

JAMES RUSSELL LOWELL.

IN a liberal sense, and somewhat as Emerson stands for American thought, the poet Lowell has become our representative man of letters. Not as our most exact scholar, though of a rich scholarship, and soundly versed in branches which he has chosen to follow. Not as an indomitable writer, yet, when he writes, from whom are we surer to receive what is brilliant and original? Nor yet chiefly as a poet, in spite of the ideality, the feeling, the purpose, and the wit that belong to his verse and that first brought him into reputation. But, whatsoever the conjunction that has enabled Mr. Lowell to reach and maintain his typical position, we feel that he holds it, and, on the whole, ought to hold it. His acquirements and versatile writings, the conditions of his life, the mold of the man, and the spirit of his whole work, have given him a peculiar distinction, and this largely without his thought or seeking. Such a nimbus does not form around one who summons it : it glows and gathers almost without his knowledge,—and not at once, but, like the expression of a noble face, after long experience and service.

I have spoken of one poet as excelling others in the adroitness of a man of the world. Mr. Lowell's qualities secure him honor and allies without the need of adroitness. He is regarded not only as a man of letters, but as a fine exemplar of culture, and of a culture so generous as to be thought supra-American by those observers who, while pronouncing him a citizen of the world, are careful to exclude this country from his range. Professor Dowden, for instance, says : " Taken as a whole, the works of Lowell do not mirror the life, the thoughts, and passions of the nation. They are works, as it were, of an English poet who has become a naturalized citizen of the United States ; who admires the institutions and has faith in the ideas of America, but who cannot throw off his allegiance to the old country and its authorities." But here is a manifest assumption. Doubtless, Lowell's mirror does not reflect Dr. Dowden's conception of the life, the thoughts, and passions of this nation, but the critic might revise his conception if better informed. In the poet's writings we find the life and passion of New England, to a verity, and the best thought of our people at large. For, when I say that he is a type of American culture, I mean of republican culture, and

nothing more or less. Those who hold to the republican idea believe that its value is to be found in its leveling tendency ; by which I do not mean a general reduction to the lowest caste, but the gradual elevation of a multitude to the standard which individuals have reached,—among them so many of the writing craft, from Franklin's generation to our own. In this respect I do not, of course, mention Mr. Lowell's position as distinctive,—the names of other scholars and writers instantly come to mind,—nor have our men of culture been confined to any guild or profession. Marshall and Story, Pinkney, Wirt, Winthrop, Sumner and Bayard, jurists, orators, and statesmen,—soldiers, merchants, artisans, Americans of every class,—have shown that culture is a plant that thrives in a republic no less than under royal care. Their number is increasing ; the average grade is advanced. If this were not so, republicanism would be a failure : in this matter it is on trial no less than in its ability to promote the establishment of first-class museums, libraries, academies, even without governmental aid.

We count Mr. Lowell, among others, as a specimen of home-culture, not of foreign, and especially of our Eastern type. His life shows what the New England culture, not always so fortunate, can do for a man of genius. And thus, even aside from his writings, he is a person of note. The tributes frequently paid him would of themselves keep his name before us. But it is natural for him to shun publicity, and the movements of authors greatly beneath him are more zealously chronicled than his own ; nor is he, I think, so commonly read as a few other poets of his standing. Yet many of his sayings, like those of Emerson, are a portion of our usual discourse and reference, and the people have taken some of his lyrics faithfully to heart. He has written one work which bids fair to become a classic. Whether as a poet and critic, or as a man of affairs, of rare breeding and the healthiest moral tone, Mr. Lowell is one of whom it may be affirmed, in the words applied to another, that a thing derives more weight from the fact that he has said it. Are we conscious, then, of having in view a man better than his best writings ? But this may be said of many authors, and there must be, at all events, a live personality behind good work.

Lowell's sense of this, and of the strength and fullness of existence, keep him void of

conceit. He often has seemed impatient of his art, half-ready to cry out upon it, lest it lead him from green fields and forests, from the delight of life itself. He is not swift to magnify his office above the heroic action of other men. This catholicity is rare among poets and artists, whose dearest failing is a lack of concern for people or things not associated with their own pursuits. On the other hand, poetry is the choicest expression of human life, and the poet who does not revere his art and believe in its sovereignty is not born to wear the purple. Lowell, in fortunate seasons, goes back from life to song with new vigor and wisdom, and with a loyalty strengthened by experiences. After all, the man dies, while his imaginative works may survive even the record of his name. Therefore the work is the essential thing; and Mr. Lowell's work, above all, is so imbued with his individuality, that none can overlook the relations of the one to the other, or fail, in comprehending his poetry, to enter into the make and spirit of the poet himself.

II.

MR. UNDERWOOD has given some account of Lowell's ancestry, and of the conditions which led to the birth and breeding of a poet. We have a picture of the Cambridge manor, Elmwood,—a home not wanting in the relics of an old-time family,—portraits, books, and things of art. Mr. Lowell's father, and his father's father, were clergymen, orthodox, well-read, bearing honored names; his mother, a gifted woman, the mistress of various languages, and loving the old English songs and ballads,—no wonder that three of her children came to be authors, and this one, the youngest, a famous citizen and poet. It is not hard to fill in these outlines with something of the circumstance that, as I pointed out in the case of Mrs. Browning, fore-ordains the training of a genius; that supplies, I repeat, the means of its self-training, since the imagination derives its sustenance like a plant, selecting and assimilating for itself. All it needs is food, atmosphere, a place to grow. In these Lowell was exceptionally favored, under the influence of local and family traditions, the home-culture, the method of his father, and the taste of the mother from whom he inherited his bent toward letters and song.

His college course made little change in this way of growth. He might fail of advantages to be gained from drill and drudgery; but was sure to extend his reading in the direction of his natural tastes, until acquainted with many literatures. His subsequent study of the law probably added the logical disci-

pline that enables one to formulate ideas. But any voice that would restrict him to his profession must have fallen "vainlier than the hen's to her false chickens in the pool." Instinct, judgment, everything, pointed to letters as his calling. The period of his start, and his father's literary tastes, are indicated by his avowal that he was brought up "in the old superstition" that Pope "was the greatest poet that ever lived." This would account for his escape to the renaissance of beauty and romance; just as the repression of an orthodox training may have had much to do with his early liberalism in politics and theology.

It seems that the light-hearted Cambridge student was eager for all books except those of the curriculum, and troubled himself little as to mathematics and other prosaic branches. This was quite in accordance with precedent, *teste* Landor or Shelley, yet I doubt not that he was more than once sorry for it in after years. And I suspect that he passed for what he was, or promised to be, with the Faculty, and became something of an oracle among his mates. There was more eagerness then, at Harvard, than now; the young fellows were not ashamed to wear their hearts upon their sleeves. The gospel of indifferentism had not been preached. The words "clever" and "well-equipped" now seem to express our highest good; we avoid sentimentalism, but nourish less that genius which thrives in youth upon hopefully garnished food.

Lowell wrote the Class Poem, and took leave to print it, being under discipline at the time appointed for its delivery. Mr. Sanborn neatly points out that it abounded in conventional satire of the new-fangled reformers whom the poet was soon to join. As a law graduate, he shortly clouded his professional chances by writing for the Boston "Miscellany," and issuing a little book of verse. A writer's first venture is apt to be a novel or poem. Should he grow in station, it becomes rare, or valued for its indications. The thin, pretty volume, "A Year's Life," does show traits of its author's after-work, but not so distinctly as many books of the kind. Three years later he termed its contents,

"the firstlings of my muse,
Poor windfalls of unripe experience."

But three years are a long time in the twenties. There are a few ideal passages in this book, and some that suggest his forming tendencies. It was inscribed to "Una," whom he aptly might have called Egeria, for she was already both the inspirer and the sharer of his best imaginings. A few well-chosen pieces are

retained in the opening division of Mr. Lowell's standard collection. Of these, "Threnodia" is a good specimen of his early manner. The simple and natural lines "With a Pressed Flower" are in contrast with vaguer portions of the first book, and have a characteristic thought in the closing stanza, where he says of flowers, that

"Nature, ever kind to love,
Hath granted them the same sweet tongue,
Whether with German skies above,
Or here our granite rocks among."

The cullings from "A Year's Life," with various and riper odes, lyrics, and sonnets, make up the "Early Poems" of his latest edition, showing his range at the date of their production.

Some of the longer pieces lack compactness, and betray an imagination still somewhat nebulous. "The Sirens," "Irené," "My Love," "Rosaline," are like the first poems of Tennyson, then a risen star. There is a trace of Shelley in the lines "To Perdita, Singing," and "The Moon." "Allegra" is sweet, direct, original. The sonnets upon reading Wordsworth, a sonnet to Spenser (in "A Year's Life"), and one to Keats, afford hints of the poet's healthy tastes. Those to Phillips and Giddings prove that he was no laggard in the unpopular antislavery movement. As to other reforms, it is plain that he began to have convictions,—or, at least, to have a conviction that he had convictions. "The Heritage" and "A Rich Man's Son" were taken up by the press, and are still found in our school-readers. Lowell's voice was for independence, human rights, the dignity of labor. Some of the love-poetry is exquisite. Its serenity declares that no other word than happiness is needed for the history of the time between the dates of his first and second books. To be sure, he set himself to edit "The Pioneer," the conditions being so adverse that poets and essayists who now should make the fortune of a magazine could not prolong its short existence. But we think of Lowell as enjoying to the full those three zestful years,—a briefless barrister, perhaps, yet guarded by the Muse, and having the refined companionship of the girl whose love he sought and won. In the year of his marriage to Maria White, he published a second volume, whose contents, with other verse composed before "Sir Launfal," exhibit his poetic genius in its fresh maturity.

"The Legend of Brittany," an artistic and legendary poem, was, for that time, quite a significant production, so much so that Poe said it was "the noblest poem yet written by an American." It commended itself to him

because, unlike some of Lowell's verse, it was designed for poetry and nothing else—it is not in the least didactic. And that Poe said this, and meant it, shows how few were the longer poems of merit we then had produced. The Legend is a sweet, flowing tale, in the *ottava rima*, after the mode of Keats and up to the standard of Leigh Hunt. It needs dramatic force in the climax, but is simple and delicately finished. A still better piece of artwork is "Rhœcus," that Greek legend of the wood-nymph and the bee. The poet by chance subjected himself, and not discreditably, to the test of a comparison with the most bewitching of Landor's Hellenics, "The Hamadryad." Much might be said, in view of these two idyls, upon the antique and modern handlings of a theme. Landor worked as a Grecian might, giving the tale in chiseled verse, with no curious regard for its teachings. Its beauty is enough for him, and there it stands—a Periclean vase. His instinct became a conscious method. In a letter to Foster he begs him to amend the poem by striking out a bit of "reflection" which a true hamadryad should "cut across":

"Why should the beautiful
(And thou art beautiful) disturb the source
Whence springs all beauty?"

Mr. Lowell's "Rhœcus" is an example of the modern feeling. Passages such as that beginning:

"A youth named Rhœcus, wandering in the wood,"

are simple and lovely; the scene where Rhœcus, playing dice, rudely treats the winged messenger, is a picture equaling the best of Landor's. But the story itself is preceded by a moralizing commentary, and other glosses of the same kind are here and there. The whole is treated as an allegory conveying a lesson. The wood-nymph herself draws one, tenderly and sadly, at the close:

"'Alas!' the voice returned, 'tis thou art blind,
Not I unmerciful. I can forgive,
But have no skill to heal thy spirit's eyes;
Only the soul hath power o'er itself.'"

This method confuses the beauty of the poem, though distinct enough in purpose, and characteristic of the New England school.

The poet, in truth, felt himself called upon for secular work. With all his love of beauty, he had a greater dread of dilettanteism. The air was full of "progress," and he made a general assay of the new thoughts and enthusiasms. Reform-verse came naturally from the young idealist portrayed by his friend Page. The broad collar and high-parted, flowing hair set off a handsome, eager face, with the

look of Keats and the resolve of a Brook-Farmer. But he was wholly himself, incapable of the affectation which—in a time when poetry is not the first choice of readers—markets its wares by posing for the jest and zest of fashion, and brings into contempt the grand old name of poet among those who know poetry only as a name. Affectation and self-seeking in art, as elsewhere, are detestable. Only the genius of Byron, in a romantic period, atoned for his trace of the former. So far as Byron was an actor, he was a great one. It makes no difference whether the affectation be one of virility or of refinement; the self-seeking is apt to be that of the author or artist who devotes one day in the month to work, and all the rest to advertising it. You may see his outward type in the water-fly *Osric*, of whom *Hamlet* says that " 'tis a vice to know him." Such creatures and their habits are the breed of special times—men with some bit of talent, gaining their paltry ends, and sure to be duly classified at last. And so *Osric*, as *Hamlet* disdainfully perceives, with "many more of the same breed that the drossy age dotes on," has "only got the tune of the time * * * a kind of yesty collection, which carries them through and through the most fond and winnowed opinions." But Lowell, I say, was himself alone, wearing his Arcadian garb, yet hasting to throw aside his crook at the sound of the trumpet. His "progressive" verse often was fuller of opinion than beauty, of eloquence than passion. Some of it is in a measure which reformers have seemed to hit upon by an exasperating instinct—the much-abused verse shown at its best in "Locksley Hall." With the typical radical, it is enough to make a thing wrong that it is accepted by a majority. Lowell found himself with the minority, but the minority then chanced to be the party of a future, and, in essentials, wholly right. If Whittier and himself, like the Lake Poets before them, became didactic through moral earnestness, it none the less aided to inspire them. Their verse advanced a great cause, and, as years went by, grew in quality—perhaps as surely as that of poets who, in youth, reject all but artistic considerations.

Before Lowell's thought and imagination had gained their richness, he had to contend with a disproportionate flow of language, if using forms that did not of themselves restrict it. "Prometheus," "Columbus," "A Glance Behind the Curtain," are studies upon massive themes, weakened because their matter is not compactly molded. Yet the poet had a terse art of saying things, as when he made Cromwell declare that

"New times demand new measures and new men;"

and himself said :

"They are slaves who dare not be
In the right with two or three,"

or, similarly, spoke up for

"One faith against a whole earth's unbelief,
One soul against the flesh of all mankind."

His manner often was fine :

"All other glories are as falling stars,
But universal Nature watches theirs,
Such strength is won by love of human kind."

"The moon will come and go
With her monotonous vicissitude."

"The melancholy wash of endless waves."

His analytic turn early cropped out in the "Studies for Two Heads," which is all Lowell—as one now would say. The poem "To the Past" is written with more circumstance than Bryant's, but the latter, in simple grandeur and diction, is the more imaginative. To indicate, finally, the chief reservation of Mr. Lowell's admirers, I must own that these poems often are marked with technical blemishes, from which even his later verse is not exempt. In trying both to express his conviction and to find a method of his own, he betrayed an irregular ear, and a voice rare in quality, but not wholly to be relied upon. He had a way, moreover, of "dropping" like his own bobolink, of letting down his fine passages with odd conceits, mixed metaphors, and licenses which as a critic he would not overlook in another. To all this add a knack of coining uncouth words for special tints of meaning, when there are good enough counters in the language for any poet's need. Space can be more agreeably used than by citing examples of these failings, which a reader soon discovers for himself. They have perplexed the poet's friends and teased his reviewers. Although such defects sometimes bring a man's work nearer to us, the question is as to their influence upon its permanent value. Verse may be faultily faultless, or may go to the other extreme. We are indebted, as usual, to Mr. Lowell himself for our critical test. Writing of Wordsworth, he says that "the work must surpass the material," and refers to "that shaping imagination which is the highest criterion of a poet."

It is a labor that physics pain to recall the verse by which he gained that hold upon his countrymen which strengthens through lengthening years. The public was right in its liking for "The Changeling," "She Came and Went," "The First Snow-fall," than which there are few more touching lyrics of

the affections. "The Shepherd of Admetus" and "An Incident in a Railway Car" are on themes which moved the poet to harmonize his taste and thought. When called upon, as he supposed, to make a choice between Taste and his conception of Duty, Taste sometimes went to the wall. Doubtless, he grew to see that the line of Beauty does not always follow Duty's follower, and that the surrender of the former itself may be in the nature of a crime. His sense never was more subtle, his taste never more delightful, than in the flawless stanzas on the "Phœbe," recently printed in this magazine. The public keeps in store for him the adage of the willful songster. That he "can" sing was discovered at the outset. One such piece as "Hebe" decided that point:

"I saw the twinkle of white feet,
I saw the flash of robes descending;
Before her ran an influence fleet
That bowed my heart like barley bending."

It also included his theory of song, and a sound one:

"Coy Hebe flies from those that woo,
And shuns the hands would seize upon her;
Follow thy life, and she will sue
To pour for thee the cup of honor."

To this lesson of his own experience he recurs again and again:

"Whither? Albeit I follow fast,
In all life's circuit I but find,
Not where thou art, but where thou wast,
Sweet beckoner, more fleet than wind!
* * * * *

All of thee but thyself I grasp;
I seem to fold thy luring shape,
And vague air to my bosom clasp,
Thou lithe, perpetual Escape!"

Like other poets of quality, Mr. Lowell has found the Muse, between her inspirations, a coquette and evader. He forms his rule accordingly:

"Now, I've a notion, if a poet
Beat up for themes, his verse will show it;
I wait for subjects that hunt me,
By day or night wont let me be,
And hang about me like a curse,
Till they have made me into verse."

From a poet who does this, we shall get flavor, and, in any event, the best of himself. Lowell's career, telling equally of use and song, has proved the wisdom of his admonitions:

"Harass her not; thy heat and stir
But greater coyness breed in her;
* * * * *
The Muse is womanish, nor deigns
Her love to him that pules and plains;
* * * * *

The epic of a man rehearse,
Be something better than thy verse;
Make thyself rich, and then the Muse
Shall court thy precious interviews,
Shall take thy head upon her knee,
And such enchantment lilt to thee,
That thou shalt hear the life-blood flow
From farthest stars to grass-blades low."

To which one may add, without malice, that Mr. Lowell can give even the Muse lessons in the art of flirting; knowing from long practice that, when she once has yielded her heart, she forgives even the infidelities of a favored lover.

There is a beautiful feeling in Lowell's poems of Nature. Wordsworth has dwelt upon the contrast between the youthful regard for Nature,—the feeling of a healthy and impassioned child,—and that of the philosopher who finds in her a sense "of something far more deeply interfused." The latter is a gift that makes us grave. It led Bryant to worship and invocation; and now, in the new light of science, we seek for, rather than feel, the soul of things. The charm of Lowell's outdoor verse lies in its spontaneity; he loves Nature with a child-like joy, her boon companion, finding even in her illusions welcome and relief,—just as one gives himself up to a story or a play, and will not be a doubter. Here he never ages, and he beguiles you and me to share his joy. It does me good to see a poet who knows a bird or flower as one friend knows another, yet loves it for itself alone. He sings among the woods, as Boone hunted, refusing to be edified, and with no wish for improvements. This one section he reserves for life itself:

"Away, my poets, whose sweet spell
Can make a garden of a cell!
I need ye not, for I to-day
Will make one long sweet verse of play."

His manhood shall not make him lose his boyhood; the whiff of the woods, the brook's voice, the spangle of spring-flowers,—these never fail to stir the old-time thrill; our hearts leap with his, and for once forget to ask the reason why.

Outside the "Pictures from Appledore" there is little of the ocean in his verse: the sea-breeze brings fewer messages to him than to Longfellow and Whittier. His sense of inland nature is all the more alert,—for him the sweet security of meadow-paths and orchard-closes. He has the pioneer heart, to which a homestead farm is dear and familiar, and native woods and waters are an intoxication. The American, impressed at first by the oaks and reaches of an Old-World park, soon wearies of them, and takes like a partridge to the bush. What Lowell loves most in nature

are the trees and their winged habitants, and the flowers that grow untended. "The Indian Summer Reverie" is an early and delightful avowal of his pastoral tastes. His favorite birds and trees, the meadows, river, and marshes, all are there, put in with strokes no modern descriptive poet has excelled. Browning's capture of the thrush's song is rivaled by such a touch as this:

"Meanwhile that devil-may-care, the bobolink,
Remembering duty, in mid-quaver stops
Just ere he sweeps o'er rapture's tremulous brink,
And 'twixt the winrows most demurely drops."

The poems "To a Pine-Tree" and "The Birch-Tree," with their suggestive measures, are companion-pieces that will last. The poet shares the stormy reign of the monarch of Katahdin; yet loves the whisper of the birch in the vale:

"Thou art the go-between of rustic loves;
Thy white bark has their secrets in its keeping;
Reuben writes here the happy name of Patience,
And thy lithe boughs hang murmuring and weeping
Above her, as she steals the mystery from thy
keeping."

Of Lowell's earlier pieces, the one which shows the finest sense of the poetry of Nature is that addressed "To the Dandelion." The opening phrase ranks with the selectest of Wordsworth and Keats, to whom imaginative diction came intuitively,—

"Dear common flower, that grow'st beside the way,
Fringing the dusty road with harmless gold,"

and both thought and language are felicitous throughout:

"Thou art my tropics and mine Italy;
To look at thee unlocks a warmer clime;
The eyes thou givest me
Are in the heart, and heed not space or time:
Not in mid June the golden-cuirassed bee
Feels a more summer-like warm ravishment
In the white lily's breezy tent,
His fragrant Sybaris, than I, when first
From the dark green thy yellow circles burst."

This poem contains many of its author's peculiar beauties and none of his faults; it was the outcome of the mood that can summon a rare spirit of art to express the gladdest thought and most elusive feeling.

I think, also, that "The Vision of Sir Launfal" owed its success quite as much to a presentation of Nature as to its misty legend. It really is a landscape-poem, of which the lovely passage, "And what is so rare as a day in June?" and the wintry prelude to Part Second, are the specific features. Like the Legend of Brittany, it was a return to poetry as poetry, and a sign that the author

was groping for a theme equal to his reserved strength. The Vinland fragment hints at a wider range of experiment. Thus far, in fact, no positively *new* notes. Lowell had shown his art and insight, a brave purpose, absolute sympathy with Nature. The ferment of his youth had worked itself clear. "Occasional" pieces, the stanzas to Kossuth, the poem on the English graves at Concord, came from definite convictions and a strong hand. He was a man, well girded, who had not found his best occasion; who needed the pressure of imminent events to bring out his resources and make his work enduring. The question, "How can I make a real addition to literature?" often must have come to one so penetrative. Possibly he was hampered, also, by his own culture. The Dervish's ointment may be too freely applied to the eyes; too close a knowledge of the verities may check ideal effort,—too just a balance of faculties produces indecision. Practical success in art must come from every-day ambition and experiment.

But creative results are apt to follow upon the gift to look at things from without. If Lowell had not utilized his surroundings, he was none the less aware of them. The solution of his problem came when least expected, and as a confirmation of his theory of the Unsought. The clew was not in ancestral or Arthurian legends, but in his own time and at his door-stone. It was woven of the homeliest, the most ungainly, material. It led to something so fresh and unique that its value, like that of other positively new work, at first hardly could have been manifest, even to the poet himself.

III.

THE "Biglow Papers" ended all question of Mr. Lowell's originality. They are a master-work, in which his ripe genius fastened the spirit of its region and period. Their strength lies in qualities which, as here combined, were no man's save his own. They declare the faith of a sincere and intelligent party with respect to war,—a sentiment called out by the invasion of Mexico, unjust in itself, but now seen to be a historical factor in the world's progress. This was a minority faith, held in vulgar contempt, and there was boldness in declaring it. Again, the "Biglow Papers" were the first, and are the best, metrical presentation of Yankee character in its thought, dialect, manners, and singular mixture of coarseness and shrewdness with the fundamental sense of beauty and right. Never sprang the flower of art from a more unpromising soil; yet these are eclogues as true

as those of Theocritus or Burns. Finally, they are not merely objective studies, but charged with the poet's own passion, and bearing the marks of a scholar's hand.

The work plainly shows its manner of growth. The first lyric struck the vein, the poet's mind took fire by its own friction, and one effort inspired another. The "Papers" made an immediate "hit"; the public instinctively passed a judgment upon them, in which critics were able to concur after the poet had made an *opus* of the collected series. Here was now seen that maturity of genius, of which Humor is a flower revealing the sound kind man within the poet. Such a work is, also, an illustration and defense of the tenure of Wit in the field of art. Verse made only as satire belongs to a lower order. Of such there are various didactic specimens. But Wit has an imaginative side, and Humor springs like Iris—all smiles and tears. The wit of poets often has been the faculty that ripened last, the overflow of their strength and experience. In the "Biglow Papers," wit and humor are united as in a composition of high grade. The jesting is far removed from that clownish gabble which, if it still increases, will shortly add another to the list of offenses that make killing no murder.

Mr. Lowell was under thirty at this time, and fairly may be reckoned among poets who have done great work in youth. His leap from provincialism is seen in the accessory divisions of his completed satire. The "Notices of an Independent Press" are a polygonal mirror in which journalism saw all its sins reflected, and wherewith he scanned not others' follies only, but his own, mocking our spread-eagleism, anglophobia, and the weaker phases of movements in which himself had joined. He burlesqued in mock Latin the venerable pomp of college-catalogues and Down-East genealogies. Then followed a clever analysis of the Yankee dialect, extended and made authoritative in a prefix to his second series. In the very first contribution of Mr. Biglow, the native Yankee is immortally portrayed. The ludicrous realism of the transcript is without parallel:

"Jest go home an' ask our Nancy
Wether I'd be sech a goose
Ez to jine ye,—guess you'd fancy
The eternal bung wuz loose!
She wants me fer home consumption,
Let alone the hay's to mow,—
Ef you're arter folks o' gumption,
You've a darned long row to hoe."

How the poet must have enjoyed that stanza! What rollicking delight! But he quickly recalls the inborn pride and patriotism,

the sacred wrath, of the true New England, and cries out from a wounded spirit:

"Massachusetts, God forgive her,
She's a-kneelin' with the rest,
She, thet ough' to ha' clung ferever
In her grand old eagle-nest!"

His rejection of the popular ideal of Webster, his branding ridicule of Robinson, Cushing, Palfrey, and his scorn of trimmers, vitalized the "Biglow Papers" and make their hits proverbial. The first series was a protest not only against the slave-holders' invasion of Mexico, but against war itself. Twenty-five years later a greater war arose, a mortal struggle to repress the wrong that caused the first. To such a conflict even Lowell could not say nay; his kinsmen freely gave their blood, and bereavement after bereavement came fast upon him. In the second series of the "Biglow Papers" the humor is more grim, the general feeling more intense. Still they are not Tyrtæan strains, but chiefly called out by political episodes,—like the Mason and Slidell affair,—and constantly the poet seeks a relief from the tension of the hour. One feels this in reading the dialogue, between the Bridge and Monument at Concord, suggested by Burns's "Twa Briggs,"—the return to "Sunthin' in the Pastoral Line," or, most of all, "The Courtin'." This bucolic idyl is without a counterpart; no richer juice can be pressed from the wild-grape of the Yankee soil. Of the epistles, the tenth has the most pathetic under-tone. It was composed, seemingly at a heat, in answer to a request for

"Sunthin' light an' cute,
Rattlin' an' shrewd an' kin' o' jingleish."

Mr. Biglow justifies the tone of his new series by avowing the immeasurable anguish and perplexity of the time:

"Where's Peace? I start, some clear-blown night,
When gaunt stone walls grow numb an' number,
An', creakin' 'cross the snow-crus' white,
Walk the col' starlight into summer."

His heart is full with its own sorrows; he half-despises himself "for rhymin'," when his young kinsmen have fallen in the fray:

"Why, haint I held them on my knee?
Didn't I love to see 'em growin',
Three likely lads ez wal could be,
Hahnsome an' brave, an' not too knowin'?"

* * * * *
'Taint right to hev the young go fust,
All throbbin' full o' gifts an' graces,
Leavin' life's paupers dry ez dust
To try an' make b'lieve fill their places!"

He longs for Peace, but invokes her to come, and rhymed, not as the poet he was, but under grim compulsion.

“Not like a mourner, bowed
For honor lost and dear ones wasted,
But proud, to meet a people proud,
With eyes that tell o' triumph tasted!
Come, with han' grippin' on the hilt,
An' step that proves ye Victory's daughter!
Longin' fer you, our sperits wilt
Like shipwrecked men's on raf's for water.”

IV.

These final lyrics, less varied and sparkling than their predecessors, are, in not unfrequent passages, more poetical. The author's statement of the causes and method of his work is more suggestive than Poe's whimsical analysis of “The Raven,” and not open to the suspicion of being written for effect.

The “Biglow Papers,” as we now have them, form a strongly proportioned work, and are a positive addition to the serio-comic literature of the world. They are almost apart from criticism; there is no prototype by which to test them. Lowell has been compared to Butler, but “Hudibras,” whether as poetry or historical satire, is vastly below the master-work of the New England idyllist. The titles of a few great books, each of which has no fellow, come to mind as we think of its possible rank and duration, and I observe that Mr. Sanborn does not fear to mention the highest. It is a point in favor of transatlantic judgment that the “Biglow Papers” first gave Mr. Lowell the standing, with those who make opinion in England, which his choicest poems of art and nature had failed to procure for him. From that time their interest in himself and his work has been apparent. Their university degrees, their estimates of his genius and character, declare him to be one whom the mother-land delights to honor, and have made more distinct the position which, as I have said, he holds among our men of letters.

His literary satire, “A Fable for Critics,” was a good-natured tilt at the bards of Griswold's “Parnassus,”—a piece of uneven merit, but far from being open to the charge—that of malevolence—which Poe brought against it. The estimate of Poe is not unfair, and other sketches—such as those of Bryant, Hawthorne, and Dwight—are deftly made. Nor could one put a surer finger upon Lowell's short-comings than his own in the lines upon himself. The allegory of the fable is trite. Its sections are loosely united, the language and rhythm are at hap-hazard, and, on the whole, it is a careless production, however true to the time and tribe it celebrates. It is hard to conceive why Mr. Lowell should permit his editions to retain the extravaganza of “Dr. Knott,” so little above the grade of the hackney verse in which poor Hood punned

A POET of intellectual scope will not content himself with verse, as the sole outlet of his thought and feeling. Mr. Lowell's essays display his genius in free activity, and have added greatly, and justly, to his authority and standing. I could not select better illustrations of the union of the critical and artistic faculties, or of the distinctions and analogies between the verse and prose of a poet.

It is to be noted that Lowell's political and moral convictions appear chiefly in his verse. His prose appertains to literature, and, with the exception of some graceful sketch-work, bits of travel and reminiscence, has been restricted to criticism. His earliest prose volume was of this kind, in the form of “Conversations” on the old poets and dramatists. These are the ardent generalizations of a young poet, appreciative rather than searching. They are superseded by his maturer survey of their field, but had a stimulating influence in their time. Many who were students then remember the glow which they felt when Lowell's early lectures and essays directed them to a sense of what is best in English song. Young enthusiasts, at Cambridge, found him an ideal teacher and professor of belles-lettres. As years went on, his critical pen was rarely idle. A good fate determined that he should be subjected to the demands of journalistic routine—that he should carry the “Atlantic Monthly” to a sure foot-hold, advancing the standard of our magazine literature; and that he should afterward hold for nine years the editorship of the “North American Review.” Such a charge overcomes a writer's *vis inertiae*. He naturally becomes his own best contributor, and it was, in a measure, to the spur of his engagements that we owe a notable series of literary essays, many of which first appeared in the review I have named. Publishers have not found his study a reservoir into which they might insert their taps at pleasure. But one must spend time in gathering knowledge to give it out richly, and few comprehend what goes to a page of Lowell's manuscript. The page itself, were it a letter or press-report, could be written in a quarter-hour; but suppose it represents, as in one of his greater essays, the result of prolonged studies—the reading, indexing, formulating works in many languages, upon his shelves or in the Harvard library? Of all this he gives the ultimate quintessence, a distillation fragrant with his own genius. Who can estimate the toil of such work? What can adequately

pay for it? There are two guerdons that raise the spirit to scorn delights and live laborious days: Milton sings of one—but the surer is the “exceeding great reward” of the work itself.

Mr. Lowell's important reviews and studies, selected with excellent discretion, are contained in “My Study Windows,” and in the first and second series of “Among My Books.” These, with the “Fireside Travels,” make up the collection, in four volumes, of his prose works. His style is marked by individuality. Mr. Underwood suggests that “the distinctive prose of a poet is necessarily quite removed from general apprehension.” The word “distinctive” seems the one qualification that justifies the remark. And how is a poet's prose distinctive? Not in rhythmic undulations, if he be a true poet and artist. Such a writer does not lend the semblance of verse to his prose. To do this, he must produce something inferior to either. Few metrical cadences in the prose of Milton, Goldsmith, Coleridge, Byron, Landor, or Bryant. Its strength and beauty are of another kind. Many of Dickens's passages, we know, can be assorted into lengths of semi-metrical verse; but Dickens, when he tried to make poems, had no great success. Thackeray, whose prose is prose, was, within his range, a charming poet. Longfellow's “Hyperion” is exceptional—written as a “prose-poem” by a young artist fresh from the sentiment of German mystics and romances. As for Carlyle, he was a poet, as Lowell says, “without the gift of song.” He invented a special kind of prose as his form of poetic expression. I infer that a poet's prose is not removed from general apprehension by its technique; all things considered, I expect to find it as clear and unadulterate as that of any layman—not more illogical, not more dependent on the reader's intuition to fill out its lapses. A poet's instinct is constructive, little given to omissions in prose syntax. If his prose is hard to understand, it may be that he is a learned thinker, whose thoughts and references do not come at once within popular apprehension.

It is because a poet is more original, not more erratic, than many laymen, that his prose often is so individual. Mr. Lowell's is clear enough to those familiar with the choicest literature. In critical exploits that bring out his resources, he is not a writer for dullards, and to read him enjoyably is a point in evidence of a liberal education. His manner, in fact, is Protean, adjusted to his topic, and has a flexibility that well expresses his racy wit and freshness: combined with this, peculiarities that irritate the most catholic minds. Outspoken reviewers have subjected it to minute analysis, and declared their sense of

its short-comings. Their statement that it is not creative, but critical, is true in the ordinary meaning; yet I doubt if “creative” criticism and that which is truly critical differ like the experimental and analytic chemistries. Certainly Lowell is a most suggestive essayist. He sets us a-thinking, and, after a stretch of comment, halts in by-paths, or enlivens us with his sudden wit. He has the intellect, held to be a mark of greatness, that “puts in motion the intellect of others.” But he is charged with querulousness, inconsistency of judgment, contempt for unity, and with the habit of becoming entangled in expression. Attention is directed to the conceits, the whimsical diction and recondite instances, to be found in these essays. Verse, not prose, is declared by a few to be his proper vehicle. The indictment has some foundation, but to what extent does it affect his general merits? Things bad in themselves are often part of an author's essential quality. It seems to me that there is a close analogy between the styles of Mr. Lowell's verse and prose, distinct as the two forms are,—an analogy to be observed, if I had space to point it out, in the verse and prose of other poets, and inevitable from an author's habits of mind. I cannot better state the matter than by saying that the beauties and faults of the one are those of the other; both are open to the criticisms already made, and to which I may refer again; but each is sustained by a spirit which makes the reader forgive and forget. Under the drift and stubble that float on the surface is the strong, deep current which bears them along, or throws them to the side, and keeps a central channel clear.

Mr. Lowell's lighter touches have the grace that is always modern. The “Fireside Travels” make his censors withhold their arrows of the chase, pleased with the landscape and the guide. However exquisite the art of our latest sketch-writers, who is better company than Lowell in Old-World loiterings or more deft in wood-craft and garden-craft at home? His other prose volumes have sturdier characteristics. Here are the companion-pieces on Lessing and Rousseau; the series—a labor of years—upon the great English masters, from Chaucer to Keats and Carlyle; the elaborate study of Dante; the off-hand portraits of Josiah Quincy, Lincoln, Thoreau; no common subjects these,—who grapples them must do his best, or suffer a fall. Other essays, too, that are not soon forgotten: “Witchcraft in New England,” the famous treatise “On a Certain Condescension in Foreigners,” and two papers—“My Garden Acquaintance,” and “A Good Word for Winter,”—outdoor studies that would have de-

lighted the man of Selborne. The style of the critical prose certainly is not modeled upon Addison and his school; it is scarcely what Lowell himself describes as "that exquisite something called Style, which makes itself felt by the skill with which it effaces itself, and masters us at last with a sense of indefinable completeness." To some it may seem a stumbling-block; but to most, I fancy, it is the self-expression of a versatile, learned, original man. When over-freighted with words from other languages, new and old, the polyglot implies so close a familiarity with many literatures that he cannot avoid drawing on them for his purpose. A pedant quotes for the sake of a display of learning; Lowell, because he has mastered everything connected with his theme. His style, as I have hinted, sometimes is quaintly influenced by his topic and its associations. "Witchcraft" revives here and there the manner of more than one seventeenth-century homilist. The English proper of this curious and learned essay, with all its auroral qualities, is less simple and strong than that of the critic's noble discourse of Dryden, whose very Latinism seems to befit the spirit of its hero. It should be noted that Lowell's polysyllables—and few writers have more—do not weigh down the page; they are accelerative, galloping, even charging, in leap on leap, from section to section. His word-coining is less venial, for he does not lack taste, and at times exercises it rigidly. But his humor, learning, and caprice audaciously put it by, with a "Go thy ways till I need thee!" His comments on Spenser's innovations should be self-applied, and especially the words culled from Bellay, who bids his poet "Fear not to innovate somewhat * * * with modesty, however, with analogy, and judgment of ear." His linguistic arsenal serves him well: nor does he fail of fine exordiums and perorations, and sentences whose "beauty and majesty," as he says of Spenser's, he refuses to endanger by "experiments of this kind." But we should miss something if we held him to his own formula of the best writing, that in which the "component parts" of English "are most exquisitely proportioned one to the other."

Authors who do lay-work for a living, and pursue their art in hours which are the breathing-time of other men, are permitted few of the common pleasures for which they needs must crave. Their manuscripts are written in their blood, and the ink grows pale apace. Even the delight of reading, that at once stimulates and draws upon the brain, is forbidden to one who is harnessed in the van of a professional career. But Lowell, I suspect, has been shy of any harness from which

he could not bolt at will. His book-feeding has been unstinted, omnivorous: he was born among books, reared upon them, and has taken from them that which enriches him yet leaves them none the poorer. Of all writing-men, he who can read without stint is to be envied. Take the essay on Chaucer; it is the result of perfect equipment for a literary task. It is a spring-time brew of philological comment and poetic induction: it reeks with fact, flavored by originality. Here is a rare elucidation of both the letter and the spirit of Chaucer's song; no mere scholar could so illumine the process, and no poet who was not a scholar would venture upon it. Lowell is the contratype of Poe, who made a flourish of scholarship, and was sure of little for which he did not cram. Poe's humor, moreover, was a heavy lance, awkwardly and maliciously couched; Lowell holds his weapon with grace and courtesy, and has a sword of wit in reserve, should affairs grow serious. His faculty of scholarly assimilation and reproduction resembles Montaigne's. What he thoroughly enjoys is work like his review of the "Library of Old Authors." This paper opens with a talk upon books, pleasant as Lamb's gossip and with latter-day thought and criticism beneath the winning style; then follow swift but searching etymological tests of early authors and modern editors, from which the latter come out with some loss of luster. Lowell's idea of translation is free reproduction by a man of genius. He values Chapman, and declares that Keats, of all men, was the one to have translated Homer. One would like to see a translation from his own hand, say of Aristophanes: should the text halt, the commentary alone would repay us, and the freest versions by Lowell might be something "more original than his originals." His wit inclines him to condense professional truths in expressions that stick in the memory. The monograph on Spenser sparkles with clever, pointed sayings: "Chaucer had been in his grave one hundred and fifty years ere England had secreted choice material enough for the making of another great poet." Of ancient poetasters, it cannot be said "that their works have perished because they were written in an obsolete dialect; for it is the poem that keeps the language alive, and not the language that buoys up the poem." * * * "The complaints one sometimes hears of the neglect of our older literature are the regrets of archæologists rather than of critics. One does not need to advertise the squirrels" (this sentence is like Landor) "where the nut-trees are, nor could any amount of lecturing persuade them to spend their teeth on a

hollow nut." * * * "Any verse that makes you and me foreigners is not only not great poetry, but no poetry at all." Speaking of Dunbar's works, "Whoso is national enough to like thistles may browse there to his heart's content. I am inclined for other pasture, having long ago satisfied myself by a good deal of dogged reading that every generation is sure of its own share of bores without borrowing from the past." And in "Witchcraft" he says that Sidney "seems to have divined the fact that there is but one kind of English that is always appropriate and never obsolete, namely, the very best." With all this point and wisdom, he often cannot refrain from unleashing conceits that fly without "stamping" their imagery. In a single page he compares Chaucer's style to a river and a precious vintage, and contrasts it with the froth of champagne and the folly of Milo. In relation to Shakspeare's birth, we have astrology, vinous processes, and alembic projection, following upon one another as illustrations of the coming nativity. Afterward, while censuring language that is "literary, so that there is a gap between the speech of books and that of life," Mr. Lowell tells us that "a mind in itself essentially original becomes in the use of such a medium of utterance unconsciously reminiscient and reflective, lunar and not solar, in expression and even in thought!" Passages of this sort not unnaturally move other critics, in their turn, to fling a *de te fabula* at the writer. An author, in truth, "should consider how largely the art of writing consists in knowing what to leave in the inkstand." But Mr. Lowell is not unconscious of these things: he toys with licenses, as if to prove that, next to Chapman, "he has the longest wind * * * without being long-winded," of all authors. Nor have we any writer whose imagery is oftener strong and exquisite: as in the description of a snowy winter landscape, or at the close of his "Milton," or where, in "Spenser," he glorifies the handiwork of "the witch, Imagination."

Lowell's scrutiny is sure, and his tests are apt and instant. He is a detective to be dreaded by pretenders. He wastes no reverence upon traditional errors, but no man is more impatient of sham-reform, less afraid of *odia*, whether theological, scientific, or æsthetic. As a comparative critic, there are few so well served by memory and reading. In the essay on Milton he treats with novel discrimination the respective modes of Shakspeare, Milton, and Tasso. Writing of Wordsworth, Swinburne, and others, he uses the comparative method to good purpose. No one is a better judge of what is original. Most

things have been said more than once, and he knows by whom. His standard is the manner of saying. "In the parliament of the present," he declares, "every man represents a constituency of the past"; and again, "Writers who have no past are pretty sure of having no future"; and "It is the man behind the words that gives them value." He names Chaucer, Shakspeare, Dryden, in evidence of the truth that "It is not the finding of a thing, but the making something of it after it is found, that is of consequence." In his paper on Wordsworth, he draws a distinction between originality and eccentricity which, I fear, will not soon become obsolete for want of cases in illustration. Striking points are frequent in his critical prose. It is Lowell who says, of Shakspeare, that the manner of a first-class poet is incommunicable, and therefore he never can found a school. His essay on Carlyle, undertaken at a time when few ventured to dispute the old Norseman's autocracy, is, on the whole, as just as it is independent; that on Lincoln could only have been written by one whose convictions rendered him prophetic. Lowell's analogical gift is seen in his comparison of Lincoln to Henry IV.—made before the President's assassination had completed the parallel. His declaration, in "Spenser," of the qualities of voice that "define a man as a poet," is not to be gainsaid, and he also gives us a clever test of the worth of allegory,—it must be that which the reader "helps to make out of his own experience." It is true that his verdicts are not always such as we agree with, nor do they always agree among themselves. Being a poet, he is prone to express his immediate feeling without submitting it to the principles that, in fact, govern his final judgment. This imparts life to a writer, but subjects him to the charge of inconsistency, especially if it is not his habit to revise past work. Mr. Lowell scarcely does justice to Wordsworth's imagination, though keenly alive to the bard's puerilities and want of humor. His essay on Dryden, as a presentation of the man and poet, is the best of its length, and contains some of the writer's finest apothegms; that on Pope is inferior,—the critic being so out of personal liking for the figure-head of his youth, as to treat him—not without fairness and discrimination, but I think inadequately. He possibly overrates Clough, as a signal representative of modern feeling, yet may be forgiven for this, as he knew and loved him, and was joined with him in the freemasonry of comrades and poets. He has touched very lightly, once and again, on Emerson, but with precision and truth. His analysis of Thoreau is sharply criticised as being narrow, but it did expose the defect-

ive side of a unique character, and, all things considered, is the subtlest of his minor reviews.

Mr. Lowell rightly holds the highest imagination to be, not so much that which "gathers into the intense focus of passionate phrase," as "the faculty that shapes and gives unity of design and balanced gravitation of parts." His work, as we have seen, at times displays the former kind, rather than the latter. It is in dwelling on special traits, with praise or censure, that he seems discursive. Thus, while his "Shakspeare Once More" includes a masterly exposition of the dramatist's style, it is fragmentary—even more than need be—in the special touches that follow. Other papers fall short in construction; they are not sustained upon the scales indicated at commencement. This lack of balance, I am sure, is due quite as much to circumstances as to the critic's temperament, and largely to the limits of the periodicals for which he has written. His mind seizes upon a great theme, in mass and in detail, and he begins as if to cover it thoroughly. "Lessing" opens with a broad view of the German intellect and literature; "Chaucer" with a survey of the Troubadour period; and the analogous introductions to Spenser, Dryden, Pope, are of the utmost value. But to complete an essay upon this plan a book must be written. We are none the less grateful for Lowell's noble vestibules, even though we find them too large for the structures. Surplusage is a regal fault. We see that he can be an artist at will, though constantly setting the law of his nature above all laws. Some of the greater essays are both various and complete. That upon Dante is a superb example; one need not be a Dantean scholar to comprehend the scope and strength of this prolonged, cumulative, coherent analysis of the Florentine's career—fortified by citations, and enriched with a knowledge of Italian history, literature, atmosphere, at the close of the thirteenth century, such as few living men possess.

Have I not indicated that the unflinching value of Mr. Lowell's prose work consists in freedom and variety that are the true reflex of the man himself? His resources make him prodigal, and he has the brave impatience of a skilled performer who trusts his ear and is none too careful of the written score. We seem to have his first notes, and find them better than the revised drafts of other men. It is a fellow-feeling which leads him to say of Dryden, that "one of the charms of his best writing is that everything seems struck off at a heat, as by a superior man in the best mood of his talk." This transfer of his own nature is delightful. He *will* be free, and his censors should rate his freedom at its worth,

and not hold him too rigidly to conventionalities which he understands, yet chooses to forego. Even the arrangement of his essays seems to be a chance one, but there is an art in the chance. He has given us a series of literary monographs in which Americans may take just pride, for his genius has imparted new light and freshness to the greatest themes. To these he might add equally notable studies of Cervantes, Molière, and Goethe. No living man could venture with less presumption to summon up once more the spirits of those masters. But already the wealth of his critical product is surprising. I think that a selection of apothegms and maxims could be made from it, which, for original thoughts and wise teaching of the author's art, would be worth more to the literary neophyte, and afford more satisfaction to veteran readers, than a digest of the English prose of any other writer since Landor in his prime.

v.

MR. LOWELL'S prose diversions, so wide in range, could not have been made without some lapse of fealty to the Muse of Song. When, in 1868, the volume "Under the Willows" appeared, a note stated that the poems mostly had been written at intervals during many years. There is, none the less, an air of afternoon about them. They are the songs of a man who in truth has *gelebt und geliebet*—to revive the motto of his juvenile book—and who has lived to love again. Their thought is subtler, their subjectivity that of one who reads the hearts of others in his own. The title-piece is a most refreshing stretch of pastoral verse. Here and elsewhere his sympathy with birds and trees continues, and much resembles Landor's:

"But I in June am midway to believe
A tree among my far progenitors, *

And I have many a life-long leafy friend,
Never estranged nor careful of my soul,
That knows I hate the axe."

The close recalls the very feeling of the "Thalysia" of Theocritus, yet escapes the parallel displayed in certain idyls of Tennyson. The opening gives us a finer rhapsody of June, though less apt to catch the popular ear, than the one in "Sir Launfal." No common musician can touch so variously a well-worn theme.

I do not read these later poems without remembering the moods to which Arthur Clough was subject, and which also affect the verse of another with whom his too brief life was associated. "Auf Wiedersehen" and its

"Palinode"—delicate, brooding, dithyrambic—might seem the work of either Clough or Matthew Arnold, and "A Mood" and "The Fountain of Youth" are quite in sympathy with that of the last-named poet. Mr. Arnold, like Lowell, delights in "accidentals" and in haunting measures, often admirably rendered. But I think few of his lines are both so suggestive and so vibratory as these from Lowell's exquisite fantasy, "In the Twilight":

"Sometimes a breath floats by me,
An odor from Dreamland sent,
That makes the ghost seem nigh me
Of a splendor that came and went,
Of a life lived somewhere, I know not
In what diviner sphere,
Of memories that stay not and go not,
Like music once heard by an ear
That cannot forget or reclaim it,—
A something so shy, it would shame it
To make it a show,
A something too vague, could I name it,
For others to know,
As if I had lived it or dreamed it,
As if I had acted or schemed it,
Long ago!

"And yet, could I live it over,
This life that stirs in my brain,
Could I be both maiden and lover,
Moon and tide, bee and clover,
As I seem to have been, once again,
Could I but speak and show it,
This pleasure, more sharp than pain,
That baffles and lures me so,
The world should not lack a poet,
Such as it had
In the ages glad
Long ago!"

Between verse like this, and that of Mr. Hosea Biglow, each definite in flavor, the range is phenomenal. To extend a comparison made for the sole purpose of illustrating Lowell's bent, I will say that in a former review I extolled the beauty of Arnold's objective verse—a kind to which his early preface would restrict the modern poet. But with reference to his occasional hardness of touch, and to the mental conflicts revealed by Clough and himself, I scarcely did full justice to a suggestive class of his poems, in a form peculiarly his own,—poems which grow upon the reader and stand the test of years,—and of these I will name, as good examples, "The Buried Life" and "A Summer Night." Lowell and Arnold, poets nearly equal in years, both scholars, both original thinkers, occupy representative positions,—the one in Old England and the other in the New,—which are singularly correspondent. Two things, however, are to be noted. The American has the freer hand and wider range as a poet. Humor, dialect-verse, and familiar epistles come from him as naturally as his stateliest odes. Again, while both poets feel the perplexities of the

time, Arnold's difficulties are the more restrictive of his poetic glow; with him the impediments are spiritual, with Lowell they are material and to be overcome. Mr. Lowell at times has found himself restricted by our local conditions, set forth in my recent articles. Like Mr. Arnold, he also feels the questioning spirit of our age of Unrest; but his nature is too various and healthy to be depressed by it. The cloud rests more durably on Arnold. Lowell always has one refuge,—to which, also, the poet of the Highland "Bothie" did not resort in vain. Give him a touch of Mother Earth, a breath of free air, one flash of sunshine, and he is no longer a bookman and a brooder; his blood runs riot with the Spring; this inborn, poetic elasticity is the best gift of the gods. Faith and joy are the ascensive forces of song. Lowell trusts in Nature and she gladdens him. How free and unjaded the spirit of "Al Fresco," and of the sprayey "Pictures from Appledore"! At times he places you

"So nigh to the * * heart of God,
You almost seem to feel it beat
Down from the sunshine and up from the sod."

Men are no less near to him. Like Thoreau, —who knew the world, having "traveled" many years in Concord,—he believes that

"Whatever molds of various brain
E'er shaped the world to weal or woe,
Whatever empires wax and wane,
To him that hath not eyes in vain
Our village-microcosm can show."

His rustics act and speak for themselves. Some of his lyrics are as dramatic, in their way, as those of Browning,—a poet whose erratic temper, also, is not unlike his own.

It is worth the consideration of those who deplore the effect of "over-culture" upon our poets, that the verse of Lowell and Emerson seems the product of their instant moods. The highest culture has learned to unlearn, and Mr. Lowell, when he wrote "A Winter Hymn to my Fire," had surely reached its freehold. A masterly, unstinted improvisation—the freshness of youth, with the off-hand ease of an accomplished workman—the mellow thought and rich imagination of a poet in his prime. Lowell's culture has not bred in him an undue respect for polish, and for established ways and forms. Precisely the opposite. Much learning and a fertile mind incline him to express minute shades of his fancy by a most iconoclastic use of words and prefixes. This trait lessened the dignity of his blank-verse poem, "The Cathedral," admired for its noble passages and justly censured for things that jar and seem out of place. It is not so much

a stately pile, conforming to itself, that has risen "like an exhalation," as a structure builded part by part, and at different periods of grandeur or grotesqueness. Contrast the imposing finale—the dome of the edifice—with the whimsical by-play of the tourists airing their French. A sensitive reader, himself a poet and critic, not long ago said to me that he never could wholly forgive Mr. Lowell for using the word "undisprivacied" in this elevated poem. But I do not know in what other production the changeful thoughts of a mind swiftly considering the most complex modern problems, are caught so naturally, and as if on the instant by some phrenographic process. "A Familiar Epistle," without the extreme finish of Mr. Dobson's work, adds no less to the raciness of Swift or Gay a poet's blood and fire. It has been said that Lowell's verse and prose are marked by a manner, rather than by style, in the modern sense,—which latter I take to be an airy, elusive perfection of language and syntax, that of itself wins the reader, and upon which writers of a new school have built up reputations. The thought, the purpose,—these are the main ends with Lowell, though prose or meter suffer for it, and there is no doubt that his manner exactly repeats his habit of mind; and so in this case, as ever, the style is again the man. My own explanation of things which annoy us in his loftier pieces, is that his every-day genius is that of wit and humor. His familiar and satiric writings are consistent works of art. It is upon his serious and exalted moods that these things seem to intrude, like the whisperings of the Black Man in the ears of a Puritan at prayers.

Where he has bravely exorcised his annoy is in the lyric efforts that hold a poet responsible, not only to himself, but also to the needs of great occasions. In these there is nothing erratic or perverse. The handiwork is unequal, but not seldom the vigorous intellect and throbbing heart of the man lift him to the airiest heights of a nation's song. I refer, of course, to his odes, delivered since the close of our civil war.

Of these the first, and strongest, is the "Ode Recited at the Harvard Commemoration." The poet was fresh from the woes and exaltations of the war. He had an occasion that comes but once in a life-time. The day, the place, the memories of inexorable events, his heart wrung with its own losses and sharing the proud grief of his Alma Mater,—these all united to call forth Mr. Lowell's highest powers. Another poet would have composed a less unequal ode; no American could have glorified it with braver passages, with whiter heat, with language and imagery so befitting

impassioned thought. Tried by the rule that a true poet is at his best with the greatest theme, Lowell's strength is indisputable. The ode is no smooth-cut block from Pentelicus, but a mass of rugged quartz, beautified with prismatic crystals, and deep-veined here and there with virgin gold. The early strophes, though opening with a fine abrupt line, "Weak-winged is song," are scarcely firm and incisive. Lowell had to work up to his theme. In the third division, "Many loved Truth, and lavished life's best oil," he struck upon a new and musical intonation of the tenderest thoughts. The quaver of this melodious interlude carries the ode along, until the great strophe is reached,

"Such was he, our Martyr-Chief,"

in which the man, Abraham Lincoln, whose death had but just closed the national tragedy, is delineated in a manner that gives this poet a preëminence, among those who capture likeness in enduring verse, that we award to Velasquez among those who fasten it upon the canvas. "One of Plutarch's men" is before us, face to face: an historic character whom Lowell fully comprehended, and to whose height he reached in this great strophe. Scarcely less fine is his tearful, yet transfiguring, Avete to the sacred dead of the Commemoration. The weaker divisions of the production furnish a background to these passages, and at the close the poet rises with the invocation,

"Bow down, dear Land, for thou hast found release!"

—a strain which shows that when Lowell determinedly sets his mouth to the trumpet, the blast is that of Roncesvalles. Three other heroic odes were composed, it is just to repeat, "after he had precluded himself," by the Harvard poem, "from many of the natural outlets of thought and feeling." That upon Washington, delivered "Under the Old Elm," is the longest and most imposing. Despite its form, it is too long for an ode, and Mr. Lowell has more fitly entitled it a poem. The characterization of Washington is less bold and sympathetic than that of Lincoln. Better the superb tribute to the Mother of Presidents,

"Virginia gave us this imperial man,"

which ends the poem with forty unbroken lines that again bring us to the height of Lowell's power. The closing strophes of the Centennial Ode—"Flawless his hand," and "They steered by stars the elder shipmen

knew"—are quite as notable. Mr. Underwood has well called the three odes an Alpine group,—yet each in its length and unevenness brings to mind a Rocky Mountain chain, in which snow-clad, sunlit peaks arise, connected by vaguely outlined ridges of the Sierra.

In a passage of the last-named ode there is food for thought between the lines :

"Poets, as their heads grow gray,
Look from too far behind the eyes,
Too long-experienced to be wise
In guileless youth's diviner way;
Life sings not now, but prophesies."

But the second-sight of age has been always, I have said, a portion of Lowell's strength and disability. One thing, perhaps, is needed to make his career ideal: some adequate theme, and mode of treatment, for a work of pure poetry, that shall be, through its imaginative beauty, the rival and contra-type of his serio-comic masterpiece. "Fitz-Adam's Story," a portion of the long-projected "Nooning," indicates one direction in which he has felt his way; but he has not followed up the clew with the unceasing, unceasing purpose that distinguishes Longfellow. Even now, and after his more heroic flights, it might be a diversion to his later years, and certainly would revive an interest in American verse, if he would go back and complete "The Nooning," making it, as he can, the most charming of New England's idyllic poems.

VI.

LOWELL, then, is a poet who seems to represent New England more variously than either of his comrades. We find in his work, as in theirs, her loyalty and moral purpose. She has been at cost for his training, and he, in turn, has read her whole heart, honoring her as a mother before the world, and seeing beauty in her common garb and speech. To him, the Eastern States are what the fathers, as he has said, desired to found,—no New Jerusalem, but a new England, and, if it might be, a better one. His poetry has the strength, the tenderness, and the defects of the Down-East temper. His doctrines and reflections, in the midst of an ethereal distillation, betimes act like the single drop of prose which, as he reports a saying of Landor to Wordsworth, precipitates the whole. But again he is all poet, and the blithest, most

unstudied songster on the old Bay Shore. He is, just as truly, an American of the Americans, alive to the idea and movement of the whole country, singularly independent in his tests of its men and products—from whatever section, or in however unpromising form, they chance to appear. Many have found him the surest to detect and welcome, at the time when welcome was needed and lesser men held back, what there might be in them of worth. He is an artist who recognizes things outside of art, and would not rate the knack of writing lines to a lady's girdle above all other wonders of the age. In default of the motive for a sustained and purely ideal work, he has awaited the visits of the Muse, and acted on the moment at her bidding; none of our poets, indeed, has so thrown the responsibility on a monitor whom no industry can placate, who is deaf to entreaty, but gives without stint at her own will. He will sing when she bids him, or not at all. But this is in the nature of genius, and thus brings me to a conclusion. The world readily perceives the genius that is set off by an eccentric or turbid life. Taking advantage of this, false Amphitryons often vaunt themselves for a while. But let a true poet be born to culture and position, and have a share of things which constitute good fortune, and his rarer gift has no romantic aid to bring it into notice: its recognition comes solely through its product, and not fully until "after some time be past." And if Lowell be not, first of all, an original genius, I know not where to look for one. Judged by his personal bearing, who is brighter, more persuasive, more equal to the occasion and himself,—less open to Doudan's stricture upon writers who hoard and store up their thoughts for the betterment of their printed works? Lowell's treasury can stand the drafts of both speech and composition. Judged by his works, as a poet in the end must be, he is one who might gain by revision and compression. But think, as is his due, upon the high-water marks of his abundant tide, and see how enviable the record of a poet who is our most brilliant and learned critic, and who has given us our best native idyl, our best and most complete work in dialectic verse, and the noblest heroic ode that America has produced,—each and all ranking with the first of their kinds in English literature of the modern time.

Edmund Clarence Stedman.



J. M. Rowse.