

**THE FUNCTION OF  
THE POET AND  
OTHER ESSAYS**

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The function of the poet and other essays by James Russell Lowell

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FUNCTION OF THE POET  
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**BY JAMES RUSSELL LOWELL**

**COLLECTED AND EDITED BY**

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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

## PREFACE

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



## PREFACE

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

## PREFACE

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

## PREFACE

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-