

# The Forum.

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## AN ENGLISH ESTIMATE OF LOWELL.

THE immortals of this generation are rapidly passing away, and as yet we see no others whose intellectual stature leads us to hope that they will take the place of the few who stand in the front rank. In England, Tennyson still stands supreme in the domain of literature, and no living poet approaches his greatness; and in the domain of politics, Mr. Gladstone still upholds the fame of his marvellous powers at the great age of eighty-two. But Robert Browning, with all his unequalled versatility, and Shaksperian insight into the human soul, has joined "the more in number," and has left the world much poorer. And Carlyle has gone, leaving behind him the sad legacy of records in which there were few of his contemporaries whom he has not branded with insulting epigrams. And "George Eliot" has gone, leaving us no chance, apparently, of ever reading another "Romola" or "Silas Marner." And Matthew Arnold — that bright and genial spirit whom to know was to love — has been called away. And though Mr. Ruskin still lives, his long silence and his broken health make it probable that we have received the last magic word-pictures of that enchanting pen.

America has lost Longfellow, who was as dear to England as to his native land, and under whose bust, glimmering at the corner of the south transept of Westminster Abbey, thousands pause with a sigh of regret for the loss of a life stainless as that white marble. And Emerson has gone, after bequeathing to us in prose and verse many a thought

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which startles us like a flash of light in the darkness. And Wendell Phillips is dead, whose oratory at its greatest, like that of Pericles,

ἤστυραπτ', ἐβρόντα, συνεχόχα τὴν Ἑλλάδα.

Two poets, indeed, remain in America, whose works the world will not willingly let die,—Dr. Oliver Wendell Holmes, whose *curiosa felicitas* and whose genial charm have delighted us for so many years; and Mr. John Greenleaf Whittier, whose Quaker righteousness, like the oratory of John Bright, often glows with such splendid indignation, because he hates cruelty and oppression with a hatred commensurate with the depth of his love for all that is tender and true. And among historians Mr. Parkman still remains. But, when these are called away, who will be left to maintain the full glories of English literature?

The immortals in any generation are necessarily few. There are, indeed, always many men of talent, of industry, of political capacity, of literary faculty. There are many who render worthy services to Church and Commonwealth, and leave behind them honorable names. Some of these, especially in political life, loom very large for a time on the attention of their contemporaries. Their names occur incessantly in the newspapers; and reams of their utterances are yearly published. We are almost tempted to think of them as great men; yet the note of originality and distinction is so completely absent from their sayings and doings, that, before a generation is over, "they are clean forgotten, as a dead man out of mind." I am daily reminded of this when I notice how completely unknown to the millions, even by name, are men, who, within living memory, have been deemed sufficiently great to have graves assigned to them in Westminster Abbey. And though eminent writers are remembered longer than others, this is true of them also. Many of them have but a temporary success, and a *succès d'estime*. Very soon the mention of their names awakens no recollection, and we have to refer to some biographical dictionary to learn about any thing which they did or wrote. There are never more than a small handful of living men of whom we can say, that, when their bodies are buried in the dust, their names will live for evermore. To class any man with the immortals is to pay him so high a compliment that it can scarcely ever be spoken without misgiving; and yet it can, I believe, be said with truth, that Mr. J. R. Lowell will be remembered on both sides of the Atlantic long after most of those are forgotten who now occupy a far larger share than he ever did of the public attention.

He was in all respects a child of the nineteenth century with its varied culture. I have always mentally compared him to Browning's

"Cleon, the poet, from the sprinkled isles,  
Lily on lily, that o'erlace the sea,  
And laugh their pride when the light wave lisps 'Greece.'"

He has the same completeness as Cleon:—

"We of these latter days, with greater mind  
Than our forerunners, since more composite,  
Look not so great, beside their simple way,  
To a judge who only sees one way at once—  
Compares the small part of some man in us  
With some whole man of the heroic age,  
Great in his way—not ours, nor meant for ours.  
And ours is greater, had we skill to know.

I have not chanted verse like Homer, no—  
Nor swept string like Terpander, no—no carved  
And painted men like Phidias and his friend:  
I am not great as they are, point by point;  
But I have entered into sympathy  
With these four, running them into one soul  
Who, separate, ignored each other's arts.  
Say, is it nothing that I know them all?  
The wild flower was the larger—I have dashed  
Rose-blood upon its petals, pricked its cup's  
Honey with wine, and driven its seed to fruit,  
And shew a better flower, if not so large:  
I stand myself. Refer this to the gods  
Whose gift alone it is!"

I will not apologize for the length of the quotation, since it exactly expresses both Mr. Lowell's strength and his weakness. He might have been greater, had he been in some respects less. He might have done more, had he not known so much. He would have attained to a more powerful originality, if it had not been a part of his training to be familiar with, and to be pervaded by, the best thoughts of many minds in many ages. His greatness in a single form of excellence would have been more unchallenged and permanent, but for his many claims to admiration. We do not at all agree with Mr. Browning's all-complete Greek poet of the decadence, with his mastery of every thing—*totus teres atque rotundus*. We think that Mr. Lowell would have been a far greater man in the eyes of posterity, if, like Tennyson, he had devoted his life to the one purpose of poetry, and if, instead of being all that he was, he had concentrated his whole genius upon the

gift of song. What he has attained to in a page or two of his verses serves to show how much more he might have done. But to complain of this would be idle and ungrateful. We are, each of us, what we *can* be, what our training, our temperaments, and our age make us; and it is absurd to depreciate any one on the ground that he would have been still greater had he been another man.

Mr. Lowell was much else besides a poet, and had many more claims on the grateful remembrance both of Americans and Englishmen. At some of these claims we now may glance.

He was a scholar, acquainted, and accurately acquainted, with Greek and Latin and with the principal languages of modern Europe. As a student he devoted many hours of every day to the earnest and systematic pursuit of knowledge and self-culture. Two great writers—Carlyle, in his lecture on “The Hero as a Man of Letters,” and Emerson, in his “Representative Men”—have sketched the ideal of quiet dignity and devotion which marks the man who has accepted it as one of his duties to make the most of the intellect which God has given him. Mr. Lowell presented a finished specimen of that ideal.

He was in the best sense of the word a patriot. He did not, indeed, plunge himself into the too often turbid stream of political intrigue and agitation, but with his voice and his pen he exercised a powerful influence over the destinies of his country. As editor of the “Atlantic Monthly,” and as a writer, he was a leader of national thought. It might be said of him, as Sir Edwin Arnold says of another,—

“He spake  
By voice of many thousand tongues. He swayed  
The pens that break the sceptres.”

Those who guide politics, and those who mould political thought, are, though they do not seem to be, incomparably more powerful than the professional rulers and politicians. Deep thinkers are to administrative statesmen as the voices are to the echoes, and the sunbeams themselves to their reflected light. It is they who create that public opinion, of which Landor wrote that “the public voice shakes the palace; the public voice penetrates the grave; the public voice precedes the chariot of Almighty God, and is heard at the judgment-seat.” The distinction between the scholar-poet or thinker and the ordinary publicist is, that the former does not trouble himself about the small combinations of personal greed and ambition of which all party-strife is full. He cares only for the great questions which affect the interests of humanity; he joins only in the Armageddon battles in

which all the true sons and servants of God are ranged against the forces of oppression, robbery, and wrong.

It was no small part of the service rendered by Mr. Lowell as a patriot, that, more than most men, he strengthened the blessed influences which bind England and America together. By birth a direct representative of the Pilgrim Fathers, he was yet most deeply attached to England, which he made a second home. Here, as in America, he was justly beloved, both as a man and as the worthy representative of the United States to the British people. Thus he furnished an illustration of his own line,—

“Before man made us citizens, great Nature made us men.”

He helped to remind the two nations—the children of the ancient monarchy and of the mighty republic—that the same blood runs in their veins; that we are one in the memories of the past and in the hopes of the future; that we both speak the tongue of Shakspeare, both hold the faith and morals of Milton, are both meant to be giant pioneers, marching side by side in the very vanguard of Christian evangelization and human progress. When an American friend gave to the Church of St. Margaret's the window in honor of Milton, who often worshipped there, Mr. Whittier wrote the four lines:—

“The New World honors him whose lofty plea  
For England's freedom made her own more sure,  
Whose song, immortal as its theme, shall be  
Their common freehold while both worlds endure.”

And when the American, with characteristic readiness of munificence, gave the window in honor of Sir Walter Raleigh, “the father of the United States,”—whose headless body lies buried under the altar of St. Margaret's,—Mr. Lowell wrote the four lines inscribed on it:—

“The New World's sons, from England's breast we drew  
Such milk as bids remember whence we came;  
Proud of her past, from which our present grew,  
This window we erect to Raleigh's name.”

Again: Mr. Lowell was an admirable speaker. No one was more welcome than he at all literary and social gatherings. His address as lord-rector of St. Andrew's was an almost perfect specimen of what such an address should be,—weighty, learned, brilliant, eloquent. Alike in this country and in his own, where there are so many good speakers, he was regarded by common consent as unsurpassed in gracefulness. When the bust of Coleridge was given to Westminster Abbey

by an American citizen, Mr. Lowell, then the United States minister, was naturally chosen to give the address in the ancient Chapter House, before the bust was unveiled. It was full of an indescribable charm, and I shall never forget the perfect way in which he recited the lines, which he selected as a specimen of Coleridge's nature-painting:—

“Beneath yon birch with silver bark,  
And branches pendulous and fair,  
The brook falls scattered down the rock,  
And all is mossy there.”

I remember, too, the hearty laugh which greeted his first words in a speech at a dinner of the Literary Fund, when on an exceedingly raw, gusty, and bitter evening of early May, he referred to Thomson's

“Come, gentle Spring, ethereal mildness, come,  
And from the bosom of yon dropping cloud,  
While music wakes around, veiled in a shower  
Of shadowing roses, on our plains descend,”

and reminded us how England was at that moment enjoying all the “ethereal mildness” of her customary spring.

Among the students of the world's best literature, Mr. Lowell held a foremost place. It was not for nothing that he had written so much, and lectured so often, on the best poets, and had himself edited the works of Marvell, Donne, Keats, Wordsworth, and Shelley. As a professor of belles-lettres at Harvard, the post in which he proved himself so worthy a successor of Longfellow, in 1855, he had to keep the claims of literature before successive generations of young students; and his essays on Chaucer, Spenser, and Shakspeare, on Milton, Pope, and Dryden, on Wordsworth and Keats, furnish sufficient evidence that he had bathed himself deeply in the purest “wells of English undefiled.” But he was also familiar with the greatest poets and thinkers of other nations, and has left us thorough and conscientious studies of Dante, of Lessing, of Rousseau, and of Calderon.

Added to these great attainments and accomplishments, Mr. Lowell possessed the rare gift of humor. He has been compared to Samuel Butler, the author of “Hudibras;” and if the “Biglow Papers” do not furnish so many quotations which have become the common stock of English illustration, it must be admitted that their tone is larger and nobler than that of Butler's masterpiece. They were entirely original; and even the “Notices of an Independent Press,” by which they were preceded, conveyed a much-needed lesson to American journalism. Though written before the poet was thirty years old, they en-

force a burning protest against slavery and war. When we quote such lines as,—

“A marcfiful Providunce fashioned us holler,  
O’ purpose thet we might our princerples swaller;”

or the inimitably witty verses,—

“Parson Wilbur he calls all these argimunts lies;  
Sez they’re nothin’ on airth but jest *fee, faw, fum*;  
An’ thet all this big talk of our destinies  
Is half on it ign’ance an’ t’ other half rum,  
But John P.

Robinson, he

Sez it ain’t no sech thing; an’, of course, so must we.

Parson Wilbur sez *he* never heerd in his life

Thet th’ Apostles rigged out in their swaller-tail coats,  
An’ marched round in front of a drum an’ a fife,  
To git some on ’em office, and some on ’em votes;

But John P.

Robinson, he

Sez they didn’t know everythin’ down in Judee,”—

we must not forget, that, under the rippled and flashing surface of their wit, the “Biglow Papers” hid ocean-depths of intense and noble feeling, and that the generous sympathies which they were intended to strengthen helped to keep a nation in the paths of righteousness. By them, and under the semblance of their boisterous fun, Mr. Lowell earned the glory of being, perhaps, the only American who attempted “to laugh down, as well as to fight down, the propagandists of slavery, the oppressors of the slave,”—the only American who was able to pierce hypocrisy and vulgarity through and through with shafts of radiant ridicule as with the arrows of the dawn.

Perhaps Mr. Lowell is thought of more often as a critic than as any thing else except a poet. But his criticism, though keen, though never foolishly and blindly eulogistic, was yet of that lambent kind which is akin to charity. His shafts were swift-winged; but they were never envenomed. They struck; but either they gave no need less pain, or brought healing in the kindly wounds which they inflicted. I think that the “Fable for Critics,” in which, with such keen intuition, he gave a critical estimate of the merits and defects of his most eminent fellow-countrymen, has been under-estimated rather than otherwise. It was marked not only by its sparkling and acute playfulness, and the clever oddity of rhymes in which even Browning has not surpassed him, but also by a very unusual power of seeing



the real men through the glamour of temporary popularity and the cloud of passing dislike.

But while I have thus spoken of Mr. Lowell's many services, I do not think that his several excellences in these directions would have sufficed to preserve his memory. I am far from sure that his prose-writings will live. They have neither the unique charm and Olympian grace of Matthew Arnold's, nor the lightning-like intensity of Carlyle's, nor even the genial and mellow wisdom of Sir Arthur Helps's. It is as a poet, mainly if not exclusively, that he will live in the grateful regard of his fellow-men. To poets more than to any others a deep debt of spiritual thankfulness is due. Now, Mr. Lowell was one of the first poets among the famous Americans of this generation. It was by poetry that he taught his chief lessons; it is as a poet that he will be remembered in the years that are to come.

How true was his own estimate of what a poet should be, and should aim at! In his "Incident in a Railroad Car," after describing how a student awed and softened all his fellow-travellers by reading to them the glowing and manly verse of Robert Burns, he says,—

"Never did poesy appear  
So full of heaven to me, as when  
I saw how it would pierce through pride and fear  
To the lives of the coarsest men.  
  
It may be glorious to write  
Thoughts that shall glad the two or three  
High souls, like those far stars that come in sight  
Once in a century;  
  
But better far it is to speak  
One simple word, which now and then  
Shall waken their free nature in the weak  
And friendless sons of men.  
  
He who doth this, in verse or prose,  
May be forgotten in his day,  
But surely shall be crowned at last with those  
Who live and speak for aye."

In "What Rabbi Jehosha Said," he sighed forth the same aspiration:—

"Twere glorious, no doubt, to be  
One of the strong-winged Hierarchy,  
To burn with Seraphs, or to shine  
With Cherubs, deathlessly divine;  
Yet I, perhaps, poor earthly clod,  
Could I forget myself in God,  
Could I but find my nature's clew  
Simply as birds and blossoms do



And but for one rapt moment know  
 'Tis Heaven must come, not we must go,  
 Should win my place as near the throne  
 As the pearl-angel of its zone,  
 And God would listen mid the throng  
 For my one breath of perfect song,  
 That, in its simple human way,  
 Said all the Host of Heaven could say."

In the lines about himself, in the "Fable for Critics," he says,—

"There is Lowell, who's striving Parnassus to climb  
 With a whole bale of *isms* tied together with rhyme;  
 He might get on alone, spite of brambles and bowlders,  
 But he can't with that bundle he has on his shoulders.  
 The top of the hill he will ne'er come nigh reaching  
 Till he learns the distinction 'twixt singing and preaching.  
 His lyre has some chords which would sound pretty well,  
 But he'd rather by half make a drum of the shell,  
 And rattle away till he's old as Methusalem  
 At the head of a march to the last New Jerusalem."

In these lines, which we now read with so much interest, we see that Lowell was aware of his own source of weakness—the very source of weakness of which I have spoken; but, on the other hand, if the last six lines are any thing but ironical, they are mistaken. The chief element of his strength, and not of his weakness, was the intensity of that moral sympathy which makes his best poetry distinctly didactic. The best chords of his lyre are exactly those in which he means to preach; and it is his main glory that he stood in the forefront of that radiant band of mighty orators, and ethereal poets, and heaven-born rulers, whose eloquence and wisdom emancipated eighty thousand slaves, and whose names are therefore written, like those of Clarkson and Wilberforce, on the noblest page of their country's history. Among the poems of Lowell that will live is that which he addressed to the pioneer of the emancipation crusade,—William Lloyd Garrison. It was the same magnificent conviction in the omnipotence of right that inspired Mr. Lowell's lines on the crisis of December, 1845, which are among the grandest that he ever wrote:—

"Once to every man and nation comes the moment to decide,  
 In the strife of Truth with Falsehood, for the good or evil side;  
 Some great cause, God's new Messiah, offering each the bloom or blight,  
 Parts the goat upon the left hand, and the sheep upon the right,  
 And the choice goes by forever 'twixt that darkness and that light."

Nor was it only for the slave, and against the slave-owner, that Lowell could plead. He was one whose heart bled for the sorrows of

the poor. He saw the glory of God's world, and in some of his noblest verses has fulfilled that function of the poet which consists in using his fine sense to interpret to our blunter conceptions the meaning of its beauty, as in the prelude of his "Vision of Sir Launfal."

A lesson no less deep and sacred was taught in one more poem, the last, I believe, that he ever published. It describes how the poet saw in a dream the great Archangel with his "fire gold flickering hair," and in his "blinding armor," standing to weigh the hopes and fears of men. It was called "St. Michael the Weigher."

It is in virtue of such poems, such thoughts, such lessons, as these, that the name of Mr. Lowell will be remembered in the literature of the English-speaking race; and, like Longfellow, he was happy enough to write not a few of them. Such are "Rabbi Yussouf," and the "Ode at the Harvard Commemoration of 1865," and those glorious lines which tell us that

"He's a slave who would not be  
In the right with two or three.  
He's a slave who would not choose  
Hatred, slander, and abuse,  
Rather than in silence shrink  
From the truth he needs must think."

Two criticisms may, however, fairly be urged against some of Mr. Lowell's poems. Some, which are simply the poems of culture rather than of humanity, remind us irresistibly of other poets who had preceded him. In the poems of his youth, few of which would of themselves live, we trace the notes and the feelings of Byron and Shelley. We say, as we read, "This poem is not exactly an echo of Wordsworth, nor this of Longfellow, nor this of Tennyson; and yet they could hardly have been written but for the unconscious spell exercised over the writer's mind by the enchantment of those poets." "Rhoecus," for instance, is a truly exquisite poem, almost perfect in its finish and Greek-like delicacy; yet we cannot help asking whether it could have been written by any one who had not delighted in that exquisite volume of *Hellenics* by Landor, which was too classically perfect to touch the general heart. Again: in the lovely verses on "What Rabbi Jehoshah Said" is it possible to overlook a reminiscence of Browning's "Theocrite"? Lowell was never a plagiarist, but in some of his poems he lacks the absolute independence which places men among the very greatest.

The only other criticism which must be made, if we are to avoid the falsehood of that indiscriminate eulogy which detracts from the

value of honest praise, is, that he was sometimes defective in distinctness, and sometimes in symmetry, as well as sometimes in melody. The latter defect is not nearly so obtrusive as it is, for instance, in Browning. Lowell never gives us those lines, which, as De Quincey said, "would splinter the teeth of a crocodile." But the lack of symmetry injures the sovereign merit of one of his best poems, "The Vision of Sir Launfal." The story takes too long in the telling, and, splendid as is the first prelude, both it and the second prelude are too long, and would have been better as separate poems. And this must be said without at all forgetting the fact that the first prelude contains the most glorious and perfect lines which Lowell ever wrote: I mean the passage which begins with the words:—

"Not only around our infancy  
Doth heaven with all its splendors lie;  
Daily, with souls that cringe and plot,  
We Sinai climb, and know it not.

Over our manhood bend the skies;  
Against our fallen and traitor lives  
The great winds utter prophecies;  
With our faint hearts the mountain strives."

This burst of poetic inspiration ends—for it is too long and happily too well-known to quote—with the line,—

"In the nice ear of Nature which song is the best?"

But the third defect—the lack of a clear, definite impression left by some of the poems—is more serious. We may take as an instance the often and deservedly quoted "Parable." Here it is impossible not to see that the poet has had something to say, and has hardly said it; that he has had a precious lesson to teach, and has not succeeded in telling us exactly what it is. The defect is the more curious because it does not arise from that tortuosity of form, and shipwreck of ordinary grammar, which, apart from their novelty and profundity, lend needless difficulty to some of Browning's poems. Mr. Lowell never shows any lack of lucidity of expression: it is the thought which is left but half revealed, like a statue covered with a veil of lawn.

Yet these blemishes in Mr. Lowell's poetry are but as spots on the sun. What poet is free from them? His verse, for many a long day, will live, and "will add sunlight to daylight by making the happy happier." That alone is an immense service; but in Mr. Lowell's case it was but one of many. And happily his merits brought him timely rewards. We shall not have to reckon him among the

“Mighty poets in their misery dead.”

England and America vied in doing him honor; and the honor came to him in his lifetime, and not too late. In 1855 he succeeded Longfellow as professor in the first of American universities; in 1877 he was appointed minister of the United States to Spain, in 1879 minister to England; in 1883 he was chosen lord-rector of St. Andrew's University in Scotland. Harvard made him her favorite teacher; Oxford, if he could have accepted it, would have elected him to the professorship once held by John Keble and by Matthew Arnold; Cambridge gave him an honorary degree. He has received in Westminster Abbey a testimony of eminence which is accorded only to earth's greatest and best.

He knew indeed, as we all know, the bitter sorrows of life. He had known what it was to lay in earth what his soul held most dear, and it was to him, when his wife died, that Longfellow addressed the exquisite lines, which told how—

“From that hushed and darkened room  
Two angels issued where but one went in.”

But whatever sorrows came to him, he bore them like a good and wise man. He served his country; he benefited his race; he welded one more golden link in the amity of kindred nations. But above all this, and more than all this, he set a high example to his fellow-men, of pure aims, of manly dignity, of faithful friendship, of honorable service. By his writings he “lent ardor to virtue, and confidence to truth.” This is the highest praise which it is given to our feebleness to win. We should be specially grateful to those richly-gifted men, who, while they have instructed us by their genius, have also set us the example of noble lives. If we cannot emulate their greatness, the humblest of us can follow their footsteps in the effort to love and to serve, to do good and to be good; and

“When our souls shall leave this dwelling,  
The glory of one fair and virtuous action  
Is above all the 'scutcheons on our tombs,  
Or silken banners over us.”

F. W. FARRAR.

## ONE REMEDY FOR MUNICIPAL MISGOVERNMENT.

IN these days, when so many sanguine philanthropists are advocating large extensions of governmental activity, and indeed are hoping for a beneficent re-organization of society, in which popular governments shall plan, order, make, store, and distribute every thing,—all without unduly abridging individual liberty,—it may be wholesome to discuss sometimes the practical shortcomings of democratic government within its present rather limited field. Before we take courage to believe that governmental management would be successful in many new fields and on a much larger scale, we ought to be satisfied with the results of that management within its actual province. It is more instructive to discuss shortcomings close at hand than those remote, evils right under the eyes of the people than those they can hardly discern. To discuss the evils which attend municipal government is, therefore, more edifying than to consider the evils of the national and state administrations.

In peaceful times the national government is remote from the daily life of the average citizen. Its wastefulness does not come home to him. Its corrupting patronage and jobbery are unperceived by him. Errors in the financial policy of the government become plain to him, only when he experiences their ill effects. The post-office is the only function of the national government which concerns him intimately, and that function is really a simple business, and has always been a government monopoly; so that the average citizen who gets his mail with tolerable regularity, and has no experience of any other method of sending letters and newspapers generally, thinks that the post-office business is as well done by government as it could be by any agency. Municipal functions, on the other hand, touch the average citizen very nearly. It makes a great difference to him whether the city keeps good schools or bad, and clean streets or dirty, supplies him with good water or bad, and taxes him fairly or unfairly. Moreover, all critics of the working of the institutions of the United States during the last fifty years—whether friendly or hostile, whether foreign or native—agree that municipal government has been the field in which the least effi-