

## Eleonora Duse and the Poetic World of Amy Lowell

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**Abstract:** *The American poetess Amy Lowell (1874-1925) had a special admiration for the famous actress Eleonora Duse (1858-1924). In 1902 she remained enchanted by the staging of d'Annunzio's plays in the United States, and had also a brief meet with her. It was the turning-point in her life: in fact, after this moment, she started her poetic production. After twenty years, when her literary career was at the highest level, she published some poems during the last American tour of the artist. She posthumously won the Pulitzer Prize for poetry in 1926 with the collection *What's o'clock*, which contains a long poem for Duse. This paper analyzes Lowell's poetic texts inspired by Duse (written in 1902, 1923, and 1924), considering the difficulties of their personal contact and the theatrical ambitions of the American poetess.*

**Keywords:** *Eleonora Duse; Amy Lowell; Gabriele d'Annunzio; poetry; theatre*

### Introduction

With her lyrics, the American poetess Amy Lowell (1874 - 1925) helped to consolidate the myth of Eleonora Duse (1858 - 1924) in the Twentieth century. Born into a wealthy family in Massachusetts, she traveled in Europe and Egypt; the epiphanic moment for her life was the meeting with Eleonora Duse in 1902, which determined the beginning of her poetic career and the consequential discover of her inner world.

In that period Duse's repertoire included Suderman (*Magda*) and Dumas jr. (*Claudio's Wife*), but the absolute focus was on three plays by d'Annunzio: *La Gioconda*, *The Dead City*, *Francesca da Rimini*. From March to May 1902, she performed in Wien and Berlin; from October 1902 to January 1903, she went on tour in the United States and performed in Boston, New York, Baltimora, Washington, Philadelphia, Chicago, St. Louis<sup>2</sup>.

In 1902, Duse also entered in the life of the American poetess Sara Teasdale (1884 - 1933), who wrote for her ten poems without ever having seen a performance<sup>3</sup>. For Amy Lowell the situation was different, because she was an admirer but started to compose poetry on the *direct* impact of her acting<sup>4</sup>. Many years later, on 5 June 1923, in a letter to Eunice Tietjens (1884 - 1944) she remembered that moment: «The effect on me was something tremendous. What really happened was that it revealed me to myself, but I hardly knew that at the time. I just knew that I had got to express the sensations that Duse's acting gave me, somehow»<sup>5</sup>.

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<sup>2</sup> M. I. Biggi. 2010 (ed.). *Eleonora Duse. Viaggio intorno al mondo*. Milan: Skira, pp. 107-108.

<sup>3</sup> M. P. Pagani. 2022. "Eleonora Duse and the Poetic Debut of Sara Teasdale." In *Education, Research, Creation*. Proceedings of the XIII International Symposium (Ovidius University in Constanta, 10-11 June 2022), vol. VIII, n. 1, pp. 317-332.

<sup>4</sup> M. P. Pagani. 2023. *Creatura di poesia. Vita in versi di Eleonora Duse*. Con postfazione di T. Iermano. Pescara: Ianieri Edizioni, pp. 11-21.

<sup>5</sup> S. Foster Damon. 1935. *Amy Lowell: a Chronicle*. Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, p. 148.

In this letter, Amy Lowell also underlined the presence of d'Annunzio's works in Duse's repertoire: it is a significant detail, because this surely contributed to her poetic inspiration<sup>6</sup>. She managed to meet the actress during the American tour in 1902, and had a brief interview with her at the hotel in Philadelphia: there was a girl full of dreams, but her talent was about to explode. She was interested in theatre, and probably wanted to become a playwright: in fact, her poems for Duse have a dialogic tone that at times makes them monologues or verse dramas. Thanks to the famous actress, she began to consider the theatricalization of poetry as form of literature.

## 2. *Eleanora Duse* (1902)

The poem entitled *Eleanora Duse*<sup>7</sup> was first published in August 1923, when the actress was preparing her last American tour, but Amy Lowell had written it in 1902 after one of her shows. The text clearly expresses what it means to be a spectator, when the theatre is full of people and they are waiting for the entrance of the famous artist. The audience is a mass made up of many single individuals: as an ancient goddess, the actress on stage offers her acting to everyone, but each spectator experiences that unique moment in a different way, with different emotions and sensations. In the complete posthumous collection of Amy Lowell's works, with an introduction by Louis Untermeyer (1885 - 1977), this text has been placed in the section *Uncollected Poems*<sup>8</sup>.

The talk is hushed,  
In the domed theatre's self the lights go out  
While other lights flash on the eyes,  
As the concealing curtain slowly lifts  
Upon a mimic world, or grave or gay,  
As artist's hand hath wrought.

The silent throng  
Is bound together by one common aim,  
One animating thought has brought them there  
In rows that curve expectant towards the stage,  
For they have come to see the self-same play.  
But this the only bond that makes them one,  
For each is here upon a different quest,  
A difference rooted deep as are their lives;  
For they have minds as various  
As are the shells the ebbtide leaves upon  
The shingle of some island beach.

For some are here on pure amusement bent,  
Others come lured by the far fame of her

<sup>6</sup> M. P. Pagani, 2018. "The Dead City. Eleonora Duse and the Archaeology of the Soul." In E. Dobson – G. Banks (ed). *Excavating Modernity. Physical, Temporal and Psychological Strata in Literature, 1900-1930*. London-New York: Routledge, pp. 42-62.

<sup>7</sup> A. Lowell. 1923. "Eleanora Duse." In *Poetry: A Magazine of Verse*, vol. XXII, n. 8, pp. 234-236.

<sup>8</sup> A. Lowell. 1925. *The Complete Poetical Works*. With an Introduction by L. Untermeyer. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, pp. 592-593.

Who tonight will image forth the tragic fate  
Of one who lived and died long since,  
Or else imbue the shadowy figment of  
A poet's dream with palpitating life.

Others there are in search of sparks to kindle  
The slow fire of their torpid brains.  
Others have wandered in they scarce know how;  
As sand that sifts all imperceptibly  
Into some ancient temple's columned hall,  
The desert wind that urged it is so far  
It hardly seems impelled by any law  
But drifting aimlessly has drifted here.

Yet all have come to see the self-same play.  
But what they take away is not the same,  
For none can go beyond what he has known  
And none can feel what was not felt before;  
No wandering half-forgotten moment passed,  
No volume read, no music heard, but now  
Bears fruit in deeper comprehension.

For she whom we have come to see tonight  
Is more to be divined and felt than seen,  
And when she comes one yields one's heart perforce,  
As one might yield some noble instrument  
For her to draw its latent music forth.

For she herself vibrates to every thought,  
And shades of feeling cross her face like clouds  
That trail their shadows hills.  
Her being is like an aeolian harp  
Clasped in a casement on some summer night  
Whence every breeze that passes draws a sound,  
Now harsh and wild, now sweet, now quaintly gay,  
But always musical, and always true.

Her voice is vibrant with a thousand things;  
Is sharp with pain, or choked with tears,  
Or rich with love and longing.  
Her little inarticulate sounds are sprung  
From depths of inner meaning which embrace  
A life's chaotic, vast experience.

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.

And as the evening lengthens, bit by bit,  
Little by little, we discern the real.  
'Tis that which holds us spellbound far, far more  
Than even her most consummate art can do,  
Through all the passion of a simulated grief  
And through the studied anguish learnt by rote  
We feel the throbbing of a human soul,  
A woman's heart that cries to God and fears!

### 3. *To Eleonora Duse. In Answer to a Letter (1923)*

The poem *To Eleonora Duse. In Answer to a Letter (1923)*<sup>9</sup> clearly reveal that Amy Lowell had a personal contact with Duse in winter 1923, while she was on tour in the United States. Probably, she invited the actress to a private reading, with the hope of a possible collaboration<sup>10</sup>. But Duse was too tired and busy to accept, and wrote her a rejection note (in Italian) which inspired the first verse of the text: «Regrets and memories these short December days». The actress was very worried because the American tour organized for her by the Slavic-born impresario Morris Gest (1875 - 1942)<sup>11</sup> was about to end, but they had quarreled for economic reasons. In January 1924 she decided to work with the Italian-born impresario Fortune Gallo (1878 - 1970), extending the tour in other new cities. The disappointment of the poetess was great, also because she had serious health problems.

«Regrets and memories these short December days».  
How the words cut and scar themselves  
Across my heart!  
Dear lady of the great compassion,  
All tenderness enmeshed in withes of truth,  
Experience harboured for its seeking flame,  
Clean burning flame of knowledge beyond thought,  
Sword-blade of sheerest beauty,  
As the sun sinks wanly,  
Branch by branch,  
Through the shaking, leafless trees,  
How cruelly the twilight comes –  
I watch it here,  
At this long distance from you,  
And rage at impotence  
Which can give you no brighter present  
Than the flicker of a small red candle

<sup>9</sup> A. Lowell. 1927. "To Eleonora Duse. In Answer to a Letter." In *Ballads for Sale*. Boston-New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, pp. 87-89.

<sup>10</sup> M. Bradshaw. 2016. *Amy Lowell, Diva Poet*, London: Routledge, pp. 131-150.

<sup>11</sup> M. P. Pagani, "L'impresario Morris Gest e le tourn ee americane di Stanislavskij e della Duse." In *Migrazioni artistiche tra Europa e America*. Proceedings of the International Conference (Bergamo, 26-27 May 2022), ed. by G. Cicali. Rome: Bulzoni, forthcoming.

Lit by you long ago.  
 You wrong yourself dwelling upon the past;  
 I have it from your lips:  
 «The past is dead. The future alone has life».  
 The past is dead, save in the continuity  
 Of your most inaccessible loveliness.  
 Where touch is healing should be no regret  
 At that which makes it so.  
 You walked, and walk, incarnate soul  
 Of human needs and meetings.  
 The sight of you is the clarity of courage;  
 Your movements, insistent, compelling, muted  
 trumpets in a still air;  
 Your voice, ah, dear, that voice, as April rain  
 Dropping at evening on beds of unsprung tulips.  
 Where has there ever been a flesh  
 So rightly framing such a spirit? Tell me.  
 You cannot.  
 Words are pebbles,  
 A gravel-path for you to tread and spurn.  
 Music is liker to encase your essence,  
 Yet you escape, for what you really are  
 Hangs to no swiftest flash of evocation,  
 But floats in rondure of its perfectness  
 Out of our sight as possible, impossible,  
 Peak of a human capability,  
 Infinite spirit with the lightest shadowing  
 Of merciful and finite flesh.  
 Has anyone ever so held the cords of life,  
 Of all our lives, as you?  
 You dare not say there has and gaze truth in the eye.  
 Look back, then, if you must,  
 But see plain fact,  
 Yourself the soul's wine of a generation,  
 The whispered bourne of blessings to a world.

#### 4. *To Eleonora Duse* (1923)

After carefully reading the Italian translation of Duse's note, Amy Lowell understood that her answer was not a cold refusal, but there were real problems that prevented any new collaboration. The artistic dream of the poetess was wrecked, but she continued to consider the actress a source of inspiration and wrote a new poem in 1923: *To Eleonora Duse*<sup>12</sup>.

If you believed my words,  
 O tragic, incommunicable lady,  
 Would they lure you for an instant  
 From your long, rapt contemplation

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12 A. Lowell. 1923. "To Eleonora Duse." In *Ballads for Sale*, cit., pp. 90-94.

Of the sunset-tinted clouds  
Lowering in grim and huddled splendour  
Over the broken turrets of your ruined sorrows?  
Dead to the sting of anguish,  
The misery that you ache no more  
Is aching so preponderant and huge  
You walk within it as an atmosphere  
And breathe its bitterness like some gaunt poison  
Easing you into numbness  
Even of its slow insidious advance.  
Where grief has watched  
Sits now the ghost of grief.  
Where tenderness once held out arms to gather  
A universe's loneliness,  
Reigns now a weariness of feeling,  
A kindness too spent to give itself,  
To smile less calmly than a sculptured saint  
Enduring anthems in an incensed niche.  
The small dried cones of my fardel of years  
Make a poor faggot to light before you,  
And yet if you believed them wood not wax  
Might not the little raw flame of them  
Warm you to a single throb of your lost life?  
I see you there before me,  
Distant as the shattered past, the shapeless future.  
The sprig of your sowing withers in my hands,  
Your remoteness is too vast to cherish it.  
See, I please it where your somnambulistic feet  
May tread upon it  
Crushing its fragrance to play round your dreams  
I could give much,  
Give back what you will not believe your own,  
Give laughter, tears.  
I am not poor in such,  
Richer than you are now, perhaps.  
You put me by  
Gently, as something in your path  
Which, scarcely seeing, yet you brush aside.  
You hurt less in the days of your revolt  
Than in this quietude of charity.  
The sight of you is piercing as a cry,  
Your loveliness betrays my eyes to tears,  
They smart in falling.  
I am no hero-worshipper,  
Yet for your sake I long to babble prayers  
And overdo myself in services.  
Is this not love, then?  
My I not write myself disciple, follower?

Unworthy, doubtless, but authentic grain  
 Sprung from your scattered seed?  
 Yet you smile and say:  
 «Of course, it is not true».  
 If this be not truth,  
 Then truth and I have never made a company.  
 You want no service, no compassion, no refreshment.  
 Tranquillity you think you have, or call it so,  
 I call it poison dripped from traitorous urns.  
 You pass me like a legend sprayed with flowers,  
 The legend of my youth, and now hence-forward  
 Of my age.  
 Pass, lady,  
 To whom I can give nothing, nothing.  
 Yet here again I say it,  
 With the doggedness of custom grown inveterate:  
 What you gave I give back again and shall,  
 Along the smooth years where you wander now,  
 Perfectly heedless of your heedlessness.  
 Truth is a brazen thing, and I,  
 Banging against the brass of utter fact,  
 Do make perhaps a horrid din  
 To your peace-longing ears.  
 So be it, I am silent,  
 But still here, believed or not,  
 A chance creation not at all desired,  
 Yet so existing while our double names  
 Shall carry any meaning to men's minds.

### 5. *Eleonora Duse* (1924)

This poem in six parts<sup>13</sup> was written in 1924 when Duse was still alive, and published in August 1925 in the first posthumous collection of Amy Lowell, who had died on May 12 of that year. It is worth noting that the American poetess passed away exactly one year after the burial of Duse in Asolo. *What's o'clock* won the Pulitzer Prize for Poetry in 1926, posthumously.

#### I

Seeing's believing, so the ancient word  
 Chills buds to shrivelled powder flecks, turns flax  
 To smoky heaps of straw whose small flames wax  
 Only to gasp and die. The thing's absurd!  
 Have blind men ever seen or deaf men heard?  
 What one beholds but measures what one lacks.  
 Where is the prism to draw gold from blacks,

<sup>13</sup> A. Lowell. 1925. "Eleonora Duse." In *What's o'clock*. Boston-New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, pp. 235-240.

Or flash the iris colours of a bird?  
Not in the eye, be sure, nor in the ear,  
Nor in an instrument of twisted glass,  
Yet there are sights I see and sounds I hear  
Which ripple me like water as they pass.  
This that I give you for a dear love's sake  
Is curling noise of waves marching along a lake.

## II

A letter or a poem – the words are set  
To either tune. Be careful how you slice  
The flap which is held down by this device  
Impressed upon it. In one moment met  
A cameo, intaglio, a fret  
Of workmanship, and I. Like melted ice  
I took the form and froze so, turned precise  
And brittle seal, a creed in silhouette.  
Seeing's believing? What then would you see?  
A chamfered dragon? Three spear-heads of steel?  
A motto done in flowered charactry?  
The thin outline of Mercury's winged heel?  
Look closer, do you see a name, a face,  
Or just a cloud dropped down before a holy place?

## III

Lady, to whose enchantment I took shape  
So long ago, though carven to your grace,  
Bearing, like quickened wood, your sweet sad face  
Cut in my flesh, yet may I not escape  
My limitations: words that jibe and gape  
After your loveliness and make grimace  
And travesty where they should interlace  
The weave of sun-spun ocean round a cape.  
Pictures then must contain you, this and more,  
The sigh of wind floating on ripe June hay,  
The desolate pulse of snow beyond a door,  
The grief of mornings seen as yesterday.  
All that you are mingles as one sole cry  
To point a world aright which is so much awry.

## IV

If Beauty set her image on a stage  
And bid it mirror moments so intense  
With passion and swift largess of the sense  
To a divine exactness, stamp a page



With mottoes of hot blood, and disengage  
No atom of mankind's experience,  
But lay the soul's complete incontinence  
Bare while it tills grief's gusty acreage.  
Doing this, you, spon-image to her needs,  
She picked to pierce, reveal, and soothe again,  
Shattering by means of you the tinsel creeds  
Offered as meat to the pinched hearts of men.  
So, sacrificing you, she fed those others  
Who bless you in their prayers even before their mothers.

## V

Life seized you with her iron hands and shook  
The fire of your boundless burning out  
To fall on us, poor little ragged rout  
Of common men, till like a flaming book  
We, letters of a message, flashed and took  
The fiery flare of prophecy, devout  
Torches to bear your oil, a dazzling shout,  
The liquid golden running of a brook.  
Who, being upborne on racing streams of light,  
Seeing new heavens sprung from dusty hells,  
Considered you, and what might be your plight,  
Robbed, plundered – since Life's cruel plan compels  
The perfect sacrifice of one great soul  
To make a myriad others even a whit more whole.

## VI

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, all disguise  
Time can achieve is but to add a stress,  
A finer fineness, as though some caress  
Touched you a moment to a strange surprise.  
Seeing you after these long lengths of years,  
I only know the glory come again,  
A majesty bewildered by my tears,  
A golden sun spangling slant shafts of rain,  
Moonlight delaying by a sick man's bed,  
A rush of daffodils where wastes of dried leaves spread.

**6. Conclusions**

Thanks to Duse, Amy Lowell discovered her literary vocation and persevered in it. The revelation of her inner world as a poetess took place thanks to the theatre, perhaps she also had the ambition to become a playwright and compose some plays for Duse. In fact, many intellectuals of the 1920s had dreams of a high-level professional collaboration with her. However, the disappointment did not prevent her from acknowledging that the actress was her lifelong inspiration.

The literary talent of the American poetess must also be considered in relation to the “theatre of poetry” by Gabriele d’Annunzio: Duse was his muse and privileged interpreter, and it is natural that there is an osmotic relationship. Admiring the actress, Amy Lowell also admired her author-poet. This game of mirrors has doubly increased the sensibility of an important female voice for world poetry.

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