Plath, Hughes, and Amy Lowell: Relations and Reflections

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In her 1922 poem ‘The Sisters’, Amy Lowell revives three ‘marvellously strange’ dead women poets – Sappho, Elizabeth Barrett Browning, and Emily Dickinson – who, in the end, ‘have not seemed strange to me, but near, / Frightfully near, and rather terrifying’.[[1]](#endnote-1) Three decades later, an eighteen-year-old Sylvia Plath would reflect on her own poetic proximity to the long-dead Lowell: ‘I am closest to Amy Lowell, in actuality, I think’.[[2]](#endnote-2) So close was Plath to Lowell in the summer of 1951, after her first year at Smith College, that the earlier poet’s words can be heard in Plath’s journal. As she reflects that ‘the evening world beats dead, flat, numb’, Plath echoes Lowell’s ‘The Taxi’ (1914), where ‘The world beats dead / Like a slackened drum’.[[3]](#endnote-3) Plath had read Lowell’s third collection, *Men, Women and Ghosts* (1916), for her ‘English 11b’ class on 18 April that year, but ‘The Taxi’ was collected in the earlier *Sword Blades and Poppy Seed* (1914) – suggesting an easy familiarity with poems from Lowell’s wider oeuvre.[[4]](#endnote-4)

Seven years later, by which time Plath and Ted Hughes had married and moved into an apartment at 337 Elm Street, Northampton, Massachusetts, Plath again named Lowell in her journal. An entry dated 29 March 1958, and written shortly after a creative ‘frenzy’ that saw the composition of eight poems in eight days, reveals Plath’s sense of both connection and competition with the ‘older sisters’ in Lowell’s poem:

Arrogant, I think I have written lines which qualify me to be The Poetess of America (as Ted will be The Poet of England and her dominions). Who rivals? Well, in history – Sappho, Elizabeth Barrett Browning, Christina Rossetti, Amy Lowell, Emily Dickinson, Edna St. Vincent Millay – all dead. (*Journals*, p. 360)

While Lowell’s hope that ‘possibly some day / Some other woman with an itch for writing / May turn to me’ (ll. 171-2) is ultimately realised by Plath, readers have only just begun to scratch the surface of the relationship between these two significant Massachusettsian women poets. I have written about Lowell’s presence in modern poetry before, but the debts of Hughes and Plath now seem far greater than I allowed.[[5]](#endnote-5)

There are, for example, remarkable points of similarity between Hughes’s second collection *Lupercal* (1960), which includes such celebrated poems as ‘Pike’ and ‘Hawk Roosting’, and Lowell’s second collection, *Sword Blades and Poppy Seed*, the volume in which her poem ‘The Pike’ was published. Many of Hughes’s curious subjects, from swallowed stars to washed-up bones – along with the more predictable predatory animals and virile landscapes – appear in Lowell’s *Sword Blades*, a critically acclaimed collection that Clement Wood described as ‘a knife in the surprised ribs of a nodding poetical public’.[[6]](#endnote-6) As its title suggests, *Sword Blades and Poppy Seed* brings together themes of chivalric warfare and the natural world, with its title poem drawing on swords and poppies (‘purple flowers, opium filled / From which the weirdest myths are distilled’) to reflect on the role of the poet: ‘You can cut, or you can drug, with words’.[[7]](#endnote-7) The poems in *Sword Blades* do not fit Richard Aldington’s description of Lowell’s work as ‘fluid, fruity, facile stuff’.[[8]](#endnote-8) Here is Lowell’s ‘Vintage’:

I will mix me a drink of stars,—  
Large stars with polychrome needles,  
Small stars jetting maroon and crimson,  
Cool, quiet, green stars.  
I will tear them out of the sky,  
And squeeze them over an old silver cup,  
And I will pour the cold scorn of my Beloved into it,  
So that my drink shall be bubbled with ice.

It will lap and scratch  
As I swallow it down;  
And I shall feel it as a serpent of fire,  
Coiling and twisting in my belly.  
His snortings will rise to my head,  
And I shall be hot, and laugh,  
Forgetting that I have ever known a woman.[[9]](#endnote-9)

Hughes’s ‘Fire-Eater’ takes up the theme of swallowing stars. The fourteen-line poem begins with ‘Those stars are the fleshed forebears / Of these dark hills, bowed like labourers, // And of my blood’.[[10]](#endnote-10) The speaker makes a direct reference to the mythical Semele, killed by a lightning bolt, before considering his ability to consume constellations: ‘My appetite is good / Now to manage both Orion and Dog’ (ll. 8-9). Whereas Lowell’s drink is felt as ‘a serpent of fire’, in spite of the cool green stars and bubbles of ice, Hughes’s stars are ingested ‘With a mouthful of earth, my staple. / Worm-sort, root-sort, going where it is profitable’ (ll. 10-11). There are obvious differences between the two poems: Hughes’s speaker eats where Lowell’s drinks; the ‘serpent’ in Lowell is ‘Worm-sort’ in Hughes; and Lowell’s star-drinking takes in ‘my Beloved’ while Hughes’s stars are made of ‘my blood’. But it would be difficult to deny a connection between these two poems about fiery star-swallowing, particularly when other poems in *Lupercal* are so closely related to poems in *Sword Blades*. Incidentally, when Hughes’s sister and agent Olwyn relayed Hughes’s thoughts on ‘Fire-Eater’ to critic Keith Sagar on 16 May 1974, she simply wrote, ‘FIRE EATER – bad poem etc. This was Sylvia’s favourite poem in LUPERCAL’.[[11]](#endnote-11)

Lowell’s Petrarchan sonnet ‘Irony’ meditates on the fossilised remains of sea creatures, prompting thoughts about life, death, and the possibilities of renewal:

An arid daylight shines along the beach

Dried to a grey monotony of tone,

And stranded jelly-fish melt soft upon

The sun-baked pebbles, far beyond their reach

Sparkles a wet, reviving sea. Here bleach

The skeletons of fishes, every bone

Polished and stark, like traceries of stone,

The joints and knuckles hardened each to each.

And they are dead while waiting for the sea,

The moon-pursuing sea, to come again.

Their hearts are blown away on the hot breeze.

Only the shells and stones can wait to be

Washed bright. For living things, who suffer pain,

May not endure till time can bring them ease.

Hughes’s sixteen-line ‘Relic’ was accepted, along with ‘Of Cats’, by *Harper’s Magazine* on 4 March 1958.[[12]](#endnote-12) The poem describes a jawbone found at the sea’s edge, where ‘crabs, dogfish, broken by the breakers or tossed / To flap for half an hour and turn to a crust / Continue the beginning’.[[13]](#endnote-13) The sense of a continued beginning is a key feature of Lowell’s poem, where sentient remains ‘wait’ to be met by the distant reviving sea. In their treatment of the sea’s discarded bones, both poets use internal rhyme and repetition to emphasise fusion. Lowell’s ‘joints and knuckles hardened each to each’, and Hughes ensures that while ‘camaraderie does not hold’ (l. 6), the jawbone does: ‘clutching’ (l. 6) in the second stanza clings to ‘beginning’ in the first, and ‘gripped, gripped’ in the final line undoes the effect of ‘Slacken’ at the poem’s centre (l. 8). Hughes’s poem has more visual and visceral force than Lowell’s: the two five-line stanzas are poised to clamp down on the central six-like stanza like a set of jaws, and the circularity of ‘Time in the sea eats its tail’ (l. 12) is altogether more sinister than the tidal back-and-forth between death and the possibility of renewal in Lowell’s poem. But, like Lowell, Hughes allows the closing lines of his poem to turn focus away from the sea’s relics and toward human mortality: ‘This curved jawbone did not laugh / But gripped, gripped and is now a cenotaph’ (ll. 15-16). Despite the poem’s sixteen lines, the finality of this closing rhyming couplet recalls a Shakespearian sonnet, and the emphatic end rhymes of lines 4 and 5 (cold/hold, where Lowell’s fourth and fifth lines end reach/bleach), along with the volta (at line 12), suggest that Hughes is purposely playing with and stretching the rules of the sonnet’s traditional forms.

Lowell’s ‘The Pike’ and Hughes’s ‘Pike’ have numerous points of contact. Lowell’s first nine lines introduce the ‘green and copper’ fish in its habitat of ‘shadows’; Hughes’s first eight lines present the fish, with ‘green tigering the gold’, as a ‘silhouette’.[[14]](#endnote-14) At precisely the same point on the page, Lowell’s fish emerges ‘*Out* from *under* the reeds’ (l. 10) while Hughes’s fish are located ‘*In* ponds, *under* the heat struck lily pads’ (l. 9, my emphases). Where ‘orange flashed up’ in line 12 of Lowell’s poem, Hughes’s twelfth line sees the fish ‘hung in an amber cavern’. Both poems end in darkness: Lowell’s final lines are ‘A darkness and a gleam, / And the blurred reflections of the willows on the opposite bank / Received it’ (ll. 16-18), while Hughes concludes with ‘Darkness beneath night’s darkness had freed, / That rose slowly towards me, watching’ (ll. 43-44). The similarities between these two poems extend beyond matters of content. To compare the formal properties of Lowell’s first four lines with Hughes’s third unrhymed quatrain:

In the brown water,

Thick and silver-sheened in the sunshine,

Liquid and cool in the shade of the reeds,

A pike dozed. (Lowell ll. 1-4)

In ponds, under the heat-struck lily pads –

Gloom of their stillness:  
Logged on last year’s black leaves, watching upwards.  
Or hung in an amber cavern of weeds (Hughes ll. 9-12)

Along with the opening ‘In’ phrases and the semantic similarity of ‘Thick’ and ‘Gloom’, the sounds of Hughes’s stanza alliterate with each line of Lowell: ‘silver-sheened’ becomes ‘stillness’, while ‘Logged’ pairs up with ‘Liquid’. Most compellingly, the fourth line of Hughes’s quatrain follows directly from the third line of Lowell’s poem to form a perfect tetrametric couplet: ‘Liquid and cool in the shade of the reeds, / Or hung in an amber cavern of weeds’.

On the surface, Lowell’s eighteen-line ‘The Pike’ and Hughes’s forty-four-line ‘Pike’ are very different poems: the various pike in Hughes are found in a tank, in unspecified ponds, and in ‘A pond I fished . . . as deep as England’ (l. 29, l. 34), while Lowell’s poem captures a single (and less sinister) pike as it passes across a pool (l. 14). But the carefully placed clues in Hughes’s poem point to Lowell’s ‘Pike’ as a source of inspiration and influence. Elaine Feinstein has discovered that the act of cannibalism in ‘Pike’ – ‘One jammed past its gills down the other’s gullet’ (l. 25) – draws on childhood experience: with his friend John Wholey, Ted ‘put three baby pike into a fish-tank at [primary] school, feeding them regularly at first. The boys forgot about them over a school holiday, and returned to find the three fish reduced to one’.[[15]](#endnote-15) Yet ‘Pike’ depicts cannibalism in more ways than one. As one pike swallows another – and as the ‘three inches long, perfect’ pike in the first line disappears from sight by the poem’s end – Hughes allows the consumption of a smaller pike, and his own digestion of a shorter pike poem, to rise to the surface of his work.

In a letter to Lucas Myers in October 1957, four months after Hughes and Plath’s arrival in America, Hughes shared his frustration at having ‘not written, at all, anything, since July, as if my head & hands were off’.[[16]](#endnote-16) While Plath was teaching freshman English at Smith College, Hughes was ‘doing nothing – I sit for hours like the statue of a man writing, no different, except that during the 3rd or 4th hour a bead of sweat moves on my temple. I have never known it so hard to write’ (p. 110). At the beginning of 1958, Hughes took up a teaching post at the University of Massachusetts – a job that he believed would be ‘no good for anything except money, unfortunately’ – and, by the summer, had produced a number of the poems that would be collected in *Lupercal*, including ‘Pike’.[[17]](#endnote-17) But while he was at last able to write, fish-out-of-water Hughes felt unable to fish:

I meant to get some fishing over here, but I was a bit deflected by the fact that there is an air over all American sports, I don’t know how to define it. . . . One can go fishing in England without feeling that you’re taking part in some national Let’s All Be Good Americans campaign’.[[18]](#endnote-18)

Although Hughes later recalled that he wrote ‘Pike’, one of his ‘prize catches’, simply by remembering the small lake where he fished as a youth, ‘looking at the place in my memory very hard and very carefully and . . . using the words that grew naturally out of the pictures and feelings’, it is clear that reading was as vital as recollection.[[19]](#endnote-19) Since the mid-1950s, Hughes had been steadily making his way through modern American verse. In a 1995 interview for the *Paris Review*, Hughes attributed the beginning of his fascination with American poetry to his encounter with the *Penguin Book of Modern American Verse* (1954): ‘Everything in that book seemed exciting to me – exciting and familiar. [Richard] Wilbur, Bill Merwin, Elizabeth Bishop, Lowell [presumably Robert, though Amy’s ‘Meeting-House Hill’ was included in Moore’s anthology]. But most of all John Crowe Ransom’.[[20]](#endnote-20) Yet while Hughes’s interest in Ransom may have sparked Plath’s own – ‘I managed to enthuse her to the point that he seriously affected her style for a period’ (pp. 84-5) – Plath’s literary influences also energised Hughes. In Hughes’s own words, ‘when we met, my writing, like hers, left its old path and started to circle and search. To me, of course, she was not only herself: she was America and American literature in person’.[[21]](#endnote-21) In the same interview, Hughes explained that when he met Sylvia, he ‘also met her library, and the whole wave hit me. I began to devour everything American’ (p. 77).

Some of the writers whom Hughes may have devoured are listed in pencil on the verso of a copy of ‘Thrushes’, another poem published in *Lupercal*. Gertrude Stein, Marianne Moore, Adrienne Rich, and Barbara Howes are named beneath Joyce’s *Ulysses* and Eliot’s *Sweeney Agonistes* and *Triumphal March*.[[22]](#endnote-22) Hughes’s list does not include only those writers whom he admired: E. E. Cummings, for instance, appears between Ransom and Stein, though Hughes wrote to Myers of ‘that most brainless American romanticism – E.E. Cummings chief Christ’.[[23]](#endnote-23) On the subject of Hughes’s feelings toward American modernism, William Carlos Williams (not listed) could, at his best, be ‘infinitely more satisfying than, say, Stevens’ (listed) – though ‘Patterson [sic] repels me – the pretension of “great mission” about its banalities’[[24]](#endnote-24) – while ‘behind every word of Hart Crane [not listed] is no human being at all – just an electronic noise’.[[25]](#endnote-25) Hughes does not name Amy Lowell, the writer to whom Plath had felt ‘closest’, though her work would clearly have appealed to a poet of his tastes. In a November 1915 *New York Times* article titled ‘A Year’s Harvest in American Poetry’, an unnamed reviewer praised the masculine energy of Lowell’s *Sword Blades*, observing that ‘a daring virility distinguishes it, obliterating the feminine appeal’.[[26]](#endnote-26) An earlier reviewer for the *New York Times* had commented on Lowell’s ‘very trenchant swordplay’.[[27]](#endnote-27)

It is indeed easy to see why Hughes – who named his influences as Chaucer, ‘Shakes’, Blake, Wordsworth, Keats, and Yeats – would be attracted to the poetics of Amy Lowell, a writer with once a formidable reputation who, to borrow the phrasing of Hughes’s ‘Pike’, ‘shrank in death’.[[28]](#endnote-28) (In 1917, Lowell ended her preface to *Tendencies in Modern American Poetry* with the claim that poets are ‘always the advance guard of literature; the advance guard of life. It is for this reason that their recognition comes so slowly’.)[[29]](#endnote-29) The numerous cat poems in *Lupercal* (‘Esther’s Tomcat’, ‘Of Cats’, ‘Cat and Mouse’) reveal a fascination with the ‘unkillable’ feline as at once majestic, murderous, and mocking (‘So are we all held in utter mock by the cats’), recalling little of T. S. Eliot’s cats but much of the coexistent fear and fondness (‘Shall I choke you, Cat, / Or kiss you? / Really I do not know’) that drives Lowell’s cat poems, most notably ‘To Winky’.[[30]](#endnote-30) Lowell’s and Hughes’s drinking scenes hold similar charm: the earlier poet’s long narrative work ‘The Great Adventure of Max Breuck’, which ends in its hero’s demise, opens outside a rowdy tavern, from which laughter and the ‘clip of tankards on a table top’ can be heard.[[31]](#endnote-31) The poem’s first four lines describe the light as it pours onto the street:

A yellow band of light upon the street

Pours from an open door, and makes a wide

Pathway of bright gold across a sheet

Of calm and liquid moonshine.

Hughes’s ‘Dick Straightup’, written at the beginning of 1958, opens with its protagonist in a Heptonstall bar-room, ‘the twelve-pint tankard at a tilt’, and follows him out into the yellow-lighted street: ‘The lamp above the pub-door / Wept yellow when he went out’.[[32]](#endnote-32) The poem ends with Dick’s obituary. The altogether ominous interplay between human, animal, and myth in ‘The Cyclists’, another poem in *Sword Blades*, seems likely to have appealed to the poet who would later write *Crow* (1970):

Spread on the roadway,

With open-blown jackets

Like black, soaring pinions,

They swoop down the hill-side,

The Cyclists.

Seeming dark-plumaged

Birds, after carrion,

Careening and circling,

Over the dying

Of England.

She lies with her bosom

Beneath them, no longer

The Dominant Mother,

The Virile—but rotting

Before time.

The smell of her, tainted,

Has bitten their nostrils.

Exultant they hover,

And shadow the sun with

Foreboding.[[33]](#endnote-33)

Elsewhere in their work, Lowell and Hughes approach the relationship between bird and human being (and poet) in similar ways. Writing to Olwyn in the summer of 1958, Hughes observed that the ‘texture’ of ‘Relic’ – the poem that bears close resemblance to Lowell’s ‘Irony’ – ‘struck me as being the same as Thrushes’ (*Letters*, p. 129). *Lupercal*’s ‘Thrushes’ positions its deadly subjects (‘Terrifying are the attent sleek thrushes on the lawn, / More coiled steel than living’) against mankind: ‘With a man it is otherwise. Heroisms on horseback, / Outstripping his desk-diary at a broad desk’.[[34]](#endnote-34) In Lowell’s ‘Purple Grackles’, first published in *The Bookman* in July 1922 and included in *What’s O’Clock* (1925) and her *Selected Poems* (1928), the speaker watches the American songbirds as they ‘strut in companies over the lawn’ from her window, much more playful than Hughes’s thrushes though ‘[t]here is magic in this and terror’.[[35]](#endnote-35) Where Lowell’s speaker can ‘only stare stupidly out of the window’ (l. 86), Hughes’s thrushes are set apart from man by ‘[n]o indolent procrastinations and no yawning stares’ (l. 6). Lowell’s grackles force both self-reflection and an unsettling awareness of the passage of time, the poem ending with ‘black rain challenges / To an old, limp Summer / Laid down to die in the flower beds’ (ll. 97-99); Hughes’s poem concludes ‘under what wilderness / Of black silent waters weep’ (ll. 23-24). There is more than a hint of ‘Ode to a Nightingale’ (1819) in ‘Purple Grackles’, and newcomers to Lowell may not be surprised to learn that she was an avid reader and collector of Keats.[[36]](#endnote-36) But to continue to read Hughes in relation only to the English ‘greats’ would be misleading, and Neil Roberts’s claim that the poems in *Lupercal* show ‘no evidence of American experience’ is clearly disputable.[[37]](#endnote-37) In June 1958, Hughes wrote to Olwyn that ‘Grackles are a bird here. Rather like jackdaws, but not much bigger than blackbirds. Their cry is exactly that “Grackle”. They are ridiculous, somehow’ (*Letters*, p. 125). The poems in *Lupercal* may be ‘as deep as England’, but they were written at a time when Hughes’s attention was captured by both the poetry and predacious wildlife of New England. Tellingly, writing to Myers in early 1960, Hughes complained that David Wright, South African poet and one of the judges for the Poetry Book Society, had read *Lupercal* in proof and dismissed it as ‘too American’ (*Letters*, p. 157).

On 11 March 1959, Plath reflected on the scarcity of worthwhile women poets in a letter to poet and scholar Lynne Lawner: ‘Except for M. Moore & Elizabeth Bishop what women are there to look to? A few eccentrics like Edith Sitwell, Amy Lowell. And the perennial Emily, I suppose’.[[38]](#endnote-38) That autumn, Hughes and Plath would spend two months as guests at Yaddo, the artists’ retreat in Saratoga Springs, New York. As Hughes revised some of his *Lupercal* poems and wrote a play, ‘The House of Taurus’, Plath read in the library and worked toward what she hoped would be her second book but in fact became her first collection, *The Colossus and Other Poems* (1960). Hughes later recalled that Plath ‘came to view this time as the turning point in her writing career, the point where her real writing began’.[[39]](#endnote-39) On 25 September, after two weeks at Yaddo, Plath noted in her journal that she had written ‘one good poem so far: an imagist piece on the dead snake’ (p. 507). Plath’s ‘imagist piece’, titled ‘Medallion’, is modelled on Lowell’s ‘The Pike’. Its first stanza reads:

By the gate with star and moon

Worked into the peeled orange wood

The bronze snake lay in the sun (*Collected Poems*, p. 124).

To compare with Lowell:

In the brown water,

Thick and silver-sheened in the sunshine,

Liquid and cool in the shade of the reeds,

A pike dozed.

Plath’s poem then takes a more sinister turn, with nods to Hughes’s ‘Pike’. Where Hughes describes the ‘jaws’ hooked clamp and fangs’ (l. 13) and the pike’s ‘sag belly and the grin it was born with’ (l. 21), Plath’s dead snake lies with ‘his jaw / Unhinged and his grin crooked’ (ll. 5-6), ‘Yet his belly kept its fire, / Going under the chainmail’ (ll. 16-17). Presenting the snake as ‘[k]nifelike . . . / Pure death’s-metal’ (ll. 25-6) and as predatory even in death (‘his innards bulged as if / He were digesting a mouse’, ll. 23-4), Plath evokes the dead yet deadly cannibal in Hughes’s poem, whose stare is akin to ‘death’s-metal’: ‘The outside eye stared: as a vice locks -- / The same iron in this eye / Though its film shrank in death’ (ll. 26-8). Like Hughes, Plath turns to both the eye of the subject (‘His little vermilion eye’, l. 9) and the ‘I’ of the self, drawing on memory (‘When I split a rock one time’, l. 12) and thus stretching the first imagist principle, as articulated by Ezra Pound, of ‘Direct treatment of the “thing”, whether subjective or objective’.[[40]](#endnote-40) Plath was reading Pound at Yaddo – ‘Read pound [sic] aloud and was rapt’, she wrote in her journal on 6 October (p. 514) – but the imagist blueprint for ‘Medallion’ was evidently provided by Lowell, as is clear in its very first stanza.

Plath’s ‘Mirror’, written as ‘Mirror Talk’ on 23 October 1961 and published in the *New Yorker* on 3 August 1963, responds directly to Hughes’s ‘Pike’.[[41]](#endnote-41) ‘Pike’ ends in darkness that ‘rose slowly toward me, watching’, while ‘Mirror’ closes with ‘In me she has drowned a young girl, and in me an old woman / Rises toward her day after day, like a terrible fish’.[[42]](#endnote-42) In turn, Hughes’s later ‘The Pike’ (1986) replies to ‘Mirror’, beginning ‘In the reservoir, behind the mirror’ before turning to wasted womanhood: ‘all this dammed water, / Like an ouined wife, has frittered away / In housework’.[[43]](#endnote-43) Plath’s ‘Mirror’ is in dialogue not only with Hughes’s first ‘Pike’ but also with Lowell’s ‘The Pike’. The structure of ‘Mirror’ faithfully reproduces or reflects that of Lowell’s poem: ‘eighteen lines are divided into two equal nine-line stanzas, [where] the penultimate line of the second stanza in both poems is longer than all other lines, thus breaking the pattern and shattering the illusion of a reflection’.[[44]](#endnote-44) But the similarities extend beyond structure, with Plath’s poem providing a series of echoes, inversions, and ‘blurred reflections’ in both content and sound:

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| **Lowell, ‘The Pike’** | **Plath, ‘Mirror’** |
| ‘silver-sheened’ (l. 2) | ‘I am silver and exact’ (l. 1) |
| ‘Suddenly he flicked his tail’ (l. 7) | ‘But it flickers’ (l. 8) |
| ‘brightness’ (l. 8) | ‘darkness’ (l. 9) |
| ‘under the water.’ (l. 9) | ‘over and over.’ (l. 9) |
| ‘under the reeds’ (l. 10) | ‘bends over me’ (l. 10) |
| ‘orange flashed up’ (l. 12) | ‘the candles’ (l. 12) |
| ‘Green and copper’ (l. 15) | ‘comes and goes’ (l. 15) |
| ‘darkness and a gleam’ (l. 16) | ‘replaces the darkness’ (l. 16) |
| ‘blurred reflections’ (l. 17) | ‘young girl’ [becomes] ‘old woman’ (l. 17) |
| ‘Received’ (l. 18) | ‘Rises’ (l. 18) |

Opening with ‘I am silver and exact’, ‘Mirror’ promises the precision and clarity of an imagist poem. But all is not as it appears. Of the many and varied readings of Plath’s poem, William Freedman’s detailed discussion of Plath’s shifting subjectivities (‘the woman/mirror . . . seeks her reflection in the mirror/woman’) perhaps comes closest to the truth of the poem’s origins: ‘the poem becomes a mirror not of the world, but of other mirrors and of the process of mirroring’.[[45]](#endnote-45) Ultimately, ‘Mirror’ itself functions as a mirror by presenting a ‘blurred reflection’ of an earlier poem. With its themes of aging and faded beauty, and its concern with false images produced by both soft lighting and traditional romance (‘those liars, the candles or the moon’), ‘Mirror’ at once performs and is about distorted mirroring and deception.

Plath’s ‘Mirror’ reflects both Lowell and Hughes, allowing careful readers to detect the similarities or ‘mirroring’ between the two pike poems. Plath’s interest in magic mirrors and themes of doubling extends from her undergraduate thesis, titled ‘The Magic Mirror: A Study of the Double in Two of Dostoevsky’s Novels’ (1954), to her plans for her second novel. ‘It is to be called “Doubletake”’, she wrote to her college benefactress and mentor Olive Higgins Prouty on 20 November 1962, ‘meaning that the second look you take at something reveals a deeper, double meaning’ (*Letters*, p. 913). Taking a second look at ‘Mirror’, a reader might see its speaker as neither a mirror nor a woman but instead as the ‘not cruel, only truthful’ (l. 4) Hughes. ‘A woman bends over me, / Searching my reaches for what she really is’ (ll. 10-11), says the mirror/Hughes; ‘In me she has drowned a young girl’ (l. 17). If the speaker is Hughes, then ‘Whatever I see I swallow immediately / Just as it is, unmisted by love or dislike’ (ll. 2-3) might be understood as a reflection on poetic appropriation. The exact and exacting ‘eye of a little god, four-cornered’ (l. 5) is the ‘I’ of a poet who ‘meditate[s] on the opposite wall’ (l. 6), waiting to swallow what he sees – or, to borrow from ‘Pike’, who ‘silently cast[s]… for what eye might move’ (l. 37, l. 39).

‘Mirror’ was written less than two months after the couple’s relocation to North Tawton, Devon. After her discovery of ‘the Other Woman business’ with Assia Wevill in July 1962, Plath wrote a letter to psychotherapist and friend Ruth Tiffany Barnhouse Beuscher in which she discussed, among more pressing resentments against Hughes, his ‘pure ego-Fascist’ ‘Hawk Roosting’ (collected in *Lupercal*) and his feeling that ‘his problem was womb-engulfment’ (*Letters*, pp. 802-7). Plath then reflected on the move to Devon:

What I am not is a Penelope type. I have come to this country town because Ted said it was his dream --- apples, fishing, peace, clean air, etc. etc. I had wanted to stay in London, because I liked all the social life, movies, art exhibits & rush. Well now I love it here, and this is the first home I’ve had, very beautiful, & with some fine people in the neighbourhood. It is a good base. But I am damned if I want to sit here like a cow, milked by babies. (*Letters*, p. 805)

In earlier letters written from Devon, the pregnant Plath reported on contented family life, describing the farmhouse as ‘a dream’ (p. 654) and telling her mother of ‘our affection for our wonderful home’ (p. 643). North Tawton was not exciting but it was ‘a wonderful place to have babies in’ (p. 645). On 22 October 1961, the day before she composed ‘Mirror’, Plath wrote delightedly to her mother of her new ‘gorgeous’ Bendix washing machine (p. 667) and the pleasing whiteness of her wash. But while we cannot and should not make confident judgements about Plath’s feelings toward the move based on a reading of her private letters, it is nonetheless clear that the ‘dream’ was Ted’s – ‘he has his big dream come true’, she wrote to Hughes’s parents on 9 October (p. 663) – and that Plath was anxious about how she would settle in. She ‘long[ed] to go to London, even for a movie or a play’ (p. 647), and she worried about ‘the best way to grow into the community here’ (p. 665).

A year before she learned of the affair with Wevill, Plath was occupied by the idea of ‘the other woman’. In response to revisions suggested by Howard Moss, poetry editor for the *New Yorker*, Plath explained on 11 September that her poem ‘The Rival’ was concerned with ‘a contrast between two women: the speaker, who is a rather ordinary wife and mother, and her “rival” – the woman who is everything she is not’ (p. 645). Though Jonathan Bate marks the move to Devon as ‘the beginning of the end’, he questions whether ‘the first crack’ in the marriage had not appeared at Smith College in the summer of 1959, when Plath witnessed Hughes apparently gazing into the eyes of one of his students.[[46]](#endnote-46) Rivalry between age and youth is, of course, a theme of ‘Mirror’, where the ‘young girl’ is drowned and replaced by ‘an old woman’. Without taking seriously Plath’s claim that she was ‘a bit of a clairvoyant’, the ‘eye of a little god’ also looks ahead to Hughes’s diminution into ‘a *little* man’, as Plath would describe him in light of the affair.[[47]](#endnote-47) It is not too hard to imagine that Plath, composing ‘Mirror’ as a newcomer to quiet domestic life in North Tawton, would reflect on Hughes’s writer’s block (‘Most of the time I meditate on the opposite wall’) and his reading or ‘swallow[ing] immediately’ of Lowell as a homesick Englishman in Northampton, Massachusetts.

Poems written throughout 1961 suggest that Plath turned to *Sword Blades* in England as Hughes had in America three years earlier. ‘The Surgeon at 2 a.m.’, written on 29 September, draws on Lowell’s ‘A London Thoroughfare. 2 a.m.’ (*Sword Blades*, pp. 43-44). Lowell’s poem begins:

They have watered the street,

It shines in the glare of lamps,

Cold, white lamps,

And lies

Like a slow-moving river,

Barred with silver and black.

Plath’s poem also opens with the glare of white lights: ‘The white light is artificial, and hygienic as heaven’ (*Collected Poems*, pp. 170-1). Just as Lowell’s street is presented as part of the natural world – the ‘watered’ street lies like a river – Plath’s artificially-lighted hospital scene, described from the perspective of the surgeon, is rendered in the language of nature: ‘The scalded sheet is a snowfield, frozen and peaceful’ (l. 5), and the body is ‘a garden I have to do with – tubers and fruits / Oozing their jammy substances’ (ll. 11-12). In Plath’s poem, the ‘red night lights are flat moons’ (l. 48), while Lowell’s moon ‘cuts, / Clear and round, / Through the plum-coloured night’ (ll. 18-20). As an aside, the ‘red stars and those of plum-colour’ (l. 26) had also made their way into the earlier ‘The Colossus’, written at Yaddo in 1959 (*Collected Poems*, p. 130). Where Lowell’s penultimate line reads ‘I know the moon’ (l. 28), Plath’s is ‘I am the sun, in my white coat’ (l. 49). In Lowell’s poem, ‘Night-walkers pass along the sidewalks’ (l. 12), while Plath’s surgeon ‘walk[s] among sleepers in gauze sarcophagi’ (l. 47). In short, Plath takes details and descriptions from Lowell’s poem – along with its ‘squalid and sinister’ atmosphere (l. 13) and ‘alien’ (l. 29) setting – and recasts them, reimagining a strange London street at 2 a.m. as an operating table at the same hour.

Earlier in 1961, a month after having undergone an appendectomy, Plath wrote ‘Tulips’.[[48]](#endnote-48) Introducing the poem before a reading in London on 17 July, Plath revealed that it ‘was occasioned quite simply by receiving a bouquet of red, spectacular tulips while convalescing in hospital’ (*Letters*, p. 626n). Plath’s overpowering red tulips threaten to kill and consume the patient-speaker: ‘The vivid tulips eat my oxygen’ (l. 49); ‘The tulips should be behind bars like dangerous animals; / They are opening like the mouth of some great African cat’ (ll. 58-9). Plath was not the first poet to present tulips as a death-dealing force. Lowell’s sonnet ‘A Tulip Garden’, published in the *Atlantic Monthly* in August 1914 and included as the final poem in *Sword Blades* (p. 246), recalls Andrew Marvell’s ‘Upon Appleton House’ (1651) with its ‘platoons of gold-frocked cavalry, / With scarlet sabres tossing in the eye / Of purple batteries, every gun in place’ (ll. 6-8). The end rhyme of ‘flaunting colours spread’ (l. 9) and ‘Our ears are dead’ (l. 11) is echoed internally in the poem’s final line, ‘We hear the wind stream through a bed of flowers’, introducing an aural relationship between the bed of tulips and death. Plath makes similar use of sound in her ‘Tulips’: the ‘loud noise’ (l. 52) of the tulips drowns out the ‘peacefulness’ that ‘the dead close on’ (l. 32, l. 34), and the internal rhyme in ‘A dozen red lead sinkers round my neck’ (l. 42) emphasises the deadening weight of the deafening red flowers. Plath’s tulips are even more closely related to those in Lowell’s Marvell-inspired ‘Appuldurcombe Park’, a poem that appeared in Harriet Monroe’s *Poetry: A Magazine of Verse* in August 1918:

I am a woman, sick for passion,

Walking between rows of painted tulips.

Parrot flowers, toucan-feathered flowers,

How bright you are!

You hurt me with your colors,

Your reds and yellows lance at me like flames. (Lowell, ll. 18-23)

The tulips are too red in the first place, they hurt me. (Plath, l. 36)

The ‘too excitable’ (l. 1), ‘too red’ tulips in a white-walled room also evoke the ‘Bath’ section of Lowell’s polyphonic prose poem ‘Spring Day’ (1915), where the bathing speaker experiences a day ‘almost too bright to bear’.[[49]](#endnote-49) ‘Spring Day’ opens with the observation that the day ‘is fresh-washed and fair, and there is a smell of tulips and narcissus in the air’. Lowell’s speaker then describes the light that ‘cleaves the water into flaws’ and the spots of sunshine that ‘lie on the surface of the water and dance, dance’. Plath meditates on sunlight and water in ‘Tulips’: the light ‘lies on these white walls’ (l. 4) and once a day ‘slowly widens and slowly thins’ (l. 45) at the window, and the speaker’s head is submerged by water in a curious scene of spiritual cleansing and conversion (‘I am a nun now, I have never been so pure’, l. 27). Interestingly, the closing sentence of Lowell’s ‘Bath’ includes the subjects of three of Hughes’s and Plath’s best-known works: ‘A crow flaps by the window, and there is a whiff of tulips and narcissus in the air’ (Plath, of course, would again wed spring flowers to human fragility and recuperation in the 1962 poem ‘Among the Narcissi’). Plath’s ‘Stars Over the Dordogne’, written after a holiday in July 1961, takes readers back to both Lowell’s ‘Vintage’ and Hughes’s ‘Fire-Eater’: the poem begins with stars ‘dropping thick as stones’ and ends with the speaker ‘drink[ing] the small night chill like news of home’.[[50]](#endnote-50) Where Hughes’s speaker is eager and greedy – ‘My appetite is good / Now to manage both Orion and Dog’ – Plath’s is melancholy and nostalgic: ‘I miss Orion and Cassiopeia’s Chair. Maybe they are / Hanging shyly under the studded horizon / Like a child’s too-simple mathematical problem’ (ll. 18-20). It would be too simple to read these poems as a dialogue merely between Hughes and Plath: reflections and refractions of Lowell shine through the surface of both.

‘The Moon and the Yew Tree’, composed the day before Plath wrote ‘Mirror’, borrows its blue hue, the moon’s garments, and the imagery of worship from ‘The Fool o’ the Moon’, an erotic poem that scandalised readers of the *Atlantic Monthly* in July 1925.[[51]](#endnote-51) The Faber and Faber edition of Plath’s journals, edited by Karen V. Kukil, includes a facsimile of an excerpt from a typed letter, dated 22 November 1955, where Plath has underlined by hand her words ‘when the moon makes blue lizard scales of roof shingles’ and added a note: ‘Cf. poem’ (p. 191). Kukil suggests that this is ‘possibly a reference to an image in SP’s poem “Dialogue Over a Ouija Board”’ (p. 682), where Plath describes how ‘veronicas and fountains / Can once in a blue moon catch the shadows of / Their passing on a perishable screen / Of cambric or waterdrops’ (*Collected Poems*, p. 282). However, Plath’s ‘blue lizard scales of roof shingles’ bear closer resemblance to the ‘blue tiles of the sky’ in the opening line of ‘Fool o’ the Moon’ – a description that, as Melissa Bradshaw has observed, was borrowed by Plath’s friend Olive Higgins Prouty for her 1927 novel *Conflict* (p. 153). Plath’s moonlit scales also draw on the short poem ‘Wind and Silver’, which along with ‘Fool…’, appears in Lowell’s Pulitzer Prize-winning collection *What’s O’Clock* (1925):

Greatly shining,

The Autumn moon floats in the thin sky;

And the fish-ponds shake their backs and flash their dragon scales,

As she passes over them.[[52]](#endnote-52)

Plath’s note to self is thus a reminder to consult Lowell: with her moon rendering roof shingles as ‘blue lizard scales’, Plath combines images from two Lowell poems. Six years later, in ‘The Moon and the Yew Tree’, the colour blue would appear four times across as many stanzas. In Lowell’s ‘An Aquarium’, published in *Men, Women and Ghosts*, ‘blue’ is applied to shadows, fish, brilliance, a lawn, and waves.[[53]](#endnote-53) ‘Silver’ is included four times, along with ‘Shadows and polished surfaces’ (l. 48), making it clear that Plath reflected on ‘An Aquarium’ across the two days that she wrote ‘The Moon and the Yew Tree’ and the ‘silver and exact’ ‘Mirror’. [[54]](#endnote-54) The willow-tree that ‘flickers’ in ‘An Aquarium’ (l. 58) becomes a wall that ‘flickers’ (l. 8) in ‘Mirror’, and the old woman that ‘Rises toward her day after day, like a terrible fish’ in Plath’s closing line nods to the waves that ‘Rise steadily beyond the outer island’ at the end of Lowell’s poem (l. 61). It is surely significant that ‘An Aquarium’ directly precedes ‘The Pike’ in Lowell’s *Selected Poems*.

It may not be surprising that Plath shared a poetic landscape and a colour palette with Lowell. Where Lowell wrote, in ‘Lilacs’, of her New England roots – ‘Roots of lilac under all the soil of New England / Lilac in me because I am New England’ – Hughes described Plath on her wedding day, in ‘A Pink Wool Knitted Dress’, as ‘A nodding spray of wet lilac’.[[55]](#endnote-55) But it is remarkable that the Massachusettsian Lowell took inspiration from Devon, the English county that would become Hughes’s ‘dream’. ‘The Exeter Road’ is the title of a poem included in *Sword Blades* (pp. 200-203), while the long poem ‘A View of Teignmouth in Devonshire’, in *What’s O’Clock* (pp. 138-153), follows Keats as he ‘walks along the streets / Of Teignmouth and asks every soul he meets / If the sun ever shines in Devonshire’ (ll. 14-16). Whereas Hughes did not cite Lowell as an influence, Lowell was explicit about her debt to Keats and his imagination, claiming that her study of his manuscripts ‘taught me more about writing poetry than anything else in the world’.[[56]](#endnote-56) In *Poetry in the Making* (1967), Hughes accredits his own poetic education to a childhood spent ‘capturing animals’. Reflecting that ‘the more I think back the more sure I am that the two interests [capturing animals and writing poems] have been one interest’ (p. 15), he explains that writing poems is ‘hunting and the poem is a new species of creature, a new specimen of the life outside your own’ (p. 17). Hughes remembers his ‘pursuit of mice at threshing time when I was a boy … that and my present pursuit of poems seem to me to be different stages of the same fever’ (p. 15). Five decades earlier, Lowell had explored the connection between hunting and poetic composition in ‘Chopin’ (1919), possibly taking her lead from the ninth-century Irish poem ‘Pangur Bán’:

The cat and I

Together in the sultry night

Waited.

He greatly desired a mouse;

I, an idea

[…]

Winky, I said,

Do all other cats catch their mice?[[57]](#endnote-57)

‘Hughes confidently fished out the most appealing imagery from [Lowell’s] earlier work’, I argued in my earlier essay.[[58]](#endnote-58) The idea of a predatory poet hunting and scavenging from the poetic past is by no means new: T. S. Eliot, who described Donne as a writer who ‘merely picked up, like a magpie, various shining fragments as they struck his eye’, famously claimed that ‘[i]mmature poets imitate; mature poets steal’.[[59]](#endnote-59) But while we could read the young Hughes as a mature magpie-genius who was simply inspired by the ideas and imagery in Lowell’s *Sword Blades*, he was also an anxious and out-of-place Yorkshireman embarrassed to admit his interest in a long-unpopular lesbian poet whose forgotten (or carrion-like) work he had come upon through his American wife. In January 1961, when Plath and Hughes were 28 and 30 respectively, they discussed their poetic intimacy in an interview for the BBC.[[60]](#endnote-60) Hughes explained how two such spiritually compatible people ‘in fact make up one person – they make up one source of power, which you both use and you can draw out material in incredible detail from the single shared mind’. This ‘single shared mind’ might be looked upon less generously: Plath biographer Carl Rollyson quotes from a letter to Myers, written on 9 December 1959, in which Hughes admits to having ‘already stolen several things’ from Plath’s recent work.[[61]](#endnote-61) Janet Malcolm is right that the Plath-Hughes marriage should not be written about with ‘proprietary authority’ – we are strangers, as Malcolm reminds us – but the gender politics and power dynamics of the couple’s ‘shared’ poetics clearly demand further attention.[[62]](#endnote-62) ‘I picked a hard way which has to be all self-mapped out and must not nag’, Plath wrote in a journal entry dated 14 September 1958; ‘he, of course, can nag me about light meals, straight-necks, writing exercises, from his superior seat’ (p. 421). To focus not on the ‘superior’ Hughes and the writing exercises that he assigned but rather on both poets’ interest in the largely neglected Lowell makes it quite clear that channels of influence in the Plath-Hughes partnership ran both ways.

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1. NOTES

   Amy Lowell, ‘The Sisters’, *North American Review*, June 1922, l.166, ll. 180-1. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Sylvia Plath, ‘Wellesley and Swampscott, Massachusetts (summer 1951)’, in *The Journals of Sylvia Plath 1950-1962*, ed. Karen V. Kukil (2000), p. 88. Amy Lowell died on 12 May 1925. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Plath, *Journals*, p. 74; Amy Lowell, ‘The Taxi’, *The Egoist*, August 1914, ll. 2-3. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. SylviaPlathLibrary < https://www.librarything.com/profile/SylviaPlathLibrary> [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. ‘Myths, Legends, and Apparitional Lesbians: Amy Lowell’s Haunting Modernism’, *Modernist Cultures*,13.4 (Winter 2018),568-589. Three pages of the essay consider textual similarities between Lowell’s ‘The Pike’ (published in *The Egoist* in February 1914), Hughes’s ‘Pike’ (written in 1958, published in 1959), and Plath’s ‘Mirror’ (written in 1961, published posthumously in the 1971 collection *Crossing the Water*). See Alison Flood, ‘Amy Lowell: Ted Hughes and D. H. Lawrence “owe unacknowledged debt” to “uncelebrated poet”’, *The Guardian*,000 November 2018. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. Clement Wood, *Amy Lowell* (New York, 1926), p. 65. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. Lowell, ‘Sword Blades and Poppy Seed’, in *Sword Blades and Poppy Seed* (New York, 1917), pp. 3-27 (p. 20, p. 18). [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. Richard Aldington, *Life for Life’s Sake: A Book of Reminiscences* (New York, 1941), pp 136-37. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. Lowell, ‘Vintage’, in *Sword Blades and Poppy Seed,* p 93. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. Ted Hughes, ‘Fire-Eater’, in *Collected Poems*, ed. Paul Keegan (2003), p. 72, ll. 1-3. [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. Keith Sagar (ed.), *Poet and Critic:* *The Letters of Ted Hughes and Keith Sagar* (2012), p. 33. [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. See Plath, *Journals*, p. 345. [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. Hughes, ‘Relic’, in *Collected Poems*, p. 78, ll. 2-4. [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. Lowell, ‘The Pike’, in *Sword Blades and Poppy Seed*, pp. 234-5, l. 8, l. 5; Hughes, ‘Pike’, in *Collected Poems*, pp. 84-5, l. 2, l. 6. [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
15. Elaine Feinstein, *Ted Hughes: The Life of a Poet* (New York, 2001), p. 13. [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
16. Hughes to Lucas Myers, October 1957, in *The Letters of Ted Hughes*, ed. Christopher Reid (2009), p. 109. Hughes and Plath had arrived in the USA on 25 June 1957. [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
17. Hughes to Daniel Huws, end of February 1958, in *Letters*, p. 120. [↑](#endnote-ref-17)
18. Hughes to Gerald and Joan Hughes and family, late August with additions dated 7 and 8 September 1958, in *Letters*, p. 130. [↑](#endnote-ref-18)
19. Hughes, *Poetry in the Making* [1967] (2008), p. 21. [↑](#endnote-ref-19)
20. Drue Heinz, ‘Ted Hughes: The Art of Poetry LXXI’, *Paris Review* 37:134 (Spring 1995), p. 85. [↑](#endnote-ref-20)
21. Ibid., p. 77. [↑](#endnote-ref-21)
22. ‘Ted Hughes Papers, 1940-2002’, Stuart A. Rose Manuscript, Archives, and Rare Book Library, Emory University, MSS 644, Box 59, ff.5. Gillian Groszewski’s essay on ‘Hughes and America’ in *Ted Hughes in Context*, ed. Terry Gifford (Cambridge, 2018), p. 158, drew my attention to this source. [↑](#endnote-ref-22)
23. Hughes to Lucas Myers, 19 May 1959, in *Letters*, p. 145. [↑](#endnote-ref-23)
24. Ibid. [↑](#endnote-ref-24)
25. Hughes to Myers, 19 June 1959, in *Letters*, p. 146. [↑](#endnote-ref-25)
26. ‘A Year’s Harvest in American Poetry’, *New York Times*, 28 November 1915. [↑](#endnote-ref-26)
27. Richard le Gallienne, ‘Sword Blades’, *New York Times*, 10 January 1915. [↑](#endnote-ref-27)
28. Hughes, ‘Pike’, l. 28. Hughes to Myers, 19 June 1959, in *Letters*, p. 146. [↑](#endnote-ref-28)
29. Lowell, *Tendencies in Modern American Poetry* (New York, 1917), p. xi. [↑](#endnote-ref-29)
30. ‘So we are all held in utter mock by the cats’ is the final line of Hughes’s ‘Of Cats’, in *Collected Poems*, pp. 71-2. ‘To Winky’ was published in Lowell’s *Pictures of the Floating World* (1919). [↑](#endnote-ref-30)
31. Lowell, ‘The Great Adventure of Max Breuck’, in *Sword Blades*, pp. 103-47, l. 7. [↑](#endnote-ref-31)
32. Hughes, ‘Dick Straightup’, in *Collected Poems*, pp. 63-65, l. 8, ll. 46-47. In a journal entry dated 4 February 1958, Plath wrote that ‘Ted has written a long-lined long-versed strong poem on “Dick Straight-up”’ (*Journals*, p. 322). [↑](#endnote-ref-32)
33. Lowell, ‘The Cyclists’, in *Sword Blades and Poppy Seed*, pp. 39-40. This poem was first published in Harriet Monroe’s *Poetry: A Magazine of Verse* in April 1914. [↑](#endnote-ref-33)
34. Hughes, ‘Thrushes’, in *Collected Poems*, pp. 82-3, ll. 1-2, ll. 17-18. [↑](#endnote-ref-34)
35. Lowell, ‘Purple Grackles’, in *Selected Poems of Amy Lowell*, ed. John Livingston Lowes (Boston and New York, 1928), pp. 16-20, l. 32, l. 85. [↑](#endnote-ref-35)
36. In Margaret Homans’ words, Lowell ‘read, collected, and wrote about Keats all her life’. See ‘Amy Lowell, John Keats, and the “Shielded Scutcheon” of Imagist Art’, in Adrienne Munich and Melissa Bradshaw (eds.), *Amy Lowell, American Modern* (New Brunswick, 2004), p. 90. [↑](#endnote-ref-36)
37. Neil Roberts, *Ted Hughes: A Literary Life* (Basingstoke, 2006), p. 43. [↑](#endnote-ref-37)
38. Sylvia Plath to Lynne Lawner, 11 March 1959, in *The Letters of Sylvia Plath*, ed. Peter K. Steinberg and Karen V. Kukil, 2 vols (2018), ii. 305. [↑](#endnote-ref-38)
39. Hughes, ‘Sylvia Plath and Her Journals’, in Paul Alexander (ed.), *Ariel Ascending: Writings About Sylvia Plath* (New York, 1985), p. 158. [↑](#endnote-ref-39)
40. Ezra Pound, ‘A Retrospect’, in *Pavannes and Divisions* (New York, 1918), p. 95. [↑](#endnote-ref-40)
41. This is the composition date as provided in Plath’s *Collected Poems*. [↑](#endnote-ref-41)
42. Plath, ‘Mirror’, in *Collected Poems*, ed. Ted Hughes (1981), pp. 173-4, ll. 17-18. [↑](#endnote-ref-42)
43. Hughes, ‘The Pike’, in *Collected Poems*, pp. 701-2, l. 1, ll. 13-15. [↑](#endnote-ref-43)
44. ‘Myths’, p. 579. [↑](#endnote-ref-44)
45. William Freedman, ‘The Monster in Plath’s “Mirror”’, *Papers on Language and Literature*,29.2 (March 1993), 152-169. [↑](#endnote-ref-45)
46. Jonathan Bate, *Ted Hughes: The Unauthorised Life* (2015), p. 199, p. 197. [↑](#endnote-ref-46)
47. Plath to Al Alvarez, 21 July 1962, in *Letters*, p. 800; Elizabeth Sigmund, ‘Sylvia in Devon: 1962’, in Edward Butscher (ed.), *Sylvia Plath: The Woman and the Work* (New York, 1977), p. 104. [↑](#endnote-ref-47)
48. Plath underwent surgery on 28 February and wrote ‘Tulips’ on 18 March. ‘Tulips’ appears on pp. 160-2 of Plath’s *Collected Poems*. [↑](#endnote-ref-48)
49. Lowell, ‘Spring Day’, in *Men, Women and Ghosts* (New York, 1917), p. 330. [↑](#endnote-ref-49)
50. *Collected Poems*, pp. 165-66. Plath later wrote that ‘news of home’ referred to her mother’s letters (16 April 1962, *Letters*, p. 759). [↑](#endnote-ref-50)
51. See Melissa Bradshaw, *Amy Lowell: Diva Poet* (Farnham, 2011), p. 154. [↑](#endnote-ref-51)
52. Lowell, ‘Wind and Silver’, in *What’s O’Clock* (1926), p. 221. [↑](#endnote-ref-52)
53. Lowell, ‘An Aquarium’, in *Men, Women and Ghosts*, pp. 360-363. [↑](#endnote-ref-53)
54. As ‘Wind and Silver’ and the first line of ‘Fool o’ the Moon’ (‘The silver-slippered moon treads the blue tiles of the sky’) indicate, silver features heavily in Lowell’s work. [↑](#endnote-ref-54)
55. ‘Lilacs’ was published in the *New York Evening Post* on 18 September 1920. ‘A Pink Wool Knitted Dress’ is included in Hughes, *Birthday Letters* (1999), pp. 34-35. [↑](#endnote-ref-55)
56. S. Foster Damon, *Amy Lowell: A Chronicle with Extracts from Her Correspondence* (Boston, 1935), p. 673. Quoted in Homans, p. 90. [↑](#endnote-ref-56)
57. Lowell, ‘Chopin’, in *Selected Poems*, p. 97, ll. 1-5, ll. 16-17. [↑](#endnote-ref-57)
58. ‘Myths’, p. 579. [↑](#endnote-ref-58)
59. T. S. Eliot, ‘Shakespeare and the Stoicism of Seneca’, in *Selected Essays* (1934), p. 138; Eliot, ‘Philip Massinger’, in *Selected Essays*, p. 206. [↑](#endnote-ref-59)
60. ‘Two of a Kind: Poets in Partnership’, an interview conducted by Owen Leeming, was recorded on 18 January and aired on 31 January 1961. [↑](#endnote-ref-60)
61. Carl Rollyson, *American Isis: The Life and Art of Sylvia Plath* (New York, 2013), p. 169. [↑](#endnote-ref-61)
62. Janet Malcolm, *The Silent Woman* (2005), p. 8. [↑](#endnote-ref-62)