

## THE SONNET.

PURE form, that like some chalice of old time  
Contain'st the liquid of the poet's thought  
Within thy curving hollow, gem-enwrought  
With interwoven tracteries of rhyme,  
While o'er thy brim the bubbling fancies climb,  
What thing am I, that undismayed have sought  
To pour my verse with trembling hand untaught  
Into a shape so small yet so sublime?  
Because perfection haunts the hearts of men,  
Because thy sacred chalice gathered up  
The wine of Petrarch, Shakspere, Shelley — then  
Receive these tears of failure as they drop  
(Sole vintage of my life), since I am fain  
To pour them in a consecrated cup.

*Edith Wharton.*



## JAMES RUSSELL LOWELL.<sup>1</sup>



R. LOWELL has written into his works his many titles to public remembrance with singular completeness. One need not go outside of the ten volumes in which the fruits of a long literary and public life are gathered to know what he has been and has done. The sign-manual of the poet, critic, and scholar is set upon the various page; moods of the fields and the homestead, the permanent attraction of human nature, patriotism profoundly felt are equally found in essay and poem; and in the admirable addresses there is stored up a lasting memory of the years of his distinguished service abroad. The fullness of this expression of a many-sided career is remarkable; but even more striking is the harmony of all these phases of life, one with another. There is no dividing line which sets off one part of his activity from its neighbor part; in his poetry there is politics, in his learning there is the vivifying touch of humor, in his reflection there is emotion, in the levels of his most familiar prose there is, at inconstant intervals, the sudden lift of a noble thought; and hence his works are at once too diverse and too similar — diverse in their matter and similar in the personality through which they are given out — to be

easily summed or described by the methods of criticism. If there is a clue that may be used, it is to be sought in his individuality, in the fact that his ten talents have somehow been melted and fused into one, and that the greatest — the talent of being a man first and everything else afterward. It goes with this that one looks in vain for any separation of his work into marked periods, such as may be observed in those writers who are absorbed by successive moods of the age or by new foreign influences in thought or literary forms, or generally are determined in their character by external forces. Mr. Lowell, with all his free curiosity, alertness of attention, and openness to the world of the present and of the past, has exercised a power of reaction equal to that of his receptivity, and illustrates the slow native growth of a self-assured mind. From the first to the last of his pages the unity of mind is such that, unhelped by the context, one could rarely say with certainty whether a particular passage was from earlier or later years. Neither the style nor the way of thinking materially changes; the same person speaks with the same voice throughout. This singleness of Mr. Lowell's personality, by virtue of which he has held the same course from youth to age, as it is most obvious, is a cardinal matter. It were impossible to condense into the brief critical sketch for which only there is now

<sup>1</sup> This article was written for THE CENTURY before the death of Mr. Lowell as a review of the recently published revised edition of his complete works (Boston and New York: Houghton, Mifflin & Co.). EDITOR.  
VOL. XLIII.—15.

published revised edition of his complete works (Boston and New York: Houghton, Mifflin & Co.). EDITOR.

occasion, all that criticism must find to say upon his writings throughout their reach; but in the absence of such a complete and careful survey, something may be arrived at, possibly, by attending to this stamp of individuality which gives likeness to all his works and imparts to them that quality of the living voice which most interests and best holds men, and is besides the invariable accompaniment of an original mind in literature.

It is commonly a disadvantage to a poet to be reputed a scholar. Belief in the spontaneity of genius is deeply implanted in men's minds, and culture is set over against the simple primitive powers of feeling and thought as something by nature opposite. In this popular opinion there is a share of truth. Instinct is the method of genius, but culture, until it has been absorbed into character and temperament, works by afterthought. The conflict which is indicated by this widely diffused impression of the incompatibility of learning and inspiration is often felt by a poet himself in his own experience. Mr. Lowell, who more than any other writer of his time expresses the moods of that border-land which lies between instinct and reflection, speaks more than once of the intrusion of thought upon the natural way of living, and shows the old annoyance, that poetical regret for a simpler habit of life, which underlies the dream of the golden age and is the source of the charm of all pastoral. In a considerable portion of his nature-verse he accepts the Wordsworthian doctrine and goes to the fields as an escape from books, lays thought down like a burden and plays 't is holiday with him, and in coming back to the study seems to make an unwelcome return to himself. Yet he is not slow to acknowledge that the true poet has a pedigree that goes far into the past of men as well as a kinship of the day and hour with sky and birds and trees, the soft air and the warm landscape. If he seeks impulses in nature, he must find art in books; and from his earlier poems it is plain to see what sources in literature he most haunted. Imitativeness in youthful verse is a measure of susceptibility, and is rather a sign of strength than of weakness. The test of originality, or of the native force of the poetical endowment, lies in the spontaneity of the imitation and in the quickness with which one type shifts with another. It is noticeable that Mr. Lowell reproduced kinds of poetry rather than particular authors, style rather than moods, the cast of the words, not ideas; and the sign of culture in these beginnings is shown in the number of types which attracted him. So a similar literary scholarship, an acquaintance with what the poets of many lands had written, gave to Longfellow in his mature life, as well as at the outset, models of

style which he made his own rather by graceful use of them than by informing them with original genius. In Mr. Lowell's case, perhaps, the single peculiarity is the taste he early showed for certain of the English poets of the seventeenth century whose defects of oddity and unevenness could not destroy the largeness of their phrase and the purity and elevation of their continuous style at its best. One need not read Mr. Lowell's criticism to discover what value he placed upon Donne and Vaughan, for example, and those who neighbor them in the "well-linguaged" manner. Culture of this sort, which is no more than the fruit of delight in poetry, has been the possession of many of those poets who are most thought inspired, and genius has thrived upon it; but usually the greatest of them have felt the gap between such poetry of the past and the nature they stood in presence of, and each in turn has reconciled his genius with his own age in some original way.

Mr. Lowell soon developed several styles in which he wrote poems of many kinds, and gave literary expression to sentiment, thought, and emotion; but he was later preëminently distinguished by three forms of verse. The most popular of these, apparently, and certainly the most original, is that in which he employed the native Yankee speech. It was fairly by accident, he says, that he discovered the power of this New England lingo to express the character of the breed of men who used it and its fitness for the purpose in dealing with the subjects to which he applied it. Nevertheless, chance has as little place in literature as in other affairs of life. One finds only those things to which his faith has led him. There are reasons in plenty why Mr. Lowell, and not any of his contemporaries in letters, made the happy discovery of the Yankee idyl. His own roots go deep into the native soil; he loves that from which he sprang, and the past was realized to his apprehension most directly through the old time, which still lingered about the Cambridge of his growing years, and through its concrete characters of diverse types from clerical to rural which interested his human sympathy, struck his humorous sense, and embodied for him the long tradition of a dying age showing its results in man. This strong attachment to the paternal acres because of old associations is a trait common to New England; but none of the poets of the land have given more frequent and free expression to the feeling or shown its power in an individual more constantly. The old New England character appealed to him in the same way that the Scotch type drew Sir Walter Scott's heart out; each found in the ancient habit of life of "sixty years since" a literary opportunity, but

not by thought prepossessed; in both the old ways, crystallized in human nature, were loved for their own sake with a kind of natural affection, and were besides dignified by a true respect for their moral quality felt through all their humorous peculiarities. Scotland had more of history, of romance, and picturesqueness to mingle with the human element of common lives; in New England there was less of circumstance, but there was a core of character equally sound, a way of thinking and a freshness of expression, marked and peculiar, characterizing a people. The attractiveness of such survivals from the old days as Mr. Lowell either knew in the beginning of life or met with from time to time in the still uninvaded country districts was enhanced further by the fact that they stood for that simpler mode of existence, already referred to, which the poet is fain to think of as the better way of living, could he make the impossible escape from his own bonds; and it was entirely natural that the two moods should blend and the keen air of New England suffer the pastoral change with the least artifice in the world. In the poem in which he describes his day under the willows Mr. Lowell reveals in most phases the feeling habitual to his mind, of the sense of nature as a refuge, of the strength of associations with a familiar landscape, of the welcome he would give to the rude molds of man, and, in a word, shows the attitude of the poet, who is also a man of thought, toward nature and human nature met face to face; and in this reflective reverie, full of personal expression, the elements are the same as in pastoral verse though seen under a different aspect. When he came to imaginative expression through the medium of old New England, he escaped at once from the literary atmosphere, finding both a subject and a language wholly unworn by use in books; and what he was to express was just that type of character in which human nature was most fresh, sincere, and genuine to his senses and could be entered into most completely by virtue of native sympathies long active in his blood, while the medium of speech was the tongue of the country people as they themselves had fashioned it for their own uses. Not since Theocritus wrote the Sicilian idyls has the pastoral come so near to real life or been not merely so free from artificiality but so slightly transformed in the change from life into art. Mr. Lowell did not attempt the useless task of saying what the average up-country man would have said if left to himself; but, in expressing the true genius of the New England character with a precision and range impossible except to a man of his own faculty, he succeeded in keeping both thought and language within the limit of the character

through which he spoke. He permitted himself to use elevation or pathos or the beauty of natural scenes, which both true art and the impulse of his own awakened powers required; but he has managed all with so sure a hand, such discernment and sensitiveness in his feeling for the form used, that all is as definitely objective as drama or novel, and the sense of reality is heightened, and the expression of the old spirit made more complete, by the curious prose of the pulpit in which the poems are set. It remains only to add that in taking public affairs for the main body of the matter of the verse Mr. Lowell chose the subject that fitted the mind of New England as perfectly as the country language fitted its lips.

The second form of verse in which Mr. Lowell has most excelled is next of kin to the Yankee poems. He was not only the son of New England, but he was born also to the wider inheritance of his fellow-countrymen everywhere, and could lay aside the provincialism of his eastern accent and phrase for the ampler English of the nation's speech. Love of home is the seed-plant of patriotism, and it was inevitable that faith to New England should grow to the larger compass of faith in America; and if in attachment to the native soil itself, such as Mr. Lowell expresses, there may be a certain closeness and peculiar warmth of the hearthstone, in his love of country there is more of what is purely ideal. When he first collected his political papers a year or two ago, there was some surprise at the amount and value of his writings upon the public topics of the time; but though this work in prose had been forgotten, it would still have been plain enough from his poems that he was ever in a true sense the citizen. In thinking of his patriotic verse attention is commonly too exclusively given to the group of odes which were rather the last and crowning work of a lifelong labor than isolated productions. In the very start he gave his country the ringing stanzas of "The Present Crisis," with the one indelible line, and that sonnet to Phillips which still stirs the blood; and, as time went on, in the first series of "The Biglow Papers" he dealt with a great political question of the period, and coming to the strong passions and immeasurable issues of the civil war he could scarce write of anything else. It was only after the peace, and in the assured triumph of the centennial anniversaries of the united country, that he closed the extensive series of poems, inspired by public spirit in the widest meaning of that phrase, with the long odes which by their solemn movement, their gravity, and the loftiness of their finer passages have that stateliness which makes them seem to dwarf his less impressive poems in this kind. He had been the true citizen-poet for almost

a lifetime before he was called to this ceremonial laureateship, and had used the lighter instrumentalities of humor, satire, and wit, the edge of epigram and poignancy of pathos, as occasion arose; so that one may fairly say that first and last he employed well-nigh all the resources of his mind in the service of his country. To think of the odes mainly as Mr. Lowell's patriotic verse would be a grave injustice both to the man and the poet, for passages may be found in the earlier verse equal, at least, to anything except the best in this last group. The distinction of the odes, and one reason why they have affected the public disproportionately in comparison with the best of the other poems, is their style. It is a style which Mr. Lowell has developed for himself, and is to be met with here and there in detached passages of his earlier poetry, but nowhere else is it so even and continuous as in the odes. It is characterized by a breadth and undulation of tone and a purity hard to describe, but these traits are not of consequence in comparison with the certainty with which, no matter how finally resonant the wave of sound may be, the thought absorbs it and becomes itself vocal and musical. The diction itself and the cast of phrase metrically seem to derive from that period of English subsequent to the Elizabethan ferment when the language retained freedom and spirit and a certain amplitude from the past age but had not yet subsided into the formalism, however excellent in itself, of the great age of prose; but if Mr. Lowell found the elements of this grave and full style in that period, he has so recombined them in his own manner that to trace out the source is at most only to hazard a guess. It is, however, this felicitous and well-commanded style which is the noticeable literary quality of the odes, and of the finer stanzas of other poems, such as "The Washing of the Shroud," to name one of the first; to have elaborated it is, possibly, the highest distinction of Mr. Lowell as a writer, in the strict sense, on the purely original side of his literary craftsmanship.

It is, however, almost a diversion to direct attention to the literary quality of these poems. What is most to be remarked in them, aside from their earnest intention and the emotion that is sometimes the welling-up of a deep passion, is the purity of the democratic feeling in them, the soundness of their Americanism. Mr. Lowell in one of his earlier volumes laid his wreath on the grave of Hood, and there are a few of his poems that express the sympathy of philanthropy with the poor and outcast; but this is a comparatively crude form of the democratic idea and is Christian merely. It is easy to pity suffering in any shape and to believe in the virtues that poverty is commonly thought

to favor; it is a harder matter to put faith in man. But that rooted interest in human nature, which has already been spoken of as cardinal in Mr. Lowell's habit of mind, as it helped him to reconcile poetry with the life of rural New England, aided also in the generation of his democratic faith, for when a man is once interested in his fellows he is already half-way to being friends with them and thus coming to know how human they are. To accustom one's self to disregard the accidents of manner and station sufficiently to see the man as he is, to have a clear sight for genuine character under any of the disguises of unfamiliarity and prejudice, to know how simple and how common are the elements that go to the making of manhood, are the paths to belief in democracy; and to do this, it is enough to live out of doors. Culture that lives in the library may easily miss its way. The "Biglow Papers" by themselves would be sufficient proof of such democracy as goes to make a town-meeting; but the American idea is a larger thing. The better proof which Mr. Lowell gave of his quality was in the recognition he gave to Lincoln. He was the first of our writers to see what name led all the rest, and the truth which he intimated in "Blondel," and spoke more plainly in prose, he made at last shine out in the most famous passages of his greatest ode. One could not be so early to perceive this unsuspected fame before it filled the world and while it was yet in the clouds through which it broke, unless faith in man came natural to him. It was so in this case, and Mr. Lowell understood the "new birth of our new soil" not only in the fact that another name was given to immortal memory, but also in the profounder truth that the soil which had borne such a son was the heir of a new age. With all the faith he had in his own people of the past, the poet looked forward to the new race which is yet forming in our womb, and nowhere in our literature is there more direct expression of the national faith in mere manhood than in a few great lines of these patriotic poems, or more soberly and explicitly in the essay upon "Democracy." It may seem little that a man should believe in what his country believes in; but it may fairly be thought that Mr. Lowell, from his place in conservative thought, is as much beforehand in his recognition of democracy in the larger sense as he was earlier than others in his recognition of Lincoln.

Besides the New England and the national poems Mr. Lowell has written a third sort that stand in a class apart and have a distinction, if not so unshared as these, shared certainly by no other poet of this century. They are what would ordinarily be called poems of culture, the verse of a man deeply imbued with

the literature of the past. This definition rests on their form rather than their subject-matter. They are run in the molds that have been handed down in the tradition of literature and belong to the gild. Mr. Lowell, who has shown a disposition to experiment in verse and try many kinds, has used a variety of these set measures, but in two sorts he has shown a hand of unrivaled mastery. In the verses "*Credidimus Jovem Regnare*" there is, perhaps, the best example of one sort, in which the intellect finds crystalline expression; modern as it is in substance and strongly personal in quality, this poem is at once recognized as being composed in a classic style which is neither a revival nor archaic, but, though written yesterday, has the look of century-old verse still fresh. Another instance is the poem upon the goldfishes, one of the best from his pen. The second sort in which this perfection of style is equally found is illustrated by the letter to Curtis as aptly as by any single piece; the terseness, ease, and finish of these lines, in which compliment blends with the wisdom of life and the whole is subdued within the range of personal talk from friend to friend, are qualities unique in our poetry and recall the habits and modes of utterance of a more polished lettered age, when intellect and manners held their own beside emotion and the literary life was more complete in manly powers. In both these sorts of pedestrian poetry, if the devotees of inspiration will insist on the distinction, it is rather the man of cultivation conversing with others than the man of genius expressing his soul whom we find; but the classic literature of the world owes much to the poets who have put into just such verse the mind and morals of their time undisturbed by the strong emotion which has latterly ruled so supreme. Mr. Lowell has certainly strengthened his work by varying it with this element of the prose of verse both in the octosyllabic and the pentameter forms. It was necessary, too, for the complete expression of himself that he should give out his literary culture in art, and also find fit channels for that power of pure thinking which divides with the poetic impulse his allegiance to literature. For, when the end is reached and one looks back over the range of Mr. Lowell's poetical works entire, the one thing that binds them all together and runs through them, besides that unresting interest in man which is their blood, is the equally single and widely diffused presence of thought, which is their spirit. In no poet of our land, at least, is there to be found so large a number of single thoughts, to apply but one test, as in these poems, and there is so little need to say that in none other is there continuous reflection to the same degree, that Mr. Lowell is reputed rather for an excess

of thought. To examine the matter further, to consider such a poem as "*The Cathedral*," for instance, would force this sketch beyond its limits; but the poems of pure reflection should be at least referred to. So, too, the type of which "*Endymion*" is the most eminent example should be named, and the poems in which Mr. Lowell has sought for musical effects—a most interesting group to the student of poetry, of which, perhaps, "*The Fountain of Youth*" is the most remarkable—should not be left unmentioned even in the briefest account of his work. It is not within the scope of this paper, however, to enter upon the criticism of Mr. Lowell's poetry further than to indicate such cardinal qualities as can be brought out by a broad treatment of it in the mass; and if the three kinds of verse in which he seems most to excel,—(1) the pastoral of his own people in their special language, (2) the poems of patriotism of several sorts but particularly those in which he employs his peculiar grave and noble style, and (3) the poems distinguished by classic perfection of manner,—if these have been discriminated, and in the course of such remarks the poet's primary instincts of love of human nature, patriotic passion and faith, and devotion to the worth and charm of literature in both its phases of thought and art, have been made obvious, the little that was aimed at has been accomplished; for it must then appear that in his poetry Mr. Lowell has really expressed himself with directness and fullness, and in the best of his work with no more intrusion of the self-consciousness of culture to the prejudice of the native gift than was necessary to make his poetry square all round with himself. The fact that so much of his verse of all sorts has the quality of improvisation is of itself proof of the immediacy of his method, the genuineness of the impulse, the truth of his statement somewhere that he has ever waited for poetry to find him and make itself out of his life. It results from this that his poetical works are the true record of that life,—the voice, as has been said, of the man, and immeasurably more complete as an expression of individuality than the larger body of prose.

If one must pack the description of that body of prose into a phrase,—and little more is possible here,—it might fairly be said that (to leave the journals out of account) the essays and addresses of various kinds, storing the results of scholarship and reflection, express distinctively the author's mind. Interesting as the political papers are both by their topics and the special contribution of the author to thought necessarily more or less generally shared, they remain subordinate to his critical work on great authors. It is in the literary papers proper that Mr. Lowell has hived what

he has gathered of wisdom in his wide range through literature, and though he does not speak more directly in them than in his speeches or poems, he communicates more and does it in a more exceptional way. Political thoughtfulness characterizes many Americans, but one would hesitate to name even Longfellow as Mr. Lowell's equal in acquaintance with literature, and certainly no other name would be offered in scholarly rivalry with his own on this ground; but he excels Longfellow by virtue of the extraordinary critical power which he brings to bear upon literature. He is, indeed, the only critic of high rank that our literature owns, and the fineness of his quality is obscured by the very singleness of his position, since there are none to compare him with; nor, if one goes to England for such comparison, is the case much bettered, for he surpasses his fellows there with equal ease. The critical faculty is so rare that criticism as an art suffers in repute thereby, and its results are undervalued; but if one is willing to learn, there is in the body of Mr. Lowell's literary papers a canon of pure literature so defined in intellectual principles and applied with such variety and fruitfulness as to suffice for an education in literary taste; and this education is of the best sort since it teaches how to see rather than how to analyze, is intuitive instead of scientific, and thus follows the method native to literature and logically belonging to it. The results of this method in what Mr. Lowell says about great works of genius are, nevertheless, the main thing, and the value of them is sufficiently appreciated by students of literature. It ought to be observed, perhaps, that that wealth of single thought which has already been noticed as characterizing his poetry is as strikingly found in these prose works of every sort. Here, too, no writer of the time equals him except Emerson, and in Mr. Lowell's work there is none of that Delphic quality which sometimes renders Emerson's most impressive phrases only an appearance of thought. Just as in all of Mr. Lowell's writings one al-

ways seems in direct contact with the man speaking, so his words are always weighted with that sense and common judgment which make them shells so impalpable that one touches the mind through them. In his poetry he gives himself, and in his prose he yields up his wisdom; to do this so immediately that the intervention of the printed page is not felt is the last victory of the faculty of expression in literature, whether it be achieved with the simplicity of genius or by the perfection of art through culture, nor are the two ways incompatible.

Such, briefly stated, is the impression made by a broad view of the ten volumes into which Mr. Lowell has recently collected his various contributions to our literature. Notwithstanding his acquirements in general and the special perfection of his literary culture, which are felt throughout his writings in their mass, it would appear that his self-expression, whether on the more scholarly, or the civic, or the simplest human side, has been more spontaneous than is commonly thought. Spontaneity, in fact, is the very quality that ought to be selected and set first in characterizing his work. It is true that the spontaneity of a complex mind wears a different aspect from that of a simpler nature, but essentially it is the same, and brings with it the same reality of life, the same genuineness and sincerity, on account of which it is justly thought to be a primary element in the genius of great writers and true poets. The intrinsic and artistic worth of Mr. Lowell's works has been purposely subordinated here; but that part of criticism of them is not in any risk of misapprehension or forgetfulness. The simplicity of his nature, as shown in his works, beneath the diversity of his interests and the subtle refinements of his intellectual part, the unity of his life as poet, citizen, and thinker, and the harmonious interplay of his faculties one with another, and especially the directness of his expression in every mode of writing, have not been hitherto so much recognized as was right; and only by attending to these primary traits can one be just to a great writer.

*George E. Woodberry.*

