DELPHI CLASSICS

Amy Lowell

Complete Poetical Works

DELPHI POETS SERIES

DELPHI POETS SERIES

Amy Lowell

(1874-1925)

Contents

Version 1

DELPHI POETS SERIES

Amy Lowell

With introductory material by Gill Rossini, MA

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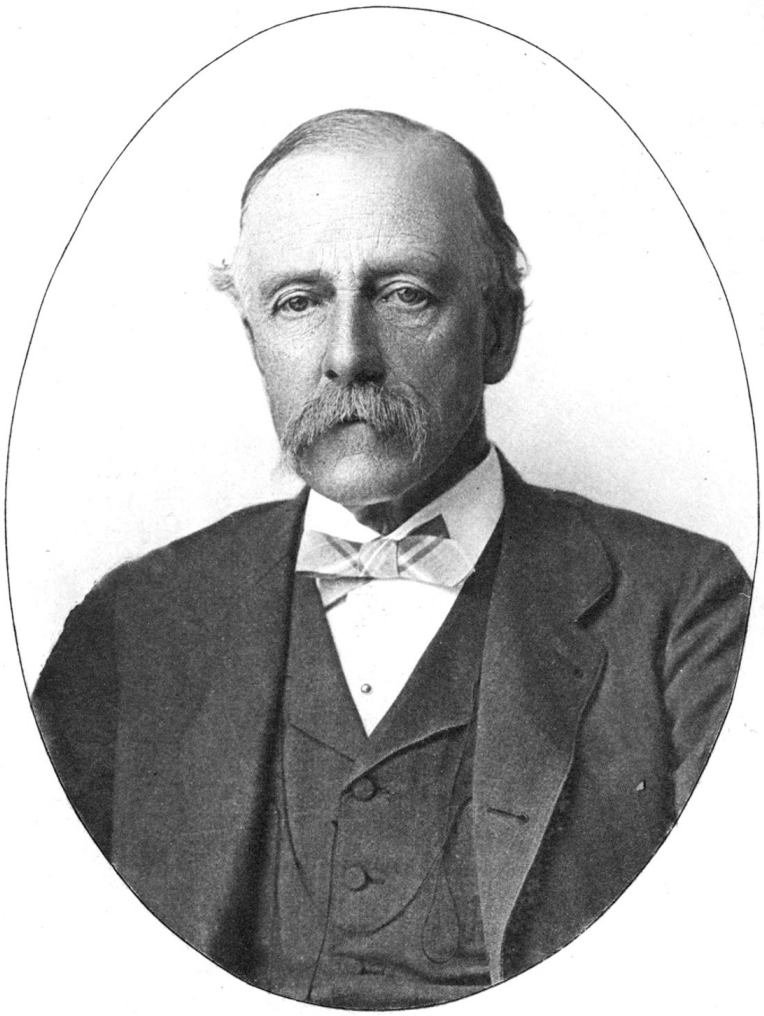
NOTE

When reading poetry on an eReader, it is advisable to use a small font size and landscape mode, which will allow the lines of poetry to display correctly.

The Life and Poetry of Amy Lowell

View of Boston, Massachusetts, 1880 by H. H. Rowley & Co — Amy Lowell was born in Boston 1874.

The birthplace — on 9 February 1874, Lowell was born at Sevenels, a ten-acre family estate in Brookline, Massachusetts.



The poet's father, Augustus Lowell (1830-1900) was a wealthy industrialist, philanthropist, horticulturist and civic leader.

Introduction to Amy Lowell (2025) by Gill Rossini

CONTENTS

Amy Lowell as a child

Amy Lowell: A Short Biography

AMY LOWELL WAS born on 9 February 1874, in Boston, Massachusetts, the daughter of Augustus Lowell and Katherine Bigelow Lowell. A member of the Brahmin (old Bostonian elite) Lowell family, her siblings included the astronomer Percival Lowell, the educator and legal scholar Abbott Lawrence Lowell and President of Harvard University and Elizabeth Lowell Putnam, an early activist for pre-natal care. They were the great-grandchildren of John Lowell and, on their mother's side, the grandchildren of Abbott Lawrence, thus descended from the crème de la crème of American society; their ancestors were among the founders of the American nation. Lowell was also distantly related to the noted American Romantic poet, James Russell Lowell (1819-1891), a connection that has been credited with giving Lowell her initial interest in poetry.

Lowell came from a wealthy family, although this did not aid her in her education — in fact it was a hindrance; as befitted her status as a Bostonian 'aristocratic' female, she began her education at home with a governess and then attended a number of different schools in Boston and Brooklyn. These were not happy years for her. Possessing no conventional beauty, she felt ugly and too masculine in her features, resorting to acting the class 'clown' to gain attention from her peers. This had little effect, as they considered her to be loud and opinionated. Nor did she have a conventional society marriage in mind at that time; by her mid-teens she was considering a career as a photographer, coach racer — or a poet. It would be another fifteen years at least before that poetic ambition was consolidated.

Due to her social status, her family forbade her to attend college, as it would not befit her expected role as a future Boston society wife. However, instead of obliging by entering the 'marriage market', she busied herself with obsessive reading and book collecting and, although essentially self educated, was even able to lecture on literary topics in Boston. Her position did allow her to travel widely and it was while she was in Europe in 1902 that she was so inspired by a performance by actor Eleonora Duse, that she wrote some of her first poetry. Thus, her career as a poet did not flourish until she was well into her thirties and she became not just a committed scholar of her art, but an innovator too. It should be noted that Lowell never turned her back on her family's status, fortune or the sense of personal authority being born into such a dynasty bestowed. Instead, she used her position to live very comfortably, in a property in the grounds of the family estate; she travelled in luxury motor cars; she employed secretaries and never went on speaking or lecturing tours without a retinue of staff to look after her, as she stayed in exclusive hotels. In fact, she described herself as the 'Last of the Barons', completely at ease with the natural authority her position gave her. Having said that, she used her position and money to feed her great passion — bringing poetry into everyday life so that everyone could engage with it. To this end and once established in her own right, her share of the family fortune was used to support new poets such as Carl Sandberg publish volumes of work. She was a showy and compelling speaker and T. S. Eliot summed her up as 'the demon saleswoman' (critics disagree as to whether Eliot was being cutting or flattering with this remark). With newcomers to the poetry scene, she was an attentive mentor, offering critique, making introductions to editors and writing articles about them to

draw attention to their work. Despite this generosity and directing her family's influence and social power into her poetry mission, she was despised by some modernist poets for having a fortune in the first place, something which was after all a mere accident of birth — but then they asked, why did she not walk away from all that comfort and money and endure life in its raw state? The answer has to be that the thought never occurred to her and that she enjoyed its power and what she could achieve with it. If she had not had the funds to visit Ezra Pound in England, she may never have become a leading light in the Imagist movement.

In 1909 Lowell met the actress Ada Dwyer Russell, who after five years of friendship, accompanied by Lowell's ardent courtship, would become her lover and long term partner. Russell (her married name) is widely described as Lowell's muse, 'the lady of the moon' and the subject of many of her more erotic works, most notably the love poems contained in 'Two Speak Together', a subsection of *Pictures of the Floating World*. Russell was eleven years older than Lowell and more than able to withstand the pressures of Lowell's formidable and driven personality. The two women travelled to England together for the eventful meeting with Ezra Pound, who had been a major influence, though later he became a scathing critic of her work; Russell was a considerable support to Lowell in her stressful dealings with Pound, whom even the ebullient Lowell found overbearing. In turn, Pound considered Lowell's embrace of Imagism to be a kind of hijacking of the movement.

Over the years, Lowell willingly supported and indeed loved Russell's daughter (from her short lived marriage) and 'their' grandchildren, supporting them as her own family; their household was completed with numerous boisterous dogs, Lowell's 'babies', who were the bane of many a visitor to the Lowell household. The couple lived together from 1914 to 1925, their partnership ending only with Lowell's death. Sadly, the couple had an agreement that many papers, including letters relating to their partnership would be destroyed and Russell, as her partner's executrix, honoured that. As a result, many details of their life together have been lost. As a mark of Lowell's love and respect she wanted to dedicate her books openly to her lover, but Russell refused except for one time in a non-poetry book in which Lowell wrote, 'To A. D. R. This and all my books. A.L.' Examples of these love poems to Russell include *Taxi*, *Absence*, *In a Garden*, *Madonna of the Evening Flowers*, *Opal* and *Aubade*. Lowell admitted to John Livingston Lowes that Russell was the subject of her series of romantic poems titled 'Two Speak Together'. These have since been praised as some of the most genuinely sensual and evocative lesbian love poems ever written.

Lowell was later criticised for not aligning herself, as a lesbian living in a devoted same sex 'marriage', with the feminists of her day. Others saw her essentially private (but not secret) partnership with Russell as a sign that it was a platonic friendship, nothing more, but a post-1945 re-evaluation of her love poems makes nonsense of this idea. It seems that in some quarters, no matter what Lowell did or did not do, she was doomed to fail in the eyes of some.

Also, Lowell has been linked romantically to writer Mercedes de Acosta, but the only evidence of any contact between them is a brief correspondence about a planned memorial for Duse, who died the year before Lowell.

As Lowell's reputation as a poet evolved, her appearance and life came under public scrutiny. As at school, she was still considered rather an oddity, being a short, very overweight (possibly from a medical condition) woman that smoked cigars in public, at the time a socially inappropriate thing to do. A 'single' (in a heteronormative sense) woman with private means, branded a 'plain jane' in a society

that valued feminine decorousness, Lowell was the perfect target to be lampooned; yet despite her public hubris, she had a very poor body image due to her weight and avoided looking in mirrors if at all possible. Whilst she never went so far as to wear male clothing such as trousers, she wore severely cut garments that were as little feminised as possible — another target for the popular press. There can be no doubt that cruel jibes such as that of Witter Byner, who dubbed Lowell the 'hippopoetess' would have stung, even if she refused to let it show.

Unfortunately, Lowell's life was cut short at the age of 51 by a cerebral haemorrhage (described by Reuters as a 'stroke of paralysis') in 1925; she was buried in the Mount Auburn Cemetery, Cambridge, Massachusetts, alongside other members of her family. According to the *Westminster Gazette*, Lowell had been planning a visit to England that year to undertake a lecturing tour, but had had to cancel some weeks before due to ill health, in the form of troublesome hernias which saw her confined to bed. (14 May 1925) She was also exhausted, her 1,100 page, two volume biography of Keats having taken up all her time and energy in the creation and writing it nearly ruined her eyesight.

The Scotsman published a genuinely admiring obituary on 14 May 1925, which included:

> 'Miss Lowell [had] an urgent, singularly candid and provoking personality. As translator, critic, lecturer, propagandist, poet, she gave evidence of quite extraordinary versatility….She wrote pugnacious prefaces to her own verse, in which she stood out as the relentless champion of *vers libre*. She was the chief exponent of the principles which led to the formation of what was called the Imagist School…she practised what she preached with more art than any others.'

In just over a decade, Lowell had proved her critics (of whom the most vocal was Ezra Pound) wrong and become a respected and innovative poet. Still, the *Daily Express* proceeded to lower the tone with their death notice, which had the title 'Famous Poetess Dead: Woman Who Preferred Cigars.' It continued with a very perfunctory résumé of her writing and concluded, 'Miss Lowell caused some comment in this country and America by smoking small cigars in preference to cigarettes'. (14 May 1925)

Amy Lowell: Poet

BY THE TIME Lowell reached her thirties, she had thrown herself into a life of poetry, putting aside her younger years of Boston society-driven events and conventional family funded travels. Until her thirties her life was somewhat aimless, despite her voracious reading, book collecting and self directed study. She had also stubbornly refused her family's attempts to marry her off to the son of another Boston Brahmin family.

Her first published work appeared in 1910 in *Atlantic Monthly*, but the first published collection of her poetry, *A Dome of Many-Coloured Glass*, appeared two years later. It was a workmanlike volume, but never going to set the literary world aflame and sales were poor. Loyal to one of its own elite, the *Boston Evening Transcript* enthuses that the verse is 'delightful, has a sort of personal flavour, a loyalty to the fundamentals of life and nationality…The child poems are particularly graceful'.

Other reviews were equally kind to the rich woman who, no doubt, was perceived as indulging her little hobby of writing verse:

> 'Miss Lowell has given expression in exquisite form to many beautiful thoughts, inspired by a variety of subjects and based on some of the loftiest ideals…The verses are grouped under the captions "Lyrical Poems", "Sonnets" and "Verses for Children"...all reveal Miss Lowell's powers of observation from the view-point of a lover of nature. Moreover, Miss Lowell writes with a gentle philosophy and a deep knowledge of humanity. (*Boston Sunday Globe*)

'A quite delightful little collection of verses, wrote the *Toronto Globe*. If there was one thing Lowell did not see in her verse, it was a pastime; she had grander ambitions than that, but needed a direction — a revolution in her writing style. She did not have to wait long to find it in Imagism.

Lowell's introduction to Ezra Pound's Imagist movement came through an article of his in the magazine *Poetry* in 1912 and she was so inspired by his ideas that she resolved to completely change her writing technique. Enthused by Pound's words, she set out for London to meet with him and the Imagists, her entré into their circle aided by a letter of introduction from literary editor Harriet Monroe. As well as meeting other Imagists, she encountered D. H. Lawrence, with whom she enjoyed a mutual respect and with whom she corresponded for the rest of her life. Lawrence dedicated his 1918 book *New Poems* 'To Amy Lowell'.

She found her meeting with Pound rather intimidating and he seems to have done little to put her at ease; his real antipathy towards her came from her overwhelming sense of mission to bring Imagist poetry to the public. She promised to have the group's work published in America — her social status and personal finances meant that she would have no problem fulfilling that promise and Pound's high handed alienation of his colleagues did not encourage them to stand by him as their leader. In short, he was jealous and possessive and claimed Lowell had 'stolen' his movement, even, as might be said today, his intellectual property as developer of Imagism. Yet, Lowell outflanked and outranked him; her family background, wealth and drive and her equable treatment of the Imagists, won the day. As she said of herself, 'God made me a businesswoman and I made myself a poet' — a powerful combination and where

Pound had sought to use Lowell as a money pot for his own projects, Lowell was too utterly focussed on her mission to notice. He was never going to prevail and apart from money matters, Lowell doubted he had the correct sensitivities to take Imagism forward, so she shrugged off his petty and sly jokes at her expense and forged ahead with her project.

Lowell was as good as her word and published three volumes of the movement's work — *Some Imagist Poets* — each with explanatory notes at the beginning. It is a landmark collection still highly prized for the quality of the poems it showcases. Out of possessive resentment, Pound refused to be involved in the project and so his work was not published alongside that of Richard Aldington, Lawrence, R. W. Flint, H. D. (Hilda Doolittle), John Gould Fletcher and of course, Lowell. In fact, Pound was furious; at one point he even threatened legal action and either out of spite or a genuine opinion that she in turn was dominating the Imagists despite her much more egalitarian approach, he labelled her renewed movement 'Amyism'. It must also have been galling to see the popularity of the three volumes, especially when he had in fact published an anthology of Imagist poems. *Des Imagistes* (1914) had in fact included more poets than Lowell's book, such as Ford Madox Ford, and Lowell was in there too. Pound's anger and sense of betrayal must have been all the more raw when he considered what he saw as this magnanimous acceptance of her work. After all this angst, Imagism was a disappointingly short lived movement, even though it inspired some fine poetry at its height.

D. H. Lawrence and Lowell met only once in London in 1914, yet they continued to nurture their literary friendship, regardless of any poetry politics. Lowell had an unshakeable belief in the greatness of Lawrence's writing and was, in an informal sense, his patron, whilst he wrote to her regularly and more often than she replied. If Lawrence was one of Lowell's 'projects', he was a willing subject and he repaid her by offering a critique on her work. Overall, it was a postal friendship based on a level of mutual respect, but frank assessment and pleasingly. Lawrence and his wife gladly acknowledged Ada Russell's place in Lowell's life, always sending good wishes to Russell in every letter.

Although not an Imagist herself, the English poet Winifred Bryher (Lover of H. D.) was fulsome in her praise of Lowell's poetry in her essay *Amy Lowell: A Critical Appreciation*, describing it as having a 'freshness of vision…a vigour and unrestricted thought, a welded root of strength and richness, absent from literature for too long a space…I wanted a new world and in the Imagist writers — particularly in Miss Lowell — all I needed lay before the eyes.' Of the poem *A Gift*, Bryher enthuses, 'This is an excellent illustration of the … Imagist tendencies in poetry. There is not a single useless word.'

Bryher could reasonably describe herself as an expert on the Imagist movement, as she was closely connected with the circle through H. D. (Hilda Doolittle, Bryher's lover). Bryher's observation was that, '...wideness of knowledge and hatred of aridity are the signs of all Imagist writers.' In Imagism, romanticism and the abstract were rejected in favour of clear, crisp descriptive and unsentimental language, a strong contrast to the Romantic and high Victorian poetry that was still popular at the time and which had been emulated by lesser poets than Keats and Shelley to the point almost of pastiche. Metre and end rhymes were no longer *de rigueur* and every word, phrase, line had to count and contribute to the finished verse.

In her *Critical Appreciation*, Bryher refers to a factor that more than likely hindered, certainly delayed, the circulation of Lowell's work. Bryher describes the English reader's attitude towards American literature as 'one of intolerant in

difference…To mention (Lowell's) name is to meet apathy, bewilderment' and blames the English for a blinkered attitude towards contemporary writers.

Beyond Imagism, Lowell occasionally wrote sonnets and was an early adherent to the 'free verse' (*vers libre*; sometimes now known as free form verse) method of poetry and would become one of its major champions. She defined it in her preface to 'Sword Blades and Poppy Seed' in the *North American Review* for January 1917; in the closing chapter of *Tendencies in Modern American Poetry*; and also in *The Dial* (January 17, 1918), as:

> 'The definition of *vers libre* is: a verse-formal based upon cadence. To understand *vers libre*, one must abandon all desire to find in it the even rhythm of metrical feet. One must allow the lines to flow as they will when read aloud by an intelligent reader. Or, to put it another way, unrhymed cadence is "built upon 'organic rhythm,' or the rhythm of the speaking voice with its necessity for breathing, rather than upon a strict metrical system. Free verse within its own law of cadence has no absolute rules; it would not be 'free' if it had.'

The American poet Louis Untermeyer, who also came from a wealthy family and was a great admirer of Lowell, writes that she was '...not only a disturber but an awakener'; in many poems, Lowell dispenses with line breaks, so that the work appears like prose on the page — a technique she labeled 'polyphonic prose' and to which she was introduced by John Gould Fletcher.

Throughout her working life, Lowell was a promoter of both contemporary and historical poets. Her book *Fir-Flower Tablets* was a poetical re-working of literal translations of the works of ancient Chinese poets, notably Li Tai-po (701-762). She also wrote poetry with a Japanese resonance, a practice that D. H. Lawrence pleaded with her to stop: '*Don't* do Japanese things, Amy, if you love us…why have you done this thing?' (Letter to Lowell, 23 March 1917). Lowell's writing also included critical works on French literature.

One of her final great achievements was her two-volume, 1,100 word biography of John Keats (work on which had long been frustrated by the non-cooperation of F. Holland Day, a wealthy bibliophile like herself, whose private collection of Keatsiana included Fanny Brawne's letters to Frances Keats). This was published early in 1925.

As biographical details are surprisingly sparse, including information on Lowell's working practices, one can turn to her obituaries for additional detail. An obituary in the *Leeds Mercury* (15 May 1925) offered this insight:

> 'A friend who stayed with her told me that her usual time for working was somewhere between midnight and 5.00am. She went to bed at about the time early risers get up and seldom reappeared until the beginning of the afternoon.'

The obituary, of course, also mentioned her preference for 'strong black cigars' and also coyly referred to 'several other of her individual eccentricities.' It is unclear if this is a reference to Lowell's sexuality. What the obituary does not reveal is that she smoked cigars (hardly ever big black cigars, but rather smaller conventional ones) while she worked so that she would not have to keep stopping to light cigarettes, as a cigar lasting longer. Even more disappointing to the researcher of her writing practices was her instruction to her secretaries to destroy all early drafts of a poem daily in order to retain only the finished or nearly version for that day. This means that scholars of her work have no insight into her first drafts and how she crafted a poem into its finished form.

The obituary in the *London Evening News* of 9 April 1926 praised Lowell's pioneering work and also commented on her personal library of 15,000 books, which

included some very rare volumes and manuscripts. Also, mention is made of a travelling scholarship that Lowell set up for fellow poets. She left a substantial bequest for the library of Harvard University, which subsequently enabled the institution to purchase a large archive of Alfred, Lord Tennyson, from that poet's grandson. The important collection included unpublished poems and drafts of well known works such as *The Charge of the Light Brigade*. At the time of her death, her brother Abbott Lawrence Lowell was President of Harvard (until 1933).

The year after her death, Lowell was awarded the Pulitzer Prize for Poetry for *What's O'Clock*, a collection edited by Ada Russell. That collection included the patriotic poem 'Lilacs', which Louis Untermeyer said was the poem of hers he liked the best.

If her family expected Lowell to be lauded posthumously, apart from the Pulitzer Prize, they were disappointed. Literary 'foes' such as Clement Wood took advantage of her demise to deliver an excoriating attack in 1926 not just on her as a literary figure, but as a person, making sly references to her sexuality and describing her 'immense physique'. He blamed some deep psychological impulse within her for her lame (as he saw them) attempts at poetry. Despite a half-hearted attempt at a kinder biography in the 1930's, Lowell gradually disappeared from view, her carefully coded love poems to her partner only revisited and seen for what they were with the advent of the 1970's women's movement. Even then, she faced criticism for not aligning herself with the feminists of her day, but gender politics was not her self imposed remit. What did interest her were female contemporary poets such as Edna St Vincent Millay and she also wrote admiringly of Emily Dickinson, Sappho and Elizabeth Browning in her poem 'The Sisters'. She also exhibited some anti-war sentiment in poems such as 'Patterns' — an aspect of her writing that was re-examined in the post-1945 decades. As for her Imagist *vers libre* poems, they were soon regarded as the dated wanderings of an entitled New Englander and it took just as long for her verse to be reconsidered as her relationship did.

Lowell's correspondence with her friend Florence Ayscough, a writer and translator of Chinese literature, was compiled and published by Ayscough's husband Professor Harley Farnsworth MacNair in 1945 and an additional group of uncollected poems was added to the volume *The Complete Poetical Works of Amy Lowell*, published in 1955, with an introduction by Lowell's friend Louis Untermeyer.

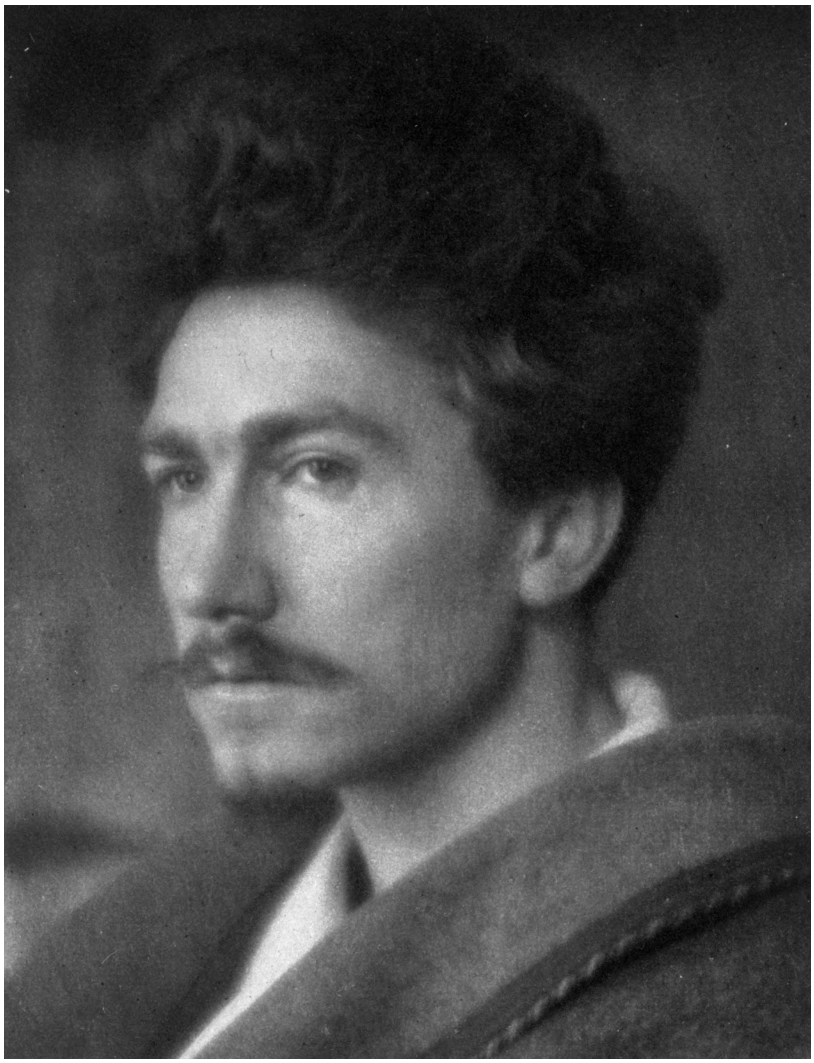
References

Winifred Bryher: *Amy Lowell: A Critical Appreciation*. Eyre and Spottiswood, 1918 (reprints available).

The author of these introductory notes respectfully acknowledges the book *Amy Lowell among her Contemporaries* by Carl Rollyson (ASJA Press, 2009) which was invaluable in researching this piece.

Amy Lowell as a young woman, photographed by James Notman, Houghton Library, Harvard University

Eleonora Duse performing Francesca da Rimini, Teatro Costanzi, 1901 — Lowell turned to poetry in 1902 (aged 28) after being inspired by Duse performing in a play in Europe.

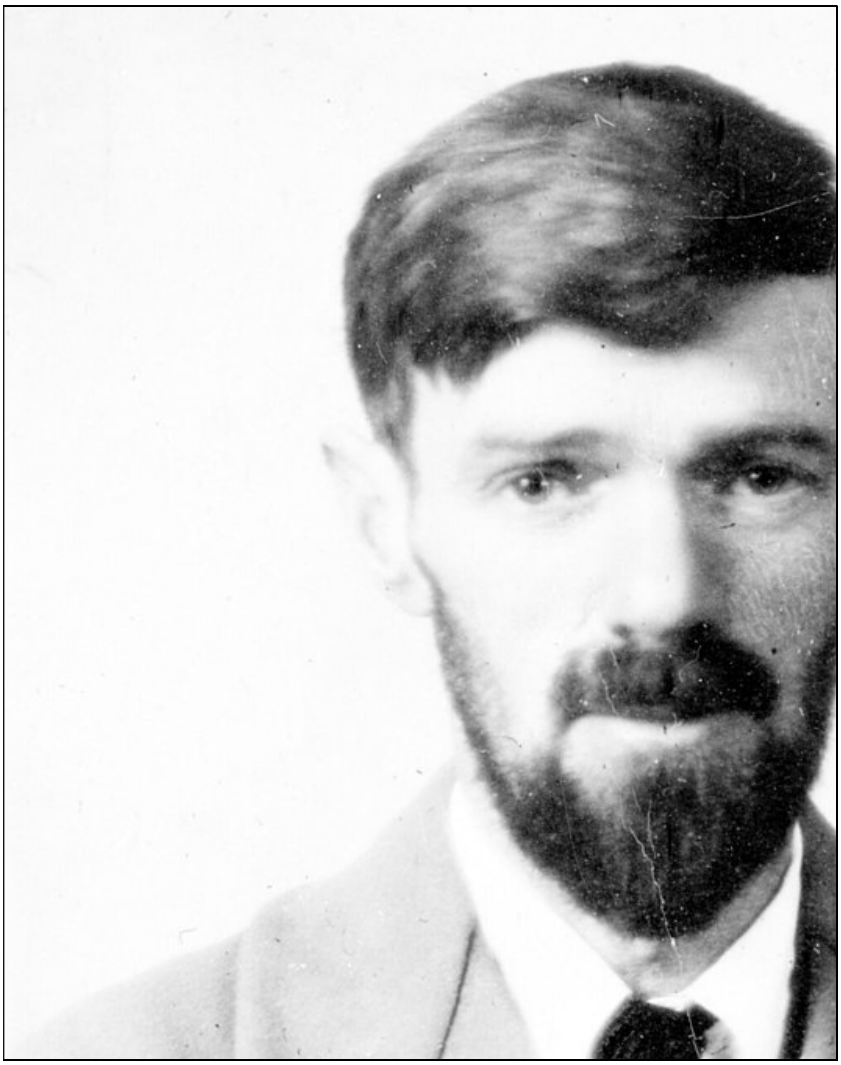


Ezra Pound in 1913 — a major influence and a major critic of Lowell's work

Lowell's long-term partner, Ada Dwyer Russell (1863-1952)

Elizabeth Lowell Putnam, reading with Lowell, c. 1887

Lowell at Sevenels, c. 1916



D. H. Lawrence in 1929. Lowell's poetry was influential to Lawrence's own verse. He dedicated his 1918 collection 'New Poems' to his American friend and correspondent.

Winifred Bryher, c. 1925. Bryher was a noted novelist, poet, magazine editor and a member of the Ellerman ship-owning family, as well as a great admirer of Lowell's Imagist verse.

A Dome of Many-Coloured Glass (1912)

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