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Lowell: Poet And Friendly Critic

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THROUGH the kindness and generosity of Miss Margaret Perry, more than three dozen autograph letters of James Russell Lowell have been added to the growing manuscript collection in the Colby Library. They cover a period of twenty-two years, from 1869 to within a few months of Lowell’s death. The letters are intimate friendly messages that reveal the genial heart of the man, and some are of sufficient general literary interest to deserve comment and quotation.

In 1869 Lowell, then lecturing at Harvard, was consulted by his twenty-one-year-old niece, Miss Lilla Cabot, about her own education. In answer to her questions about the relative merits of attending lectures and of studying at home, Lowell wrote, on September 14:

The great advantage of lectures, it seems to me, is to give one an intellectual nudge now and then... The advantage of study, I suspect, is not in the number of things we learn by it, but simply that it teaches us the one thing worth knowing—not what but how to think. Nobody can learn that from other people.... I am inclined to think that one may get a reasonably good education out of any first-rate book if read in the right way. Take Dante or Milton, for example. If you like or dislike a passage, insist with yourself on knowing the reason why.... What one wants is to enlarge his mind, to make it charitable, and capable of instruction and enjoyment from many sides. When one has learned that, he has begun to be wise,—whether he be learned or not is of less consequence....

What I mean is that our aim should be not to get many things into one’s head, but to get much, and one gets that when he has learned the relations of any one thing to all others, because in so doing he has got the right way of looking at anything.

Four years later, when Lowell was in Paris, he received the announcement of Lilla Cabot’s engagement to Thomas Sergeant Perry. These future friends of Edwin Arlington Robinson* were married a year later, and on June 12,

* The year after the death of Mr. Perry, Robinson edited, with an Introduction, Selections from the Letters of Thomas Sergeant Perry, New York, Macmillan, 1929.
20 Colby Library Quarterly

1874, Lowell wrote them from London that he was "dreadfully bothered about a present." Eventually he asked Lilla what she would like; she replied "Landor's works"! On February 28, 1875, the present was still unpurchased when Lowell wrote:

The edition of Landor in two volumes is grown scarce, and I may find it hard to come by. But Time is a stream that floats everything (outside ourselves) to our feet if we wait long enough. So I have no doubt we shall lay our hands on the book at last. The original editions have been long unobtainable.

The Landor volumes were eventually found and presented to the young Perry couple. They of course wanted an inscription from Lowell. On August 8, 1875, he wrote: "You can stick this into your Landor till I make a better one.

A villa fair with many a winding walk
Darkened with deathless laurel from the sun,
Ample for troops of friends in mutual talk,
Green caves to hush the reverie of one:
Fixed here in marble, Rome and Athens gleam,
Here is Arcadia, here Elysium too;
Anon an English voice disturbs our dream,
And Landor's self will Landor's spells undo.

J. R. L."

This poem is not found in The Complete Works of James Russell Lowell (University Edition, New York, 1897), and it might be surmised that the author did not wish to add it to his published canon. But he did not forget the poem. Ten years after writing it, he asked Mrs. Perry for a copy; and on November 23, 1886, he wrote again: "Please send me another copy of the Landor verses. Of course I instantly lost the other. This time I may wish to print 'em (with your leave) . . . ."

The letters in the Colby Library have not only brought to light the text and the occasion of the Landor poem, but have also identified the author and the subject of a poem that appeared in the Century Magazine (8: 14) in May, 1885. Its title read: "F. D. L. (Died February 19th, 1885)"; the
poem was signed simply "L." F. D. L. was Lowell's second wife, Frances Dunlap Lowell, who died in London three or four months before the end of his ambassadorial service there. "L" was Lilla. On May 15, 1885, Lowell wrote her from London:

I had read your sonnet in the Century and been deeply touched by it, wondering much who its author could be. I am glad it was you. . . . I shall be coming home very soon now and shall see you. I cannot go back to Elmwood [his home in Cambridge, Mass.] now that its sunshine is darkened. My future is a problem to me.

A year later Lowell was back in New England and there received a notorious visit from Julian (the son of Nathaniel) Hawthorne.* In view of the international repercussions of this episode, Thomas Sergeant Perry wrote Lowell that he needed a double bolt on his door. On November 24, 1886, Lowell replied: "My door does indeed want a double bolt if I would escape (Haw)thorns in my side."

A month later Lowell received a book of poetry entitled The Heart of the Weed. It bore no name, but when he came to "A Sonnet to Mr. Lowell on his birthday, February 22, 1886," he could identify the author as Mrs. Lilla Cabot Perry. On the last day of the year he wrote her: "I liked it [that little book] better than I do most books. There was a crudity here and there that might have easily ripened into better form, but the defect of art was more than made good by the plenty of nature."

Instead of taking offense at Lowell's mention of "a crudity here and there," Mrs. Perry welcomed his criticism. Her experience with her uncle's readiness to criticize calls to mind the testimony of William Dean Howells:

Lowell . . . was not only generous of money, but he was generous of himself. . . . He would go carefully over a poem with me, word by word, and criticize every turn of phrase, and after all be magnani-

* For a detailed report of this visit, see "Lowell's 'Dead Rat in the Wall,'" by Carl J. Weber: New England Quarterly (9: 468-472, 686-688), September and December, 1936.
mously tolerant of my sticking to phrasings that he disliked. . . . He objected to silver. Why not silver? . . . As he grew old he was less and less able to restrain himself from setting people right to their faces. . . . His patience in analyzing my work with me might have been the easy effort of his habit of teaching.*

Lowell retained to the end of his life his “patience in analyzing” the work of young writers as well as his readiness in voicing objections to “phrasings that he disliked.” During the years that followed the publication of her Heart of the Weed, Mrs. Perry continued to write verses, and by the end of 1889 she had accumulated a large number of metrical translations from the Greek Anthology. She submitted them to Lowell, with the result that, on February 11, 1890, he wrote her a long critical letter. It is worth quoting at length, because it shows clearly that, after playing critic to Howells twenty-five years before, he had lost none of his ability to “go carefully over a poem, word by word, and criticize every turn of phrase.” Lowell wrote:

Yes, dear Child, I like your translations and return them to you with a few criticisms. What you lack is what they call nowadays technique. I have put a X against the verses I find fault with.

“Hyacinth” should be “jacinth”—that’s what our elder poets (and they knew a thing or two) called the dark-coloured sapphire or amethyst—whichever it was. “th’ India”—never mark an elision. Tis too direct an allusion to the ears of your readers. [Mrs. Perry took Lowell’s advice. When she published her translation from Paul the Silentiary (Book V, Epigr. 270), it read:

From purple depths of the Indian jacinth gleams
A sparkling fire.

(From the Garden of Hellas, by Lilla Cabot Perry; Cambridge, Houghton, Mifflin & Co., 1904; p. 133.)]

“Though far beyond Meroë thou wanderest.” I can’t make this read. It might hobble thus: “Though far ’yond Meroë thou wanderest,” but “wanderest” is a stumpy ending for a verse at best, and moreover ought to be in the subjective here. [Mrs. Perry wisely profited by

Lowell's criticism. Her published translation (Paul, V, 301) reads (opus cit., p. 195): "Though far beyond Meroë thou should'st go."

"Pray the Gods for your luckless friend but now." Can never pass. Pray the gods rather for so luckless a verse! [Mrs. Perry accordingly revised the line (Paul, V, 254) to read: "And for your luckless friend beseech the gods" (op. cit., p. 131).]

"My lips delay to say to thee farewell!" Delay, say, to, to—never! It is too—too! [Like W. D. Howells, Mrs. Perry could sometimes stick to phrasings that Lowell disliked. She yielded the word "delay" but retained "to say to," when the poem (Paul, V, 241) was published (op. cit., p. 129): "The moment comes to say to thee 'farewell!'"]

There! I have been as savage as I could manage to be with you, and I wouldn't have been, were I not so fond of you... I wish only to show you on which foot (or shall I say on which feet?) you limp.

Throughout the year, Mrs. Perry worked over her compositions and by the end of 1890 she was ready to publish. She wrote to ask whether she should (or could) dedicate The Garden of Hellas to him; and, upon his consenting, she asked whether he would prefer a plain short prose dedication or a rhymed one which she submitted. On January 6, 1891, Lowell wrote (in his last letter to Mrs. Perry): "Yes, I like this better." Accordingly, when From the Garden of Hellas was published, by the United States Book Company, 1891, it carried the following dedication

To
JAMES RUSSELL LOWELL

Life's brightest memories around you cling,
Child, girl, and woman, I have loved you long,
My friend, my poet, if I too may sing,
To you is dedicate my wreath of song.

Yet it should be of fairer flowers than grow
Within my garden wall. This wreath I twine
In Beauty's fields, where deathless blossoms glow.
The hand that gathers them alone is mine.

Lowell died on August 12, 1891.