the actress Ada Russell, who later became her life companion, during a meeting of a lunch club of Boston Ladies in 1912 where Russell was a guest of honour.

Despite the growing awareness and critique of the limited female role in society within these women's clubs, many confined their activities to the cultural sphere in order to not alienate women who wanted to be less politically involved. Regardless of the level of involvement of each literary club in the political struggle, the few critical studies on women's clubs highlight that they were places where women learned, for example, how to self-promote, how to deliver public speeches more confidently, how to review and be reviewed by friends, and how to deal with editors, who were generally male. One other significant result of these meetings was to relieve women of their household isolation. Interestingly, it opened up a dynamic relationship between different social classes although not between races, given that membership was exclusively

²¹ Most of the members of Heterodoxy, were never married and some were overtly lesbians. This challenged traditional society.

²² For a detailed history of the lives of Heterodoxy's members, see Schwarz Judith. *Radical Feminists of Heterodoxy, Greenwich Village. 1912-1940*. Norwich (VT): New Victoria Publishers, 1986. Glaspell founded, with her husband, the Provincetown Playhouse, which produced her plays including *Suppressed Desires* (1915), a satire about the new trend of psychoanalysis, and *The Verge* (1921), one of the first feminist plays.

²³ This pamphlet will be discussed in Chapter Four of this study.

granted to white women. In terms of media coverage, this overshadowed the feminist goals of certain literary clubs. For example, the May 1912 edition of *The New York Times* devoted more than ten pages to pictures and accounts of the suffragist parade. However, the anonymous journalist, estimating the number of participants at 10,000, focused on the social heterogeneity: ‘There were women who work with their heads and women who work with their hands and women who never work at all. And they all marched for suffrage.’²⁴ Despite the increasing numbers of participants in their parades, the suffragette movement, as well as the women’s clubs, and those women who wanted to explore their own creativity, were in fact surrounded by numerous prejudices based on an entrenched hierarchical conception of society where women could not have important roles and decision-making was considered inappropriate for them.

Amy Lowell’s critical reception, during her lifetime and after her death, was based on many of these stereotypes, especially that women were not considered fit to have professional creative jobs or to speak in public. Soon after her father died, in 1900, Lowell made her first public speech, pleading the case of a young, unemployed librarian. According to S. Foster Damon, her own family was embarrassed by her audacity, not because she supported the librarian but because she dared to speak in public; only the male members of her family had that privilege.²⁵ In his biography, *Amy Lowell: Portrait of the Poet in Her Time*, Horace Gregory used this example to emphasise Lowell’s determination to command. Lowell’s speech, however, resulted in her election to the executive and library committees of the Brookline Education Society, and Gregory comments that ‘she had taken over duties that would have fallen into her father’s hands had he been alive.’²⁶

Another transformation that developed a more open, innovative space for intellectual and artistic women to express their potential was brought about by the web rotary printing press, invented in 1863. Towards the end of the

²⁴ ‘Suffrage Army Out on Parade.’ *New York Times*. May 5 1912: p. 1.

²⁵ Damon, S. Foster. *Amy Lowell: A chronicle, with Extracts from Her Letters*. Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1935. pp. 143-144. Hereafter: *Amy Lowell: A Chronicle*.

²⁶ Gregory, Horace. *Amy Lowell: Portrait of the Poet in Her Time*. New York: Libraries Press Freeport, 1969. p.36. Hereafter: *Amy Lowell: Portrait of the Poet*. Gregory was a scholar and a poet; his lyrics often focused on the inequalities constructed by the capitalistic system. He first met Lowell during one of her readings when he was a student at the University of Wisconsin; he had several meetings at her house, during which he sought advice for his poetry. Gregory married the poet Marya Zaturenska, who had emigrated to the USA from Russia when she was eight years old.

nineteenth century, the reduced costs of printing increased the population of readers and further enabled the flourishing of the publishing industry. Popular periodicals, books, and magazines circulated widely, reaching across more of the social strata.²⁷ The simultaneous improvement in education, and the opening of many schools, vocational and non-vocational, also for girls, increased not only the number of female readers but also the number of those who wished to write in a more professional way. At the turn of the twentieth century, women writers had become increasingly cognisant of their literary needs, and that, in general, society did not acknowledge them and did not offer them enough opportunity to fulfil them. The women who did succeed with their pens and were published in local and national newspapers still faced inequality (their work was less paid, for example). They also encountered societal prejudices, which sought to relegate hide the majority of them to the shadows. Most of the articles written by women were, in fact, published in a manner which withheld the sex of the writer —frequently signed with their initials only or without any signature at all.²⁸

In *The Lively Audience*, Lynes observes that at the turn of the century the publication of magazines and newspapers in America increased considerably compared to the rest of Europe: ‘Americans were then primarily magazine readers, not book readers’ (7). During the 1890s, the circulation of the *Ladies Home Journal*, established in 1883, ‘rose from 440,000 to an unprecedented one million copies a month’ (7). It was the most popular magazine at the time among middle-class white women, and it reaffirmed the image of the passive female devoted to the care of her family. Advertisements about the best methods and products to clean a house, to raise healthy children or to be a perfect guest, occupied a large space of such popular periodicals, including *Good Housekeeping* or *American Magazine*.²⁹

²⁷ One of the magazines that Lowell enjoyed reading during her childhood was the British *Punch*, known for its satire and cartoons. This from her journals, in which she registered all her expenditures at the end of the year. Lowell, Amy. *Journals. 1889-1890*. Cambridge (MA): Houghton Library, MS Lowell 38 (1).

²⁸ Elaine Showalter discusses the invisibility of women’s writing in *A Jury of Her Peers*. New York: Random House, 2010. pp. x-xiv. See also Bennett, Alma J. *American Women Theatre Critics, Biographies and Selected Writings of Twelve Reviewers.1753-1919*. Jefferson (NC): McFarland & Company, 2010.

²⁹ *Good Housekeeping* was very popular and it was devoted to ‘the higher life of the household’; it published more fiction and poetry from 1904. There was also a British version, which started in 1922. *Good Housekeeping* and *American Magazine* were both founded around 1904 in New York, the city that interestingly, at the time was also home to a growing number of flourishing women’s clubs.

At the turn of the century, many local and national newspapers began to include regular columns dedicated to women but most did not praise women or put them in a positive light. In *Radical Feminists of Heterodoxy. Greenwich Village. 1912-1940*, Judith Schwarz stresses that they often misquoted and gossiped about public women, particularly those who were involved in women's clubs.³⁰ Even the poetry chosen for publication by the male editors in these popular journals often praised female 'virtue' and duties. For example, in the October *American Magazine* issue, in 1910, one of Mrs. Schuyler Van Rensselaer's poems, entitled 'Listen, My Sister,' invited her female reader to value the most important things of her life: 'Believe when I tell thee what far and forever outweigheth the rest:/ The heart of a man on thy heart day and night,/ A child on thy breast.'³¹

Despite the suspicious and often negative attitude towards women writing in newspapers, the early years of the twentieth century witnessed a remarkable and unprecedented change in this tendency and a variety of female novels and poetry publications obtained more visibility in monthly reviews and magazines. The presence of women on the editorial staff of many of those popular periodicals at the time (edited by men and generally aimed to improve the 'taste' of American housewives regarding their domestic duties) became more consistent. Women began to write more columns but were still constrained by mostly focussing on 'household issues,' for instance, how to be a perfect host, or how to feed their children in a healthy way.

Along with these periodicals, magazines with more artistic goals and even more importantly, magazines edited not by men but by women began to flourish, albeit gradually and with many financial difficulties. In 1909 in New York, Charlotte Perkins Gilman (1860-1935) founded and financed her feminist monthly magazine *The Forerunner* where she questioned the woman's place in society through articles, stories and poetry. Gilman was well aware that one of the big problems faced by women was the lack of opportunity, and her magazine's aim was to offer, at least, a different kind of reading to fuel fe-

³⁰ Schwarz, Judith. *Radical Feminists of Heterodoxy, Greenwich Village. 1912-1940*. Norwich (VT): New Victoria Publishers, 1986. p. 18.

³¹ *American Magazine*. 70.6 (1910): p. 851.

male action towards change rather than passivity.³² A few years later in 1912, in Chicago, the poet Harriett Monroe (1860-1963) founded *Poetry: A Magazine of Verse*, which grew to have significant influence in modernist circles. Also in Chicago, Margaret Anderson (1886-1973) founded *The Little Review* in 1914, and then moved it to New York in 1917.

Anderson's and Monroe's avant-garde magazines challenged the monopoly of many long established literary magazines edited by men, such as *Atlantic Monthly*, *Harper's Magazine*, and *Scribner's Magazine*. These magazines rapidly acquired critical recognition, and became a significant, steadfast point of reference for the most influential experimental female and male writers at the time. For instance, the first poetic productions of the Imagist movement, formed by Ezra Pound in London, were published in the United States in *Poetry* in 1912.³³ Moreover, in 1911, one year before Monroe's *Poetry* was published, the English anarchist and feminist Dora Marsdeen (1882-1960) founded the weekly feminist review *The Freewoman*, in collaboration with Mary Gawthorpe. Although Marsdeen's journal was based in London, it is credited to have influenced the new aesthetics about the arts. These ideas circulated in the United States at the turn of the century, thanks to the contribution of certain expatriate American artists (such as Ezra Pound, for instance) in avant-garde magazines (notably in Monroe's *Poetry*).

This cross-fertilization of new artistic forms comes hand-in-hand with the development of a fertile dialogue among artists living in different nations at the beginning of the twentieth century. Among all the avant-garde magazines, Marsden's one in Europe distinguished itself for more radical political engagement compared to Monroe's and Anderson's in North America. Marsden opened up discussion on more radical questions centred around ethics and morals, such as heterosexual norms and the right of women to get gain economic independence outside marriage. Her 'radical' point of views on these

³² *The Forerunner* stopped its publication in 1916 due to financial problems. *Herland*, one of Gilman's utopian novels, appeared first in 1915 in *Forerunner*.

³³ The Imagist movement, in search of new poetical forms through which to convey their ideas, focused in particular on a concentrated image, new rhythm and the use of the language of common speech. It also claimed the complete freedom of its artists to deal with any subjects and matters of life. Started initially in London by Ezra Pound, it included a selection of British and American poets, such as H.D. (Hilda Doolittle), Richard Aldington, John Fletcher, and Amy Lowell, who brought it to larger attention in the USA. This will be discussed further in Chapter Six.

matters was probably one of the causes of the end of *The Freewoman's* publication in 1912.³⁴

While Marsdeen's magazine was more involved in political and moral issues, Monroe's *Poetry*, since the beginning, was deeply involved in the new poetry and its new poetical form, such as *verse libre* of which Lowell was a vigorous defender. In her first editorial for *Poetry* Monroe declared that her aim was to publish 'some of the best work now being done in English verse [...]. We hope to offer our subscribers a place of refuge, a green isle in the sea, where Beauty may plant her gardens, and Truth, austere revealer of joy and sorrow, of hidden delights and despairs, may follow her brave quest unafraid.'³⁵ Indeed, Monroe kept her promise and *Poetry* became one of the most important magazines in which most of the poets of the modernist era were published: including Sara Teasdale, Edna St. Vincent Millay, Ezra Pound, Edith Wyatt, Josephine Preston Peabody, T. S. Eliot, Hilda Doolittle (H.D.), James Joyce, Lola Ridge, and Amy Lowell.

In *The First Wave: Women Poets in America, 1915-1945*, William Drake credits Monroe's magazine have a forum for the female voices of the time, highlighting also the political involvement in her passionate democratic belief in social equality and nondiscrimination against women or ethnic minorities.'³⁶ Undoubtedly, Monroe's magazine was a powerful means for spurring debate on the new forms of poetry; many articles about *verse libre* and Imagism were printed there for the American readership for the first time, and always received more space in it than in other national literary magazines. Pound, John Gould Fletcher, as well as Lowell, among others, wrote frequently about the new poetic tendency both in defence and in appreciation. *Poetry*, along with other progressive cultural magazines of the time, such as Anderson's *The Little Review* (where many of Lowell's poems appeared) and *Others* (edited in New York by the poet Alfred Kreyborg), offered, as well, a privi-

³⁴ *The Freewoman* returned one year later, in 1913, as *The New Freewoman*, edited by Harriet Shaw Weaver, and Marsdeen appeared as a contributing editor. *The New Freewoman* became more concerned with literary issues. In 1914, the magazine changed name and editor again. It became *The Egoist*, edited by the poet Wyndham Lewis.

³⁵ Monroe, Harriet. 'The Motive of the Magazine.' *Poetry: A Magazine of Verse* 1.1 (October 1912): pp. 26-27. Hereafter: *Poetry*. Monroe was also a distinguished poet; one of her poems was read at the inaugural ceremony for the opening of the Chicago Auditorium in the presence of American President Benjamin Harrison in 1889.

³⁶ Drake, William. *The First Wave: Women Poets in America, 1915-1945*. New York: Macmillan, 1987. p. 68.

leged place for the female poets engaged with these new forms. All the literary, critical and cultural works published in these magazines reveal a relevant body of the literary and cultural taste of the time. Although not sufficiently investigated by critics, it appears that female editors and poets reviewing and commenting on each other's work led to further acknowledgement and heightened the relevance of the presence of female artistic works. Such peer assessments emerged, as well, in the critical books that women wrote at the time. Among the female poets of the time, Lowell was one of the few who also entered into this field.

In Lowell's *Tendencies in Modern American Poetry*, for instance, she discusses H.D.'s contribution to the Imagist movement.³⁷ Lowell also highlighted the solitude and the indifference H.D. suffered during her early years, when her writing vocation was not focused clearly on poetry. Lowell pointed out how H.D. found the right 'stimulus' to her literary vocation when she went to Europe and met Pound and his friends—'London at that time was a very El Dorado for young poets' (251). Lowell gave credit to Pound, who, upon perceiving 'her remarkable talent' (252), sent H.D.'s poems to Monroe, who then printed them in her 1913 January issue. In *Tendencies*, Lowell criticized as well the attitude of 'many "smart" critics' who dismissed H.D. by labeling her poems 'short, concentrated' (256). Lowell also offered her generous support to other women poets through giving advice or using her social and literary connections. In one of her letters to the poet Bryher (Annie Winifred Ellerman), who had sent her some translations from Greek, Lowell updated her friend about the publication of one of Bryher's poems that she had placed successfully in the *American Bookman*: '[Y]ou will probably hear from Mr. Saxton, the editor. In all these cases, as soon as a poem has been accepted, I have given your address with your nom de plume, [underlined in the original] so that they could communicate with you direct, for I thought that would be the most satisfactory way to arrange things.'³⁸

The acknowledgment of female works was not only for Lowell's living fellow poets, but also included those of her immediate predecessors. Lowell,

³⁷ Lowell, Amy. *Tendencies of American Poetry*. New York: Macmillan, 1917. Hereafter: *Tendencies*.

³⁸ Lowell, Amy. Letter to Ms Ellerman, (January 7 1919). Cambridge (MA): Houghton Library, MS Lowell 19.1. Bryer's poem appeared in *The Bookman American* in the February issue of 1919.

for example, valued in particular Emily Dickinson, whose poems were published for the first time in 1890. In *Poetry and Poets*, published in 1918, she described Dickinson as the first ‘Imagist.’ ‘It is an odd story, this history of Imagism, and perhaps the oddest and saddest moment in it is comprised in the struggle of this one brave, fearful, and unflinching woman.’³⁹

During the earlier years of the twentieth century, the avant-garde magazines proved essential in the promotion of their authors among a larger audience. Monroe’s *Poetry*, as well as Anderson’s *The Little Review*⁴⁰ and Alfred Kreymborg’s *Others*, provided their authors with various opportunities. They organized poetry readings, poetry competitions and forums for discussions on the most contemporary trends in poetry and art. Through publishing their authors’ poems along with critical reviews on their books and plays (reviews mostly written by the other authors within these publications), the magazines reinforced a heterogeneous circle of intellectuals, both male and female. Soon the magazines became relevant to small and big publishers who began to submit their advertisements to them regularly. All these magazines financially survived because of such advertisements, along with subscriptions and donations; one of the aims of the many poetry readings and lectures they organized to support their authors was also to attract donations and subscriptions. Moreover, letters sent to other poets calling for subscriptions or for increasing their subscriptions were not uncommon. For example, Lola Ridge (who became the American editor of the little international art magazine *BROOM* when one of its editors, Alfred Kreymborg, left) started a publicity campaign in America to financially support *BROOM*’s publications.⁴¹ She wrote personally to Lowell, asking for her help in finding other sustainers. ‘Will you help us to do this by getting at least three new subscriptions for *BROOM* from among your personal

³⁹ Lowell, Amy. *Poetry and Poets: Essays*. New York: Biblio and Tannen, 1971. p. 89.

⁴⁰ *The Little Review*, first based in Chicago, moved to New York in 1917 and to Paris in 1922. The September 1916 issue is remembered because it appeared with the headline ‘Want-Ad’ and the subsequent pages were left blank in protest of the *Vers Libre* Contest.

⁴¹ *BROOM* was an international little magazine published by the Americans Harold A. Loebe and Alfred Kreymborg in Italy with the aim to bring new avant-garde art back to USA. It ran from 1922 to 1914 and went through many financial crises. In the first edition of *BROOM* Lowell’s poem ‘Lilacs’ was published. *BROOM*. Rome and New York: The Broom Publishing Company. 1.1 (1921): p. 41.

friends? Also will you please send us three or more names and addresses of people whom you know to be interested in modern literature and art?’⁴²

The network of relations which was constructed and developed through the activities of both the members of literary women’s clubs and the avant-garde magazines provided a fertile ground for female poets, widening their space of action and contributing to the rise of a new feminine consciousness due to their creative achievements. Their first encounter with a large female and a large male audience, alike, was enabled through the pages of these publications. By the time most of the modernist female poets published their first volumes, they had already gained a certain reputation through *Poetry*, *The Little Review*, *Others*, and *The Freewoman*, among others. H.D.’s poems had been published in *Poetry* since 1912, and it was through *Poetry* that she gained the recognition and respect that allowed her to publish her first volume, *Sea Garden*, in 1916. Similarly, the name of Edna St. Vincent Millay was already publicly known before 1917, which is when her first collection, *Renascence and Other Poems*, came out. Lowell, as well, had published her first poem, ‘A Fixed Idea,’ in a magazine, the *Atlantic Monthly* in 1910, two years before her first poetical collection, *A Dome Of Many-Coloured Glass*, was released. Again proving the power of networks in this space, Lowell’s initial publication in that magazine was due to her childhood friend, Mary Cabot, who married Ellery Sedgwick editor of the *Atlantic Monthly*, as Bonnie Kime Scott highlights in ‘Amy Lowell’s Letters in the Network of Modernism.’⁴³

These avant-garde magazines acquired a certain visibility within national and local media in terms of highlighting a possible link between the new form of poetry the magazines supported and the idea of free love. One example that epitomizes this is that for the six columns of her 1917 *New York Tribune* article about the ‘free verse’ the journalist Margaret Johns chose a specific image to make her point clear to readers: two young women and a young man sit-

⁴² Ridge, Lola. Letter to Amy Lowell. Cambridge (MA): Houghton Library, MS Lowell 19 (1022). It is not possible to say if and how Lowell responded to Ridge’s call: Lowell’s correspondence, consulted at Houghton, does not contain a letter of response.

⁴³ Scott, Bonnie Kime. ‘Amy Lowell’s Letters in the Network of Modernism.’ *Amy Lowell, American Modern*. Eds. Melissa Bradshaw and Adrienne Munich. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2004. pp. 136-153. The author illuminates Lowell’s early female network, beginning in her childhood.

ting on the grass in the countryside, looking free and relaxed.⁴⁴ In her article, Johns explained to her readers that the ‘free verse’ used by those ‘new’ younger poets, followed any rules and, thus, she implied that their poetical attitude did not differ from a ‘loose sexuality.’

Despite critical recognition of female authors and magazines of the time, prejudices and stereotypes and the societal system as a whole continued to work against women’s demands for an equal place and sharing of the same rights as their male counterparts. These demands were not easily solved by concrete changes like equal education, equal rights, and equal wages, as few activists of the feminist movement acknowledged this challenge. In her 1906 essay, ‘The Tragedy of Woman’s Emancipation,’ Emma Goldman (1869-1940) was one of the few who critiqued the limits of female emancipation as envisaged by the first wave of feminism. She denounced the perils of the ‘internal tyrants,’ of social conventions that inhibit women in their fight for freedom denouncing the notion of dualism of the sexes. In ending her essay she claims that ‘[t]he demand for various equal rights in every vocation in life is just and fair, but, after all, the most vital right is the right to love and be loved’ (173).

The limitations, marginalisation, and exclusion experienced by women during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries were deeply rooted in a male-oriented vision that continued to offer women only the reign of their own homes. In *The Madwoman in the Attic*, Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar emphasise the lack of any authoritative or influential female predecessors to help guide women in their struggle; the majority of women faced challenges attempting to ‘fit in’ to an artistic world that was entirely dominated by men. That struggle sometimes had tragic repercussions for their personal lives, resulting in fear, distrust, and unhappiness. Some of these women suffered from ‘neurosis’ or ‘hysteria,’ and a few even committed suicide. In *The Anxiety of Influence*, Harold Bloom underlines the implications of the psychosexual and socio-sexual contexts implicit in every literary text.⁴⁵ In *The Madwoman in the Attic*, the authors admit the relevance of this concept (clarified by Bloom mostly for *male* anxiety) for a better understanding of the conflict felt by fe-

⁴⁴ Johns, Margaret. ‘Free-footed verse is danced in Ridgefield, New Jersey: get what meaning you can out of the futurist verse.’ *New York Tribune*, (July 25 1917): p. 2.

⁴⁵ Bloom, Harold. *The Anxiety of Influence: A Theory of Poetry*. 2nd ed. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997.

male artists.⁴⁶ From the many texts by female writers the critics analysed, another kind of anxiety emerged, more appropriate to that historical moment and the development of women's literary experience and encapsulating the difficulties that women faced in entering a male-oriented cultural world and gaining recognition for their contributions to it.⁴⁷ The anxiety of authorship was undoubtedly an important feature of women's writing of the period. This differed from the anxiety of 'creativity,' which, as Bloom argues, was rooted in the Oedipus complex because the literary models available at the time were male and conflicts or anxieties were consequently also bound to male concerns. As Gilbert and Gubar underline in *The Madwoman in the Attic*, the struggle for recognition of female literary authorship had to take into account that a woman's battle was 'not against her (male) precursor's reading of the world but against his readings of *her*. In order to define herself as an author she must redefine the terms of her socialization' (49).

At the turn of the twentieth century women were looking into a mirror that did not reflect their own image but rather one constructed for them by their forefathers. This was often framed by the simple binaries of Angel/Devil and Madonna/Whore. In the arts, woman still served as 'Muse' or the object of male desire. For many female artists, the struggle was primarily about recognition of the 'self' as both woman and writer. Although the trials faced by female writers, particularly those born into a cultural elite, differed from those faced by women who struggled against hunger, all women regardless of employment, health, race, class, religion, or sexuality, suffered the oppression of patriarchy. In 'Non-Autobiographies of "Privileged" Women: England and America,' Carolyn G. Heilbrun highlights this aspect, and questions whether 'the "leisure class" woman has no demands to make upon society which are universal for all women' (63). She argues that because 'privileged' women had time, space, and money to experiment with metaphorical miseries and hunger, they could be important 'sources for the rise of a new feminine consciousness.'⁴⁸ Ultimately

⁴⁶ Gilbert, Sandra M. and Gubar, Susan. *The Madwoman in the Attic*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979. p. 48.

⁴⁷ Robinson, Bonnie J. "'Individual Incorporate': Poetic Trends in Women Writers, 1890-1918.' *Victorian Poetry* 38.1 (2000): pp. 1-14.

⁴⁸ Heilbrun, Carolyn, G. 'Non-Autobiographies of "Privileged" Women: England and America.' *Life/Lines: Theorizing Women's Autobiography*. Eds. Bella Brodzki and Celeste Schenck. New York: Cornell University Press, 1988. pp. 62-76.

Heilbrun claims that belonging to a higher social class does not diminish the value of the work done by Virginia Woolf or other affluent women of the time. This point is also relevant for Lowell, who as a creative woman living at the turn of the twentieth century bore witness to the desire for something more than her society was able to grant her. Despite expectations of change, cultural and social structures were fundamentally patriarchal, and Amy Lowell was determined to confront these through her literary work.

0.2. *Amy Lowell: A Profile of her Life and Career*

Amy Lowell lived in an exclusive and traditional sphere, inhabited primarily by prominent male artists and scientists who left their mark on the history of Massachusetts. She was part of this exclusive sphere because her ancestors were a notable English family of colonists dating from the twelfth century, who settled in New England in the seventeenth century, thereafter growing in wealth and prestige in Boston.⁴⁹

Lowell's mother and father were very privileged and accomplished. Lowell's mother, Catherine Bigelow Lawrence, could speak seven languages, play many instruments and sing well. She was the youngest daughter of Abbot Lawrence, who had served as American Minister at the Court of St. James and was one of the leading anti-abolitionists. Lowell's father, August, was the son of John Amory Lowell who built the Boot Cotton Mills. August graduated from Harvard before taking over the family business, opening and owning many mills during the course of his lifetime. He also maintained a passion for horticulture inherited from his father; he embellished the garden of his mansion, Sevenels, which was named for the total number of his family members.⁵⁰

⁴⁹ Heymann, David C. *American Aristocracy: The Lives and Times of James Russell, Amy and Robert Lowell*. New York: Dodd, Mead & Company, 1975. pp. 3-51. Heymann offers a detailed background of Lowell's family beginning when Percival Lowle arrived from England to America. Lowle was an educated man and arrived with a few other settlers in 1639, settling first in Bristol where he began his trade business, which soon prospered due to expansion of trade in the area. Lowle died at the age of ninety-three; his descendants, who adopted the new spelling of 'Lowell,' moved to Boston. The family name became synonymous with wealth, culture, and power, and the name of the industrial town in Massachusetts, Lowell, was named after Lowell's ancestors.

⁵⁰ Lowell's grandfather, John Armor Lowell, grew the first orchids in America and brought large azalea bushes. He donated his herbarium and botanical library to the Boston Society of Natural History and Harvard respectively in 1857. Hunt, Richard. 'Amy Lowell: A Sketch of her Life and her Place in Contempo-

This garden became the favourite setting for many of Amy Lowell's love lyrics.

Lowell's high-status relatives also influenced her through their own cultural contributions and interests. Amy Lowell was distant cousin to the anti-slavery poet, critic, and intellectual James Russell Lowell (1819-1891) who authored an anonymous 1848 pamphlet, *A Fable for Critics*. Lowell based her ironic 1922 *A Critical Fable*⁵¹ on this pamphlet. The poet Robert Lowell (1917-1977) was Amy Lowell's cousin. Lowell's brother, Percival Lowell, who was an astronomer, diplomat to Japan, and author of several books about his experiences in the country, introduced her to Japanese art.⁵² Her second brother, Abbott Lawrence, was a lawyer and remained the president of Harvard University for thirty years. She had two sisters, Katherine and Elizabeth. Katherine married Alfred Roosevelt, first cousin of the American President, while Elizabeth married William Lowell Putnam (a third cousin of the Lowell family).

Most of Lowell's biographers use her social status and ancestors to question her vocation and belittle her literary achievements. In *Amy Lowell: Portrait of the Poet in Her Time*, for example, Horace Gregory addresses her notoriety by limiting it to local fame and attributing it primarily to her lineage:

Much of the local fame that Amy Lowell was to acquire beyond the age of forty had for its origins the plain fact that she was a Lowell of the senior branch, which in Boston and throughout New England was more than a sign of personal gifts and the ability to get things done. It carried out with it a family legend of hard-headed, skillfully acquired wealth that had begun before the American War of Independence. It was a reigning house whose sons were directors of law offices and banks, iron foundries and cotton mills; its culture was the counting house and the courtrooms.⁵³

Lowell did undoubtedly live in a rich intellectual environment, which stimulated and enriched her knowledge. In stark contrast to her academic envi-

rary American Literature.' *Amy Lowell: Sketches Biographical and Critical*. Boston: Mifflin and Company, 1922, p. 2.

⁵¹ The oft-overlooked irony in this pamphlet will be discussed in detail in Chapter Four.

⁵² Percival, Lowell. *Soul of the Far East*. Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1888. It was his most popular book about his life in Japan. His Japanese art collection forms the basis of the Japanese art collection now in the Boston Fine Art Museum.

⁵³ Gregory, Horace. *Amy Lowell: Portrait of the Poet in her Time*. New York: Freeport, 1958, p. 4. Hereafter: *Amy Lowell: Portrait of the Poet*.

ronment, Lowell's home environment was intellectual, challenging, and exciting; since childhood, she had been exposed to the lively and brilliant conversations of many prominent literary men and foreign scientists during dinners and lunches at her home, or other dinner-parties that she attended with her parents. In addition to intellectual relatives such as the great Cousin James Russell, other eminent personalities including those who held lectures at the Lowell Institute were frequently guests of honour at Sevenels.⁵⁴

However, as the youngest of five, she soon found herself alone in the big estate: when Lowell was five, Percival left for Japan and only occasionally returned home, and Lawrence and Elizabeth married when Lowell was five and eight respectively. According to S. Foster Damon's biography, *Amy Lowell. A Chronicle with Extracts from Her Correspondence*, 'little Amy, in fact, suffered the privileges and disadvantages of arriving between generations [...] [her] parents were half a generation too old to discipline her; they had brought up too many children, to respond to the novelty of coping with a new stubborn personality'⁵⁵ (40). Moreover, her siblings were too preoccupied by their social lives in the Bostonian 'aristocracy' to take care of the 'Postscript,' as they nicknamed her (34). Horace Gregory uses the same term to emphasise Lowell's wealth: '[t]o be the darling "Postscript" of Sevenels was to have privileges beyond the reach of many other New England children (6).' In *Amy: the World of Amy Lowell and the Imagist Movement*, Jean Gould also emphasises the meaning of this nickname, offering insight into Lowell's 'unconventional habits' that began in childhood. Gould reports that Lowell's family claimed that Lowell's usual tardiness to dinner 'was not her fault: she was born late.'⁵⁶ Focusing mostly on Lowell's habit of doing as she pleased since her childhood,

⁵⁴ Lowell's grandfather's cousin, John Jr., founded the Institute, and at his death Lowell's grandfather, John Amory Lowell, became the only trustee. Amory Lowell had two great passions, algebra and botany, and so the Institute became particularly devoted to scientific agriculture. The Swiss biologist, Louis Agassiz, professor of biology at Harvard and an innovator in the study of Earth's natural history, was one of the first distinguished lecturers invited by Lowell's grandfather.

⁵⁵ Damon, S. Foster. *Amy Lowell: A Chronicle with Extracts from Her Correspondence*. Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1935. p. 40. Hereafter: *Amy Lowell: A Chronicle*. Damon enriches his extensive biography with detailed accounts of Lowell's childhood at Sevenels. He reports that one of her astonishing 'first acts' happened at the age of two, when she 'drove the pair of horses to and from the church, one fine Sunday' (35). Lowell learned about horses and other animals from her coachman, with whom she spent much of her time on the estate during her childhood.

⁵⁶ Gould, Jean. *Amy: The World of Amy Lowell and the Imagist Movement*. New York: Dodd, Mead & Company, 1975. p. 18. Hereafter: *Lowell and the Imagist Movement*. Gould published many other biographies of American writers and poets, including Edna St. Vincent Millay, Robert Frost, Melville, and Amy Lowell.

Gould describes Lowell as ‘precocious, knowledgeable, a tomboy, and a smart-aleck too impatient to “grub” for grades’(32), without much sense of discipline.

Lowell’s intolerance to rules, along with her precocious intellectual curiosity and imagination, resulted in her changing private schools often between the ages of eight and twelve until at seventeen, she was provided with a tutor. Lowell’s difficulty with staying in a school may have had something to do with dyslexia, but also much with the fact that she was fortunate enough to have grown up in an intellectual environment that her schools could not replicate. School seemed to not challenge her and, in fact, bore her; her diaries include only a few remarks about school, and are mostly concerned about certain books that she had to read. ‘I am reading the third chapter of the first volume of Macaulay for school. It is awfully long, but very interesting but heavy as a brick’ (October 18, 1889). Other annotations are impersonal, such as ‘Read the Spectator for the school’ (November 17, 1889).

It is from the discrepancy between her cultural experience at home and the limited one offered by the private schools she attended that Lowell developed her critical attitude toward the American educational system in general; she never lost an opportunity during her adult life to criticise the system in articles, lectures and in general.⁵⁷ She expressed her negative opinion in her 1914 notes prepared for a talk at Little Village titled ‘Is the present high school education productive to individual development?’ In it, Lowell pointed out the scarce attention paid toward readings and books alike in the school: ‘It is a great mistake to regard books as dried up things, petrified words, no longer containing spans of vitality.’⁵⁸ Furthermore, in *Poetry, Imagination and Education*, published in the *North American Review* in 1917, Lowell discussed the importance of imagination in poetry, and denounced the American educational system in its inadequacy to sustain and develop imagination and passion for

⁵⁷ Her diffidence toward the academic world (as well as her belief in the value of travelling abroad) is manifested clearly in her will to establish an annual scholarship to support travel abroad for gifted American-born poets. ‘My trustees shall appoint a committee to be composed of one member of the English Department of Harvard University and of two poets of recognized standing (preference being given to those of progressive literary tendencies) and of the trustees themselves who collectively shall count as one [...] The aim of the committee shall be to avoid the extremes of academic conservatism on the one hand or of that radicalism which springs from a desire for effect and not from sincerity, on the other.’ See Amy Lowell Poetry Travelling Scholarship: www.amylowell.org.

⁵⁸ Lowell, Amy. Notes for a talk given at Little Village on a Miscellaneous Travelling Library. Cambridge (MA): Houghton Library MS Lowell 38 (19), Lowell 10.6.17. She explores this belief in one of her long poems, ‘The Bostonian Athenaeum,’ appearing in her first collection, *A Dome of Many-Colored Glass*, which will be discussed in greater detail in Chapter Seven.

learning in young students. 'Children are now taught to do, where in the older systems, they were taught to think.'⁵⁹ She claimed that what develops individuality are 'the humanities [...] A knowledge of facts does not make us men; it is active use of brain which does that' (32). On recalling the last two years of her school course, she emphasised that the 'eminent Harvard professor' (52) who was supposed to introduce the students to Shakespeare, taught them everything about the plays 'except the things that mattered' (52). According to her, 'the plays might have been written in the baldest prose for all the eminent professor seemed to care' (53). Lowell confessed that what she and her friends learnt at the end was a criterion 'promptly and satisfactorily forgotten.' She adds that, luckily, she was saved 'from the clutches of ignorant and unimaginative Academia, by coming across a volume in my father's library [...] Browsing one day, I found Leigh Hunt's *Imagination and Fancy*. I did not read it, I devoured it' (53).⁶⁰

Such activities outside the school were often more significant and influential for Lowell, illustrated by the fact that they are referred to extensively in her accounts of her life. Reading was Lowell's foremost passion since she was a child and in her diary, she frequently comments on her favourite books. Her family placed great value on reading, and gave her 'Postscript' books as presents on many occasions, encouraging her to read.⁶¹ When she could not read because of trouble with her vision (which afflicted her since childhood), her parents read to her: '[the doctor] says that I have got congestion of the eyes, and must not read at all till Thursday. It isn't pleasant. P.M. Mama and Papa are reading *Quest* at lunch to me' (March 29, 1890). Lowell learned to read before going to school, and reading came always before her school duty. '*David Garrick* came this morning. Of course I read it before I did anything else. Then I studied' (November 9, 1889).

In *A History Of American Poetry*, published in 1942, Gregory Horace and Zaturenska Marya criticise Lowell's literary taste, claiming that 'she had

⁵⁹ Lowell, Amy. *Poetry, Imagination, Education*, in *Poetry and Poets: Essays*. New York: Biblo and Tannen, 1971. p. 31. First edition: Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1930.

⁶⁰ James Henry Leigh Hunt (1784-1985) was an English critic, essayist and poet. Among his best friends were John Keats, Percy Bysshe Shelley, and Thomas Carlyle. He in 1844 wrote *Imagination and Fancy*, a selection of English poets, which was well appreciated among intellectuals and provided him with a stable financial situation.

⁶¹ One of her ancestors had been among the founders of the old library in Boston, the Boston Athenaeum; her father was a board member, and her brothers were its patrons later.

developed the literary tastes of a small boy; specifically books such as Jules Verne's scientific romances, Dana's *Two Years Before the Mast*, and Bullen's *Cruise of the Cachelot* left their mark on her childhood and colored her imagination.⁶² Gregory emphasises this point again in his biography, *Amy Lowell: Portrait of the Poet*, published in 1958, and to prove it, chose to list those dealing with adventures—such as Cooper's sea tales or Sir Walter Scott's novels—among several others commented on Lowell in her diary.⁶³ Undoubtedly Lowell had a strong passion for reading such books but she was mostly an omnivorous reader as her diaries testify. 'I love *Pickwick*. Oh! How I wish I could travel round the way Mr. P. did. I think how coaching would be great fun. I want a book awfully called *Coaching days and coaching Ways* [underlined in the original]. It came out in *The English Illustrated Magazine*.⁶⁴ I have two papers of it but I have lost the end of one of them.'⁶⁵ Indeed, she was a voracious reader; she read William Makepeace Thackeray's historical novel *The Virginians* and *The Four Georges*, bought for her by her brother Lawrence on March 4, 1889; she read them immediately, as the day after receiving them she wrote, 'I found V's delightful.' Two weeks later she expressed her comments after reading Izaak Walton's *The Complete Angler*, a book about the art of fishing written in prose and verse; according to her, it was 'lovely so calm and sweet' (March 17). Another book dear to her was *Reveries of a Bachelor* (1850) by Donald Grant Mitchell, about boyhood, country lifestyle, and travel. She was so fond of *Oliver Twist* that she reread it many times: 'for the 100 hundred time,' she noted in her diary of 1890 (March 27). After reading Sir Walter Scott, she declared 'I feel more and more drawn toward history and literature' (March 28). Many British novelists enchanted Lowell, especially Frances Burney and the Brontë sisters. She expressed her admiration for the Brontë sisters years later in the 1920 *New York Evening Post* as well as during the lectures

⁶² Gregory, Horace and Zaturenska Marya. 'Amy Lowell: Literary Statesman.' *A History of American Poetry, 1900-1940*. New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1942. p.182.

⁶³ Gregory, Horace. *Amy Lowell: Portrait of the Poet*. New York: Freeport, 1958. pp. 20-21.

⁶⁴ This monthly magazine was very popular and it published different artists and writers such as Stevenson, Wilde, Shaw and Hardy. This was one of magazine subscriptions of Lowell's family.

⁶⁵ Lowell, Amy. Journals. 1889-1890. (February 19 1889). Cambridge (MA): Houghton Library, MS Lowell 38 (1). Subsequent references to the 1889 and 1890 journals will be in parenthesis in the text, stating the date only. Lowell's mother bought her *Coaching Days and Coaching Ways* in May of the same year. Lowell was delighted.

about literature she held soon after the publication of her first book in 1912.⁶⁶ Lowell believed in the importance of books to the extent that, in answering a questionnaire about what she would take with her to a desert island, the young Lowell responded: Louisa May Alcott's work and Webster's Dictionary.⁶⁷

Not only did short stories and novels colour Lowell's imagination and enhance her learning during her childhood, she also went regularly to the theatre with her family since childhood. She loved to read plays, in particular those she had seen at the theatre. One of the comedies she seemed particularly keen on was Charles Reade's *Mask and Face* to which she dedicated many entries in particular in her 1890 diary.⁶⁸

Originating at such an early age, this passion for readings, never abandoned her and inspired in her, quite early as well, a passion for collecting old books and rare editions. In the 1920 *New York Evening Post* she wrote an article about her collection.⁶⁹ In this article, although Lowell shares that she did not know exactly when she began to collect books, she knew that 'it was at so tender an age as to seem ludicrous even to me in retrospection' (1). She also recalls the first books which she desperately wanted to own—'the lion's share of my vice and virtue'—which included *Rollo Learning to Read*. It was a series of stories written by Jacob Abbott for children learning to read; Lowell's mother had received it from her parents at age six. Lowell reports that she was not sure that she was able to read when she was first exposed to the stories but she knew all of the stories of the series by heart because her parents had read them to her, and she desperately wanted to own the book. At the end, her

⁶⁶ Lowell, Amy. 'That Bookcase.' *New York Evening Post*. September 18 1920.

⁶⁷ The questionnaire is in an undated composition book kept in Houghton Library. There are ten other exercise-books, each of them dedicated to different subjects, such as history, English, French and Italian language; these are dated 1886-1887. The exercise-books also contain many essays written during that time, which may have been related to school activities or exercises set by her parents. The titles of these essays illuminate her interests at the time. In the exercise-book dated 1886, for example, there is 'A Plan of American History.' Although it is the only one organized like a book, with numbered pages and an index, Lowell never completed her project. Another essay is about 'The Advantage of the Study of French Language,' and in another one she discussed the advantages of travelling. There is also a short comment on a passage from Homer's *Odyssey* concerning Nausicaa.

⁶⁸ The complete title of this two-act comedy is *Mask and Faces or Before and Behind the Curtains*. Charles Reade (1814-1884), an English novelist and dramatist, wrote it in 1851 in collaboration with Tom Taylor. The female characters of Reade's plays, as exemplified by Mabel Vane in *Masks and Face*, were not always presented as morally perfect, but were never as incompetent as many of his male characters. In 1853, Reade turned the play into a novel, *Peg Woffington*.

⁶⁹ Lowell's collection was donated to Harvard University by Ada Russell according to Lowell's will soon after her death.

mother gave it to her because ‘when a tenacious heart knows its goal few can withstand it, certainly not an affectionate and sympathetic mother.’⁷⁰

In addition to writing about her love for books, Lowell also writes about and focuses on other outside activities (and not school). She writes about conversations with her new friends (finally of her age) about literature, beauty, love, and life; about the visits they paid her and the parties they had during summer holidays in Sevenels; about her feelings for some of her new friends. She also writes about events concerning her family including the birth of her first niece, her mother’s illness, her frequent visits with her father to various exhibitions, theater, old bookstores and the concerts she attended with her brother Lawrence and his wife.

In her diaries, especially in her 1889 diary, Lowell also reveals her juvenile uncertainty about being physically attractive; writing about her feelings for a boy she met, she declares:

How long I have loved him I don’t know. But I must have loved him for some time. It is so silly but when Paul asked Mabel to walk with him I feel just like going off alone somewhere and crying [...]. If there was any chance of Paul’s ever loving me it would be different. I would not be ready to pound much for being such a fool as to love him. But I am ugly, fat, conspicuous, and dull; to say nothing of a very bad temper. Oh Lord please let it be all right: and let Paul love me, and don’t let me be a fool (October 28, 1889).

She also lamented about the restrictions of her sex.⁷¹ On January 16th 1889, she reports that ‘Papa is going to his club tonight [...] I wish I was a man’; and on January 18th, having noticed some college boys playing in Cambridge, she again wishes that she ‘was one of them.’ Most critics have read Lowell’s disappointment with her sex as a clear indication of her hidden lesbianism rather than her awareness of her sex’s social limitations.

Lowell’s mother died in 1894, and Lowell remained alone with her father in his big estate, Sevenels. In 1900, when her father died, she bought

⁷⁰ Lowell, Amy. ‘That Bookcase.’ *New York Evening Post*. September 18 1920: p.1.

⁷¹ Her journals will be discussed in greater detail in Chapter One.

Sevenels from her siblings. Thereafter, she became gradually more involved in the social life of Brookline; she joined many library and educational committees in Boston, and constructed her own cultural network of relationships until she found her vocation. Her choice to become a poet was inspired by Eleonora Duse's performance in the Boston Globe Theatre in 1902, as Lowell revealed many years later in a letter to Eunice Tietjens, it 'loosed a bolt in my brain and I found out where my true function lay.'⁷²

It was after that epiphany, in fact, that Lowell started her self-taught 'apprenticeship' in poetry, and devoted herself to writing. Her work resulted in publication of her sonnet 'A Fixed Idea' in 1910 in the *Atlantic Monthly*. It was followed in 1911 by two lyrical poems 'Japanese Wood-Carving' (based on one of the prints her brother sent to her from Japan) and 'On Carpaccio's Picture' (based on *The Dream of St. Ursula*, one of the Italian paintings she admired in Venice during one of her trips to Europe), published respectively in February and September. Another poem 'Leisure' appeared in May 1911 in the *Hampton's Magazine*; in this sonnet she praised 'that sole condition of all loveliness/ The dreaming lapse of slow, unmeasured time' (13-14).⁷³

In October 1912, Lowell published her first collection, *A Dome of Many-Colored Glass*, thus starting her more serious involvement with the poetic field. The title of the book was inspired by Shelley's poem 'Adonis' which was dedicated to John Keats.⁷⁴ The book was divided into four parts: the first, second and fourth part contained lyrical poems, sonnets, and verses for children, respectively. The third part, entitled *The Boston Athenaeum*, was a long narrative poem in which Lowell's passion for reading and books is clearly manifested. It was dedicated to the historical library *The Boston Athenaeum*, which was one of her favourite reading places since childhood.⁷⁵ The book, which received only a little critical attention at the time—and still has lukewarm reviews—reveals Lowell's interest in metrical forms, different topics as

⁷² Lowell, Amy. Letter to Eunice (Hammond) Tietjens. Cambridge (MA): Houghton Library, MS Lowell 19.1 (1287). Lowell's vocation will be discussed in Chapter One.

⁷³ Lowell included all these poems in her first collection, *A Dome of Many-Coloured Glass* (1912).

⁷⁴ On the front page of the book appeared some lines from Shelley's poem 'Adonis,' dedicated to Keats, and some lines by the French symbolist poet Albert Semain. Lowell's interest in, and admiration for the French symbolists and the English poet resulted in the publication of a critical study on some French symbolists in 1915, *Six French Poets*, and her biography *John Keats*, published in two volumes in 1924, a few months before her death.

⁷⁵ The poem 'The Boston Athenaeum' will be discussed in Chapter Seven.

subjects of poetry, as well as her interest in the position of poetry in society; these interests deepened in her later collections.⁷⁶

The year 1912 represented a significant year not only for Lowell's literary career but also for her personal life. It was in that year, that at the age of thirty-eight, she met the actress Ada Dwyer Russell during a luncheon of The Purple Club, one of the female literary clubs that flourished in the country at the turn of twentieth century, and to which Lowell belonged. Russell was a forty-nine-year-old widow with a daughter. The friendship between the two women started immediately. After subsequent months of letters and meetings, Lowell decided to invite Russell to live with her at Sevenels. Russell refused, explaining that it would be difficult for her to leave the theatre and retire at Sevenels because she needed to earn her bread. Lowell was persistent and persuasive, however, and after one year, Russell joined her during her second trip to London and moved to Sevenels upon their return. They lived together at Lowell's mansion from that time until Lowell's death in what contemporaries called a 'Boston marriage,' and modern critics have assumed to be a long-term lesbian relationship.⁷⁷ There are however, conflicting viewpoints on the nature of and motivation for their relationship. In his account of their friendship, Horace Gregory claims that Russell, was 'the companion that Lowell sought' because in addition to the charm of her personality, she 'could also offer helpful teaching of how to read in public' (73). In addition to this pragmatic reason, he also emphasized that their relationship was more of a financial agreement than a relationship, pointing out that at Russell's refusal because of her need to work, Lowell asked how much she earned with her performances and offered Russell the same amount for the rest of her life (73-74). However, Foster Damon, to whom Russell authorised Lowell's posthumous biography, does not offer much insight in regard to the nature of their relationship. Moreover, Russell burned most of their private correspondence in accordance with Lowell's will. Although she stands beside the economic motivation for the relationship,

⁷⁶ Lowell, Amy. *A Dome of Many-Colored Glass*. New York: Macmillan, 1919. pp. 115-122. The book was first published in 1912 and reprinted in 1915, 1916 and 1919. *A Dome of Many-Coloured Glass* will be discussed in Chapter Seven.

⁷⁷ The term 'Boston marriage' owes its name to Henry James' novel *The Bostonians* (1886) and refers broadly to two unmarried women living together without male economic support. See Faderman, Lillian. *Surpassing the Love of Men: Romantic Friendship and Love between Women from the Renaissance to the Present*. New York: William Morrow, 1981.

Jean Gould, in *The World of Amy Lowell and the Imagist Movement*, (1975), is the first critic to imply that there was more between the two women than platonic friendship: ‘At last,’ she summarises, ‘Ada yielded, and the result was a lifelong attachment that ripened into a remarkable one of mutual love and devotion’ (123).⁷⁸

A few months after Ada moved in with Lowell, Lowell began to gain interest from the Imagist movement. In January 1913, a few months after the publishing of Lowell’s first collection, Monroe’s magazine, *Poetry*, published the poems of ‘“H.D., Imagiste” [...] an American Lady resident abroad, whose identity is unknown to the editor.’⁷⁹ The mysteriousness of the ‘lady’ and her poems enthralled Lowell, who had subscribed to that magazine since its publication in 1902 and had already submitted some of her poems to it. She wrote to Harriet Monroe expressing her desire to meet the Imagists who were based in London. Monroe prepared for her a letter of introduction to Ezra Pound, who was considered the leader of the group and was *Poetry*’s correspondent abroad. During the summer of 1913, Lowell went to London and met Pound, Hilda Doolittle (H.D.), Richard Aldington, and John Gould Fletcher, among others. That meeting brought Lowell deeper into the world of poetry and marked the beginning of her involvement with the Imagist movement. In September 1913, in fact, one of her poems, ‘In a Garden,’ (which she would include one year later in her second collection) was published in *New Freewoman*, where the Imagist group was publishing most of their poems. Since then, the appearance of Lowell’s poems in the avant-garde magazines of the time became more frequent in conjunction with her articles about *verse libre* and the new trends in poetry.⁸⁰

In May 1914, she published her second collection, *Swords Blades and Poppy Seed*, which was met with great respect and appreciation from critics, and her readings subsequently became more popular. The book, divided into two sections that took the first and second half of the name of the title of the book respectively, included mainly poems written in ‘unrhymed cadence’—as

⁷⁸ Gould, Jean. *Amy: The World of Amy Lowell and the Imagist Movement*. New York: Dodd Mead & Company, 1975. Lowell’s supposed lesbianism will be discussed in the next section of this Introduction and in Chapter Seven.

⁷⁹ Monroe, Harriet. *Poetry* 1.4 (1913): p. 135.

⁸⁰ One of her articles, ‘Verse Libre and Metrical Prose,’ appeared in *Poetry* 3.6 (1914): pp. 213-220.

Lowell preferred to call ‘*verse libre*’—and a few in ‘cadenced verse.’ In the preface, Lowell explained the forms she employed, and expressed her debt to French symbolists, in particular to Paul Fort who inspired her ‘cadenced verse.’⁸¹ The same year, Ezra Pound included her poem ‘In a Garden’ in his first Imagist anthology, *Des Imagistes*, thus strengthening her link with the movement.⁸² In the summer of 1914, Lowell took another trip to London, this time accompanied by Russell. It was during this trip that, in order to bring the new poetic form of the Imagist movement to the attention of a wider audience, she decided to develop and edit an anthology of Imagist poets in the United States. This idea generated conflict between Lowell and Pound, as Pound felt threatened, claiming that he was the leader of the Imagist movement and thus only he had the right to determine which poets and poems to include. Lowell argued that the poets should be given the freedom to choose which of their poems to include. The quarrel continued for a few months until Pound left the Imagist group. The anthology, *Some Imagist Poets*, was published anyway in May 1916. Lowell highlighted the distance and the differences between Pound’s and Lowell’s attitude in the preface to her anthology, emphasising the cooperation and sense of equality among the poets she had gathered:

We wish it to be clearly understood that we do not represent an exclusive artistic sect; we publish our work together, because of our mutual artistic sympathy, and we propose to bring put our cooperative volume each year for a short terms of years, until we have made a place for ourselves and our principles such as we desire.⁸³

In 1915, Lowell published a translation of French poetry, *Six French Poets*, which stemmed from both her interest in the symbolist poets, and a series of

⁸¹ From this time, Lowell prefaced all the books she wrote. *Swords Blades and Poppy Seed* will be discussed in Chapter Seven.

⁸² ‘In a Garden’ will be discussed in detail in Chapter Six.

⁸³ Lowell, Amy. *Some Imagist Poets*. Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1915. p. viii. The other two editions appeared in 1916 and 1917, covering the same poets: Richard Aldington, H.D., John Gould Fletcher, F. S. Flint, D. H. Lawrence, and Amy Lowell. The tenets of Imagism were summarised in the preface of the 1916 edition: its distinctiveness was not in ‘what Imagists write about, which makes them hard of comprehension; but how they write it’ (viii).

lectures she had delivered on invitation in Boston.⁸⁴ The book was a success and received much critical appraisal not only in the United States, but also in England. In *The Little Review* January-February issue, in fact, the English Imagist poet and translator Frank Stuart Flint stated that they were ‘the finest translations into English that exist of the [...] French poets of the symbolist generation.’⁸⁵ He recalled Lowell’s ‘excellent French’ when, during her last visit to London she read to him and other poets of the Imagist group, and he praised Lowell’s method of ‘quoting whole poems and long poems as well as detached and beautiful fragments’ which filled her book ‘with an emotional content’ (16). In ending his review, Flint acknowledged ‘[t]hat Miss Lowell had all equipment for a task of this kind, her own two books of poems left no doubt at all’ (16-17). In one of his reviews on Lowell’s work, Louis Untermeyer, concerning *Six French Poets*, emphasized Lowell’s ‘eager and national restlessness’ and acknowledged her ‘versatility’ that made possible a volume on foreign tendencies ‘so sympathetic and authoritative. Referring to some negative reviews, he also pointed out that, ‘It is a subjugation of prejudices that makes such a book not only a notable interpretation but a contribution to criticism.’⁸⁶

In October 1916, Lowell published her third collection, *Men, Women and Ghosts*. The book, divided in five sections, gathered long narrative poems, ‘tales divided into scenes,’ and ‘the few pieces of less obvious story-telling import in which one might say that the dramatis personae are air, clouds, trees, houses, streets, and such like things,’ as she explained in her preface.⁸⁷ The book confirmed her versatility in the verse forms she continued to experiment with, and in her interested in historical subjects. In ‘Cremona Violin,’ for instance, using a combinations of rhymes she changed rhythm according to the one played by the violin of her character while in ‘Spring Day,’ in particular in the section titled ‘Bath’ using the ‘polyphonic prose’ she rendered the sensual atmosphere of a bath taken in the open space during the day. In ‘The Bronze

⁸⁴ The six French poets are Emile Verhaeren, Albert Semain, Remy de Gourmont, Henri de Régnier, Francis Jammes, and Paul Fort.

⁸⁵ Flint, Frank Stuart. ‘Amy Lowell’s New Book.’ *The Little Review* (1916): p. 17.

⁸⁶ Untermeyer, Louis. ‘Amy Lowell.’ *The New Republic*, December 28, 1918. p. 256. London: Forgotten Books, 2013. Melissa Bradshaw highlights that Lowell used to buy her jewelry from the jewelry firm of Untermeyer’s family, where he worked until 1923.

⁸⁷ Lowell, Amy. *Men, Women and Ghosts*. New York: Macmillan, 1916. p. vii. Some poems of this book will be discussed in Chapter Seven.

Horses,’ for instance, she focused on the Napoleon Era while ‘Guns as Keys’ was about Commodore Matthew Perry.⁸⁸ The latter poem, appearing first in *Seven Arts* in 1917, focused on the arrival of Perry in the Tokyo Bay and highlights Lowell’s interest in Oriental art (which her brother Percival had introduced in her as a child). Following her first book in 1912, Lowell included several poems in which Japanese motifs and setting were central and in 1917 most of her new poems appearing in newspapers and magazines (such as: *Yale Review*, *Little Review* *Good Housekeeping*, *Scribner’s*, among others) had an oriental atmosphere. *Poetry*, in particular, published a group of her poems entitled ‘Lacquer Prints’(which she would later include in her 1919 *Picture of the Floating World*) which received positive reviews.⁸⁹ In her brief analysis on Lowell’s Orientalism, Mari Yoshihara points out that ‘Orientalism’ received the attention of scholars at the turn of the twentieth century and inspired many poets; both the brevity and the use of images in Chinese and Japanese poetry attracted the Imagists specifically.⁹⁰

In 1917, Lowell also published a critical study *Tendencies in Modern American Poetry*. Through the life and the works of six American poets: Edwin Arlington Robinson, Robert Frost, Edgar Lee Masters, Carl Sandburg, H.D. and John Gould Fletcher she illustrated the new poetic forms, and also focused on explaining their innovative use of images through several examples of their poems.⁹¹ This book connected her even more deeply to the Imagist movement in the public eye, also because, in the same year, she had published the second anthology of the Imagist Poets in North America. It also highlighted her tendency to explore different poetic forms, in particular ‘polyphonic prose.’ This form, according to her, was the ‘freest, the most elastic, of all forms, for it follows at will any and all of the rules which guide other forms.’

⁸⁸ The book and the poem ‘The Cremona Violin’ will be discussed in Chapter Two. ‘Guns as Key’ will appear in *Can Grande’s Castle* (1917).

⁸⁹ *Poetry* had published in its March 1915 issue Pound’s translation of Li-Po’s ‘Exiled Letter’ (based on Fenollosa’s notes). Pound, Ezra. ‘Exiled Letter.’ *Poetry* 5.6 (1915): pp. 251-258.

⁹⁰ Yoshihara, Mai. ‘Putting on the Voice of the Orient.’ *Amy Lowell: American Modern*. Eds. Adrienne Munich and Melissa Bradshaw. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2004.

⁹¹ The book, generally appreciated, received some negative comments from Monroe’s *Poetry* in its December issue. Monroe lamented in particular the exclusion, from the list of the poets representing the new Movement, of Vachel Lindsay, a poet from Chicago who, according to her ‘represents a tendency much richer and more indigenous than that personified by the imagist [...] however high theirs may be. His roots run deep into the past of American Literature.’ Monroe, Harriet. ‘Miss Lowell on *Tendencies*.’ *Poetry*. 12.3 (1917): p.153.

It was this form that she employed in her fourth collection, *Can Grande's Castle*, which came out in September 1918.⁹² In this book, she gathered some such poems that had appeared in newspapers and magazines the year before (such as 'Guns and Keys, for instance). This tendency to include poems that had been previously published in magazines was one of the distinctive traits of Lowell's method of attracting both the attention of her audience and the critics. *Can Grande's Castle* was made up of four long semi-narrative poems that illustrated how far she had come from adapting the original form of the French poet Paul Fort. In reviewing Lowell's books in *The New Republic* of December 1918, the critic Untermeyer emphasises this change, acknowledging that Lowell adapted the 'regular prose passages alternating with regular rhymed' of Paul Fort and developed it into 'many changes of rhythm and subtleties of rhyme' which had made polyphonic prose 'practically a new form, dignified, orchestral, flexible' (257). Lowell's ability to experiment with form and nearly reinvent it also illuminates her ability to bring life to the 'pages of history books' (257). Referring to the title of the book, Untermeyer points out that she had borrowed it from a line of Richard Aldington's poem 'At the British Museum' highlighting that this [the title] was the 'strangest thing about this energetic book' (257). Ending his review, the critic ultimately declared that, '[i]t will be found, I believe, that beneath her vigor and versatility she is expressing the poet that is half singer, half scientist and the groping, assimilative period she represents' (257).

A few months before the publication of *Can Grande's Castle* (1917), Lowell began to suffer more seriously from an umbilical hernia. Despite her doctor's recommendation to reduce her activities, Lowell continued to travel around the country delivering lectures and readings, writing poems and preparing another collection, *Pictures of the Floating World*. She curated the collection by gathering some of the poems already known to her audience and readers and published the book in 1919. The book is divided into three parts titled: 'Lacquer Prints,' made up of fine Japanese hoku; 'Chinoiseries,' in which she included one poem dedicated to Li T'ai-po; and 'Planes of Personality' consisting of lyrical poems only. The latter, as Lowell explained to the readers in her

⁹² Lowell, Amy. *Can Grande's Castle*. New York: Macmillan, 1918. p. x.

preface contains certain poems she could not include in her two last books, *Men, Women and Ghosts* and *Can Grande's Castle*, since the 'scheme' of these volumes 'necessarily forbade their inclusion'; in these two books, in fact, 'polyphonic prose' was prominent.⁹³ In her foreword to *Pictures of the Floating World* Lowell, who had appreciated Oriental poetry since childhood, explained, as well, that the poems 'written in a quasi-Oriental form' were not translations; 'the hokku pattern has been more closely followed than has any corresponding Chinese form in the 'Chinoiserie';' but, even here, I have made no attempt to observe the syllabic rules which are an integral part of all Japanese poetry' (vii-viii).

Although Lowell went through a second operation for her hernia in 1920, she continued to work: she prefaced books for some friends, collected material for a biography on John Keats, and put together translated poems from classic Chinese poetry in collaboration with her childhood friend Florence Ay-scough, a sinologist who lived in China.⁹⁴ Her poetic research continued as well, as evidenced by a letter to Arlington Robinson in January of the same year: 'I am glad you like what you call " [...] metrical manner" [...] I have been experimenting much with metre and rhyme lately, in free use and conventional, but I am not sure that the opener forms are not a more native expression to use.'⁹⁵

In May 1921, Lowell published her sixth collection, *Legends*, which was dedicated to 'Tales of People' from different cultures, countries, and epochs that she had explored and adapted. In the preface, in fact, she advised her readers, 'But searchers for exact folk-lore need not look to me, there is nothing exact to be found here. I have changed, added [...] in short, made them over to suit my particular vision.'⁹⁶ In her review of *Legends* in *Poetry* in March 1922, Dorothy Dudley laments that the poems are 'too crowded with adjectives, with ornament, with imagery; they are obese with ornament,' and only a few are po-

⁹³ Lowell, Amy. *Pictures of the Floating World*. Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1919. pp. viii-ix.

⁹⁴ She prefaced Annie Shepley Omori and Kochi Dori's *Diaries of Court Ladies of Old Japan*, Winifred Bryher's *Development*, and Hilda Conklin's *Poems by a Little Girl*. All of these books came out in 1920.

⁹⁵ Lowell, Amy. Letter to Edwin Arlington Robinson. January 6, 1920. Cambridge (MA): Houghton Library, MS Lowell 19.1 (1086).

⁹⁶ Lowell, Amy. *Legends*. Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1921.

ems which are of ‘intangible quality.’⁹⁷ Although she acknowledged Lowell’s preface, she claimed that Lowell failed to make them ‘with a vision acute enough to equal the origin of primitive lore’ (331). Notwithstanding Dudley’s opinion, the book was successful and went through its second edition before the end of the same year. Lowell, although disappointed by Dudley’s opinion, did not reply, because she then had to go through a third difficult and painful operation for her hernia.

The operation forced her to cancel many lectures and readings around the country during the summer of 1921 but she continued her collaboration with her friend Ayscough, which resulted in *Fir-Flower Tablets: Poems Translated from the Chinese* published at the end of year in December 1921. The book received severe comments from the editor of *Poetry*, Eunice Tietjens, who took to the task of explaining to readers the state of the Chinese poetic translations.⁹⁸ Although she welcomed Lowell’s book as a further addition in the Chinese translation field ‘since it gives us many and charming poems in a contemporary technique’ (330), she criticized Lowell’s lack of knowledge of Chinese and the colloquialism of the *vers libre*. Basing most of her statements regarding the Chinese prosody and musicality on the study in progress made by Miss Lousie Hammond (incidentally Tietjens’ sister), Tietjens declared that *vers libre* used by Lowell was not the exact rendition of the closest prosodic structure of classic Chinese poetry. Therefore, according to her, Lowell’s translations read too much as if they were her own poems because ‘She has surely too vivid personality to make a good translator’ (331). Lowell’s response to Tietjens appeared in *Poetry*’s December issue of the same year and focused essentially on two aspects of Tietjens’ article: the method used and the free verse implied. Concerning the method, Lowell reaffirmed what she had already explained in the preface of the book; that is that the rendition of the Chinese poems had been done in constant collaboration with the sinologist Ayscough. And she underlined that this collaboration between a Chinese scholar and a poet, in terms of method, was also the novelty of her book.⁹⁹ Concerning her

⁹⁷ Dudley, Dorothy. ‘Miss Lowell’s *Legends*.’ *Poetry* 19.6 (1922): pp. 330-332.

⁹⁸ Tietjens’ article was divided into two parts: the first one was published in the August issue, *Poetry* 20.5 (1922): pp. 268-274. The second part, in which Tietjens specifically refers to Lowell’s *Fir-Flower Tablets*, appeared in the September issue, *Poetry*. 20.6 (1922): pp. 328-332.

⁹⁹ Lowell, Amy. ‘Miss Lowell on Translating Chinese.’ *Poetry* 21.3 (1922): pp. 167-172.

choice in using ‘free verse,’ she pointed out that the poems were actually in ‘strict verse [...] in trimeter’ adding that ‘as to rhyme, the partiality of rhymed or unrhymed translations is merely a matter of taste’ (170). Then, she quoted Dr. Chang Hisn-Hai, a Chinese scholar who in a discussion of Chinese translation, advised to do away with rhymes altogether, explaining that it could ‘impair[ed]’ both the original structure and the meaning as well (171). Lowell ended the letter by questioning Tietjens’ aim in her article, specifically pointing out its potential bias due to the role of Tietjens’ sister.

A response from the editor was included at the end of Lowell’s letter, as was usual in the correspondence section of *Poetry*. Tietjens assured readers that ‘her little excursion into the realm of Chinese translations [...] was merely a warning against thinking we understand the Chinese,’ with no intention to have ‘impugned Miss Lowell’s veracity’ (173). This controversy, however, did not fade and remained in the frequent dialectic discussions among poets, editors and readers characteristic of many avant-garde magazines at the time.¹⁰⁰ It did not affect Lowell’s relationship with *Poetry* (which continued to publish her poems) nor Lowell’s relationship with Tietjens.¹⁰¹

In 1922, Lowell experienced more health complications and underwent an additional operation, yet still she continued her literary and critical work. In June of the same year, her poem *The Sisters*—on three of her female poet predecessors (Sappho, Elisabeth Barrett Browning and Emily Dickinson)—was printed in the *North American Review*.¹⁰² In September, she followed this with *A Critical Fable*, a pamphlet published anonymously and infused with irony, aimed to defend *vers libre* and women’s creativity.¹⁰³ Although her health was not stable, she concentrated her efforts on completing Keats’ biography. The

¹⁰⁰ Letters of protests or complaints from poets and/or readers were not unusual and *Poetry*, among the avant-garde magazines, was the one that gave the most space and relevance to these, with a correspondence section. For example, in the ‘protest section of the *Poetry* issue of May 1922, a reply appeared by the President of the Poetry Society of America, Witter Bynner, to the severe comments made by one of the editors of *Poetry*, Dorothy Dudley, in the *Poetry* issue of April 1922. In the issue of June 1922, there is a letter sent by Louis Untermeyer protesting against what he called ‘an attack on feminist poetry’ made by Yvor Winters in her review of Anna Wickham’s book. *Poetry* 20.3 (1922): pp. 168-170.

¹⁰¹ In the twenty-two letters between Lowell and Tietjens I consulted at Houghton Library, dated from 1916 to 1923, there are no references to this episode; moreover, the letters they exchanged in the middle of 1923 show the same friendly tone and reciprocal appreciation for each other work that characterizes their correspondence from the first letters.

¹⁰² ‘The Sisters’ will be discussed in Chapter Five.

¹⁰³ *A Critical Fable* will be discussed in Chapter Four.

two-volume biography of Keats came out in February 1925, just two months before she suddenly died on May 13.

When she died, she received widespread, notable tributes. One of them, in the form of a poem, appeared in the *Boston Transcript* on May 16, 1925 and offered a vision of her among her younger contemporaries:

Now she is one with the Beauty. She who heard
The call of loveliness in each rare thing
Of craft or nature; lilacs, night of spring,
Feel of warm fur; old volumes, crossed and blurred;
The subtlety of sound, the soul of a word
Her fire-lit group in friendly loitering;
Great tragedy, quick humor; thoughts that sing
In the sweet passion of a bard or bird

Now she is strong, who faltered not in pain
From her beloved task, and joyous she
Who loved bright youth; eager and fleet again,
Companioned in high felicity,
'Among the Poets' whom she died to praise.
Now she is one with Beauty for all days.¹⁰⁴

Three months after Lowell's death, Ada Russell published a collection of poetry called *What's O'Clock*, which Lowell had already prepared and which included 'The Sisters' and her first poem dedicated to Eleonora Duse. This book was awarded the Pulitzer Prize in August 1926. Lowell's poems continued to be published all over the country in newspapers and magazines. In 1926 and 1927, respectively, Russell edited Lowell's second and third posthumous collections, *East Wind* and *Ballads for Sale*, the latter of which contains the other poems Lowell wrote for Duse.

¹⁰⁴ Brown, Abbie Farwell. 'Amy Lowell.' *Boston Transcript*, May 16 1925. Cambridge (MA): Houghton Library, MS AM (1597). Brown was a young student who met Lowell during one of her lecture tours around the universities of Massachusetts.

In 1930, some of her articles and unpublished essays were collected in *Poetry and Poets* by Houghton Mifflin Company, the publisher house with whom Lowell published her first book of poems before turning to Macmillan Company when she realised the poor success of this first publication. Macmillan had published both Lowell's brothers' books, and, therefore, as Damon argued in his biography to her, she would have had more chance to obtain a liberal contract. Damon emphasised as well, Lowell's 'ability to handle money-matters' (221) when early in 1914, she secured her contract with Macmillan agreeing to give all the other writings to them but retaining for herself the right to sell her single poems to whomever she decided. In fact, many of her poems appeared in magazines and newspapers before as well as after their publication in volumes and she kept royalties for herself. In 1955, Lowell's *Complete Poetical Works* was published by Macmillan with an introduction by Louis Untermeyer.

In accordance with Lowell's will, Ada Russell donated Lowell's library to Harvard University soon after her death in May 1925. The Lowell collection is huge. There are more than three hundred boxes that include volumes, diaries, school notebooks, scrapbook, clips, and miscellaneous notebooks including early compositions, paper dolls' houses and later notes on historical topics as well as on Lowell's own lectures. The book collection, kept in the Amy Lowell Gallery on the second floor of Houghton, consists mostly of American and English literature of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Most of the books (such as Bronte's copy of John James Audubon's *Birds of America*) were duplicates and thus were not kept by Harvard at the time, and this, most likely, makes it more difficult to have a complete list of the original books in her library.¹⁰⁵ The Lowell Room at Houghton displays a portion (nearly two-thirds) of Lowell's books while others she owned as a child are kept in an off-site storage facility. Harvard's collection also includes her vast correspondence with influential *literati* of her time (some hand-written by Lowell and others typed and signed by her secretary).¹⁰⁶ Lowell's correspondence (more than two

¹⁰⁵ In the Lowell room a selection of manuscripts is also kept. Several manuscripts were acquired later with the support of the Amy Lowell Trust Fund, such as Tennyson's notebooks.

¹⁰⁶ The correspondents include Thomas Hardy, Sara Teasdale, Harriet Monroe, D.H. Lawrence, Ezra Pound, Richard Aldington, H.D., Lola Ridge, Josephine Preston Peabody, Victoria Sackville-West, Florence Ayscough, William Rose Benét, Paul Fort, Maxwell Bodenheim, Winifred Bryher, Robert Frost,

thousand letters) is divided into five series: letters to Amy Lowell (from more than one thousand different correspondents), copies of her outgoing letters (after 1913), some correspondence between others, and letters of condolence addressed to Lowell's companion Ada Russell, and to other members of Lowell's family upon her death.¹⁰⁷ Although in many of the letters consulted at Harvard, the age and the imperfection in their first cataloguing system are visible—eaten margins, some intelligible words, dates often missing and in some cases wrong—they are quite well kept.¹⁰⁸

Lowell's biographers have consulted Lowell's vast correspondence, as well as her diaries, in relation to her life and her books. However, this huge collection, with its references to the other relevant figures of the modernism period (Sara Teasdale, H.D., Edna Vincent St. Millay, Harriet Monroe, among many others) constitutes a gold-mine, at present by no means exhausted by critics and scholars, for further study of the network of artists of the time, their vision of society, and their contribution to, and role in the poetic field at the turn of the twentieth century.

0.3. Amy Lowell: Critical Reception after her Death

The popularity as well as the critical respect Lowell obtained during her thirteen years of intense poetic and critical activity has been translated poorly in those few critical studies after her death. In particular, the attitude of Lowell's earlier biographers gives rise to many questions about Lowell's marginalisation from literary history. When exploring the relationship between her persona and her texts, the majority of the critics focus mostly on the former; they reinforce the idea of Lowell as 'ruler,' a rich, competitive woman who did not marry and was not conventionally attractive; therefore, she had nothing better to do than compete with male artists and attempt to conquer the poetic realm. Her goal to

Marianne Moore, Vachel Alfred Lindsay, Edgar Lee Masters, Grace Conkling, William Butler Yeats, Havelock Ellis, and Elizabeth Shepley Sergeant.

¹⁰⁷ I am in debt to Ms. Leslie Morris, curator of Modern Books and Manuscripts at the Houghton Library, who kindly answered my queries during and after my research visit to the Houghton Library. She is still working to complete the list of Lowell's books, which will hopefully become available next year.

¹⁰⁸ A letter written by Richard Aldington to Lowell, for example, is dated May 1914, but in it, Aldington mentions the sinking of the Lusitania, which happened in May 1915. Aldington, Richard. Letter to Lowell. Houghton Library, MS Lowell 19.1 (16)

be a 'professional' with the pen most likely puzzled many of the critics, and upset most of them. Indeed, Lowell did not fit the stereotype of a woman at the time. Entering the literary world at the turn of the twentieth century as a self-taught female poet while belonging to the cultural elite, made her confusing and 'unintelligible' to her critics.

The exclusion, as well as the later inclusion at the middle of the twentieth century, of her poetical and critical works in literary history and the debate that her position elicited among select critics, reveal how the difficult path she took toward citizenship in the artistic world and in society, was not taken into much consideration by critics. Generally, critics preferred to investigate her work inside rigid categories based essentially on class differences and sexual differences, diminishing or often ignoring the social denunciations infused in them concerning the limited role of female poets in the artistic field. They did not explore the possibility that for Lowell, poetry was also the means that enabled her to explore her womanhood in all its variations. Such less investigated aspects makes Lowell's position among critics, both male and female, quite unstable, and reveals the problems trying to fit her into rigid categories.

Most of Lowell's biographies reveal a prejudicial attitude towards her wealth and critics use the fact that she had an influential family to belittle her literary works. Since the poetical vocation pushed Lowell to the centre of the cultural scene, her social status and ancestors became relevant to how contemporaries and later critics addressed and viewed her literary achievements. The focus in their critical works is in fact more on these aspects than on analysis of the body of Lowell's poetry, and her contribution to the literary history. It leads us to question their assumptions regarding her 'atypical' figure in the literary panorama.

One year after her death, the first reflection on Lowell was published: *Amy Lowell* by Clement Wood.¹⁰⁹ In it, Wood (1888-1950) pays great heed to particular aspects of Lowell's personal life: her size, her bad habits, her chain-smoked cigars, her sleeping hours, and how she slept with more than a dozen pillows. Wood had met Lowell during one of her readings in New York when he was a law student at Yale; he was a socialist, 'an extreme radical,' as

¹⁰⁹ Wood, Clement. *Amy Lowell*. New York: Harold Vinal, 1926. pp. 184-185.

John Reed described him in his review of Wood's first book of poems in the socialist magazine, *The Masses*.¹¹⁰ In his narrative of Lowell, Wood emphasises her social class, which, according to him, prevented her from understanding the injustice and inequality of the class-based society. For this reason, Lowell's feelings could not be 'universal' feelings: she could only speak for her social class. The abundance of adjectives, verbs, and images from her gardens, are highlighted negatively and linked to the 'abundance' of her wealth. Wood also refers to her 'strange' habits—'chronological perverse, from a standpoint of the normal man or woman [...] though most prefer the day for work, and the night for relaxation and sleep (34).' Wood uses information about her life gathered from 'talks' with Lowell's friends, without ever mentioning their names. Further information about her life comes directly from his insights from Lowell's poems—which he analyses based on his vision of poetry and his knowledge of Freudian's theories. He claims that the reason for her engagement with poetry, for example, was because her body was 'plump rather than graceful' and her 'appearance and conduct toward the masculine.' Poetry, therefore, was her defensive mechanism—'her defensive shell' (23)—which enabled Lowell's 'sense of power, and her longing for more of the sweet taste of domineeringness' (23). Moreover, in reporting his conversation with Lowell about poetry during one of his visits to her mansion, Wood highlights her temperament: '[s]he uttered cordial allegiance of poetry, and told me that after all, my function was not that of a voice of protest, but of a "serf to beauty"' (31).

At the time they met, Wood's second book had received many severe critiques in *Poetry*, and in Lowell's *Tendencies in Modern American Poetry* (1917), she did not mention his works.¹¹¹ Wood resented this and disparaged *Tendencies* as 'sublimated logrolling.' Wood explains Lowell's protest in a way that highlights his opinion on her need for power: 'she became impassionate in protestations,' although, according to him 'not so much outraged at my attitude, for we remained and parted as friends,' though she seemed 'baffled and impotent at her inability to convert me' (31). Concerning Lowell's in-

¹¹⁰ Reed, John. 'Clement Wood.' *The Masses* 9.7 (1917): p. 30.

¹¹¹ In her review of Wood's *The Earth Turns South*, Marjorie Allen Seiffert commented that 'from calm certitude, or willing quiescence as his, no great poetry can be born.' Seiffert, Allen Marjorie. 'The Earth Turns South.' *Poetry* 15.1 (October 1919): pp. 51-53. Wood's third book, *The Tide Come In*, was negatively reviewed by Harriet Monroe under the scathing title 'Driftwood.' *Poetry* 24.1 (1924): pp. 51-52.

volvement with the Imagist movement, he refers to it in terms of a fight for its leadership. Wood is dismissive of Lowell's life and career to the point of spitefulness and forges a path that other critics would follow. In particular, Wood deplores her habit of 'singing her love' in a masculine way and points out that, even with some great poets like Shakespeare, Shelley, Byron and Whitman, '[T]here was such a blend, of the characteristics of the two sexes [but] they remained predominantly men, with a man's attitude' (173). The critic explains Lowell's 'vigour' in singing human love quite clearly: '[y]et she was a woman; which brings up the essential paradox of her being and singing, the essential limitation of the group for whom she speaks' (174). He ends the one hundred and eighty-five pages by claiming that '[h]er pain came from unique and non-general causes; her poetry is unique and correspondingly non-general ... Amy Lowell, neither distinguished poet nor great critic, was still Amy Lowell, and played her part well. The rest may ultimately be largely silence' (185).

Defying this prediction, *Amy Lowell: A Chronicle with Extracts from Her Correspondence* appeared in 1935. It was authorised by Ada Russell to S. Foster Damon, poet, critic, and Lowell's friend.¹¹² This bulky volume remains one of the most referenced by scholars and students of Lowell. The richness of details Damon provides about her life and correspondence fills the gaps in understanding of Lowell's life since she asked Russell to burn most of her correspondence. Although Damon is reticent about Lowell and Russell's relationship, his dedication of the book echoes that which Lowell once made to Russell in her Keats biography: 'To/ A.D.R./ This, and All My Books.' Damon modifies it to 'For/ A.D.R./ To Whom All The Books/ Also The Biography.'

Twenty years later, the poet and critic Louis Untermeyer (1885-1977) gathered Lowell's entire body of poetry in *The Complete Poetical Works of Amy Lowell*, with a short introductory 'memoir' that deals mostly with Lowell's 'unusual habits,' her struggle in the name of poetry, and her unstable health—and includes very few words about the poems themselves.¹¹³ Untermeyer was a socialist, as well, and one of the prolific contributors to *The Masses*. His friendship with Lowell was a strong one: he and his wife—the

¹¹² Damon, S. Foster. *Amy Lowell: A Chronicle, with Extracts from her Correspondence*. Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1935. Hereafter: *Amy Lowell: A Chronicle*.

¹¹³ Untermeyer, Louis, *The Complete Poetical Works of Amy Lowell*. Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1955.

poet Jean Starr of whom Lowell gave an ironic account in her satirical pamphlet *A Critic Fable*—were often guests in Lowell's house, went to the theatre and restaurants together and participated in the same social occasions. Moreover, until 1923, Untermeyer worked as a salesman in his father's jewelry manufacturing company, and Lowell used to buy her pieces of jewellery from him. As Melissa Bradshaw suggests in *Amy Lowell. Diva Poet*, this financial complication in their relationship might compromise his position as critic of her poetry, because, according to Bradshaw, Lowell 'wield[ed] a power' on him not unlike the one of a 'patron towards his merchant.'¹¹⁴ Although this might seem suspicious and reflect class prejudice, other factors might have influenced his unbalanced account of Lowell. These include the negative critiques expressed by previous critics on Lowell and his resentment at not having been asked to write Lowell's biography.

Three years after Untermeyer's book, another volume was published about Lowell, this time by the poet and college professor, Horace Gregory (1898-1982). His 'interpretative historical essay,' as he calls it, offers nothing new but has a clear hostility towards Lowell.¹¹⁵ Gregory follows Wood's perspectives, creating an even more crass caricature of Lowell, satirizing her poems, taking pleasure in the fact that Sevenels 'is now no longer in Lowell's hands' (212), and envisaging her future as a recipient of D. H. Lawrence's letters (213). He ends his book echoing Lowell's poem 'Astigmatic' (a poem she dedicated to Ezra Pound), in which she plays ironically with Pound's walking stick: 'If at Sevenels a spirit still haunts the magnificent gardens, it is one of Amy Lowell, her weight held upright by her walking stick' (213).¹¹⁶ His resentment of her social status, wealth, and struggle for poetry is palpable on each page. Moreover, Gregory echoes Woods' opinion in affirming that Lowell's 'verses expressed her observations and opinions which were often forthright' (118).

Undoubtedly, the portrayals of Lowell by Wood and Gregory—
influenced also by their own political assumptions—do not serve to illuminate Lowell's poetry. Following in their footsteps in 1969, another biographer, Pro-

¹¹⁴ Bradshaw, Melissa. *Amy Lowell, Diva Poet*. New York: Ashgate, 2011. p. 10.

¹¹⁵ Gregory, Horace. *Amy Lowell: Portrait of the Poet in her Time*. Freeport: Books for Libraries Press, 1958. p. 205.

¹¹⁶ Lowell's poem 'Astigmatic' will be discussed in Chapter Four.

fessor F. Cudworth Flint, argues that ‘Period histories of American literature are unlikely to bear the title “The Age of Amy Lowell”.’¹¹⁷

Finally, in 1975, with Glen Richard Ruihley’s *The Thorn of a Rose: Amy Lowell Reconsidered*¹¹⁸ and Jean Gould’s *Amy: The World of Amy Lowell and the Imagist Movement*,¹¹⁹ the absence of serious studies on Lowell and her exclusion from literary history started to be questioned. Ruihley doubts the objectivity of the so-called ‘new critics,’ particularly regarding the Pound-Lowell quarrel about the leadership of the Imagist movement because these critics were followers of T. S. Eliot and Ezra Pound. According to Ruihley, they denigrated Lowell’s works. In analysing Lowell’s poetry, Ruihly points out a mystical call infused in them: ‘the subject that is treated is experience of the Divine, and this is conceived not as mindless force of science but as a Sacred Presence’ (64). In tackling Lowell’s relationship with Russell, he cautiously claims:

Mrs. Russell was credited with giving Amy Lowell ‘a heart,’ and her services to the poet in advice and literary research were of untold value. In return Amy gave unstintingly to Mrs. Russell, in every sense, and after her death this included even her home and her fortune in trust. Though the relationship could not replace the lost domain of love, it was a mating of souls which ended Miss Lowell’s protracted loneliness and gave her the spirit to carry forward her career (111).

Gould, too, offers a new lens to examine Lowell and Pound’s quarrel, emphasising that Pound found it unacceptable that he could not exercise total power over the small groups of poets gathered in London. Gould gives detailed accounts of Lowell’s second trip to London, confirming that she obtained D. H. Lawrence’s consent to be included in the first American anthologies of the Imagist poets (125-132). Gould’s and Ruihley’s approaches to Lowell joined the debate about the overlooked role of female artists which feminist critics and scholars including Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, Shari Benstock, and

¹¹⁷ Flint, F. Cudworth. *Amy Lowell*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1969. p. 45.

¹¹⁸ Ruihley, Glen Richard. *The Thorn of a Rose: Amy Lowell Reconsidered*. Hamden (CT): Archon Books, 1975. p. 11. Hereafter: *Amy Lowell Reconsidered*.

¹¹⁹ Gould, Jean. *Amy: The World of Amy Lowell and the Imagist Movement*. New York: Mead & Company, 1975. Hereafter: *Lowell and the Imagist Movement*.

Elaine Showalter had started around the same time, in the middle of the twentieth century. The works of these feminist critics made a valuable contribution in bringing to the surface numerous works belonging to a largely 'forgotten' rank of women artists in the 1970s and '80s; Edna St. Vincent Millay, H.D., and Marianne Moore were investigated and their works analysed in search of a female lineage.¹²⁰ Language and sexual differences became relevant aspects of such critical studies how they might 'mark' the imagination in the creative act also became an area of investigation. Gender began to be conceived as a category of analysis in its own right. In 1988, Gubar and Gilbert included Lowell in *No Man's Land*, thus making amends for not having included her previously in their *Shakespeare's Sisters* or *The Madwoman in the Attic*. The important work undertaken by feminists and scholars to retrace female literary history was not a path free from risks, particularly highlighted by feminists' and critics' motivations for including or excluding female poets and writers.

In the introduction to *Women of the Left Bank: Paris, 1900-1940*, her substantial study of expatriated English and American women in Paris at the turn of the twentieth century, Shari Benstock points out the contribution of these female artists to the modernist experience. She highlights how often it appears 'catalogued in footnotes to biographies of James Joyce, T.S. Eliot, and Ezra Pound.'¹²¹ She denounces, as well, a general prevailing 'misogynistic' attitude among critics and scholars in dealing with those 'powerful communities' established by lesbian and heterosexual female modernists in Paris (x-xi). Years later, in her preface to *Gender Trouble*, Judith Butler also emphasises that many feminists of the 1970s and 1980s assumed that lesbians were necessarily feminists or adopted feminist practices.¹²² Her point still raises questions about the destiny of those female artists who did not conform to these assump-

¹²⁰ See, among others, Elaine Showalter's *The Female Malady: Women, Madness and English Culture, 1838-1980*. London: Virago, 2011; and *A Jury of Her Peers: Celebrating American Women Writers from Anne Bradstreet to Annie Proulx*. New York: Random House Vintage Books, 2010; Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar's *No Man's Land: The Place of the Woman Writer in the Twentieth Century*, Volume 1: *The War of the Words* and Volume 2: *Sexchanges*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988 and 1989; *The Madwoman in the Attic*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979; and *Shakespeare's Sisters: Feminist Essays on Women Poets*. Bloomington & London: Indiana University Press, 1979.

¹²¹ Benstock, Shari. *Women of the Left Bank: Paris, 1900-1940*. Austin: University of Texas Press, 1988.

p. x.

¹²² Butler, Judith. *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. New York: Routledge, 2007 (1990).

tions. Were they dismissed because they did not fit into the literary canon forged in a male-oriented literary world?

Ultimately, two very different, irreconcilable issues about Lowell's reception are raised, both of which reflect the period of the critic and/or historian writing, both of which impact the perception and reception of the female artist. The first is the attitude of male critics who, addressing Lowell's appearance in the cultural scene, were mostly influenced by her social status; the second is the assumption of feminist critics that all lesbians were feminists. These critical issues have animated, and will continue to animate, feminist and critical debates and studies. Here they cast light on the nature of Lowell's rediscovery. If her initial marginalisation was due mostly to the male critics' class resentment, and her entry into a public sphere (perceived mostly as male dominion), her later inclusion in literary history was tied to the growth of queer studies.¹²³

Other aspects of Lowell's work have been overlooked by focusing on sexual differences, thus placing her in a category that does not illuminate both her poetical achievements and her broad cultural contribution to literary history. Undoubtedly, the reconstruction of the female poet's contribution to literary history also raises many questions and doubts connected to race, sex, and social class in feminist debates. In his contribution to the first collective critical Study of Amy Lowell, 'Amy Lowell and Cultural Border's in 2004, Paul Lauter states that states that many female poets 'continued to be marginalised even in the midst of a feminist revival.'¹²⁴ Comparing publications of the last two decades devoted to the modernist writers, he points out some crucial differences: 'interest in Lowell declined sharply after her death in 1925 and writers like Pound and Eliot, and even Stein and H.D., preoccupy the academics most likely to produce books and articles on literary subjects' (2).

Years before, the scholar Mary E. Galvin denounced how heterosexist discourse was 'the hidden ruling category in our culture' and was at the core of the literary canon in the 1970s and 1980s.¹²⁵ According to her, heterosexism

¹²³ For the increasing presence of women in the public sphere and their perception, see the first section of this Introduction.

¹²⁴ Lauter, Paul. 'Amy Lowell and Cultural Borders.' *Amy Lowell, American Modern*. Eds. Adrienne Munich and Melissa Bradshaw. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2004. pp.1-8.

¹²⁵ Galvin, Mary, E. *Queer Poetics: Five Modernist Women Writers*. Westport: Praeger Publishers, 1999. p. 2. Hereafter: *Queer Poetics*. Galvin investigates the positions of Emily Dickinson, Amy Lowell, Gertrude Stein, Mina Loy, Djuna Barnes, and H.D. from a queer perspective.

pushed many women to the sidelines and marginalised their contribution to the literary canon. She claims that Lowell's exclusion from the literary canon was due to 'a homophobic reaction to her overt lesbianism' (7). A few years later, In *The Wicked Sisters: Women Poets, Literary History & Discord*, Betsy Erkkila questions the assumption of the rescue operation of the female predecessor. She writes about the risks of creating the same stereotyped image of women, which for so long oppressed them in patriarchal society, since efforts to retrace a female genealogy and a bond of sisterhood have resulted in a political exclusion from literary history. According to her, 'the almost exclusive focus on sexual difference [...] along with the corresponding emphasis on women's culture, women's writing, and women's language, virtually erased the multiple and various race, class, ethnic, cultural, and other locations of women within a particular social field.'¹²⁶ In underlining the tendency among feminist scholars to 'privilege certain kinds of women writers,' she uses Lowell's 'The Sisters' to confirm 'the difficulty and complexity of sisterhood as an affirming model of women's literary history' (8).

In 'Family Matters,' Adrienne Munich analyses 'The Sisters' and categorises Lowell as 'a not-quite feminist,'¹²⁷ while Cheryl Walker, approximately a decade earlier, underlines Lowell's androgynous persona.¹²⁸ According to Walker's contemporary, Betsy Erkkila, Lowell struggled 'to stay in the category "woman" at a time when early modern discourse on the "mannish" or "butch" lesbian was telling her that lesbians were indeed "not women"' (14). In Lowell's time, 'the only choice available' was 'man, woman, or pervert' (14). This point is also highlighted by Mary Galvin in *Queer Poetics*. She emphasises that in the patriarchal vision of society at that time, heterosexuality represented the only option for 'female sexual activity' (27). A sexually inactive woman would be forced into the stereotype of the spinster, and this figure would generally be burdened with gendered attributes that trivialised and dis-

¹²⁶ Erkkila, Betsy. *The Wicked Sisters: Women Poets, Literary History & Discord*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1992. p. 7. Hereafter: *The Wicked Sisters*. Despite considerable criticism, Erkkila maintains the category of 'woman poet,' embracing the concept of difference and acknowledging the risk of remaining entrapped within categories.

¹²⁷ Munich, Adrienne. 'Family Matters.' *Amy Lowell, American Modern*. Eds. Adrienne Munich and Melissa Bradshaw. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2004. pp. 9-26. As her title suggests, Munich asserts that Lowell's quest for a sisterhood bond must be seen more as a personal struggle to be 'the first' inside her familial group than as a struggle for a universal recognition of her 'sisters.'

¹²⁸ Walker, Cheryl. *Masks Outrageous and Austere*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991. pp. 16-43. Hereafter: *Masks Outrageous*.

missed her (27). Undoubtedly, that attitude also played a part in reducing and limiting any eventual social and political comparison of this ‘category’ with the common view of the relationship between man and woman and their roles in society.

Both Jean Gould and Mary Galvin see Lowell’s absence from the modernist scene as due more to this than to her poetical achievements; her poetic value was often *weighted* in referring to her *stoutness*. In spite of her active participation in literary and academic spheres during her lifetime, Lowell’s own poetical and critical works have seen little substantial feminist discussion, and there have been few monographs or critical studies on Lowell outside the United States of America. In Italy, for example, a partial collection of Lowell’s poems was published in 1990 for the first time. Compared to other European countries, Italy paid the least attention to Lowell and the feminist debate about her, and the collection was the result of a series of academic courses on translation held over the years by the scholar Barbara Lanati at the University of Turin.¹²⁹ Before Lanati’s collection, Lowell appears in a 1968 anthology, which focuses primarily on Imagist poets.¹³⁰ Critical studies of Lowell are few in France and Spain as well, although it is at least possible to find translations of some of her poetry collections in these countries.

The first relevant collection of critical essays on her work did not appear until 2004. This collection was edited by Adrienne Munich and Melissa Bradshaw (the latter had published a collection of Lowell’s poems two years previously).¹³¹ These two co-editors must certainly take credit for re-opening Lowell’s case and for re-contextualising her work in her time, offering a broader ground for both social and literary investigation. They also illuminate Lowell’s contribution to early modernist aesthetics at the turn of the twentieth century, though one aspect of Lowell’s modernism—in term of her conception of a literature as not elitist, contrasting with Pound’s idea—has not been sufficiently investigated.

¹²⁹ Lanati, Barbara. *Amy Lowell: Poesie*. Turin: Einaudi, 1990.

¹³⁰ Ruggeri, Paolo. *La Parola e l’Immagine: antologia dei poeti imagisti da Ezra Pound a Amy Lowell*. Milan: Mursia, 1968.

¹³¹ Lowell, Amy. *Selected Poems of Amy Lowell*. Eds. Melissa Bradshaw and Adrienne Munich. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2002.

Earlier receptions of Lowell from critics such as Wood in 1926 and Horace in 1950 undoubtedly entrenched a certain caricature of Lowell. Her re-appearance in the critical works of feminist scholars, however, is generally in the context of her unstable positions as feminist, lesbian, or queer. None of these labels are satisfactory, and Bradshaw's *Amy Lowell. Diva Poet*, published in 2011, which offers another fresh perspective on reading Lowell's lifestyle as her conscious self-construction as a diva, goes some way to amend this.¹³² Bradshaw rereads Lowell's popularity in her time as due to the image that she constructed for her American audience in order to both enlarge the poetry readership and popularise her own poetry. Although Bradshaw argues that Lowell consciously created her own category or legend, there is a risk of re-inscribing Lowell into it and diverting attention from her poetry in this new re-reading. It was through this legend, her intelligence, her passion for the beauty of the world, and her size that Lowell expressed herself and her desire to be in the world.

Bradshaw has certainly made steps toward freeing Lowell from the caricatural image of an overweight, 'rich, headstrong, opinionated, self-promoting, cigar-smoking [...] lesbian' (27) into which so many previous critics have forced Lowell. However, the preoccupation with Lowell's lifestyle, her lesbianism, and her 'male attitude' still seems to persist. Carl Rollyson, in the first page of his introduction to *Amy Lowell Anew: A Biography*, published in 2013, summarises Lowell's career using expressions that once again focus on her strong will, her ancestry, and her size.¹³³ Referring to her involvement with the Imagist movement, he writes, '[s]he had wrested the Imagist movement away from Pound,' and in the subsequent paragraph he calls her 'the pugnacious Lowell' and ends with, '[s]tanding only five feet tall and weighing as much as 250 pounds, she made good copy. The sister of Harvard's president, she smoked cigars and cursed' (xvi). Although *Lowell Anew* is enriched with many other details of Lowell's life and her relationship with Russell, it ultimately also brings to light another affair that Lowell had before meeting Russell. According to Rollyson, Lowell's first published poem in 1910, 'A Fixed Idea,' is the result of her feelings for Elizabeth Seccombe, a young woman she

¹³² Bradshaw, Melissa. *Amy Lowell, Diva Poet*. New York: Ashgate, 2011. pp. 4-5.

¹³³ Rollyson, Carl. *Amy Lowell Anew: A Biography*. Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2013.

met during one of her cross-country readings. The relationship was apparently broken by Lowell, and the poem, according to him, reflects that bond. Rollynson is mostly focused on the problem of dating the poem, in order to support his point; and ultimately, he admits that he cannot assert the date of her composition to better support his point because of Lowell's habit of destroying every draft of her poems as soon as they were finished.¹³⁴

The one-way lens which seems to have guided and obsessed critics, both male and female, to dig into Lowell's private life to find evidence of her sexuality reflected in her poems or vice versa may explain why other aspects of Lowell's poetical and critical thought have been neglected and merit a more in-depth investigation. Adrienne Rich, in her speech for a lecture at Brandeis University in 1975, asserted that the key to a female artist's life and work is to ask 'how she came to be for herself and how she identified with and was able to use women's culture, a women's tradition; and what the presence of other women meant in her life.'¹³⁵ This study will follow Rich's advice and contribute to the investigation into Lowell's life and works, in the context of 'difference' and plurality nurtured in the space of poetry, thus allowing Lowell herself to re-narrate the complexities of her womanhood.

¹³⁴ Rollynson, *Amy Lowell Anew*. p. 32.

¹³⁵ Rich, Adrienne. *Adrienne Rich's Poetry and Prose*. Eds. Barbara Charlesworth Gelpi and Albert Gelpi. New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1993. p. 177.

Chapter One

Amy Lowell: Enchanted by Theatre

The theatre was a special place for Lowell from a young age. In her journals, which run from 1889 to 1890, she describes what made her days in Brookline, Massachusetts, exciting and memorable.¹ In that majestic mansion of her home Sevenels, she wrote about books, visitors, schooldays, dreams, plays she saw, and games she played.² Although her fifteen-year-old handwriting is at times indecipherable, her enthusiasm for theatre is quite apparent. Her parents were habitual theatre-goers and brought along the little Amy as soon as she was able to behave. Indeed, according to S. Foster Damon, the Boston Theatre ‘became one of her favorite spots.’³

The role of the theatre in Lowell’s life has been treated by critics and scholars as an inconsequential idiosyncrasy, without any further exploration. They never question, for example, what exactly it was about the theatre that enticed Lowell into the realm of poetry, or how the theatrical scene opened up a space for her through which she could establish a new image and conception of herself. Specifically, Lowell’s choice of the Italian actress Eleonora Duse (1858-1924) as her living muse merits exploration in order to understand how the theatrical scene, and Duse’s new acting specifically, fuelled Lowell’s desire to become a poet. The aim of this first chapter is to retrace that theatrical path, overlooked by critics, and to explore its consequences for Lowell’s artistic life.

It is divided into three sections: the first, based on her journals consulted at Houghton Library in Boston, will establish Lowell’s interest in the theatre. The second will briefly investigate new tendencies in theatre at the turn of the twentieth century, shedding light on those rumblings of revolt in the art form that, with the advent of new technology, changed the world as Lowell and

¹ Lowell’s journals and correspondence used here were consulted from the Amy Lowell Collection at Houghton Library, Harvard University, in Cambridge, Massachusetts.

² Augustus Lowell named his house Sevenels because his family had seven members.

³ Damon, S. Foster. *Amy Lowell: A Chronicle, with Extracts from her Correspondence*. Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1935. pp. 47-48. Hereafter: *Amy Lowell: A Chronicle*. Damon published Lowell’s biography ten years after her death. It is based mostly on first hand interviews with Ada Russell, Lowell’s friends and relatives, her letters, and Damon’s personal acquaintance with the poet.

the generations before her had known it. The third section will focus on those relevant traits of the theatre embodied by the Italian actress Eleonora Duse, who, according to Lowell, ‘revealed me to myself.’⁴ The theoretical frame offered by Russell Lynes’ *The Lively Audience: A Social History of Visual and Performing Arts in America, 1890-1950*,⁵ along with Edward Gordon Graig’s *On the Art of the Theatre*,⁶ Silvio D’Amico’s *Storia del Teatro*,⁷ Susan Bassnett’s *Bernhardt, Terry, Duse*⁸ and Diana Tietjens Meyers’ *Gender in the Mirror*,⁹ among others, will heavily inform this chapter. In summary, this chapter will serve as an important framework and basis for further investigations carried out later in the study.

1.1. *The Theatre through Lowell’s Journals*¹⁰

Lowell opens her journal of January 1889 with some comments on a play she saw: ‘Went to see Mary Anderson in *A Winter’s Tale* with Lawrence [her brother] and Anna [Lawrence’s wife] this evening. Perfectly splendid [underlined in the original]. I could go to the theater every night, the light, the people, the plays, everything is delightful’ (January 2). Lowell was fifteen at that time and every aspect of the theatre captivated her; her comments generally include both her judgment of the plays and the settings. After having seen *Othello* a few days later, for example, she reports: ‘[It] was nice but not so nice as *The Winter’s Tale*. In one scene they have a very bad copy of the Madonna which struck me as being really profane, in a Theatre’ (January 26). In addition to the plays at the Boston Museum, Amy was regularly taken to other performances to see great actors and hear great singers. She knew many songs by heart, including those of the librettist W. S. Gilbert (1836–1911) and the composer Arthur Sullivan (1842–1900). However, her comments on their last work are not

⁴ Lowell, Amy. Letter to Eunice (Hammond) Tietjens. MS Lowell 19.1 (1287).

⁵ Lynes, Russell. *The Lively Audience: A Social History of the Visual and Performing Arts in America, 1890-1950*. New York: Harper & Row, 1985. pp. 7-8. Hereafter: *The Lively Audience*.

⁶ Graig, Edward Gordon. *On the Art of the Theatre*. London: Butler & Tanner, 1911.

⁷ d’Amico, Silvio. *Storia del Teatro: L’Ottocento-Il Teatro Contemporaneo*. Vol. 2. Milan: Garzanti, 1970.

⁸ Bassnett, Susan. *Bernhardt, Terry, Duse: The Actress in her Time*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988. pp. 119-170.

⁹ Meyers, Diana Tietjens. *Gender in the Mirror*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2002.

¹⁰ Lowell, Amy. Journals. 1889-1890. January 2, 1889. MS Lowell 38 (1).

enthusiastic. On February 16, referring to their last play, she reports: 'It was not very good,' although she sang their songs to her nephews and nieces to entertain them when her sister came to visit the family at Sevenels.

When a play was intriguing to her, she often became deeply involved with it, and if there was a script or a book of it, she wanted to have it. After she saw the play *David Garrick*, for example, she noted the same evening: 'I have sent for the play of *David Garrick*. Nothing has ever appealed to me like that. There is a spot in my heart which nothing had ever touched till I saw that play. I hope reading it will be the same' (November 8). Lowell's feelings for the play went so far as to relate to the romantic side of her life: 'I should like to marry a man like D.G. [...] However I don't suppose he was really a bit like that. I hope he was though, it is nice to think of one gentleman in an age when most of men were beast[s]' (November 8). She was so enchanted by the theatrical world that in one of her scrapbooks, one of the rooms of her paper dollhouse was a painted theatre. During that same month, she also manifested her desire to write a play: 'The plot is all on a letter,' she reports 'and generally mixed up' (November 16). Lowell gives updates on the progress of her play, including the names and roles of the characters and, a year later, she finally finds a title for it.¹¹

Lowell also reports on the opinions of others regarding the plays she saw. About *The Rivals*, she notes: 'Of course it was fine,' and then adds her brother's opinion: 'Lawrence says it's the brightest play since Shakespeare' (November 16). Lowell is precise in referring to the titles of those plays that in one way or another struck her fantasies as well as her feelings. After she saw *The Battle of Bunker Hill*, for example, she feels patriotic: 'It made me feel very patriotic indeed,' while another play, *The Iron Master*, which she saw with her parents in the same period (December 1889), made her cry: 'I did not care much for this acting, though the play was fine. It made me cry.' She didn't appreciate *The Gondoliers* much, and on seeing the Greek play *Antigone*, the young Lowell, then about sixteen years old, also reveals her taste and competence in music: 'It was perfectly fine. They used Phunitic's translation and

¹¹ 'Some time ago I said I was trying to write a play. Well I'm writing it. It is called *Plot and Counter Plot*. Mamma and Bessie seem to think it's rather good.' Lowell, Amy. Journals. 1889-1890. March 3, 1890. MS Lowell 38 (2).

Mendelson's music transposed for women's voices by Mr. Lang' (March 13, 1890). Her enchantment with theatre continued to deepen and, on May 6 of the same year, 1890, she reports in her journal, 'Went to the Comedy Club with Polly. We have decided to act a play. This happened on Wednesday.' And a few days later she records the title of the play they would act—Oliver Goldsmith's play, *She Stoops to Conquer*. All of the people she gathered for this enterprise were female, who would act in both male and female roles. Lowell chose a male part for herself. At this point, she encountered her mother's disapproval and consequently comments on theatre became less frequent in her diary. On May 18, she reports, without showing any resentment of it, 'Mamma does not want me to act as a man; so we have given the play up.'¹²

During her childhood, Lowell was not particularly aware of the great debates surrounding the theatre and dominating most of the daily newspapers. For her, theatre was a magical place where stories about people and life were told, where emotions¹³ could be expressed, and where actresses were 'pretty.'¹⁴ She showed curiosity and interest in the real lives of the actors and actresses and, like every fan of her age, cut out and collected the pictures of her favourites. When one day her friend Polly asked her to go to buy pictures of Emma V. Sheridan, the actress she admired most, and she realised that the shop was closed (the following day was Washington's birthday), she records the event in her diary with a note of frustration: 'Just my luck!!!' (January 21, 1890). A few days later, when she had finally acquired the photos, she notes:

They do not do her justice. Oh! She must be a fine woman (with a lot of character I mean). Her face is so sweet; so loving; so tender; so true; and yet so strong. It shows a great deal of character I think. To me, it is a face so beautiful; oh! She must be what I imagine her to be. She must have high thought and a very high ideal. Oh! I wish I wish I could know her and find out (January 24).

¹² Lowell, Amy. Journals. 1889-1890. MS Lowell 39 (2).

¹³ Years later, in her essay 'Why We Should Read Poetry,' Lowell will define poetry as 'the height and the quintessence of emotion, of every sort of emotion.' Lowell, Amy. *Poetry and Poets: Essays*. New York: Biblio and Tannen, 1971. p. 4. This essay will be explored in Chapter Three.

¹⁴ On January 22, 1889, she went to see *London Assurance*, which she judged as fine. She writes, 'I thought the heroine was very pretty and attractive, but Dana thought she looked common, and Mamma thought she had no good looks. So! So!' The day after, she ordered the book. Lowell, Amy. Journals. 1889-1890. MS Lowell 38 (1).

After she saw Emma V. Sheridan in *Masks and Faces*, she wondered about ‘her real name’ and fantasised about her: ‘I suppose she is a mechanic’s daughter.’¹⁵ Well, whoever she may be she is very pretty and attractive on the stage’ (February 21, 1890). She seems to either not know or ignore that Sheridan was not only one of the leading ladies at the Boston Theatre but also one of the representative women who wrote and published her reactions and ideas about plays, actors, and theatre practices.¹⁶ The actress was also part of the debate about new ideas and forms in the theatre, but the young Lowell’s comments in her diaries focused more on Sheridan’s ‘real life’—in what she may reveal under the mask.

The interest in the theatrical world manifested in Lowell’s diaries might be considered girlish and juvenile, but it was far from insignificant, as Lowell herself explains in a letter just two years before her death. On May 15, 1923, Eunice Hammond Tietjens, then-editor of *Poetry* magazine, wrote to Amy Lowell asking her for one of her early poems—something ‘you wrote when you were 23 or under’—to be published in a special August issue. Lowell answered with a long letter the following month on June 5, writing that she had had ‘rather a curious writing life. I used to write poems as a little girl, but I was no Hilda Conkling—they were the ordinary verse of little girls, and of no value whatever.’¹⁷ For this reason, she explained, she would send Tietjens what was ‘really my first poem, or rather, my first poem after my babyhood days.’ In the same letter, Lowell confesses that although she had always written—‘I tried my hand at novels, short stories, and plays, but it did not dawn upon me that I could write poetry’—it was only when she saw Eleonora Duse’s performance

¹⁵ The complete title of the 1854 comedy by Tom Taylor and Charles Reade is *Masks and Faces or Before and Behind the Curtains*. It is a comedy in two acts concerning the public image and private life of a leading Covent Garden actress, which highlighted contemporary theatrical conditions as well as public hypocrisy. It may have been the first occasion for Lowell to reflect on the private and public aspects of life in general, which then entered into her poetry.

¹⁶ According to Alma J. Bennett, Sheridan had a notable presence at the turn of the century, although she remains, with several other female theatrical writers, mostly absent from the history of criticism. Bennett, Alma J. *American Women Theatre Critics: Biographies and Selected Writings of Twelve Reviewers, 1753-1919*. Jefferson (NC): McFarland & Company, 2010.

¹⁷ I have found only two of her first attempts at poetry in her diaries. One, dated April 17 and bearing the title ‘Morning in Heaven,’ is an enthusiastic depiction of a morning; the second, dated April 6, 1890, is dedicated to one of her friends, Louly, who was three years her senior, singing Louly’s beauty and expressing admiration. ‘A good deal in the style of “Nursery Rhymes,” you see,’ Lowell comments at the end of the poem.

at the Boston Theatre in 1902, that ‘something tremendous’ happened to her: ‘it loosed a bolt in my brain and I found out where my true function lay.’¹⁸

Lowell was approaching her fifties as she reflected upon that significant episode of her life—when at twenty-eight, her life changed direction and headed towards poetry.¹⁹ Although Lowell dated her poetic ‘epiphany’ in 1902, reading her diaries alongside *That Bookcase*, it is possible to retrace other ‘epiphanic’ situations in which poetry, was, however, also entrenched in her desires and future expectations, before that pivotal moment. In her diary on January 13th, 1889, for example, she expresses her wish to be a poet, a desire she immediately dismisses as a dream just like the others of which she secretly wrote (to be a photographer, midshipman, or messenger boy). In her autobiographical account of her first purchases as a book collector and of her early readings (specifically of Jacob Abbot’s *Rollo* series), *That Bookcase*, which appeared in 1920 *New York Evening Post*, Lowell confesses that the moment she saw and read Victor Hugo’s tragic drama *Ruy Blas* she felt a major inclination towards poetry: ‘Victor Hugo opened the doors of poetry for me, but through the prose.’²⁰ At that time (1893), Lowell did not answer the call, neither did she when she saw Duse’s performance in 1893 and in 1896.²¹ She had seen Eleonora Duse for the first time the year before Hugo’s play, in April 1893, when the Globe Theatre in Boston first used ‘Edison Incandescent Light’ and Lowell was nineteen years old. This first *début* tour in North America was not as successful, as her following one in 1896, which Lowell attended as well, and in which the Italian actress performed the same 1893 repertoire in Italian. However, it was Duse’s performance in 1902 that finally pushed Lowell into poetry. The influence of Duse’s first two performances (1893 and 1896) remain inexplicably in the shadows in the accounts of her biographies, and even the most complete biography on Lowell (by Foster Damon) similarly offers no useful insights of that period. However, in other letters, both written in 1924 and addressed to Ellery Sedgwick and Louis Untermeyer, respectively, Lowell

¹⁸ Lowell, Amy. Letter to Eunice (Hammond) Tietjens. MS Lowell 19.1 (1287).

¹⁹ The relevance of this epiphany requires more attention and will be explored fully in Chapter Two.

²⁰ Lowell, Amy. ‘That Bookcase.’ *New York Evening Post*. September 18, 1920. pp. 1-2.

²¹ Eleonora Duse performed in *Camille*, *Fedora*, *Cavalleria Rusticana*, and *La Locandiera*. Besides Duse, other well-known foreign actresses and actors had also performed at the Globe Theatre and The Boston Theatre, including Sarah Bernhardt and Alexander Salvini. Italian Opera was often performed in Bostonian theatres, especially at the Globe Theatre.

confirms Duse is at root of her poetic inspiration.²² To the poet and critic Louis Untermeyer, her close friend, she declares the Italian actress ‘has been to me an artistic ideal ever since I was eighteen.’²³ What had changed in the theatre between 1893 and 1902 to create that short-circuit in her? And what aspects of the theatre, and specifically Duse’s acting, reflected Lowell’s quest for a place in the world?

1.2. *New Tendencies in the Theatre: Art or Entertainment?*

At the turn of the twentieth century, most towns, which were developing into cities in Western Europe and North America, attracted swathes of people in search of better jobs and a more enriching cultural scene. In *The Lively Audience: A Social History of the Visual and Performing Arts in America, 1890-1950*, Russell Lynes (1910-1991) reports that technological advances appeared to bring about changes in taste and attitude among audiences. In many countries, theatres and music halls grew quickly and theatre-goers increased in number. Art associations blossomed; for example, the Central Art Association founded in Chicago in 1894 with the purpose of promoting ‘good art and its dispersion among people’ (13). Architecture also flourished, and many buildings were constructed in order to contain the ever-growing audiences that attended plays or queued to be enthralled by the new machine that put images in motion, invented by the Lumière brothers in 1895. Their cinemascope surpassed Edison’s peephole kinoscope and was the basis for the development of the cinema.

According to Lynes, in North America in the late nineteenth-century, the middle classes began to consider culture as ‘a social approach to sharpening the intellect and an intellectual excuse for justifying social occasion,’ while wealthy people’s support of cultural institutions became ‘a matter of noblesse oblige’ (13-20). Libraries, schools and playhouses were financially supported. In Boston, new theatres were built and the oldest one, the Boston Museum Theatre was enlarged to host more people as well as offering new orchestral

²² Lowell, Amy. Letter to Ellery Sedgwick. March 3, 1924. MS Lowell: 19.1 (1148).

²³ Lowell, Amy. Letter to Louis Untermeyer. May 27, 1924. MS Lowell 19.1 (1316).

space out of the generous donations of the generous donations of the wealthy people of the town.²⁴ But in what ways did the theatre respond to the changes in society? Did the 'modern life,' which the new century would experience, become a central preoccupation for the dramatists, actors and the actresses?

At the turn of the century, some intellectuals and authors reacted against the conventions of the theatre, which, according to them, generally preferred to see the 'pleasant' aspects of their society represented rather than the 'unpleasant' ones, for example virtue triumphing over vice, lust condemned, gentlemen and ladies filled with grace and kindness.²⁵ This reaction took a number of different forms in the theatre of Western Europe and gradually reached North America. Many critics and historians of theatre, agree that the Norwegian playwright Henrik Ibsen's psychological play 'A Doll's House' which debuted at the Royal Theatre in Copenhagen in 1879, opened the doors to the new modern theatre.²⁶ Ibsen's prose play in three acts caused significant controversy due to his critical attitude toward marriage, but it also fuelled debate about the playwright and how actors dealt with his work. His plays become, then, an important point of reference for the new generation of playwrights and actors, and there were a few stage directors and theatrical companies who began to put on plays that addressed more challenging issues.

The question regarding acting methods at that time was considered crucial by playwrights and actors more sensible to these issues. There was a growing awareness that special schools devoted to acting were needed, in order to surpass the stereotyped and egotistical approach to acting, which prevailed at the time both in Western Europe and North America. For example, Sarah Bernhardt, one of the most popular and acclaimed French actresses of that time, used to remain in the centre of the stage looking at her audience and emphasising her best lines in order to gain applause. There was, as well, among actors and stage-managers, the tendency to cut controversial lines in order to smooth over their work and gain the sympathy of the public.

²⁴ Tompkins, Eugene. *The History of the Boston Theatre. 1854-1901*. Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1908.

²⁵ In North America, in particular, most of these playhouses initially presented comedies, dramas together with a variety of performers from orators to ballet dancers and singers; all activities aimed to please the audience.

²⁶ See in particular Angelini, Franca. *Teatro e Spettacolo nel Primo Novecento*. Bari: Laterza, 1988; d'Amico, Silvio. *Storia del Teatro: L'Ottocento-Il Teatro Contemporaneo*. Vol. 2. Milan: Garzanti, 1970; Ferguson, Francis. *Idea di un teatro*. Milan: Feltrinelli, 1957.

In Western Europe in 1887, the French actor, André Antoine (1857-1943), founded one of the first private theatres, the French *Théâtre Libre*, in France, *Theâtre Libre* which also functioned as a theatre school.²⁷ Artistic experimentation at the core of Antoine's theatre aimed to produce 'criticism of life.' He professed a freer, more naturalistic way of acting and an absolute respect of reality. In his *Théâtre Libre*, Antoine presented many works adapted by foreign authors, never produced before in France, such as Tolstoi, Verga, Hauptman, Turgenev, and Ibsen. His company consisted of amateurs and he was not interested in profit, producing plays for a subscription audience. In 1892, another French playwright, Julien Jean, who grew up under the influence of the *Théâtre Libre*, introduced his theory of *théâtre vivant*, in which he distanced himself from Antoine and from Émile Zola's naturalistic ideas. Zola (1840-1902) had propagated a theatre of naturalism based on three essential tenets: *faire vrai*, *faire grand* and *faire simple* [make it authentic, great and simple]. According to Jean, Zola grounded both his characters and his plot too much in an idea of 'reality,' without paying much attention to the action. Unlike Antoine and Zola, Jean believed that natural dialogue, the setting and above all action, in the sense of the movements of actors on the stage, were all a fundamental part of artistic expression. They could not be separated and the actors had to learn how to make their feelings and emotions visible. In order to do this they had to first learn to experience them.

All these new ideas were later theorised by the Russian Konstantin Sergeevic Stanislavskij (1863-1938) who founded the Art Theatre in Moscow in 1898 which inspired many actors and dramatists at the turn of the century. Stanislavsky's approach also focused on theatrical practice, like Antoine and Jean, but his motivation and finality ultimately differed because his object of study remained the actor. According to him, the actor had to identify with the character through a rigorous psychophysical study of the character itself. Stanislavsky's approach was different as well from the ideas of the naturalistic theatre expressed at the time, by Zola who advocated a naturalism that had to subordinate plot to character and character to the influence of heredity and environment. Zola's ultimate aim was to analyse society in an objective way.

²⁷ André Antoine was also active in the new field of cinematography at the time. He directed circa nine movies since 1916.

However, according to the Irish playwright George Bernard Shaw, another problem afflicted the theatre.²⁸ Shaw lamented that the theatre did not deal with real issues and challenging opinions, and was thus unable to truly engage its audiences. An international debate focused on the role of the theatre itself: should it be a place to instruct the audience? To make them reflect? Or should it simply amuse and entertain them?

In *The Lively Audience*, Lynes laments that the theatre in the United States appeared to be concerned more with quantity than quality. Most of the playhouses, which were built all around the country, initially presented comedies and dramas together with a variety of performers from orators, athletes, to ballet dancers and singers; all activities aimed to please the audience. Although international debates about 'theatre as art' were often of no interest to audiences, critics, playwrights, or actors, the European experience of the new theatre was also felt in North America. Moreover, there was a growing awareness that American drama had to develop its own national potentiality and distinguish itself from the European theatre. According to Lynes, there were a few actors, such as Mrs. Fiske and Mansfield,²⁹ 'who were eager to bring to the public plays that were neither revivals of the standard repertory of Shakespeare and Sheridan nor pleasant drawing-room farces like *Sappho*, or sentimental, melodramatic costume pieces like Belasco's *The Girl of Golden West*' (176).³⁰

According to Constance D'arcy Mackay, also, 'poetic drama went starving; fantasy shivered in the biting wind of neglect,' before the advent of the new forms of theatre from Europe, which reached the United States of America through foreign companies as well as through the work of the English

²⁸ Shaw was an enthusiastic follower of Ibsen and claimed that 'The New Theatre would never have come into existence but for the plays of Ibsen, just as the Bayreuth Festival Playhouse would never have come into existence but for Wagner's Nibelungen tetralogy.' Shaw, George Bernard. *Plays Unpleasant and Pleasant*. London: Constable and Company, 1931. p. 9.

²⁹ Minnie Maden Fiske was a leading actress who, in 1893, performed in Ibsen's *A Doll's House*, introducing the American audience to Ibsen. She also played Thomas Hardy's *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*. The actor, manager, and producer Richard Mansfield, born in Germany, emigrated to the United States in 1882, after starting his career on the London stage. He was one of the earliest to stage George Bernard Shaw's plays for an American audience. In 1894 he performed in *Arms and the Man* and in 1897 in *The Devil's Disciple*.

³⁰ *Sappho* was produced in 1900 by William Clyde Fitch, an interesting playwright and actor who died at the age of forty-four in 1909. According to Lynes, the play so much shocked 'the defenders of the public virtue by having his male lead carry a young lady upstairs, with what were obviously dishonorable intentions, that the police closed the show.' Lynes, Russell. *The Lively Audience*. New York: Harper & Row, 1985. p. 170. See in particular Chapter 7, 'The 'Legit' Theatre.' pp. 166-216.

actor Gordon Graig (1872-1966).³¹ Between 1904 and 1910, Graig, son of one of the leading ladies of the English stage, Ellen Terry, collected his reflections about the new tendencies in the theatres he had witnessed during his European tours. Graig's *On the Art of Theatre* was published in 1911 in a bid to take theatre in a new direction.³² In this book, he laments the 'poverty' of the theatres in America compared with the new theatrical experiences in Moscow, Paris, and Berlin. According to him, the reason why theatre in Western Europe, particularly England, continued to offer the usual classical repertoire was merely that it offered reliable success for both the box office and the actors.

Graig was particularly disappointed with the lack of imagination and the reluctance to attempt anything other than imitations of life.³³ 'Realism [is] the blunt statement of life' he declares, and 'all far from the purpose of art: for its purpose is not to reflect the actual facts of this life because it is not the custom of the artist to walk behind things, having won it as his privilege to walk in front of them—to lead' (89). The English actor, particularly criticized the ideas of the French writer Émile Zola who focused mostly on the relationship between the human being and the environment. According to him, in Zola's theatrical representations the setting assumed a great relevance because men had to be inserted into an environment most similar to reality.³⁴ In defiance of this, Graig invoked a theatre of the marionette, the Über-Marionette theatre, where there was neither the attempt to reproduce nature nor to make a picture to rival a photograph (62). According to him no one part of the theatrical art should dominate. Graig also denounced the dangerous tendency among well-known actors of the time to 'dress' the same role forever in order to attract the audience, not for the quality of the play but just to show themselves off.³⁵ According to him, the actors' problem was that they generally made no attempt to

³¹ Mackay, D'arcy Constance. *The Little Theatre in the United States*. New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1917. p.18.

³² Graig, Edward Gordon. *On the Art of the Theatre*. London: Butler & Tanner, 1911. In the preface, Graig explains that most of the writings in the book previously appeared in the artistic magazine *The Mask* in 1908-1909 and in *The Art of Theatre* in 1905.

³³ Alexander Hevesi, playwright and director of the State Theatre of Budapest, agrees with Graig concerning the issue of imitation. In his preface to Graig's *On the Art of the Theatre*, he states: 'The Art of Theatre as pure imitation is nothing but an alarming demonstration of the abundance of life and the narrowness of Art' (p. xvii).

³⁴ *Thérèse Raquin*, adapted from one of Zola's novels and first performed in Paris in 1873, is considered the best example of this kind of theatre.

³⁵ The actor Edwin Booth played the role of young Hamlet year after year until he died at the age of sixty in 1893. Lynes, Russell. *The Invisible Audience*. New York: Harper & Row, 1985. p. 22.

connect with the author's mind or to use their own imaginations, and thus failed to bring to the stage the fear, happiness, or rage of the story. In the absence of flamboyant scenery and costumes, actors were not able to convey any vivid emotions in the audience. Therefore, in order to free the theatre of all those ideas of reproducing nature, a new form of acting had to be created, 'consisting for the main part of symbolical gesture' (61), and for that reason, actors now needed to rely more on their own craft.

At the turn of the century, both in Western Europe and in North America, the debate around the theatre, which challenged the old conception of acting as well as setting, saw actors and actresses increasingly confronting these issues. This was reflected in the theatrical productions which some sensible artists of the time brought in North America. New York, Greenwich Village in particular, where many artists and authors lived because of the low cost of living, was one of the places which responded to this new tendency. In Greenwich Village, foreign plays were performed along with new American and local plays, mostly consisting of only one act.

Also in Boston, which was a theatre-loving city, many playhouses opened during the second half of the nineteenth century. The Boston Theatre, one of the oldest theatres in town, used to alternate plays with various other activities, including concerts, dance performances and lectures.³⁶ In 1890-1902 the major theatres in Boston—the Boston Theatre as well as The Globe theatre, The Boston Museum and the Tremont Theatre—produced many plays by foreign and national authors sensitive to international debates about the method of acting and the role of theatre. According to Foster Damon, Lowell particularly attended the performances in the Boston Museum, The Boston Theatre, as well as The Globe Theatre (where she saw Duse in 1893, for the first time) and the Tremont theatre, where several new performances reflected the new tendencies. Lowell, as she claimed in her letter to Tietjens, 'always went to see everything that was good in theatre,' and so she was gradually exposed to the new tendency expressed by many local and foreign theatrical companies.³⁷

³⁶ For instance, T. D. Sullivan, the Irish patriot, lectured on Sunday afternoon October 28 and in the evening John Graham gave a series of concerts which lasted throughout that season. Tompkins, Eugene. *The History of the Boston Theatre, 1854-1901*. Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1908. p. 419.

³⁷ Lowell, Amy. Letter to Eunice (Hammond) Tietjens. MS Lowell 19.1 (1287).

At The Boston Theatre, for example, Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, was performed in 1892. It presented many innovations both in acting and setting; some original episodes of the novel were cut and more dancing and singing with Afro-American actors was introduced. A real fight was also performed in front of the audience who responded positively to these changes. The same year, Mrs. Fiske's company presented her vision of the anti-heroine of William Tackeray's *Vanity Fair*, while, a year after, in 1893, another acclaimed actress Fanny Davenport gave her sensual acting of *Cleopatra* by the French dramatist Sardou. In 1896 at the Tremont Theatre Duse presented the same repertoire of her first unsuccessful Bostonian tour in 1893, receiving, this time, great acclaim both from critics and audiences, enchanted by her acting. In 1902, Duse came back to Boston but this time to the Boston Museum. On her third tour, Duse presented a new production in which her response to the new acting was reflected. The three plays she performed, *Gioconda*, *Francesca da Rimini*, and *La Città Morta (The Dead City)*.³⁸ According to the historians of theatre, the Italian actress was the one who marked the change of acting in the history of the theatre.

1.3. *The Italian Scene: Eleonora Duse (1858-1924)*

The international debate about the role of the theatre and in particular the acting method was felt strongly in Italy, where in the early twentieth century, leading actors ruled their itinerant companies in every respect. There was no professional stage manager tradition, and according to the Italian critic Silvio d'Amico,³⁹ this aspect, together with the absence of any economic support from the government, left the Italian theatre in the hands of the leading actors.⁴⁰ They chose the plays to perform, the theatre, the set, the actors to employ, and the appropriate wages. Their repertoire was generally classic, consisting largely of William Shakespeare and Carlo Goldoni, and actors performed the same roles for years. Most of these itinerant companies still followed the

³⁸ The three plays were written by the Italian poet Gabriele d'Annunzio.

³⁹ d'Amico, Silvio. *Storia del Teatro*. Vol. 2. Milan: Garzanti Editore, 1970. pp. 315-351.

⁴⁰ The Italian Government was engaged in domestic affairs connected with problems following the reunification of the peninsula in 1861, particularly the reconstruction of national identity.

old tradition of the 'Commedia dell'Arte' involving fixed roles, improvisations, and 'canovaccio.'

At the turn of the century, dwindling interest in drama on the part of authors and poets along with discontent regarding the way the actors in these itinerant companies manipulated their works (cutting lines or entire scenes) pushed many Italian companies to perform foreign plays, generally from France. Dumas, Sardou, and Zola were among the favourite playwrights as audiences began to favour more realistic settings, which better matched their increasingly changing tastes and moods.⁴¹ Zola's realism was particularly consistent with the Italian literary movement 'Verismo,' which based its vision of the world on positivist ideas and tried to give space and a voice to those who had not previously had one; to those 'classe degli umili' (the class of the poor) whom Giovanni Verga (1840-1822), Italian writer and leading representative of Verismo in Italy, depicted in many of his novels.⁴² According to the historian Silvio d'Amico, in *Storia del Teatro*, Duse, in particular, created a personal type of realistic acting which interweaving ideas and responding to new female role ultimately created her myth.⁴³ Duse's versatility brought her from the romanticism of Dumas fils (*The Dame of the Camelias*), from the Verismo of both Giovanni Verga (*Cavalleria Rusticana*) and Giacosa to the lyrical symbolism of Maurice Maeterlinck and the linguistic beauty and eroticism of Gabriele d'Annunzio (9). Susan Bassnett observes that Italian 'realism' seemed 'to be related to a notion of psychological realism' focused primarily on characters.⁴⁴

The study of the character, in fact, was at the core of the new tendencies in Italian theatre in Italy and throughout Western Europe. In *Storia del Teatro*, d'Amico points out that Duse in particular 'chose to devise alternatives to the familiar gestural modes,' and Duse's personal technique 'was to draw attention through down-playing rather than over-playing' (136). It was her 'revolu-

⁴¹ The Italian author Arrigo Boito translated *Antony and Cleopatra*, cutting out some of the most significant scenes of the play in order to fit Duse into it.

⁴² Verga's most popular novels are *Storia di una Capinera*, *I Malavoglia*, and *Mastro Don Gesualdo*. One of his plays, *Cavalleria Rusticana*, was performed in the Theatre Carignano by Rossi's company when Duse was the leading actress.

⁴³ d'Amico, Silvio. *Storia del Teatro*. Vol. 2. Milan: Garzanti Editore, 1970. pp. 315-316. According to d'Amico, Italian theatre in this period is characterised by the story of two great actors, Ermete Zacconi (1857-1948) and Eleonora Duse (1858-1924). Their earlier performances were linked to the Verista theatre but they gradually moved on.

⁴⁴ Bassnett, Susan. *Bernhardt, Terry, Duse: The Actress in Her Time*. Cambridge (MA): Cambridge University Press, 1988. pp. 119-170.

tionary' interpretation of the female characters she chose to perform that ultimately broke the conventions that ruled the theatre at the time (136).

She based her performance on rigorously studying them and her serious approach to rehearsals highlighted her rigorous attitude towards developing her characters within the drama and her intellectual experience (139).⁴⁵ According to Anna Sica, who studied Duse's library in Cambridge, her intellectual education started in 1882 and became more intense and focused between 1886-1892 when she met the poet and composer Arrigo Boito (1842-1918) and Gabriele d'Annunzio (1863-1938), and 'her intellectual evolution did impact on her acting.'⁴⁶ Critics agree that Duse's heroines were made of 'flesh and blood,' and, her interpretations of them revealed, for the first time on stage, hidden sides of female passion and desire.

For instance, the character of the peasant in Verga's *Cavalleria Rusticana*, Santuzza, who refused her role of 'pretty' and obedient woman, was conveyed by Duse through her minimalistic approach. Santuzza's jealousy, for example, was made clear without any spectacular and dramatic gestures, unlike the rendition by the predecessor of the role, Adelaide Ristori. Duse's new approach to conveying characters' emotions highlighted the dramatic nature of their choices. She presented well-rounded characters rather than one-dimensional ones. Giovanni Pontiero reports that in the diary of his South American *tournee* in Duse's company (1906-1907), the actor Guido Noccioli gives many examples of Duse's methods and her rigorous study of the characters she performed. According to him, Duse's performances were more emotional because she was able to 'penetrate the intimate essence of the complex personality of the women she played, hinting at some of their inner tragic destiny.'⁴⁷ One of the most 'intriguing aspects of her artistry' was her ability to

⁴⁵ Eleonora Duse's archive in Giorgio Cini, Venice, offers the largest collection of scripts showing annotations by the actress indicating her particular artistic vision and the rigorous studies she undertook in order to immerse herself in the characters she performed. Among many scripts there are *Antony and Cleopatra*, *Romeo and Juliet*, and *Francesca da Rimini* translated by Arrigo Boito, *La Città Morta* by Gabriele d'Annunzio, *Magda*, and other plays by Ibsen.

⁴⁶ Sica, Anna. 'The Eleonora Duse Collection in Cambridge.' *Arcojournal* (July 2008): pp. 1-15. See also her essay 'Eleonora Duse Tragica Sapiente.' *Voci e Anime, Corpi e Scritture*. Eds. Maria Ida Biggi and Paolo Puppa. Rome: Bulzoni Editore, 2009. pp. 389-403. For Duse as a reader, see De Leo, Mimma. 'Duse Grande Lettrice: Libri per la Gioia di un'altra Vita' in the same volume (pp. 373-388).

⁴⁷ Pontiero, Giovanni. *Duse on Tour: Guido Noccioli's Diaries, 1906-07*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1982. p.7. Pontiero provides a complete edition of the diaries of the young actor who joined Duse's company during her *tournee* in South America, with a biographical appendix of authors, actresses,

transform her physical appearance without any make-up; she could move convincingly from ‘grandeur to pathos, from lyrical tragedy or sparkling comedy’ (8). ‘Her intelligent coordination of vocal colouring and the appropriate gesture or movement helped her undergo a complete transformation of personality as she moved with deceptive ease from the roles of Magda and Cesarine to those of Marguerite and Mirandolina’ (9).

According to William Weaver, Duse’s movement on stage ‘was not only natural; it possessed the subtle grace and economy of certain simple, handsome objects of unsophisticated elegance.’⁴⁸ Weaver, talking about Duse’s spell, brings to light Duse’s incorporation of old female tropes, praising the impressive level of performance she reached every time, which revealed how for her, acting was an art—a pure art (12). Duse’s interpretations of the lives and emotions of her characters involved rendering inner conflicts as ‘real’ for her audience through the trembling of her hands, a sudden blushing or pallor in her face, her eyes fixed on the vacuity, her body curved to highlight their sufferings. All her gestures appeared ‘natural,’ including touching her fellow actors as if by chance. Duse’s acting was more introverted than extroverted; she used her body to express all her characters’ emotions. Duse moderated the heroic poses and based her own acting on little movements that paradoxically obliged the audience to concentrate on her figure much more than they had on Bernhardt’s majestic poses and gestures. According to Susan Bassnett, there was ‘evidence of an impression of restraint, of the unconscious working its way to the surface, of an inner performance that catches and holds everyone who watches it’ (141) in Duse’s performances.

Duse’s way of acting fascinated and inspired not only poets—such as Arrigo Boito, Gabriele d’Annunzio, Rainer Maria Rilke, and perhaps James Joyce—but female audiences, too.⁴⁹ At the turn of the century, theatre became

and actors at the turn of the twentieth century (pp. 151-173). He prefaces the book with a comprehensive biography of Duse (pp. 1-42).

⁴⁸ Weaver, William. *Duse: A Biography*. London: Thames and Hudson, 1984. p. 7. Weaver points out that Duse’s acting was so unique and personal that she even stood out as exceptional in a silent film, *Ceneri*, her only cinematographic work.

⁴⁹ In his book on Joyce, Richard David Ellmann refers to Joyce’s admiration of Duse, mentioning a poem that the Irish poet wrote for the Italian actress. My efforts to trace this poem have been unsuccessful. I consulted with Professor Samuel Slote of Trinity College Dublin, an expert on Joyce, who suggested that this poem was most likely never written, Ellmann’s source on this point being Joyce’s brother Stanislaus, ‘who is not always a reliable source.’ Regardless, the anecdote illustrates the impact that the Italian actress had or was imagined to have on poets and writers of her time.

an important place for women (actresses and female audiences) as well as a vehicle with which to spread the new vision of woman that had transpired from the works of authors like Ibsen, Shaw, and d'Annunzio. It provided new and different female models for the next generation and revealed the expressive potentiality of this medium to women, particularly those struggling for emancipation. The historian Anna Laura Mariani credits the actress Adelaide Ristori as a pioneer in the struggle to affirm acting as a decorous and respectable profession for women as well as men, and indeed a noble vocation. According to her, she encouraged her female followers such as Adelaide Pezzana and later Duse to be 'rebels' and conquer their own public image.⁵⁰ Mariani points out, in particular, the 'mysterious and profound connection' (67) between the theatre and the female experience in terms of women's emancipation at the end of the nineteenth century. In her reading of the Pezzana and Duse's individual interpretations of the character of Ibsen's Nora, she retraces the 'centrality' of the theatre for these women, specifically in terms of its impact on them.

She focuses specifically on themes like rebellion, social commitment, and the 'myth of art as life' (68). In her study, she points out that this concept is manifested within their lives and in the roles they played. In terms of female representation, this connection between biographical subjectivity and theatrical subjectivity (represented on the stage) had a particular impact in the case of these actresses because at this point a woman's role was limited to the domestic sphere: wife, mother, or sister (71).⁵¹ The construction of a symbolic female—from the lives of the heroines performed on the stage and the real lives of actresses—undoubtedly impacted female audiences differently than the actresses themselves. Duse, for instance, revealed that when she performed as Juliet for the first time in *Romeo and Juliet* in Verona in 1873, she felt she *was* Juliet.⁵²

⁵⁰ Mariani, Anna Laura. *Teatro e Storia* 28 (2007): pp. 367-369.

⁵¹ Important works in this field include studies on women and theatre by Teresa Lauretis and Judith Butler's exploration of the performative nature of gender. See also the papers presented during an international meeting in Rome by Cusick, Franco, Mariani, Nordera, and Wilbourne, collected in *Teatro e 'Gender': L'Approccio Biografico = Teatro e Storia* 28. Eds. Annamaria Cecconi and Roberta Gandolfi. Rome: Bulzoni Editore, 2007. pp. 329-406.

⁵² Cuppone, Roberto. "'Lo Fui Giulietta': la Prima Volta di Eleonora Duse." *Voci e Anime, Corpi e Scrittura*. Eds. Maria Ida Biggi and Paolo Puppa. Rome: Bulzoni Editore, 2009. pp. 23-38. This rich volume gathers papers delivered during the international meeting on Eleonora Duse in 2008 in Venice. It is divided into five sections, each with bibliographies.

The actresses' new professional approach to acting inevitably clashed with the durable stereotypes of the patriarchal society at the time. And notwithstanding the actresses' attempts to separate the public sphere from the private, it was inevitable that audiences and critics alike made connections between the action on stage and the private lives of the performers.⁵³ Such projections, however, played a powerful role for the female audience and influenced them in many respects. The Italian feminist and writer Sibilla Aleramo, for example, declared that her life changed when she saw Giacinta Pezzana acting as Nora in Ibsen's *Doll's House* at the theatre in Milan. Aleramo, whose real name was Rina Faccio, abandoned her family and started a new life, just like Nora. She left her husband, her son, and her domestic duties and started her career as writer, eventually coming out as a lesbian.⁵⁴

The media often leveraged the lives of actresses to advertise the plays, and Duse's participation in and sympathy with her heroines' destiny on stage, helped this attitude. Many American newspapers that welcomed the first of Duse's *tournées* in North America in 1893 tried to dig into the life of the actress in order to attract an audience for this 'unknown' lady, who, unlike Sarah Bernhardt, disliked publicity. The title chosen by *The Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, for instance, to advertising Duse's performance was: 'The career and the sufferings of Eleonora Duse.' The unsigned editorial pointed out Duse's evasiveness with interviewers and 'annoying, time wasting persons to whom a great actor, sojourning among us, is an object of interest.'⁵⁵ As a result of her sufferings, the editorial read:

Duse's married life was not happy. Her husband—an actor—was her inferior in talent as in other respects. They separated. Except to apply for a share in her earnings at intervals he never troubles her—for which consideration, at all events, he deserves some credit. The unfortunate

⁵³ Gabriele D'Annunzio's autobiographical short story, 'The Flame of Life,' in which he narrates a story of a young poet and an aged actress, was used by the media to advertise Duse's American tour in 1902. During that *tournee*, Duse performed only plays written by her former lover.

⁵⁴ Aleramo wrote the first feminist novel published in Italy, in 1906. Her novel, *Una Donna*, was clearly autobiographical, and told of the ups and downs in the author's life, including the rape she suffered and the isolation and entrapment of her married life. Aleramo, Sibilla. *Una Donna*. Milan: Feltrinelli, 2002. Aleramo's is just one notable case among many illustrating the profound relationship between female emancipation and art at the turn of the century.

⁵⁵ 'The Career and Sufferings of Eleonora Duse.' *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*. February 26, 1893. p. 5.2.

union was not altogether productive of regrets. The child that came of it is the actress's chief joy in life.

In 1893, *The Salt Lake Herald* correspondent Hillary Bell also focused on the 'plain, unvarnished and unimaginable history of her [Duse's] life.'⁵⁶ She pointed out that 'the little maid was often so weak for lack of nourishing food that on several occasions she fainted in sight of the audiences that applauded her' (5), implying that Duse's weakness was as a result of her miserable childhood. *The New York Press* chose to focus on the difference between Duse and the celebrated French actress Bernhardt and favoured the latter in order to encourage the attention of its readers.⁵⁷

Many of Duse's biographers and scholars agree that her life and career were indeed remarkable. She is described by Guido Nocchioli as a tortured personality, by William Weaver as a person full of spells, and by Eva Le Galliene (1899-1991) as a mystic.⁵⁸ Both critics and audiences could not refrain from ascribing to her the tragic lives of her heroines: the death of her first child soon after his birth became part of the plot in Dumas' play *Denise*, which she performed on the stage; Nora's departure from her domestic place mirrored Duse's independence as well as the failure of her marriage.⁵⁹

Duse played many roles that were once performed by the French actress Sarah Bernhardt soon after Bernhardt's 1881 *tournée* in Italy ended, but her interpretations were not an imitation. Unlike Bernhardt's, Duse's style was not based on poses, great entrances, a central position on the stage, or extensive publicity about her eccentricities. This shift from the stereotypical role was not

⁵⁶ Bell, Hilary. 'The Great Duse': An Accurate Account of the Life and the Personality of the Famous Italian.' *The Salt Lake Herald*. March 19, 1893. p. 2.10.

⁵⁷ *The New York Press*. January 27, 1893.

⁵⁸ There are many books, reviews, and articles on Duse, together with numerous references to her in the autobiographies, letters, and diaries of many of her contemporaries. Along with those referenced in this chapter, see Signorelli, Olga. *Vita di Eleonora Duse*. Bologna: Cappelli, 1962; Symon, Arthur. *Eleonora Duse*. New York and London: Benjamin Bloom, 1961; Molinari, Cesare. *L'Attrice Divina: Eleonora Duse nel Teatro Italiano fra I due Secoli*. Rome: Bulzoni Editore, 1985. For Duse's correspondence, see Nardi, Piero. *Carteggio D'Annunzio-Duse*. Florence: Le Monnier, 1975; Radice, Paul. *Eleonora Duse-Arrigo Boito: Lettere d'amore*. Milan: Il Saggiatore, 1979; and Bigi, Maria Ida. *Ma Pupa Henriette: le Lettere di Eleonora Duse e la figlia*. Venice: Marsilio, 2010.

⁵⁹ Duse was the first to perform Ibsen's *Doll's House* in Italy, in 1891 at the Filodrammatici theatre in Milan. The production was a great success, although the issues addressed were considered scandalous and her friend and lover, the writer Arrigo Boito, had advised her not to perform Ibsen. Duse's 1881 marriage to Tebaldo Checchi, a fellow actor in Rossi's company, ended in 1885 upon her return from her first South American *tournée*; the birth of their daughter Enrichetta in 1882 was not sufficient to keep the couple together.

necessarily grounded on the plot of the plays Duse performed, but mostly in her way of highlighting the inner conflicts experienced by her ‘characters.’ Duse’s female characters were more complicated and real; and her method and style, her challenging the stereotyped role and model of the actress at the time, made her different from other acclaimed actresses. Duse offered a new model also outside the stage: she was a single mother, owned her own company and decided the role and the play to perform. She chose to play characters—such as Ibsen’s Nora, Santuzza’s Verga or d’Annunzio’s Silvia—in whom a tension between desire and morality was evident, and impressed on her audience the image of a woman in extreme anxiety, in search of a solution to conflicts which often derived from strict social and moral codes. In d’Annunzio’s *Gioconda*, for instance, she performed the character Silvia, a woman from the middle class, caught between two opposite choices: to privilege art in her life or the ‘sacred bond’ of marriage.⁶⁰

In *Gender in the Mirror* (2002), philosopher Diana Tietjens Meyers refers to the female experience of ‘internalized oppression’ which constrained women’s development and placed them in a state of subordination, and Duse artfully exposed this in her performances.⁶¹ Nora’s final decision to abandon her domestic role and her husband, for instance, was given a new interpretation by Duse, who demanded from her audience a more intellectual than passive engagement. Duse brought Nora’s traumas alive through ‘nuances’ rather than heroic gestures, which revealed her inner drama gradually but inexorably, and encouraged the audience to share the experience.

Duse’s skill of making experiences ‘real’ on stage was ultimately the revolution she brought to the theatre, but the reality she brought was not limited to appearance as was the case with many actors who followed Zola’s realism. She entered into the role, she *became* the character on the stage and, as

⁶⁰ d’Annunzio’s *Gioconda* will be investigated in Chapter Two of this study.

⁶¹ Meyers, Diana Tietjens. *Gender in the Mirror*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2002. pp. 67-153. Meyers proposes an approach to feminist theory that focuses on self-determination and analyses women’s identities as both gendered and individualised. In this book she analyses the contradictions of feminist theories concerning self-determination and autonomy and discusses ‘how women can resist internalized oppression and increase their self-determination’ (p. 28).

Melissa Bradshaw points out in *Amy Lowell, Diva Poet* (2011), she subjected herself to that fictional person.⁶²

The Anglo-American actress, Eva Le Galliène—who was inspired and encouraged by Duse, explained her feelings after Duse’s performance: ‘I saw ‘the impossible’ come true.’⁶³ Duse’s ability to ‘embody’ the character on stage without any particular use of make-up or magnificent dress, but through simple facial gestures, or slow movements of her hands contributed to rendering her performances ‘real’ to the audience, thus engaging them and encouraging a different ‘listening’ of the female characters. As Le Galliène pointed out, Duse’s acting style awakened in her audience ‘a sense of the sublime,’ and raised them ‘from the torpor and through a heightening of the emotions make them aware of the mystery and wonder of the human spirit’ (18).⁶⁴ It was that magnetic spell that worked its magic on Amy Lowell on a fateful night in The Boston Theatre in 1902. That magnetic spell continued to work on Lowell since then. One of her long narrative poems ‘The Cremona Violin,’ included in her third book, *Men Women and Ghosts*, published in 1916, for instance, has several references to the drama Duse performed that evening and testifies how deep Duse’s impact had been on Lowell.

⁶² Bradshaw dedicated an entire chapter of her monograph on Lowell to Duse: Bradshaw, Melissa. *Amy Lowell, Diva Poet*. New York: Ashgate, 2011. pp. 131-151.

⁶³ Le Galliène, Eva. *The Mystic in the Theatre: Eleonora Duse*. London: The Bodley Head, 1966. p. 5.

⁶⁴ This aspect will be further explored in Chapter Two.

Chapter Two

Lowell's 'Epiphany': A Retrospective Reconstruction of Personhood

In August 1923, *Poetry: A Magazine of Verse* published two groups of poems: one written by nine established poets when they were young, and the other by thirteen young poets, titled 'The Youth of Today.'¹ Amy Lowell was included among the established poets, and the poem she submitted had been written when she was twenty-eight years old. She was the only established poet who started at that late age because, as she explains in a letter to then-editor Eunice Tietjens, she only felt the call to poetry when she witnessed Eleonora Duse's performance in 1902.² Following up on this first poem, Lowell in 1923 wrote three other poems dedicated to Duse: 'Eleonora Duse'—which appeared in *What's O'Clock* (1926), and 'To Eleonora Duse: in Answer to a Letter' and 'To Eleonora Duse, 1923,' both published in *Ballads for Sale* (1927). In assessing Duse's impact on Lowell's artistic career, critics generally focus on the statement made by Lowell in this letter to Tietjens; however, through a re-reading of these four poems, this chapter will explore Lowell's retrospective reconstruction of her personhood. Focusing on Lowell's letter to Tietjens, the first section will investigate aspects of Duse's performance that Lowell recalled in her first poem dedicated to the actress. Crucially, in order to trace significant changes in Lowell's perspective regarding her status as a poet and a woman, it is necessary to analyse two more of Lowell's poems that are not specifically devoted to Duse but are linked to Lowell's epiphanic moment: 'The Cremona Violin' from *Men, Women and Ghosts* (1916), and 'East, West, North, and South of Man' from *What's O'Clock* (1926).

The novelty in this analysis lies in the proposition that the poems dedicated to Duse are not only clear evidence of her homage to the actress, but also represent a conscious retrospective reconstruction: Lowell's re-narration and

¹ *Poetry: A Magazine of Verse* 2.4 (August 1923): p. 10. Hereafter: *Poetry*.

² Lowell, Amy. Letter to Eunice (Hammond) Tietjens. MS Lowell 19.1 (1287).

redefinition of her new identity. The questions and the issues explored here will be sustained by a theoretical framework offered primarily by Diana Tietjens Meyers' *Gender in the Mirror*,³ Adriana Cavarero's *Relating Narratives: Storytelling and Selfhood*,⁴ and Mary Duggan and Roger Grainger's *Imagination, Identification and Catharsis in Theatre and Therapy*.⁵

2.1. Lowell's 'Eleonora Duse': The Epiphany

In 1923, at beginning of June, Lowell replied to Eunice Tietjens' request to submit one of her earliest poems to be published in the August issue of *Poetry*. Lowell's reply offers an important insight in the retrospective reconstruction of the source of her poetic vocation, and it also reveals Lowell's mature poetical attitude.

In her letter, dated June 5 1923,⁶ Lowell explained to the then-editor of *Poetry* that since she had received the editor's request, she had been wondering what she could possibly submit. It was only when she was 28 that she 'suddenly burst into poetry,' and thus, Lowell pointed out, she had no poems pre-dating that time. She confessed that she had written a number of poems in the period of 'recrudescence of the poetic faculty' that she had never included in her first book. She emphasised that, even then, 'they were not good enough,' claiming that nothing of what she 'thought good in those early days' was of sufficient quality to submit. Lowell then revealed to Tietjens that she only began writing poetry after she saw Duse acting in the d'Annunzio's plays. Although she did not mention the year, her specific reference to d'Annunzio's plays helps to place with certainty that she referred to 1902, when Duse, on her fourth tournée in America, performed the plays of the Italian poet for the first time. 'The effect on me,' Lowell pointed out, 'was something tremendous.'

³ Meyers, Diana Tietjens. *Gender in the Mirror*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2002.

⁴ Cavarero, Adriana. *Relating Narratives: Storytelling and Selfhood*. London and New York: Routledge, 2000. Translated by Paul A. Kottman. I consulted this work in the original Italian edition: *Tu che mi Guardi, Tu che mi Racconti. Filosofia della narrazione*. Milan: Feltrinelli, 1997.

⁵ Duggan, Mary and Grainger, Roger. *Imagination, Identification and Catharsis in Theatre and Therapy*. London: Jessica Kingsley, 1997.

⁶ Lowell, Amy. Letter to Eunice (Hammond) Tietjens. MS Lowell 19.1 (1287).

She had a ‘revelation’ that she should become a poet and thus began reading and writing often, ‘trying to learn how one could express one’s self in poetry.’

Lowell clarified to Tietjens that at that time her challenge was not the content, ‘the things’ she wanted to express, but rather ‘to find a medium.’ Only after eight years did she send two sonnets to the *Atlantic Monthly* and when they were accepted, she was encouraged and started to gather all the poems for her first book, which came out two years later, in 1912. She did not include her poem on Eleonora Duse because she ‘realized that the first poem of mine was not good enough to go into it’ and that it had never been printed. Lowell left to Tietjens the decision of whether or not to publish that first attempt at poetry, which she judged unsatisfactory in technical terms, being full of ‘clichés.’

At the end of her long letter, Lowell pointed out what this first poem really meant to her, after all those years. She wrote: ‘but as I read it now, I can see that, in many ways, and with all its infelicities, it continued the germ of my later work.’ Although Lowell offered to send a different poem if Tietjens considered it too long, she pointed out that any alternative ‘will not be so characteristic, nor will it have the biographical value that this poem has.’ In the letter to Tietjens the biographical value is preceded by Lowell’s reflection —‘as I read it now [...] it continued the germ of my later work’—and indicated Lowell’s reflection on her achievements. Tietjens’ request was the ‘occasion’ for Lowell to reflect retrospectively upon her career, and to publicly share her relationship with Duse. Lowell’s first ‘adult’ poem appeared a few months later, in *Poetry*, the only biographical reference being about Lowell’s age.

Of the nine poems written by established poets⁷ published by Tietjens, two were dedicated to Eleonora Duse: Sara Teasdale’s poem ‘To Eleonora Duse, On First Seeing Her Picture,’⁸ and Lowell’s poem ‘Eleonora Duse.’⁹ This dominance of dedications to the same person may seem unusual, but it underscores Duse’s considerable influence and prominent position in the collective female imagination at that time.

⁷ The four established women poets were Sara Teasdale, Witter Bynner, Eunice Tietjens and Amy Lowell; the five male poets were Edgar L. Masters, Edwin Arlington Robinsons, Robert Frost, Vachel Lindsay and Arthur Davison Ficke

⁸ Teasdale, Sara. ‘To Eleonora Duse on First Seeing Her Picture.’ *Poetry* 2.4 (August 1923): p. 246.

⁹ Lowell, Amy. ‘Eleonora Duse.’ *Poetry* 2.4 (August 1923): pp. 234-236.

Sara Teasdale's fourteen lines, written when she was nearly twenty-one, depict her vision of Duse, her beauty that 'is filled so full of tears' (1). She recognises the strength of Duse's acting and praises her silence, which she imagines might be loved by God 'better than a prayer' (14). This poem, along with seven others written by Teasdale for Duse, was later published in 1907 in *Sonnets to Duse and Other Poems*.¹⁰ These eight poems open the first section of the book and are all inspired by pictures of Duse from the two Gabriele d'Annunzio's plays—*The Dead City* and *Francesca da Rimini*—in which she performed during her Northern American tournee from October 14, 1902 to January 22, 1903. In *A Song to Eleonora Duse in Francesca da Rimini*, which closes the section, Duse's portrait with a bunch of roses in her arms gives Teasdale the opportunity to express her passionate feelings and to 'sing' the beauty of Duse's hands, which d'Annunzio also praised.¹¹ Teasdale pleads with Duse to hold her hands instead, and leave the roses:

Oh leave, oh leave the roses, and hold the hands of me!
 She draws the heart from out them, she draws away their breath,
 Oh would that I might perish and find so sweet a death! (7-12)¹²

Teasdale consistently praises Duse's grace and beauty using the clichés of romantic love, and does not go beyond an enthusiastic, poetic homage to Duse's beauty.

Lowell's 'Eleonora Duse' takes an altogether different direction, in particular in the light of her decision to share the root of her poem to Tietjens. The poem, excluded from all of Lowell's collections published during her lifetime, was critically regarded as merely a poetic attempt to describe her feelings after Duse's performance. Echoing Lowell's strict critique in his biography on Lowell, S. Foster Damon defines the poem's lines as 'bad blank verse.'¹³ Despite its artistic imperfections, however, he confirms that it may stand for much

¹⁰ Teasdale, Sara. *Sonnets to Duse and Other Poems*. Boston: The Poet Lore Company Publishers, 1907. The book begins with seven sonnets dedicated to Duse and one song (pp. 10-18).

¹¹ On the front page of *Francesca da Rimini*, the play d'Annunzio wrote for Duse, is written 'To Eleonora Duse of the beautiful hands.'

¹² Teasdale, *Sonnets to Duse*. p. 17.

¹³ Damon, S. Foster. *Amy Lowell: A Chronicle, with Extracts from Her Correspondence*. Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1935. p. 148. Hereafter: *Amy Lowell: A Chronicle*.

more—‘The vision of Duse revealed to Miss Lowell that art is an expression of the deep truths of human reality, that her hitherto unguessed vocation was poetry, and that in herself she should find the material’ (149)—but then he does not investigate this aspect further.

‘Eleonora Duse’ is comprised of seventy-one lines divided into ten unequal strophes and characterised by a complex pattern of sounds made from alliteration, assonance, and repetition. The poem possesses a cinematographic quality of movement that shifts from external to internal observations, giving a certain strength and visionary power to the poem. Lowell constructs the scene as if she is working with a camera to create the atmosphere and delimit the space in which the proceeding poetic narration will be built. Although there are no references to Lowell’s interest in cinematography, this particular cinematographic approach used by Lowell in her first poem is recurrent in several others (both in her love lyrics and in her narrative long poems) published in all her books.¹⁴

After setting the scene for her observations and reflections—‘The talk is hushed,/ in the domed theatre’s self the lights go out,’ 1-2—Lowell focuses directly on the audience gathering there ‘to see the self-same play,’ and begins to explore the reasons for which the audience have been brought together at the theatre, thereby narrowing the focus of her camera. According to her, ‘the only bond that makes them one’ (12) results from the function of the place itself, but she then realises that ‘each is here upon a different quest’ (13). The different motivations that the audience members might have are listed in the subsequent lines: ‘pure amusement’ (18), ‘lured by the far fame of her’ (19), ‘in search of sparks to kindle/ The slow fire of their torpid brains’ (24-25).¹⁵ Although the reasons for this public gathering are different, how the play affects the audience becomes the point of the speaker’s investigation: ‘Yet all have come to see the self same plays’ (32) ‘but’ that ‘what they take away is not the same’ (33), she differentiates. Ultimately, Lowell realises that Duse’s performance

¹⁴ According to Laurence Goldstein, many poets in the early twenties had a passion for cinematography, which was regarded as more democratic than the theatre. For example, the poet John Vachel Lindsay, Lowell’s friend, wrote many poems dedicated to film actresses (Blanch Sweet, Mary Pickford, and Mae Marsh) whom he regarded as his poetic muses. He also reports that the poet Archibald McLeish (1892-1982) uses Lowell’s poem ‘East, West, North and South of a Man’ as a model for his cinematographic poem ‘Cinema of Man.’ Goldstein, Laurence. *The American Poet at the Movies: A Critical History*. Michigan: University of Michigan Press, 1995. p. 68.

‘Bears fruit in deeper comprehension’ (38). To reinforce the problematic nature of this ‘comprehension,’ Lowell shifts focus from the audience to Duse. This perspective change is marked by the reduced distance between the poetic ‘I’ and her fellow audience members when the ‘I’ shifts to ‘we’: ‘For she whom we have come to watch tonight/ Is more to be divined and felt than seen’ (39). Duse assumes the function of divine inspiration and is ‘felt’ while ‘she herself vibrates to every thought,/ And shades of feeling cross her face like clouds’ (44-45). ‘Her being is like an aeolian harp’ (47) whose sound is ‘Now harsh and wild, now sweet, now quaintly gay,/ But always musical, and always true’ (50-51). At this point, an emotional catharsis for the audience occurs, and ‘Little by little, we discern the real’ (65).

Mary Duggan and Roger Grainger’s analysis of catharsis in theatre is useful to understand the effect of Duse’s performance both upon the audience and Lowell. In *Imagination, Identification and Catharsis in Theatre and Therapy*, the authors analyse how theatre explores every aspect of human experience in terms of feeling and understanding, and how it presents a world ‘as if it were a reality. In particular, they point out the powerful effect of the performance which works on us in a way that ‘forces us to take the psychogenitive world-changing force of emotion with the kind of seriousness it deserves in every sphere of life, but rarely receives.’¹⁶ Specifically, the intense relationship between idea and experience within the theatrical image has the power to ‘intensify the experience.’ This intensification, expands the power of the experience itself, and enables the reproduction of its potency in those whom experience it, or, as they stress, ‘at least to make latent things salient and operative’ (81). Duggan and Grainger highlight the dependence on the image-making faculty of the psyche in theatrical catharsis and that it is associated with the process of identification: ‘The power of theatrical catharsis is a hidden force. We are set at a distance and left to draw our own conclusions’ (81).

In this light, it is the reality, or as Lowell puts it in her poem, the perception of the ‘real,’ that casts the spell that evening even more than Duse’s ‘most consummate art’ (67), ‘all the passion of a simulated grief’ (68), or ‘the

¹⁶ Duggan, Mary and Grainger, Roger. *Imagination, Identification and Catharsis in Theatre and Therapy*. London: Jessica Kingsley, 1997. p. 81. See also Lengel, Laura and Warren, T. John. *CASTING GENDER: Women and Performance in Intercultural Context*. New York: Peter Lang, 2005. This collection of essays discusses the relevance of theatre as a medium for social change.

studied anguish learnt by rote' (69). The emotion caused by Duse's performance, grounded on the minimalistic way she conveyed the feelings of her female characters, fuels the power of the experience of the audience and Lowell; and all of them can 'feel the throbbing of a human soul,/ A woman's heart that cries to God and fears!' (70-71).

The poetic 'I,' no longer separated from the audience, suffers and rejoices with them. The identification with Duse as the object of love and desire has been made, and the audience and Lowell respond to what they see and—for a moment—believe to be 'true.' The moment in which they 'discern the real' is quick and has the feel of a vision, which Lowell captures with a powerful image:

As if a little, sudden gust of wind,
Should blow aside the branches of a tree,
Revealing for an instant to our eyes
The deep night sky all twinkling full of stars
And then the branch sweep back and shut it out
And leave us wondering, 'neath the rustling leaves (63-68).

In the seventy-one lines of the poem, Duse's performance serves almost as a mirror for Lowell that 'bears fruit' (38); and she is inspired to bear fruit like Duse does but in the form of producing poetry—'I could write poetry,' she writes in her letter to Tietjens. Lowell recognises the heights reached by Duse and that with her 'genius' and dexterity in becoming her character, Duse becomes a mirror in which people see themselves reflected.

Lowell introduces this notion of the mirror early in the poem and develops it gradually with the use of verbs and substantives associated with vision. She reinforces the metaphor in line 11: 'For they have come to see the self-same play,' and in line 32 when she repeats, 'Yet all have come to see the self-same play.' This repetition underlines the power and ambiguity of the vision as Lowell plays with the concept on a symbolic level. The audience is there to 'see' but also to *be seen* in the characters on the stage.

The free space offered via the stage acts on a symbolic level for the performers and for the audience. This free space also influences Duse, who can

identify with her fictional character and her emotions, reaching an imaginary unity between herself and the character she performs. In the reflection cast by what Lowell views as Duse's mirror, Lowell also sees herself as part of this symbolic unity, and recognises 'the shadowy figment of a poet's dream with palpitating life' (23). It is after this identification or acknowledgement, in fact, that the 'I' joins with the audience and becomes 'we.' Lowell's position shifts from external to internal and collective.

'Eleonora Duse' travels a full aural circle of sorts. Initially, the narrator focuses her attention on the silence that falls soon after the 'lights go out/ While other lights flash on the eyes' (2-3). At the end of the poem, with the audience and the 'I' still under the spell of Duse's performance, that initial silence returns in a different, inverted form: it has become the silent yet audible 'cries' of 'a woman's heart' (71). This reversal lends the poem a strong unity and simultaneously reflects the 'epiphany' undergone by the narrator. The silence becomes audible only because the audience's perception has been sharpened by Duse's performance, and the 'I' can also hear the cries of a woman's heart, becoming the receiver and the testifier of the story that Duse tells through her performance.

Lowell focuses not on the bodily form of the actress but rather on her symbolic disembodiment; Duse is in fact *felt* by Lowell: 'For she whom we have come to watch tonight/ Is more to be divined and felt than seen' (39). This sense of disembodiment experienced under Duse's spell both by the audience and Lowell opened a new territory for Lowell: the one of poetry. It is after that performance that she is able to recognise and legitimise another part of herself, 'latent' until this epiphany: '[I]t revealed me to myself,' wrote Lowell to Tietjens. The powerful effect of the experience, illustrated by Duggan and Grainger, has its result in Lowell.

The final line of the poem is emblematic and marks the threshold that Lowell crosses. It reveals not only the 'real' perceived by the audience and Lowell in Duse's character but also a vision, which belongs to Lowell alone: 'A woman's heart that cries to God and fears!' (71). A new world opens up to Lowell after this 'epiphany' that is surrounded by 'cries' and 'fears,' much like a newborn child the moment it leaves the safety of the womb. The revelation is painful, and nothing can be the same thereafter. From this moment, Lowell be-

gins her personal re-narration, which she develops in her subsequent poems dedicated to Duse as both her living muse and the testimony of the new path she is taking. Although this poem stands as Lowell's great homage to the Italian actress as artist and as woman, it is also what makes Lowell a poet: in praising Duse, Lowell legitimises herself.

In 1923, at the time Lowell reflected on and shared her debt to Duse, she was at the height of her maturity as a poet. Although in her articles and critical works Lowell rarely cites Duse explicitly, in illustrating her point on poetry, for example, she quite often explains poetry in terms of theater. In her essay 'Poetry as Spoken Art,' for example, in which she asserts the primacy of the rhythm in poetry, regardless of the form of the poem, Lowell emphasises the difference between reading lines and acting: difference which is not mistaken by 'the great actresses like Sarah Bernhardt or Duse' (16). Lowell specifically points out the effects of such great performances on the imagination of the audience, to whom 'Dream world [the one on the stage] ... it is for the moment real' (17). This is the same brief 'real' dream world, to which the audience and herself were exposed that evening of 1902. Such references to theatre thus reveal the strong effect that theatre and Duse had on Lowell. That experience remained active and one that formed not only a part of her critical approach to poetry but was also linked to several of her poems. The poem 'Eleonore Duse,' reveals clearly the effect of the 'magnetic' spell of the actress, although with the technical 'infelicities' as Lowell called them.

To Lowell and the audience, Duse has the beauty and enchantment of an 'Aeolian harp,' the same beauty and enchantment that Lowell 'studying and reading' tries to reach in all the lyrics written after that epiphanic moment. In one of her more investigated love lyrics, 'Madonna of the Evening Flowers,' appeared in 1919 *Pictures of the Floating World*, Lowell is more confident in her medium than she was in 1902. Beauty and enchantment emerge expressed with more perfect elegance and padronance; she has learnt how to 'express one's self,' her desires and feelings and, also, how to develop and recreate Sappho's images and motifs, which she had not yet mastered in 'Eleonora Duse.' In 'Madonna of the Evening Flowers,' her lover appears in a typical Lowell setting: her rich and coloured garden: 'Then I see you/ Standing under a spire of pale blue larkspur, / With a basket of roses on your arm.' The lover is stand-

ing, she does not move, and it is on her apparent immobility, that Lowell constructs her response to her vision. Immobility was one of the strategies used by Duse to draw her audience's attention to the complexity of her female characters. This vision also shares other links with Lowell's first poem to Duse. For instance, the sound of the harp—the 'Aeolian harp'—is reproduced here, but replaced by the sound of bells: 'I think the Canterbury bells are playing little tunes.' Lowell uses both the sound and the colour of the bells to create a sublime atmosphere with which she introduces the beloved: 'But I look at you, heart of silver,/ White heart-flame of polished silver, / Burning beneath the blue steeples of the larkspur.' The power of the vision is short but intense, as it was in her previous poem to Duse.

Once under the spell of Duse, Lowell is able to include Sapphic images and to adapt them in order to elicit sensuous movements, glances and body in her own way. And it is under this influence that her later poems are written. That epiphanic experience continued to show its effects throughout her growth as a poet, as Lowell admits at the end of her letter to Tietjens; it is on this basis that she constructed both her critical and poetical approaches. When Duse came back in North America, late in November 1923, Lowell again reflected—in poems—upon her artistic process. Such retrospective reconstruction of her personhood, as Adriana Cavarero argues in her analysis on the philosophy of the narration, can only be recognized when the pattern is visible, that is, when it has happened.¹⁷

This maturation undoubtedly reaches its apex in her poem 'The Sisters,' published in June 1922.¹⁸ It is, in particular in this poem, that Lowell shows her confidence in the path she has taken. Comparing briefly Lowell's first poem 'Eleonora Duse' and 'The Sisters' it appears clear that in the latter, the focus is no longer on the effect of Duse's performance, rather it is in her right to choose her 'inspiring muse.' This point is strongly reflected in 'The Sisters,' where she constructs a conversation among three female poets who have some relevance for her. At the end of the poem, however, Lowell 'dismisses' the three poets manifesting her right to choose her artistic path. Lowell's voice is the voice of

¹⁷ Cavarero, Adriana. *Tu che mi Guardi, Tu che Mi Racconti: filosofia della Narrazione*. Milan: Feltrinelli, 1977. pp. 43-44.

¹⁸ 'The Sisters' will be discussed in detail in Chapter Five.

a Lowell who is master of herself, a Lowell who had experimented different poetical forms at the time, who has found her way to give definitive voice to her initial latent inclinations and desires, and to reveal her ‘woman’s heart’ but without those ‘cries to God and fears,’ which appeared at the end of her first political homage to the Italian actress. ‘The Sisters’ reveals a more mature Lowell, more confident in her choices and in her poetic ability than the amateur Lowell of 1902. While ‘The Sisters’ is woven not only on images but on her clear awareness of her right to choose, ‘Eleonora Duse’ is still sustained, in its ebb and flow of emotions, by images which are clearly moving under the magnetic spell of Duse. Its construction remains at the level of enchantment. That this more confident and mature Lowell ascribes Duse as her muse is evidence that further strengthens the case that she was inspired by Duse from 1902 onwards. Lowell’s claims of her debt to Duse, ultimately, showed her mature poetical attitude; her serious and sincere approach toward the art of poetry. It was through poetry that she could re-narrate herself.

2.2. *Duse as Testimony of Lowell’s Self-Reconstruction*

In analysing the philosophy of narration in Hannah Arendt’s work, the philosopher Adriana Cavarero highlights that ‘birth, action and narration become the scenes of an identity which always postulate the presence of the other.’¹⁹ In this light, the epiphany felt and described by Lowell in ‘Eleonora Duse’ can be considered the moment of her re-birth, the occasion of her re-narration, a path for her new identity. This rebirth, however, needs to be recognised—needs ‘the presence of the other’—just as a newborn child is recognised by her parents and the community as the witnesses of the newborn’s existence, and therefore, they can tell the story of his or her birth.

According to Cavarero, the need to be told about one’s own story or the need to narrate one’s own story is inherent in every human being, as the ancient oral tradition of telling stories demonstrates (57). If you are the narrator

¹⁹ Cavarero, Adriana. *Tu che mi Guardi, Tu che mi Racconti: filosofia della narrazione*. Milan: Feltrinelli, 1997. p. 44. English version: *Relating Narratives: Storytelling and Selfhood*. London and New York: Routledge, 2000. Translated by Paul A. Kottman. Debating Hannah Arendt’s thought, Cavarero develops an interesting analysis of identity in narration, rooted in Karen Blixen’s theory that the design or story of a life can be seen and narrated only after the lifetime of the subject.

of your own life story, or if someone else tells it, the presence of the other is essential. Any life story has to be recounted to someone else, a listener. Every narration needs an audience, then, to be legitimised. This legitimisation logically works in three different ways: for the storyteller who, as Cavarero points out, becomes a kind of biographer; for the listener, who becomes witness to the narration; and for the subject, about whom the story is told, who becomes in this way exposed, readable, and visible to the others (55-59). To continue the metaphor of the newborn child, this subject acquires the status of being alive because he or she is made visible in flesh and soul through the narration.

Another important element that features in the mechanism described above is logically connected to the storyteller's point of view. In narrating the actions of the subject, the storyteller will consciously or unconsciously add elements of his or her own story. The storyteller is in a way present in the story itself—with his or her voice, body, emotions, or language within the body of the text as well as on the stage—and in turn legitimises his or her presence simply by narrating the story. This becomes significant in respect to Lowell. Duse's story—and above all the genius of her art—told by Lowell in the poems she dedicated to the Italian actress, reveals not only some aspect of Duse's life, but also of Lowell's own story. In this way, Duse becomes a testimony to Lowell's new artistic life, and Lowell becomes the storyteller of Duse's great artistic achievement. Lowell's devotion to the actress must therefore be reconsidered in this light.

In *Amy Lowell, Diva Poet*, Bradshaw emphasises 'Lowell's self-identification [with the Italian actress] as one of Duse's most ardent fans' and that her devotion to Duse gave Lowell the 'courage' to write poetry.²⁰ Lowell was also aware of this, as her reply to Tietjens testifies. Undoubtedly, Bradshaw goes further than Damon in suggesting that 'Loving Duse shaped Lowell's selfhood, offering a desultory young heiress a way out of neurasthenic torpor, towards self-actualization' (132). However, Bradshaw argues that Duse's spell on Lowell owed much to Duse's 'acquiescent femininity' and 'submissive womanhood' (132). Bradshaw underlines that Lowell perceived Duse's passivity as 'responses to desire' (142), and that 'Eleonora Duse' con-

²⁰ Bradshaw, Melissa. *Amy Lowell, Diva Poet*. New York: Ashgate, 2011. p. 132.

templates ‘the aesthetic power of this silence and submission’ (142). Duse’s ability to elicit feelings in her audience, her function as ‘a theorist of emotions’ (144), is projected by Bradshaw onto Lowell, and Lowell’s ability ‘to elicit feeling in others’ is seen by Bradshaw ‘as the pinnacle of feminine achievement,’ which Lowell vests ‘with quasi-religious power’ (144).

Although Bradshaw’s vision may seem enthralling and maintains her statement regarding Lowell’s supposed lesbianism ‘as an aesthetic and an artistic identity’ (151), she misses the relevance of Duse’s testimony of Lowell’s self-reconstruction, necessary to Lowell’s rebirth. In addition, she does not explore other angles of that epiphanic moment, such as Lowell’s negotiation of her new path, or how Lowell consummated her hidden or ‘latent’ desires to play an active part in society. Crucially, the interval between the last time Lowell watched Duse’s performances in 1893 and the evening of the 1902 epiphany saw relevant changes in both Duse’s acting and Lowell’s personal life. The improvement of Duse’s performance and the theme of the play—permeated by d’Annunzio’s eroticism—that Lowell watched that evening are the two novelties that matter in Lowell’s epiphanic evening, and are already manifested in this poem. It is ultimately the expression of her extreme gratitude not only for the effects of her performance but also, for Duse becoming the visible testimony to Lowell’s new path.

By writing about that epiphanic evening and offering ‘Eleonora Duse’ for publication, Lowell allows Duse—as the subject of the poem—to become symbolic of her new path; Duse makes Lowell ‘visible’ and readable not only to Lowell herself but to the external world. Lowell chose Duse as her living muse, and in all of her poems dedicated to her, Lowell praises the actress’s grace and artistic beauty, insisting on her art above all as having the power to purify and elevate the audience and Lowell herself.²¹

The British critic and poet Arthur Symons gives a picture of Duse’s superior performance that does not significantly differ from Lowell’s vision and understanding of the Italian actress and underlines that which makes Duse so essential for Lowell’s new direction.²² In his recollections of the Italian actress,

²¹ Lowell develops and defends this didactic characteristic of art in her subsequent essays, especially those relating to education and poetry. Lowell’s essays and articles will be discussed in Chapter Three.

²² Symons, Arthur. *The Virginia Quarterly Review* (Summer 1925): pp. 172-183.

Symons emphasises Duse's spell as well her ability to 'master herself' to reach that point, which was not 'her abandonment to it' that fuels the imagination and inspiration, but her being that 'impersonal force' which put life in 'every and brain-cell with a life which was unslackening and sleepless (172).

Symons uses the verb 'magnetize' to describe her spell: she 'magnetizes our poor vertebrae.' According to him, 'along with the words' she spoke comes 'an emotion, which you might resolve to ignore, but which seized on you, which went through and through you' (174). Symons focuses on Duse's art, which he compares to the French poetry of Verlaine: 'always suggestion, never statement, always a renunciation.' Duse's art is not a copy of reality, 'but the thing itself, the evocation of thoughtful life, the creation of the world over again, as actual and beautiful a thing as if the world had never existed' (176).

The woman she put on the stage was a woman in love but 'not the woman in love with love.' The passion infused by Duse into her female characters was 'the primary not the primitive, emotion, because it was passion's absolute self, which became personal because it was universal' (178). That passion was one well aware of its 'term': 'neither death nor any other annihilation of the future' (180). The evening of the epiphany, Lowell felt the theatrical power that Duggan and Grainger explain in their work and 'draw[s]' her own conclusion: she is now able to read her new story, realising what she can do in order to transcend the image of herself shaped by the norms and codes of patriarchal society. She resolved to find her way, her own new image and identity.

In the preface to *Gender in the Mirror*, Diana Tietjens Meyers emphasises that in order to find their own self-image and self-imagery, 'women must shatter the silvered glass of entrenched gender imagery.'²³ Reading Lowell's 'Eleonora Duse' in this light, it becomes clear that the function of artist and art in general became Lowell's field for self-exposure, her way to 'shatter the silvered glass,' tell her story, and construct her new identity. The poem also reveals her need for an empty surface that would reflect her new self-image, unobscured by other reflections.

On the evening of the performance, Lowell tried to release some of the tension by setting down her emotions on paper using poetry, a discipline she

²³ Meyers, Diana Tietjens. *Gender in the Mirror*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2002. Preface.

had not yet practiced. But after Duse's performance, Lowell believed poetry to be the only medium through which she could fully express her turmoil. Duse's surrender to her own creativity, rather than her character's surrender emphasised by Bradshaw, gives her the chance to experience different passions every night—hatred, envy, grief, love—and this free space in which to be was something Lowell sought for herself. Lowell's direction following the epiphany took her towards reconstruction, a kind of re-imagining of herself beyond the roles designated by the codes of her society. Her insistence in her proceeding poems—particularly those dedicated to Duse—on the ambiguity of the vision, is not coincidental. Importantly, there is no narcissism here—Lowell is not in love with her own reflection; instead, she questions the 'truth' of the reflection, as she is in search of her 'real' one. In the last homage to Duse, published a few weeks after Duse's death in 1924 but written a few months before, she continues to question it, 'Seeing's believing? What then would you see?' (II, 9).²⁴ She will use this refrain to construct subsequent poems, which will be hereafter considered.

2.3. *Duse's Gioconda and Lowell's 'The Cremona Violin'*

As many newspapers and magazines have highlighted, the Eleonora Duse who made her reappearance in America in 1902 differed significantly from the young woman Lowell had watched many years before. In an anonymous 1902 review in the *New York Dramatic Mirror*, the editorialist, acknowledging Duse's physical changes (she was forty-four years old at the time), remarks how she was grown up in her talent and how her voice had become more powerful and points out that all those chances 'fairly belittled her own former appearance of authority that had seemed supreme.'²⁵

However, Lowell had also changed. In 1902, after the death of her parents, she had bought Sevenels from her siblings and set out to discover who she was and what she was capable of. Lowell was a relatively young, unmarried

²⁴ Lowell, Amy. 'Eleonora Duse.' *What's O'Clock*. Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1925. p. 235.

²⁵ *The New York Dramatic Mirror*. November 15, 1902. p. 16.

woman, rich, intelligent, and of good temperament, but with few opportunities to branch out from the role dictated by her social status. Lowell witnessed Duse performing in Gabriele d'Annunzio's dramatic play, *Gioconda*, in 1902.²⁶ Beyond the performed character, Lowell saw a woman who had chosen her profession, a woman who had chosen a different path from her rival Sarah Bernhardt and Duse's well-known Italian predecessors, Adelaide Ristori and Giacinta Pezzana. She was a woman who was beaten at the age of four so that she might show real pain and real tears on stage, who was following her dream of pure art and had learned the tyranny of her craft as well as the great difficulties of being a female artist in a male world, under the male gaze.

Duse was also a mother living apart from her daughter, who she called 'Ma Pupa Henriette' in the correspondence they exchanged in French rather than Italian.²⁷ Duse 'inhabited' many worlds on the stage, but the world of poetry was closest to her life. Her lovers and life-long companions included important Italian poets and writers such as Arrigo Boito and Gabriele d'Annunzio. Like Lowell, Duse was a self-taught woman, and the theatre functioned for her 'as if' it were the world in which she could re-narrate herself and express 'the complex, distinctive, three-dimensional individual' a woman was, to use Meyers' words.²⁸ The evening of this performance, Lowell saw the path taken by this woman and began to see her own, a path she could choose in order to liberate herself and express her feelings. Moreover, the play Duse performed that evening in Boston was a psychological drama, a genre in which Duse was at her best. She was Silvia, married to a sculptor who had attempted suicide due to a dilemma: to choose his art and his inspiring muse, the beautiful young *Gioconda*, or renounce his art and remain with his faithful wife. Silvia also flutters between two choices that both have tragic consequences: to allow her husband to follow his calling and inevitably his muse *Gioconda*, or to stay with an unhappy man devastated without his art. Ultimately, the faithful Silvia chooses to privilege his art and set him free, saving the statue that *Gioconda* threatens to destroy and losing her hands in the scuffle. The tragedy symbolises

²⁶ *Gioconda* was written in 1900 by the poet Gabriele d'Annunzio (1863-1938), who was a former lover of Duse.

²⁷ Biggi, Maria Ida. *Ma pupa, Henriette: Le Lettere di Eleonora Duse alla figlia*. Venice: Marsilio Editore, 2010.

²⁸ Meyers, Diana Tietjens. *Gender in the Mirror*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2002.

the total abnegation of Silvia—her ‘submission,’ as Bradshaw sees it—although Bradshaw fails to notice that it also symbolises the triumph of art over all, including the values of marriage.

Lowell felt that the dilemma being caused by the sculptor’s powerful devotion to art and not by Silvia’s ‘servitude’ was the strong point of the play, as is evident in ‘The Cremona Violin’ (*Men, Women and Ghosts*, 1916), which has clear parallels with *Gioconda*. In this poem, from a different angle, Lowell presents the dilemma faced by the housewife ‘Frau Altgelt,’ married to a musician who is shut off in his private artistic world. The emphasis is on the woman’s need to be ‘desired’ and ‘possessed’ by her husband: ‘What would life be? What?/ For she was young, and loved, while he was moved/ Only by music. Each day that was proved’ (I, 116-118). Her desires clash with the devotion her husband reserves for his Stradivarius violin and his music: ‘Quick, Lotta, shut the door, my violin/ I fear is wetted. Now, Dear, bring a light’ (I, 36-37); ‘Give me the candle. No, the inside’s dry./ Thank God for that! Well, Lotta, how are you?’ (I, 42-43).²⁹

Unlike d’Annunzio’s faithful Silvia, Lowell’s Frau Altgelt breaks her husband’s violin before abandoning him for Heinrich, a beer merchant who she imagines promises her a more reliable and affectionate love. Silvia and Frau Altgelt are united in terms of the marriage bond, but are separated by different visions of themselves and of art. Frau Altgelt’s dilemma is rooted in the separation of sex and happiness by the domestic and sentimental traditions. In Lowell’s poem it is resolved in an open choice in favour of a life where she can have both sentimental emotions and bodily pleasure. Frau Altgelt is not afraid of her sexual desire and believes it to be the natural reward for her services. The poem ends with the breaking of her husband’s ‘beloved’ violin and with her abandoning the house where she sewed, waited, prepared dinner, brought comfort to her man, and was defined in her human needs by social codes and her husband’s demands. In her domestic life, she played the roles of a child and a privileged audience for her husband. In the final lines, Lowell intensifies the use of words linked to the aural sphere in order to underline the distance between the two characters: the male who wants to be listened to and the female

²⁹ Lowell, Amy. ‘The Cremona Violin,’ *Men, Women and Ghosts*. New York: Macmillan, 1916. The poem is divided into five sections of varying length.

who is destined to listen. The deafness of her husband is mirrored in the deafness of Frau Altgelt herself because she ultimately leaves without attending to the call of the clock:

The little door in it came open, flicking
A wooden cuckoo out: 'Cuckoo!' It caused
The forest dream to come again. 'Cuckoo!'
Smashed on the grate, the violin broke in two.
'Cuckoo! Cuckoo!' the clock kept striking on;
But no one listened. Frau Altgelt had gone (V, 261-266).

The poem ends with Frau Altgelt's exit, and Lowell leaves the listener-reader to his or her own conclusions about the consequences of the housewife's decision. She does not reveal whether Frau Altgelt's romance ends happily, or whether her husband follows her and takes her back to her domestic duty or kills her for having disobeyed the bond of marriage, as in 'Pickthorn Manor,' which precedes 'The Cremona Violin.'³⁰ Lowell appears impartial; she is the storyteller in the body of the text, but it may be argued that choosing to tell the story is in itself an act of complicity.

In the preface to *Men, Women and Ghosts*, Lowell identifies herself with a 'watcher' who has to use 'eyes, and ears, and heart, in watching' (xii), implying that both she and the poetic voice are wholly in the text in flesh and soul. In so doing, she reaffirms her subjectivity as a poet and a woman, as both internal and external to the text, and reinforces her identity and her role. Lowell highlights in the preface that her interest lies in the form of 'The Cremona Violin,' and explains that she intended to produce 'something of the suave, continuous tone of a violin. Again, in the violin parts themselves, the movement constantly changes, as will be quite plain to anyone reading these passages aloud.' She confesses the difficulty of transcribing some movements of Stra-

³⁰ Lowell, Amy. *Men, Women and Ghosts*. New York: Macmillan, 1916. Both poems appear in the first section of the book, entitled *Figurine in Old Saxe* and comprising six poems. The first three poems present the unfortunate love affairs of three different women who are confronted by the social codes of morality and duty. The opening poem is the well-known 'Patterns,' which ends with the protagonist exclaiming 'Christ! What are patterns for?' when she receives the letter announcing the death of her lover in war. She then turns her back on her beautiful garden and walks into the house, her gilded cage. This poem will be discussed in detail in Chapter Seven.

vinsky's Three Pieces 'Grotesques' for String Quartet and shows her satisfaction because 'several musicians, who have seen the poem, think the movement accurately given.' The rest of the poem, she explains, was written in the seven-line Chaucerian stanza.

When the collection was published in 1916, Lowell was already involved with the Imagist movement and still in search of her own poetic voice, a new rhythm for her poetry. 'The Cremona Violin' develops on two levels, binding meaning and form together. The musicality which Lowell attempts to exhibit reveals her attention to the performative element of poetry; as many critics have recognised, Lowell was a superb performer of her poems.³¹ When Frau Altgelt leaves the house, every sound ceases; no one is listening anymore. Lowell emphatically links these two components of the poem: the sound of the clock that divides and dictates the rhythm of her daily domestic duties is ironically set against the harsh sounds of the violin when she smashes it. Due to Frau Altgelt's action, both clock and violin lose their original function and sound: they are no longer instruments of enjoyable collective moments or harmonious sound, but rather solitude, frustration, and discordance. Like Ibsen's Nora, Lowell's Frau Altgelt simply turns her back on the house, and 'the curtains' go down.

In *Diva Poet*, Bradshaw implies that Frau Altgelt's romance is built on dreams and fantasies and is therefore going to become another cage, most likely more terrible than the one she escaped (106). Lowell leaves the scene open to the reader's interpretations about Frau Altgelt's destiny because she is more concerned with her own poetic research and her vision of art. In 'The Cremona Violin,' Lowell implies that when art converses only with art and is pursued at the expense of contact with reality, the result is an incommunicability, a barrier between people which unbalances relationships and becomes a source of misery and despair, as it was for Silvia. Although the tragedy of d'Annunzio's Silvia is connected to sex and loyalty, it essentially results from a choice the heroine made, which suggests by extension that for every unconventional choice made, there is a certain price to be paid: the price a woman

³¹ No recordings of Lowell's readings have been found, but there was a great deal of music written for her poems during her lifetime and after her death. Lowell was interested in the analogies between poetry and music, as she wrote in her essay 'Some Musical Analogies in Modern Poetry.' *Musical Quarterly* 6.1 (1920): pp. 127-157.

pays for simply making a choice, something considered beyond her rights in society at this time.

Silvia and Duse each make an independent choice and are prepared to face the consequences. Duse's performance promoted the idea that art is experienced in a manner filled with quasi-mystical, almost divine virtues more noble than any marital bond. Bradshaw focuses on another interesting characteristic of choice-making in her *Diva Poet*, underlining the 'latent' masochistic aspect of rejection, a humiliation which both Silvia and Duse experienced. In Bradshaw's view, Duse's trust of d'Annunzio's artistic vision—although d'Annunzio abandoned her, Duse continued to support his art and present his play—reveals Duse's 'erotic sublimation.' Bradshaw thereby justifies Lowell's career in light of the eroticism that this 'sublimation' implies, and it is precisely the 'erotics of sublimation' that she suggests enthralled Lowell in Duse's performance. Bradshaw fails to notice the other relevant trait common to both Duse and Lowell: the power they both perceived in art. Duse's disruptive relationship with d'Annunzio does not diminish her ability to judge a piece of good art, and art cannot be limited by any bonds. According to *ars gratia artis* (art for art's sake), it is possible to give and receive a certain pleasure, but this aesthetic credo was not without consequences for a woman who chose to embrace it.

Duse chooses it in her own way, but her choice was not strictly linked with the ideal vision patriarchal society expected women to embody; instead, it was connected with a new independent vision of herself as woman and artist. Duse's performance emphasised the strength of a woman who made an epic choice. As many of her biographers and critics have commented, Duse believed in and strove wholeheartedly for the power of pure art that could vindicate the sufferings of human souls, including her own. This inspired Lowell to work and encouraged her to maintain that 'flicker of a small red candle/ Lit by you [Duse] long ago,' as her poetic 'I' confesses in 'To Eleonora Duse in Answer to a Letter' in 1923.

2.4. *Ballads for Sale: 'To Eleonora Duse in Answer to a Letter' and 'To Eleonora Duse, 1923'*

In 1923, the Italian actress Elenora Duse made her fourth tour to the United States. It is the same year that Lowell submitted her first poetic homage to Duse to *Poetry*, and wrote two other poems to her. Both of these occasions are relevant in supporting the position that these two poems must therefore be re-considered as the framework of Lowell's personal path, helping her give form and visibility to her art and herself: an important retrospective reconstruction of personhood. If in her 1902 poem what clearly emerges is a Lowell under the powerful spell of the Italian actress, in these two poems Lowell reconsiders and reflects upon both her path after her epiphany and Duse's path after those years.

Both poems were published in Lowell's second posthumous poetry collection, *Ballads for Sale*, in 1927 by Ada Russell.³² 'To Eleonora Duse in Answer to a Letter' opens the section titled 'Portraits, Places, and People' and it is followed by the second poem, entitled 'To Eleonora Duse, 1923,' in which the year is clearly indicated. Although the first poem, 'To Eleonora Duse in Answer to a Letter,' is undated, it is possible to retrace the date because the poem opens with a sentence that also appears in the note written by Duse to 'Amie' from the Stafford Hotel in Baltimore where she was based during her performances in the Lyric Theatre, in December 1923.

In her brief note, Duse thanks 'Amie' for her gift and apologises that she cannot accept her invitation,³³ writing, 'Vorrei picchiare alla "Porta dello Spirito" ed essere stasera fra quelli che ascolteranno la "parola dello Spiri-

³² Lowell, Amy. *Ballads for Sale*. Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1927.

³³ Duse's note to Lowell, conserved in the Amy Lowell collection of the Houghton Library, is the only remaining evidence confirming that the two women knew each other. The nature of their relationship, however, remains unclear. According to S. Foster Damon, who based his account on Russell's grandchild's recollection of the episode, Ada Russell burnt most of the correspondence and other papers of which Lowell asked her to dispose at her death. A letter from Katherine Onslow addressed to Ada Russell reveals that some letters in her possession were not destroyed. Onslow, who was the actress's friend, asked Ada to forgive her for keeping Duse's letters. Although she does not clearly report what was at stake, the correspondence she kept may well have been that between Lowell and Duse. In another undated letter, presumably sent to Russell in 1925, because she refers to a copy of *What's O'Clock* received from Russell, Onslow expresses her appreciation for a number of specific poems included in that collection: 'Evelyn Ray' ('always one of my favourites'), 'Lilacs,' and the six sonnets to Duse, which she refers to as 'the most telling of them all.' Onslow, Katherine. Letter to Ada Russell. MS Lowell: 95 M36.

to”.³⁴ With poetic and dramatic elegance, Duse plays with the Italian words *porta* (door) and *parola* (word) in her homage to Lowell’s generosity and art. *Porta* and *parola* both give access to the Spirit and both are metaphors for Lowell. Duse’s note clearly acknowledges the quality of Lowell’s poems and speech, and her metaphysical vision of Lowell as ‘Spirit,’ the power of the art, reveals Duse’s conception of art and specifically poetry, which can reach out and open the door of the Spirit. In addition, her use of ‘Amie’ instead of ‘Amy’ suggests a more intimate relationship between the two women and plays with the French word for ‘friend.’

In her poetical response to Duse’s message, Lowell chooses to quote Duse’s words at the beginning of her note but translated into English: ‘Regrets and memories these short December days’ (1), followed by her own lines: ‘How the words cut and scar themselves/ cross my heart!’ (2-3).³⁵ Presented at the beginning, these words underline the personal and confessional quality of the poem, and remark on the distance between the two women’s independent but linked paths. The poem, unlike the first one dedicated to Duse in 1902, develops around those ‘regrets and memories’ mentioned by Duse. Lowell acknowledges that the ‘Lady of the great compassion’ (4), ‘the incarnate soul/ Of human needs and meetings’ (26), the one whose flesh is ‘So rightly framed into such a spirit’ (34), has run away. Although, Duse is out of sight, she remains ‘peak of human capability’ and her ‘Infinite spirit with the lightest shadowing/ Of merciful and finite flesh (39-45).³⁶ It is a painful reality for Lowell who, in the subsequent lines, asks to her listener-reader, ‘Has any one ever so held the cord of life,/ of all our lives, as you? You dare not say there has and gaze truth in the eye’ (46-47), and then, comes back to Duse inviting her to look back at what she was, what she represented to her. She ‘was soul’s wine of a generation,/ The whispered bourne of blessings to a world (48-52).

Lowell’s high estimation of Duse’s art is unquestionable, and this creates a kind of pain in Lowell—not because it has diminished but because the time has passed. The poetic ‘I’ is talking to the one who long ago ‘lit’ a ‘small

³⁴ ‘I wish I could knock at the “Door of the Spirit” and be among those who tonight will listen to the “word of the Spirit”’ [my translation].

³⁵ Lowell, Amy. ‘To Eleonora Duse in Answer to a Letter.’ *Ballads for Sale*. Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1927. pp. 87-89.

³⁶ Lowell, Amy. ‘To Eleonora Duse in Answer to a Letter.’ p. 89.

red candle' (18-19), smashing the mirror which now can reflect only the new Lowell. It is clear that this 'distance' in terms of years, is the only aspect which separates Duse's first epiphanic action in 1902 from Lowell's new life in 1923. Lowell cannot dismiss or forget Duse because she facilitated the transformative self and unknowingly lit the fire. Twenty-one years had passed, during which Duse still functioned as testimony to Lowell's poetic achievements and new identity. This poem focuses on Lowell's response to Duse not only as an actress but also as the cause of her new incarnation. As Cavarero underlines in *Tu che mi Guardi, Tu che mi Racconti* a story can only be told and consequently understood when its actions or events have been performed.³⁷

In re-reading 'To Eleonora Duse in Answer to a Letter,' under Cavarero's reflections, it becomes clear that it stands for Lowell's conscious act of retrospective reconstruction of her own story. Those regrets and memories mentioned at the beginning of the poem belong to both women in different ways. Duse, for example, was obliged to take a tournée around the world at the age of sixty-five with serious health problems (which led to her death months later in Pittsburg) in order to keep her independence, having refused Mussolini's offer of a state pension, which she perceived as a form of charity.

Lowell saw her in Winter 1923 during her busy and exhausting tour in North America that forced the Italian actress to move continuously: 'walked, and walk' (26), as Lowell underlines in her poem. Duse had no time for resting or meeting friends. Lowell shows her comprehension of and empathy for the life Duse had chosen, and tries to heal her sufferings by praising her good qualities. Lowell recognises Duse's superhuman efforts to be what she is, to offer her superior qualities to her audience, and to maintain her independence. Duse and her art are both therefore necessary to the world. Duse's achievements, notwithstanding the difficulties (such as her unsuccessful reception on her first American tour in 1893 and her health's problems) remain live in Lowell's memory, encouraging her in following her path.

In 'To Eleonora Duse, 1923,' Lowell's acknowledgement of her identification with the Italian actress is unequivocal. She links herself to Duse, referring to 'our double names' (79). In the following line she wonders what this

³⁷ Cavarero, Adriana. *Tu che Mi Guardi, Tu che Mi Racconti*. Milan: Feltrinelli, 2001. pp. 7-11.

will bring to 'men's mind.' Lowell gives her laconic answer: 'A chance creation not at all desired,/ Yet so existing while our double names/ Shall carry any meaning to men's mind' (78-80).

Here, Lowell again symbolically plays with the image of the mirror which reflects the other who is the same, and insisting on 'same—'our same names'—she echoes her first poem dedicated to Duse: 'and all came to see the self-same play' (32). This scene of sympathetic identification is the crux of Lowell's narrative poem, and also tells the story of a lack of predecessors with whom she can build a poetic world containing the female as subject rather than object. Lowell sees herself linked to Duse, as they both belong to the artistic world where space for women is always restricted.

The cause and effect of Duse's role in Lowell's acknowledgment of her vocation are developed after eleven years in these poems. The efforts made by Duse to have voice, power, and authority in the male artistic world might remain beyond the comprehension of male minds, but are clearly present in Lowell, who cannot forget that ecstatic moment she experienced when she could see herself in herself. That epiphany was a rebirth for Lowell, a threshold that she could cross only once. After eleven years, she cannot help reminding, both Duse and herself, that the change she brought into her life is alive and active. Those were years of hard work for Lowell and when she saw Duse again, during the Winter of 1923, she was a woman at the service of poetry for herself and for her country. She had popularised the Imagist movement, edited two anthologies, and written her 1922 poem 'The Sisters' in which she claims her individual choice and right to follow her own path by suggesting another meaning of 'sisterhood.'³⁸

In the 1923 poems she dedicates to Duse, her acknowledgment of the difficulties for a woman in the artistic world emerges. For Lowell, a reciprocal relationship based on respect and love between man and woman appears to be possible but 'impossible' path for a woman in a male-oriented world: 'our double names/ Shall carry any meaning to men's minds,' she laconically acknowledges at the end of 'To Eleonora Duse, 1923.'

³⁸ This aspect will be discussed in Chapter Five.

This theme reappears in one of her narrative poem, 'East, West, North, and South of a Man,' first published in *The Harpers Monthly Magazine* in 1924,³⁹ and included in her first posthumous collection, *What's O'Clock*, in 1925.⁴⁰

The long narrative poem, divided into four parts, moves from one image/imaginary space to another in each section. In it, Lowell shows how far her cinematographic approach has developed, and her confidence in constructing double levels of readings.⁴¹ She takes the reader from East to North in a metaphorical journey that seems to place the 'object'—man—at the centre. The 'object' has two implications here: *object* as opposed to *subject*, and object as being the final aim of a woman's search or destiny according to the social code. In the thirty-one lines of the first section, Lowell introduces the 'man' to Mary Madonna, who plays the role of a young and inexpert lady to whom Lowell shows the 'real' him. Lowell offers an image of him as a noble man, riding his white horse: 'A proud gentleman, Mary Madonna (1-8).'

After all the praise of the gentle knight, Lowell reversing the picture of him, leaves no chance of romance for Mary Madonna: 'There are dead men in his hand,/ Mary Madonna,/ And sighing women out beyond his thinking' (22-24). The last image of this knight is powerful and designed to undermine the romantic aspiration of the young lady. In the second section, Lowell addresses Scheherazade, the principal character of *One Thousand and One Nights*, the storytelling woman who told stories in order to save her life and those of other virgins from the terrible death dictated by the sultan Shahriyâr. Lowell presents Scheherazade in the moment she decides to challenge the sultan's will to kill each morning the virgin he had married the day before, and then questions her: 'Who are you to aspire beyond the petals/ to touch the golden burning beneath the marigold robe?' (44-45).

Lowell raises doubts and tension by describing the sultan's approach and focusing on details such as his scimitar—'the young moon hanging before

³⁹ Lowell, Amy. 'East, West, North, and South of a Man.' *The Harpers Monthly Magazine* (1924): pp. 608-612.

⁴⁰ *What's O'Clock*. Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1925. pp. 3-13.

⁴¹ According to Laurence Goldstein, this poem was a model for the poem 'Cinema of a Man' by Archibald MacLeish MacLeish, who was attracted by the lapidary beauty and structural suppleness of Imagist verse in general and Lowell's in particular. Goldstein, Laurence. *The American Poet at the Movies: A Critical History*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1995. p. 68.

a sunset' (47), and his voice—'the sun of mid-heaven' (48), before directing her glance to Scheherazade:

So, Scheherazade, he has passed the dragon fountains
And he is walking up the marble stairways, stopping to caress the peacocks
He will lean above you, Scheherazade, like September above an orchard
of apples
He will fill you with the sweetness of spice-fed flames.
Will you burn, Scheherazade, as flowers burn in September lights? (51-55)

The final lines shed a sinister light on her success and her destiny and she remains closed in the palace, while outside life is marked by the splash of the fountain and the peacocks spreading their tails (58-61). Lowell's cinematographic approach focuses on the continuous changes in light, intensifying the two worlds: outdoor and indoor. The former is dominated by the sultan's walk and great power, and the latter by Scheherazade, who is waiting within the palace. A powerful game of shadows in backlighting is reinforced by the final effect of the several eyes in the tails of peacocks and the windows shattered and barred. This focus on the eyes elicits the feeling of being watched, even if the eyes in the tails are merely decorative elements and not active agents. They represent a still, fixed beauty to be watched. In her descriptions of the sultan and the knight, Lowell insists on many details of the luxurious garments which indicate their social status and make them visible to the women and the wider world. Lowell uses powerful similes, adjectives, and metaphors usually applied to women in poetry and narratives by men—'The tawny glitter of his turban,/ Is it not dazzling—/ With the saffron jewel set like a sun-flower in the midst?' (39-41)—while the women mentioned in the poem are products of men's perceptions of them, particularly in the third section. In this longest, sixty-nine line section of the ballad, the women are depicted through the eyes of a street vendor who uses kind and promising words to attract their attention in order to sell them things they purportedly need for their beauty (78-79)—as well as for their domestic duties.

The third section closes with another confirmation of the illusionary world offered by man; the peddler, in fact, goes away with all his tricks and

promises, leaving Maudlin, Jennifer, and Prue behind, watching him ‘vanishing into the distance. The change of colour from green to white marks the distance between the static world of these three young women and the active world, which ‘vanishes’ into the distance. The external world is continuously presented as distant, closed, and impenetrable for the women. In the fourth and final section, Lowell depicts a scholar: ‘Who would read on a ladder?’ Lowell asks, ‘But who could read without a ladder?’ (203). She uses a ‘cheerful paradox’ (205) and leaves the scholar to the attention of Minerva, because ‘surely he has none for himself’ (209). The qualities of this scholar are illustrated with ironic seriousness:

His opinions on affairs of the moment are those of an eye-witness
Although he never sets foot out of doors.
Indeed Minerva, you should watch the step of this gentleman,
For he runs so swiftly past event and monuments it seems incredible he
should not trip (232-236).

But even the scholar, with all his intelligence, wit, and wisdom, is not open to women, although ‘He knows you better than you know yourself’ (250). After this laconic declaration, Lowell ends the fourth section of the ballad with a joyful calling to all women, inviting them to ‘Draw the curtain’ and to turn their attention to other pleasant activities, ‘Since neither the old gentleman nor Minerva will speak to us,/ I think we had best ignore them and go on as we are’ (252-253).

Lowell’s sudden call to her reader—both internal and external to the poem—back into another ‘reality’ is emphasised by the use of the verb ‘draw’ and the substantive ‘curtain.’ The use of ‘curtain’ in particular, hints clearly to the theatre, emphasising as well, a division between two worlds—male and female. It also implies the need to find or take another independent path distant from romantic love, which offers a factitious aspect of female experiences. The common traits of all of the different men in this poem lead the reader to one conclusion: the men are in another world; they don’t listen or care. In offering her advice after the metaphorical journey, the ‘I’ posits herself unmis-

takably inside the female community: 'I think we had to ignore them and go on as we are' (253).

At the beginning, the 'I' appears to be the only one who knows how to read the 'true' in these characters; but at the end, the narrator implies that this knowledge is shared by both the external and internal audiences. Lowell reinforces her involvement using the personal pronouns 'we' and 'us.' The male world appears deaf to the women, and their efforts to see it differently seem to be in vain. Leaving out the external world ('draw the curtains') and assembling the women with food and discussion, however, might continue to feed the same vision of separation. Separation works for both men and women because it makes them believe in a parallel, safe, and wise world which only they know and inhabit. The temptation to read the poem in this way is obvious if the irony and hyperboles are not taken into account. The ballad form lends the tone and theme a certain lightness, but the final joyful reunion in a female community questions another hidden side of the problem: the appearances of the external world and the lens used to investigate them or the mirror into which they reflected.

Lowell's develops this aspect concerning the fallibility of the vision in the six sonnets titled 'Eleonora Duse' that close *What's O'Clock*. The first sonnet, in fact, opens with the statement 'Seeing's believing,' which leads to the first questions of the poem in line five: 'Have blind men ever seen or deaf men heard?' At the end of the first sonnet, it becomes clear that Lowell is speaking of a spiritual, immaterial vision and a world that can be perceived through the eyes of revelation: 'Not in the eye, be sure, nor in the ear,/ Nor in an instrument of twisted glass' (9-10). These perceptions are 'sights and sounds' that 'ripple me like water as they pass' (12). Under Duse's spell, Lowell is able to give an image of herself as a moulded form: 'Like melted ice/ I took form and froze so, turned precise/ And a brittle seal, a creed in silhouette' (20-22). At this point, Lowell presents herself as a dark shadow and soon after questions the ambiguity of the vision, repeating the first line of the first sonnet, which at this point becomes a question: 'Seeing's believing? What then would you see?/ A chamfered dragon? Three spear-heads of steel?' (23-24). Like a reflection in a mirror, the question also embraces Lowell's figure, and 'silhouette' in line 22 is an ironic reference to her physical appearance, which testifies her ability to keep

her dialogue with both the text and her audience. Lowell then invites the reader to ‘Look closer, do you see a name, a face,/ Or just a cloud dropped down before a holy place?’ (27-28). Materialistic perceptions are under scrutiny, and Lowell pushes Duse to an aerial position. Out of this image which ends the second sonnet, the figure of the actress is made visible in the third sonnet, and Lowell uses the appellative of ‘lady’: ‘Lady, to whose enchantment I took shape/ So long ago’ (29-30).

At this point, while acknowledging Duse as her inspiring muse, she recognises the limitation of her own art because her words, compared to Duse’s art, are ‘jibe and gape’: ‘After your loveliness and makes grimace/ And travesty where they should interlace/ The weave of sun-spun ocean round a cape’ (33-36).

In the following lines, Lowell surrounds the actress with vibrant, delicate, surrealistic images such as ‘the sigh of wind,’ the ‘desolate pulse,’ ‘the grief of morning,’ all related to the five senses and leading to ‘one sole cry/ To point a world aright which is so much awry’ (41-42). The opposition between the external and internal worlds is clearly expressed. The world of art assumes an important function not only for Lowell but for the world itself. Lowell places Duse on an exalted plane and Duse acquires the power of a healer able to guide mankind to a better world. Lowell’s belief in the ability of art to speak to the soul of human beings is salient to Duse’s effect on her years previously. On recognising Duse’s ability, Lowell confirms her transformation and simultaneously reinforces her own identity as a poet before the world.

In the fourth and fifth sonnets, Lowell increasingly distances Duse from the real world. She becomes predestined, chosen by ‘Beauty’ itself, and Duse, like Lowell, is shown in her moulded form—‘spon-image to her needs’ (51). It is her form which forces her to submit to the call without question, and ‘pierce, reveal, and soothe again’ (52). Duse’s role is now sacrificial: ‘So, sacrificing you, she [Beauty] fed those others/ Who bless you in their prayers even before their mothers’ (55-56). At the end of the fourth sonnet, Duse reaches the highest level and symbolically evokes divine sacrifice; specifically, the verb ‘to feed’ evokes the Eucharist. This almost blasphemous shadow is marked at the end of the fourth sonnet with the verb ‘bless’ and the noun ‘prayers,’ reinforcing the metaphor. This image elicits, as well, a maternal function between the

two women and recalls Lowell's epiphany. The sequence of the last sonnet is reconnected with the first one through the metaphor of the vision and its ambiguity:

Seeing you stand once more before my eyes
In your pale dignity and tenderness,
Wearing your frailty like a misty dress
Draped over the great glamour which denies
To years their domination ...
[...]
Seeing you after these long lengths of years,
I only know the glory come again (71-75, 79-80).

Duse's vision, although accompanied by years of separation, again works for Lowell as her turning point, and confirms who she is now and what she has discovered thanks to Duse's womanhood. The last two lines of the sonnet hasten into the reality of human frailty: 'Moonlight delaying by a sick man's bed/ A rush of daffodils where wastes of dried leaves spread' (83-84). The movement of the poem is circular, and the images in each sonnet are repeated with increasing frequency, as though under the active 'spell' of a wave: 'Which ripple me like water as they pass' (12). The water is a powerful symbol of rebirth, and Lowell dexterously opens and closes the six sonnets with it.

Glenn Richard Rühley in *The Thorn of a Rose: Amy Lowell Reconsidered* suggests that 'mystic awareness' is the predominant note in many poems in *What's O'Clock*.⁴² He highlights 'the dematerialization of vision' (170) of these six sonnets, which helps Lowell show her extreme reverence of Duse. While Melissa Bradshaw in *Amy Lowell: Diva Poet*, focuses on Lowell's worshipful attitude and the feelings of dissatisfaction implicit in the relationship between a fan and her or his idol. Both Rühley and Bradshaw overlook another relevant point in their analysis of the poems Lowell dedicated to Duse.

The two poems written in 1923 and the last group of sonnets of 1924, have a strong link with her first poem written in 1902, after the evening of the

⁴² Rühley, Glenn Richard. *The Thorn of a Rose: Amy Lowell Reconsidered*. Hamden (CT): Archon Books, 1975. pp. 168-170.

epiphany. Many of the images and metaphors Lowell uses in the first poem are easily retraceable in all of those she wrote later. They must therefore be considered as a mirror in which Lowell reflects many aspects of her new poetic life, and her retrospective attempt to testify to the strength and power not only of art but of that which a woman can give to another by following her own path: a reciprocal recognition and empowerment. In all those poems, Duse is subject and agent in interchangeable roles with the poet herself. Lowell operates a significant shift. It is not only a question of faithful homage or worship, but a story told through poetry in which images function as a catalyst for emotions and disembodied experiences.

‘Seeing’s believing’: it is with this affirmation, which soon becomes a question and then an affirmation once more, that Lowell reveals the path taken to reach her transformative identity through the spell of Duse’s performance. In addition, Lowell links herself with Duse’s struggle for recognition and independence, and challenges the attitude of judging according to rules that disregard other perspectives. In her last homage to Duse, Lowell questions both herself and the reader: ‘What then would you see’ (I, 9), ‘Look closer, do you see a name, a face’ (I, 13). Her questioning of the true or perceived reality was one of her concerns in many of her other poems written earlier than those in 1923. In ‘A Tulip Garden’ (*Sword Blades and Poppy Seed*, 1914), for example, the line ‘We hear the wind stream through a bed of flowers,’ echoes what the audience of her Eleonora Duse of 1902 felt: ‘We feel the throbbing of a human soul.’ In both poem the correspondence between the ‘I’ with the collective ‘we’ happens at the end, marking the powerful effect of the art and its beauty. ‘A Tulip Garden’ end Lowell’s first collection the six sonnets to Duse ends her last collection. Different ways of seeing and perceiving are crucial to Lowell’s experience of Duse’s performance that night in the Boston Theatre. She narrated them retrospectively in her poems dedicated to the Italian actress—her testimony and living muse—highlighting that performative identity can facilitate a transformation of self: we can transform what we see, but what we see can also transform us.

In particular in her last six sonnets, Lowell tries to articulate Duse’s effect upon her, legitimising herself as poet and highlighting the meaning of art for her. She writes to Ellery Sedgwick, ‘I have always believed that great art

fecondates art [...] I began to write, not specifically about Madame Duse, but simply out of the fullness of the vision of poetry which she had given me ... These sonnets are my reaction to her twenty years later.⁴³ This statement constitutes Lowell consciously retrospective reconstruction of her path. Just one year before, in 1923, Lowell wrote to Tietjens that Duse 'revealed me to myself.'

⁴³ Lowell, Amy. Letter to Ellery Sedwick. March 3, 1924. MS Lowell 19.1 (1148).

Chapter Three

‘Poetry as a Spoken Art’: A New Interpretation

As discussed in Chapter Two, the epiphany that Lowell experienced during Duse’s performance in 1902 was the starting point of her career. Duse’s demands for more active audience participation also brought new awareness to the path Lowell undertook to inhabit the literary world. Soon after the publication of her first collection in 1912, Lowell began to actively participate in critical debates about poetry, gave lectures on French poetry, and expounded upon her views in magazines and newspapers. Most of Lowell’s contributions to magazines were devoted to increasing the poetry readership. However, reading these articles in the context of women’s struggles at the time offers new possibilities for interpretation of Lowell’s individual response to women’s emancipation in the early twentieth century and its impact on the consciousness of artists and their works and desires. Reconsidered in this light, Lowell’s choice of poetry as her profession must be linked to the struggle for rights set up at the turn of the century to free women from prejudices and constraints.

Drawing on Lowell’s articles and essays, which are often overlooked by critics, this chapter will investigate how she responded to the constraints of the time, specifically the marginalisation of the female voice in the arts and how she emphasised the performative aspect of poetry. It will also investigate whether she used her articles to gain respect and authority, shedding more light on her own poetry, or offered her readership new perspectives on ‘listening’ and reading the female point of view. Lowell’s interest in the orality of poetry is especially evident in her essay, ‘Poetry as Spoken Art,’ which is the focal point of this chapter. The significance of her interest in the oral aspects of poetry will be investigated both in terms of her desire to play an active role in society and in light of the first wave of feminism. Although Lowell was never directly involved in any feminist movement, certain issues raised by women’s struggles nevertheless affected her own demands for freedom.

Through a re-reading of her articles, the first three sections of the chapter will address the literary and social scene in which Lowell operated at a time when ‘America rioted in poetry.’¹ By exploring Lowell’s opinions of the new tendencies in poetry in juxtaposition with commentary from poets and critics at the time, the chapter will expose the prejudices and constraints that Lowell and female artists confronted. Two fictional female characters, Philomela and Madame Bovary, will be discussed in the last two sections in order to illustrate that the ‘authentic’ voice of women was silenced and emphasise the original and courageous path that Lowell chose after the epiphany discussed in Chapter Two.

In summary, Lowell’s articles and essays will be used to explore the connection between the oral quality of poetry and women’s increasing desire to be subjects rather than objects in both art and society at large. These essays will provide a lens through which to question the consequences of this privileged aspect of spoken poetry in terms of ‘exposure’ of both female feelings and the female body, and the significance of this for Lowell, who did not embody ideal female beauty. The theoretical framework of the chapter will be provided by works such as Paula Bennett Bernat’s *Poets in the Public Sphere: the Emancipatory Project of American Women’s Poetry, 1800-1900*;² David Perkins’ *A History of Modern Poetry: Modernism and After*;³ Merry E. Wiesner-Hanks’ *Gender in History: Global Perspective*,⁴ and Francesca Sawaya’s *Modern Women, Modern Work: Domesticity, Professionalism, and American Writing, 1890-1950*.⁵

¹ Wood, Clement. *Amy Lowell*. New York: Harold Vinal, 1926. p. 4.

² Bennett, Paula Bernat. *Poets in the Public Sphere: The Emancipatory Project of American Women’s Poetry, 1800-1900*. Princeton: Princeton University Press. 2003. Hereafter: *Poets in the Public Sphere*.

³ Perkins, David. *A History of Modern Poetry: Modernism and After*. Cambridge (MA): The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1987. Hereafter: *A History of Modern Poetry*.

⁴ Wiesner-Hanks, Merry E. *Gender in History: Global Perspectives*. 2nd ed. London: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011. Hereafter: *Gender in History*.

⁵ Sawaya, Francesca. *Modern Women, Modern Work: Domesticity, Professionalism, and American Writing, 1890-1950*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004.

3.1. *Poetry, Magazines and Articles: A New Space for the Woman's Voice*

In the early years of the twentieth century, 'an epidemic of poetry swept through the States.'⁶ This statement may seem excessive, but clarifies the rapidly increasing interest and involvement in poetry throughout the country at the time. At the turn of the century, periodicals, magazines, and newspapers provided poets and artists with opportunities to exchange opinions, build aesthetic theories, and express visions of the world.⁷ *Poetry* published most of the poets working with *vers libre* and Imagism, the new trends in poetry at the time.⁸ In her editorial in the first issue, then-editor Harriet Monroe explained the reason for the existence of the magazine.⁹ She disagreed with the general opinion that there was no audience for poetry in America, and criticized the general opinions among most magazine editors that poetry 'must appeal to the barber's wife of the Middle West' (27). Monroe particularly emphasised the role and the connection between the artists and their readers, highlighting the necessity for both artists and readers to cultivate and irrigate the soil if the desert is to blossom as the rose' (27).

According to Damon, the rapid success of Monroe's magazine among the new poets was due to three factors. First, it was timely: '[t]he coming poets were already writing; now they found a place prepared for their writing' (195); second, although it welcomed poets from Europe, it was essentially American; and third, it paid poets for published poems.¹⁰ *The Dial*, *North American Review*, and *The New Republic*, among others in New England and Chicago, also welcomed the new trend but did not offer the same remuneration. According to Paula Bernat Bennett, in *Poets in the Public Sphere*, all these magazines and newspapers also offered women the chance to inhabit a public space and estab-

⁶ Wood, Clement. *Amy Lowell*. New York: Harold Vinal, 1926. p. 4.

⁷ See West, Darrell M. *The Rise and Fall of the Media Establishment*. Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2001; and Mott, Frank Luther. *A History of American Magazine*. Vol. IV: 1885-1905. Cambridge (MA): Harvard University Press, 1957. For further information about magazines and their definitions, see Hoffman, Frederick J., Charles, Allen and Ulrich, Carolyn F. *The Little Magazine: A History and a Bibliography*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1946; Churchill, Suzanne W. *The Little Magazine Others and the Renovation of Modern American Poetry*. New York: Ashgate, 2006.

⁸ Harriet Monroe takes credit for having published the most important female voices of the period, including H.D., Amy Lowell and Edna St. Vincent Millay, as well as male poets such as Ezra Pound and T. S. Eliot in her magazine.

⁹ Monroe, Harriet. 'The Motive of the Magazine.' *Poetry* 1.1 (October 1912): pp. 26-28.

¹⁰ Damon, S. Foster. *Amy Lowell: A Chronicle, with Extracts from Her Correspondence*. Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1935. Hereafter: *Amy Lowell: A Chronicle*.

lish an ongoing practice of discussion, which helped to spread ideas on gender issues.¹¹ Ultimately, these discussions became a fertile ground for many women who were struggling for acknowledgment of their acquired professionalism in artistic and journalistic fields. Lowell took an active role on the cultural debate of the time, quickly embracing Monroe's appeal for participation, subscribing to the magazine, and submitting her own poems and articles.

Lowell's first article, 'Vers Libre and Metrical Prose,' appeared in *Poetry* in 1914.¹² Explaining that the term originated in France, she made a distinction between 'pure prose' and 'pure poetry' (213) maintaining that their difference was mostly the long and the short rhythm on which they rely. Lowell insisted on the long 'rhythm of prose' which is 'slightly curved,' as opposed to the 'very much shorter' rhythm of verse 'with a tendency to return back upon itself' (215). She finds this return that makes the distinction between the two forms; it is this return, in fact, that creates the musical effect, and in the *vers libre* 'the return' is stronger than in other forms. In supporting her point on the musical effect, she offered plenty of examples; according to Lowell, one of the 'excellent' examples in English can be found in Fiona Macleod's *The Founts of Song* (218).

In another article in the *Boston American* from that same year, she shifted her focus on the necessity of poetry.¹³ Conceived as more of a speech than an academic essay, Lowell compared the need for poetry to the need for food, if a culture wants to survive. Lowell acknowledged that the Bible also expresses this idea of poetry as food for the soul 'in the best possible way' (3), and called on unusual images to draw her readers' attention. For example, she used a striking metaphor comparing the emotional response to poetry with the ecstasy, which a baseball game produces in the routine of men's daily life. Without this ecstasy, she argues, the enchantment of game is lost.

In addition to her declaration of the supremacy of poetry, Lowell asserted its power to understand humans; only through reading poetry, she ar-

¹¹ Bennett, Paula Bernat. *Poets in the Public Sphere*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003. See especially pp. 1-13.

¹² Lowell, Amy. 'Vers Libre and Metrical Prose.' *Poetry* 3.6 (1914): pp. 213-220. There were only two editorial comments in this March issue; Lowell's editorial comment is followed by Ezra Pound's 'Homage to Wilfred Blunt.'

¹³ Lowell, Amy. 'Why We Should Read Poetry.' *Poetry and Poets*. New York: Biblio and Tannen, 1971. pp. 3-9.

gues, is it possible 'to know man in all his moods' because poetry can enter deeper than other artistic forms 'in the most beautiful thoughts of his heart,' 'in the nakedness and awe of his soul confronted with the terror and wonder of the Universe' (8-9). This nearly sacred power of poetry is not dissimilar from that expressed by other poets before her, particularly Percy B. Shelley who declared in 'A Defence of Poetry' that poetry is 'at once the centre and the circumference of knowledge' and that poets are 'the unacknowledged legislators of the world.'¹⁴ It is clear from the beginning of her article that Lowell was ready to take this power for herself.

In 1916, Lowell's 'The New Manner in Modern Poetry' appeared in *The New Republic*, and a few months later in *Craftsman*, she embraced the challenge of the time in her answer to the question she posited in the title: 'Is there a National Spirit in the New Poetry of America?'¹⁵ In speaking of the new poetry movement in America, Lowell highlighted the decision of the new poets to distance themselves from the traditional English form. She explained their choice in terms of Nationalism, one of the relevant points on debate at the time, linking it directly with the need to achieve a cultural independence, to cultivate and grow 'the American race.' She believed, in fact, that poetry also can 'free ourselves from the tutelage of another nation' (342). Although she was aware that acceptance and the spread of this change is a long process, she ensures her readers that this process has begun irreversibly. Just one month before the publication of her third collection, *Men, Women and Ghosts*, Lowell's letter to the editor titled 'In Defence of *Vers Libre*' appeared in *Dial*.¹⁶ Her letter testified that she was becoming one of the major representative voices of *vers libre* among readers, and the resistance encountered by the new trend expressed in the anthology *Some Imagist Poets*, published in 1916.

In January 1917, 'A Consideration of Modern Poetry' appeared in *North American Review*, and in it, Lowell again gave 'explanations and elucidations' of the new tendencies in order to reaffirm the characteristic aspects of

¹⁴ Shelley, Percy B. 'A Defence of Poetry.' *Essays, Letters from Abroad, Translations and Fragments*. Ed. Mary Shelley. 1840. In Literature Online: <http://lion.chadwyck.co.uk/search>. pp. 47 and 57.

¹⁵ Lowell, Amy. 'Is There a National Spirit in the "New Poetry" of America?' *Craftsman* 30.4 (1916): pp. 339-349.

¹⁶ Lowell, Amy. 'In Defence of *Vers Libre*.' *Dial* 61 (1916): p. 133.

Imagism.¹⁷ She used a musical comparison to demonstrate that the ‘new tendencies’ in poetry needed both time and knowledge to be completely understood, arguing that Wagner’s music was not initially appreciated, and that it took time for the audience to become accustomed to it, to understand his new ‘idiom’ (104).¹⁸ Lowell emphasised that this musical analogy refers not only to poetry, but to all arts, pointing out that the recognition of the new forms had always met with some resistance in history, because ‘no generation ever learns to wait a little before judging’ (104).

Lowell was also acknowledging here the literary war between those for or against the new tendencies that was being fought in magazines, journals, and anthologies. This war continued when Lowell’s musical analogy was harshly criticised by Llewellyn Jones in ‘Free Verse and its Propaganda’ in 1920. Jones expressed his doubts about her conception of verse rhythm, and focusing on her tertiary education, highlighted that she: ‘has read no metrician later than Pope, whose *Rationale of English Verse* left much to be desired as a systematic treatise.’¹⁹

This inclination to discredit the new tendencies and the poets who encouraged them was not uncommon among critics at the time, but journals and magazines continued to welcome both the new poets and their adversaries, allowing both of them to express their new ideas. In ‘The Process of Making Poetry,’ Lowell tried to explain the inner process of writing, arguing that it is not possible to find appropriate definitions, because, according to her, it is a result of a personal process. She clarified, however, that it is not a ‘day-dream, but an entirely different psychic state and one peculiar to itself (25).’²⁰ Lowell drew upon her personal experience to reinforce her statements throughout the article, speaking candidly about the task of writing a poem and referring to a subconscious gestation that works for her first, preparing her for the event of writing.

¹⁷ Lowell, Amy. ‘A Consideration of Modern Poetry.’ *North American Review* 205.734 (1917): pp. 103-117.

¹⁸ The musical analogy is also expressed by Lowell in ‘Some Analogies in Modern Poetry.’ *The Musical Quarterly* 6.1 (1920): pp. 127-157. The connection between poetry and music is often discussed by poets. T. S. Eliot, for example, talked about ‘The Music of Poetry’ during one of his lectures at Glasgow University in 1942.

¹⁹ Jones, Llewellyn. ‘Free Verse and its Propaganda.’ *The Sewanee Review* 28.3 (July 1920): p. 385.

²⁰ Lowell, Amy. ‘The Process of Making Poetry.’ *Poetry and Poets: Essays*. New York: Biblio and Tannen, 1971. pp. 24-29.

She made clear her conviction that creativity was strictly linked to human craft, and that the poet, being a craft-man, has to learn his art. This declaration distances her from the concept of poet as genius, and was in one respect nearer to the American concept of the ‘handyman’ or ‘do-it-yourselfer,’ as Perkins highlights in *A History of Modern Poetry*.²¹ Lowell’s statement also highlights her notions of a non-elitist literature. Lowell believed that anyone who has time, space, and education could be an artist. Lowell emphasised the importance of time and space when writing poetry; when the ‘words are there,’ she declared, one must simply sit and write them down.

Virginia Woolf expressed the same concept in ‘A Room of One’s Own,’ highlighting how a lack of time and space prevented the majority of women from being represented in literature.²² Lowell however, did not denounce this with the same clarity and strength as Woolf. In 1917 ‘Poetry, Imagination, Education,’ Lowell focused on another aspect of the problem: the inefficiencies of education, in particular their impact on creativity.²³ Lowell showed her awareness of the manner in which poetry was taught in schools; the focus was on establishing technical ability rather than developing imagination and a taste for beauty. Lowell criticised the lack of humanity in the curricula and the quality of books written for children because she believed that children were capable of much more, and they were able to take pleasure even ‘where the full meaning is only faintly grasped.’ (44).

In ‘Poetry, Imagination, and Education,’ Lowell used incisive prose and skillfully maintained the attention of her readers with anecdotes taken from her personal experience. For example, in order to reinforce the importance of listening and reading at an early age, she wrote about her grand-cousin, the writer James Russell Lowell, to whom his sister used to read Edmund Spenser’s *Faerie Queen* before bed. Likewise, Lowell explored the impact of environment on education by writing about Charlotte Brontë, who did not have an opportunity to attend a good school and spent her life in a small town. Lowell ar-

²¹ Perkins, David. *A History of Modern Poetry*. Cambridge (MA): The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1987. p. 89.

²² Woolf, Virginia. ‘A Room of One’s Own.’ London: Penguin Books, 2004. I have been unable to find evidence of contact between Virginia Woolf and Amy Lowell.

²³ Lowell, Amy. ‘Poetry, Imagination and Education.’ *Poetry and Poets: Essays*. New York: Biblio and Tannen, 1971. pp. 30-58.

gued that Brontë was able to reach great literary heights because she became accustomed to reading and listening to stories from an early age.

Lowell regarded reading an important part in the creative process, and praises the book that can stimulate it, and focuses on the power of imagination. She pointed out that it is the fertile ground on which all changes and transformations in the world had grown. Lowell believed in the power of imagination to create another reality, and valued the book that can elicit it. In this article, she credited a book she found in her father's library, Leigh Hunt's *Imagination and Fancy*, as having the most influence on her opinions on education and expanding her knowledge of poetry (53-54).

In another article, 'A Consideration of Modern Poetry,' Lowell explained to the American readership the three most important characteristics employed in modern poetry: suggestion ('invoking a character rather than describing it' (106), vividness, and concentration. She added a fourth to these: externality, which 'concerns itself with man in his proper relation to the universe, rather than as the lord and master of it' (106). According to Lowell, the novelities expressed by this new form responded to the new demands of the time. The insistence on words like 'new' and 'modern' in the works of both male and female authors in the early twentieth century distinguishes them from both literature of the past and English influences. Paula Bernat Bennett credits Walter Blackburn Hart as someone who exhibited 'newness' because he subtitled his new magazine *Fly Leaf*, 'A Pamphlet Periodical of the New—the New Man, New Woman, New Ideas, Whimsies, and Things.'²⁴ Bennett also underlines the trend embraced by early modernist female poets in order to be recognised as the New Woman: they had to leave behind 'the way in which women had traditionally been represented and represented themselves' (184). That meant avoiding 'genteel verses' and sentimentality above all.

In *A History of Modern Poetry*, David Perkins points out that during the first phase of Modernism, the poets who chose to write *vers libre* were 'pressed

²⁴ Bennett, Paula B. *Poets in the Public Sphere*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003. p. 183. Bennett reads Lowell's poem 'The Sisters' as announcing this separation (p. 184). While I agree with this in part, I argue that there are relevant aspects in the poem other than a simple 'announcement' of this separation, as it will be discussed in greater detail in Chapter Five.

to find an identity or role that the novel and short story could not usurp.²⁵ Poets such as Marianne Moore, Lola Ridge, H.D., Amy Lowell, Robert Frost, Ezra Pound, T.S. Eliot, and Carl Sandburg were reacting against the poetry of the Genteel Tradition and trying to write poetry that was distinctly American. Lowell gave her contribution to create that 'National Spirit in the New Poetry of America' also in her tendency to deal with a typical American landscape, and what she inscribed in them, therefore, became American. For example, in the poem 'The Sister,' Sappho is depicted outside of the Ellenistic references, she 'was like a burning birch-tree.'

Perkins highlights this historical and political attitude common to many American poets at the turn of the twentieth century and agrees that 'in her day Amy Lowell did more than anyone else to win from the general public an understanding reception for the new poetry' (328). Despite her involvement being such a distinctive trait of Lowell, however, her critics often reserve this acknowledgment for male peers (such as Pound or Eliot).

The debate opened up at the end of the twentieth century by Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar *No Man's Land*, among other relevant contributions, reread modernism as a movement in which the female artists had just as relevant a role as their male peers. However, Lowell's engagement into the intellectual debate of the time has still not been evaluated fully in terms of her complete contribution of Modernism. Her tireless public campaign through newspapers on behalf of the new tendencies in poetry, or the publications of the three Anthologies of the Imagist poets in North America (since 1916), for example, are often dismissed as the result of her domineering 'attitude.' Yet, among the male and female poets who embraced the new trend of poetry, she was one of the few female poets who entered openly and with all her strength into the task of further growing public interest in poetry. For example, one of Lowell's other contributions to Modernism (that has been scarcely investigated or linked to Modernism) was her belief that 'art is rooted in life' and should communicate through a simple and understandable language, another contributions of hers to Modernism, has been scarcely investigated and linked to it.

²⁵ Perkins, David. *History of Modern Poetry: Modernism and After*. Cambridge (MA): The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1987. p. 96.

In particular, in her articles she often argued that any subject is poetically worthy, and in her poetical achievements she developed a belief in an inclusive way through which to read and represent female experiences. Her female experiences as well as her poetical ones offered not only new space to be explored, but also challenged its border.

It is also from this challenge that her modernism mostly developed. Lowell's personal experience of daily life—for example, waiting at home for the return of her life companion—distinguishes several of her poems (such as 'The Blue Scarf' or 'The Garden') and highlights the shift in poetry that she directed. This shift reverses the conventional position of the woman in poetry, as mostly 'object' rather than subject of the poem. In her love poems, for instance, Lowell supported this shift, not only using 'active verbs' with which she related to her lover, but making a dialectical use of her own feelings and emotions, allowing them to alternate their position between object and subject of her love lyrics.²⁶

In *Modern Women, Modern Work*, Francesca Sawaya points out the conflict faced by female writers, especially journalists, concerning the 'cult of domesticity' and the 'cult of professionalism.'²⁷ This conflict emerges in the resistance encountered by Lowell in her attempt to become more 'professional' and gain greater respect and authority as well as her challenging the distinction between a literature for intellectuals and well-educated people and the 'mass.' Lowell's battle on behalf of a less elitist, more embracing literature, challenged this distinction emerging clearly in these first decades of the twentieth century as the literary canon increasingly dictated the requirements for a work of art.

3.2. *Territory in Poetry: Stereotypes and Critical Responses*

More than writing novels or prose, writing poetry was considered male territory, and even the few female poets who were well known in Lowell's time,

²⁶ This aspect will be discussed, and the two mentioned poems analysed, in Chapter Six.

²⁷ Sawaya, Francesca. *Modern Women, Modern Work: Domesticity, Professionalism, and American Writing, 1890-1950*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004. Although her book deals more specifically with problems encountered by female journalists, I am indebted to her work because it has offered me precious insights into Lowell's views on this matter.

like Elizabeth Barrett Browning or Christina Rossetti, were celebrated within a male tradition. In *Gender in History*, Wiesner-Hanks writes that the prejudices faced by the majority of female writers over the centuries were based on the conception of women as inferior.²⁸ These ideas kept women outside of the public sphere and limited them to the private realms, including emotions. Instead of being a relevant and desirable quality for every human being, the capability to understand and express emotions was paradoxically considered a characteristic that obscured the rightness of a man's judgment. The Western philosophic tradition from Plato to Spinoza considers judgments made under the influence of emotion to be lacking in control, and therefore not compatible with rational thought. The unpredictable characteristics of emotions were considered dangerous to society itself; it is not a coincidence that Plato banned poetry, considered to be rooted in emotions and fantasy, from his ideal city. Rationality was seen as a male characteristic, while emotions, along with caring and submission, were considered 'natural' for a woman.²⁹

Another stereotype that would accompany women in the arts for many decades was the idea of the female poet as a pure creature, a young child, or somebody 'exceptional'—a 'Phenomenal Woman,' ironically affirmed in the poem by American poet Maya Angelou (1928-2014).³⁰ The number of female poets who grew up in Victorian times characterised as gifted children is considerable. The English poet Felicia Hemans (1793-1835) is said to have had such a good memory that she was able to learn numerous long poems at a very early age and to have published her first collection of poems when she was nearly fourteen years old. Elizabeth Barrett Browning (1806-1861) wrote her first lines at the age of eight, and when she was fourteen, her father privately published her long epic poem 'The Battle of Marathon.' Another female Victorian poet, Christina Rossetti (1830-1894), wrote her first lines at the age of five and at twelve penned a mock-melancholy ballad called 'Rosalin.'

²⁸ Wiesner-Hanks, E. Merry. *Gender in History: Global Perspectives*. London: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011. See especially Chapter 4 (pp. 83-108) and Chapter 5 (pp. 109-126).

²⁹ Nussbaum, Martha C. *Poetic Justice: The Literary Imagination and Public Life*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1995. In particular, Nussbaum highlights that among traditional Western philosophers, judgments based on emotions were considered false as they attributed too much value to external and unpredictable elements and were essentially subjective.

³⁰ Angelou, Maya. 'Phenomenal Woman.' *And Still I Rise*. London: Virago Press, 2009. p. 8.

These biographic details and the idea of purity and juvenile inspiration of the female poet shed light on the amazement of some critics concerning Lowell's career, and their reluctance to take it seriously. In particular, her numerous contributions to literature in the forms of readings and articles were perceived as 'unusual' and unnatural, as was her decision to become a poet at the age of twenty-eight. This point continued to bother the University of Chicago's Percy H. Boynton and was clearly linked with the prejudices that worked to prevent the entrance of women into the sphere of public life. In 1922, in his article, 'Authors of Today, III: Amy Lowell,' Boynton makes clear his point: 'It is particularly unusual for any mature, intellectual person, not impelled by outward circumstances, to choose a career at twenty-eight, to work patiently in preparation until thirty-six, and to succeed. It is particularly unusual when the career is an artistic one.'³¹

Although Boynton acknowledges her 'patient preparation,' he does not think it sufficient to prove her professionalism, as it appears too grounded in her desire to become a poet. The simple desire to become someone, especially in the arts, was not recognised for women, particularly—as in Lowell's case—if there was a clear intention to be present in 'flesh and blood,' not only in the poetry scene but in the public scene as well. While male writers and poets could aspire to reach high levels in their artistic works and their efforts were noticed and publicly praised, female aspirations outside of marriage and the family circle were often judged with suspicion.

Boynton goes on to speak ill of Lowell's 'slow decision' which, according to him, is not to be confused 'with the tardy recognition of a Hawthorne or a Browning, for each of them had one goal from youth' (528). Boynton's 'reading' of Lowell's artistic career clearly indicates an attitude still rooted in the Victorian concept of women and domesticity and a traditional, close-minded vision of the 'natural desire' of a respectable woman.

First, a female poet had to be an *enfant prodige*, a 'gifted girl' like those popular in the Victorian age: a girl who embodied the ideals of purity, morality, and innocence and could convey the idea, as Angela Leighton underlines, 'of the woman poet as a spontaneous improviser' and 'that women's poetry is

³¹ Boynton, Percy H. 'Authors of Today, III: Amy Lowell.' *The English Journal* 11.9 (November 1922): p. 528.

itself no more than a spontaneous flow of feminine instinct, a tearfulness raining onto the page.’³² Professionalism was beyond a woman’s domain. If on the one hand it excluded women from professionalism, this perception also highlighted that a ‘gifted girl’ was not conscious of her gift and could therefore be accepted in artistic circles because the ‘gift’ did not depend on her person, qualities, or skills, but instead was simply given to her. Lowell categorically disagreed with the idea that the poet is born and not made. In her preface to *Sword Blades and Poppy Seed*, she declared that the poet has to learn to do something before doing it like any other workman.

Another general stereotype working against women in general, and Lowell specifically, emerges from Boynton’s statement that women were ‘not impelled by outward circumstances.’ He suggests that writings by women must be pushed by some economic distress in order to justify their existence but not their appreciation as worthy works of art. Nothing was more distant from Amy Lowell—the last of the barons, as she called herself—who certainly was not in need. Moreover, there were many other women who had made their ‘bread’ from their writing. Felicia Hemans, for example, was able to live and support her five children, and Elizabeth Barrett Browning supported her husband for years.

In ending his essay on Lowell’s poetry, Boynton uses many ‘ifs’: ‘If Miss Lowell had been docile and acquiescent [...] If she had enjoyed the serene independence of Robinson or Frost [...] If she had had the strongly liberal social convictions of Masters of Sandburg’ (534). At the end of the article Boynton dismisses her by paraphrasing one of Lowell’s lines from ‘Astigmatic,’ which is dedicated to Pound and appears in *Sword Blades and Poppy Seed*. Boynton substitutes ‘brother’ for ‘sister’ and dismisses her with, ‘Peace be with you [Sister,]/ You have chosen your part’ (535).³³ More than other critics who did not appreciate Lowell’s poetry, Boynton calls attention to Lowell’s ability to convey ‘sense impressions’ (533)—colour, sound, smell, and touch—in her poems. He also complains about her ‘limited and sophisticated subjects’ such as gardens, studios, bookshops, museums and streets through which

³² Leighton, Angela. *Victorian Women Poets: Writing Against the Heart*. London: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1992. p. 33.

³³ Lowell, Amy. *Sword Blades and Poppy Seed*. New York: MacMillan, 1914. p. 45. The poem ‘Astigmatism’ will be discussed in the second section of Chapter Four.

Lowell ‘assail[s] eye, ear, and nostril’ (533). Even more disturbing for Boynton are her ‘yearnings and desires,’ her energy. He openly laments that, ‘In many cases, the lyrics are written as if the man-lover is dazzled by the beauty of his mistress, ravished by the thought of what her costume conceals and her continence withholds’ (534).

Yet, even critics who never seem to fully appreciate Lowell’s poetry, such as Clement Wood, Percy H. Boynton, and Llewellyn Jones, acknowledge that she was one of the most vigorous defenders of *vers libre* and experimentation in poetry. Lowell argued that such experimentation would broaden the subject of poetry itself. This belief informs all of her articles and critical works. They reveal her deep involvement—as well as her intellectual and personal ‘competence,’ despite her tertiary education,—with most of the challenges brought about by the turn of the century.

3.3. ‘Poetry as a Spoken Art’: A Path of Her Own?

Among Lowell’s articles, ‘Poetry as a Spoken Art,’ with its focus on the oral aspects of poetry, reveals the relationship between women’s lack of voice and Lowell’s choice to speak publicly about herself and the world through poetry. The existing social codes were based on a prevailingly patriarchal society and prevented women from publicly stating their opinions about social and economic aspects of life and from taking an active part in the construction of society itself. The struggle for an equal place in the arts demanded the pursuit of a path to recognition of the ‘self’ as both woman and professional writer.³⁴ When Lowell’s article ‘Poetry as a Spoken Art’ appeared in *Dial* in 1917, she had already gained a certain reputation as a ‘defender’ of the new poetry. The cold response to her first book, *A Dome of Many-Colored Glass* (1912) did not continue; her second publication found greater success. She had already become a controversial figure thanks to her extravagant lifestyle, cigar-smoking, and living under the so-called Bostonian Marriage, and critics of the time also questioned why this wealthy woman had decided to become a poet—why she took

³⁴ This will be explored in greater detail in Chapter Seven.

such a stand in favour of the new verse form, and why she was so concerned with the oral and performative aspects of poetry.

In 'Poetry as a Spoken Art,' the implication of 'spoken' in the title immediately calls attention to the use of colloquial forms (such as swear words, which she used in the poem 'Patterns' or dialect forms, used in her *Legends*, for example), and underlines the conversational aspect that informs many of her articles, as well as most of her long narrative poems. Lowell emphasises the poetry's 'performative' aspect, which conveys a larger, symbolic meaning inscribed in the semantic area of communication. She focuses particularly on the connection between poetry and music, often lost in the printing age. Poetry, according to her, is 'intended primarily to be heard' (10). It is easier, she explains 'to convey the impression of a sight than of a sound' (11) and argues that 'no art has suffered from printing as has poetry' (11). In clarifying the distinction between reading and acting (16), Lowell asserts that, generally, poets read their own words rather than those written for them by others, and can therefore be more 'authentic' and exposed. In her pamphlet, *A Critical Fable*, Lowell gives an ironic account of what she meant by being exposed to her critics, by depicting herself as if through their eyes: 'Armed to the teeth like an old Samurai.'

In her insistence on the rhythm in 'Poetry as a Spoken Art,' there is a tendency to shift the attention of the audience from the merely verbal signification of the word to its aural resonances. Lowell draws attention not only to the sounds of the words in the text of the new poetry trend, but also to the amplification of them with real sounds. She experimented with this aspect during her first public reading in New York in 1914. Lowell accepted the invitation from her childhood friend, Josephine Peabody, to be part of a recital for the relief of the Belgians; one of the poems she read was 'Bombardment,' which appeared in *Men, Women and Ghosts*. Her friend, the composer Carl Engel, helped her to strengthen the image of holocaust and terror for her audience by reproducing the sound of a cannon on a drum behind the scenes. According to Damon in *Amy Lowell: A Chronicle*, Lowell enlisted Engel's help for fear of not producing a strong enough 'boom' with her voice. He clearly fails to notice her deep concern for the oral quality of poetry as well as her awareness of its performative aspect for the audience's reception. Rhythm in poetry is relevant, accord-

ing to Lowell, and repetitions, assonances, onomatopoeia, as well as alternation of long and short lines (abundant in her poems) make poetry particularly suitable for oral performance.

However, Lowell explained that the oral quality of poetry reveals an interesting aspect which in one respect links her to women's claim to be subjects and not objects in both art and society, and in another, undermines the impersonality claimed by Eliot in his 'Tradition and the Individual Talent.' The personality of the speaker of the poem, in fact, acquires more visibility through the reading itself in which not only the voice but also the posture, the gesture, and the emotions of the speaker come into play. In his Lowell biography, Damon acknowledges that 'her poetry was addressed to the ear, and nobody could read it so well as herself.'³⁵ Damon here is merely referring to one side of Lowell, connected with her strong personality. He overlooks the subversive aspect in her performance: her presence in flesh and blood on the stage.

In 'Poetry as a Spoken Art' Lowell, continuing to defend *vers libre*, ventures into English prosody, complaining that 'there is a good tradition of speaking poetry, and ninety and nine bad traditions' (17), including mispronouncing words. According to her, *vers libre* is 'destined entirely to supersede metrical verse' (22). In 'Reflections on *Vers Libre*,' T. S. Eliot writes that a division between conservative verse and *vers libre* 'does not exist, for there is only good verse, bad verse, and chaos.'³⁶ Revealing her pragmatism, Lowell contrarily declares in her article that they 'can exist side by side as cheerfully as do blank verse and quatrains' (22). She closes 'Poetry as a Spoken Art' with an illuminating definition of the modern movement: 'If the modern movement in poetry could be defined in a sentence, the truest thing which could be said of it, and which would include all its variations, would be that it is a movement to restore the audible quality to poetry, to insist upon it as a spoken art' (23).

Her statement reveals a subversive strategy: in claiming or advocating her right to have a more active place in the artistic field, she grounded her appeal on the oral aspect of poetry which called for greater visibility of the female body and voice.

³⁵ Damon, S. Foster. *Amy Lowell: A Chronicle*. Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1935. p. 280.

³⁶ Eliot, T. S. 'Reflections on *Vers Libre*.' *Selected Prose of T. S. Eliot*. New York: A Harvest Book, 1975. p. 36.

3.4. *The Right to Have a Voice: Reactions and Resistance*

The oppression, prejudices, and restraints based on the class system and a patriarchal vision of human relationships, particularly those between the sexes and their roles in Western society, were partly responsible for the increasing demand for ‘freedom’ in every field of society. If the freedom of speech protected by the First Amendment to the American Constitution gave symbolic confidence to every American citizen about their freedoms, the struggle for women’s suffrage underscored the lack of female voices on a political and social level and how far women were from truly attaining their right to free expression. The right to vote would allow women a say in the choices made to progress the nation and the living conditions of its people. The struggle for the right to vote, and the commitment of those who fought for it, had a relevant symbolic value for women in every aspect of society. It gave rise to many questions concerning the connection between women’s sexual lives and political institutions, and these had to be investigated in a systematic way by feminist critics and scholars in the 1960s and 70s, as discussed in the Introduction.³⁷

Many of the reactions to women’s demands conveyed a general resistance to their sexual freedom, and there were a number of essays on women’s behaviour that supported these reactions. In 1893, for example, Cesare Lombroso’s essay ‘Criminal Woman, the Prostitute, and the Normal Woman’ became very popular and was promptly translated into numerous languages.³⁸ Rooting his observations in biology and anatomy, Lombroso investigates the differences between three female personalities and traces a profile for a prostitute, a criminal, and a ‘normal’ woman. In all of these profiles, great impor-

³⁷ Adrienne Rich underlines the relevance of feminist critics’ work during the 60s and 70s: ‘without a growing feminist movement the first inroads of feminist scholarship could not have been made; without the sharpening of a black feminist consciousness, black women’s writing would have been left in limbo between misogynist black male critics and white feminist, still struggling to unearth a white women’s tradition; without an articulate lesbian/feminist movement, lesbian writing would still be lying in that closet where many of us used to sit reading books “in a bad light”.’ Rich, Adrienne. ‘When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-Vision.’ *Adrienne Rich’s Poetry and Prose*. New York: W.W. Norton & Company. p. 166.

³⁸ Lombroso, Cesare. *Criminal Woman, the Prostitute, and the Normal Woman*. Eds. Nicole Hahn Rafter and Mary Gibson. Durham (NC): Duke University Press, 2003. Original title: *La Donna Delinquente, la Prostituta e la Donna Normale*. Lombroso (1835-1909) was an eminent Italian anthropologist and jurist, and is credited as ‘father’ of modern criminology. Most of his theories are based on the idea of the criminal being born rather than made.

tance is given to a woman's sexual behaviour. The English psychologist Havelock Ellis (1859-1939) studied female 'inverts,' and Sigmund Freud (1856-1939) investigated neurosis as one of the most common 'maladies' that allegedly affected women at this time.³⁹ Freudian theories about these 'maladies,' some of which survive today, became popular at the turn of the twentieth century and shaped narratives about women. In general, these studies presented women as individuals to be guided, controlled, and protected from their sexual 'drives' and emotions.

This attitude is also signaled in the artistic field, in what Adrienne Rich calls the 'biased and astigmatic' literary canon, echoing Amy Lowell's poem 'Astigmatic' that was dedicated to Ezra Pound. In 'Tradition and the Individual Talent,' T.S. Eliot insists that poetry is not 'the expression of personality but an escape from personality' (38) and emotion. As Woolf suggests in 'A Room of One's Own,' when a female writer succeeds in firmly holding pen and paper, she must find her own voice and struggle to make it in a field where she had never been considered as a subject rather than an object of male narratives. Undoubtedly, things were beginning to change in the literary world at the turn of the twentieth century. Women's voices became more audible, more female poets were anthologised, and magazines were increasingly being edited by women.⁴⁰ The economic aspects of writing were not shameful as they had been during the Victorian period, and were less frequently used by critics to draw a line between 'professionals' and 'amateurs.'

Nonetheless, when women were admitted to the table of poetry, it was still more often as muses, financial supporters (like Mary Dodge, Sylvia Beach, or Margaret Anderson), 'amateurs,' or simply as 'audience'; the professional female poet was still a rare thing. For instance, Artemis Michailidou has shown that Edna St. Vincent Millay's faced a significant struggle to 'overcome both the masculinist presuppositions of mid-century critics dealing with women's literature and the personal denigration she was subjected to.'⁴¹ Millay's poem

³⁹ Showalter, Elaine. *The Female Malady: Women, Madness and English Culture, 1830-1980*. London: Virago Press, 1987.

⁴⁰ On anthologies and magazines in North America, see Gelpi, Albert and Gelpi, Barbara Charlesworth. *A Norton Critical Edition of Modern Literature*. Vol. 11. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1993. pp. 89-108.

⁴¹ Michailidou, Artemis. 'Gender, Body and Feminine Performance: Edna St. Vincent Millay's Impact on Anne Sexton.' *Feminist Review* 78 (2004): p. 126.

'Renaissance' was erroneously attributed to 'a browny forty-five male' because it was inconceivable for critics of the time to attribute a good poem to a woman. This attitude demonstrates the stereotypes which still accompanied female writing; women's engagement with poetry had to have some 'special' reason or 'exceptional' virtue, and nevertheless still needed the male gaze's approval. As Angela Leighton underlines in *Victorian Women Poets*, Christina Rossetti had many of her lines cut by her brother before her poems were published, and Elizabeth Barrett Browning experienced 'much mortification' from her father's comments and disapprovals. The constant devaluation of female writings was a framework in which women found themselves entrapped for centuries, and as Susan Gubar and Sandra Gilbert underline in *No Man's Land*, the literary canon played a significant role.⁴²

Despite the increasing number of female artists on the literary scene in the early 1900s, women who succeeded in having a part in the literary arena were not always seen to have a *relevant* one, especially in poetry. Lisa Rado denounced 'a massive cultural "forgetting"' in a course of modern literature organised by Columbia College in 1950. She reported that female modernist writers like H.D., Marianne Moore, and Gertrude Stein were sacrificed in favour of a male-oriented 'unassailable literary elite.'⁴³ In her 1977 essay 'Vesuvius at Home,' Adrienne Rich explores Emily Dickinson's powerful poems and writes that the 'nineteenth-century woman poet, especially, felt the medium of poetry as dangerous, in ways that the woman novelist did not feel the medium of fiction to be.'⁴⁴ According to her, Dickinson explores herself 'through language, states which most people deny or veil with silence' (192); for Rich, language is 'practical equipment' for 'diving into the wreck' (192). Women continuously struggled for ways to appropriate language that could express an authentic female experience and a real female voice.

⁴² Gilbert, Sandra M. and Gubar, Susan. *No Man's Land: The Place of the Woman Writer in the Twentieth Century*. Volume 1: *The War of the Words*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988. p. 166.

⁴³ Rado, Lisa. 'Lost and Found: Remembering Modernism, Rethinking Feminism.' *Rereading Modernism, New Directions in Feminist Criticism*. New York and London: Garland Publishing, 1994. pp. 3-4.

⁴⁴ Rich, Adrienne. 'When We Dead Awaken: Writing a Re-Vision.' *Adrienne Rich's Poetry and Prose*. New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1993. p. 191. Discussing this point in 'A Room of One's Own,' Virginia Woolf suggests that because women started to experiment with the novel in a more systematic way than did men, they could be more confident with the genre than with poetry, where predominantly male names were already celebrated.

Through her poetic experimentations and articles, Lowell was in search of her own voice through which she could speak for herself and others. Female poets consciously or unconsciously began to question the silence that preceded them. Those who now entered into the forbidden land of their ‘self’ found themselves without a safe and preexisting path and were haunted by the ‘lack of voice,’ dating as far back as Greek mythology, in which it was possible to find female characters whose voices had been literally ‘cut off.’ Mythological women such as Philomela or Tacita Muta were deprived of their speaking abilities with a violent act in order to prevent them from speaking and revealing the truth, which was principally the violence committed against women’s bodies. Over the centuries, violence and silenced women recorded in literature were linked together, and every time a woman was deprived of speech, there was some connection to physical or psychological violence committed against her. Philomela and Madame Bovary offer the most representative examples.

3.5. Does a Woman Have a Voice of Her Own? Philomela and Madame Bovary: Two Literary Cases

According to Ovid, Philomela, the princess of Athens, had her tongue cut after being raped by her brother-in-law, Tereus, who tried to prevent her from revealing the terrible violence to his wife, Procne.⁴⁵ The story states that Philomela succeeded in revealing Tereus’ misdeeds to her sister Procne by using her embroidery. The violent crime committed by Tereus was terrible, and the revenge of the two women was of equal gravity. They decided to kill Tereus’s child, Itys, and use his body to prepare a banquet for Tereus. At the end, the two women were ‘saved’ from Tereus’ wrath by the gods’ intervention, and were transformed into birds. Philomela was changed into a nightingale, while Procne became a swallow.

Philomela’s metamorphosis brings to light a relevant aspect of woman’s role: she can embellish through embroidery and she can sing—both activities that are strictly connected with the idea of beauty. Broadly, the idea of beauty

⁴⁵ Ovid, *Metamorphoses* 6.438-485.

is linked to the senses of seeing and hearing. These are also the 'actions' requested of an audience: to watch and to see. Is the role envisaged for women in society, then, that of an 'audience'? In symbolic terms, could this be the subliminal message of Philomela's tragedy? She was 'condemned' to be a silent witness without the ability to express her vision of the world or—more relevant—her feelings. If a woman cannot speak, then no one can hear her voice. Silence and lack of a female voice are therefore the result of the same problem: the conception of male and female roles in society based on a rigid system of production. The world appears divided between men and women: one active and the other passive, one speaks and the other listens—both caught in the same trap. If a great deal of literature on women is written by men, it is not possible to consider all women's ideas, speeches, desires, and expectations expressed in that literature as women's legitimate expressions. If, as Heather Ingman observes, 'H.D. and Richardson both suggest that a woman finds her true identity not in the male gaze but through being mirrored by another woman,'⁴⁶ it is understandable that in the absence of both gaze and voice women were obliged to mirror themselves through male eyes. The fictional character Madame Bovary proves to be an interesting case study in this regard.

The 1857 publication of *Madame Bovary* caused great scandal and allegedly led Gustave Flaubert to claim, 'Madame Bovary, c'est moi.'⁴⁷ From an author's point of view, he speaks the truth: only he can be Madame Bovary. What he was trying to affirm was not that he was she, but that there could not be a Madame Bovary without Flaubert talking about her life, her dreams and her expectations. She could not speak with her voice, as she was not entitled to; she had a 'voice' only in the book, and that voice did not belong to her either, but to her author. The implication which Flaubert consciously or unconsciously conveys in his first work is the impossibility for a woman of that time to govern her own destiny. All of the dramatic consequences of the characters have their origin in a heterosexist attitude concerning women's role in marriage offered to both women and men by society. This attitude proved too restrictive for Madame Bovary, who learned about the world written by men from books

⁴⁶ Ingman, Heather. *Women's Fiction Between the Wars: Mothers, Daughters and Writing*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1998. p. 155.

⁴⁷ The expression 'Madame Bovary, c'est moi' is attributed to Gustave Flaubert by René Descharmes. Descharmes, René. *Flaubert: Sa vie, son caractère et ses idées avant 1857*. Paris: Ferroud, 1909. p. 103.

that were also written by men. The desires or expectations inflamed in Madame Bovary by her readings encouraged her to envisage a kind of life that was different from that which the real world could offer her with its many codes and constraints.

In a way, this tension unveils the unbearable position perceived by middle-class women in particular. Like Madame Bovary, many women could not give voice to their dreams or expectations. In Flaubert's novel, Madame Bovary's conflict is solved through her 'disappearance'; in order to be herself, she must die and consequently stop speaking to Flaubert's readers, both male and female. The solution Flaubert devises to solve Madame Bovary's conflict reveals his reading of the situation, and the response of the society which could be in danger of accepting a different solution to the story. The plot of this novel allows another relevant factor to be half-seen: the importance and effects of culture. As Flaubert reminds his reader, Madame Bovary and her perceptions of the world were stimulated enormously by books: her world is seen through Flaubert's eyes; the reading of her world is Flaubert's reading. Madame Bovary, then, was responding to Flaubert's own reading of the world. Mary Jo Salter observes:

In the genre of poetry, women writing in English must pay [their] respects to Shakespeare, and to Milton, and to Chaucer, and a long list of others just a notch below them. Until recent times the writing of poetry was mostly the province of the learned, which in itself isn't a bad thing. The problem is that the learned, of course, were men (31).⁴⁸

Salter considers the lack of female voice in terms of missing female predecessors' voices. Before Virginia Woolf, Emily Dickinson and other female writers and poets of the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries had lamented this point.

Many critics and feminists since the 1960s have focused on the 'lack of authoritative female voice' in the arts.⁴⁹ Lowell also stresses this in her poem

⁴⁸ Salter, Mary Jo. 'A Poem of One's Own.' *The New Republic* (March 4, 1991): pp. 30-34.

⁴⁹ Gilbert and Gubar explore and expose this problem for the first time in *No Man's Land*, Volumes 1 and 2. Elaine Showalter offers a remarkable, comprehensive history of American women writers from 1650 to

‘The Sisters.’⁵⁰ This absence and its consequences for self-devaluation is also traceable in Else Baker’s poem ‘When I am Dead and Sister to the Dust,’ which was included in *The Little Book of Modern Verse* published in 1917.⁵¹ This poem expresses the disappointment of a female poet who bitterly considers that her being a female poet would most likely be discovered after her death. The poem is worth quoting in its entirety for its relevant implications for the ‘natural’ incorporation by woman of the authoritative male voice and perception.

When I am dead and sister to the dust
When no more avidly I drink the wine
Of human love; when the pale Proserpine
Has covered me with poppies, and cold rust
Has cut my lyre-strings, and the sun has thrust
Me underground to nourish the world-vine,—
Men shall discover these old songs of mine,
And say: This woman lived—as poets must!
This woman lived and wore life as a sword
To conquer wisdom; this dead woman read
In the sealed Book of Love and underscored
The meanings. Then the sails of faith she spread,
And faring out for regions unexplored,
Went singing down the River of the Dead.

Baker seems to rely on male recognition in her longing for posthumous discovery. Lines seven and eight effectively divide the sonnet into two parts, acting as a counterpart with her previous life, which acquires a different meaning only after the verb ‘say.’ Baker consciously waits for the male reading of her life. Women were often told that they were ‘read’ through male eyes rather than

the present day in *A Jury of Her Peers: American Women Writers from Anne Bradstreet to Annie Proulx*. New York: Random House Vintage Books, 2010.

⁵⁰ This poem will be discussed in greater detail in Chapter Five.

⁵¹ Else Baker did not appear in the second edition of the anthology published in 1920, to which some of her contemporaries were added, such as H.D., Richard Edwin Arlington, and Clement Wood. Amy Lowell was included in both anthologies; in the second anthology her biographical note was significantly enlarged and her involvement and leadership in the Imagist movement acknowledged.

‘speaking’ or ‘watching’ through their own eyes. The life of the female poet in Baker’s poem offers two distinct ‘readings’ before and after recognition. Baker reads herself in a mirror which reflects men’s literary and social conventions, incorporating and responding to the male gaze. As Mary P. Ryan underlines in *Women in Public: Between Banners and Ballots, 1825-1880*, ‘men speak for and act upon community as a whole, including women. A reciprocal power does not accrue to women by virtue of their stature in the private realm.’⁵²

Lowell’s persistence in defending poetry, and the oral and aural quality of its ‘performative’ aspect, was a sign of her searching, not simply for a model to follow, but a medium through which she could escape or try to escape the boundaries of patriarchy and heterosexual discourse. In the preface to *Can Grande’s Castle* (1918), she declares that ‘[for] an artist to shut himself up in the proverbial “ivory tower” and never look out of the window is merely a tacit admission that it is his ancestors, not he, who possess the faculty of creation’ (viii). She clearly wanted to be part of the public ‘arena,’ to affirm the power of ‘creation’ from the woman’s side, and to express herself. In an early poem, ‘Apology,’ which appeared in *Sword Blades and Poppy Seed* (1914), her awareness of the power of the word was manifested: the ‘word’ that, she believed, was set on her ‘unconfessed/ to go on unguessed.’ The ‘unconfessed’ word refers here to both her feelings for her lover and her desire to express them openly. Lowell’s position as both poet and woman emerged in her first poetry collection; although it is often overlooked by critics in this context, it was reinforced through her parallel work as critic and essayist. She wanted to enter the world and explore it through her ‘singing,’ her ideas, and her desires, giving to all of them her voice.

This was the path chosen by Lowell after Eleonora Duse’s performance. From the beginning, Lowell’s ‘voice’ provoked protests and conflicts; when she read her poem in public for the first time, for instance, the theatre exploded into a loud protest. The subject of her poem was a woman taking a bath in the open space of a garden. According to Lowell’s critics, the unusual subject of her poem—female bodies were often exposed, but through male eyes—was

⁵² Ryan, Mary P. *Women in Public between Banners and Ballots, 1825-1880*. Baltimore and London: The John Hopkins University Press, 1990. p. 8.

one reason for such a strong reaction. Lowell's reading, which was so evocative and enchanting that the audience nearly saw the body in the poem and was delighted, was the other reason for the protest. When the reading finished and audiences were left with Lowell's stout body in front of them, they felt offended by her challenge.⁵³ This episode, frequently reported by critics who choose to mock her physical appearance rather than praise her skill in constructing a 'real' scene, nonetheless demonstrates Lowell's talent for performance attained over years of self-training and the help of Ada Russell, with whom she lived until her death. Theatre and poetry, more than any other artistic genres at the time, included two qualities or capabilities restricted to women: voice and expression of feelings, qualities both linked to the body and its performative aspects.

Lowell entrusted herself to poetry, which became her stage. From there, she spoke of and to herself pushing her 'flesh and blood' into the centre and moving from the passive role of audience into the active role of subject. However, she also spoke through her articles and public readings, challenging and changing the position of woman from object to subject of poetic discourse. Many biographers have recorded Lowell's aptitude for 'speaking' her poems using pauses, and most of them have implied that her success was likely due to the high quality of her performances rather than the quality of her texts. It is true that Lowell was a good performer and that poets tried to appeal to as large an audience as possible in the United States at the time. Nevertheless, the spoken aspect of poetry that Lowell privileged appeared to be more relevant for women than for men. It was linked to one of the constraints that the feminist movement was struggling against: the one that prevented women from speaking in public and speaking about themselves and their desires. Lowell happened to fight this from inside the system using poetry. But in Lowell's case, unlike Emily Dickinson's, her fight implied the assumption of responsibility linked with the performative aspect of poetry itself; she offered the audience not only the words but also the body, her persona, as the unique creator of those lyrics. She acted in the first person using 'a script' that she wrote herself. In one way, she offered her production directly to her audience without any

⁵³ For perceptions about the 'ideal' female body, see Bradshaw, *Diva Poet*. pp. 27-45.

male patronage and starting from her own different desires. The language she employs in her poems and her involvement through her articles and essays about the arts must be read through this lens.

Whether she used a conscious strategy to reach her goal has not yet been properly explored. However, Lowell's public readings and articles offered her, as both woman and poet, the chance and the courage to 'speak' of herself and to give her own 'reading' of the world around her. The response of the literary community was not always favourable; Lowell was called 'Hippopotess,' for example, and the Imagist movement was named 'Amigism' by Ezra Pound after he left it. Even if female poets became more active with their writings, at the turn of the twentieth century, they were not always regarded as equals by their male colleagues, who often criticised their works and mocked their aspirations. Most female poets had to be 'discovered' by men before being acknowledged as poets; Hilda Doolittle, for instance, had to become the 'impersonal' H.D. in order to be included by Pound in the group of Imagist poets that he led in London. Lowell decided to be a subject rather than an 'unacknowledged legislator of the world': a 'conscious and respected legislator' of her own destiny. And she struggled for this, paving her path with her articles, public lectures, and poems, where her perceptions as an individual with the right to express everything about the world and about herself were skillfully and originally manifested through her ironic and sensual images grounded on the oral quality of poetry. It is this aspect that, pushing her into the public poetic scene, obtained the most hostile responses from male critics; consciously or unconsciously, they believed she was trying to occupy a territory which they believed was exclusively their own.

Chapter Four

‘What’s Irony For?’ A Re-Reading of *A Critical Fable*¹

Lowell’s involvement in poetry was intense. Between the publication of her first collection, *A Dome of Many-Colored Glass* (1912), and that of her pamphlet *A Critical Fable* (1922), she had already published the bulk of her poetry, including her translations of six French poets in 1916 and a number of Chinese lyrics in 1921. In her lectures, articles, essays and prefaces, Lowell sought both to highlight the limited presence and influence of women poets, and to bring attention to the new poetry, as discussed in Chapter Three. Her versatility was often acknowledged by critics during her lifetime, as well as posthumously. Indeed, she possessed a technical facility not only with conventional verse forms such as sonnets, ballads, and lyrics, but also with *vers libre* and, as she explains in her preface to *Can Grande’s Castle*, polyphonic prose.²

By focusing on *A Critical Fable*, this chapter will illustrate how Lowell used irony to interrogate the unequal poetic contribution of women and to support the new poetry in her own way.³ Beginning with a brief account of Lowell’s tendency to mock society and individuals in her journals, the second section of this chapter will centre on a re-reading of several poems from her second and third collections, *Sword Blades and Poppy Seed* (1914) and *Men, Women and Ghosts* (1916). The final section will examine the nuances of Lowell’s use of irony, which she employed to question stereotyped representations of female beauty, thereby exposing herself as a flesh-and-blood woman. Ultimately, this chapter promotes a reconsideration of *A Critical Fable*, not only as a *jeu d’esprit*, but as a demonstration of Lowell’s struggle to alert the American audience to the significant contributions made by women in the

¹ This echoes the last line of Lowell’s well-known poem ‘The Pattern’: ‘What’s the pattern for?’ The poem appeared first in *Little Review* in 1915 and was then included in Lowell’s *Men, Women and Ghosts*. New York: Macmillan, 1916. pp. 3-9. ‘The Pattern’ will be discussed in Chapter Seven.

² Lowell, Amy. *Can Grande’s Castle*. New York: Macmillan, 1918. pp. vii-xvii.

³ Lowell, Amy. *A Critical Fable*. Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1922. The book had two editions, the first being anonymous (1922), and the second with the author named (1924). Two other editions followed: in 1971, Folcroft Library Editions, and in 1981, AMS Press. All references here are from the first 1922 edition.

artistic field. To these ends, the theoretical framework of this chapter will be provided by Elizabeth J. Donaldson's 'Amy Lowell and the Unknown Lady,' Melissa Bradshaw's 'Remembering Amy Lowell: Embodiment, Obesity, and the Construction of a Persona,' and Bice Mortara Garavelli's *Manuale di Retorica*.

4.1. *Irony in Lowell's Journals*

Sounds, patterns, the musicality of poetry, and the power of words themselves, had enthralled Lowell since childhood. Her enthusiastic attempts to write stories,⁴ depict characters and atmospheres, and focus on the many details of her environment and the people she encountered, are all evident in her early journals and scrapbooks, as discussed in Chapter Two.⁵ Lowell often provides 'pictures' of people she encountered in childhood, a skill perfected in her mature writings, where these pictures develop an almost cinematographic quality. For example, Lowell describes her teacher, Mr. Hubble, by writing that 'he is made out of cardboard, and was flat, I always want to hit him and see if he will fall well. He and I were a contrast [underlined in the original].'⁶ The underscored word indicates Lowell's ironic awareness of her own physicality: the contrast to which she refers is between her teacher's slenderness and her own incipient heaviness. Many other examples of Lowell's self-mocking tendencies are available in her diaries. Waiting on a tardy reply to a letter Lowell had written to a friend for whom she had romantic feelings, Lowell notes in her journal, 'July 12th: I wish Lottie would answer. Though I don't suppose that epistle required any answer. I do hope it's lost in the road. But I am afraid it will get to her all right. Moral: always look over letters the next morning that were written

⁴ In one of the small notebooks consulted at the Houghton Library, there is a short fairy story, *The Goblins and the Grocery Store*, dated 1884. This is most likely one of the first examples of her writing. Cambridge (MA): Houghton Library, bMS Lowell, 38 (1).

⁵ Damon reserved considerable space for her juvenile writings, including many precise and usually complete references from her earlier diaries. *Amy Lowell: A Chronicle, with Extracts from Her Correspondence*. Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin Company. 1935. Hereafter: *Amy Lowell: A Chronicle*.

⁶ Lowell, Amy. Journals. 1889-1890. February 1, 1889. Cambridge (MA): Houghton Library, MS Lowell, 38 (1).

the night before.⁷ Here, Lowell is referring to her attempt to kiss this friend on July 5th, and this self-chastisement demonstrates her concern about the letter's contents. Whether the letter contained justification or a reaffirmation of her feelings for Lottie, this diary entry illustrates Lowell's use of irony for self-protection. In addition, as Bice Mortara Garavelli highlights in *Manuale di Retorica*, the use of irony belittles the world and ourselves, but is not 'a superficial approach'; it is also intended to be 'an expression of a "pudore", a modesty, a mix of tears and laughter.'⁸

Lowell also uses irony to express the opposite of her thoughts or desires. For example, she opens one of her *Private Scrap-book's Arranged by Amy Lowell* with a hilarious 'preface,' writing:

The contents of this book are made up chiefly of scraps cut out of different magazines, quotations, and one or two significant pieces [unclear]. The compiling of this book has taken a good deal of time, care and propriety. This book will probably interest nobody but myself, so do not imagine naughty reader that you will like it because you won't: I must stop because the dinner bell has rung.⁹

Her notice to the imagined reader is ironic as Lowell often showed her diaries to her mother and to female friends, particularly those for whom she had romantic feelings, as in the case of another friend of hers, Polly.¹⁰ In an entry dated 18 May 1889, Lowell wrote, 'She, Polly, wanted to read my journal, so we went into the [...].¹¹ She read some of it. I don't care. I do love her, and I think she cares a little for me.' The ironic quality of her juvenilia increases in subtlety and distinction in Lowell's mature works, but this aspect of her writing was generally underappreciated by critics during her lifetime. Louis Unter-

⁷ Lowell, Amy. Journals.1889-1890. July 12, 1890. Cambridge (MA): Houghton Library, bMS Lowell 38 (1).

⁸ Garavelli, Bice Mortara. *Manuale di Retorica*. Milan: Bompiani, 2012. p. 167. Garavelli discusses this point illustrating the different figures of speech in classic rhetoric.

⁹ The brown exercise book contains a calendar; for each month there are illustrations (mostly cut from magazines or newspapers), or a story connected to the month, or a rhymed poem. Cambridge (MA): Houghton Library, MS Lowell, 38 (1).

¹⁰ Lowell, Amy. Journals.1889-1890. Cambridge (MA): Houghton Library, bMS Lowell, 38 (1). In the 1889 journal there are two references to her mother reading her diaries, respectively dated February 20 and 23.

¹¹ The following word is unreadable; it might be 'garden.'

meyer, for example, alludes to Lowell's 'probing irony'; however, he only lists a few titles from her second and third collections and does not attempt any further critical analysis.¹² Nevertheless, Lowell's mordant irony is present and more or less overt in all of her publications. In 'On a Certain Critic,' she mocks the critics who aspire to immortal fame through the poetry they interpret.¹³ Lowell describes the critic as 'a sprig little gentleman' who turns over Keats' manuscript:

... with his mincing fingers,
And tabulates places and dates.
He says your moon was a copy-book maxim,
And talks about the spirit of solitude (66-69).

She wishes Keats were present 'to damn him/ With a good round, agreeable oath' (71-72). Directly addressing Keats, she definitively states, 'You and the moon will still love,/ When he and his papers have slithered away/ In the bodies of innumerable worms' (74-76). These final three lines, which close the lyric in a somewhat ferocious manner, punish the critic's desire for immortality.

4.2. 'Astigmatism' and 'The Dinner Party': Nuances in the Irony of Amy Lowell

Although Lowell's biting irony peaks in intensity in the final lines of 'On a Certain Critic,' in 'Astigmatism' it is clear from the beginning, on account of the dedication: 'To Ezra Pound/ With much Friendship and Admiration and Some Differences of Opinion.' Lowell's quarrel with Pound about leadership of the Imagists had already begun when she wrote 'Astigmatism.' Critics generally defended Pound, failing to note that his interest in Lowell was due more

¹² Untermeyer, Louis. *A New Era in American Poetry*. New York: Henry Holt & Co, 1919. p. 145.

¹³ Lowell, Amy. 'On a Certain Critic.' *Pictures of the Floating World*. Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1919. pp. 256-257. This poem closes the last section of the collection with the ironic title 'As Towards Immortality' (pp. 253-257).

to her money than her poetry.¹⁴ Moreover, they disparaged her attempts to keep the Imagist group active in the United States with the publication of three anthologies promoting still relatively unknown poets such as Hilda Doolittle (H.D.), Richard Aldington, D. H. Lawrence, and John Gould Fletcher.¹⁵ Critics generally examine ‘Astigmatism’ only in the context of Lowell’s relationship with Pound; however, it is also an excellent example of Lowell’s aesthetic use of irony.¹⁶ In the poem, she adeptly and elegantly plays with the metaphor of astigmatism, an optical defect which causes difficulties in seeing fine detail and results in blurred vision. Due to his own astigmatism, Pound is unable to recognise the beauty for which he searches when it appears before him. His vision is obscured by his precise idea of beauty symbolised by ‘the rose.’

In a 1913 editorial in *Poetry*, Harriet Monroe emphasises the critical importance for modernist poets of beauty and the poet’s struggle to reach it. ‘New beauty which must inspire every artist,’ is not merely a question of subject or form, Monroe writes.¹⁷ She emphasises the position of the poet who ‘is not a follower, but a leader’ and suggests that ‘the new beauty is a vision in his eyes and a passion in his heart.’ The poet must also ‘strain every sinew of his spirit to reveal it to the world’ (22). Monroe regrets that poetry and art in general are ‘regarded as a decoration of life, not as its very pulse and heart-beat, inevitable like a sunrise or a flower’ (23). She invites the poets of her time to ‘feel as if poetry were new, and they were the first to forge rhythmic chains for the English language’ (24). In her preface to *Sword Blades and Poppy Seed*, Lowell writes about the same topic, claiming that ‘a work of beauty which cannot stand an intimate examination is a poor and jerry-built thing’ (vii), suggesting that the elements of ‘a work of beauty’ do not depend solely on the perfection of the description of a poem’s subject but have to reach the emotion and imagination of readers. The two words Lowell employs in her preface—‘work’ and ‘beauty’—conflict with Romantic ideas of the poet as ‘born’ and not made.

¹⁴ Wilhelm, J. J., *Ezra Pound in London and Paris, 1908-1925*. University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1990. The author highlights that ‘to rejuvenate imagism or keep it moving forward depended on his control of a workable organ in which to disseminate new productions. To acquire this, he had to have money behind him, and the person who seemed to possess the funds and the artistic interest was the recently departed Amy.’ p. 141. See also Damon, S. Foster. *Amy Lowell: A Chronicle*. Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1935. pp. 197-252.

¹⁵ The subject of Pound and the Imagists will be touched on in Chapter Five.

¹⁶ Lowell, Amy. *Sword Blades and Poppy Seed*. New York: MacMillan, 1914. pp. 45-49.

¹⁷ Monroe, Harriet. ‘The New Beauty.’ *Poetry* 2.1 (April 1913): p. 22.

Her vision of the poet as ‘the artisan of words’ illustrates her belief that artistic production is a result of hard work, and that the artist’s final goal is beauty, with the caveat that ‘we distrust a beauty we can only half understand’ (viii).

Lowell’s ideas about beauty are unexpectedly echoed by the philosopher and novelist George Santayana’s claims in his 1896 book *The Sense of Beauty*.¹⁸ He writes that the moral dignity of beauty needs no justification because it ‘exists for the same reason that the object which is beautiful exists, or the world in which that object lies, or we that look upon both. It is an experience: there is nothing more to say about it’ (268). Santayana ends his book affirming that ‘[i]f perfection is, as it should be, the ultimate justification of being, we may understand the ground of moral dignity of beauty. Beauty is a pledge of the possible conformity between the soul and nature, and consequently a ground of faith in the prevalence of the good’ (270).

In Lowell’s ‘Astigmatism,’ Pound (or ‘Poet’) is in search of ‘roses,’ the symbol of perfect beauty, and is ultimately incapable of affecting the reader’s emotions; his search is confined to the length of his cane. From the first line, Lowell’s humour is manifest; she calls Pound ‘the Poet’ and describes him taking a walk with the ‘walking-stick’ he had previously admired for its perfection. His admiration leads him to start his search away from home. Lowell reinforces this image of Pound abandoning his homeland, depicting him erring with his stick in search of beauty: ‘The Poet took his walking-stick/And walked abroad.// Peace be with you, Brother’ (19-21).

This line emphasises her condemnation of the expatriation of Pound, who, like Henry James and T.S. Eliot, left his country in search of his ‘rose.’¹⁹ The ‘walking-stick’ in the subsequent lines becomes an ironic object, from whose perspective Lowell follows the Poet’s quest and from which Pound

¹⁸ Santayana, George. *The Sense of Beauty: Being the Outline of Aesthetic Theory*. New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1896. George Santayana (Madrid 1863–Rome 1952) was one of the most influential and admired philosophers at the turn of the twentieth century, revered by many of the intellectuals in New England and elsewhere. His books on philosophy, poetry, and his essays and memoirs were well known. He taught at Harvard University when Lowell’s brother, Abbott, was President there, and among his most devoted students were Franklin D. Roosevelt, Walter Lippmann, Robert Frost, Wallace Stevens, Conrad Aiken, and T. S. Eliot. He emphasises the relevance of creative imagination and influenced Eliot’s notion of the ‘objective correlative.’ His essay ‘The Genteel Tradition in American Philosophy’ has influenced many modernist writers and poets.

¹⁹ According to Damon, Henry James, during a conversation with Lowell in London in 1913, regretted his expatriation: ‘I have cut myself off from America, where I belonged,’ he said, ‘and in England I am not really accepted. Don’t make my mistake.’ Damon, S. Foster. *Amy Lowell: A Chronicle*. Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1935. p. 212.

‘judges’ the beauty he encounters. In naming and describing the walking-stick or cane—the two terms are interchangeable in the poem—Lowell emphasises the attention and the admiration of the Poet for his external ‘extension’ made of ‘fine polished ebony’ (2), which ‘To him was perfect/ A work of art and a weapon,/ A delight and a defense’ (16-18). With his cane the Poet, reaching a meadow, strikes some daises (25): ‘The little heads flew off, and they lay/ Dying, open-mouthed and wondering,/ On the hard ground’ (26-28). In describing the effect produced by the Poet’s stick on the defenseless flower, Lowell implies a sexual game, lending a more biting irony to the poem. She leaves to the Poet the explanation of his unreasonable act: ‘“They are useless. They are not roses,” said the Poet’ (29). And when he arrives at a stream where he again finds irises, ‘The Poet lifted his cane,/ And the iris heads fell into the water’ (35-36). The explanation is the same: they are not roses. Likewise, when he reaches a garden full of dahlias, gillyflowers, and trumpet-vines, ‘The Poet knocked off the stiff heads of the dahlias./And his cane lopped the gillyflowers at the ground/ Then he severed the trumpet-blossoms from their stems’ (47-49). When the Poet repeats his explanation, the speaker (‘I’) approaches him and summarises the results of his search for beauty: ‘Peace be with you, Brother./ But behind you is destruction, and waste places’ (54-55). By repeating ‘Peace be with you, Brother’ in response to the Poet’s every act, Lowell widens the ironic distance between the two, and it becomes epitaphic with the final line: ‘Peace be with you, Brother. You have chosen your part’ (66).

If in ‘Astigmatism’ Lowell uses irony to emphasise the different paths she and Pound have taken, ‘The Dinner Party’ offers a glimpse of her discomfiting feelings during a social occasion. This poem was published in her third collection, *Men, Women and Ghosts*, and is divided into six sequences: ‘Fish,’ ‘Game,’ ‘Drawing-Room,’ ‘Coffee,’ ‘Talk,’ and ‘Eleven O’Clock.’²⁰ Each sequence reflects different moods experienced during a dinner party. The first nine lines begin in a conversational tone focusing on an interior scene: ‘“So [...]” They said,/ With their wine-glasses delicately poised,/ Mocking at the thing they cannot understand’ (1-3). The ‘I’ reveals itself at the end in a final sarcastic meditation on the strangeness of the situation, the people, and the

²⁰ Lowell, Amy. *Men, Women and Ghosts*. New York: MacMillan, 1916. pp. 338-341.

wine, which is turning into ‘the blood I had wasted/ In a foolish cause’ (9-10). The second sequence centres on a failed conversation the ‘I’ tried to have with ‘The gentleman with the grey-and black whiskers’ who ‘Sneered languidly over his quail’ (1-2). Lowell emphasises her efforts to start a dialogue with her use of verbs such as ‘blow’ and ‘thrust’; however, these efforts are ultimately unsuccessful: ‘But my weapon slithered over his polished surface,/ And I recoiled upon myself,/ Panting’ (7-9). The eight lines of the third provide a poignant, vivid image of an unknown lady, caught by Lowell in her languid pose—‘Indolent and self-reclined’—upon a couch with the firelight reflected in her jewels (1-4).

Through the repetition of ‘half,’ Lowell underscores the lady’s unstable and useless position: her liveliness is only the reflection of her jewels. The lady is completely absent: ‘her eyes had no reflection,/ They swam in a grey smoke’ (5-6), a smoke which in the last line is the result of ‘her cindered heart’ (8). The sense of exclusion which Lowell gradually constructs becomes intense in the fourth sequence, where the ‘I’ perceives the people around her as:

... a circle of ghosts
Sipping blackness out of beautiful china,
And mildly protesting against my coarseness
In being alive (4-7).

In the fifth section, the ‘I’ reflects more deeply on the increasing separation between itself and the guests: ‘They were ghouls battening on exhumed thoughts’ (5). The only human contact of comfort is the gesture of the servant who pours her a ‘green liqueur’: ‘And I took a green liqueur from a servant/ So that he might come near me/ And give me the comfort of a living thing’ (7-8). This sense of exclusion is complete at the end of the sixth sequence, ‘Eleven O’Clock,’ when the party is over. The speaker comes back to the ‘house of ghosts’ (2) and, while going up the stairs, intentionally hurts herself on the pointed railings in order to feel alive. Waking up in the night and feeling pain in her palms, the speaker laughs: ‘When I woke in the night/ I laughed to find them aching,/ For only living flesh can suffer’ (12-14). The apparent vitality exhibited by the ghostly gentleman and ladies during the dinner party is

mocked by her real, aching flesh. Lowell plays with the falsity of appearance; at this dinner party, everyone is present purely for appearance's sake, to show their faces and their selves. The human contact, which involves listening to others, is missing, and their fake attitude is grounded on their narcissism. The reality implies tears and laughter and in these last lines Lowell bitterly mocks herself as well, for insisting on having real contact with them, having failed to understand the falseness of the situation. This self-irony is also manifested in one of her shortest poems, 'Epitaph of a Young Poet Who Died Before Having Achieved Success.'²¹ The poem is comprised of two lines: 'Beneath this sod lie the remains/ Of one who died of growing pains' (1-2). The title and lines are cleverly positioned as a mirror to emphasise the useless efforts of the 'young poet' which brought him prematurely to the tomb. The title serves as the coffin lid and brings a sour sense of defeat. If this short poem betrays any anxiety about herself or her art, such concerns disappear entirely by 1922 with the publication of *A Critical Fable*.

4.3. 'A Critical Fable' and its Reception

Lowell's talents for characterisation and humour are most evident in *A Critical Fable*, a long, satirical poem about the 'virtues and vices' of twenty of her fellow contemporary poets. From the first page, in which Lowell uses every possible kind of font (such as Gothic, Bodoni, Times Roman, old style and so on), playing as well with lowercase and upper cases letters, its joyful aim is made clear to her readers.

Dear Sir (or Dear Madam) who happen to glance at this/ TITLE-PAGE/
Printed you'll see to enhance its aesthetic attraction,/ Pray buy, if you're
able, this excellent bargain:/ A CRITICAL FABLE/ The book may be
read in the light of A/ Sequel to the *FABLE for CRITICS*/ A Volume
Unequal (Or Hitherto So) For Its Quips And Digressions On/ The Poets
Of The Day/ Without Undue Professions, I Would Say That This Trea-
tise/ Is Fully As Light As The Former, Its Judgments As/ Certainly

²¹ Lowell, Amy. *Sword Blades and Poppy Seed*. New York: MacMillan, 1914. p. 99.

Right As Need Be./ A HODGE-PODGE/ Delivered Primarily In The
Hope Of Instilling Instruction/ so Airily That Readers May See, In The
Persons On View,/ a peripatetic, poetic Who's Who./ An Account Of
The Times.

Lowell also makes clear that it was intended as a 'sequel' to the one published in 1848 by her distant cousin, James Russell Lowell, signing it, for example, with the pseudonymous 'A Poker Of Fun.' This is an overt reference to what her cousin wrote on the first page of his pamphlet: 'A Fable for Critics; or, Better, A Glance at a Few of our Literary Progenies, from the Tub of Diogenes; that is A Series of Jokes.'²² Like J.R. Lowell, Amy published it anonymously. This pamphlet may initially be read as a mockery of her maternal ancestors, the Russells, who purportedly never demonstrated much consideration for the Lowells. Lowell's father, for example, was esteemed more for his success in the cotton industry than for his cultural activities.²³ This devaluation of the Lowells by the Russells continued through to the younger generations, targeting Amy as well.

In his first letter to Pound in 1936, eleven years after Lowell's death, Amy's cousin, the poet Robert Lowell, in fact, demonstrated public reluctance to being associated with her. He wrote:

Dear Mr Pound: I have been wanting to write to you several months, but I haven't quite had the courage to until now. You will probably think that I am very impudent and presumptuous but I want to come to Italy and work under you and forge my way into reality. I have no right [to] ask this of you, yet let me try to describe myself and explain my desire. I am 19, a freshman at Harvard, and some relation, I don't know what, to Amy.²⁴

²² Lowell, James Russell. *A Fable for Critics*. Boston: Ticknor and Fields, 1948. A second edition appeared in 1890 with Houghton Mifflin Company. All references are to the first edition.

²³ His two oldest sons did not follow him into this business. The firstborn, Percival Lowell, was a diplomat with a passion for languages and astronomy. He built the observatory in Flagstaff, Arizona and studied Mars's canals, while the second-born, Abbott Lawrence Lowell, was a legal scholar and served as President of Harvard University for over thirty years.

²⁴ Hamilton, Saskia. *The Letters of Robert Lowell*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2005. p. 3.

While Robert Lowell's attitude may have been motivated by a desire not to involve himself in the notorious quarrel between Pound and his cousin, his reluctance to acknowledge connections with Amy did not waver. In a 1948 letter to George Santayana written twenty-three years after Lowell's death, he again emphasises that his connection with the Lowells was distant at best: 'Dear Mr. Santayana: Here is some of my story: I am 30, the son of a retired naval officer; J. R. Lowell was my great grand-uncle, Amy was about a fourth cousin; long long ago Jonathan Edwards was one of my ancestors' (79). And again, in a letter to Elizabeth Bishop, at that time an intimate friend, he offers a brief and ironic comment to her, focusing mostly on her unstable health; and referring to her poems he credited Percival, Lowell's brother, to have inspired and influenced her 'Chinese scenes' (269-270).

Critics generally tend to view *A Critical Fable* as an expression of 'revenge' on the Lowells. However, although this cannot exactly be denied, this potential motivation does not justify neglecting the merit or general aim of the piece. Yet *A Critical Fable* was the object of several different critiques mostly grounded on her 'alleged[ly]' revenge or her representation of her fellow contemporary poets. While Harriet Monroe argued that Lowell 'has tried, like Byron, at a lightly running satirical handling of her contemporaries,'²⁵ for Horace Gregory, *A Critical Fable* had the 'half-pathetic value of an historical document that once had had pretensions to literary fame.'²⁶ Clement Wood's perspective of the poet in his biography *Amy Lowell*, as 'a coddled and pampered daughter of wealth from the start,' may explain his view of *A Critical Fable* as merely another example of Lowell's desire to show off.²⁷ Praising James Russell Lowell's verse—'[it] was earth-bound'—he shows his disappointment about the achievement of his niece: 'after seventy-four years, we may expect better verse from his niece' (123).²⁸ He supports his complaining, with some examples, out of their contexts, of Lowell's 'slant' rhymes. Lowell's

²⁵ Monroe, Harriet. 'Amy Lowell.' *Poetry* 25.1 (October 1924): p. 33.

²⁶ Gregory, Horace. *Amy Lowell: Portrait of the Poet in Her Time*. New York: Books for Libraries Press, 1958. p. 191.

²⁷ Wood, Clement. *Amy Lowell*. New York: Harold Vinal, 1926. p. 142.

²⁸ Amy Lowell's grandfather was half-brother to the father of James Russell Lowell. They were from opposite lines of the same family. In his biography on Amy Lowell, Foster Damon identifies J.R. Lowell as Lowell's grand-cousin.

‘inept couplets of words,’ he writes, do not ‘achieve rhyme or assonance;’ she ‘has many identities instead of rhymes.’ Wood lists most of them: such as: ‘motion/emotion,’ ‘succeeded/preceded,’ exception/deception; tradition/ erudition; deficiencies/efficiencies (124). Wood places more relevance on the form rather than ‘substance,’ a focus which Lowell had already denounced as excessive and irrelevant in one of her first comments on the new movement in poetry. In 1916 in *The New Statesman*,²⁹ referring to the new trend in poetry, and in particular to Imagism, she pointed out that ‘The whole New Movement in poetry is a matter of substance rather than of form. Form is merely an adjunct, but because form is more quickly noticed than the content, it is principally on the question of form that people have been moved to argue’ (342). Woods fails to notice, however, that these ‘identities instead of rhymes,’ placed in the mouths of the two male characters, increase the irony of the pamphlet in particular in her mocking of her cousin. One of the two characters of Lowell’s pamphlet, in fact, is clearly identified as her poet grand-cousin James, considered expert and confident in the art of poetry.

In subsequent pages, Wood dismisses Lowell’s attempt to imitate her cousin, pointing out: ‘If it be offered in extenuation that the verses were meant to be casual and slipshod, we need not quarrel; they achieve that impressive aim’ (126). Wood also shows his disapproval of the treatment Lowell reserved for T. S. Eliot, whom she called a ‘pen protruding,’ declaring that his essays were build up from ‘a process of massiving.’ Wood, perhaps misinterpreting Lowell’s intentions, accused her of neglecting certain women poets, such as Edna Vincent Millay, whose poems he argues were ‘greater than any but two of Miss Lowell’s poems’ (123). He assumes that motivation for such treatment ‘It is no idle rumor that the Brookline critic was bitterly jealous of her woman rivals’ (123). If Wood had counted the pages dedicated to ‘femininity,’ as he calls it, he would have noticed that their total is higher than those Lowell dedicated to male poets.

Elizabeth J. Donaldson offers another interpretation of *A Critical Fable*. In her essay ‘Amy Lowell and the Unknown Ladies,’ she suggests that it reflects Lowell’s deep commitment to art, poetry, and women. According to

²⁹ Lowell, Amy. ‘Is There a National Spirit in “The New Poetry of America”?’ *The Craftsman* 30.4 (1916): pp. 339-349.

Donaldson, the pamphlet is more precisely '[o]ne example of Amy Lowell's covert yet public commentary on the position of the woman writer.'³⁰ She observes that her pamphlet is a method of exposing prejudices towards female writers using an ironic form. Lowell's irony, in fact, demonstrates that women are as capable of satire and irony as men. Donaldson bases this contention on Lowell's choice to set her conversation in *A Critical Fable* between two 'gentlemen,' using a male voice. Yet this decision serves more purposes. Lowell's frequent use of the male voice in many of her poems has two relevant functions in the context of *A Critical Fable*: to maintain her anonymity in proximity with her cousin's pamphlet and, above all, to attract serious attention also from a female audience more accustomed to a male authorial voice. In the preface of her pamphlet, in fact, Lowell clearly approaches this point when referring to the ladies of the women's club; she identifies them as those 'who take what they're told as immaculate gospel in letters and gold, and rather than buy prefer to be sold' (vi).

Using a male voice, moreover, was not uncommon among female writers, as epitomized in the acclaimed novel, *Orlando* (published in 1928, three years after Lowell's death) in which the English novelist Virginia Woolf (1882-1941) uses a male voice. It challenged the attitude of biographers of that time and their propensity to base their account of the truth only on several anecdotes referring to the external world. Woolf, in her fictional biography on Orlando's life, reveals Orlando's interior world to the reader. She narrates the change of gender of her character Orlando, through the voice of her two fictional male characters: Orlando and Orlando's biographer. Woolf, investigating the differences of the experience faced by her character when his male form inhabited the female one, subtly asserts, as well, that female writing may address the 'universality' of the human experience. Ironically in relation to her own life, Woolf asserts that this can be achieved 'without pain.'³¹

Woolf insists that Orlando's metamorphosis happens without pain and in a complete way, which causes Orlando himself to be both surprised and admired. Woolf ironically plays with the confusion of Orlando's male biographer

³⁰ Donaldson, Elizabeth J. 'Amy, Lowell, and the Unknown Ladies.' *Amy Lowell, American Modern*. Eds. Adrienne Munich and Melissa Bradshaw. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2004. p. 28.

³¹ Woolf, Virginia. *Orlando. A Biography*. San Diego: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1956. pp. 142-147.

in the light of this social issue. He feels the urge to offer some explanations to his readers based on scientific facts, affirming at the end that according to the scientists such a transformation was not 'natural.' In sharing Orlando's emotions, feelings and expectations with her readers, Woolf constructs a contrasting dialogue between the experiences (physical and emotional) of Orlando and the 'facts' about Orlando's life reported by the biographer, thus emphasising the irony of the situation. In presenting to her readers Orlando's character in all of his humanity, she challenges the biographer's attitude grounded in the Victorian conceptions of truth and reality. Woolf mocks her father the biographer Leslie Stephen, just as Lowell mocks her distant cousin.

Woolf's irony is emphasised by the two voices (male and female) that Orlando, due to his metamorphosis, is allowed to use. This strategy gives Woolf the chance to express female emotions, thoughts or expectations by openly using the female voice of her character. Whereas in *Orlando*, due to his metamorphosis, Woolf may play with two voices (male and female), in *A Critical Fable* Lowell's characters are males, with Lowell hiding her female voice under the two male voices. On considering the use of the poetic 'I' in Lowell's poetry, several feminist critics, point out that it is rarely clearly female—although it is often ambiguous.³² However, Donaldson has observed that this may have arisen from her conflicted position as 'a woman poet speaking in a poetic tradition that is gendered male' (28).

If this aspect of her love lyrics appears paradoxical, in *A Critical Fable*, it could be considered consistent with her mockery of male prejudice against women's writing and in her use of irony with dexterity. Just as Woolf in *Orlando* shows her versatility in dealing with the biography form, Lowell, in *A Critical Fable* shows her versatility and ability in dealing with irony in a complex way. Her pamphlet has the content of an essay but in rhyme: chained rhymes, rhyming couplet and alternate rhymes, to sustain the dialogue between the two characters. Ultimately it is a conversation in rhyme that has more than one resemblance to a theatrical form. The setting is clearly delineated through the observations of the two gentlemen, for example, and it is used to characterise or identify one of them or both. For example, when the two gentlemen ap-

³² This aspect will be discussed in Chapters Six and Seven.

proach the Mount Auburn, the older gentleman's identity is revealed as Lowell's cousin, J. R Lowell who is buried there. The opposite points of view, with further explanations and emotions, are directly communicated to the readers without the knowledge of the other character by one of the two characters.

This is a typical device used both in comedies and in farce, generally by one of the leading characters, mostly to increase the effects of the comic situations. Lowell further enhances this result using typographical signs to alert her readers to such comedic shifts. On stage, generally the actor or actress steps aside from the scene, or just turns directly to the audience to share with them his/her point of view to increase the hilarity. Most critics do not pay attention to the theatrical implications in Lowell's pamphlet, which indeed play a relevant role because they support her ironic intent. Lowell also plays with anonymity: the two characters meet by chance and do not know each other, but through their conversation their anonymity does not last for long. In particular concerning one of the old gentleman whose connection with Lowell is unmistakable, being her grand-cousin, James Russell Lowell.

After *A Critical Fable's* publication, Lowell's wish to remain anonymous did not last for long. As Damon reports in his biography, Lowell's name as the author of *A Critical Fable* was soon discovered, before it appeared in the English *Who's Who*.³³ And certainly it was not a secret for her publisher whom she asked to keep the secret for a while, as Damon also points out.

Lowell conceived the pamphlet during the summer of 1922 while convalescing at home after her fourth hernia operation. In *Amy Lowell Anew*, published in 2013, Carl Rollyson agrees that it was more of a therapeutic process for Lowell, it was 'a *jeu d'esprit*.'³⁴ Most likely, the waiting for the reaction of her critics, when she conceived her *jeu d'esprit*, was fun for Lowell, as well it was for her cousin, according to David Heyman.³⁵

³³ Damon, S. Foster. *Amy Lowell: A Chronicle*. Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1935. pp. 612-626. On this matter, most critics failed to contribute new ideas and in many cases they used Damon's information as granted.

³⁴ Rollyson, Carl. *Amy Lowell Anew*. Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2013. p. 140. His first book was *Amy Lowell Among Her Contemporaries*. New York: ASJA Press, 2009. His second book, besides offering more detailed information about Lowell's family, does not seem to shed any more light on Lowell's relationship with her companion, Ada Russell, as promised in the introduction.

³⁵ Heymann, C. David. *American Aristocracy: The Lives of James Russell, Amy and Robert Lowell*. New York: Dodd, Mead & Company, 1980. p. 264.

However, Lowell's preface to the pamphlet indicates that it meant much more than that. Although both the preface and title page initially recall (and thus mock) those of her cousin—both claiming to be 'in a search of pure fun' while simultaneously instructing the readers—Lowell takes another direction. In the rhyming preface, she alerts her readers that they might discover in the 'jokes of fun' something 'more pungent and hotter than simple pretention might lead one to think, recollect, if you please, there's a devil in ink' (v). In the five pages of her preface in which she ironically gives reasons for her readers to buy her 'bargain,' Lowell points out the 'malice' of the critic. He is able to sell to the ladies of 'Women's Club' his anthology which, like Poe, he might call 'A handy-Book of Conchology' (vi). Lowell invites the readers to read beyond appearance. Her rhymed essay based on dialogue about poetry between two men belonging to different generations, focuses not only on generational conflicts but also on how to appreciate female poetry. Although Lowell takes the side of the younger, through whom she defends the new trend of poetry and in particular the female writings, in the final lines, she shifts to intentionally share her doubts about the ability of her contemporary fellows to understand the times they live in.

She had expressed the same doubt in one of her articles that appeared in 1917, entitled 'A Consideration of Modern Poetry.'³⁶ Talking about the diffidence and reluctance in accepting the new poetic expression she declared that it takes time to acknowledge the novelties: 'no generation ever learns to wait a little before judging' (104). Her trust in fair judgment, in particular from future female readers, is also expressed at the end of her poem 'The Sisters,' written in the same year of *A Critical Fable* (1922). Lowell, then, addresses her work both to her contemporary readers but with her eye to her future readers.

Lowell's rhymed essay differentiates the poet from her cousin. First, his *A Fable for Critics* is retitled as Lowell's *A Critical Fable*. The change of the noun, *Critics*, into an adjective, *Critical*, is clearly intentional. Lowell intended not only to have fun but also to lampoon critics and their attitudes concerning the literary efforts of poets, writers, and specifically female artists. The pamphlet offers a direct correlation between her ideas and the poetic form used.

³⁶ Lowell, Amy. 'A Consideration of Modern Poetry.' *North American Review* 205.734 (1917): pp. 103-117.

Her sense of rhythm leads her to use the line as the fundamental unit, and the rhyming couplets, alternating rhyming as well as the numerous rhyming chaining are measured in order to fulfill this requirement.

James Russell Lowell's *A Fable for Critics* opens with Phoebus lying under a laurel tree that reminds him of Daphne; it is Apollo who introduces the poets (7-8). Seventy-four years later, Amy Lowell takes this role for herself, and, like her grand-cousin, introduces poets largely unknown to the wider public. In *Tendencies in Modern American Poetry*, just two years before her pamphlet, Lowell had already more seriously discussed most of the poets included in *A Critical Fable*.³⁷ Her reasons for repetition are the cause of much critical controversy—it is unclear whether Lowell sought a *jeu d'esprit*, or a mere diversion during her convalescence,

As the younger gentleman declares at the beginning of the pamphlet, when by chance he met the older gentleman, the best contemporary poetry is the topic of the conversation between two gentlemen. This conversation takes place during their walk along the river near the Mount Auburn cemetery. This choice of setting is relevant, as it was here that James Russell Lowell was buried, and this helps Lowell to identify the older gentleman as her cousin, James Russell. However, the setting has another important function: it gives her the opportunity to shape a serious conversation against the backdrop of a dramatic place and question the vanity of the living:

The living have nothing to say to the dead.
The fact is entirely the other way round,
The dead do the speaking, the living are wound
In the coils of their words (*A Critical Fable*, 3).

This statement immediately places James Russell among those with negative views of modernity and introduces Lowell's defense through the protestations of the younger gentleman. James Russell pleads with him with a smile: 'Fold your wings, young spread-eagle, I merely have stated/ That the worth of the living is much over-stated' (3).

³⁷ An account of *Tendencies in Modern American Poetry* will be given in the second section of Chapter Six.

Starting from their first exchange, Lowell gives her characters two distinctive, conventional attitudes: one rooted in the values of the past, the other in modernity; the two attitudes are instrumental to Lowell's aims: to instruct readers on the new voices of and new path taken by poetry, and to question the vacuity of the critics, particularly regarding female poetry. Despite their conflicting views, the two agree on the work of the critics: 'I was not fond of critics;/ If I rightly remember, I gave them some sly ticks' (8), says James Russell, referring to his *A Fable for Critics*. The younger gentleman adds that the times have changed: everything in the newspapers is standardised and critics take no care in reading the books they review (8-10). With this ploy, Lowell reinforces her own criticism of her contemporary critics. In addition, by obliging the two men to discuss the works of female poets of her time she names them, acknowledging their presence and achievements in literature. In doing this, Lowell also inserts her work into the debate of the time about both the new trends in poetry and the increasing presence of women in it. Because the sex of the author is unknown, initiating a discussion on poetry between two gentlemen, then, Lowell is given an opportunity to be heard and taken seriously despite the allegedly playful intentions of the pamphlet. By using male voices, Lowell also demonstrates her awareness of the conflict encountered by women in the realm of artistic creation, where her role was considered a passive one. In 'The Blank Page and the Issues of Female Creativity,' Susan Gubar points out that the root of that conflict was grounded in that 'long tradition' identifying the author as a male 'who is primary and the female as his passive creation.'³⁸

From the first lines of *A Critical Fable*, Lowell introduces the two men's points of view in such a way that they are recognisable as two generations confronting each other. The older Lowell, focusing on 'these/ Trans-Atlantic urbanities which crowds out the flavor' (4), ironically questions the younger:

Does maturity get the same joy from a damson?
But we, with our marshes, were more certainly urban
Than you with your brummagem, gilded suburban,

³⁸ Gubar, Susan. 'The Blank Page and the Issues of Female Creativity.' *Critical Inquiry* 8.2 (1981): p. 247.

Which you wear like a hired theatrical turban [...]
Just look at this bottle, we were free in my time,
But I think you are free of nothing but rhyme (5).

Lowell's metaphors about the limited freedom of poets also allow her to reiterate her high regard for her fellow poets, and to make her point about another issue on debate at the time, specifically disenfranchisement from the motherland.

The conversation quickly shifts to the poet 'sincerely admired' by the younger man, who immediately replies with a female name, 'Miss Dickinson,' revealing the heart of this talk. The reaction of the older Lowell is predictable; he starts to name Longfellow, himself, Emerson, Hawthorne, and Washington Irving, among others: 'Are they not deserving/ A tithe of your upstart, unfledged admiration?/ In the name of the Furies, what's come to the nation!' (7). The discussion returns to the critics, and Lowell gradually and skillfully brings back examples of female critical writings. The old gentleman, referring to the critics of his 'petulant age,' admits that 'we had a very few men/ Who wielded a passably powerful pen' (10), and the younger replies: 'And one woman,' I slyly put in. He grimaced.// Fairly touched and I owned it, and let Margaret Fuller/ Slide softly to limbo' (10).

Here Lowell demonstrates her awareness that 'culture is steeped in such myth of male primacy in theological, artistic and scientific creativity'—as Gubar underlines in her essay 'The Blank Page and the Issues of Female Creativity'—and thus cautiously introduces the female poets (244). Although Lowell was not 'active as a Suffragist,' as she declared in a letter to the Boston Equal Suffrage Association for Good Government in 1908, one of the people she names first is a woman, namely Margaret Fuller.³⁹ If her intent was to mock James Russell [Fuller was a strict critic of his, and he mocked her in his *A Critical for Fable*], it is relevant not only for her personal amusement, but for its function in the context of the text.⁴⁰ It establishes a double communication:

³⁹ Lowell, Amy. Letter to the Boston Suffrage Equal Association for Good Government. MS 19.1 (121).

⁴⁰ Fuller, Margaret. *Papers on Literature and Art*. Part II. New York: Wiley and Putnam, 1846. Margaret Fuller criticised James Russell Lowell in her essay on 'American Literature' (pp. 122-159), writing, 'his interest in the moral questions of the day has supplied the want of vitality in himself; his

an overt one between the older Lowell and the younger—made visible by the use of inverted commas—and that between the reader and the younger gentleman, to whom Lowell entrusts her opinions without inverted commas. This theatrical device increases the satire in the pamphlet. With this manoeuvre, Lowell not only raises the expectations of the reader but also reinforces the situational irony of her pamphlet. Fuller's name is not overtly pronounced by the younger man; it remains between him and the reader but unknown to his interlocutor (10). The reader is then waiting to see how the younger gentleman may succeed in discussing female writers with the older gentleman, and which female poets he has in mind. To render her game more amusing, she makes the vacuity of the neglect of women poets more explicit through statements expressed by the old gentleman, who has been cast as representative of the old way of thinking:

I am human,
And hardly can bear to allow that a woman
Is ever quite equal to man in the arts;
The two sexes cannot be ranked counterparts (44-45).

These are the feelings of Lowell's grand-cousin James Russell Lowell, who was a conservative despite his progressive ideas against slavery. The scarcity of female poets in Lowell's time was well known. In an editorial of *Poetry*, for example, Harriet Monroe, after having listed the poets of her time, and without further explanations, admitted that women were 'not so numerous as the men, nor so different each from each; but true to their sex and imitative of the other.'⁴¹ In *A Critical Fable*, Lowell gives a reason for this scarcity and ensures that the reader comprehends it by allowing the younger gentleman to express it without inverted commas: it is in 'the country's small stock of imagination' (14). Lowell deeply analyses neither the works of male nor female poets, instead focusing more carefully on their differing positions in the literary field: women are regarded with a gendered lens. This is reflected in all of the com-

great facility at versification has enabled him to fill the ear with a copious stream of pleasant sound. But his verse is stereotyped, his thought sounds no depth, and posterity will not remember him' (p. 132).

⁴¹ Monroe, Harriet. 'Comment.' *Poetry* 23.4 (January 1924): p. 210.

ments between the two gentlemen: ‘Man will always love woman and always pull down/ What she does.’ ‘Well, of course, if you will hug the cynical,/ It is quite your affair, but there is the pinnacle. She’s welcome to climb with man if she wishes’ (45).

This is the point at which Lowell chooses—having named Frost (23), Edwin Arlington Robinson (26), Carl Sandburg (29), Edgar Lee Masters (33), Vachel Lindsay (40), and Emily Dickinson (44)—to let herself be introduced by the younger gentleman: ‘I know several women not yet broken crockery. Amy Lowell, for instance, I spoke a bit clammily’ (45). Her name provokes the expected angry reaction of the older Lowell: ‘ “Good Heavens!” he shouts, “not one of the family!/ I remember they used to be counted by dozens,/ But I never was interested in immature cousins” ’ (45). Then she depicts herself with the ‘vices,’ stereotypes, and prejudices contemporaries and critics generally saw in her persona and work. Lowell does not spare herself anything, from her experimentations (such as polyphonic prose) to the negative view of her body.

She was fat, and this has been used to discredit her art both during her lifetime and posthumously, as analysed by Melissa Bradshaw in ‘Remembering Amy Lowell: Embodiment, Obesity, and the Construction of a Persona.’ Bradshaw writes: ‘Lowell’s body [...] serves as a pawn: if she behaves well, is not too opinionated or too demanding, her peers will overlook it, but if she oversteps the boundaries of gentility, they will not see anything else.’⁴² Years after Lowell’s death, Ezra Pound emphasised her ‘metallurgic mass’ in his *Cantos*, depicting Lowell through the eyes of his French friend, the sculptor Gautier.⁴³

Lowell, well aware of her ‘appalling’ bulk—so counter to the male ideal of slenderness and delicacy in female poets—intentionally and courageously plays on it in *A Critical Fable*.⁴⁴ In ‘Coming Out as Fat: Rethinking Stigma,’ Abigail C. Saguy and Anna Ward declare, ‘In proudly coming out as fat, one rejects cultural attitudes that fatness is unhealthy, immoral, ugly, or,

⁴² Bradshaw, Melissa, ‘Remembering Amy Lowell: Embodiment, Obesity, and the Construction of a Persona.’ *Amy Lowell, American Modern*. Eds. Adrienne Munich and Melissa Bradshaw. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2004. p. 182.

⁴³ Pound, Ezra. *The Cantos of Ezra Pound*. New York: New Directions, 1926. Canto LXXVII. p. 47.

⁴⁴ In the journal entry of March 15, 1890, she used this term when she realised she was fat. Lowell, Amy. *Journals*. 1889-1890. Cambridge (MA): Houghton Library, MS Lowell 39 (2).

otherwise undesirable.’⁴⁵ In her descriptions of her own physicality, then, Lowell affirms subtly and subversively her ‘right’ to have a desirable body despite its size. Rather than covering it, she flaunts herself and highlights her difference; this constitutes a subversive message about a non-negotiable aspect of self which critics often fail to acknowledge, not least because the derogatory descriptions are made by a male voice. Echoing her detractors, Lowell depicts herself as ‘fury surpassing the norm’ (46) and ‘Titanic’ (48), writing that ‘Broncho-busting with rainbows is scarcely a game/ For middle-aged persons inclined to the tame’ (47).

In emphasising her ‘faultness,’ she belittles and ironically dons the same lens as her detractors. He points out that she puts a preface in front of each book to defend it in advance, ‘Armed to the teeth like an old Samurai’ and ‘a modern White Knight (49).’ Her audience becomes ‘more than a hundred people,’ and her readings are told to inspire ‘a species of horrible fear.’ Lowell’s free verse and polyphonic prose are denigrated, as well: ‘For the magic she has, I see nothing demonic/ In the use of free verse (the “free” is quite comic!)/ Or even that mule of the art, polyphonic’ (49).

At this point, Lowell makes the younger gentleman introduce the other new female poets, with brief intrusions by male poets, such as Conrad Aiken soon after H.D., John Gould Fletcher before Sara Teasdale, Alfred Kreymborg after Louise Untermeyer, and William Rose Benét before Edna St. Vincent Millay. Lowell reserves space for all female poets, praising their efforts and dedication to poetry, but does not hesitate to criticise them. She calls Sara Teasdale ‘our poet par excellence,’ niece of Sappho and more bold than Mrs. Browning, but then complains about her being *Mrs.* Filsinger. She implicitly asserts that marriage does no good for women artists, neither for their creativity nor for their economic independence.

In her most quoted poem, ‘The Sisters,’ also published in 1922, Lowell reiterates this negative view of marriage by repeatedly referring to Elizabeth Barrett Browning with the title ‘Mrs.’⁴⁶ While in ‘The Sisters’ she focuses on three female poets, in *A Critical Fable* she lengthens the list. After Teasdale,

⁴⁵ Saguy, Abigail C. and Ward, Anna. ‘Coming Out as Fat: Rethinking Stigma.’ *Social Psychology Quarterly* 74.1 (2011): p. 66.

⁴⁶ The poem ‘The Sisters’ will be discussed in detail in Chapter Six.

Lowell introduces the child poet prodigy, Hilda Conkling, who 'is a greater phenomenon than they would proclaim her./ She is poetry itself' (71), and she credits her as 'the first imagist' (72).⁴⁷ To Hilda's mother, Grace Conkling, she dedicates more space, writing that she is a great poet whose love poems 'she serves, piping hot, a lyric of passion' (74).⁴⁸ Lowell creates an emotional landscape populated with flowers, perfumes, sounds, mountains, and rivers for her female poets, particularly Grace Conkling. She also uses musical terms to describe the texture of female poetry.

Lowell insists on the under-representation and under-estimation of female creative art. Her younger gentleman notes of Teasdale, for example, that 'Her poetry succeeds in spite of fragility,/ Because of her remarkable agility' (69). Lowell also focuses on female subjectivity in relation to female experiences and memory, insinuating that, in approaching poetry by female writers (including herself), one has to 'have courage enough not to fear her' (70). Throughout *A Critical Fable*, Lowell disseminates this statement so that it appears suddenly but logically from the younger gentleman's perspective. This cautious approach helps Lowell to continue her statements without raising alarm and yet at the same time to subtly and gradually denounce the prejudices against poetry by female writers. Discussing the experience of writing poetry, for example, she ridicules the romantic conception of art as synonymous with 'genius' that comes directly from the 'gods' (33-35). She is aware that this conception is dangerous for women because it excludes them from the artistic world. Critics, she argues, are more concerned with the established, divinely constituted canon, and as such fail to analyse the quality of the 'new' poetry. In order to keep the reader's attention, she makes the older Lowell summarise the poets named until this point in the pamphlet, granting satisfaction to those who might have shared the older gentleman's opinion that these poets were 'A junkshop indeed!' (82). After the disappointment demonstrated by the older Lowell, she introduces 'the expatriates' (89-96) Ezra Pound and T. S. Eliot. The

⁴⁷ Hilda Conkling (1910-1986) was the daughter of the poet and musician Graze Hazard Conkling who, in 1920, transcribed and published her daughter Hilda's childhood poems. Her book, *Poems by a Little Girl*, is prefaced by Lowell.

⁴⁸ In the first issue of *Poetry*, (October 1912,) Grace Hazard Conkling (1878-1958) was among the poets introduced by Harriet Monroe. In 1923, Amy Lowell was criticised by Berenick K. Van Slyke for having awarded the Blindman Prize of that year to Grace Hazard Conkling's *Variations on a Theme*. According to her, 'Mrs. Conkling has done what Edgar Lee Masters once accused most modern poetry of doing: of stating and repeating rather than developing.' *Poetry* 22.2 (May 1923): p. 94.

younger gentleman links them with this bond of being expatriated from the beginning and then continues listing both their similarities and their differences. Lowell uses assonance and chains rhymes freely, thus amplifying the effects of a monotonous refrain.

T.S. Eliot's a very unlike proposition,
He has simply won through process of attrition.
Where Pound played the fool, Eliot acted the wiseacre;
Eliot works in his garden, Pound stultifies his acre.
Eliot's always engaged digging fruit out of dust;
Pound was born in an orchard, but his trees have the rust (90).

Lowell does not spare her disapproval of their expatriation, and focuses on their view of literature, emphasising their distance from the common people to whom they offer cold and dry lines. She speaks of Eliot's poems as 'expert even up to a vice,/ But they're chilly and dead like corpses on ice' (91). Pound is spoken of differently, with a focus on his attitude to people and his own talent, which is 'dry rot' and ultimately destroys rather than creates.

Lowell places the two poets in juxtaposition and creates a refrain using an alternating line for each, further emphasising the considerable attention the two poets received from critics compared to that received by their female contemporaries. Lowell's criticism of the lack of consideration given to female poets is undoubtedly the subtext of this work, which she exposes in her mirthful yet serious way. She often plays with the multiplicity of language and employs equivocal vocabulary to great effect, subverting common truths. In the two gentlemen's opinions, for example, Lowell echoes general opinions about women's writings and highlights their efforts to be accepted as equals in art. The critical view highlighted in *A Critical Fable*—that culture is not an appropriate field for women—reveals how deeply this division was gendered in her time. The biting irony that pervades the work is striking, particularly given that Lowell sustains it over ninety-nine pages, masterfully avoiding dead-ends and holding her reader's attention without losing control of the scheme.

After the exposition of all the 'vices and virtues' of the poets, the younger gentleman finds himself alone along the river. This is a very delicate

moment because Lowell has to close it by delivering her message. She also employs a tactic used in 'The Sisters,' but differently; here, she does not hasten the three sisters departure, but plays on another level, maintaining doubt in the younger gentleman's mind: 'Did I dream him perhaps? Was he only a bluff' (99). This displacement of the perception of reality and magnification of the doubts in her work about the poets' value creates an expectation of their future fame and works: 'I, for one, am most eager to know what they'll do./ Aren't you?' (99).

Ultimately, in *A Critical Fable*, a more mature Lowell establishes her thoughts and intentions unequivocally. In all of her works, she pursues a path emphatically her own using a variety of techniques to achieve her goal. One of her aids, as touched upon above, was irony, a point often neglected by critics both of her own time and in later years. Even those critics who take care to 'read between the lines' of Lowell's works have failed to recognise the nuances of irony running through them, with which she exposed her inner world to a society still influenced by diffused Puritanical notions.

Chapter Five

Sisterhood: A Critical Re-Reading of ‘The Sisters’¹

Of Lowell’s poems, ‘The Sisters’ has perhaps drawn more attention than most among feminists who, since the 70s, have used it to highlight the absence of models for women artists in the early 1900s. Through a re-reading of the poem ‘The Sisters,’ this chapter will explore Lowell’s vision of sisterhood and her response to the lack of models for female artists at the turn of the twentieth century, and in particular the overlooked question regarding *choice* for a woman artist—whether she can choose writing as a ‘profession.’

The lack of a literary ‘matriarchy,’ a subject that Virginia Woolf addressed in *A Room of One’s Own*, was something women writers had long struggled with. Amy Lowell was no exception, but how she coped with the lack of female fore-figures singled her out from her peers, notably at the level of the poetic ‘muse,’ and it manifested itself unusually in her work.²

The first two sections of this chapter will explore ‘The Sisters’ in the context of the critical questions that were often used to interrogate Lowell’s affiliation with feminist literary history. The final section will consider the poem in terms of Lowell’s individual path and the degree to which she was conscious of the direction in which she headed. The theoretical framework will include Betsy Erkila’s *The Wicked Sisters*, Cheryl Walker’s *Masks Outrageous and Austere*, Mary E. Galvin’s *Queer Poetics. Five Modernist Women Writers*, and Gregory A. Staley’s, *American Women and Classical Myth*.

5.1. ‘The Sisters’: Critical Reception and Critical Questions

Although the title ‘The Sisters’ might suggest a familial theme, Lowell’s poem follows a different path altogether, made clear in the opening lines: ‘Taking us by and large, we’re a queer lot/ We women who write poetry.’ So the sisters

¹ Lowell, Amy. *What’s O’Clock*. Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1926. p. 127-137.

² See Chapters One and Two of this study.

here are precisely ‘women who write poetry.’ Lowell invites the listener-reader to bear witness to her three-hour conversation with the Greek woman poet Sappho, the English Elizabeth Barrett Browning and the American Emily Dickinson.³ This move is unorthodox for its genre, as critic Cheryl Walker points out; unlike female and male poets of the past, Lowell names not just one poetic forerunner, but three.⁴ Sappho, Browning, and Dickinson have become, among others, the objects of study for many feminist literary scholars who, in the 1970s and 1980s, engaged in an operation to rescue the female writers neglected in literary history. The attention received by Lowell’s ‘The Sisters’ parties largely down to her references to these three famous women poets.

The repetitive use of the first person plural ‘we,’ suggests Lowell identifies herself as being part of a ‘collective’ poetic female ‘we,’ positing a new poetic matriarchy spanning time and space, with herself inserted in the center. This overt move arguably inscribes ‘The Sisters’ within a primarily feminist debate, given its concern with the shift from an initial quest for foremothers, to the discovery of a sisterhood link. The poem has received a variety of scholarly readings and two crucial issues in particular remain unresolved. The first concerns the relationship between female literary productions of the twentieth century and the female struggle to fit herself and her text into a male-oriented artistic community, as illustrated by scholars Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, among others. The second point concerns Lowell’s attempt to canonise her work in a literary establishment conditioned by hetero-centric thought, as Mary E. Galvin emphasises in her study: *Queer Poetics: Five Modernist Women Writers*.⁵ According to Galvin, the ‘oppressive paradigm of dichotomizing oppositions’ (1) acted on canonisation of both male and female artists ‘as long as their sexuality was not readily evident in their work’ (1). Galvin’s insistence on this point continues where Judith Butler left off nearly ten years before. Butler

³ Most of Lowell’s earlier biographers, including S. Foster Damon (1935) and Horace Gregory (1958), suggested that her ability to read so well in public was most likely thanks to her life-companion, the actress Ada Russell, and her passion for theatre. The term listener-reader is used here to emphasise the oral aspect of her poetry.

⁴ Walker, Cheryl. *Masks Outrageous and Austere*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991. p. 20.

⁵ Galvin, Mary E. *Queer Poetics: Five Modernist Women Writers*. Westport: Praeger Publishers, 1999. In particular, Galvin pointed out how women’s search for foremothers was not simply a question of influences as read by Harold Bloom in *The Anxiety of Influence* (1973), as it was deep-rooted in an Oedipal complex based on heterosexist patriarchy. Galvin’s assumption, based on feminist critics from Virginia Woolf to Gilbert and Gubar, underlined that, on the contrary, it had to be considered as a struggle to resist ‘the confines of patriarchal gender identity’ (pp. 23-24). See also Gilbert, Sandra and Gubar, Susan. *Shakespeare’s Sisters: Feminist Essays on Women Poets*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1979.

identifies the risks of any feminist theory that tends ‘to idealize certain expressions of gender that in turn, produce new forms of hierarchy and exclusion.’⁶ The few studies on Lowell’s critical and aesthetic works during the 80s and 90s continue to highlight Lowell’s figure rather than to her poetic expression, keeping H.D. Roberts’ advice alive when, in order to sustain the increasing relevance of biography in literature courses, he affirmed that: ‘often in the simplest anecdote there are the keys to the character of the man that unlock his writing.’⁷

Every ‘narration’ of Lowell—whether memoirs, introductions to her poems, or critical works—is prefaced with these anecdotes about her ‘immense physique,’ her commanding attitude, her use of pince-nez spectacles like Theodore Roosevelt, or her relationship with her companion, the actress Ada Russell. As Galvin rightly emphasised, these recollections are rooted in precisely the kind of hetero-sexism that was at the core of perceived sexual differences during Lowell’s time, and persisted long after her death. In *A Jury of Her Peers*, Elaine Showalter affirms that Lowell’s rediscovery as a poet is due to her lesbianism. But this categorisation is insufficient to support Lowell’s stature of poet *tout court*, and she adds by way of a curious caveat: ‘but she was also an antiwar poet of some distinction.’ The use of the conjunction ‘but’ gives to this sentence a ‘queer’ sense of distinction.

While Lowell is lumped into a poetic category based on her sexual preferences, which somehow diminishes her artistic prowess, her distinction in ‘antiwar’ expression somehow lends more prestige and relevance to her poetic corpus in general, as if a lesbian poet could not write a decent war poem. Whether or not Showalter intended to imply this, her train of thought is an example of feminist critics’ failure to assess Amy Lowell’s poetry outside the categories offered by either a lesbian or feminist approach, and to provide their own assessment without ambiguity. In a literary text, ambiguity often represents a narrative strategy on the writer’s part, but it can also result from an interpretation of single words using our present knowledge. For instance, the word ‘queer,’ applied twice in ‘The Sisters,’ cannot be read in terms of its

⁶ Butler, Judith. *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. New York: Routledge, 2007 (1990). p. viii.

⁷ Roberts, D. H. ‘A Brochure Approach to Modern Biography: A List of Intimate Sketches.’ *The English Journal* 17.4 (1928): p. 332.

meaning today. Betsy Erkkila, on referring to ‘the family’ of poets Lowell discussed in her poem, places the term ‘queer’ in brackets, highlighting an allusion to its present meaning, which denotes homosexual orientation.⁸ This retrospective imposition of today’s meaning of the word coupled with Amy’s openly lesbian lifestyle has recently led her to be claimed as a poet of queer studies, rather than as a feminist. It is clear, then, that ‘The Sisters’ is a complex poem to assess, despite its apparent simplicity in terms of language and narrative, and it is subject to numerous interpretations. It seems Lowell cannot simply be a poet in literary history; she cannot escape categorisation or epithet.

A number of critics argue that the ambitious scope of ‘The Sisters’ was purely an attempt to access the literary realm and that Lowell used the names of three great women poets to give herself credit. Cheryl Walker, on the contrary, considers it ‘the first grand attempt by a woman poet in America to situate herself within a feminine literary tradition.’⁹ The poem however challenges both theses when at the end the ‘I’ dismisses those three women who are supposed to represent her legacy within the female tradition. Why did Lowell do this? Did the three female poets simply function in the body of the text to support Lowell’s speculating, just as Mrs. Browning does in the poem itself? Or did they rather provide a mirror in which Lowell recognised herself as ‘sister’ to them? Are Sappho, Dickinson and Browning metaphors for the collective destiny of women artists who have for so long struggled for a place in the literary world? If the latter is the case, other questions arise, linked both to the meaning of the word ‘Sister’ in the title and the constraints and boundaries suffered by women poets in general. Were these the same as those suffered by Lowell, who came from a prominent Bostonian family, and, residing in the grand ‘Sevenells’ residence, was not suffering from the lack of ‘a room of one’s own’? How does the dismissing of the ‘Sisters’ provide for Lowell’s narration of ‘construction’ or ‘reconstruction’ of identity—literary and non-literary? Ultimately, what did the poet and the woman Lowell want to communicate to her ‘future’ listener-readers and to her contemporaries through her fictional conversation with the three ‘Sisters’?

⁸ Erkkila, Betsy. *The Wicked Sisters*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1992. p. 8.

⁹ Walker, Cheryl. *Masks Outrageous and Austere*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991. p. 20.

5.2. 'The Sisters': Identity and Acknowledgement

The opening lines of 'The Sisters' clarify Lowell's intentions regarding the theme and the style of her poem, as noted in the first section of this chapter. The reader is drawn into a monologue of sorts, concerning (at first glance) the strange position of being a woman who writes poetry (1-2). Lowell opens her poem *in medias res* and gets straight to the point she wants to discuss with her 'invisible guests': She starts to 'name' the problems that worry her, specifically the scant presence of women who write poetry. The themes of 'recognition' and identity are introduced and linked.¹⁰ The question: 'who am I?' (to which Dickinson ironically answered, calling for anonymity in her poem: 'I am nobody, who are you?,' thus expressing her anxiety concerning the lack of models) enters into a sphere of sharing, emphasised by the compliment: 'How few of us there've been, it's queerer still' (3). Lowell wonders why women, who are 'Already mother-creatures, double-bearing,/ With matrices in body and in brain' (7-8), want to write in the first place, or 'to scribble down, man-wise?' (5).

This question does not appear to be rhetorical; Lowell immediately gives her own answer: 'I rather think that there is just the reason/ We are so sparse a kind of human being' (9-10). This answer allows her to acknowledge her relationship with the 'other' women poets and, consequently, to talk about the cause of that 'official shortage' which makes conversation among women poets difficult, leaving them to bear alone the heavy burden of writing, and to feel guilty when they work in isolation. The inclusive pronoun 'we' reinforces her awareness of sharing the same role and destiny.

In her essay, 'The Other Voice: Autobiographies of Women Writers,' Mary G. Mason picks out a set of paradigms for females writing about their lives, and provides a model to which this chapter adheres.¹¹ According to her,

¹⁰ According to psychoanalytical theory, in particular Jacques Lacan and his followers, the first step to becoming aware of one's problems is being able to give them a name. This 'naming' is a sort of prelude to the action of recognition which gives 'corpus' and substance to the question and leads to potential actions.

¹¹ Mason, Mary G. 'The Other Voice: Autobiographies of Women Writers.' *Life/Lines: Theorizing Women's Autobiography*. Eds. Bella Brodzki and Celeste Schenck. New York: Cornell University Press, 1988. p. 22.

'self-discovery of female identity seems to acknowledge the real presence and recognition of another consciousness, and the disclosure of female self is linked to the identification of some 'other' (22). In analysing the works of Dame Julian, Margery Kempe, Margaret Cavendish and Anne Bradstreet, whom Mason labels as precursors to biographical writing, she highlights the strategies they use, pointing out how the delineation of identity 'evolves' through a relationship with the 'other.' According to Mason, the 'other' in women's autobiography might work as an *alter ego* with whom the author starts a dialogue, or within a plot itself, where the figures of the 'other' are distant or different from the author, and the author may shape herself to identify with or differentiate herself from one or all of the figures introduced in a plot. How do the 'others'—represented in 'The Sisters' by the three female poets—function for Lowell? Lowell names them one-by-one in her poem and her naming opens up some logical deductions which might lead to simple equations: 1). These women are poets and I am a woman and a poet; 2). These poets are not good poets but I am a different one; and 3). These are great female poets and so am I, but we write differently. Does Lowell identify with them in part or in entirety? What is this assumed identification for?

5.3. *Fragmentation, Unity and Incorporation*

In the poem's opening lines, Lowell first identifies both the 'others' and then the 'self':

Taking us by and large, we're a queer lot
We women who write poetry. And when you think
How few of us there've been, it's queerer still.
I wonder what is this that makes us do it (1-4).

This 'queer/strange family' appears as a group, reinforced by the use of the pronoun 'we.' The difficult path leading to 'identity' is metaphorically represented through a game of mirrors, which the woman poet, the narrative 'I' and the reader, have to confront. Before a mirror, the woman poet begins to study

the image, picking out similarities and differences. Each woman poet is introduced through one or a multiplicity of recognisable characteristics: Sappho through the word ‘fragments,’ as her ancient works survive only as such, E. B. Browning by her marital status, later contrasted with the ‘spinster’ status of Emily Dickinson. Lowell links these three archetypal ‘others’ together using a series of reflections connected to their biographical notes and poetic characteristics, viewing her predecessors in the same way as she herself would come to be viewed in posterity. The continuous leap from one female poet to another provides the text with movement (near and far, present and past). The word ‘fragment’ with which Sappho is announced highlights the first problematic point for Lowell, both as a woman and as a woman poet. The idea of ‘unity,’ which is first reinforced in the poem by the repetition of the plural pronoun ‘we’ and by the nouns ‘group’ and ‘family,’ then changes with ‘the fragments of ourselves’ (6)—which conveys a lack of unity. Lowell and her poetic ‘I’ show that the *corpus* of poetry is constituted by these ‘fragments’; pieces to put together, perhaps, but pieces that are also kept separate. They also emphasise the difficulty, for a woman, to sustain attention on writing her works, as her social role obliges her to fulfil many other duties, prescribed to by her domestic role. Thus, a woman can write only in fragments, which become a reflection of her life, a metaphor for the various ‘fragmentary moments’ in her daily life.

The appearance of Sappho is accompanied by a strong classical aura (‘Atlases’) that immediately fills the surroundings with sensuality, according to the amorous Greek poetic tradition. This point is relevant as Lowell rarely refers in her poems to ancient mythic figures as many of her contemporaries did, like Edna Vincent Millay or Hilda Doolittle (H.D.), both close friends whose works she praised and, in particular in the case of H.D., whose works she edited in her three anthologies of Imagist poets.¹² Among many classical mythical figures, such as Dido, Penelope, or Medea—women who privileged heterosexual love, according to their authors—Lowell devotes her attention to the poet Sappho, who legend describes as embodying both heterosexual and lesbian love. During the nineteenth century, the story of Sappho, who committed sui-

¹² According to Sarah Graham, H.D.’s poems ‘Trilogy’ and ‘Hymen’ show her knowledge and interest in Greek classicism. Graham, Sarah. ‘Hymen and Trilogy.’ *The Cambridge Companion to H.D.* Cambridge (MA): Cambridge University Press, 2012. pp. 113-126.

cide for love, was very popular in Europe among poets, and passionate love became a metaphor for lesbian love in particular. According to Adrienne Munich, Lowell deliberately chose to misspell the name of the Greek poet; she uses the French spelling which arguably links up with the prominence of Sappho and her lesbianism in the collective imagination of French poets.¹³ Whether it is a conscious misspelling or just a misprint, Lowell's Sappho is stigmatised, and for this reason in some way entrapped, in a vision of fire.

Lowell introduces the Greek lyricist with a series of adjectives and verbs connected with the imagery of fire and colours:

There's Sapho, now I wonder what was Sapho,
I know a single slender thing about her:
That, loving, she was like a burning birch-tree
All tall and glittering fire, and that she wrote
Like the same fire caught up to Heaven and held there,
A frozen blaze before it broke and fell (10-18).¹⁴

The colours serve to reinforce the vision and the reception of fire, which is the metaphor for 'burning' love, and ice, a metaphor for unreturned love. Fire and ice result in burning or freezing: the two extremes of passion. This dichotomy is reinforced by the theme of fragmentation that makes the poem's narration progress in a puzzling way and giving the sense that each disparate piece has to have at least one element in common. Lowell twists things—people, expressions—and creates a sort of web that connects words, adjectives or verbs in such a way that she can easily move from one 'scene' to another, taking her listener-reader by the hand.

If Sappho is introduced by the imagery of 'fragments' and by her name, 'And she is Sapho-Sapho—not Miss or Mrs.' (32), the English poet Elizabeth

¹³ Munich, Adrienne. 'Family Matters.' *Amy Lowell, American Modern*. Eds. Adrienne Munich and Melissa Bradshaw. New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 2004. pp. 12-16.

¹⁴ The name of the Greek poet appeared with two 'p's (Sappho) in the version published in *North American Review* in June 1922, while it has one 'p' in *What's O'Clock*, published posthumously in 1925. Adrienne Munich offered an interesting explanation for that alteration in her essay 'Family Matters' in *Amy Lowell, American Modern*. Eds. Adrienne Munich and Melissa Bradshaw. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2004. pp. 9-26. According to her, Lowell chose to 'exhibit a French Sapho,' referring to Alphonse Daudet's novel *Sappho*. It was published in France in 1888 and offered the basis for the construction of a lesbian Sappho.

Browning is announced and constantly referred to as ‘Mrs. Browning.’ Her marital status attributes to her the appearance of ‘unity,’ a quality rooted in the Victorian ideal of womanhood. Soon Lowell points out, however, the division between body and mind in Mrs. Browning:

... Mrs. Browning’s heart
Was squeezed in stiff conventions. So she lay
Stretched out upon a sofa, reading Greek
And speculating, as I suppose,
In just this way on Sapho; all the need,
The huge, imperious need of loving, crushed
Within the body she believed so sick (41-47).

This division can also be detected in Browning’s writings, before her marriage to Robert Browning, and after her marriage and her experience of motherhood. Lowell quotes Browning’s *Sonnets from the Portuguese*, and this is the only work that is openly presented with its title. It acts as a watershed between the English pre-marital Browning and the later Browning who moved to Italy and was ‘fertilized’ by Robert, her husband. Lowell feels the power of the division, the power of her writing, and the power of her love because, ‘A poet is flesh and blood as well as brain’ (91). The risk for the poet is revealed in the following lines:

Suppose there hadn’t been a Robert Browning,
No ‘Sonnets from the Portuguese’ would have been written.
They are the first of all her poems to be,
One might say, fertilized ... (87-90).

Lowell insists on positioning Browning in a suffocating Victorian set, in ‘need of sofas,’ with her body suffering and sick, in ‘pieces’ and, above all, in contrast with the free space in which Sappho was presented. She is trying to engage in conversation with her when suddenly she realises that ‘speaking souls must always want to speak’ (99) and then that ‘Sappho was dead’ (103).

At this point, the poem has a short suspension, which is noticeable in the text, as line 109 starts further from the edge of the page. Lowell uses this suspension to prepare her listener-reader to the change in scenario, and to share also the new intention to visit another female poet.

But I go dreaming on,
In love with these my spiritual relations.
I rather think I see myself walk up
A flight of wooden steps and ring a bell (109-110).

The setting is at once an open space and an enclosed one: a garden, which is often the privileged setting of Lowell's love lyrics. The entrance of Dickinson has been prepared for by Sappho and Browning and, in particular, by their contrasting physical exuberance; Sappho full of 'burning' passion while Browning lays 'on a sofa talking of Sappho.' On the contrary, Elizabeth Browning is first introduced through her marital status and then forced into 'a close-shuttered room in Wimpole Street' (38). The unbroken reference to Browning as 'Mrs' and not with the more confidential 'Ba,' is disparaging.

And she is Sappho—Sappho—not Miss or Mrs.,
A leaping fire we call so for convenience;
But Mrs. Browning—who would ever think
Of such presumptions as to call her 'Ba' (32-36).

Regarding the use of nomenclature, Lowell is insisting on Browning's traditional manifestation of womanhood: 'And Mrs. Browning, as I said before,/ Was very, very woman. Well, there are two/ Of us, and vastly unlike that's for certain' (92-94). When the uneasiness reaches a certain point, Lowell herself expresses her impatience:

Convention again, and how it chafes my nerves,
For we are such a little family
Of singing sisters, and as if I didn't know
What those years felt like tied down to the sofa (81-84).

The listener-reader finds out together with Lowell that the heavy burdens women poets have to carry—both in terms of their creative expressions and their social expectations—have a name: ‘convention.’ In the following lines, Lowell lists and then denounces all these ‘conventions’ in the form of social rules as well as the political, religious and sexual obsessions that entrapped women at that time. Three months later, in her pamphlet *A Critical Fable*, she will denounce them again using her ironic predisposition.¹⁵

Before turning her attention to Browning, Lowell manifests her first act of recognition, identifying the Greek poet as her sister, even though her attempt at identification is fashioned as a strong desire, a longing: ‘And listen, thinking all the while ‘twas she/ Who spoke and that we two were sisters/ Of a strange, isolated little family’ (30-32). The catchphrase and poem’s title ‘Sisters’ comes back again, but at this point, the word clarifies the true ‘substance’ of these sisterly relationships that exist outside the family sphere; thus, it is neither under the family hierarchy nor the law of the patriarchy. Convention introduces a conflict or a split between mind and body, and this conflict is shaped in the figure of Mrs. Browning, who appears to be a patient of psychology, Freudian in nature: ‘Mrs. Browning’s heart/ Was squeezed in stiff conventions. So she lay/ Stretched out upon a sofa, reading Greek’ (41-43). According to theories of the time, most female problems (such as neurosis, hysteria, and so on) were provoked by an excessive use of imagination that conveys all the energetic flux of blood from uterus to mind. Physicians advised women to take total rest and leave aside the ‘imagination,’ including writing.¹⁶ Lowell is using here the effects of the thermostatic theories of her time—hence, Browning’s weak health is caused by her tendency to privilege her literary works. But her maternal experience has undermined her body, as well. Browning has to face an old conflict: to divide her efforts between her biological powers of creation, and the power of her writing creativity. Lowell writes:

¹⁵ Lowell’s use of irony and her pamphlet *A Critical Fable* are discussed in Chapter Four.

¹⁶ In her short story ‘The Yellow Wallpaper,’ Charlotte Perkins Gilman described the effects of this pre-emption based on her own experience. The story has become a cult book for many feminists and scholars since the 1970s. Gilman, Charlotte Perkins. *The Yellow Wall-Paper, Herland, and Selected Writings*. London: Penguin Books, 2009.

... because words
Are merely simulacra after deeds
Have wrought a pattern; when they take the place
Of actions they breed a poisonous miasma
Which, though it leave the brain, eats up the body (48-52).

The empowering of one part seems to create weakness in the other, as they are ruled by different forces. When passionate love or Sapphic love are not kept under control, then all primitive, uneducated and instinctive feelings take over the subject. Victorian society's conception of womanhood offered women only the power of biological creativity, while it gave to men the power of artistic creativity. As Virginia Woolf pointed out women who had 'an itch for scribble' risked madness or isolation. The destructive power of creativity can consume, just like love 'burns' Sappho, more than her love poems, and love for writing consumes Browning's weak body. Isolation, however, surrounds the two women poets as well, as Lowell cannot succeed in talking to them because Sappho is dead while Browning is lost 'Beyond the movement of pentameters' (107).

After an intentionally brief pause, Lowell introduces the last woman poet, Emily Dickinson. In her contribution towards affirming an autonomous American poetic tradition, Lowell praises her as a precursor of the new poetic movement dubbed Imagism.¹⁷ Emily Dickinson was born in Amherst, Massachusetts and she was 'one of her kind' in geographical terms. In 'The Sisters' Lowell treats her with great enthusiasm and claims she is ready to do everything for her if only she could talk to her. However, the reader discovers with the poetic 'I' that, if Browning suffered the heavy burden of being split in two halves (mind/body, wife/husband), Dickinson is completely absorbed and isolated in her writings. She is totally enclosed in her world of nature and hardly even enjoys the company of other human beings.

Once all three poetic predecessors have been introduced, the poem gradually moves onto another topic. Lowell begins to catalogue details of pros and cons about the three women poets who incarnate three types of women's

¹⁷ Amy Lowell. 'Emily Dickinson.' *Poetry and Poets: Essays*. New York: Biblio and Tannen, 1971. pp. 87-108.

writing. 'Sappho' embodies the poetry of love but also that of the fragmented nature of the literary patriarchy over the millennia. Browning stands for domestic poetry and also for the domesticated woman, 'fertilized' by her husband physically and creatively. Dickinson represents the poetry of 'thinking' of nature, of dialogue between herself and the world, but as viewed from inside the security of the woman's traditional prerogative, the home. Three ways to write and consider poetry, three ways that Lowell feels close to her own, in a bond of continuity and affiliation, yet none is quite right: 'Strange trio of my sisters, most diverse,/ And how extraordinary unlike/ Each is to me, and which way shall I go?' (143-145).

The question raised here is not a rhetorical one. This is a difficult moment for the poetic 'I' in search of its own voice: 'But Sappho was dead/ And I, and others, not yet peeped above/ The edge of possibility. So that's an end' (103-105). The displacement is clear and prepares the ground for the final cut. After denouncing the people responsible for creating all these restrictive conventions, there comes a *coup de theatre*:

Good-bye, my sisters, all of you are great,
And all of you are marvelously strange,
And none of you has any words for me.
I cannot write like you, I cannot think
In terms of Pagan or Christian now (165-169).

Feminist critics, who have read the poem in search of a manifest act of affiliation, do not approve of this final twist. How is it possible to 'dismiss' Sappho, Browning and in particular Dickinson? They react with the same words used by Lowell herself when Robert Browning suddenly entered into her private 'conversation' with Elizabeth: 'I do not like the turn this dream is taking' (75). To the contrary, arguably the 'twist' is precisely what makes the dream worth dreaming, or the poem worth studying.

The many levels on which this poem can be read indicate the maturity reached by Lowell at this point in her poetic career, which started only ten years before the poem's publication. The world in which she was writing, at the turn of twentieth-century America and at the start of the women's rights

movement, differed greatly from any society inhabited by her aforementioned ‘Sisters,’ hence they can no longer serve as models for her in terms of how to negotiate the world as a woman or her work as a poet. Lowell’s country, in particular, was beginning to have an important role in the world, which was reinforced after World War I. She was involved emotionally and intellectually in the construction of the new nation, which emerges in particular in her critical work *Tendencies of Modern American Poetry*, which was itself the result of a course of lectures she delivered at the Brooklyn Institute of Arts and Science in early 1917. In her preface to the book, Lowell acknowledges that the war ‘has produced a more poignant sense of nationality.’¹⁸ She confirms a general opinion in her time among many artists as well as politicians, that ‘We are no more colonies of this or that other land, but ourselves different from all other peoples whatsoever’ (VII).

Lowell lived in the midst of profound social and artistic changes. It was a time of difficult transition between two ways of living, between past and future. The twentieth century introduced a new dimension to the lives of women—that of *choice*.

5.4 ‘The Sisters’: A Poem about Choice

Re-reading the poem through this fresh lens, ‘The Sisters’ represents Lowell’s conscious acknowledgment of this new era of choice. But which direction has this choice taken in her poetics? Has it something to do with her desire to express her poetic vision of the world as well as her desire to have an active role in society? A role that might also imply her vision of a woman nearer to a citizen with equal rights to men? Was her demand then, a demand for full citizenship in the artistic field?¹⁹

The number of women with an ‘itch’ for scribbling was surely growing, but the Bostonian woman poet signals that ‘Sapho’ is long dead and for the other female poets and for herself the path is not clear. Here Lowell finds herself with two options: to follow the current of the past or to find her own way

¹⁸ Lowell, Amy. *Tendencies in Modern American Poetry*. New York: Macmillan, 1917. p. VI.

¹⁹ Some of these questions will be explored further in Chapter Seven.

into the future. It seems that, personally and poetically, she chooses to find her own way although this requires the cutting of the proverbial umbilical cord. From the beginning, from the very title, she talks about 'Sisters' and feels a strong sense of affiliation, a sense of family and lineage. Lowell's chosen path offered less security than the 'conventional' one that society had already envisaged for her as wife and mother. She had to learn the hard way that 'the strength of forty thousand Atlases/ is needed for our every-day concerns' (11-12). Nevertheless, she keenly felt the appeal to build a new literary history for her country, as is clearly denoted in her critical work *Tendencies*,²⁰ in which she also manifests her aesthetic ideas.

She declares that the modern poets 'are less concerned with dogma and more with truth' (v) and that the symbol 'has taken a new intensity' (vi). According to her, both man and nature are placed into a common part of a whole and 'vast plane' (vi). This aspiration towards a unified world emerges in 'The Sisters,' in which she strives to construct a female literary history into which she could first insert herself and then position herself within. Should Lowell accept her 'Sisters' passively and follow in their footsteps only? But Lowell was not merely asking for affiliation, because proximity to the literary matriarchy would not have altered her standing in the greater male-dominated society at large. Instead, she is looking for another 'reality,' but in that 'reality' she realises she cannot write like them. This is a moving moment in 'The Sisters,' the point at which the poetic 'I' makes her choice and decides that, however 'great' those sisters may have been, it is not possible for her to follow them. In other words, Lowell cannot imitate them, she cannot align with them simply because she is a woman who wants to write and those are the models available to her. Poetry, as she declared in her *Tendencies*, 'reveals the soul of humanity' and American poetry needed new nourishment, new strength. Thus a new notion of sisterhood emerges; it represents the concrete legacy on which a female genealogy can be built, according to her vision, but not in terms of 'religion.'

It is precisely in this first act of acknowledgement that Lowell consciously plays out her female and individual choice. In recognising a common identity with her sisters and giving them credit, she undoubtedly reinforces

²⁰ Lowell, Amy. *Tendencies in Modern American Poetry*. New York: Macmillan, 1917.

their power as well as her own. But Lowell does something more: in refusing their models, she authorises herself to speak about herself: her body, her love, and her sufferings. In most of her poems, Lowell used a ‘perennial theme of love’ but without entrapping herself as a victim of love; in one way, she refused to consider the source of female sufferings as a simple result of her sufferings for Love. She refused years before Adrienne Rich, in her essay ‘When We Dead Awaken,’ claimed that ‘the victimization by Love [is] an almost inevitable fate’ for a woman.²¹ Lowell tried to change this position; she tried to make a woman a subject and not an object in her poems, singing her love for another woman. Does Lowell just substitute herself with a poet who traditionally used to sing his unrequited longing for a woman or the female sufferings for love, (heterosexual love, of course) in order to be accepted into the artistic world? Jaime Hovey points out, in particular in the poems of Lowell’s second book, *Sword Blades and Poppy Seed* (1914), how often the Bostonian poet is addressing ‘the question of whether art, desire, and the idealized female can be valued in a world where men seek to subdue and possess women.’²² In ‘The Sisters’ this question is a starting point, remains unanswered throughout the poem, and longs for a solution; the longing cannot be accepted as a sublimation of an ‘unrequited desire.’²³

The sisters of her poem are ‘great,’ but Lowell feels the distance between them and herself and she keenly feels the pain of letting them fade away so she can strike out on her own. Lowell expresses her longing that ‘Some other woman with an itch for writing/ May turn to me as I have turned to you/ And chat with me a brief few minutes’ (171-173). Through these lines, Lowell again links her poetic voice with Sappho’s as she echoes one of the Greek poet’s fragments: ‘Someone, I say, will remember us in the future.’²⁴ It is this line, highly evocative yet unnoticed by critics, that allows Lowell to build a bridge between past and future, to disclose the individual nature of the poetic community and its desire for continuity over the ages.

²¹ Rich, Adrienne. ‘When We Dead Awaken: Writing as a Re-Vision.’ *Adrienne Rich’s Poetry and Prose*. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1993. p. 168.

²² Hovey, Jaime. ‘Lesbian Chivalry in Amy Lowell’s *Sword Blades and Poppy Seed*.’ *Amy Lowell, American Modern*. Eds. Adrienne Munich and Melissa Bradshaw. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2004. p. 79.

²³ This aspect will be discussed fully in Chapter Six.

²⁴ Voigt, Eva M. *Sappho et Alcaeus, Fragmenta*. Amsterdam: Athenaeum, Polak & Van Gennep, 1971, 174.

In the lyric, the theme of sisterhood is clear, but only in the sense of a necessary starting point and its necessary and ‘painful’ acknowledgement. To become independent, an adult in one’s own right, the umbilical cord has to be cut. In *Masks Outrageous and Austere*, Cheryl Walker saw in Lowell’s claim of independence, of separation from those ‘sisters,’ a form of extreme competition: according to her, Lowell’s work ‘urges to compete both with men and women.’²⁵ In spite of her appreciation of Lowell, it seems Walker views her through the same lens as her previous detractors, focusing on her legendary strong will. But in this poem, the presence of the three female poets does not indicate an attempt to compete; instead, it serves to emphasise the important and conscious moment of adulthood.

Lowell’s choice of the three female poets in ‘The Sisters’ offers the key to a more complex reading of the poetics that Lowell endeavoured to sketch throughout her lifetime. The distance from the literature, expressed by the motherland (England), and its reunion with the Classical (Greek and Latin) tradition indicate how undeniable the legacy is, but it also reveals the need for an independent path, as Lowell affirmed in her critical work *Tendencies*: ‘We are no more colonies of this or that other land, but ourselves different from all other peoples whatsoever’ (VII). The times were changing; the new world as well as the new poetry, could not wait. As Lowell informs us seven lines before the end of the poem, ‘Put on your cloaks, my dears, the motor’s waiting’ (179). Lowell’s task to give a distinctive American trait to the American literature and thus continue in the path opened up by other poets of the time (such as Walt Whitman, for instance, among many others) is here marked. The use of a technological word has two important functions: to focus the attention of the listener-reader on the time in which the poem is set—in North America the car industry was in particular expansion—and to prepare her final delivery.

Lowell emphasises therefore, that the new technology was changing the face of her own time, marking the dawn of an American age. The epoch of

²⁵ Walker, Cheryl. *Masks Outrageous and Austere*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991. p. 37. Walker observes that Lowell wore the mask of ‘virile poet, whose work need not to be judged according to the deficiencies of past female efforts’ (43). If in part I agree with this, given Lowell’s numerous critical interventions, and in particular her two volumes of Keats’ biography, I would argue that she was also in search of new critical instruments which could at last concentrate on the ‘flesh and the blood’ of the text without being pushed into the field of competition: ‘The first, the best,’ this field being more responsive to the desires of a male-oriented society than to an equal one.

‘Queen Victoria,’ the might of England, Europe and the age of the ‘Church Fathers,’ was coming to an end. Lowell assumes the responsibility of saying ‘good-bye’ to all that, even if ‘old sisters are sobering things’ (178). Nonetheless, Lowell does not abandon or push her sisters back into oblivion. Soon after urging them to go, she comforts them: ‘No, you have not seemed strange to me, but near/ Frightfully near, and rather terrifying./ I understand you all, for in myself’ (180-182).

In these two lines, Lowell entrusts her revolutionary choice, disclosing the significant path she has undertaken: she incorporates the women into herself, and with their three distinctive traits, both poetic and human, she puts into practice her negotiations with the past—a past she does not want to experience as a ‘burden’ that needs the ‘strength of forty thousand Atlases’ (11). Lowell is cutting the umbilical cord; she does not want a blood-bond or maternal associations. She needs to choose her sisters, to stay with her peers and face the differences. Lowell’s insistence on differences more than similarities between herself and her ‘sisters’ does not indicate a dismissive *tout court* of them, but a necessary acknowledgement of difference. Lowell’s space, into which she invites her reader, is a place of inclusion; a place where she incorporates her sisters, and where readers, present and future, are invited to follow their own path.

Despite admiring them all unconditionally, she can accept neither Sappho’s ‘burning’ and dying for love, nor Browning’s splitting into halves between Robert and her writing, nor even Dickinson’s affection for her isolated creation. They are all suffering for love, thus upholding the conception of women as victims of love. Lowell, of course, is not inclined to think of herself as a victim, nor to stigmatise love in its negative burning. She wants to profess her love from an active position. Lowell is a ‘new woman,’ well aware of the constraints and boundaries that patriarchal society is imposing on her and her sex. She is searching for a new space and in so doing, arguably creates a new archetype for the woman poet.

All these ‘fragments of ourselves,’ referred to in ‘The Sisters,’ need to be kept together, and Lowell does just this. To her invisible guests she declares: ‘all of you are in me.’ After this, when the ‘motor’ is waiting, Lowell feels the urge to express her wish, and echoing Sappho, leading them to the

door, she softly says: 'I only hope that possibly some day/ Some other woman with an itch for writing/ May turn to me as I have turned to you' (170-173).

Her longing functions on two planes: the one in which she is playing with the three sisters at the door, in the farewell moment; and the one that she has performed in front of her listener-reader, witness to her discourse with women poets past, present and future. In this moment, she is throwing a rope to her female listener-readers—and writers—of the future, and attempts to contain a spirit of compassion for human mortality, because the exit of the three beloved sisters signals that 'that's the end.' And at the same time, she is reaffirming the idea of longevity through art.

Lowell is a poet and she knows quite well 'the trick' of it, the power to create another world with words, a world in which it is possible to bring Sappho, Browning and Dickinson back from the past and talk with them about poetry and human destiny; to encounter the 'others,' to recognise them and through them recognise herself.²⁶ Lowell is both poet and woman precisely because other women poets and historical women have left traces of their existence. Her naming of them is a guarantee of the longevity of their life both in memory and in history—'The Sisters' is Lowell's humble homage to them. She is reverently mindful of the past, both in terms of gender and poetry, but she also looks to the future in revealing the new American philosophy to go and build.

Her devotion to poetry and writings, which can be compared to that of Dickinson, has a different trait; it stays in the world and tries to transform it. She defies the tradition and the culture of her time by becoming a new kind of woman poet, rewriting her own rules in both her lifestyle and her literature, setting down a new 'archetype' of female creativity. And she accomplishes it by choosing 'to write poems' although she 'was not in need' and in spite of her social class. And, above all, she attributes the source of this self-authorisation to one woman—Eleonora Duse—who becomes her Muse and her testimony. Her discovery of the beauty and the mystery of poetic language through a

²⁶ The reception of Lowell's sensual poem 'The Bath' in its first public reading shows her awareness of the 'power of words.' The scene of a woman taking a bath in a tub in the middle of her garden was followed by whistles and laughs. The audience reacted first to the unconventional subject and then to the obese lady reading the poem as they identified her with the 'other' in the poem. Carl Rollyson, among others, asserts that this must be considered a tribute to Lowell's ability to create powerful images. Rollyson, Carl. *Amy Lowell Among Her Contemporaries*. New York: ASJA Press. 2009. pp. 1-8.

woman's gaze has to be considered as a break with tradition. Eleonora Duse was a woman who, like Lowell, spoke in public using the power not only of words, but of gesture and body language, in such a way that altered the conventions of acting in the world of theatre. Through the medium of poetry, Lowell managed to express herself, to speak in public, to reveal the mystery and the beauty of poetic language. She did not feel the medium of poetry as dangerous, or destructive as, according to Adrienne Rich, Emily Dickinson and most of the female poets of her lifetime might have felt. This was not only on account of her solid social background; indeed, from the age of fifteen, she confessed in her diaries that she was in search of her path and she was in love with beauty and with art.

The question with which Lowell ends her poem 'Patterns,' published in 1917—'Christ! What are patterns for?'—finds, in one respect, its answer in 1922 'The Sisters.' The question in 'Patterns' reveals the frustrated impotence of the lady of the poem: 'the pattern of war,' which she doesn't understand, caused the death of her beloved, the man who was supposed to 'loose her.' But after his death, she is condemned to remain 'unloose,' as she is incapable of changing the path traced for her by the social codes of the time. In dismissing the three women poets, and having incorporated the best part of them—'I understand you all, for in myself' (182)—Lowell makes her choice, she chooses her path. Indeed, choices actively taken seem to be the only answer if progress is to be made, at least in the artistic world. Lowell chose her path, then, even if it was a difficult one to stick to, beset with obstacles. It took her to a place where she had no authoritative voice, few models to follow, and from which she was often shunned on account of being a woman.

What did Lowell choose, ultimately? She chose to sing love poems but not to remain entrapped and burn herself as Sappho did. She experimented with different artistic forms and themes. She chose to sing the beauty of nature but did not separate it from the world, as Dickinson did; through articles, poems, lectures and readings, she worked to bring the poetic word to everyone, everywhere. She chose to be 'in flesh and body' in her poems without being 'fertilized' by a man like Browning.

Considering all this, Lowell's dismissal of the three female poets has nothing to do with rivalry or contest, as many critics were inclined to think. It

certainly was not rooted in that dichotomised, male-oriented idea of winner versus loser or strong versus weak binaries used to assign roles to women and men in society, isolating them from one another. Instead, it was an attempt to reaffirm the individual's right to choose a role in society, regardless of gender, sexuality, and social status.

Through the medium of poetry, Lowell found a way to negotiate her right, as a human being, to choose her model of life: to speak in public, 'loosing' herself from that constraint and limitation, to sing her love for her companion Ada, as well as for nature and for her country. She struggles to unite her own contradictions—her notions of being a woman but with a 'man's brain'—through her art, in her poetry, and manages to build an inclusive place, and 'The Sisters' serves as the manifestation of this process. It is true that she hurries her guest to go at the end of the poem as if she feels that her own time is near to an end. Lowell, in fact, will die less than three years after the first publication of this poem. Talking about posterity, in her preface to *Tendencies*, she noted: 'Posterity cares nothing for the views which urged a man to write; to it, the poetry, its beauty as a work of art, is the only thing which matters. But that beauty could not exist without the soil from which it draws its sustenance' (VIII).

In 'The Sisters,' Lowell reveals that 'soil' from which *she* draws sustenance: a strong sense of sisterhood but a new kind that can offer space instead of constraints or rigid codes, which only serve to isolate and separate people from one another and from the rest of the world.

Chapter Six

Lowell's Love Discourse in *Sword Blades and Poppy Seed*

Through her construction of an erotic, emotional space and the omission of a gendered speaker in her love poems, Lowell challenges the objectified female position in traditional love lyrics, and creates her own characteristic love discourse. This is also reflected in her conscious attempt to reconstruct her own vision of womanhood and express her critical poetical beliefs. It is particularly illuminating to explore one aspect of this love discourse, the 'waiting' for the beloved and her/his absence in many of Lowell's poems, in light of Roland Barthes's *A Lover's Discourse: Fragments*¹ and Jaime Hovey's 'Lesbian Chivalry in Amy Lowell's *Sword Blades and Poppy Seed*.'² Such a juxtaposition of texts can provide insight into whether this 'waiting' serves simply as a dramatic monologue or a manifestation of Lowell's 'unrequited' passion as the ultimate goal of her love poems, or whether it is a conscious strategy to expose her female desires. Additionally, the position that her 'object of desire' maintains in her lyrics merits examination in order to determine whether it is simply one of 'object' or whether, through Lowell's erotic, almost Sapphic imagery, it assumes the same subjective position of her ungendered 'I.' It is crucial to question the tendency of many critics to consider that Lowell's poetical improvement following her second collection in 1914 was a direct result of her involvement with the Imagist movement. There is already an abundance of literature available on both the Imagist movement and Lowell's involvement with it, and there is therefore little need to investigate the subject further here.³ Instead, there is fresh insight to be gained by exploring Lowell's often over-

¹ Barthes, Roland. *A Lover's Discourse: Fragments*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 21st ed. 2001. Translated by Richard Howard. Original title: *Fragments d'un discours amoureux* (1977).

² Hovey, Jaime. 'Lesbian chivalry in Amy Lowell's *Sword Blades and Poppy Seed*.' *Amy Lowell, American Modern*. Eds. Adrienne Munich and Melissa Bradshaw. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2004. pp. 77-89.

³ For a detailed account of Lowell's relationship with the Imagist movement, see Damon's biography, *Amy Lowell: A Chronicle*. Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin and Company, 1935, particularly pp. 197-252. See also Gould, Jean. *Amy: The World of Amy Lowell and the Imagist Movement*. New York: Dodd, Mead & Company, 1975; Scott, Bonnie Kime. 'Amy Lowell's Letters in the Network of Modernism.' *Amy Lowell, American Modern*. Eds. Adrienne Munich and Melissa Bradshaw. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2004. pp. 141-143; and Rollyson, Carl. *A Biography: Amy Lowell Anew*. Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2013. pp. 31-63.

looked comments on the Imagist movement in her *Tendencies of American Modern Poetry*, and relevant criticism.⁴ The selected pieces are all chosen from her second collection, *Sword Blades and Poppy Seed* (1914), which can be considered the starting point of her consciously poetical and critical path.⁵ There are two reasons to restrict commentary to pieces selected from this collection: the short span of time between Lowell's active involvement with the Imagists and the publication of *Sword Blades*, and the specific relevance of these pieces to retracing and pinpointing critical points in Lowell's writing career and the factors affecting her exclusion from literary history. Of course, it must be acknowledged that the scope of this analysis is limited; it is not intended as an exhaustive critical survey of all of Lowell's poetic productions. In addition to Barthes and Hovey, a valuable theoretical framework is drawn from, among others, Audre Lorde's 'Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power'⁶ and Melissa Bradshaw's *Amy Lowell, Diva Poet*.⁷

In this chapter the intent is to address the reception of Lowell's second poetry collection and to examine Lowell's involvement with the Imagist movement in the light of her *Tendencies*. Through a close reading of 'In a Garden,' I will also analyse Lowell's love discourse, paying special attention to the poem's Sapphic allusions, the meaning of longing desire, and the 'object of desire' as compared with Ezra Pound's 'The Garden.' Moreover, I will explore the position of gender in 'Clear, with Light Variable Winds,' and briefly debate both the 'erotic as resource' in regard to knowledge and experience manifested in Lowell's poems, and the meaning and strategic significance of the 'absence' of the beloved in Lowell's poetry.

⁴ Lowell, Amy. *Tendencies in Modern American Poetry*. New York: Macmillan, 1917. pp. 235-343. Hereafter: *Tendencies*.

⁵ Lowell, Amy. *Swords Blades and Poppy Seed*. New York: Macmillan, 1914. Hereafter: *Sword Blades*.

⁶ Lorde, Audre. 'Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power.' *Writing on the Body: Female Embodiment and Feminist Theory*. Eds. Katie Conboy, Nadia Medina and Sarah Stanbury. New York: Columbia University Press, 1997. pp. 277-283. Hereafter: *The Erotic as Power*.

⁷ Bradshaw, Melissa. *Amy Lowell, Diva Poet*. New York: Ashgate, 2011.

6.1. *Sword Blades and Poppy Seed: Lowell's Preface and its Reception*

Sword Blades appeared in the autumn of 1914 and, unlike Lowell's first publication, immediately garnered the attention of critics and readers alike. In his short pamphlet, *Amy Lowell*, F. Cudworth Flint observes the steady improvement of her work after her first 1912 publication, *A Dome of Many-Colored Glass*.⁸ Flint expresses his surprise at the results she achieved in such a short time, declaring that 'in the two years just past Miss Lowell had learned more than she had in the previous ten,' and suggesting that her joining the Imagists was responsible for this 'improvement.'⁹ His claim reflects the opinions expressed by most of Lowell's critics who also failed to notice what Richard Hunt highlights in his 1917 essay, 'Amy Lowell: A Sketch of her Life and her Place in Contemporary American Literature.'¹⁰ Hunt offers another perspective on Lowell's progression, her involvement with the London group, and her commitment to contemporary literary innovations. According to Hunt, Lowell's subsequent enthusiasm and participation in the English Imagist group was a natural consequence of the poetic vision already exhibited in her first collection, *A Dome. Vers libre*, for example, had in fact been employed by Lowell before that form 'had broken into the magazines and 'Imagism' was a word not heard of' (6). Furthermore, Hunt acknowledges Lowell's previous achievements and points out, with an emphatic 'but,' that 'no one who is at all acquainted with Miss Lowell's poetry can think of her primarily as an Imagist. She is primarily herself' (6-7). Concerning *Sword Blades*, Hunt observes that the volume—besides '*vers libre* and Imagism fully conscious of itself as such'—manifests 'her respect for the classics'; however, Hunt primarily praises Lowell for 'the first examples of polyphonic prose which have ever appeared in this language' (7). Hunt does not support this claim with examples from *Sword Blades*, most likely to preserve the brevity of the essay.

⁸ Lowell, Amy. *A Dome Of Many-Colored Glass*. Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1912. Hereafter: *A Dome*.

⁹ Flint, F. Cudworth. *Amy Lowell*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1969. p. 18.

¹⁰ Hunt, Richard. 'Amy Lowell: A Sketch of her Life and her Place in Contemporary American Literature.' *Amy Lowell: Sketches Biographical and Critical*. Boston and New York: Mifflin and Company, 1922. According to its date, the essay was written in 1917. In the same book appears another essay written by Royall H. Snow, 'Amy Lowell: The Last Three Books,' dated 1921. Snow illustrated his appreciation for other three Lowell's collections: *Men, Women and Ghosts*, *Can Grande's Castle*, and *Legends*.

In her 1918 *A Critical Appreciation*, Winifred Bryher writes that in Lowell's first book, 'the fibres are visible from which Imagism is to blossom,' but 'definite touch of it is absent, or hovers a line or two, fearful of alighting,' while in *Sword Blades*, 'we are in the full maturity of Imagist expression' (13).¹¹ She praises the 'magic' in her poetry in which 'exists' 'the imperceptible breathing of the age itself' (17). What Bryher admires most is Lowell's distinctive gift of building 'a picture before the substance of her thought is reached' (30). She also values Lowell's attitude toward the problems of her country as 'vital with protest, so aware of injustice and repression,' whereas Robert Frost appears 'to be acquiescent' (31). In *The Thorn of a Rose* (1975), Glenn Richard Ruihley identifies more clearly than Hunt the Imagist mode in *Sword Blades*, specifically in 'The Matrix' or 'The Fruit-Garden Path.'¹² Ruihley finds an example of free verse also in 'Before the Altar' (from *A Dome*) which he considers her 'first venture into free verse' (62), predating her involvement with Imagism. Meanwhile, Jean Gould finds signs of Lowell's 'unconscious' imagism—'the art of description in a single precise word or phrase'—in 'New York at Night,' also from *A Dome*.¹³

These different critical views over the years notwithstanding, as Gould claims (115), it is likely that Lowell recognised in the Imagist creed (as expressed by Pound in 'A Few Don'ts by an Imagiste') a response to her search for that poetical community with which she could share her personal vision of the world, her tendency to experiment, and her search for her own poetic voice.¹⁴ In *Sword Blades*, Lowell demonstrates her uncommon ability to deal with many themes and different verse forms, and confirms the attention to detail already manifested in *A Dome*. In addition, her preface to *Sword Blades* manifests her tendency to use her own voice to convey her critical poetical opinions. Unlike *A Dome*, in *Sword Blades*, Lowell prefaces her poems with an explanation of her technique and her critical approach in order to explain the innovations and nuances in poetry. Although often underestimated by the ma-

¹¹ Bryher, Winifred. *A Critical Appreciation*. London: Eyre and Spottiswoode, 1918. p. 13. Bryher was the pen name of Annie Winifred Ellerman, who had a lesbian relationship with H.D.

¹² Ruihley, Glenn Richard. *The Thorn of a Rose: Amy Lowell Reconsidered*. Hamden (CT): Archon Books, 1975. Hereafter: *Amy Lowell Reconsidered*.

¹³ Gould, Jean. *The World of Amy Lowell and the Imagist Movement*. New York: Dodd, Mead & Company, 1975. p. 108. Hereafter: *Lowell and the Imagist Movement*.

¹⁴ Pound, Ezra. 'A Few Don'ts of an Imagiste.' *Poetry* 1.6 (March 1913): pp. 200-206.

majority of her critics, who hitherto undervalued her prefaces, Lowell's first introduction has been crucial in illuminating her chosen direction. In this preface, she explains the technique she employed in the book, for which she claims her debt to French symbolists and their *vers libre*.¹⁵

According to Lowell, her 'unrhymed cadence'—her favourite term for the French *vers libre*, 'as it conveys their exact meaning to the English ear' (IX)—is based upon 'organic rhythm,' or 'the rhythm of the speaking voice rather than upon a strict metrical system' (XI). This assumption clearly manifests Lowell's intent to pay particular attention to the sounds of the words, which must resonate 'emotionally' not only to the writer but also to the reader. Lowell's research regarding the kinds of words which 'sound' is not confined to those poems where she uses her 'unrhymed cadence' but is also present in those in which she employs a more classic English metre (XII). Lowell claimed her will to be free from any schools, because, as she declared, 'schools are for those who can confine themselves within them,' adding that '[p]erhaps it is a weakness in me that I cannot.'¹⁶ This admission of 'weakness' establishes a direct dialogue with her readers; addressing them directly, she places the readers in a privileged position while maintaining her own authorial one: she is the 'artisan' of her work and she can explain it.

Although the coincidence of Lowell's marked attention to rhythm with the poetics of the Imagist group, who sought to compose in the sequence of the musical phrase as Pound emphasises in 'A Few Don'ts,' is debatable, it nevertheless highlights her initial poetical interest and the direction she will take hereafter. Her concern about the relationship between the verse and its instrument, the voice—which will find full expression in Lowell's 1917 essay 'Poetry as a Spoken Art,' as discussed in Chapter Three—is latent here from the beginning. This concern also illuminates the manner in which Lowell is already projecting herself as the speaker of her own poems, emphasises her understanding of the novelties of poetry, and most importantly underscores how heavily

¹⁵ The poems are preceded by an homage to Henri de R gnier's poem 'Les M dailles d'Argile,' with which Lowell means to make clear her indebtedness to the metrical experiments of French Symbolism. At that time Lowell was preparing her critical study on the works of some exponents of that school, which was published in 1915 under the title *Six French Poets*. In her first poetry collection, Lowell's admiration of John Keats and the influence of his work on hers are evident as the title inspired by Shelley's poem 'Adonis,' dedicated to Keats, highlights.

¹⁶ *Sword Blades*. p. XII. Lowell wrote it before joining the Imagists in London in the early summer of 1913.

she relied on the oral rather than the written text. In the preface to *Sword Blades*, on the other hand, it is Lowell herself who states that ‘the poet must be constantly seeking new pictures’ in an attempt to renovate those worn-out words that are unable to produce a vital and living image for the reader.

In her 2011 ‘Amy Lowell and Japan: from her earlier production to *Pictures of the Floating World*’ Elisabetta Marino also emphasises Lowell’s attention to the image prior to her involvement with Imagism.¹⁷ Marino underlines the role of Lowell’s brother, Percival, who spent more than ten years in Japan and sent Lowell various art objects during her childhood. According to Marino, in Lowell’s the ‘link between ‘poetry’ and ‘image,’ the visual, almost pictorial quality displayed by poetry (205-206), was already acquired.¹⁸

As Marino points out, the varieties and accumulation of adjectives in Lowell’s lines, through which she constructs her images and depicts the ‘objects’ of her poems, must be reconsidered in light of her earlier fascination with the powerful visual impact of Japanese paintings—rather than the notion that she was merely following Imagist tenets. Nevertheless, given that soon after joining the Imagists Lowell became one of the more widely known American *vers libristes*, her first meeting with the Imagists in London during the summer of 1913 and her use of both images and *vers libre* are generally regarded as crucial aspects of Lowell’s career.

The account of her technique offered in the preface illuminates as well her aesthetic response to the world she depicted in the poems. Lowell claims that a ‘work of beauty’ in the context of poetry is instrumental for reaching the emotions and imagination of the reader (VII), emphasising her struggle to convey her feelings through a ‘perfect’ image. According to her, poetry ‘should exist simply because it is a created beauty’ (VII). Lowell also claims that ‘Art is as much a function of the Universe as an Equinoctial gale, or the law of Gravitation’ (VIII) and that the study of poetry, full of ‘beauty and feeling,’ is both an inspiration and ‘a despair for the artist’ (IX). Her concern with the role

¹⁷ Marino, Elisabetta. ‘Amy Lowell and Japan: From her Earlier Production to *Pictures of the Floating World*.’ *‘E Pluribus Unum’ Or ‘E Pluribus Plura’? Unity And Diversity In American Culture*. Ed. Hans-Jürgen Grabbe. Heidelberg: Universitätsverlag, 2011. pp. 205-219.

¹⁸ Ernest Francisco Fenollosa (1853-1902) was a well-known Japanese art historian. After his death, his widow entrusted Ezra Pound with her husband’s unpublished notes and translations of Chinese poetry and Japanese Noh drama. Pound’s interest in and knowledge of Chinese and Japanese art started then, while Lowell’s knowledge and interest dated from her childhood and were already manifest in some poems appeared in her first collection, *A Dome*, published in 1912.

of the poet is also latent in this statement. Lowell's preface appears to be in tune with Harriet Monroe's principles in terms of her vision of the poet as leader rather than follower. As Monroe expresses in one of her *Poetry* editorials in 1913, a poet 'is not a follower, but a leader.'¹⁹

Lowell's decision to preface her books is a clear indication of the active role she had in mind for herself, her struggle to have her 'own voice,' and how deeply involved she was in her research. Although Flint links Lowell's improvement in *Sword Blades* with the Imagist movement, he declares that Lowell was never an Imagist when compared to Hilda Doolittle (H.D.), for example, who was considered the best woman poet among the Imagists. Flint compares 'Oread,' one of H.D.'s well-known Imagist poems, with 'July Midnight' from Lowell's 1919 *Pictures of the Floating World*, declaring that unlike Lowell, H.D. starts from 'the thing seen' and finds for it a significance (25). Flint claims that Lowell uses too many details in depicting the 'thing.' Indeed, while Imagism was 'congenial to her penchant for noticing her surroundings [...] the Imagist stress on conciseness was quite antipathetic to her temperament' (25). He affirms that Lowell's 'ability' was visual: 'she could see and note in rapid sequence flowers, birds, object d'art, people [...] and above all, lights, shadows and colors' (22). According to Flint, 'the interest of the poem is limited to the scene described' (25), and Lowell was not an Imagist at all; he saw no beauty in her 'visual' details. Flint's contradictory opinion appears dictated more by a resentful response to Lowell's increasingly 'authorial voice' in her poetics without any support or shield of male protection, than an accurate and objective analysis of her works. However, Flint was correct in detaching Lowell from Imagism, because Lowell, as she herself claimed in *Tendencies*, had another path in mind, and her involvement with Imagism was more grounded in her poetical research than imitation or 'affiliation' to schools in order to receive public attention.

¹⁹ Monroe, Harriet. 'The New Beauty.' *Poetry* 2.1 (April 1913): p. 22.

6.2. *Tendencies in American Poetry and Lowell's Rereading of Imagism*²⁰

Many critics interpret Lowell's affiliation with Imagism in light of the 'querelle' she had with Pound which resulted in both his withdrawal and her new role as group leader and promulgator of Imagist poets in America, since her article on *vers libre* appeared in *Poetry* in 1914.²¹ Most critics were likewise predisposed to read Lowell's active involvement by focusing on her strong and 'dominant' personality and her background of heritage and tradition: 'a Lowell is a Lowell.'²² Such an attitude has made Lowell the subject of endless discussion and controversy based more on her role as a public figure than on her poetic work.

Furthermore, the fact that the Imagists represented a small, relatively unknown group of young artists living in London, who only after Lowell's involvement obtained a certain popularity among a larger audience in America, was often forgotten by those editors who, after Lowell's death, published many poets connected with Imagism, including Ezra Pound, H.D., and Richard Aldington, but rarely Lowell.²³ These editors also failed to notice some of Lowell's most striking characteristics: her independent mind and her desire to play an active role in society rather than remain passive.

In her essay, 'Ecos sáficos en la poesía norteamericana: Amy Lowell y la feminización del movimiento imaginista,' Ana I. Zamorano Rueda highlights Lowell's contribution to the Imagist movement in terms of feminine perspective. According to her, the Bostonian woman poet drew attention to subjective female desire and offered space and a voice to other female poets, such as H.D. and Louise Untermeyer, helping to level the playing field with their male counterparts.²⁴ Lowell explains the new aims of Imagism to American audiences in

²⁰ Lowell, Amy. *Tendencies in Modern American Poetry*. New York: Macmillan, 1917. pp. 235-343. Hereafter: *Tendencies*.

²¹ Lowell, Amy. 'Verse Libre and Metrical Prose.' *Poetry* 3.6 (March 1914): pp. 213-20.

²² Flint, F. Cudworth. *Amy Lowell*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1969. p. 16. In referring to Lowell's second trip to London in 1914, Flint comments on Lowell's tendency to flaunt her wealth, noting that she 'was accompanied by her noted maroon automobile and one of her two maroon-liveried chauffeurs. After all, it could do no harm to let the English, too, know that a Lowell is a Lowell.' p. 16.

²³ Gould claims that the 'Imagiste movement was simply a series of weekly meetings in Soho cafes or teahouses, where struggling poets gathered to talk over tea and cakes and to sit around by the hour writing Japanese tanka or haiku for their own amusement.' Gould, Jean. *Lowell and the Imagist Movement*. New York: Dodd, Mead & Company, 1975. p. 126.

²⁴ Rueda, Ana I. Zamorano 'Ecos sáficos en la poesía norteamericana: Amy Lowell y la feminización del movimiento imaginista.' *Asparkia* 18 (2007): pp. 15-36.

Tendencies, giving many examples to elucidate her own vision of the new poetic trend. In addition, it was Lowell's aim to publish three anthologies, gathering the poets who followed Imagism's tenets and giving them popularity in her country.²⁵ In *Tendencies*, in analysing the poetry of H.D. and John Gould Fletcher, the only two poets Lowell includes as representative of Imagism, she lists the 'tenets' upon which the group had agreed.²⁶

Pound, in his 'A Few Don'ts' in the March 1913 issue of *Poetry*, lists only three points: direct treatment of the 'thing' whether subjective or objective, use only of words that contribute to presentation, and, in regard to rhythm, composition in the sequence of a musical phrase rather than in that of a metronome. However, Lowell adds three more tenets to Pound's. According to Lowell, the Imagist poets 'react toward the world in which they live and represent a changed point of view' (240). One-by-one and with clear examples, Lowell summarises the innovations of the group. Her first point concerns the duty of Imagist poets to use common speech and avoid clichés but not imaginative language or metaphor in order to employ the 'exact' word needed to precisely convey the writer's impression to the reader. In her second point she emphasises the creation of new rhythms, and asserts that although Imagists 'find more satisfactory expression in *vers libre* and 'polyphonic prose,' they do not insist upon free-verse as the only method of writing poetry' (243). In her third point she claims the 'absolute freedom in the choice of subject.' Lowell highlights, in her fourth tenet, that the group is not a school of painters, and references to 'presenting an image' are related rather to 'the manner of presentation than to the thing presented' (244). Lowell's fifth tenet, 'concentration,' is considered vital in avoiding great discursiveness (246), while the use of suggestion (the sixth tenet) states that one of the goals of a poet is 'the implying of something rather than the stating of it' (247).

²⁵ Lowell's idea was not welcomed by Pound and was the reason for the argument. Lowell succeeded in her aim and the first edition appeared in 1915 edited by H.D. and Aldington Richard. *Some Imagist Poets*. Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin Company. In 1916 and 1917 Lowell edited the other two editions with the same publisher. In all three anthologies three English poets and four Americans appeared: Richard Aldington, F.S. Flint, Ford Madox Ford, D.H. Lawrence, John Gould Fletcher, H.D. (Hilda Doolittle) and Amy Lowell. Ezra Pound was not included, having already left the group in favour of other experimental artistic forms such as Vorticism.

²⁶ Other poets appearing in the book are Edwin Arlington Robinson, Robert Frost, Edgar Lee Masters, and Carl Sandburg.

Lowell admits that these rules were not new in the field of poetry, but the difference for these poets was their overwhelming concern with ‘their manner of dealing with the idiom’ (249). In *Tendencies*, Lowell declaims the new ideas in poetry of her time, demonstrating her involvement in literary society and in its problems. She focuses specifically on two aspects that the new poets, including herself, manifest in their works: the concept that ‘literature is rooted on life’ (VI), and that beauty in art ‘could not exist without the soil from which it draws its sustenance’ (VI). According to Lowell, the new poets do not see nature as separate from man, rather ‘man and nature are recognized as a part of a whole’ (VII). This new awareness inevitably affects poetry, and Lowell therefore claims that the modern poets are ‘less concerned with dogma and more with truth’ (VII).

In analysing the contribution of these poets, Lowell considers them as both men and artists and places them in the context of their time. All of her critical essays are grounded in this approach, and her last work, *John Keats*,²⁷ clearly demonstrates her personal way of dealing with both biographical aspects and critical analysis, offering the reader the historical and personal context in which the work was created.²⁸ Introducing Edwin Arlington Robinson, the first poet of ‘the tendency,’ Lowell declares that ‘Art, true art, is the desire of a man to express himself, to record the reactions of his personality to the world he lives in,’ that ‘great emotion always tends to become rhythmic,’ but, when form takes precedence over emotion, ‘art becomes artificial’ (7). She proclaims that ‘literature is rooted on life’ and the many gradations of human feeling are therefore at the core of her poetry.

Before stating the ‘tenets,’ Lowell declares that her interest in the Imagist group was first piqued by the January 1913 issue of *Poetry*. In this edition, she found poems defined by the editor, Harriet Monroe, as ‘sketches from the Greek [...] not offered as exact translation, or as in any sense finalities, but as

²⁷ Lowell, Amy. *John Keats*. 2 vols. Hamden (CT): Archon Books, 1969. Originally published Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1925.

²⁸ In his biography, *Amy Lowell: A Chronicle*, S. Foster Damon seems to follow her example and interweaves his critical analysis with Lowell’s life. The musician and poet Carl Engel, in one of his letters to Ada Russell, criticises Damon’s approach. According to him, ‘instead of treating Amy’s life in one sequence, and sticking into the narrative every detail of every work, it might [help if] Damon arranged the book something like this: 1) Background and family; 2) Personality and life; 3) Poet and Reader; 4) Critic and Lecture; Appendix: a) Letters of A.L.; b) Letters to A.L.; Bibliography, etc... I believe that [with] such a treatment more could have been made of Amy’s work as a poet.’ Engel Carl. Letter to Ada Russell. January 2), 1938. Cambridge (MA): Houghton Library, b 95M36.

experiments in delicate and elusive cadences which attain sometimes a haunting beauty [written by] ‘H.D., Imagiste’ [...] an American lady resident abroad, whose identity is unknown to the editor.’²⁹

After reading H.D.’s poems, Lowell met with the poets in London. The brief period between Lowell’s meeting with the Imagists in London and the publication of one of her poems ‘The Garden’ in Marsden’s magazine, casts doubt upon the common critical assumption that her improvement in poetry was due to Imagist ideas. Her own concerns with the power of diction, the right word and image, and the recreation of new rhythms appeared coincidental with the Imagist movement. In ‘In a Garden,’ in fact, most of these characteristics which convinced Pound to include it—and it was the only poem of hers he chose in his 1914 anthology ‘Des Imagistes’—are already latent.

As Hunt and Gould have claimed, this poem indicates the direction in which Lowell was bringing her poetry soon after her first collection in October 1912, and highlights her continued work on images prior to her involvement with Pound and Imagism. In addition, certain Sapphic images and motifs such as the moon, the garden, and particularly the recreation of ‘longing’ with the implicit reference to harmonious and sensual contact between women, reveals Lowell’s attention to different themes. Although it can be argued that Lowell’s approach to Imagism helped her to become more conscious of her literary path, it is perhaps too easy to over-determine its impact on her path, particularly in light of two points she makes in *Tendencies*: that literature is grounded in life, and the absolute freedom taken in dealing with subjects or themes in her lyrics. Her approach to Sapphic motifs also emphasises her own literary position, which appears to differ from that of H.D., who is considered the major representative of both Imagism and Sappho’s tradition of the time and translated many of Sappho’s fragments.³⁰

²⁹ Monroe, Harriet. Notes. *Poetry* 1.4 (January 1913): p. 135. Hilda Doolittle’s poems published in this issue were ‘Hermes on the Ways,’ pp. 118-120; ‘“Priapus” Keeper-of-Orchards,’ pp. 121-122, and ‘Epi-gram (*After the Greek*),’ p. 122.

³⁰ H.D., who knew Greek, openly uses Sappho’s fragments, and freely re-works four of them (36, 40, 41, 68) in her *Heliadora and Other Poems*. New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1924. Writers who, like Lowell, did not read Greek, could enjoy Sappho’s poetry through the first English edition of Sappho’s lyrics by Henry Thornton Wharton, *Sappho: Memoir, Text, Selected renderings and a Literal Translation*. New York: John Lane Company, 3rd ed. 1907.

6. 3. Lowell's Love Discourse: Sapphic Allusions in 'In a Garden'

Unlike in H.D.'s writing, in Lowell's poems there are rarely explicit references to Sappho. 'The Sisters' is an exception and it is considered a testament to Lowell's familiarity with the Sapphic lyric tradition from which she likely drew inspiration for her use of erotic imagery, according to Faderman and Bradshaw. At the turn of the twentieth century, Sapphic tradition involved many of Lowell's contemporary modernist fellows, including H.D., Winifred Bryher, Sara Teasdale, and Margaret Anderson. The discovery of new fragments of Sappho's poems in the Oxyrhynchus expedition in Egypt during the late nineteenth century excited many modernist poets, such as Ezra Pound, Richard Aldington, and H.D., who started to study, translate, and imitate her lyrics. In Flint's *Poetry* editorial, in which he presents Imagism, he claims that their goal is 'to write in accordance with the best tradition,' and he clearly emphasises that they find it 'in the best writers of all time—in Sappho, Catullus, Villon.'³¹

If male poets' responses to Sappho were more concerned with the translations of some of her poems and fragments and saw her mostly as a muse,³² in the context of their renewed interest in the past, Susan Gubar writes in 'Sapphistries'³³ that female poets could find a sustainable authorial encouragement for their female creative response to her love lyrics. As Gubar points out, many female modernists saw Sappho as a female precursor: the dancer Isadora Duncan 'viewed Sappho as a legendary survivor from a paradise lost long ago,' (44) Edna St. Vincent Millay 'identified her as a love-lost suicide' (44) 'Sara Teasdale idealized Sappho as a mother-poet crooning to her daughter Cleis' (44), and Lowell 'used Sappho's images to celebrate her passionate response to her lifelong companion, Ada Russell' (58).

Cheryl Walker acknowledges that the Greek spirit permeated all the arts, emphasizing that, at the turn of the century; it was reflected in the power-

³¹ Flint, Stuart Frank. 'Imagisme.' *Poetry* 1.6 (March 1913): p. 199.

³² In the first six pamphlets collected in *The Poet Translations Series*, published in 1926 by Richard Aldington, kept in Lowell's collection at the Houghton Library, there are translations of poems and fragments of Sappho by Edwards Storer, and poems of Anyte of Tegea, translated by Richard Aldington. *Des Imagistes*, edited by Alfred Kreyenborg in New York in 1914, contains other translations and imitations of Sappho's lyrics by Richard Aldington, H.D., and Ezra Pound.

³³ Gubar, Susan. 'Sapphistries.' *Signs*. 10.1 (Autumn 1984): pp. 43-62.

ful performances of Duse, in Isabella Duncan's dance, as well as 'in the poetry of Sappho, and in the lush lyricism of Swinburne.'³⁴ Ellen Greene, in the introduction to *Re-reading Sappho*, underlines how the figure of Sappho changed over time according to the need and understanding of female sexuality.³⁵

The scarcity of information about Sappho's life in particular created her mythical re-reading, and at the turn of the twentieth century modernist writers 'for whom the classical era represented the keystone of their own aesthetic' (184) attempted to rescue 'Sappho from centuries of scholarly misinterpretation and bad translation' (184). As Susan Gubar ultimately underlines in her essay 'Sapphistries,' Sappho became a model for many female modernist poets who saw her as their first lost female ancestor. Feminist critical studies, starting with Gubar's essay in particular, open a door to a rereading of Sappho's story in the context of her suppressed lesbian voice, especially in the context of the limitations of the categorisations of human sexual behaviour and emotions. Sappho becomes for the silenced woman a 'mask,' one that could be worn in order to have her feelings acknowledged and her voice heard. Imitating Sappho's motifs and imagery enables them to express their lesbianism, and eroticism in general. But were Sappho and her erotic imagery a point of arrival or, in fact, a starting point for Lowell in the search for her own poetic voice? Can Sappho be considered the precursor for Lowell's 'love discourse'? Lowell's use of her 'longing' for her absent beloved merits examination; is this the ultimate goal of her love lyrics, or does she wish to establish her own presence and demonstrate openly her own female erotic desires, in spite of Sappho?

6.3.1. 'In a Garden': *Exposure of Love and Longing*

'In a Garden,' the penultimate poem in *Sword Blades and Poppy Seed*, is placed in the second section of the collection, 'Poppy Seed.' Its twenty-two

³⁴ Walker, Cheryl. *Masks Outrageous and Austere*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1961. p. 112.

³⁵ Greene, Ellen. *Rereading Sappho: Reception and Transmission*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996. p. 3. The essays collected by Greene discuss the fascination with the legendary literary figure of Sappho throughout the centuries, with particular reference to her influence on modernist writers. For the current debate on 'Sapphic Modernism,' see also Patea, Viorica and Derrick, Paul Scott. *Modernism Revisited: Transgressing Boundaries and Strategies of Renewal in American Poetry*. Amsterdam and New York: Rodopi, 2007; and Collocott, Diana. *H.D. and Sapphic Modernism 1910-1950*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999.

lines are written in ‘cadenced verse,’ as Lowell calls *vers libre*. It offers an example of Lowell’s aesthetic taste: her relentless attention to details, with which she conveys the exact intended image and her tendency to ‘reach’ a point of view at the end of her lyrics. This is something she will continue to develop in future work but that is already manifest in poems such as ‘The Starling’ or ‘The Boston Athenaeum’ in *A Dome*.³⁶ In ‘In a Garden,’ Lowell’s attention is initially fixed upon a well-defined ‘object-image,’ the water, and all the effects it might suggest to the senses and mind of the poem’s speaker. Lowell uses the ‘sounds’ produced by the visible objects in the garden to induce, by suggestion or allusion, more intimate feelings, anticipating one of the tenets she would add to Pound’s in *Tendencies* years later.

The poem opens in the present tense with a bold eruption of water ‘gushing from the mouths of stone men’ (1) which rules all movement in the poem. Lowell combines interest and aesthetic effect in her depiction of the water and follows its ‘rushing,/ In the midst of the quiet of close-clipped lawns’ (7) and all around the garden. The sounds and movements of the water alongside its ‘touch’ or contact with the other elements in the garden, such as ‘the iris’ (4), ‘the ferns’ (8), or ‘the marble fountains’ (9), are rendered by a variety of verbs intended to elicit a sense of the potential perfection of the garden as a space, one which cries out for the presence of the beloved.

In constructing this setting, Lowell emphasises both the emptiness of the space (its potential unfulfilled) and its beauty, which could be yet more beautiful were the beloved present—that is, until the running of the water ‘throb[bed]’ (13) the air with its ‘leaping, and deep, cool murmur’ (15). This ‘throbbing,’ this sudden increase in momentum, represents the climax of the poem. It is at this moment, in fact, that the garden, with its sensual allusions conveyed by all of the details that Lowell has offered, has become ‘familiar’ to the reader, that the ‘I’ introduces him/herself together with the ‘particular’ remembrance aroused by his/her *mise en scene*. And the present tense in which the intimate memory of the ‘I’ acts now becomes the past: ‘And I wished for night and you’ (16).

³⁶ These two poems will be discussed in Chapter Seven.

It would be possible to end the poem at this point, with the ‘sweetbitter’ pleasure of that desire hanging in the memory, leaving the reader to shape it, but Lowell proceeds for another six lines, in which ‘desire’ and remembrance of it takes form and reaches the final erotic vision: ‘Night and the water, and you in your whiteness, bathing!’ (22).

As Barthes points out in his *A Lover’s Discourse: Fragments*, ‘the body’s gesture caught in action and not contemplate in repose’³⁷ is one ‘figure’ which occupied the lover’s mind and on it the lover constructs his/her love discourse. Lowell’s final image of her lover ‘bathing’ is one of the ‘figure’ explained by Barthes, and in it as well, she conveys her eroticism, which is emphasised by an omission of verbs, and marked by the use of the gerund ‘bathing.’ In this way, Lowell suggests an image of the action in progress in which the remembrance of that ‘daring’ desire and its intimate charm persist in the present, notwithstanding the use of the past tense in the previous line which emphasises the absence: ‘And I wished for night and you’ (16). The impossibility of that desired moment also gives the poem a sublime tension.

In this poem, Lowell appears to fulfill the creeds expressed by both Pound and Flint in *Poetry* in 1913, particularly in her treatment of the ‘thing.’³⁸ However, the poem goes further in conveying her idea of beauty, what Santayana calls ‘expressiveness,’ in *The Sense of Beauty*. Santayana uses the word ‘expressiveness’ to indicate ‘all the capacity of suggestion possessed by a thing’ and ‘expression’ for ‘the aesthetic modification which that expressiveness may cause in it’ (122).³⁹ According to him, then, ‘[e]xpressiveness is thus the power given by experience to any image to call up others in the mind; and this expressiveness becomes an aesthetic value, that is, becomes expression, when the value involved in the association thus awakened are incorporated in the present object’ (122).

In relating different and indifferent things (all the ‘objects’ in the garden), giving them sensible and imaginative form, in ‘In the Garden,’ Lowell incorporates their beauty and sensual hints in the water, which is ultimately as-

³⁷ Barthes, Roland. *A Lover’s Discourse: Fragments*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 21st ed. 2001. p. 3

³⁸ Pound, Ezra. ‘A Few Don’ts by an Imagiste.’ *Poetry* 1.6 (March 1913): pp. 200-206; Flint, F. S. ‘Imagisme.’ *Poetry* 1.6 (March 1913): pp. 198-200.

³⁹ Santayana, George. *The Sense of Beauty Being the Outlines of Aesthetic Theory*. New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1896. p. 122. Hereafter: *The Sense of Beauty*.

sociated with her beloved. In this associative process, she also conveys her own intimate emotions in the poem using some bold and erotic Sapphic allusions, such as the moon and the rushing of the water. The central themes of the poem are the memory of and longing for a woman, which clearly alludes to Sapphic motifs. These emotions are framed in a natural landscape into which the reader is invited. The sense of freedom inspired by the garden becomes in turn a cause for her 'expressiveness,' because it offers her the liberty to recollect her emotional and sensual experiences.

Furthermore, the water itself becomes both cause and effect, the active agent through which the initial hidden thoughts and desires of the speaker can be publicly revealed. The water reaches its target in time with the speaker's longing, becoming the point of contact or association between the 'I' and the 'body' of the lover: 'Splashing down moss-tarnished steps/ It falls, the water;/ And the air is throbbing with it.' It is the 'falling of the water,' in fact, which incorporates and urges the 'remembrance,' and, interrupting the 'contemplation' of the indifferent 'objects' in the garden, makes the longing for the absentee an imaginable perception, a real presence. The process of association produces emotions in the 'I' that gives form to that intimate desire, which is conveyed to the audience through the 'watching' of the strength of the water running freely in the garden.

The indoor setting, although confined to the space of a garden, reveals Lowell's bias for this kind of space in most of her love poems. Moreover, the exposure of her desire in this nocturnal place suggests Lowell's intention to make public her private regions of consciousness. The private space of the garden is inhabited by another 'you' with both her absence and her presence. The daring image evoked in that 'you,' which enters and then rapidly permeates the space, and the erotic fantasies of the speaker, become part of that intimacy that the 'I' shares with the 'other' and the reader. The other, the 'you,' takes shape from the contraposition of two distinct colours, black and white; against the obscurity of the night—which suggests both complicity and indeterminacy—the 'whiteness' of the beloved is carved in her implied nudity, which is emphasised by the gerund form. Furthermore, the presence of the moon, elicited in the line which follows the remembrance of her beloved—'White and shining in the silver-flecked water' (18)—and materialising in the subsequent line—

‘While the moon rode over the garden’ (19)—enriches the erotic image and its Sapphic motifs.

Lowell constructs her erotic atmosphere gradually through all the objects in the garden, but it is in the final line, which enshrines the beloved in her bathing position, that the speaker’s erotic and sensual longing are expressed with a clear feeling of pleasure. After the image of her beloved ‘bathing,’ the speaker feels no shame in her desires, or in sharing them with the reader despite the Watch and Ward Society.⁴⁰ It is the use of ‘longing’ in creating and communicating the desire that associates Lowell with Sappho who, according to critics, was the first female poet to introduce a female erotic gaze, a female passion, and a female desire in her lyrics. In expressing in this poem—as well as in many others—her own desires and feelings for a female body, and singing of its beauty, Lowell posits herself in between male and female gaze.

Both man and woman may recognise and share the erotic atmosphere which she constructs, but Lowell goes further, as she gives a subjective status to the traditional ‘object of desire’ which women have always perceived through a male gaze. In ‘In a Garden,’ Lowell guides the attention from the beauty of the titular garden to the emotions that its beauty activates, rather than merely the beauty of the female body. As this brief analysis has revealed, she constructs in this way her own love discourse in which to convey all of the dimensions of her female desire and passion, reinforcing it using a number of Sapphic images.

In echoing Sapphic imagery, and opening it to both the male and female gaze, Lowell attempts to create a common ground from which she can share her emotions with the reader and empower her female voice, but she also enriches it by using ‘the power given by experience to any image to call up others in the mind,’ as Santayana pointed out in his *The Sense of Beauty* (122) Her ‘imagism’ in this sense appears more grounded in this than in Imagism.

⁴⁰ This was an organisation founded in 1891 that aimed to censor performing arts and books.

6.4. *Unrequited Love and the 'Object of Desire': A Reconsideration*

While most critics focus on Lowell's lesbian tendency in her love poems by focusing on her Sapphic motifs, in 'Lesbian Chivalry' Jaime Hovey shifts to the 'theme of unrequited love,' which enables Lowell to express her own 'unrequited lesbian or queer desire.'⁴¹ Hovey argues that unlike Sappho, who 'longs to possess her beloved,' Lowell finds a 'certain satisfaction in the desire itself' (80). Reading 'In a Garden,' Hovey focuses on the moment of desire which has 'neither sublimation nor consummation' (88), most likely based on the implication of the last lines in which it is clear that her beloved is absent.

Hovey rereads the poem through a lens of lesbian desire and the tradition of courtly love, in which the knight is 'possessed' by an impossible love for the unattainable lady and finds his reason for living in that continuous, eternal attempt to satisfy what it is not possible to satisfy. 'Lesbian Chivalry,' as Hovey intends it, expresses not an obsession with possessing the beloved and her beauty, but the desire for unrequited sexual passion: 'physical consummation is beside the point' (84).

According to her, 'the beauty of feminine idealization, unrequited longing, [and] amorous servility' is at the core of lesbian chivalry (82). The moment of desire, in its unfulfillability, is 'eternal' and ultimately points to 'the aesthetic and cultural significance of lesbian desire' (82). In Hovey's view, Lowell assumes the position once held by the medieval knight and shifts the emphasis to unrequited love and the emotional quality of the search itself, rather than its fulfillment. It is in this context, according to Hovey, that the artist finds strength and the unrequited passion becomes the 'wellspring of creativity and inspiration' (82).

However interesting and enchanting Hovey's theory may be, it is unsatisfactory in respect to Lowell. In fact, Hovey's reading of 'In a Garden' leaves the 'I' in a static position, contemplating of her own 'eternal desiring moment,' (82) thus giving the beloved the status of the 'object of desire,' which, is Lowell's aim. Reading the poem through Hovey's lens it seems that nothing

⁴¹ Hovey, Jaime. 'Lesbian Chivalry in Amy Lowell's *Sword Blades and Poppy Seed*.' *Amy Lowell, American Modern*. Eds. Adrienne Munich and Melissa Bradshaw. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2004. pp. 77-89. Hereafter: 'Lesbian Chivalry in Lowell's *Sword Blades*.'

happens after the ‘vision’ of the beloved bathing, either to the speaker or to the reader, and the sharing of emotions loses significance. In ‘In a Garden’ what Lowell puts into action is not merely a monologue; she made her eroticism readable to the audience. In making her desire so patent she opens a conversation with them about this ‘lack,’ and also activates their own eroticism. The conclusions Hovey draws also raise some questions. In referring to the ambiguity of the ‘I’ at the end, she argues that the speaker who endures the unrequited love can be anyone, and that in Lowell’s case, because ‘we know’ about her life, and ‘we know’ that she wrote these poems, ‘it is more than possible for readers to think of [Lowell’s] poems as lesbian poems’ (87).

It is of course debatable, that the reader needs to know the life or sexual inclination of the author in order to properly appreciate the poem, or that the connection between text and author is inseparable. In addition, information about the life of the author may be significant to detect his/her real identity (Eliot and not H.D., for example) but may still say nothing about the gender of the speaker in his/her poem. In the only Italian translation of some of Lowell’s poems, the addressee of the ‘I’ in her love lyrics is demonstrably male, and the speaker female. Of course, the translation is only such because, according to a heterosexist vision, the recipient of love poems must be a man if the author is female.⁴² But even leaving this aside, what about the positions—subjective or objective—of both the speaker and her/his ‘object of desire’ in Lowell’s love lyrics? How can this desire become ‘fruitful’ and generate ‘empowering’ desires, as discussed by Audre Lorde in her ‘Uses of the Erotic: the Erotic as Power,’ for example?

Hovey’s admittedly well-articulated notion of lesbian chivalry, which Melissa Bradshaw will develop in *Amy Lowell, Diva Poet*, raises a question regarding the subjectified—as opposed to objectified—position of the beloved, which I argue is also at the core of Lowell’s subversive reading of love in the context of love poems: her personal love discourse.

Hovey’s insistence on unfulfilled desire as the central point of Lowell’s poems, and on the beloved onto which the ‘I’ projects his/her desire, makes the

⁴² Lanati, Barbara. *Amy Lowell: Poesie*. Turin: Giulio Einaudi Editore, 1990. See particularly ‘A Gift,’ pp. 34-35; ‘A Decade,’ pp. 36-37; and ‘The Bungler,’ pp. 20-21. Strangely, in some of Lowell’s Hokku, (XIII, XIV, and XXI), the speaking ‘I’ is male (pp. 213-215).

beloved an object—an ideal version of female beauty—and not the subject, as Lowell does. Hovey pays insufficient attention to two active verbs used by Lowell in the gerund form—‘gushing’ and ‘bathing’—and placed respectively at the beginning of her poem: ‘*Gushing* from the mouths of stone men’ (1)—and at the end, in perfect symmetry and cadence, ‘Night and the water, and you in your whiteness, *bathing!*’ (22) The action of the water is emphasised by its flow and touch, which adds ‘motion’ to the life of the garden; in using the same verb form for the action of her beloved, Lowell gives her the status of subject: she is bathing; her action and the delight of the vision of that action sustains the images’ erotic power. She is the subject caught in action, and a sensual and erotic one at that. To reinforce this active and subjective agency, the bathing is willfully acted out by her beloved, independent of the speaker’s memory. It is something the subject has already done, and this memory remains in the speaker’s memory. Lowell separates the last line from the body of the poem, thereby rendering the beloved’s presence more pronounced and doubling the speaker’s own pleasure both in the delight he/she takes in the beloved’s action, and his/her remembrance of it, which also highlights her own active position. The longing, the desire for the presence of the beloved, is not limited to the confines of the text itself, but somehow transcends it; the poem resonates in such a way that the emotional landscape Lowell has created spills into the imagination of the reader and remains there long after the poem ends, continuing the conversation. At the end of the poem, the speaker takes back control of his/her erotic feeling with delight; the desire is the evidence of the speaker’s vitality and his/her subjectivity distinct from that of his/her beloved.

A comparison between ‘In a Garden’ and Ezra Pound’s ‘The Garden’—which appeared just one month before the publication of Lowell’s poem in the August 1913 issue of *The Freewoman*—is useful in highlighting the manner in which Lowell posits the subjectivity of both the ‘I’ and the ‘object’ of his/her desire.⁴³ Although the titles are similar, the two poems show their differences in dealing with the ‘object of desire.’ Pound’s desire is not evoked by any beauty of Kensington Gardens or memory, but rather moves from his own reading of the hidden female expectation. He watches the female figure which

⁴³ Pound, Ezra. ‘In Garden.’ *The New Freewoman* 1.5 (August 1913): p. 87.

is depicted to the reader since the first lines: ‘She walks the railing of a path in Kensington Gardens,/ And she is dying piece-meal/ of a sort of emotional anaemia’ (2-4). Pound places her within a mob: ‘[...] there is a rabble/ Of the filthy, sturdy, unkillable infants of the very poor’ (5-6). These unsavoury adjectives suggest to the speaker that she would like to engage in conversation with a more decent human being: ‘She would like someone to speak to her,/ And is almost afraid that I/ will commit that indiscretion (19-20). However, Pound’s strong, direct images, far from the sensual charm and beauty of Lowell’s longing in the enclosed perfection of her garden, reveal unanticipated similarities in the manner in which these poets grapple with parallel issues.

The beloved’s presence in ‘In a Garden’ is recalled through the sensual and powerful beauty of the ‘I’s memory of her ‘bathing,’ while in Pound’s poem it is the nasty environment that elicits a more pleasant moment. A desire to escape all that because the light shed by Pound both on nature (which is excluded from his poem) and the people do not elicit any desire of sharing. The most relevant difference between the two poems, however, lies in the positions of the ‘I’s and the ‘object’s of their respective desires. In Lowell’s lyric, the ‘object’ of desire is a subject, whereas in Pound’s ‘The Garden,’ although he envisages a conversation which presupposes an equal exchange, the object of his desire remains an ‘object’ onto which he projects his expectation. The lady is walking, eating, most likely in a moment of rest from work or family duties, and perhaps enjoying her moment of solitude. It is the poet who projects his desire onto her own, purportedly hidden one. In Lowell’s poem, she does not project her wish onto her beloved, she merely manifests it; she misses her presence.

Although Pound’s ‘unrequited desire’ may appear more attainable than the one expressed by Lowell—given that Lowell’s beloved is absent while the female figure in Pound’s poem is physically present—it aims to satisfy his supposed male prerogative to read women’s desire and alter their lives. Instead, Lowell offers an opportunity to share this desire, both with her absent beloved and her reader. In addition, the ambiguity of the gender of the ‘I’ adds a more erotic and subversive dimension to Lowell’s poem, which enters into a sphere which—excluding the limitation of the sexual reference—can be shared both by the speaker and the reader in its intimate emotion. Through her erotic im-

agery, Lowell is attempting to transcend the biological limitations of gender and open a door to an alternative perspective—that of an active and positive female desire.

6.5. 'Clear, with Light Variable Winds'⁴⁴

'Clear, with Light Variable Winds' appears in the same section as 'In a Garden' and shares many motifs and images with it. In treating the erotic and sensual desire from a clearly gendered position, Lowell reveals unexpected results which provide insights into the limitations of a one-way male gaze. Here, the bathing woman is evoked with the same sensual, active action of the water—but without any hint of the 'cleansing' effect in 'In a Garden'—and under the omnipresent 'eye of the golden moon' (6).

This time, the gaze is male: 'From a stone seat,/ Beneath a blossoming lime,/ The man watched it' (7-9), and the speaker is omniscient and external. Lowell presents what the man sees or desires to see in 'The fountain gurgled and splashed' (18) through a series of questions which bring the attention of the reader to the vision, and simultaneously elicit doubts regarding its reality: 'Is that an arm he sees?' (14), 'Does he catch the moving curve/ Of a tight?' (16-17). After casting doubt on his sight, Lowell plays with his hearing: 'Is it singing that he hears?/ A song of playing at ball?' (20-21). Soon after, the woman's body appears piece by piece, offering itself:

Her breasts point outwards
And the nipples are like buds of peonies.
Her flank ripple as she plays,
And the water is not more undulating
Than the lines of her body' (26-29).

⁴⁴ Lowell, Amy. 'Clear, with Light Variable Winds.' *Sword Blades and Poppy Seed*. New York: Macmillan, 1914. pp. 160-3.

The woman at this point invites the man to sing about her beauty. She openly challenges him, naming him Poet and emphasising the difficult moment of creativity that he is enduring:

Am I not more worth than your day ladies
Covered with awkward stuffs,
Unreal, unbeautiful?
What do you fear in taking me?
Is not the night for poets?
I am your dream,
Recurrent as water,
Gemmed with the moon! (31-38).

After the speaker's questions, the woman reaches the edge of the fountain which 'streams behind her/ Like an opened veil' (42-43). What the veil hides is made clear to the reader in the last strophe, when the 'gardeners' find the body of 'their dead master' on the grass the following morning. Lowell closes the poem with the head gardener's speech: "I will close his eyes," said the head gardener,/ "It is uncanny to see a dead man staring at the sun" (48-49). In 'Clear, with Light Variable Winds,' Lowell seems to offer a critique of the stereotypes in art which give a vision of a woman as a beautiful and attractive 'object,' useful in arousing men's erotic feelings. She suggests that such erotic feelings are unproductive and useless to artistic creativity ('gemmed' here appears explicitly ironic); they arrive at nothing. The poet who can only sing about external beauty cannot survive because, as Lowell explains in her preface to *Sword Blades*, 'a work of beauty which cannot stand an intimate examination is a poor and jerry-built thing' (VII). The one-way of male gaze is here condemned: at the end the poet died.

The interest of this poem is not limited to the scene Lowell describes but also lies in the relationship between the 'subject' and the 'object' of the poem and in Lowell's perspective on this relationship. In 'In a Garden,' the speaker caught her beloved in a moment of voluntary action (bathing); the woman is not trying to impress anyone. Contrastingly, in 'Clear, with Light Variable Winds,' the woman asks to be sung, and it is she who brings the artis-

tic crisis endured by the poet to the surface. The position of this woman may be read as active, but this activeness is subordinated to a man's reading of female desires, which is merely the projection of the man's—or artist's—desire.

In 'In a Garden,' the beloved is caught in a 'real' and pleasant moment and the speaker's desire is clearly inclined towards harmonious contact with her; it is a desire to share the private and delightful moment together. The positions occupied by the 'I' and the beloved are equal because both are subjects of the poem: the beloved bathes and the speaker remembers that pleasant moment, longing to share it with her again.

In 'Clear, with Light Variable Winds,' Lowell uses the word 'veil' to emphasise the 'veiled' image of the woman, which causes trouble for the poet, as he cannot see her as a subject. The beloved in 'In a Garden' is watched without any veil, and Lowell does not need to name the eroticised parts of her body to elicit its sensuality in the speaker's memory, as the poet in 'Clear, with Light Variable Winds' is obliged to do. The erotic, emotional setting of 'In a Garden' has the important function of activating the eroticism in a mutual exchange which links the garden (standing for the natural world) and the body of the beloved, which is summoned by that beauty. The luxury of the beautiful, harmonious garden is reminiscent of Eden, where nudity was not a source of shame and feelings could be openly expressed. The setting of 'Clear, with Light Variable Winds' is insufficient: the moon, the water, 'the white lily'—symbols of the love lyric—are insufficiently strong to feel eroticism and arouse it in the poet's vision, as he focuses only on the woman's body, on her objectification. The point of contact, the water, here has no healing recognition and Lowell emphasises this aspect because the water is constrained by the fountain, while in 'In a Garden,' it runs free, 'gushing from the mouths of stone men.' The longing caused by the absence of the beloved in 'In a Garden' gives the 'I' knowledge of his/her erotic feelings which, although 'sweetbitter,' allows both the author and speaker of the poem to feel their own humanity. The poet's longing in 'Clear, with Light Variable Winds' brings him to death, as it is elicited not by a desire to share it but by the male desire to sing of her for his egotistical satisfaction; in addition, the poet projects his desire onto the female's wish to be sung by him.

The woman in this poem, however, presenting herself as challenge to the poet, questions his ability to sing the real female beauty. The poet can see only the beauty of her body, her objectification. The woman and the poet apparently show different desires but there is one which, as the end of the poem affirms, leads the poet to his gloomy destiny. The gendered speaker's surrender to the woman's seduction marks his heterosexist vision, which does not allow him a mutual sharing by both the male and female gaze. It is only when the 'I'—as in 'In a Garden' and many other love poems by Lowell—takes back control of her/his emotions that the constructiveness of the erotic experience endured in the poem becomes self-knowledge of her/his feelings. For Lowell, this experience is ultimately the subject of the poem.

The knowledge of female desire and its erotic implications constitutes the substance and relevance of Lowell's poetry. Lowell's positing of herself often in an androgynous rather than gendered position, particularly in her short love sonnets, allows her to take an experiential position similar to that assumed by Tiresias in the *Odyssey*. Like Tiresias, Lowell's ungendered 'I' may introduce him/herself from both male and female perspectives. Lowell does not specify her speaker's gender because in her aesthetic perspective and poetic struggle, she is concerned with the universality of the 'work of art' generally, which must be inclusive of all human feelings and not exclusively male—rather than with defining the voice of a poem as either male or female.

Although Hovey does not sustain her argument with sufficient evidence, her suggestion that the speaker of love poems may be anyone may be substantiated if reconsidered in the context of Lowell's aesthetic motivation, rather than in her hidden lesbian love. Lowell's powerful erotic imagery is a component of her strategy to explain her literary point of view and by extension her female perspective, in order to share with and empower others through her experience and her knowledge.

6.6. *Knowledge and Experience: The Erotic Resource*

In her essay 'Uses of the Erotic: the Erotic as Power,' Audre Lorde clarifies the importance of the erotic in women's lives.⁴⁵ Lorde writes that 'the erotic is a resource' (277) which women in Western society have been taught to devalue; instead, they have been encouraged towards 'the superficially erotic' which is 'a sign of female inferiority' (277). She claims that 'the erotic has often been misnamed by men and used against women' because it is generally perceived as pornography. Lorde clarifies the difference between pornography and eroticism: while the first 'emphasizes sensation without feeling,' the second is 'a measure between the beginnings of our sense of self and the chaos of our strongest feelings' (278). 'The erotic is the nurturer or nursemaid of all our deepest knowledge,' she writes (280). It is knowledge, in the end, that empowers and also provides a way to resist the dominant heterosexual vision of society. Does the gendered speaker in 'Clear, with Light Variable Winds' lack this knowledge because his vision of the woman is shaped within the sphere of a heterosexual relationship? Might the poet's death, which ends the poem, then be read as a failure of this one-way vision, while the erotic signifies a deeper acknowledgement of 'the chaos of our strongest feelings' from Lowell's point of view?

The idea of the erotic as resistant to heterosexuality is also emphasised by Mary E. Galvin in *Queer Poetics: Five Modernist Women Writers*.⁴⁶ Galvin writes about the manner in which the aesthetic and imagist techniques employed by Lowell 'provided a powerful vehicle' for her erotic poetic vision (29). Furthermore, according to Galvin, free verse with 'its emphasis on sensory experience conveyed through language [...] becomes one of the modernist techniques most amenable to conveying a lesbian erotic sensibility' (34).

Galvin agrees with Lorde's concept of the erotic as power and claims that it is 'a primary source for most, if not all, women who write seriously' (28). Lorde specifically insists that 'the erotic is not a question only of what we

⁴⁵ Lorde, Audre. 'Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power.' *Writing on the Body: Female Embodiment and Feminist Theory*. Eds. Katie Conboy, Nadia Medina and Sarah Stanbury. New York: Columbia University Press, 1997. pp. 277-283. Hereafter: 'The Erotic as Power.'

⁴⁶ Galvin, Mary E. *Queer Poetics: Five Modernist Women Writers*. Westport: Praeger, 1999. Hereafter: *Queer Poetics*.

do; it is a question of how acutely and fully we can feel in the doing' (278). She underscores the empowering nature of this kind of 'knowledge,' this self-conscious, mindful recognition of the erotic experience.

Lowell was undoubtedly a woman who held a position of authority in the artistic world at the beginning of the twentieth century, a position of 'not incompetence' which disturbed the male-oriented vision of women's roles in patriarchal society. Lowell's involvement with poetry was not confined to her books; instead, she took a public stand in the cultural context of her time. She lectured on many literary subjects in women's circles and academic settings. The notes she took for her public talks,⁴⁷ consulted in Houghton Library, reflect her 'competence' with and curiosity for many aspects of culture and literature. Her cultural knowledge is illuminating not only in the versatility of the verse forms she used, from classical to extreme avant-gardism, such as the polyphonic prose of her narrative poems, but also in the subjects she chose for her poems, ranging from historical figures like the Commodore Matthew Perry in 'Guns as Keys' to the modes of orientalism in her translations in *Fir-Flower Tablets*. Mari Yoshihara focuses on the way in which Lowell gendered the Orient in *Fir-Flower Tablets*. According to her, Lowell's presentation of the Orient as a female 'penetrated' by American expansionism enables her 'to construct and perform alternative gender roles and sexuality through a type of racial masquerade.'⁴⁸

In comparing the position of the 'object of desire' in 'In a Garden' and in 'Clear, with Light Variable Winds,' Lowell's attempt to subjectify her female figure in her poems (rather than mark them as objects) emerges. The exposure of her longing thus has to be read in the context of this effort, and not merely in that of her chivalrous courtly love, as Hovey affirms.

⁴⁷ Lowell, Amy. 'Notes for a Talk.' Cambridge (MA): Houghton Library, MS Lowell 38 (19) .

⁴⁸ Yoshihara, Mari. 'Putting on the Voice of the Orient.' *Amy Lowell Modern American*. Eds. Adrienne Munich and Melissa Bradshaw. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2004. p. 125.

6.7. 'The Blue Scarf' and the Absence of the Beloved

Lowell questions the knowledge of female desire as well as the stereotypes which present woman purely as the object of male desire. In assuming the ungendered role of the lover (the 'I,' as Hovey rightly notes, could be anyone) rather than a hidden one, as Faderman, Galvin, and others claim, Lowell offers the reader the opportunity to choose her/his perspective; in addition, she posits the 'body' of the beloved—unmistakably female and always *active*—as a subject in the body of the text. What could appear as the passive gaze of the 'I' is rendered active via the process of remembrance, as in 'In a Garden,' or through absence, as in 'The Blue Scarf.'⁴⁹ In 'The Blue Scarf,' also from *Sword Blades*, the absence of the beloved and the longing for her presence is aroused by the blue scarf left behind. This poem addresses the emotional response to the absence of the beloved, which is emphasised by an accumulation of images initially limited to a chromatic vision of the colour blue; at the beginning, it is 'pale,' and by the poem's end, 'shining blue in the afternoon sunshine.' The images are gradually linked to touch and smell. The absence of the 'body' is conveyed by the 'warmth' (3) of the scarf as the speaker is 'caressing' (3) it with his/her fingers, suggesting that the beloved has only recently left. It is described as 'empty,' and it is the contact with this emptiness that provokes the sudden reaction of the 'I': 'Where is she, the woman who wore it? The scent of her/ lingers and drugs me' (4).

This direct, abrupt question is the poem's first climax. The tone's simplicity and bluntness enables Lowell to convey the range of feeling the speaker endures: surprise, irritation, anxiety, and longing, creating that 'opera air,' as Barthes puts it in his *A Lover's Discourse* (p. 5), from which she constructs her dialogue with her audience, and makes her feelings readable to them. 'She' becomes 'the woman who wore it,' but the scarf cannot give back the 'body' of the lover and the speaker only 'drugs' (4) her/himself with her perfume. The subsequent lines enter into the visionary space of the speaker's intoxicating and erotic world, sustained thus by the absence of the beloved. The cadenced verse of the poem, which according to Lowell follows the 'organic breath' and not

⁴⁹ Lowell, Amy. *Sword Blades and Poppy Seed*. New York: Macmillan, 1914. pp. 236-237.

the metre, establishes the emotional context for the rising and falling of the changing images: 'A languor, fire-shotted, runs through me, and I crush the scarf down on my face,/ And gulp in the warmth and the blueness, and my eyes swim in cool-tinted heavens' (5-6). The imaginative erotic space, in which the speaker 'consumes' the absence of her beloved, is built through images which, considered one by one, are almost prosaic in nature, yet put together, provide the emotional context from which the erotic originates. The assembled images also have the quality of a collage: 'columns of marble,' 'sun-flickered pavement' (7), 'the lute tinkles' (8), 'Frog hops through the sunlight, and plops in the gold-bubbled water of a basin' (10). The sequence of these images is such that it shifts both the speaker and the reader in and out of the speaker's imaginative space, and prepares the other climactic moment when 'The west wind has lifted a scarf/ On the seat close beside me' (11-12).

Again the reality of the absence asserts itself and shifts the speaker's perception onto another level. The change in the scene brought by the blowing of the wind and the movement of the scarf makes the speaker perceive the scarf next to him/her as 'filled' with the woman's body. In the following line, in fact, the passionate desire reaches its erotic fulfillment (13-16):

She draws it more closely about her, and it ripples beneath her slight stirring.
Her kisses are sharp buds of fire; and I burn back against her, a jewel
Hard and white, a stalked, flaming flower; till I break to a handful of cinders
And open my eyes to the scarf, shining blue in the afternoon sunshine.

Now the speaker returns from the erotic flux of images and sees only a scarf not 'pale' but 'shining blue.' The speaker's poignant feelings of solitude and abandonment are emphasised in the last line: 'How loud clocks can tick when a room is empty, and one is alone!' (17).

Unlike 'In a Garden,' here the solitude and absence remain unpleasant and real feelings, which are emphasised by the end of the poem itself and the closing of the room. The reader and the 'I' may perceive the loneliness of the absence enriched by that experience. Hovey acknowledges but dismisses the 'sublimation and fetishism' (86) that this poem may suggest, claiming that the poem suggests a 'lesbian femininity expressing its sexuality as its art, and its

art as its sexuality (87). Even if we go along with Hovey's claim, she overlooks the significance of the position of the 'I' towards the object and the relevance of the *mise en scene* in the poem. Lowell repeatedly plays with the 'emptiness' left by the lover and fills that emptiness by displaying different objects which arouse her erotic expectations. In the process, she comes to realise her own desires while exposing them to the reader with whom she shares them. This is particularly significant in light of Lorde's understanding of the power of the erotic. Considered from this perspective, the subject or goal of Lowell's love lyrics assumes another direction and may give a reason for the 'threat' Bradshaw alludes to in the introduction of the *Selected Poems of Amy Lowell*. When projected in sexual terms, female erotic sensibility is in fact perceived as a female attack on masculinity, particularly when it can confront and resist the assumption of gender-determined roles, reclaiming a space of pleasure for a woman that can be shared with other women. It is this stereotype and the constraint which society imposed on women that ultimately, subtly become Lowell's target.

In exposing her longing through her powerful erotic images, conveyed in her poems using recognisable Sapphic motifs, Lowell challenges the territory of desire, a space traditionally occupied exclusively by men, as Harriet Monroe comments in the June 1920 issue of *Poetry*. Monroe rhetorically asks, 'Is [poetry] loved and practiced more by men, than women?' to which she answers positively. Although she recognises that 'in spite of the lyric supremacy of Sappho, men have been an immense majority in the creation of poetry,' Monroe expresses her conviction that women 'are just beginning their work in the arts, and the twentieth century may witness an extraordinary development' (148).⁵⁰

Many are the allusions to Sappho's fragments in 'The Blue Scarf,' particularly Fragment 31, which critics have never acknowledged. Lowell emphasises her own re-reading of Sappho in 'The Blue Scarf.' In Fragment 31, Sappho considers the man sitting next to her beloved 'to be like the gods,' as he can enjoy her voice and her laugh. Sappho is incapable of 'speak[ing] one word,' and in that silence, 'a fine fire at once runs under my skin/ ... Cold

⁵⁰ Monroe, Harriet. 'Men or Women?' *Poetry* 16.3 (June 1920): p. 146.

sweat covers me, trembling seizes my whole body, I am more moist than grass;/ I seem to be little short of dying.’ In Lowell’s poem, there is an empty chair with a blue scarf on it beside the speaker, and its scent brings turmoil to the mind and body of the ‘I’: ‘Her kisses are sharp buds of fire; and I burn back against her, a jewel,/ Hard and white, a stalked, flaming flower, till I break to a handful of cinders’ (14-15).

In ‘The Blue Scarf,’ the object of the scarf, the agent in constructing the speaker’s erotic desire, maintains its doubly symbolic meaning throughout the poem: the ‘soft stuff’ belonging to the lover, and the beautiful garment described in the initial lines of the poem, ‘shimmered over with silver, brocaded/ In smooth, running patterns, a soft stuff, with dark knotted fringes, it lies there’ (1-2). Lowell uses a chiaroscuro contrast to emphasise on the one hand the external aesthetic beauty— that passive beauty taken in by the male gaze but as stimulus of his erotic desire, and on the other, that beauty which ‘[can] stand the intimate examination,’ as she explains in the preface of *Tendencies* (VI).

In that preface, Lowell also signals the tendency to ‘distrust a beauty we only half understand, and rush in with our impertinent suggestions.’ According to her, the poet is struggling to convey ‘the same poignant feeling which he has himself’ (X) to the reader. Lowell values the personal, emotional experience (‘literature is rooted on life’), and it is on this that she structures the foundation of her poetic world. The frequent absences of Russell, as Lowell regrets in her letters to friends, become a metaphor to investigate the absence of the female erotic voice in the tradition of love poems.

6.8. *The Use of Absence as Strategy in Lowell’s Love Discourse*

A work of art must be universal, as Lowell claims in both her prefaces and critical writing, and because ‘literature is rooted on life,’ language and its ‘nuances’ must be accessible and meaningful for both men and women. What are the implications and consequences of this in her work? Lowell strives to ensure that her art occupies a cultural space that is inclusive of her female reader, and she focuses on female erotic sensibility, especially its absence in art. The ‘absence’ of her beloved, a frequent topic in her love lyrics, may provide a useful

key to understanding a strategy Lowell adopts in order to construct her own love discourse: how she brings to the surface not only ‘silenced’ lesbian leanings but also the magnitude of female erotic feelings, the importance of which patriarchal society had for so long suppressed or ignored in women’s writings. The pain and distress caused by the absence of her beloved that Lowell displays in her love poems is openly expressed and fits with a more general, accepted tradition of love poetry. However, an essential aspect of her strategy is the intention to inform not only her beloved, but more importantly herself and by extension her audience. In laying bare her passion and sensuality, Lowell acknowledges her own erotic feelings, which both empower her and constitute the reason for her art. Their exposure allows Lowell not only to express her female erotic feelings but, in giving them poetical expression, pushes them into a higher status of universal sharing and thereby legitimises them. Lowell takes back the ‘forbidden knowledge’ which might stand for the ‘knowledge and experience’ human beings lost after the gates of Eden were closed behind them.

Lowell seems unconcerned as to whether to conceal or reveal ‘that love that dare not to speak its name’; her high social position in society, reinforced by her economic independence, allowed her immunity from such prejudices. In other words, she does not feel obliged to justify her choice to live with Ada Russell. The fact that—according to her biographer Damon—she also asked Russell to destroy their correspondence, and the silence that Russell kept until her death in 1962, may be seen as a last attempt to keep readers’ attention focused on her texts. That Russell was frequently absent from Lowell’s mansion, Sevenels, because of duties to her own mother is confirmed in many letters Lowell wrote to her friends.

In a 1915 letter she sent her friend ‘Nell’ (Mrs. Eleanor Belmont), Lowell laments how things in the house were bad without Russell and admits that ‘having got used to her presence, I find [it] quite impossible to accustom myself to her absence ... Surely Ada’s vacation is not proving exactly a joy-ride for me.’⁵¹ In another letter sent to Mrs. Belmont in 1924, Lowell expresses her anxiety awaiting Russell’s return, writing, ‘Meanwhile, I am living on a tread-mill. It is even worse than when you were here, but it has one advantage;

⁵¹ Lowell, Amy. Letter to Mrs. Eleanor Belmont. (August 7, 1915) Cambridge (MA): Houghton Library: MS Lowell 19.1: (89).

it makes the days go round more quickly than they otherwise would, and brings the time of Ada's coming back nearer.'⁵²

Because 'literature is rooted in life,' Lowell uses her experience of waiting for Russell's return to question the silencing of women's feelings in love poetry. Lowell often chooses places typically associated with female presence to expose her longing for her beloved, such as the enclosed space of a garden or the rooms of her house. If this setting offers her a place from which she can continue to communicate with her beloved, it also serves to engage other women with her love discourse; this is a recognised female space where women most frequently do the waiting.

However, Lowell does not intend to remain in the 'closet' and directs her female gaze and her female erotic sensibility at both men and women. Most of her love poems echo each other, not only in their structure, genre, and the various verse forms used, but also in the subject and position given to the 'other,' who is always a woman. She, the 'Other,' functions as a mirror with which Lowell can expose and understand herself. The position acquired by the 'other' enables Lowell to emerge from the closet, as Lowell gives her the status of subject (in 'The Blue Scarf,' she wore the scarf). In Lowell's poem, the 'I' and the 'Other' are both subjects. Lowell's love poems are organised so that the 'I,' even when 'alone' as in 'The Blue Scarf,' talks to someone: 'Where is she, the woman who wore it?' And here she is 'talking' to an 'empty chair.'

The use of direct questions shows Lowell's desire to involve everyone in her poems and gives a distinctive conversational tone: her female subject (the beloved), herself, the audience. Doing so allows Lowell to more deeply question gender binarism both within the discourse of poetry and by extension outside of it. In the absence of her beloved, in the time she spends waiting for her return, be it hours or days, Lowell manages to connect herself to the world both as poet and as woman while negotiating the conflict for women between love and art. Unlike the male poet, who develops poetically without having to choose between a social role linked with reproduction, and his art, the woman poet is subjected to this conflict as a result of society's predominantly heterosexual vision, and is obliged each time to choose which role she wants to play.

⁵² Lowell, Amy. Letter to Mrs. Eleanor Belmont. (June 25, 1924) Cambridge (MA): Houghton Library: MS Lowell 19.1: (89).

Lowell is more interested in negotiating this conflict than in covering or uncovering her lesbianism. Although the ungendered 'I' in her poetry is surrounded by autobiographical references, the absence of a specific gender is intentional: Lowell's role as a poet is to give voice to human feelings and experience, and she starts with her own. However, the Romantic vision of a poet enclosed in his own world and looking *out* might not be applicable to Lowell; as a public figure, her poetic experience became social. The absence of the beloved is the absence of a female erotic voice and is emphasised by the beloved's *presence* in the speaker's memory and emotional state. As Hovey writes, the speaker might be anyone, but in Lowell's poetry, the speaker *is* Lowell—not because she is reading and writing her poems, but because her point of view is female, the point of view of a woman who has experienced erotic and amorous pleasures, the silenced voice which dares to speak.

Lowell focuses not only on the distress brought about by the beloved's absence but the desires with which she fills the time waiting. The nature of her desires is emphatically erotic, stimulated by the absence of the lover, rather than focusing on feelings of rage, revenge, or fears about the beloved's return. Roland Barthes, in his *A Lover's Discourse*, envisaged the setting of the 'waiting' for the beloved as a *mise en scene* with fixed stages similar to those in a dramatic monologue in which the person waiting reflects on particular traits and attributes of the beloved, as well as hopes and fears regarding their return.⁵³ The manner in which the speaker of Lowell's love lyrics fills time awaiting the return of the beloved is crucial in order to understand Lowell's use of the erotic in the text and her love discourse. Strikingly, time is filled positively by dwelling on erotic desire: joy is created.

The focus is not on unfulfilled 'hidden desires,' 'unrequited love,' or dramatic monologue, but rather on the remembrance of an experience of fulfillment. The desire is to relive and perhaps even enhance that pleasurable experience. In this respect, it is clear that the beauty and wonderment Lowell finds in the erotic are such that they override any negativity engendered by the separation from her lover.

⁵³ Barthes, Roland. *A Lover's Discourse: Fragments*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 21st ed. 2010. pp. 3-8.

In not declaring the gender of the speaker, then, Lowell reveals her negotiation of the conflict between the sexes and reclaims a space for poetry in which anyone can see their own reflection, thereby reinventing her own ungendered poetry. The emphasis on the beloved's absence, grounded on her personal experience, challenges, by extension, the absence of female erotic desire from literature up to this point, and emphasises Lowell's love discourse.

Chapter Seven

Problematic Aspects of Lowell's Poetical Identity

Lowell opens her first poetical collection, *A Dome of Many-Colored Glass*, with a long narrative poem, 'Before the Altar' in which a poet deals with feelings of inadequacy, and a sense of being limited as an artist by societal expectations.¹ This is a theme manifested throughout the book, and S. Foster Damon asserted that Lowell's primary concern was with the idea of exclusion. He believed she wrote honestly about her experiences from her wealthy vantage point, with her own sense of isolation at the heart of the work, describing this collection as 'a veiled record of frustration; a dedication of an otherwise useless life to poetry; a blind, almost hopeless, determination to succeed.'² While Lowell was undoubtedly concerned with exclusion—both of herself and of her sex—she led a far from isolated existence, as discussed in the Introduction.

A Dome was not well received, but she continued to explore the same theme from different angles in her second and third collections. Lowell's positioning of these long narrative pieces at the beginning of her books indicates a deep concern for and interest in the topic. There is a performative element to her persistence in dealing with the poet's feelings of constraint and limitation, and this calls for attention, posing questions concerning the search for a poetical identity in Lowell's work, as conducted in feminist studies until now. Among the modernist women poets, Lowell is one who received all the 'labels' (feminist, lesbian, queer); indeed, her critics had a tendency to pigeon-hole her and her work according to their own theoretical approaches and tastes. Most of the time her 'personality' was confused with her 'dramatic personae' and this undoubtedly contributed to her seesawing literary fortune and misfortune, as described in the Introduction.

Through a re-reading of the opening poems in three of her collections, this chapter will explore these issues and ascertain their relevance to Lowell's

¹ Lowell, Amy. *A Dome of Many-Colored Glass*. Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1912. Hereafter: *A Dome*.

² Damon, S. Foster. *Amy Lowell: A Chronicle with Extracts from Her Correspondence*. Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1935. p. 187. Hereafter: *Amy Lowell: A Chronicle*.

poetic quest. It will investigate how through the limitations and constraints endured by the characters in her poems, Lowell manifests her idea of poet, rooted in her claim to inhabit both the private and the public sphere without society inflicting limitations on account of gender. The chapter will also focus on her attempt to respond, through the medium of poetry, to her own need (and by extension, that of other women like her) to play an active role in society, to claim full citizenship—both in the artistic field and in society at large. Her unstable position in feminist studies and the problematic elements of her poetical identity will be approached through the analysis of a selection of poems.

The chapter is divided into four sections. The first will investigate the theme of isolation explored by Lowell in her first poem at the beginning of her debut collection, *A Dome*, and follows its development in two other poems of the same collection, focusing on her ideas about sharing knowledge and experience. The second section will deal with the opening poem of her second collection, *Sword Blades and Poppy Seed* (1914), and the third will focus on a re-reading of one of her most quoted poems, ‘The Pattern,’ from her third publication, *Men, Women and Ghosts* (1916). The temporal space between these collections offers the opportunity to trace, from the beginning, any changes and developments in Lowell’s approach. The fourth section of the chapter will debate her unstable position in feminist studies, before finally drawing a conclusion to the study.

The theoretical framework for this chapter is provided by Margaret Homan’s essay, ‘Amy Lowell’s Keats: Reading Straight, Writing Lesbian,’³ Audre Lorde’s essay ‘The Transformation of Silence into Language and Action,’⁴ and Judith Butler’s *Gender Trouble*.⁵

Finally, it must be acknowledged that the scope of this analysis is limited; it cannot be an exhaustive critical survey of all of Lowell’s poems. Those explored here have been selected for their specific relevance to the subject of the chapter; they aim to highlight another perspective in the contemporary de-

³ Homans, Margaret. ‘Amy Lowell’s Keats: Reading Straight, Writing Lesbian.’ *The Yale Journal of Criticism* 14.2 (2001): pp. 319-351. Hereafter: ‘Amy Lowell’s Keats.’

⁴ Lorde, Audre. ‘The Transformation of Silence into Language and Action.’ *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches*. Berkeley: Crossing Press, 2007. pp. 40-44.

⁵ Butler, Judith. *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. New York: Routledge, 2007 (1990).

bate about female identity, and in particular to link Lowell with the ‘continuum’ of women’s struggle for recognition and full citizenship today.

7.1. *Sharing versus Isolation*

The first three poems analysed here—‘Before the Altar,’ ‘The Starling,’ and ‘The Boston Atheneum’—belong to Lowell’s first poetical collection, *A Dome*, published in 1912. The book is divided into four sections: ‘Lyrical Poems,’ ‘Sonnets,’ ‘The Boston Atheneum,’ and ‘Verses for Children.’ ‘Before the Altar’ opens the first section and is composed of fifty-six lines, divided into six strophes and a final couplet. In his biography *Amy Lowell: A Chronicle*, Damon acknowledges that the poem was written by Lowell after she had submitted the manuscript to the editor, and sent it to him requesting it be the first poem of the first section, replacing ‘Apples of Hesperides,’ previously chosen, which then appeared third. According to Damon, ‘Before the Altar’ was a product of Lowell’s interest in the French *vers libre*, and affirms that the Bostonian poet discovered the ‘new versification’ before her meeting with the Imagist group in London in 1913.⁶ Undoubtedly, the poem illustrates Lowell’s search for a ‘new versification,’ but it also manifests—in their embryonic state—issues that will become Lowell’s targets in the articles and essays she wrote later: Lowell’s vision of poets, their position in the world and the constraints and limitations they endured.

In ‘Before the Altar’ she builds a plain, minimalist scene for her character, a poet. She opens the poem sketching him in reverential posture and in despair: ‘Before the Altar, bowed, he stands/ With empty hands’ (1-2). She emphasises the poet’s misery—‘His sole condition/ Love and poverty’ (12-13) playing with his motionless and bowed position, in order to highlight the distance between him and the ‘shining’ Goddess—the moon—to whom he addresses his prayer:

⁶ Damon, *Amy Lowell: A Chronicle*. pp. 182-196. Damon wrote: ‘Although this poem is iambic and rhymed, the irregular line-lengths and the rhyme-pattern show the influence of French *vers libre*. Miss Lowell later was to claim it as her first experiment in free verse.’ p. 188.

‘Shining and distant Goddess, hear my prayer
Where you swim in the high air!
With charity look down on me,
Under this tree’ (22-25).

The faraway shining Goddess is the key image with which Lowell conveys her poet and his distress. She assembles all the elements that express the sense of a sacrificial moment—the altar, the burning perfumes, the night, the moon—eliciting curiosity from the reader-listener. Positioning herself as a hidden observer, she offers her ear to his lament, through which the reader-listener acknowledges that the man is a poet and the cause of his despair is his art and for its sake he is ready to offer all he owns, his life.

Lowell allows the poet’s prayer to construct gradually the dramatic tone of the poem, and gives it plenty of space, following the poet listing all the suffering he faced in order to fulfil his artistic dream.

The dramatic pitch arrives at the end of the prayer, which reveals his ultimate offerings to the Moon, his Goddess: ‘On this stone, in this urn/ I pour my heart and watch it burn,/ Myself the sacrifice’ (51-53). At this point, Lowell ends the poem with a couplet separated graphically from the rest of the lyric: ‘From the altar, bathed in moonlight,/ The smoke rose straight in the quiet night’ (55-56). This break underlines the distance and the isolation suffered by the poet, and it also raises questions to the reader-listeners about whether and by whom the poet’s pain can be relieved. The pause serves both to keep the attention of her reader-listener and to strengthen the relationship between the ‘I’ and audience: they both (‘I’ and audience) are waiting for what will happen next. This is one of strategies Lowell uses in her poems and illuminates how the performative aspect of poetry was present in her mind since the beginning. These two last lines are perhaps the most significant of the poem; the preposition ‘from’ signals a shift, emphasising the separation of the two worlds: that inhabited by the poet and that inhabited by the Moon, his Goddess. Lowell then slowly switches focus, moving her eye from bottom to top, from the static position of the poet—bowed and under the tree, to the ‘swinging’ Moon in the sky. The contrast between the poet’s static position, established in the first line, is highlighted by the slowness of the on-going external nocturnal life—from

the moon swinging ‘slow across the sky’ (15), a waving pine tree (16), to the ‘smoke’ going straight up to the sky. All this makes the poet’s pain more acute and striking. In the face of the distance of the shining Moon, the poet feels keenly his isolation and uselessness, remaining ‘Empty and silent’ (49).

In the first lines, the adjective ‘empty’ is used by the ungendered ‘I’: ‘Before the Altar, bowed, he stands/ with empty hands’ (1-2); but at the end of the lyric, the poet himself declares to kneel before his Goddess, ‘empty and silent’ (49). The poet’s use of the same adjective as the external observer might suggest a shift in position, a contact between the ungendered ‘I’ and the poet, suggesting an identification of Lowell with her poet character, as Damon, among other critics, sustained, but the final couplets underline a lack of sympathy and involvement in the poet’s despair. Lowell is not trying to elicit the reader-listener’s sympathy for the desperate poet, but she seems to question that Romantic idea of a desperate and isolated poet, which is so distant from her view. In one of her essays, *The Process of Making Poetry*, published a few years later and addressing her experience of the poetic process, she asserts that ‘it is not day-dream, but an entirely different psychic state and one peculiar to itself’ (24).⁷ According to her, ‘emotion, apprehended or hidden [...] can rouse the subconscious into action’ (25). Before the altar, her sketch poet remains ‘empty and silent’; no action comes from him, but a feeling of failure and desperation. Considering himself as a born poet, he relates with his metaphysical world, of which he asks for inspiration and help and to which he is ready to give his life back; the rest of the world appears distant and the positions assumed by all elements in Lowell’s poem—the moon, the altar, the poet—emphasise the separation and the distance.

In the preface to *Can Grande’s Castle* (1918), Lowell digs deeper on this matter, and explicitly states that that the poet cannot remain in an ‘ivory tower’ and watch the world from there. In this attitude Lowell sees ‘the real decadence: to see through the eyes of dead men.’⁸ The poet before the altar, although in an open space, remains ‘shut up’ in his imaginary ‘ivory tower.’ The

⁷ Lowell, Amy. ‘The Process of Making Poetry.’ *Poetry and Poets: Essays*. New York: Biblio Tannen, 1971. pp. 24-30. Although the precise date of this essay seems to be untraceable, its similarities with ‘Why We Should Read Poetry’ (1914) and ‘Poetry, Imagination, and Education’ (1917), suggest it was written between 1914 and 1917.

⁸ Lowell, Amy. *Can Grande’s Castle*. Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1918. p. viii.

reference to the smoke in the final couplet, in particular its verticality, reinforces the poet's sense of distance and exclusion from the world. In addition, the smoke emphasises the idea of uselessness and finitude, grounded both in the ephemeral state of the burning substances and in the lack of any response or participation from the external world. This theme has a particular appeal for Lowell, and she developed it in 'Apples of Hesperides,' originally the first and subsequently the third poem in her debut collection. The two lyrics overlap and differ. Reading them in parallel, the differences in atmosphere are immediately clear: 'Glinting golden through the tree,/ Apples of Hesperides' (1-2).

While in 'Before the Altar' the poet's distress is reinforced by the plainness and misery of the surroundings, here, the isolated condition and distance is set in another intangible world, but this time it is one of beauty. Lowell presents the Apples of Hesperides through a game of lights and movements: 'through the moon-pierced warp of night' (3) they are swung by 'the kissing breeze' (5). The attempt to seize that magnificence, to enter into contact with it, by 'a poor duped mortal' (12) who thinks he can 'possess the golden-glistening/ Apples of Hesperides!' (13-15) is revealed in vain, and Lowell closes the lyric with the image of the apples 'yielding to no man's desire' (20), and remain 'glowing with a saffron fire,/ Splendid, unassailed, the golden/ Apples of Hesperides!' (21-23). The isolation remains, but embraced now in a context of beauty. Both poems are set in open spaces; the abundance of adjectives in 'The Apples of Hesperides' (significantly reduced in 'Before the Altar'), mostly relate to the visual sphere, and reinforce the richness of the place described. Lowell also plays with a gradation of lights and colours to underline the sensual quality of the elements in the lyric—pale, golden, radiant, saffron fire, yellow. In addition, whereas the position assumed by all the elements in 'Before the Altar' conveys the idea of straight lines, which reduce and limit the space itself, in 'The Apples of Hesperides' the elements on display—whether apples, or moon, or swarm of bees—all recall an implicit and explicit roundness, soliciting a more pleasant, desirable, and sensual atmosphere. The movement is not from bottom to top, but circular; the distance of the apples both from the ground and the sky is demonstrated, and there is always a circular response from each of the elements that Lowell weaves together. They respond through their peculiarities and varieties: the moon shooting 'pale shafts of yel-

low light' (4), which are, in turn, 'swaying the kissing breeze' (5) that itself 'swings the treasure, golden-gleaming' (6) apples. However, the apples themselves—'far and lofty' (7)—remain 'orbed, and glittering and pendent' (16). In their response to each other, the elements remain detached and isolated in their position; at the end, a taste of solitariness and futility is implied once again.

Lowell explores this issue from a different (and somewhat unusual) angle in another poem from *A Dome*, in the sonnet 'The Starling' situated at the end of the second section. Sterne's *Sentimental Journey* gives her the occasion to go further with her point. The refrain 'I can't get out,' which obsessed Sterne's character Yorick, is quoted at the beginning of the sonnet and becomes her litmus test. Lowell constructs a parallel between the human condition and the imprisoned bird. She opens with the bird's speaking, and, in using the first person, creates an intimacy between the reader-listener and the bird itself: 'Forever the impenetrable wall/ Of self confines my poor soul' (1-2). She gives a soul to it, and, gradually, a self-awareness of its isolated condition: 'I never see the towering white clouds roll/ Before a sturdy wind, save through the small/ Barred window of my jail' (3-5), the starling laments. Later on, the bird realises that being cut out of the world (7-8), limits both its experience and the strength of its creativity: 'My thoughts are grown uneager and depressed/ Through being always mine, my fancy's wings/ Are moulted and the feathers blown away' (9-11). The starling's limited world is a suffocating one because, at the centre of it, there is the starling itself, with no occasion of sharing or communication. Lowell emphasises the isolation and the constraints suffered by the starling through images relating to the claustrophobic place in which the bird is enclosed: 'square hole,' 'rectangular,' 'small barred window.' It is from this prison that the bird's humanisation is reached in the last line, when its hidden desire, which is ultimately the source and the reason for its lamentations, is revealed: 'To be some other person for a day' (14). As in the case of many of Lowell's poems, the end addresses the main point she wants to focus on. Here is the substantive 'person' that she chooses and with which the starling identifies itself. It completes the starling's humanisation, and adds more drama to the bird's lamentation, because it is an unattainable desire, it being a bird. But the choice of this term, never investigated by critics, takes the parallel deeper, shedding new light on this sonnet. This neutral substantive, instead of man or

woman, suggests a different way to look at the human condition, without the constraints of two separate categories or roles that society provides: that of man or woman. The starling's desire becomes interchangeable, therefore, in terms of sex, because both man and woman can experience it or suffer from the impossibility of fulfilling it. In addition, 'person' recalls the idea of a human being characterised by rights and duties, but its etymological meaning is also strictly linked to the realm of art. In fact, it refers to any character embodied by an actor on a stage.

The use of this term, 'person,' with its legal and artistic implications, suggests an awareness from Lowell's side that her desire to inhabit the artistic field might be linked with rights: the right and the freedom to express herself as poet and female poet. It illuminates, then, the direction Lowell is taking. Both the poet's lament in 'Before the Altar' and the starling's wish in 'The Starling' question the artist's approach to the world and to art itself. They also question the limitation of experiences, the restricted angle or position from which the poet of 'Before the Altar,' 'The Starling' itself, and the 'Apples of Hesperides' watch the world. In particular, the poet and the starling struggle in vain to find a way out, while in the case of 'Apples of Hesperides' they remain 'splendid, and unassailed.' The poet's prayer to the Goddess, as his extreme act of salvation, takes place in an open, isolated space and receives no answer from the intangible world in which he entrapped himself. The starling is entrapped against its will, and yearns to change its position, even if for one day. Both of them experience isolation, just like the isolated watcher, or the excluded woman.

It is this isolated condition, the 'ivory tower' is favourable neither for the poet nor for a woman artist, as it amounts to an 'empty and silent' existence. It is Lowell's belief, as she exposes repeatedly in her essays and articles, that the experience of contact with the world, with reality, is one of the most important elements in the creative process. In the introduction to *Men, Women and Ghosts*, years later, identifying with 'the watcher,' Lowell made it clear that 'the watcher has used eyes, and ears, and heart, in watching.'⁹ In other words, the watcher /the poet has to be active in every sense. In the section 'The Boston Atheneum' (from *A Dome*), the long narrative poem of the same name

⁹ Lowell, Amy. *Men, Women and Ghosts*, Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1916. p. xii.

depicts a ‘watcher,’ again in a secluded place, although here it is a pleasant one.¹⁰ The opening line introduces the reverential and intimate tone of the long poem: ‘Thou dear and well-loved haunt of happy hours’ (1). Lowell speaks directly to the reader-listener using the first person and revealing her private feelings to her audience: ‘The crowd of casual readers, have I passed/Long, peaceful hours seated on the floor’ (5-6). But just five lines on, the speaker becomes ‘we’ (11), and maintains this position throughout the remaining one hundred and thirty-nine lines, mingling with those readers for whom ‘Reading at times, and at times simply dreaming, /The very room itself becomes a friend,/ The confidant of intimate hopes and fears’ (27-29).

As already illustrated in the Introduction to this study, Lowell has a great passion for books, and in this poem she emphasises the idea of reading as a private and unique experience and, although she associates with the community of readers, she also makes sure to distinguish herself from them. She believes that everyone makes different ‘requests’ of those books collected in The Boston Atheneum: ‘love and feel as well as think’ (40).

In ‘The Boston Atheneum’ as in ‘Eleonora Duse,’ Lowell insists on the different expectations of the audience, emphasising her belief in the multiplicity of experience.¹¹ The Bostonian poet opens her ‘poetic eye,’ moving around to set the limit of her scene, and in this ‘cinematographic’ approach she adds tension and expectation to poems which might otherwise have been didactic and static. She shifts her attention back and forth between the details of the rooms of the library and the emotions and feelings of the readers. Both the place and the books engender not only ‘pleasant thoughts’ but ‘possibilities before unguessed’ can now be born.

Her chosen adjectives and verbs recall images of fruitful gardens in order to emphasise the positive aspects of knowledge.¹²

A genial southern slope, warmed by the sun,
The flowers give their fragrance joyously
To the caressing touch of the hot moon;

¹⁰ The poem was written to protest against the selling of an old private building, the site of a library where Lowell herself had spent much of her time.

¹¹ ‘Eleonora Duse’ is discussed in Chapter Two of this study.

¹² The relevance of knowledge in terms of the body and the erotic has been discussed in Chapter Six.

So books give up the all of what they mean
Only in a congenial atmosphere.

Lowell's 'gay garden' is a paradise with no sign of sin. In *A Jury of Her Peers: Celebrating American Women Writers from Anne Bradstreet to Annie Proulx*, Elaine Showalter, discussing the presence of gardens in the works of Edith Wharton (1862-1937), notes that in Wharton's time many women writers 'identified writing and the imagination with a lush maternal garden and reading intellect with an immense paternal library.'¹³ In Lowell's garden-library, the maternal and paternal touch—the 'caressing touch of the hot moon'—are merged together, and respond to each other in mutual understanding and commitment. The 'gay garden' is perceived as a place beyond the limitations of gender and prescribed roles; it is the ideal community Lowell was looking for: a community which could break the 'walls' and offer her the chance to take an active part in society.

Unlike 'Before the Altar' and 'Apples of Hesperides,' both 'The Starling' and 'The Boston Atheneum' are set in a closed space. If the place in which the starling is entrapped highlighted the starling's condition of prisoner, the enclosed space of the Boston Atheneum library represents an ideal prison, voluntarily entered; a safe place in which everyone can think, dream, and experiment with another dimension, another self. In that place the readers can reach a personal communion with the author's voice, but their experience shares the limitations of the place itself: it flourishes and takes forms inside the 'gay garden'—just like a performance in the theatrical space. The isolation experienced by the community of readers is the very opposite of that experienced by the starling: it is a shared experience, one that allows the silence of the book to speak, to transgress time and space, to reach other souls. Lowell's belief in the power of knowledge offered by books is not felt as a stereotype, or as a token, because it needs to be activated: 'books give the theme, our hearts the rest' (23). In the following lines she goes further, highlighting the significant link between life and artistic work, 'For books are more than books, they are life,/ The very heart and core of ages past' (41-42), bringing to light the relevance of

¹³ Showalter, Elaine. *A Jury of Her Peers: Celebrating American Women Writers from Anne Bradstreet to Annie Proulx*. New York: Random House, 2010. p. 273.

the author's experience based on contact with the world. Ultimately, in fact, books are: 'The reason why men lived, and worked and died,/ The essence and quintessence of their lives' (43-44). The relationship between both the text and the author, and the text and the reader, appears to be another of Lowell's primary concerns, and it is manifested here for the first time. She makes a parallel between the action of the sun and the book, emphasizing the 'creative' nature of the sun. Under its hot 'caressing touch' (36) 'books give up the all of what they mean'(37). However, both place, sun and book are not sufficient, because there is a need for the book to be 'touched by reverent hands, and read/ By those who love and feel as well and think (39-40).

The text and consequently the authors themselves need to maintain a relationship and contact with the living world at all times. Lowell explores how these authors and their 'voices' can be kept alive. She then highlights another aspect linked to the 'affinity' which the authors and their texts need to have with the reader in order to be brought to life, to be brought from the 'womb of time' into the present. Lowell becomes aware of the necessity of a voluntary act in order to make the invisible visible, to bring the silence into words or to put 'the subconscious into action.' This question of choice, unnoticed by critics, becomes the leitmotif on which she constructed her most celebrated poem, 'The Sisters,' already discussed in Chapter Six, where echoing Sappho's desire to be remembered some day, Lowell expresses her own desire:

I only hope that possibly some day
Some other woman with an itch for writing
May turn to me as I have turned to you
And chat with me a brief few minutes.¹⁴

How to give space, voice, and action to all those efforts so dear to her and the community of her fellows emerges as her individual quest—though not always overtly. It is, however, manifested here in an embryonic state. Lowell's use of recurring images, and the recurring situations in which she posits her characters—investigating their limitations, constraints and their isolation—becomes

¹⁴ Lowell, Amy. *What's O' Clock*. Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1925. p.136.

her way of exploring these issues, which will become her primary concern in many of her other poems. This strategy she employs is useful in illuminating how she openly begins to question the restrictions put on female desire.

7.2. *'Sword Blades and Poppy Seed'*

Sword Blades and Poppy Seed, published two years later in 1914, opens with a long narrative poem of four hundred and fifty-eight lines, which takes the collection's title and has much in common with 'Before the Altar,' previously discussed.¹⁵ The character is again a poet; he is poor and desperate and tells his story directly in the first person. He scrutinises everything with a disillusioned and pessimistic attitude, speaking of his distressed mind, and his encounter with a strange old man—'a dealer of words'—during 'a drifting, April, twilight sky' (1), with a wind blowing 'the puddles dry' (2) along an old wharf. Although the mention of April might suggest to the reader-listener anticipation of a season of hope or regeneration, the poet's perception links it tightly with the winter, the 'dead' season and his desperate state. The poet, unable to write, looks at the table and his lines, spread on several papers, seem to him 'a graveyard, full of coffins waiting burial' (9-14). These lines highlight his lunatic attitude.

The image of the poet in 'Before the Altar' packing his poet's dreams and tossing them into the urn, is here revisited, and now, the poet of 'Sword Blades and Poppy Seed' gives names to his material—'vile abortions' (15)—which break into pieces, and finally swears: 'to be the dupe of hope no more' (17). He manifests the same feelings of defeat and disillusionment, which are now exposed and investigated in a different surrounding, not before an altar but in the heart of a city, a city that 'shivered in the cold' (8). This change of setting might suggest that finally her poet has left his metaphysical world and become part of it. In providing a visionary atmosphere in the poem and emphasising the poet's tendency to give human characteristics to inanimate things,

¹⁵ Lowell, *Sword Blades*. pp. 3-30.

Lowell reinforces his displacement from a reality he perceives in his confused, irrational mood.

The sun appears ‘discouraged’ (24) while the talk of the old man he encountered that evening ‘became an element’ (53), and when he enters into his house, ‘The house stood guessed, and shy/ It peered at the stranger warily’ (89-90). The poet’s visionary approach is grounded on the poet’s digressions from his own perceptions, which posit him again in a world in which he occupies the centre and consequently remains isolated: ‘I walked as though some opiate/ Had stung and dulled my brain’ (71-72), and later on: ‘Again I felt as though a trance/ Had dimmed my faculties’ (362-363).

Lowell gradually prepares the scene for a *coup de théâtre*, one that questions again the position of the poet in the face of reality and his ability to read it. Once more she puts the poet in a corner, and through his words and gaze the reader-listener sees the objects of the room—‘A little shop with its various ware/ Spread on shelves with nicest care’ (91-92)—where the two men have a conversation. The poet lists the objects in a vortex of images which possess all gradations of the visual sphere: colours, shapes are all at once perceived. ‘There was dusky blue of Wedgewood ware,/ The carved, white figures fluttering there/Like leaves adrift upon the air’ (101-103).

The poet’s last glance to some vases echoes the urn in ‘Before the Altar’ but here its content has not the same charm and inspiration, because in that sealed Chinese urn contain ‘mortal harms’ which inspire ‘thoughts impure’ ‘vicious thinking (130-135).’

Through his observations he tries to read the reality; all his observations lead him to assume the old man’s occupation: ‘ “Ah, I see,”/ Said I, “you deal in pottery” ’ (135-136). And it is at this point that his watching proves to be wrong: ‘The old man turned and looked at me./ Shook his head gently. “No,” said he.’ (137-138). Lowell highlights the abrupt shift into reality—or another reading of reality—with a break in the narration of the poet, which is resumed not with a precise answer from the old man but through his action. The poet watches, under a new spell, the man who takes a Toledo blade hidden under his cloak. (139-143). This new vision forces him to look around again at the room, but this time he explores the walls where there are various swords, scimitars, arrows, stilettos and blades from all over the world. From now on, the narration

increases its level of drama and threat and fear; every object that comes into the poet's vision, he perceives as an offensive weapon which throws him in a state of confusion. (223-224). His imagination makes him 'nerveless and shaking' (243) until the voice of the man brings him back. It is now that the man explains his business in the world.

I sell no tools for murders here.
Of what are you thinking! Please clear
Your mind of such imaginings.
Sit down. I will tell you of these things' (246-250).

What the man sells is 'poppy seed./ Lethean dreams for those in need' (265-266). It is halfway through the long narration that the old man introduces himself through his printed card: 'I read the legend, "Ephraim Bard./ Dealer in Words." And that was all' (296-297). The references to 'The Boston Atheneum' are here unmistakable, but, in the old man's conception, 'All books are either dreams or swords,/ You can cut, or you can drug with words' (301-302). Lowell again emphasises the power of 'words,' but unlike in 'The Boston Atheneum,' she links them with their economical side, Mentioning the latter aspect, Lowell also allows herself to enter in the text; like the old man, she too 'inherited' this ability from ancestry. (306-310).

The old man makes a distinction between the scope of his poppy seed and the swords that threatened the poet. While the latter 'are purchased by men who feel/ The need of stabbing society's heel,/ Which egotism has brought them to think/ Is set on their necks' (319-322), the poppy seed, 'the other half of my business deals/ With visions and fancies' (329-330).

The old man then offers his favours to the poet. Unlike in 'Before the Altar,' where the poet is the one who offers his life, in 'Swords Blades and Poppy Seed,' the situation is reversed, and the old man is asking for the poet's life in exchange for his poppy seed. The long narrative poem ends with the poet accepting the deal. In spite of the resolution provided by the poet's bargain, the poem leaves the reader-listener puzzled as to what will happen next. If in 'Before the Altar,' the smoke going straight up to the sky seals the indifference of nature, leaving the poet in his distress, here, this poet is pushed into

an empty street: 'I stumbled out in the morning hush,/ As down the empty street a flush/ Ran level from the rising sun' (455-457).

Again, Lowell plays with vertical lines, which bring the two separate worlds into contact—the earthly one, where the street is empty, and the ethereal one inhabited by the sun. And again the poet is excluded: the ray of sun touches the empty street, not the poet, who remains passive testimony of this contact. The final line is shadowed by an atmosphere of hopeless continuity in its repetition: 'Another day was just begun' (458). With 'another,' Lowell reaffirms the isolation and exclusion of the poet from the reality of the world, suggesting his inability to read the reality through his stereotyped idea of it and its role. Both characters of the poem deal with words, but they reflect different experiences, expectations and perceptions. The dealer of words shows an awareness of what the others can do with them; the poet is 'dizzy, stumbled'—he is in search of what he can do with the 'words.' He wants more from them, he wants life, reality, not only ideas, images, or dreams. He is searching for the truth of life—as the poet/Pound in 'Astigmatic'—but he remains outside of life itself. He remains a watcher but not an active one, continuously trading his life.

The echoes in these poems were never investigated by critics. In particular the dexterity shown here by Lowell to maintain an open dialogue between the text and her own experience. Critics also failed to notice how relevant and serious Lowell's path into the artistic world had become. Her long narrative poem, dealing with distressing situations, became her favourite kind, and she continued to open her collections with them. In so doing, she continued to explore the themes of exclusion and isolation and, in the first poem of her third collection, *Men, Women and Ghosts* (1916), she goes one step further.¹⁶ In her preface, she expresses her point of view more clearly, exposing her themes and her approach to them. This is the book that marks Lowell's experimentation with 'polyphonic prose,' which, according to her, explores the 'possibilities of *vers libre*' (ix) and gives more space to her belief in the oral aspect of poetry, in its sounds and rhythms. In *Poetry as Spoken Art*, Lowell highlights the performative aspect of poetry, emphasising the role of voice and body. Polyphonic prose is connected, in fact, with the way how it is 'spoken,' a

¹⁶ Lowell, Amy. *Men, Women and Ghosts*. Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1916.

rhythm which is linked to its speaker. The internal rhymes on which it is however built, rely on that internal ‘breath’ of its author.

At the end of 1916 Lowell had a distinguished place in the artistic world, and she continued her artistic search, her individual struggle for a full right of citizenship for herself and her poetry. With *Men, Women, and Ghosts*, she made a definite turn, and opened ‘windows’—as she points out in the preface of the book—, returning to her leitmotifs, always present in the first poems of her two previous collections. But this time, she focused on another kind of exclusion and constraint, which openly concerned the female world and questioned the social rules. Her quest to break the wall of isolation, manifested in the poems of *A Dome*, revealed a less individualistic tendency.

7.3. ‘Patterns’

The poem that opens the first section of *Men, Women and Ghosts* is the well-known ‘Patterns,’ which first appeared in the August issue of the *Little Review* magazine in 1915, and was well received.¹⁷ Again, it is a long narrative poem dealing with a character trapped in a distressing situation, but this time, the character is a woman who tells her story directly. Lowell provides the poem with an historical background, setting it in the seventeenth century, during the war in Flanders. It became very popular as an antiwar poem at the time.

Lowell combines two strong themes: war, and the constraints endured by women. The latter aspect marks the direction she undertook concerning the claim of freedom and her awareness of it. ‘Patterns’—divided into seven strophes of different lengths—opens the first section, *Figurines in Old Saxe*.¹⁸ Frequent internal rhymes, an abundance of assonance and repetition, both of the same words—garden, pattern—and their sounds—down, gown—keep the one hundred and seven lines linked together. Lowell again sets the scene within a

¹⁷ Damon, S. Foster. *Amy Lowell: A Chronicle*. Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1935. p. 318. Damon records fully Sara Teasdale’s appreciative letter received by Lowell two months after the publication of ‘Patterns.’

¹⁸ The other four sections are ‘Bronze Tablets,’ ‘War Pictures,’ ‘The Overgrown Pasture,’ and ‘The Clocks Tick a Century.’

closed place: a beautiful garden, full of blowing flowers, where her female character walks:

I walk down the garden paths,
And all the daffodils
Are blowing, and the bright blue squills.
I walk down the patterned garden-paths
In my stiff, brocaded gown (1-5).

The repetition of her actions highlights her waiting status, while her 'stiff' dress conveys the physical constraints she endures. Emphasising the blooming of the daffodils as the visual sign of their freedom, Lowell highlights the two separate worlds: the lady's feelings of constraint provoked by her dress, in contrast to the life she sees in the garden, changes her mood. Sitting under a lime tree, the lady, responds emotionally to the blossoming of the tree, and suddenly weeps when 'one small flower has dropped upon my bosom' (27). In the following lines, her tears mingle with the incessant 'waterdrops' (28) of a marble fountain. That 'dripping' emphasizes her sexual desire: 'The dripping never stops./ Underneath my stiffened gown/ Is the softness of a woman bathing in a marble basin,' and her fantasy takes a sensual path (31-33). Apparently the garden, with its lushness and vitality, moves the lady's emotions and entraps her in fantastic and sensual images of herself with her lover: 'I would be the pink and silver as I ran along the paths,/ And he would stumble after,/ Bewildered by my laughter' (43-45).

The images of her dreaming encounter with her lover follow one-by-one in a sensual crescendo. Lillian Faderman sees this as 'a clichéd heterosexual fantasy scene of a pink silver female surrendering her soft and willing body to a heavy-booted man in dashing uniform.'¹⁹ She seems to miss the key function of the scene in the economic strategy of the poem. It is true that Lowell plays with the cliché—with great skill—but she does so to reinforce the sudden change of the lady's position. In addition, it serves to raise doubts about what is considered 'natural' and 'normal' for a woman, in terms of her expectations

¹⁹ Faderman, Lillian. 'Ada Russell in Amy Lowell's Life and Work.' *Amy Lowell, American Modern*. Eds. Adrienne Munich and Melissa Bradshaw. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2004. p. 66.

and desires. The bosom, where the lime-tree flower has fallen, is the 'poetical site' where feelings of love are kept, and provides the ground for her sensual fantasy, which responds to the reader-listener as well. But it is also where secrets are kept, and Lowell introduces, soon after the sensual scene, an unexpected turn: 'Underneath the fallen blossom/ In my bosom,/ Is a letter I have hid' (59-61).

The poem climaxes here and reality finally hits the lady, through a letter announcing the death of her lover: 'Madam we regret to inform you that Lord Hartwell/ Died in action Thursday se'nnight' (63-64). The official tone of the letter restarts the situation and the lady begins her walk again, repeating the same sequence of the first strophe: 'And I walked into the garden,/ Up and down the patterned paths,/ In my stiff, correct brocade' (71-73). The climax is great; the repetition of 'up and down' expresses the extent of the lady's disruption, and creates expectations about her next move. In the last strophe the lady's fantasy is again at work, and she foresees her solitary future, a passing of seasons, and her walking in her 'stiff, brocaded gown.'

I shall go
Up and down
In my gown (96-99).

The conventions now become the reality she has to confront, because: 'the man who should loose me is dead,/ Fighting with the Duke in Flanders,/ In a pattern called war' (104-106). It is at this moment that the lady's howl comes, sudden and with all its questions and condemnations: 'Christ! What are patterns for?' (107). With this utterance, Lowell emphasises the coldness of the official letter, making her character alive, closer and more readable to her audience. Unlike the characters of the previous poems considered here, the lady acts; her howl is more powerful than the actions taken by any of the previous characters. The poem does not reveal whether the lady's future will be as she predicts in the last strophe, and the omission raises doubts about the 'pattern' in general, and the patterned life of women in particular. Nonetheless, her cry challenges the world outside the beautiful garden. Compared to the other opening narrative poems in Lowell's collections, where her characters remain entrapped and ex-

cluded by the world (because they submitted themselves to it and are unable to move on) here, a woman takes a stand—she questions the rules. Lowell underlines this point, emphasising the physical position of the lady when, after reading the letter, she meditates upon her future. She again takes a look around, noticing the blossom season she compares herself to the ‘blue and yellow flowers’ which ‘stood up proudly in the sun’ and concludes:

I stood upright too, Held rigid to the pattern
By the stiffness of my gown (73-78).

Lowell plays skillfully with adjectives and adverbs to highlight the difference between a ‘free’ will and a constrained one: the flowers are standing proudly and open to the energetic and positive influence of the sun, while the lady’s position is dictated by the rigidity of her dress, which restricts her choices and regulates her movements as well. She intentionally uses the metaphor of the dress to focus on the constraints and limitations of the woman’s role. The standing position of the lady, reinforced by her howl, marks her proud challenge. Roles and positions, as well as all the facts of life, will from now on be subject to greater scrutiny in Lowell’s poems.

The relevant point in the poem ‘Patterns,’ is how Lowell uses the lady’s gaze to manifest the complexities of her situation and to encourage her character—and her audience—to question it. Moving from internal to external insights—her emotions, her tears, the stiffness of her dress, the colours and the smells of the garden—Lowell’s character and the surroundings come to be known through the lady’s gaze. Like a game of mirrors, meditating on the uniqueness of every element in the garden she sees, she suddenly recognises her uniqueness as well: ‘I too am a rare/ Pattern’ (7-8.) The lady acknowledges it from the beginning, linking her uniqueness with the beauty of the garden, placing herself under a traditional male gaze. Gradually the drama and the irony of the kind of uniqueness she attributes to herself comes to the surface and the ‘freedom’ showed by the on-going life of the garden is the mirror into which her vision of herself is smashed. But she is rare indeed, and at the end, after the letter, she resumes her contact with the fatal reality, and questions the ‘pattern.’ Ultimately, she questions her own ‘pattern’ as well.

The female character in 'Patterns' does not remain before an altar; she does not harbour the impossible desires of the starling, keep her equidistant position from the ground and the sky, or walk into 'another day' with any poppy seed. Her final howl indicates her sudden and new awareness that the pattern might not belong to her, and most likely she has not freely chosen it or contributed to its construction. Lowell does not explicitly tell if the situation her female character endures is common to every woman; she again leaves it up to her reader-listeners, but she has spread sufficient doubts. In this and in other poems, here already discussed, Lowell shows her subjectivity, but with a tendency to distance her poetic landscape from those feelings of 'victims of love' that categorised female writings and gained them a general acceptance by both critics and audience. Criticism of social codes, of constraints and limitations, and of war, enter into her poetry in a subtle way. If in 'Patterns' she does not clearly state what is behind the dilemma of her character (but only hints at it) in 'The Sisters,' written six years later, she does so emphatically:

'Whose fault? Why let us say
To be consistent, Queen Victoria's.
But really, not to over-rate the queen,
I feel obliged to mention Martin Luther,
And behind him the long line of Church Fathers (158-162).

In *A Critical Fable*, written the same year as 'The Sisters,' she names them again using her ironic touch, showing the maturation she has reached. At the core of the poems here analysed, her concern is with the stereotyped image of a male poet who is unable to understand or embrace the complexities of the female world. His assumed universalistic gaze, which has to be sufficient for both woman and man, is questioned by Lowell. The isolation that causes the despair of the poet in 'Before the Altar' or in 'Sword Blades and Poppy Seed' is the same experienced by the ungendered 'I' in 'The Bostonian Athenaeum,' all grounded on the one-way gaze forged by society of her time. The gendered 'I' in 'Patterns,' through her final howl, questions the social code, the construction of both femininity and masculinity. That howl marks Lowell's claim for the right of a full citizenship in the artistic world—much more evident in her

text than her lesbianism—and explains the success of her career at her time. Her relentless confrontation with the themes concerning the isolation and constraints or limitations endured by the poet in her earlier poems are congenial to her acknowledgement of those endured by the female poet, and not only in the artistic field. Lowell uses her own female perspective, and she took seriously her work to sing and write of human experience. Undoubtedly, she strived to embrace the broadest possible experiences of human beings through the medium of poetry.

7.4. Lowell's Unstable Position in Feminist Studies

Since her first publication, Lowell's quest, set down in the space given to her by poetry, is clearly retraceable in many of her narrative poems, as exemplified in this study. The search for a poetical identity in Lowell's work, as conducted in feminist studies until now, runs the risk of pushing Lowell merely from one category to another, or belittling her achievement as a mere representation of her social position—which is so far from the reality of what she was, in fact, striving to achieve. Lowell's struggle was first and foremost about claiming her right to exist and be vocal in both spheres, public and private; it was her claim for full citizenship in the artistic field beyond rigid categories based essentially on sexual differences.

Critics are keen to read and praise Lowell's work mostly for her love lyrics, diminishing or often ignoring the social denunciations that she diffused in them. Her struggle to enlarge the audience of poetry, the 'Cinderella of Arts'—as Monroe called her in her first editorial in *Poetry*—brings her unexpectedly nearer to the struggle of those women of the first wave of feminism—and certainly closer than the critics realised.²⁰ This less investigated aspect makes Lowell's position among feminist critics unstable, and reveals the problems with attributing her to one fixed category. Critics, when exploring the relationship between her persona and her texts, focus mostly on the former, reinforcing the idea of Lowell as 'ruler,' a rich, competitive woman with nothing

²⁰ Monroe, Harriet. 'The Motive of the Magazine.' *Poetry* 1.1. (October 1912): p. 27.

better to do—since she did not marry and was not conventionally attractive—than compete with male artists and attempt to conquer the poetic realm. Invariably they failed to consider her work in any other context. The variety of fictional voices, and the themes with which she used to question herself and her society in her poems, interrogate not only the assumed universality of masculinity, but also the different labels that Lowell gained among critical feminist studies.

In her essay ‘Amy Lowell’s Keats: Reading Straight, Writing Lesbian,’ Margaret Homans underlined the complexities of retracing Lowell’s poetic identity using, for example, our contemporary ‘analytical lenses of gender and sexuality,’ and cautioned against their ‘power to predetermine our selections and our readings’ (321).²¹ But Homans did not offer any other perspective and, ultimately, she reached the same conclusions as Lillian Faderman, who was the first to notice the lesbian topic in Lowell’s love poems.²²

Although Lowell’s explicit love or lesbian lyrics, in terms of quantity, do not comprise half of her total poetical production, they question the assumptions on which her labels are grounded; whether, for example, a lesbian poet shows her lesbianism only in her love lyrics. Homans also pointed out that the term ‘lesbian’ was not used in Lowell’s time, as it is today, and that the friendship between women (that ‘romantic friendship, or Boston Marriage,’) had not yet been pathologised or condemned. Although she contested the efforts of scholars and feminist critics (such as Faderman, Gubar, and Walker) to make Lowell fit into ‘these present-day categories’ (321) in her conclusions she does not go further than repositioning Lowell in the lesbian category, and fails to offer significant theoretical points to advance discussion about the complexity of retracing a sustainable poetic identity for a woman poet. In her critical analysis, in fact, Homans contested the very often interchangeable position of ‘persona and personal’ in feminist studies, but then, in reaffirming Lowell’s love for women, she supported her thesis alluding to Lowell’s poetic identification with a male voice, the English poet John Keats.

²¹ Homans, Margaret. ‘Amy Lowell’s Keats’: Reading Straight, Writing Lesbian.’ *The Yale Journal of Criticism* 14.2 (2001): pp. 319-351. Hereafter: ‘Amy Lowell’s Keats.’

²² Faderman, Lillian. *Surpassing the Love of Men*. New York: William Morrow and Company, 1981. In Chapter Two, ‘Writing Lesbian,’ pp. 392-399, she noticed the ‘lesbian’ theme in Lowell’s love lyrics, in particular in ‘Two speak together.’

Homans grounded Lowell's affiliation with Keats on the basis of the two volumes Lowell wrote on his life, published a few months before her death. According to Homans, Lowell's love for women, as well as her vocation and identity as a poet, 'came into existence in complex interaction with her reading of Keats' (322), but she forgets to take into consideration what Lowell herself declared about her 'vocation' in the letter to Eunice Tietjens. More interested in her Keatsian-centric thesis, Homans did not investigate other possibilities. She asserted that it was Lowell's love for Keats that pushed her to write Keats' biography, in order to 'correct [...] his misogyny toward the woman he loved' who, in Homans' thesis, became 'Lowell's object of desire' as well, and this increased Lowell's general awareness of her own affection for women (326) and made her identify with Keats' male voice.

Homans constructed a picture of cross-identification with Keats at the centre—his effeminate reputation, and the women he loved and mistreated—and on the margins, Lowell, who ultimately took on Keats' identity in order to bring 'into being her own complex identifications and desires' (327). Homans reversed, here, Faderman's position when she suggested that 'the straight Keats, "virile" and desiring of women, is here to speak Lowell's desire for a woman' (339). But why Lowell gives 'textual existence to a remarkable fluidity in gender and sexual orientation' (according to Homans), moving from 'the mythic figure of a straight man' (347), is not clear. Not very well supported either is Lowell's alleged need to identify herself in Keats' male attitude and voice, in order to manifest her lesbianism (which, as Homans rightly demonstrated, was not judged as improper conduct by society in Lowell's time). In spite of her brilliant insight into Lowell's poetry, Homans's thesis elicits questions concerning the legitimisation of a lesbian experience through a male one. It also casts doubt on the basis of which experience the legitimisation should occur: the one experienced in the body of the text or the one experienced by Lowell in her life?

Furthermore, why should a textual lesbian experience be a permanent thing, and not considered a momentary identification, like, for example, that which actor and actress appear to experience on the stage? If in her text Lowell emphasises an attraction to and affection for women, this must be related to the text itself, not necessarily to her real life lesbian experience, if she had one.

Just as actors playing a part on the stage are not the person they play, so too can be the case with Lowell's poems.

This analogy seems particularly fitting given Lowell's relationship with the theatre, and given that her 'living muse' was herself an actress. On the stage, the actors and the actresses 'act' the conventional and recognisable aspects of one type of character or another, but in terms of subjectivity, they are not this or that character. And the part of themselves that they put into their fictional character (and not only in terms of body, voice and so on) has its finality and justification in the fictional context of the protected and limited space of the stage, or, as in Lowell's case, in the limits of the body of her text. The multiple speakers in Lowell's poems, in particular in her long narrative ones, which 'imitate' or give signification to different identities, suggest a parallel close to this kind of theatrical 'performativity.'

The fluidity of both identity and of sexual identification in the body of the text can have, then, another direction, because everyone, no matter the gender, can recognise one 'performativity' of his/her corporeal signification through the identification with this or that character, as Lowell experienced during her epiphanic moment. According to Butler, 'acts, gestures, enactments, generally construed, are *performative* in the sense that the essence or identity they otherwise purport to express are *fabrications* manufactured and sustained through corporeal signs and other discursive means.'²³

Borrowing Butler's theory of gender performativity, I argue that in Lowell's case, in 'fabricating' the multiple voices of her characters in her text (through which she was able to express her points of view about the role of the poet and poetry), Lowell manifested a tendency to escape from categorisations, to elude 'patterns' of any kind.

Multiplicity of voices, then, and not identities—although they may incorporate, in terms of concepts, ideas, taste for adjectives or verbs or sound, the experience of the author—perform their identity role only in the body of the text, and they don't substitute, correspond to or reflect the subjectivity of the author. If the gender and ungendered narrative voice Lowell chooses, and, in particular, the active position it assumes in her love poems, questions the male

²³ Butler, Judith. *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. New York: Routledge, 2007 (1990). p. 185.

construction of female sexual desires as well as female ‘incompetence,’ in giving a poetic language to those desires, it also questions feminist thought about a universal bond of sisterhood grounded on the conception of equality—often seen through the lens of a white middle class’ perspective (as Audre Lorde, among many, pointed out). It also challenges the notion that every lesbian’s erotic desire has to be focused essentially on her lover’s body.

Homans’ essay, which clearly converses with Lillian Faderman’s identification of Lowell as lesbian, alongside her Keatsian thesis, points out the limits of reading Lowell’s identity, giving more weight to her sexed subject, without operating a balance between her ‘public and private’ spheres, and in particular without taking into consideration the cultural context into which Lowell was operating.²⁴ Lowell’s concern about the isolation of the poet is strictly linked with the cultural battle in favour of poetry that flourished at the turn of the twentieth century. Lowell assumed in herself the ‘mission,’ as Monroe emphasised in her first editorial of *Poetry* in 1912 to popularise poetry and to find her own contemporary, poetic voice. This was the position from which Lowell also explored her female desires, offering her female gaze as opposed to the predominant male one.

After her epiphany, Lowell recognised poetry as the congenial space in which she could respond to her individual need for creativity and participation in society, grounding it all on the performative aspect of poetry. To the question she posited in her essay ‘Why We Should Read Poetry,’ Lowell offered her answer: ‘We should read poetry because only in that way can we know man in all his moods.’²⁵ It was through that medium and with this belief that, at the age of twenty-eight, she reclaimed her right to speak for herself not only as a poet, but as a woman. She was claiming her right of a full citizenship in the artistic field. Through her poetical language, she expressed her different vision of life, death and love, in a male-oriented world, questioning as well—in a pioneering way—the notion of pleasure that eludes definition and quantification. She brought to light female desires that defied the conventional masculine con-

²⁴ The debate is referred to in Lillian Faderman’s book, *Surpassing the Love of Men: Romantic Friendship and Love between Women from the Renaissance to the Present*. New York: William Morrow and Company, 1981. Notable is the reference in Homans’ title essay which echoes Faderman’s chapter title ‘Writing Lesbianism.’

²⁵ Lowell, Amy. *Poetry and Poets*. New York: Biblio and Tannen, 1971. pp. 8-9.

cepts expressed in Mozart's opera *Don Giovanni* in which Leporello—Don Giovanni's servant—lists the women loved or conquered by his master.²⁶

From her privileged position, Lowell manifested her right to enjoy female creativity outside of her reproductive role. Her quest, first and foremost, was to establish her place as a woman and a woman poet, and find a balance between her love and her freedom to sing it. Her depiction of the poet's insistence on isolation—in 'Before the Altar' as well as in 'Sword Blades and Poppy Seed'—was her way of calling for a more active role for herself and others like her. In response to the cultural debate of her time, her notion of poetry and the role of the poet should be reconsidered. In understanding and confronting the issues of her time, she found her unique poetic voice, a voice that spoke not only for herself, but for all women who wished to question the constraints put upon them, whether in the artistic sphere, or in society at large. These latter aspects, overlooked by critics, have been explored in this last chapter and throughout this research work, through a re-reading of her poems and her articles.

²⁶ Mozart, Wolfgang Amadeus. *Don Giovanni*. Act I, Scene V.

Conclusion

Amy Lowell's marginalisation from literary history and the diminishment of her artistic achievements were primarily due to the prejudices and homophobia of her critics. The phallographic, patriarchal, and hierarchal society undoubtedly fostered the marginalisation of many female artists, as critics such as Sandra Gubar, Susan Gilbert, and Elaine Showalter have illustrated in their studies. Male critics such as Clement Wood and Horace Gregory have made it clear that, for them, the figure of Lowell as a wealthy, determined, unmarried woman takes precedence over her poetry. Feminist critics from Lilian Faderman in the 1980s to Melissa Bradshaw in the twenty-first century have utilised a prejudicial lesbian or queer lens on account of the lesbian themes in Lowell's love lyrics. Moreover, such criticism is largely limited to an American literary context due to the comparative lack of relevant critical studies in Europe. The few extant critical studies on Lowell have likewise focused on these lesbian themes at the expense of a more thorough consideration of her work and critical thought. Ultimately, many aspects of Lowell's personality and artistic achievements remain in the shadows, as discussed in the introduction.

The focus of this thesis has therefore been directed to these relatively unexplored areas. In the process, the thesis served to illuminate the role of the theatre in Lowell's work and to show how, in choosing Eleonora Duse as her living muse, Lowell took a subversive step to free herself from the constraints and prejudices of her time through the medium of poetry. As illustrated in Chapter One, Duse's interpretations of the lives and emotions of her female characters were more introverted than extroverted, and reliant on body language to express moral, sentimental, or sexual conflicts. Unlike Sarah Bernhardt, who was more interested in interacting with her audience and showing more of herself than the characters she played, Duse—through the internalisation of her characters' dilemmas—engaged in an intellectual conversation with the audience, demanding from them a more active role than they may have played in the past in order to share her experience with them. Moreover, critics

generally agree that Duse embodied the idea of the New Woman that bloomed with the first wave of feminism.

This study explored Lowell's critical and artistic achievements in light of Duse's inspirational role in her life. This new angle of investigation revealed that the poems Lowell devoted to her living muse, as discussed in Chapter Two, are far from simply an enthusiastic homage to Duse's great art as critics have hitherto assumed. Instead, these poems represent both Lowell's conscious attempt to re-narrate herself—her retrospective reconstruction—and to incorporate the artistic experience for women. This point was particularly relevant in highlighting Lowell's serious, in-depth involvement with poetry and its problematic aspects, such as the responsibility of the poet to include all subjects and themes in the body of a text. As discussed in Chapter Three, the new form of *vers libre*, which she strongly defended and constantly explained in her articles, offered more freedom in experimentation and development of its oral quality. Lowell's subversive choice of muse was also explored as a distinctive trait, which had been insufficiently investigated by critics. Unlike her contemporary fellows such as H.D. and Edna St. Vincent Millay, who were inspired to express their female desires through Sappho as a historical muse, Lowell was inspired by Duse, an actress of her time who embodied the new changes in the theatre. Although Lowell was not directly involved in the feminist movement, she could incorporate these ideas through Duse, and make them conform to her own vision.

As discussed in Chapter Five, Lowell's vision of sisterhood both underscores the question of choice and demonstrates her willingness to incorporate women's ideas and experiences. As she made clear through the fictional conversation with the three poet sisters introduced in 'The Sisters'—Sappho, Elizabeth Browning, and Emily Dickinson—the sisterhood bond must inspire and not entrap. Additionally, Duse's demand for an active audience found a response in Lowell's struggle to increase the readership for American poetry. In this light, Lowell's involvement with Imagism and her quarrel with Pound were considered in this dissertation.

Lowell's epiphany regarding her vocation on a 1902 evening in the Boston theatre catalysed the exploration of two significant aspects: the con-

struction of her love discourse discussed in Chapter Six and the expression of her poetic identity addressed in Chapter Seven.

Feminist critics have used the eroticism of Duse's performance as a lens through which to investigate Lowell's love lyrics in different ways. In *Amy Lowell, Diva Poet*, Melissa Bradshaw—one of the few critics who pushed the debate further—focused on those aspects of Lowell which linked her to a modern concept of 'diva' or fan-worshipper.¹ Bradshaw's new and interesting view of Lowell both freed her from the many grotesque characteristics attributed to her by male critics, and reestablished her within the cultural debate of her time. However, Bradshaw neglected Lowell's aspiration to surpass constraints and prejudices.

Lowell's constant appeal for freedom in art, evident in her articles and in *A Critical Fable*, continued in her love lyrics via themes of female eroticism and sensuality and a tendency to transcend gender. Her use of both ungendered and gendered speakers seemed deliberately inclusive. As discussed in Chapter Six, in Lowell's poems 'The Blue Scarf' or 'In a Garden,' the 'I' who longed for the presence of the beloved might be male or female, as Jamie Hovey and other critics had agreed, but not because Lowell intended to expose her lesbianism.² Her aim was instead to explore her female desires and offer her audience the chance to explore their own, which this thesis strived to demonstrate. In doing so, it hopes to promote the case of Lowell as one worthy of further investigation.

Undoubtedly, Lowell's wealth granted her the time and means to write, but it did not give her an equal position in the literary world, as shown by the hostility exhibited by many of her critics. Her wealth had long placed her in opposition to the male prerogative. Entering the literary world as a female poet at the turn of the twentieth century claiming her right to be professional was in itself a declaration of independence, a claim of full artistic citizenship. This study probed the way in which Lowell 'applied' for such citizenship (hitherto ignored by critics). Lowell's questioning of poetry and the position of the poet was the lens through which she investigated the world and her own position

¹ Bradshaw, Melissa. *Amy Lowell, Diva Poet*. New York: Ashgate, 2011.

² Hovey, Jaime. 'Lesbian Chivalry in Amy Lowell's *Sword Blades and Poppy Seed*.' *Amy Lowell, Modern American*. Eds. Adrienne Munich and Melissa Bradshaw. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2004.

within it. The study thus highlighted how she infused her poetry, articles, essays and lectures with polyphonic voices and her belief in the responsibility of the poet. Such themes emerged clearly through a close reading of the poems included in this study, mostly from the following collections: *A Dome of Many-Colored Glass* (1912), *Sword Blades and Poppy Seed* (1914), *Men, Women and Ghosts* (1916), *Pictures of Floating World* (1919), *What's O'Clock* (1925), and *Ballads For Sale* (1927). As explained throughout the chapters, these works were selected for the chance they afforded for a temporal comparison of the themes the study set out to discuss, whilst keeping the limitations of the research scope in mind,

As many feminist critics have commented, in Lowell's mature work, when her artistic career had become more established, she was able to sing and declare her right to freely express her sexual preferences but this was neither her priority nor the aim of all of her works. Rather, Lowell was an intellectual woman who sought for the freedom to investigate, through poetry, every aspect of human life without constraints; her calls for freedom and for breaking the wall of isolation that imprisoned the poet paralleled the calls of first-wave feminists and those of Duse in her performances.

The exclusion and inclusion of her works in literary history and debate illuminated the difficult path she took toward her citizenship in the artistic world and in society. It also illuminated the critics' difficulties in dealing with the complexities of her figure. Poetry was for her the means by which she found her own poetic voice and awareness of her female identity. Ultimately, she wanted to explore her womanhood in all its variations. She stood before the world held up not by the stiffness of her dress but by her unwavering belief in the uniqueness of every human being, the diversity of human experience, and every man and woman's right to voice their own beliefs without constraint. Her poetical work revealed her belief in the power of the poetic word to serve as an instrument in the construction of a different model of society.

In his critical works, particularly *The Death of the Author*, Roland Barthes emphasises the relationship between the text and the reader. In his view, the author's struggle is to interrogate the world rather than explain it, and in doing so, he must remain 'neutral' or disappear entirely: it is the text, the language, which must activate the reader's emotional and/or critical response.

In 'Image, Music, Text,' Barthes reaffirms his point, pointing out that 'the birth of the reader must be at the cost of the death of the Author' because 'the reader is the space' in which the multiple writings of which a text is made can maintain their unity and understanding (148).³

Barthes' metaphorical death of the author is like a 'second death penalty' when applied to the female author's voice, given that it had been historically subjected to and subjugated by the male gaze and voice (as illustrated by the literary case of Philomela and Madame Bovary, discussed in Chapter Six). Lowell tried to give her audience space without abdicating her subjectivity in the sense that Barthes advocates. She humanised—or rather womanised—her poetry, opening her gaze not only to female desires but also to the female right to citizenship in the artistic world and society in general. Ninety years after her death, her artistic achievements, more than her life, still interrogate this right—a right still denied to the silenced voices of female poets writing in Arabic, women who marry to reach an economic independence or to have a role in a society, or those who risk their lives to escape war, rape, or devastation. Lowell's poetry also queried the hetero-normative social structure which, despite the acquired notion of identity fluidity, still supports the 'heterosexual imperative that is implicit in biological reproduction,' as Louis-Georges Tin writes in *The Invention of Heterosexual Culture*.⁴

Ultimately, the aim of this thesis was to link Amy Lowell with the continuum of women's struggle for recognition. It also suggested and encouraged further lines of investigation such as a reflection on Lowell's influence on her contemporary poets (both female and male), and more particularly on today's poets.

³ Barthes, Roland. *Image, Music, Text*. Ed. Stephen Heath. London: Harper Collins, 1977. p. 149.

⁴ Tin, Georges-Louis. *The Invention of Heterosexual Culture*. Cambridge (MA): MIT Press, 2002. p. viii.

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