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Goethe Dostoyevsky Kipling Doyle Hall  
Baum Cotton Henry Flaubert Turgenev Balzac Willis  
Leslie Dumas Stockton Vatsyayana Crane  
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Curtis Tocqueville Gogol Busch  
Homer Tolstoy Whitman Twain  
Darwin Zola Lawrence Dickens Plato  
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# **The Function of the Poet and Other Essays**

James Russell Lowell

# Imprint

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## PREFACE

The Centenary Celebration of James Russell Lowell last year showed that he has become more esteemed as a critic and essayist than as a poet. Lowell himself felt that his true calling was in critical work rather than in poetry, and he wrote very little verse in the latter part of his life. He was somewhat chagrined that the poetic flame of his youth did not continue to glow, but he resigned himself to his fate; nevertheless, it should be remembered that "The Vision of Sir Launfal," "The Biglow Papers," and "The Commemoration Ode" are enough to make the reputation of any poet.

The present volume sustains Lowell's right to be considered one of the great American critics. The literary merit of some of the essays herein is in many respects nowise inferior to that in some of the volumes he collected himself. The articles are all exquisitely and carefully written, and the style of even the book reviews displays that quality found in his best writings which Ferris Greenslet has appropriately described as "savory." That such a quantity of good literature by so able a writer as Lowell should have been allowed to repose buried in the files of old magazines so long is rather unfortunate. The fact that Lowell did not collect them is a tribute to his modesty, a tribute all the more worthy in these days when some writers of ephemeral reviews on ephemeral books think it their duty to collect their opinions in book form.

The essays herein represent the matured author as they were written in the latter part of his life, between his thirty-sixth and fifty-seventh years. The only early essay is the one on Poe. It appeared in *Graham's Magazine* for February, 1845, and was reprinted by Griswold in his edition of Poe. It has also been reprinted in later editions of Poe, but has never been included in any of Lowell's works. This was no doubt due to the slight break in the relations between Poe and Lowell, due to Poe's usual accusations of plagiarism. The essay still remains one of the best on Poe ever written.

Though Lowell became in later life quite conservative and academic, it should not be thought that these essays show no sympathy with liberal ideas. He was also appreciative of the first works of new writers, and had good and prophetic insight. His favorable reviews of the first works of Howells and James, and the subsequent career of these two men, indicate the sureness of Lowell's critical mind. Many readers will enjoy, in these days of the ouija board and messages from the dead, the raps at spiritualism here and there. Moreover, there is a passage in the first essay showing that Lowell, before Freud, understood the psychoanalytic theory of genius in its connection with childhood memories. The passage follows Lowell's narration of the story of little Montague.

None of the essays in this volume has appeared in book form except a few fragments from some of the opening five essays which were reported from Lowell's lectures in the *Boston Advertiser*, in 1855, and were privately printed some years ago. Charles Eliot Norton performed a service to the world when he published in the *Century Magazine* in 1893 and 1894 some lectures from Lowell's manuscripts. These lectures are now collected and form the first five essays in this book. I have also retained Professor Norton's introductions and notes. Attention is called to his remark that "The Function of the Poet" is not unworthy to stand with Sidney's and Shelley's essays on poetry.

The rest of the essays in this volume appeared in Lowell's lifetime in the *Atlantic Monthly*, the *North American Review*, and the *Nation*. They were all anonymous, but are assigned to Lowell by George Willis Cooke in his "Bibliography of James Russell Lowell." Lowell was editor of the *Atlantic* from the time of its founding in 1857 to May, 1861. He was editor of the *North American Review* from January, 1864, to the time he left for Europe in 1872. With one exception (that on "Poetry and Nationalism" which formed the greater part of a review of the poems of Howells's friend Piatt), all the articles from these two magazines, reprinted in this volume, appeared during Lowell's editorship. These articles include reviews of poems by his friends Longfellow and Whittier. And in his review of "The Courtship of Miles Standish," Lowell makes effective use of his scholarship to introduce a lengthy and interesting discourse on the dactylic hexameter.

While we are on the subject of the New England poets a word about the present misunderstanding and tendency to underrate them may not be out of place. Because it is growing to be the consensus of opinion that the two greatest poets America has produced are Whitman and Poe, it does not follow that the New-Englanders must be relegated to the scrap-heap. Nor do I see any inconsistency in a man whose taste permits him to enjoy both the free verse and unpuritanic (if I may coin a word) poems of Masters and Sandburg, and also Whittier's "Snow-Bound" and Longfellow's "Courtship of Miles Standish." Though these poems are not profound, there is something of the universal in them. They have pleasant school-day memories for all of us and will no doubt have such for our children.

Lowell's cosmopolitan tastes may be seen in his essays on men so different as Thackeray, Swift, and Plutarch. Hardly any one knows that he even wrote about these authors. Lowell preferred Thackeray to Dickens, a judgment in which many people to-day no longer agree with him. As a young man he hated Swift, but he gives us a sane study of him. The review of Plutarch's "Essays" edited by Goodwin, with an introduction by Emerson, is also of interest.

The last essay in the volume on "A Plea for Freedom from Speech and Figures of Speech-Makers" shows Lowell's satirical powers at their best. Ferris Greenslet tells us, in his book on Lowell, that the Philip Vandal whose eloquence Lowell ridicules is Wendell Phillips. The essay gives Lowell's humorous comments on various matters, especially on contemporary types of orators, reformers, and heroes. It represents Lowell as he is most known to us, the Lowell who is always ready with fun and who set the world agog with his "Biglow Papers."

Lowell's work as a critic dates from the rare volume "Conversations on Some of the Old Poets," published in 1844 in his twenty-fifth year, includes his best-known volumes "Among My Books" and "My Study Windows," and most fitly concludes with the "Latest Literary Essays," published in the year of his death in 1891. My sincere hope is that this book will not be found to be an unworthy successor to these volumes.

Though some of Lowell's literary opinions are old-fashioned to us (one author even wrote an entire volume to demolish Lowell's repu-

tation as a critic), there is much in his work that the world will not let die. He is highly regarded abroad, and he is one of the few men in our literature who produced creative criticism.

Thanks and acknowledgments are due the *Century Magazine* and the literary representatives of Lowell, for permission to reprint in this volume the first five essays, which are copyrighted and were published in the *Century Magazine*.

**ALBERT MORDELL**

*Philadelphia, January 13, 1920*

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## ON POETRY AND BELLES-LETTRES

### THE FUNCTION OF THE POET

This was the concluding lecture in the course which Lowell read before the Lowell Institute in the winter of 1855. Doubtless Lowell never printed it because, as his genius matured, he felt that its assertions were too absolute, and that its style bore too many marks of haste in composition, and was too rhetorical for an essay to be read in print. How rapid was the growth of his intellectual judgment, and the broadening of his imaginative view, may be seen by comparing it with his essays on Swinburne, on Percival, and on Rousseau, published in 1866 and 1867—essays in which the topics of this lecture were touched upon anew, though not treated at large.

But the spirit of this lecture is so fine, its tone so full of the enthusiasm of youth, its conception of the poet so lofty, and the truths it contains so important, that it may well be prized as the expression of a genius which, if not yet mature, is already powerful, and aquiline alike in vision and in sweep of wing. It is not unworthy to stand with Sidney's and with Shelley's "Defence of Poesy," and it is fitted to warm and inspire the poetic heart of the youth of this generation, no less than of that to which it was first addressed. As a close to the lecture Lowell read his beautiful (then unpublished) poem "To the Muse."

*Charles Eliot Norton*

\* \* \* \* \*

Whether, as some philosophers assume, we possess only the fragments of a great cycle of knowledge in whose centre stood the primeval man in friendly relation with the powers of the universe, and build our hovels out of the ruins of our ancestral palace; or whether, according to the development theory of others, we are rising gradually, and have come up out of an atom instead of descending from an Adam, so that the proudest pedigree might run

up to a barnacle or a zoophyte at last, are questions that will keep for a good many centuries yet. Confining myself to what little we can learn from history, we find tribes rising slowly out of barbarism to a higher or lower point of culture and civility, and everywhere the poet also is found, under one name or other, changing in certain outward respects, but essentially the same.

And however far we go back, we shall find this also — that the poet and the priest were united originally in the same person; which means that the poet was he who was conscious of the world of spirit as well as that of sense, and was the ambassador of the gods to men. This was his highest function, and hence his name of "seer." He was the discoverer and declarer of the perennial beneath the deciduous. His were the *epea pteroenta*, the true "winged words" that could fly down the unexplored future and carry the names of ancestral heroes, of the brave and wise and good. It was thus that the poet could reward virtue, and, by and by, as society grew more complex, could burn in the brand of shame. This is Homer's character of Demodocus, in the eighth book of the "Odyssey," "whom the Muse loved and gave the good and ill" — the gift of conferring good or evil immortality. The first histories were in verse; and sung as they were at feasts and gatherings of the people, they awoke in men the desire of fame, which is the first promoter of courage and self-trust, because it teaches men by degrees to appeal from the present to the future. We may fancy what the influence of the early epics was when they were recited to men who claimed the heroes celebrated in them for their ancestors, by what Bouchardon, the sculptor, said, only two centuries ago: "When I read Homer, I feel as if I were twenty feet high." Nor have poets lost their power over the future in modern times. Dante lifts up by the hair the face of some petty traitor, the Smith or Brown of some provincial Italian town, lets the fire of his Inferno glare upon it for a moment, and it is printed forever on the memory of mankind. The historians may iron out the shoulders of Richard the Third as smooth as they can, they will never get over the wrench that Shakespeare gave them.

The peculiarity of almost all early literature is that it seems to have a double meaning, that, underneath its natural, we find ourselves continually seeing or suspecting a supernatural meaning. In the older epics the characters seem to be half typical and only half

historical. Thus did the early poets endeavor to make realities out of appearances; for, except a few typical men in whom certain ideas get embodied, the generations of mankind are mere apparitions who come out of the dark for a purposeless moment, and reënter the dark again after they have performed the nothing they came for.

Gradually, however, the poet as the "seer" became secondary to the "maker." His office became that of entertainer rather than teacher. But always something of the old tradition was kept alive. And if he has now come to be looked upon merely as the best expresser, the gift of seeing is implied as necessarily antecedent to that, and of seeing very deep, too. If any man would seem to have written without any conscious moral, that man is Shakespeare. But that must be a dull sense, indeed, which does not see through his tragic—yes, and his comic—masks awful eyes that flame with something intenser and deeper than a mere scenic meaning—a meaning out of the great deep that is behind and beyond all human and merely personal character. Nor was Shakespeare himself unconscious of his place as a teacher and profound moralist: witness that sonnet in which he bewails his having neglected sometimes the errand that was laid upon him:

Alas, 't is true I have gone here and there,  
And made myself a motley to the view,  
Gored mine own thoughts, sold cheap what is most dear,  
Made old offences of affections new;  
Most true it is that I have look'd on truth  
Askance and strangely;

the application of which is made clear by the next sonnet, in which he distinctly alludes to his profession.

There is this unmistakable stamp on all the great poets—that, however in little things they may fall below themselves, whenever there comes a great and noble thing to say, they say it greatly and nobly, and bear themselves most easily in the royalties of thought and language. There is not a mature play of Shakespeare's in which great ideas do not jut up in mountainous permanence, marking forever the boundary of provinces of thought, and known afar to many kindreds of men.

And it is for this kind of sight, which we call insight, and not for any faculty of observation and description, that we value the poet. It is in proportion as he has this that he is an adequate expresser, and not a juggler with words. It is by means of this that for every generation of man he plays the part of "namer." Before him, as before Adam, the creation passes to be named anew: first the material world; then the world of passions and emotions; then the world of ideas. But whenever a great imagination comes, however it may delight itself with imaging the outward beauty of things, however it may seem to flow thoughtlessly away in music like a brook, yet the shadow of heaven lies also in its depth beneath the shadow of earth. Continually the visible universe suggests the invisible. We are forever feeling this in Shakespeare. His imagination went down to the very bases of things, and while his characters are the most natural that poet ever created, they are also perfectly ideal, and are more truly the personifications of abstract thoughts and passions than those of any allegorical writer whatever.

Even in what seems so purely a picturesque poem as the "Iliad," we feel something of this. Beholding as Homer did, from the tower of contemplation, the eternal mutability and nothing permanent but change, he must look underneath the show for the reality. Great captains and conquerors came forth out of the eternal silence, entered it again with their trampling hosts, and shoutings, and trumpet-blasts, and were as utterly gone as those echoes of their deeds which he sang, and which faded with the last sound of his voice and the last tremble of his lyre. History relating outward events alone was an unmeaning gossip, with the world for a village. This life could only become other than phantasmagoric, could only become real, as it stood related to something that was higher and permanent. Hence the idea of Fate, of a higher power unseen—that shadow, as of an eagle circling to its swoop, which flits stealthily and swiftly across the windy plains of Troy. In the "Odyssey" we find pure allegory.

Now, under all these names—praiser, seer, soothsayer—we find the same idea lurking. The poet is he who can best see and best say what is ideal—what belongs to the world of soul and of beauty. Whether he celebrate the brave and good man, or the gods, or the beautiful as it appears in man or nature, something of a religious

character still clings to him; he is the revealer of Deity. He may be unconscious of his mission; he may be false to it; but in proportion as he is a great poet, he rises to the level of it the more often. He does not always directly rebuke what is bad and base, but indirectly by making us feel what delight there is in the good and fair. If he besiege evil, it is with such beautiful engines of war (as Plutarch tells us of Demetrius) that the besieged themselves are charmed with them. Whoever reads the great poets cannot but be made better by it, for they always introduce him to a higher society, to a greater style of manners and of thinking. Whoever learns to love what is beautiful is made incapable of the low and mean and bad. If Plato excludes the poets from his Republic, it is expressly on the ground that they speak unworthy things of the gods; that is, that they have lost the secret of their art, and use artificial types instead of speaking the true universal language of imagination. He who translates the divine into the vulgar, the spiritual into the sensual, is the reverse of a poet.

The poet, under whatever name, always stands for the same thing—imagination. And imagination in its highest form gives him the power, as it were, of assuming the consciousness of whatever he speaks about, whether man or beast, or rock or tree, fit is the ring of Canace, which whoso has on understands the language of all created things. And as regards expression, it seems to enable the poet to condense the whole of himself into a single word. Therefore, when a great poet has said a thing, it is finally and utterly expressed, and has as many meanings as there are men who read his verse. A great poet is something more than an interpreter between man and nature; he is also an interpreter between man and his own nature. It is he who gives us those key-words, the possession of which makes us masters of all the unsuspected treasure-caverns of thought, and feeling, and beauty which open under the dusty path of our daily life.

And it is not merely a dry lexicon that he compiles,—a thing which enables us to translate from one dead dialect into another as dead,—but all his verse is instinct with music, and his words open windows on every side to pictures of scenery and life. The difference between the dry fact and the poem is as great as that between reading the shipping news and seeing the actual coming and going

of the crowd of stately ships,—“the city on the inconstant billows dancing,”—as there is between ten minutes of happiness and ten minutes by the clock. Everybody remembers the story of the little Montague who was stolen and sold to the chimney-sweep: how he could dimly remember lying in a beautiful chamber; how he carried with him in all his drudgery the vision of a fair, sad mother's face that sought him everywhere in vain; how he threw himself one day, all sooty as he was from his toil, on a rich bed and fell asleep, and how a kind person woke him, questioned him, pieced together his broken recollections for him, and so at last made the visions of the beautiful chamber and the fair, sad countenance real to him again. It seems to me that the offices that the poet does for us are typified in this nursery-tale. We all of us have our vague reminiscences of the stately home of our childhood,—for we are all of us poets and geniuses in our youth, while earth is all new to us, and the chalice of every buttercup is brimming with the wine of poesy,—and we all remember the beautiful, motherly countenance which nature bent over us there. But somehow we all get stolen away thence; life becomes to us a sooty taskmaster, and we crawl through dark passages without end—till suddenly the word of some poet redeems us, makes us know who we are, and of helpless orphans makes us the heir to a great estate. It is to our true relations with the two great worlds of outward and inward nature that the poet reintroduces us.

But the imagination has a deeper use than merely to give poets a power of expression. It is the everlasting preserver of the world from blank materialism. It forever puts matter in the wrong, and compels it to show its title to existence. Wordsworth tells us that in his youth he was sometimes obliged to touch the walls to find if they were visionary or no, and such experiences are not uncommon with persons who converse much with their own thoughts. Dr. Johnson said that to kick one's foot against a stone was a sufficient confutation of Berkeley, and poor old Pyrrho has passed into a proverb because, denying the objectivity of matter, he was run over by a cart and killed. But all that he affirmed was that to the soul the cart was no more real than its own imaginative reproduction of it, and perhaps the shade of the philosopher ran up to the first of his deriders who crossed the Styx with a triumphant “I told you so! The cart did not run over *me*, for here I am without a bone broken.”

And, in another sense also, do those poets who deal with human character, as all the greater do, continually suggest to us the purely phantasmal nature of life except as it is related to the world of ideas. For are not their personages more real than most of those in history? Is not Lear more authentic and permanent than Lord Raglan? Their realm is a purely spiritual one in which space and time and costume are nothing. What matters it that Shakespeare puts a seaport in Bohemia, and knew less geography than Tommy who goes to the district school? He understood eternal boundaries, such as are laid down on no chart, and are not defined by such transitory affairs as mountain chains, rivers, and seas.

No great movement of the human mind takes place without the concurrent beat of those two wings, the imagination and the understanding. It is by the understanding that we are enabled to make the most of this world, and to use the collected material of experience in its condensed form of practical wisdom; and it is the imagination which forever beckons toward that other world which is always future, and makes us discontented with this. The one rests upon experience; the other leans forward and listens after the inexperienced, and shapes the features of that future with which it is forever in travail. The imagination might be defined as the common sense of the invisible world, as the understanding is of the visible; and as those are the finest individual characters in which the two moderate and rectify each other, so those are the finest eras where the same may be said of society. In the voyage of life, not only do we depend on the needle, true to its earthly instincts, but upon observation of the fixed stars, those beacons lighted upon the eternal promontories of heaven above the stirs and shiftings of our lower system.

But it seems to be thought that we have come upon the earth too late, that there has been a feast of imagination formerly, and all that is left for us is to steal the scraps. We hear that there is no poetry in railroads and steamboats and telegraphs, and especially none in Brother Jonathan. If this be true, so much the worse for him. But because *he* is a materialist, shall there be no more poets? When we have said that we live in a materialistic age we have said something which meant more than we intended. If we say it in the way of blame, we have said a foolish thing, for probably one age is as good as another, and, at any rate, the worst is good enough company for

us. The age of Shakespeare was richer than our own, only because it was lucky enough to have such a pair of eyes as his to see it, and such a gift of speech as his to report it. And so there is always room and occasion for the poet, who continues to be, just as he was in the early time, nothing more nor less than a "seer." He is always the man who is willing to take the age he lives in on trust, as the very best that ever was. Shakespeare did not sit down and cry for the water of Helicon to turn the wheels of his little private mill at the Bankside. He appears to have gone more quietly about his business than any other playwright in London, to have drawn off what water-power he needed from the great prosy current of affairs that flows alike for all and in spite of all, to have ground for the public what grist they wanted, coarse or fine, and it seems a mere piece of luck that the smooth stream of his activity reflected with such ravishing clearness every changing mood of heaven and earth, every stick and stone, every dog and clown and courtier that stood upon its brink. It is a curious illustration of the friendly manner in which Shakespeare received everything that came along,—of what a *present* man he was,—that in the very same year that the mulberry-tree was brought into England, he got one and planted it in his garden at Stratford.

It is perfectly true that this is a materialistic age, and for that very reason we want our poets all the more. We find that every generation contrives to catch its singing larks without the sky's falling. When the poet comes, he always turns out to be the man who discovers that the passing moment is the inspired one, and that the secret of poetry is not to have lived in Homer's day, or Dante's, but to be alive now. To be alive now, that is the great art and mystery. They are dead men who live in the past, and men yet unborn that live in the future. We are like Hans in Luck, forever exchanging the burdensome good we have for something else, till at last we come home empty-handed.

That pale-faced drudge of Time opposite me there, that weariless sexton whose callous hands bury our rosy hours in the irrevocable past, is even now reaching forward to a moment as rich in life, in character, and thought, as full of opportunity, as any since Adam. This little isthmus that we are now standing on is the point to which martyrs in their triumphant pain, prophets in their fervor, and poets