
Issues of Contemporary Aesthetics
PAMPHLET SERIES



KINDRED FIRE

Texas Quarterly as Literary Nexus:

**Connecting Larry D. Thomas, Sylvia Plath and Ted Hughes
Through Aesthetic and Institutional Affinity**

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KINDRED FIRE: *The TEXAS QUARTERLY as Literary Nexus*
Connecting Larry D. Thomas, Sylvia Plath, and Ted Hughes

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KINDRED FIRE

The Texas Quarterly as Literary Nexus:
Connecting Larry D. Thomas, Sylvia Plath, and Ted
Hughes Through Aesthetic and Institutional Affinity

ABSTRACT

This article argues that *The Texas Quarterly* functioned as a significant literary nexus connecting the early work of Larry D. Thomas with the internationally recognized poetics of Sylvia Plath and Ted Hughes. Although Thomas's poem "The Duel" never appeared in print due to the journal's closure in 1978, archival evidence confirms its acceptance in 1977. This acceptance—by a journal that had already published Plath and Hughes—reveals a shared aesthetic terrain: mythic naturalism, animistic imagery, and formal precision. By examining the *Quarterly's* editorial identity, its cosmopolitan ambitions, and its curatorial preferences, this article demonstrates how the journal served as a bridge linking a rising Texas poet to a broader international lineage.

INTRODUCTION: *A Journal Larger Than Its Name*

Founded in 1958 at the University of Texas by Harry H. Ransom, *The Texas Quarterly* quickly established itself as a major international literary journal rather than a regional publication.¹ Its contributors included W. H. Auden, Marianne Moore, Octavio Paz, Robert Graves, Eudora Welty, Frank Lloyd Wright, and numerous other major writers and artists.² Most relevant to this study, the *Quarterly* published **Sylvia Plath** and **Ted Hughes** in its 1960 and 1961 issues.³

Against this backdrop, the journal's acceptance of Larry D. Thomas's "The Duel" and "Cremation" in 1977—verified in correspondence and manuscript materials preserved in the Larry D. Thomas Collection at the East Texas Research Center (ETRC), Stephen F. Austin State

University—becomes a moment of significant literary convergence.⁴ *The Quarterly* becomes the institutional site where three distinct poetic sensibilities align through shared aesthetic commitments. [Note: “Cremation” was subsequently published in *The Austin Chronicle* (26:19)].

THE QUARTERLY’S EDITORIAL VISION: *Myth, Nature, And Formal Precision*

Ransom’s founding editorial statement described the *Quarterly* as a journal for the “general literate reader,” one that would balance the sciences, humanities, and arts.⁵ Its editors consistently sought writing that was formally disciplined, imagistically vivid, and intellectually ambitious.

This curatorial vision explains why the journal published Plath’s “Flute Notes from a Reedy Pond” and “Witch Burning” in 1960–61,⁶ and Hughes’s “Lines to a Newborn Baby” and related works in the same period.⁷ These pieces exemplify the journal’s preference for poetry that animates the natural world with symbolic or mythic force.

Thomas’s “The Duel”—with its cornstalk “fencing” the dawn and raven “cracking” the quiet—fits this aesthetic profile precisely. The *Quarterly*’s acceptance of the poem thus reflects not coincidence but **editorial affinity**.

NATURE AS CHARGED FIELD: *Aesthetic Parallels Across Three Poets*

LARRY D. THOMAS: RITUALIZED ANIMISM

In “The Duel,” Thomas transforms a Texas dawn into a ceremonial contest. The wind “creep[s],” the cornstalk “yawns,” and its leaves become “swords / of emerald lightning.” Nature is alive, but its aliveness is **ritualistic**, understated, and regionally grounded. This aligns with Thomas’s broader early style, which critics have described as “compressed, elemental, and animistic.”

SYLVIA PLATH: PSYCHIC NATURALISM

Plath’s nature imagery is intensely interior. In poems published by the *Quarterly*, reeds, flames, and ponds become extensions of psychic

states. Her animism is **psychological**, often occult, and charged with emotional volatility. Scholars have long noted that Plath's landscapes function as "psychic topographies."⁹

TED HUGHES: PRIMAL MYTHIC NATURALISM

Hughes's nature is overtly violent and archetypal. Animals are embodiments of cosmic energies; landscapes are arenas of predation and revelation. His animism is **shamanic**, external, and forceful.¹⁰

Shared Terrain

Despite differences in tone and scale, all three poets treat nature as:

- **agentive**
- **symbolically charged**
- **mythically resonant**

This shared terrain is precisely what the Quarterly sought to curate.

THE QUARTERLY: *Gatekeeper and Validator*

The Quarterly's acceptance of Thomas's poems is significant because:

1. **It placed him in the company of Plath and Hughes**, whose work the journal had already validated.
2. **It confirmed his early poetic maturity**, recognizing the sophistication of his imagery and mythic sensibility.
3. **It provided institutional recognition** from a journal with international reach.
4. **It is archivally documented**, giving scholars a material record of the acceptance.

The presence of the original typed manuscripts of "The Duel" (and "Cremation") in the ETRC archive further anchors the poems in a tangible literary history.¹¹

INSTITUTIONAL INTERRUPTION: *The Poetic Echo*

The Quarterly ceased publication in 1978, a fact documented in UT

Austin's institutional history.¹² This closure prevented "The Duel" from appearing in print. The interruption mirrors the poem's own imagery:

- the raven's "sharded song"
- the cracking of quiet
- the sudden rupture of dawn

The institutional break becomes a real-world echo of the poem's thematic tension between stillness and disruption.

THE QUARTERLY AS NEXUS: *Aesthetic, Institutional, and Archival*

When viewed as a nexus, *The Texas Quarterly* connects Thomas, Plath, and Hughes across three dimensions:

1. Aesthetic Nexus

All three poets animate nature with mythic or psychic force. *The Quarterly* curated this aesthetic consistently.

2. Institutional Nexus

The same editorial judgment that recognized Plath and Hughes recognized Thomas. This places Thomas in a lineage of international modernist and postmodernist poetics.

3. Archival Nexus

The acceptance of "The Duel" and "Cremation" in 1977 is preserved in correspondence and manuscript form. The archive becomes the material site where this convergence is documented.

CONCLUSION: *A Texas Poet in an International Lineage*

The Texas Quarterly serves as the institutional bridge linking Larry D. Thomas to Sylvia Plath and Ted Hughes. Its acceptance in 1977 of "The Duel" and "Cremation" reveals that Thomas's early work was already operating within the same imaginative register as two of the most influential poets of the twentieth century. The journal's cosmopolitan ambitions, its curatorial preferences, and its archival traces together demonstrate that Thomas was never merely a "Texas

poet.” He was, from the beginning, a poet whose work resonated with international modernist traditions.

In this sense, the Quarterly is not simply a publication venue. It is the **nexus** through which Thomas’s early literary stature becomes legible, validated, and historically grounded.

NOTES / CITATIONS

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9. Heather Clark, *Red Comet: The Short Life and Blazing Art of Sylvia Plath* (New York: Knopf, 2020).
10. Keith Sagar, *The Art of Ted Hughes* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975).
11. Larry D. Thomas Collection, ETRC, Stephen F. Austin State University
12. UT Austin Office of Publications, “History of the *Texas Quarterly*,” University Archives.
13. Larry D. Thomas, “Cremation,” *The Austin Chronicle* (26:19).

ABOUT LARRY D. THOMAS:

LARRY D. THOMAS is an American poet whose work is deeply rooted in the landscapes and histories of the American West and Southwest. Born in Texas, he served for decades in social service and adult criminal justice before devoting himself full-time to poetry. He is the author of numerous poetry collections, beginning with *The Lighthouse Keeper* (Timberline Press), a letterpress edition that sold out quickly. Appointed Texas Poet Laureate in 2008 by the Texas Legislature, Thomas is also a member of the Texas Institute of Letters. His poetry has earned multiple major literary awards and appears widely in national journals.

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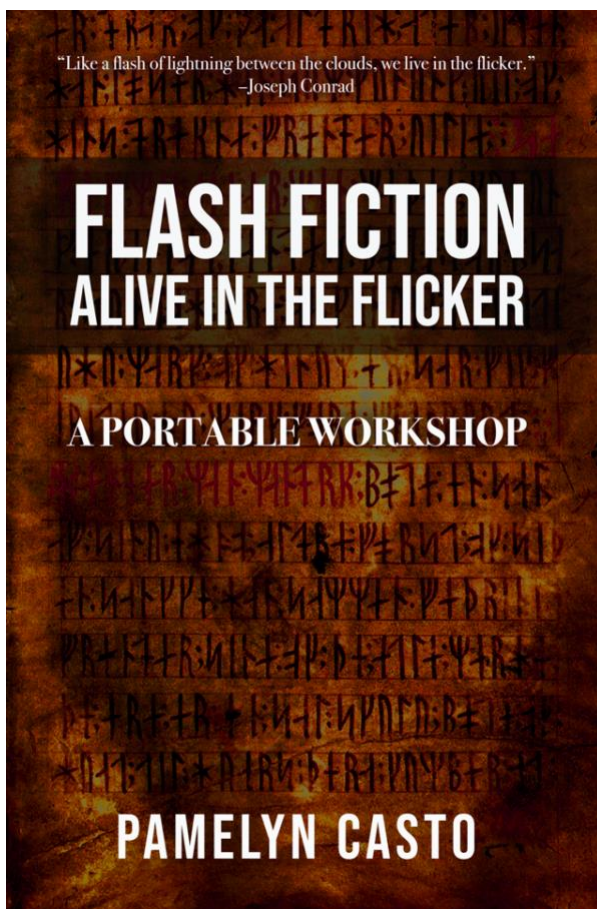
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