

THE ELEMENT OF CHARITY IN MARIA WHITE LOWELL'S  
WRITINGS

by Sister Jeanne-Françoise, O.P.

[ie. Cécile Jacques]

Thesis presented to the Faculty of Arts  
of the University of Ottawa in order to  
obtain the Master of Arts degree.



Degré conféré  
May 8, 1956

*E. J. J.*

Ottawa, Canada, 1955

UMI Number: EC55456

### INFORMATION TO USERS

The quality of this reproduction is dependent upon the quality of the copy submitted. Broken or indistinct print, colored or poor quality illustrations and photographs, print bleed-through, substandard margins, and improper alignment can adversely affect reproduction.

In the unlikely event that the author did not send a complete manuscript and there are missing pages, these will be noted. Also, if unauthorized copyright material had to be removed, a note will indicate the deletion.

**UMI<sup>®</sup>**

---

UMI Microform EC55456  
Copyright 2011 by ProQuest LLC  
All rights reserved. This microform edition is protected against  
unauthorized copying under Title 17, United States Code.

---

ProQuest LLC  
789 East Eisenhower Parkway  
P.O. Box 1346  
Ann Arbor, MI 48106-1346

## ACKNOWLEDGMENT

Very sincere thanks are presented to Dr. Emmett O'Grady, Head of the Department of English, and to Dr. George Buxton, Head of the Department of History, for their direction of this thesis.

I am deeply indebted to Reverend Father R.H. Shevenell, O.M.I., Director of the Institute of Psychology, University of Ottawa, for his kindly help and encouragement.

Thanks are also due to the Librarian of the Lewiston Public Library for her generous contribution of material, and to members of my own Community for their gracious assistance in this work.

## CURRICULUM STUDIORUM

Sister Jeanne-Françoise, O.P. (Cécile Jacques)

Born in Van Buren, Maine, on January 13, 1906.

Obtained a Bachelor of Arts degree from Rivier College, Nashua, N.H., June 1, 1947; through summer courses, one year of correspondence, and one year regular courses.

Was admitted to the School of Graduate Studies, University of Ottawa, in June 1949.

Has completed the course work required for the Master of Arts degree (English Literature section) in August 1952.

Has passed the comprehensive examination on her subject of specialization in August 1953.

The plan for this thesis was submitted, and accepted by the Committee in July 1953.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

Chapter	page
INTRODUCTION . . . . .	viii
I.- THE PLACING OF MARIA LOWELL IN HER MILIEU . . . . .	1
1. Time	1
2. Transcendentalism	2
3. Family Circle	4
4. Social Relations	6
5. Literary Friends and Acquaintances	11
6. Maria Lowell's Character, as traced in the Early Poems of James Russell Lowell	23
II.- MARIA LOWELL'S INFLUENCE . . . . .	33
1. General Aspect	34
2. On Lowell's Character	35
3. On Lowell's Career	40
4. On Lowell's Viewpoint Concerning Slavery and Temperance	42
5. Posthumous Influence	61
III.- CHARITY IN MARIA LOWELL'S WRITINGS . . . . .	66
1. A Sisterhood of Song	66
2. Poetry	68
3. Prose	94
4. Comparisons and Contrasts	102
BIBLIOGRAPHY . . . . .	124
 Appendix	
1. <u>ABSTRACT OF The Element of Charity in Maria         White Lowell's Writings</u> . . . . .	127

CHRONOLOGICAL SUMMARY OF THE LIFE OF MARIA WHITE LOWELL

(MRS. JAMES R. LOWELL)

- 1821 Anna Maria White was born on July 8, to Abijah and Anna Maria Howard White.
- Maria was sent to the Ursuline Convent on Mt. Benedict in Charlestown.
- 1834 On August 11, she escaped from the Convent when it was burned by a Know-Nothing mob.
- 1839 Maria attended Miss Margaret Fuller's "Conversations."
- On December first she met James Russell Lowell for the first time.
- 1840 On November 4, the betrothal of James and Maria was celebrated.
- 1842 On July first, Maria White presented a banner to the Watertown Washington Total Abstinence Society and addressed the audience in a few appropriate words.
- 1843 Miss White published her two love sonnets beginning with the words: "I Love Thee", in the March issue of the Pioneer.
- Publication of Jesus and the Dove in the October issue of the Child's Friend.
- In Absence (another sonnet) was included anonymously in Lowell's volume, Poems.
- 1844 On December 26, Maria White and James Russell Lowell were married.
- 1845 The Wreath, The Ring, The Pilgrimage to Kevlaar, and The Dying One (four translations from the German) were published by C.F. Briggs in the Broadway Journal, issues of January 18, February 1, March 1, and March 22. Song of the Flowers to the Sunbeam in the June issue.
- Publication of the Maiden's Harvest in the Liberty Bell.
- On November 26 she wrote The Slave Mother, published in the Liberty Bell of 1846.

- 1845 On December 31 her first child, Blanche, was born.
- Four of her poems were printed by R.W. Griswold in his anthology: Female Poets of America.
- 1847 In March, her daughter, Blanche, died.
- She addressed her poem The Alpine Sheep to a friend.
- Publication of A Twilight Vision in the Liberty Bell.
- On September 9, Mabel, the second child, and the only of four to survive, was born.
- In November, she dedicated to her husband Sea Mosses from Appledore, (a short inscription, in a little shell-book.)
- 1848 Composed The Morning-Glory, included in Lowell's Poems: Second Series.
- 1849 In August her third child, Rose, was born.
- 1850 On February 2, Rose died.
- On December 22, Walter, the only son, was born.
- 1851 On February 22, she addressed another shell-book inscription to her husband, as a birthday present.
- On July 12, the Lowells sailed for Europe on the "Sultana."
- From the bark "Sultana," Maria wrote an account of the voyage in a letter to her sister Lois, dated August 7.
- 1852 In April Walter died and was buried in Rome.
- The Lowells spent the summer in leisurely travels on the continent. Maria's impressions were crystallized in seven poems:
- Necklaces (Malta, August 23, 1851.)
- Cadiz (Written at sea, off Cadiz, 1851.)
- Rome (November 1851.)
- The Grave of Keats (Rome, March 20, 1852.)

Avignon (1852)

Rouen, Place de la Pucelle (1852)

Memories of Waters (an unfinished poem)

1852 October 30, The Lowells sailed from Liverpool for America, aboard the "Canada".

1853 An intimation of Maria's ill health appears in an undated letter written to her husband, then in New York.

---- Maria wrote two poems inspired by ill health:

The Sick-Room

An Opium Fantasy

---- October 27, Maria White Lowell died at Elmwood.

---- Rouen, Place de la Pucelle was published in Putnam's Magazine, issue of November, Vol. 2, p. 499.

1855 Fifty copies of Maria Lowell's poems were edited by her husband, James Russell Lowell, and privately printed for distribution among her friends.

1907 Ferris Greenslet reissued the Poems of 1855 in a limited edition (330 copies) designed by Bruce Rogers.

1936 Hope Jillson Vernon published The Poems of Maria Lowell (Mrs. James Russell Lowell) with some letters and a biographical sketch.

Undated poems: Song (1848 or 1849)

Africa, considered today as her best poem, was presumably written in 1848 or 1849.

## INTRODUCTION

Among the poets of the nineteenth century, Maria White Lowell is one whose work is still almost unknown to the public at large. Her poems, in general, deal with Nature and Slavery; her letters, with daily events. The purpose of this research is to determine in a specific way, to what extent the element of Charity is present in her writings.

The word Charity is used here, in the modified sense of love as applied to Nature and to Mankind. Nature is the word which mostly needs definition, since it may have various, even conflicting meanings, or shades of meaning, each passing into the other. In the present work, by Nature we understand the sum of external appearances which reach us, are made known to us, primarily through the senses.

Insofar as Mrs. Lowell's poetry is concerned, the word Mankind will be applied almost exclusively to that class of human beings who, during her lifetime, were in greater need of help and support, namely: the Slaves. Though the whole institution of slavery be castigated, the poems depict principally the mental distress of defrauded Negro mothers and children.

It is not our purpose, therefore, to bring forward any psychological view of the qualities and characteristics mentioned; nor is it our intention, in speaking of Nature,

to present it as an element of esthetics; or with the Pantheists, as God himself.

As for the Transcendentalists, they are by no means considered as adherents to a philosophical doctrine, but rather as a body of men and women interested in humanitarian reforms. The word "humanitarian" itself has, in here, no philosophical import. It must be taken strictly in the sense of altruistic or benevolent. The word "mystic" barely implies a mysterious or visionary tendency.

Thus, our standpoint is absolutely literary, and all terms merely have a literary application, to the exclusion of all other interpretations.

In 1936 Mrs. Hope Jillson Vernon prefixed a sketch of Mrs. Lowell's life to her edition of The Poems of Maria Lowell. This was the first, and it is still the only account that has ever been written of Mrs. Lowell's life and career. Before the publication of this book, in order to become acquainted with Mrs. Lowell, one had to glean through the numerous biographies of James Russell Lowell, especially Scudder's, Hale's, Underwood's and Greenslet's; and through Lowell's Letters edited by Charles Eliot Norton.

Mrs. Lowell's volume of poems was privately printed under the supervision of her husband in 1855, and reissued by Ferris Greenslet in the limited edition of 1907, but in 1936 it had become a great rarity. As for her letters,

only one had been printed complete hitherto. Since her poems have never been analyzed, the element of Charity in her work has, consequently, never been brought to light. Hence, the present research is both new and expedient.

In the first chapter Maria White Lowell will be observed in her milieu; that is, the time in which she lived, her family and friendly relations. This investigation is a necessary preliminary for the subsequent study of her character as it is presented in the early poems of James Russell Lowell.

The purpose of the second chapter is to throw light on the manner and the extent of her influence over her poet husband.

The subject matter of the third chapter is the very essence of this work, the aim of which is to discover the Charity traits in Maria Lowell's writings.

May this study do justice to the memory of a practically unknown poet who, in her contributions to American letters, has sung the glories of Nature, and exposed the horrors of Slavery.

## CHAPTER I

### THE PLACING OF MARIA LOWELL IN HER MILIEU

Poets of all ages have been classified as: poets of childhood, nature poets, love poets, poets of the people, etc. Maria White Lowell, as it appears in her slender book of poems, has combined all these poetic types. Her charity, or her love, as the word is applied here, embraced all living things. She merely considered nature as a gorgeous background for the picture of human life; the sufferings of humanity as so many wrongs which needed redress. She was both an American and a woman. Therefore, as an American woman she soon became a strong advocate of freedom for all human beings. In so doing, she was simply following the vanguard of the Humanitarian party which, during her lifetime, was growing stronger and more powerful every day.

#### 1. Time.

When Maria White was born, a feeling of national pride and self-sufficiency was already spreading over the American continent. Freed from the hardships of colonial days and the struggles of the Revolution, the people had begun to enjoy reading for pleasure and pastime.

While New York took the lead, during the early years of the century, in a literature characterized by freshness,

exuberance of feeling, and naive enthusiasm; the next decade marked the height of the New England renaissance with writings more truly American; and, in a large measure, animated by Transcendental ideals, provoked by the wrongs of slavery, and finally deepened to the passions that tore the very heart of the nation in the Civil War. It was the New England of Emerson, Hawthorne, Longfellow, Whittier, and Holmes. In 1821, these men of letters were already on their way to success. Holmes was preparing to enter college; Whittier, even though he was working on his father's farm, wrote poetry and contributed articles to local newspapers; Longfellow and Hawthorne were at Bowdoin; and Emerson, the future "Sage of Concord," was a Harvard graduate, around whom prominent men, and women of talent would soon rally. As for Thoreau, Whitman, and Lowell, they belong, like Maria White herself, to the younger generation of New England writers whose youth coincided with the full flush of humanitarian reforms.

## 2. Transcendentalism.

Though the supreme and lasting achievements of the Transcendental group were the essays and poems of Emerson, and the mystical romances of Hawthorne; the core of the movement was idealistic and humanitarian, and the most definite object proposed to the eager moral enthusiasm of its adepts was the blotting out of slavery.

Lowell, who had been in a favorable position to grasp the mood of those effervescent years, has drawn, in later life, a vivid picture of it in his essay on Thoreau:

"Ecce nunc tempus acceptabile!" was shouted on all hands with every variety of emphasis, and by voices of every conceivable pitch . . . Wild-eyed enthusiasts rushed from all sides . . . No brain but had its private maggot . . . Communities were established where everything was to be common but common sense . . . Conventions were held for every hitherto inconceivable purpose . . . All stood ready at a moment's notice to reform everything but themselves. The general motto was:--

And we'll talk with them, too,  
And take upon's the mystery of things.  
As if we were God's spies.<sup>1</sup>

Was Maria White a member of this animated group? Was she a Transcendentalist? Yes, she was, but in a mild way. Such, at least, seems to have been the common belief; since Lowell, in a letter to his friend Loring, felt bound to defend her against a charge which, undoubtedly, implied a reproach as of a mere visionary:

Yes, she does indeed go beyond them. They cannot understand a being like her. But if they mean she is unfit for the duties of life, they are entirely wrong. She has more common sense than any woman I have ever seen. Genius always has.<sup>2</sup>

It was a certain high, enthusiastic allegiance to Truth which dominated her nature, made her, in a degree,

---

<sup>1</sup> James Russell Lowell, Literary Essays, Vol. 1. Boston, Houghton Mifflin. 1892, pp. 362 - 363.

<sup>2</sup> Hope Jillson Vernon, The Poems of Maria Lowell, Providence, Brown University Press, 1936, p. 15.

accept this allegiance as a sign of the mission she was to fulfill. It was, moreover, the warm sympathy which the Transcendentalists manifested for the oppressed that won her to their cause; just as the Temperance crusade had found in her, as in her brother William, an ardent supporter.

### 3. Family Circle.

Anna Maria, born July 8, 1821, was the fifth child of Abijah White and Anna Maria Howard. Her father's lineage had its roots in the early days of the colony. In fact, the Whites had settled in Watertown, Massachusetts, as early as 1695; but the Georgian house known as "The Elms," which stands on Main Street along the highway from Mount Auburn to Watertown village, was built by Maria's father, whom Lowell characterized as "the most perfect specimen of a bluff, honest, hospitable country squire you can possibly imagine."<sup>3</sup> Of Mrs. White, whose ancestors were, likewise, among the early colonists, Lowell says that she was a very pleasant woman. From Edward E. Hale, we learn that she was "one of the most charming women who ever lived."<sup>4</sup> Like her husband, she exerted a considerable influence in her home-town.

---

<sup>3</sup> Charles Eliot Norton, Letters of James Russell Lowell, Vol. 1, New York, Harper, 1894, p. 51.

<sup>4</sup> Edward Everett Hale, James Russell Lowell and His Friends, Boston, Houghton Mifflin, 1898, p. 78.

A cluster of sisters of all ages, charming young ladies of character and promise, made the great Watertown house the most homelike of homes. There was Lucy Dana, seven years older than Maria, and Lois, three years younger; then came Mary, Agnes, and Caroline. Lois, being closest in age, seems to have been closest also in interests and sympathies. Maria's only brother, William, had been James Russell Lowell's classmate at Harvard.

It was he who first introduced James R. Lowell to Maria, on the first of December, 1839. In one of his letters, Lowell described her as "a very pleasant and pleasing young lady," who "knows more poetry than anyone" he is "acquainted with." In concluding, however, he hinted at the only fault he was ever to acknowledge in her, saying: "She is more familiar with modern poets than with the pure wellsprings of English poesy."<sup>5</sup>

Impressed by her charming manners, encouraged by the hearty welcome with which he had been received, Lowell soon became a regular member of the inner circle of companions who met at "The King's Arms" (as they often called the cheerful house).

---

<sup>5</sup> Norton, op. cit., p. 51.

#### 4. Social Relations.

Lowell's affiliation to that inner circle, raised the number of its members to ten. They were generally known as "The Band." But the boys were apt to call their association "The Club."

These young men had always been very friendly at Harvard during their college years; and, drawn toward each other by similar tastes and a common ideal, they formed ties of lifelong friendship. They -- William Wetmore Story, the artist, future poet and sculptor; John Gallison King, who eventually became a member of the Suffolk Bar; Nathan Hale, the lawyer-journalist; and William White, who even though he was a lawyer, never practiced law because he gave most of his time to the temperance and anti-slavery reforms -- were fortunate in having sisters nearly their own age. These women of unusual personal beauty and charm had intellectual tastes and interests similar to their brothers', and were also bound to each other by a strong unity of purpose. They were, Maria White, Mary Story, Augusta and Caroline King, and Sarah Hale.<sup>6</sup>

Their intimacy was such that they were all like brothers and sisters of one family. Charity was queen among them. Edward Everett Hale was right when, borrowing a text

---

<sup>6</sup> cf., Vernon, op. cit., p. 12.

from the Scriptures concerning the early Christians, he applied it to them saying, that "they lived with one heart and one soul" in complete harmony and perfect unity of mind. They held everything in commom. "If one had money, all had it; if one had a book, all had it." They had no definite meeting place; the home of each was the home of all; but the White homestead with its spacious gardens, was undoubtedly the most congenial meeting place, since parties were held there frequently. On such occasions the house donned its holiday apparel to greet the youthful guests. Each member contributed to the general festivities according to his personal endowments. William Story who was a capital mimic, was lavish in gay nonsense and bright repartee; William White was always ready to cap a good story with a better one; Nathan Hale, clever, witty, leisurely dropped his polished sentences in a sophisticated manner until he forgot his reserve and joined the revels. John G. King was the recognized leader of the entertainment. Maria was often asked to recite ballads, which she did with finished art and perfect grace. Lowell, who was then enthralled in Shakespeare's Sonnets, sought every opportunity to read "just this one beauty" to some obliging listener. Though he had practically no voice and no ear, he also sang for sheer merriment. Thus, a continuous flow of wit, sentiment, and fun was kept up till it was time to disperse.

The betrothal of the young poets, James and Maria, was an important event for the "Band." They were honored accordingly with the titles of King and Queen, and were hitherto the center of interest. Such were the diversions of the lighter hours of "Band" meetings.

In their more serious hours the members of the "Band" had animated discussions which lacked neither spice nor vigor, for, a similarity of purpose does not necessarily mean a complete identity of opinion. As each one maintained his own point of view, many a witty stroke was met by an equally clever thrust. The "wish-I-dared" attitude was shared good-naturedly. With the audacity of youth they discussed the various topics of public interest and proclaimed their decisions with that "easy certainty that (they) were quite able to settle the affairs of the world."<sup>7</sup> Their indignation was roused when the evils of slavery and intemperance were evoked. William White, especially, had become a zealous opponent of those social evils. He gave his time, his money, his mental powers; he gave, so to speak, all he had, thus entering heart and soul into the Anti-slavery and temperance movements. His attitude was, by no means displeasing to Maria, who was, likewise, inclined to do the same. Being easily moved by someone's sorrow or adversity, she could not remain indifferent to the success of those

---

7 Hale, op. cit., p. 76.

activities which were directed towards the welfare of the people. The July manifestations of 1842, in favor of temperance, was held on the very grounds of her Watertown home. On this occasion she appeared in a sort of New England representation of a May Queen. One of Lowell's letters in the Norton collection has given an animated account of the scene:

Last Friday, (July 1) Maria presented a banner to the Watertown Washington Total Abstinence Society in the name of the women of Watertown. There were more than a thousand persons present. The meeting was held on a beautifully wooded hill belonging to Mr. White . . . Maria looked -- I never saw any woman look so grand. She was dressed in snowy white, with a wreath of oak-leaves and water-lilies round her head, and a water-lily in her bosom. There were a great many tears in a great many eyes when she presented the banner . . . . She said a few words in clear, silvery tones. She told them that the banner came from their mothers and sisters, their daughters and wives, and they must hold it sacred. The motto on the banner was excellent. It was this verse from the Bible: "My son, if sinners entice thee, consent thou not." The next day . . . a great brown-faced, hard-handed giant of a farmer, overtook me and . . . said: "I s'pose it's superfluous to tell you of it, but I never saw such a face as Miss Maria White's in my life. There 's something supernatural about it. I dunnow what to call it but heavenly and angelic. When she smiles, it don't seem as though she smiled, but as if an actual lustre shone out of all her face."<sup>8</sup>

Maria said a few words (we underline), to the crowd on that particular occasion. What manner of deduction can be drawn from this simple assertion? Does it follow that she was one of those "Yankee bluestockings" of whom Parrington

---

<sup>8</sup> Norton, op. cit., pp. 67 - 68.

says, that they were "commonly looked upon as . . . the most fearful"?<sup>9</sup>

Maria was certainly very active in whatever celebrations were organized in favor of the desired reforms. She held steadfast to her opinions concerning these freedoms, because, in her mind, freedom meant liberty for all, and human brotherhood. Yet, the occasion mentioned above was the only one on which she is said to have spoken publicly; and it was certainly a very solemn and unique one.

In a letter to Mr. Briggs, written on December 12, 1844, she explains her attitude:

I always say just what I think, as you see, and I trust it will not seem harsh and unlovely to you in me as a woman. I do not wish to appear so ever, but I had rather than give up what I think is truly and undeniably one of woman's rights in common with man.<sup>10</sup>

Margaret Fuller had been the first to advocate "Woman's Rights" demanding social and political equality, a free access to all stations, professions, employments, which are open to man. She once said of herself, "A man's ambition with a woman's heart is an evil lot."<sup>11</sup>

---

<sup>9</sup> Vernon Louis Parrington, Margaret Fuller, in Main Currents in American Thought, N.Y., Harcourt, 1930, p. 427.

<sup>10</sup> Horace Elisha Scudder, James Russell Lowell; A Biography, Vol. 1, Boston, Houghton Mifflin, 1901, p. 131.

<sup>11</sup> Thomas Wentworth Higginson, Margaret Fuller Ossoli, in American Men of Letters, Boston, Houghton Mifflin, 1884, quoting Fuller MSS.

### 5. Literary Friends and Acquaintances.

Outside "The Band" Maria White had several literary friends and acquaintances. Among these, three at least -- Margaret Fuller, whom we have already named, Mrs. Hawthorne, and Mrs. Lydia Maria Child -- command our attention, either because of their influence over Maria's intellectual training; or, on account of their more intimate relations with her.

#### A. Margaret Fuller and Maria White A parallel -- "Conversations."

Both Margaret and Maria were highly gifted, well educated women. Their education likewise, had been started at home. And what homes! How different! Maria's, was as happy, peaceful, serene; as Margaret's, was austere, lonely, unbalanced. "I had," says Margaret, "nothing except the little flower-garden behind the house, and the elms before the door. I used to long and pine for beautiful places such as I read of."<sup>12</sup> Margaret's father, from early childhood took charge of her education and carried on by an intellectual forcing process. She began to study Latin at the age of six; at thirteen she was regarded as a prodigy; yet, with what consequences! That it was physically disastrous to her, we know from her own statements.

---

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., p. 21, quoting Fuller MSS., ii. 711 - 3.

Maria White, on the contrary, had been trained by a kind governess under the vigilant care of a loving mother. Concerning her education, Edward E. Hale says: "Her education, as I look back on what I know of it, seems to me as perfect as any education can be."<sup>13</sup> Among other experiences which, fortunately, did her no harm, she was one of the frightened girls who fled from the Ursuline Convent on Mount Benedict in Charlestown, before it was destroyed by a mob, in 1834.

Both girls had a knowledge of languages. At the age of fifteen, Margaret used her spare moments to read French and Italian books. She was also studying Greek at the time, and German was not neglected. At about the same age, Maria was reading and enjoying the works of Goethe and other German writers in their own tongue. Four of her poems are adaptations from the German.

Now for appearances. The contrast, here, is most striking. The general effect produced by Margaret Fuller was undoubtedly that of personal plainness. She was homely and her manners were not at all engaging. On this point, all her biographers are unanimous, the least flattering comments being those made by her own sex. Emerson described her as follows:

---

<sup>13</sup> Hale, op. cit., p. 78.

Her appearance has nothing prepossessing. Her extreme plainness, a trick of incessantly opening and shutting her eyelids, the nasal tone of her voice -- all repelled. At first sight, one's inclination was to shun instead of to meet her, but soon her wit had effaced the impression of her personal unattractiveness, and the eyes, which were so plain at first, swam with fun and drolleries and the very tides of joy and superabundant life.<sup>14</sup>

Horace Greeley, with whom she was associated on the "New York Tribune," really avoided her at first, but finally grew as enthusiastic about her as any of her friends.

Just as unanimous (though here it is to praise), are the remarks concerning Maria White's appearance. A person who knew her well, has certified that "Nothing ever gave, or ever could give the angelic grace of her whole bearing . . . Her lovely body seemed scarcely more than a veil for a lovelier spirit."<sup>15</sup>

More significant perhaps, was the impression produced on the famous Swedish novelist, Fredrika Bremer, who during a prolonged visit to America, was entertained several days at Elmwood. She was deeply impressed by the intimacy which prevailed among the members of the Lowell family. In her

---

<sup>14</sup> Mildred Rutherford, American Authors, A Handbook of American Literature, from Early Colonial to Living Writers, Atlanta, Georgia, The Franklin Printing Co., 1902, p. 258.

<sup>15</sup> Vernon, op. cit., p. 14, quoting C. H. Dall, in Peet Lore, issue of January, 1898, Vol. 10, p. 19.

letters, in connection with observations and comments on American household life, she gives a brief description of James R. Lowell and his wife:

He is full of life and youthful ardor, she as gentle, as delicate, and as fair as a lily, and one of the most lovable women I have seen in this country, because her beauty is full of soul and grace, as is everything which she does or says . . . She, like him, has a poetical tendency . . . There is a trace of beauty and taste in everything she touches, whether of mind or body; and above all she beautifies life. . . Maria reads her husband's poetry charmingly well.<sup>16</sup>

Our last testimony, but not the least, is that of Lowell himself. Of a portrait painted by William Page, he declared: "It is like as far as there can be any likeness made of a face so full of spiritual beauty, and in which so much of the charm was subterficial."<sup>17</sup>

Maria's delicate grace thus attracted everyone. All those who knew her were drawn to her by an irresistible charm. Margaret's manners, on the contrary, rebuked those who saw her for the first time, though they eventually became friends, and not the least enthusiastic either. Her precocity and her taste for hard study naturally created for her the reputation of a grave young pedant. To most people she seemed a living paradox: so proud and presumptuous, yet so meek; so worldly

---

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., pp. 33 - 34, quoting A. B. Benson, America of the Fifties, Letters of Fredrika Bremer, New York, 1924, pp. 51 - 52.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., p. 14.

and artificial, yet tender-hearted and craving for affection. In reality, both, Margaret as well as Maria, had a keen sensibility and possessed artistic talents which found their expression in poetic stanzas, though Margaret had little consideration for her own poetic ability.

A final point of resemblance, the most important at this stage, is the extraordinary power of influence that each of them possessed, and exercised to a considerable extent. Margaret's, may be likened to a domineering, convincing force; Maria's, to a more subtle, loving persuasion. As the pebble tossed on a placid lake forms circular waves which grow and multiply rapidly; so, Maria reached the public through the medium of one individual, namely: her husband. On the other hand, Margaret directly addressed groups of educated people, mostly women, among whom was Maria White Lowell herself, who was probably the youngest (she was eleven years younger than Margaret) of the "gorgeous pedants" as Miss Harriet Martineau<sup>18</sup> has christened those who attended Miss Fuller's Conversations.

At the first meeting, which was held in the Peabody house in West Street, on November 6, 1839, were present twenty-five women, some of the most agreeable and intelligent to be found in Boston and its neighborhood. Besides Miss

---

<sup>18</sup> Higginson, op. cit., p. 127.

Maria White, there was Mrs. George Bancroft, the historian's wife; Mrs. Lydia M. Child; Miss Sarah Clark, James Freeman Clark's artist sister; Mrs. Emerson; Mrs. Farrar, who was Margaret's elderly friend and confidant; Mrs. George Ripley, a Breck-Farm enthusiast; Mrs. Putnam, James Russell Lowell's elder sister, herself a writer; Mrs. Wendell Phillips, the wife of the brilliant orator; Mrs. Francis G. Shaw, a close friend of Maria White; Miss Elizabeth Peabody and her sisters Mary and Sophia, who were respectively engaged to Horace Mann and Nathaniel Hawthorne; and several others, no less famous. The first course of the Conversations was on Greek mythology and fine arts. Winter after winter new subjects were introduced. One series was devoted to ethics, and such influences on women as family, school, church, society, and literature, were discussed. Other series were concerned with such topics as the Will and Understanding, the celestial inspiration of genius, etc.

Margaret was certainly an extraordinary woman who creatively influenced those with whom she came in contact. That influence on the intellectual Boston society soon became considerable. The reason for it may be ascribed to her truth-speaking power. She met people fairly, sometimes provokingly. Her eyes, it is said, seemed to pierce through one's outward frame. Her outspokenness, however, was not always appreciated, nor encouraged. Many a time it gave

rise to disagreements or misunderstandings. There is a point concerning Margaret Fuller which has not yet been cleared up. Why did she, who was charitable, always ready to help the needy, enter so tardily and with such reserved sympathy into the Anti-Slavery Movement? She may not have felt ready for it. It was certainly not on account of those who attended her classes, for, if we recall the list of the names mentioned, we are faced with the fact that they were neither pedants nor dreamers; but the very women who led the philanthropic thought and action of Boston; and all were in favor of Abolition. Mrs. Lydia Maria Child, for example, was, in that group, one of the most enthusiastic advocate of the cause. She had been Margaret's classmate and she was Maria's literary friend. For this reason she is entitled to retain our attention somewhat longer.

B. Mrs. Lydia Maria Child.

Maria White Lowell greatly valued Mrs. Child's charming conversation and spirited thinking. She observed a peculiar purity of mind in this elderly friend who was soon to be known as a leader in the vast field of American literature for children, as well as a novelist and anti-slavery writer. The National Anti-Slavery Standard, official paper of the American Anti-Slavery Society, was, for several years, conducted successively by Mrs. Child and her husband, Davis

Lee Child, a young lawyer in full sympathy with her views and with her work. Her letters published in that paper once a week set an ideal type for writing in that line.

She had early joined the ranks of the ultra-abolitionists and was not afraid to express her convictions openly. When in 1833 she published her work, An Appeal in Behalf of that Class of Americans Called Africans, the book met with a storm of indignation from an irritated public. Harsh criticisms and censures were showered upon her from her literary associates, maledictions from her foes, and the threatened withdrawal of patronage by a large portion of those who had previously delighted in her books. Justice, charity, and self-control were almost laid aside. But all this upheaval in no wise affected her conduct, nor changed her attitude. She trusted to her motives and felt that the cause was a just one. She was true to the generous sympathies of her own heart. She said of this book:

Should it be the means of advancing even one single hour the inevitable progress of truth and justice I would not exchange the consciousness of a duty performed for all Rothschild's wealth or Sir Walter's fame.<sup>19</sup>

Mrs. Child, like Maria White Lowell herself, was interested in nature, whether human, animal, or vegetable. She loved birds, flowers and trees, as well as the changeful

---

<sup>19</sup> Rutherford, op. cit., p. 180.



Yes, a great heart is hers, one that dares  
 To the prison, the slave-hut, the alleys of sin,  
 And to bring into each, or to find there,  
 Of the never completely out-trampled divine;  
 . . . . .  
 What a wealth would it bring to the narrow  
 Could they be as a Child but for one little hour!

There is an airy lightness in the benevolent treatment of this author, that has the effect of wit in action. It reaches the depth of her compassionate heart to expose its treasures for all to see. Maria White could but gain in her relations with such charitable people.

Mrs. Child was not, however, Maria Lowell's sole literary friend. A backward glance over the list of the regular attendants at Miss Fuller's Conversations would reveal several others, and the necessity of choosing would become embarrassing if, a double reason of friendship and moral resemblance did not come to the rescue. Those two characteristics are found happily combined in the bright, hopeful and refined companion of our great romance-writer, Nathaniel Hawthorne.

C. Mrs. Hawthorne (Sophia Peabody).

Sophia Peabody and her sisters, Elizabeth and Mary, were quite intimate with the White family and shared the same ideas concerning emancipation, though not to such an extreme degree. Sophia had, in fact, many common traits

with Maria Lowell. She was impulsive, cheerful and lively, though frail. A difference is found in the fact that Maria's health declined after her marriage, while Sophia's improved. A semi-invalid up to that time, she had been confined to her room, which she had converted into a studio -- she was an artist of great natural gifts, a talent subsequently put to use in drawing pictures for Hawthorne's stories. She even published a series of juvenile books. Her spontaneous and affectionate nature lived upon friendship as flowers live upon sunlight. She was forever sending people little gifts, flowers, or notes. Her room had become a meeting-place where the Salem girls stopped on their rounds of visits to tell her what was happening in the world she wanted to know. Maria White and her elder sister were occasional visitors. In later life Maria and Sophia became regular correspondents. Mrs. Lowell and Mrs. Hawthorne were at the time very much alike, bright and exquisitely refined. Sophia's illness had served to heighten all the beauties of a nature inherently beautiful, and Hawthorne recognized her for what she was. She changed the loneliness of the great-hearted student into peace and perfect satisfaction. She did for Hawthorne what Maria did for Lowell. Both made their home a delightful place to live. Sophia read Latin, Greek, and Hebrew with her husband. She was a fit companion in every way. She possessed, moreover, the secret of drawing good out of evil

fortune. In time of disappointment and depression she encouraged her husband in his literary pursuit; and brought back joy and hope when they had vanished. So, it may rightly be said that Hawthorne's fame was mostly due to his brave little wife. He said of her:

My wife is my sole companion and I need no other; there is no vacancy in my mind any more than in my heart.

And again,

Methinks my little wife is twin sister to the spring, both are fresh and dewy, both full of hope and cheerfulness, both have bird voices, always singing out of their heart, both have power to renew and recreate the weary spirit. I have married the spring! I am husband to the month of May.<sup>22</sup>

She, in turn, did not fail to see in him the incarnation of the husband of her dreams. She wrote home:

I never knew such delicacy of nature. He is completely pure from earthliness. He is under the dominion of his intellect and his sentiments. I think it must be partly smiles of angels that make the air and light so pleasant here.<sup>23</sup>

They were, in short, perfectly happy in each other's company. He was everything to her, while she was his inspiration, his guide, and his continual blessing.

So was Maria White Lowell the continual blessing, guide, and inspiration of her poet husband, James Russell Lowell.

---

22 Rutherford, op. cit., p. 240.

23 Loc. cit.

6. Maria's Character, traced in the  
Early Poems of J.R.Lowell.

For a year or so, James Russell Lowell had been a frequent visitor at "The King's Arms." He had been, likewise, a regular contributor of verse to literary magazines and periodicals.

His first volume of poems A Year's Life, published in January 1841, was, as the name clearly intimates, a poetic record of the time which elapsed between his first meeting of Maria White, and their betrothal. He was encouraged to print this volume, as he wrote to Loring, because, said he, "Maria wishes me to do it, and that is enough."<sup>24</sup>

A. A Year's Life.

A Year's Life is, of course, full of Maria's presence. The love with which Lowell's heart overflowed, could not fail to leave its trace on every page, nay, in almost every line of the verses from Dedication to Epilogue. The motto was from Schiller: "Ich habe gelebt und geliebet." The tribute was clearly for Maria, to whom the book was to be openly dedicated. Upon her request, however, Lowell refrained from doing so. The rhymed dedication which he substituted, though informal and veiled, was still transparent enough for all

---

<sup>24</sup> Norton, op. cit., p. 60.

those who knew "the gentle Una" of his love, "the snowy maiden, pure and mild." He, her "Red Cross Knight" declared that he was ready to fight for the noble causes she had embraced, if only, says he, she would "accept this book from me."<sup>25</sup>

In the opening stanzas of the small volume, personified Hope leads the youthful poet to Memory; then, Hope and Memory, united through bonds of love, are perfectly happy, for,

The poet now his guide hath found,  
And follows in the steps of Love.<sup>26</sup>

Lowell's favorite themes are, indeed, his overflowing joy in this newly-found love, and in Maria's perfection, as he says, of both beauty and spirit.

The book contained within its 182 pages, thirty-five sonnets and thirty-three other poems of varying length. Even though many pieces have been set aside by the severer judgment of the mature poet, they are by no means unworthy of consideration.

Two of these early poems in particular, reflect Maria's physical and spiritual traits. They are Ianthe and Irene. The former is a tribute to the beauty of her face

---

<sup>25</sup> Cf. James Russell Lowell, Dedication to a Year's Life, in Poems, Philadelphia, Henry Altemus Co., (no date), p. 125.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., Opening Poem to A Year's Life, p. 126.

and character. Lowell always seemed fascinated by her "spirit eyes." He writes:

There is a light within her eyes  
Like gleams of wandering fire-flies;  
From light to shade it leaps and moves  
Whenever in her soul arise  
The holy shape of things she loves.<sup>27</sup>

He then discloses his inner feelings concerning what he repeatedly called her ethereal beauty, wholly pure and spiritlike. When he first saw her he had the impression that she was half of earth and more than half of Heaven. A very touching passage is that in which he pays homage to her maiden purity:

When first I saw her, not of earth,  
But heavenly both in grief and mirth,  
I thought her; she did seem  
As fair and full of mystery,  
As bodiless, as forms we see  
In the rememberings of a dream;  
. . . . .  
Early and late, at her soul's gate,  
Sits chastity in wanderwise,  
No thoughts unchallenged, small or great,  
Go thence into her eyes;  
Nor may a low, unworthy thought  
Beyond that virgin warder win,  
Nor one, whose password is not "ought,"  
May go without or enter in.<sup>28</sup>

Maria's intellectual gifts: vivacity, imagination, variety, depth, wit; all those qualities which imparted to her conversation the charm and grace observed by Miss Bremer,

---

27 Ibid., Ianthe, p. 164.

28 Ibid., pp. 168 - 169.

Lowell had praised years before. He once declared that her thoughts and expressions were ever changeful, ever new. Her language was not stereotyped like those pictures fixed forever on a thin metal plate, to preserve the memory of persons and things gone by, but always colorful and as fresh as dew. Words swiftly came and went,

As golden birds across the sun,  
As light gleams on tall meadow-grass  
Which the wind just breathes upon.<sup>29</sup>

Could he forget her charity,-- so kind, so broad, so compassionate -- for all the poor and destitute? No, indeed. He summarizes his thoughts on the subject, in two short verses, saying:

She has a sister's sympathy  
With all the wanderers of the sky.<sup>30</sup>

An undercurrent of holy awe, a vague apprehension of Maria's short life, runs throughout the poem; the same sentiment of her premature death which recurs in several letters to his friends, Lowell seems to have been haunted by the sad idea which sometimes evoked the most dismal pictures. At such times, the bright flickering fire-flies mentioned above were transformed into "Wild corpse-lights gliding waveringly."

---

29 Ibid., p. 167.

30 Loc. cit.

31 Ibid., p. 165.

The closing lines of the poem bring out, by comparison, the essential traits which imparted individuality and distinction to her countenance, and produced the ideal portrait which remained forever enshrined in the poet's heart. She was the

. . . . . frail flower,  
Which, thoughtless of the world, hath grown  
To beauty and meek gentleness,  
Here in a fair world of its own --  
By woman's instinct trained alone --  
A lily fair which God did bless,  
And which from Nature's heart did draw  
Love, wisdom, peace, and Heaven's perfect law.<sup>32</sup>

Ianthe was completely discarded from the later collections. It was not without good reasons either. The sentiments expressed were too highly emotional; the phrases and sentences too rambling and vague, lost in unreality.

In an undated letter, Maria had made a few objections. She had suggested revision and condensation, saying: "I cannot help thinking that Ianthe might be greatly perfected now."<sup>33</sup>

Irene fared better. It was kept and reprinted to the last. In this poem the central thought is more highly sustained throughout, and especially better identified with Miss White. It is, in short, a distinct and more exact piece of characterization. So Maria thought. At the time of its composition, Lowell probably had his feet better planted on

---

32 Ibid., p. 170.

33 Vernon, op. cit., Letters, p. 95.

the ground, he was less governed by sentimentality. In November 1840, he could write: "Irene has gathered good opinions from many." And, a little later, "People have called Irene a beautiful piece of poetry. And so it is. It owes all its beauty to her . . ."34 The poem said:

Here is a spirit deep and crystal-clear;  
Calmly beneath her earnest face it lies,  
Free without boldness, meek without a fear,35

How clear this language is, compared to the exalted fancies in Ianthe; how truer to reality, also, are these simple descriptive words: "her large and patient eyes." No matter how noble-minded and dignified she may be, Irene remains human, because she sets not

. . . . . her soul so steadily  
Above, that she forgets her ties to earth.36

What Lowell admires above all, according to his own assertion, is

That, being bound, like us, with earthly thrall,  
She walks so bright and Heaven-wise therein --  
Too wise, too meek, too womanly to sin.37

In the line above, Lowell is carried by his love beyond the bounds of truth and reason, the fact of being very womanly does not "ipso facto", exempt one from sinning.

---

34 Norton, op.cit., p. 61.

35 Lowell, Irene, in Poems, op. cit., p. 190.

36 Ibid., p. 193.

37 Loc. cit.,

Then, Lowell exalts her unflinching patience, in two distinct passages; while he sings in rythmical strains, her large, unbounded charity, her compassion for all creatures. So deeply was this virtue ingrained in her soul, that it seemed a natural endowment informing her every deed and word. Here is a short extract chosen among several which exalt her charity:

Most gentle is she; her large charity  
 (An all unwitting, childlike gift in her)  
 Not freer is to give than meek to bear;  
 And, though herself not unacquaint with care;  
 Hath in her heart wide room for all that be --38

Her charity was inspired by the teachings of Our Lord in the Gospel. Lowell has stressed this character trait in Irene more than anywhere else. We, in turn, must focus our attention on it, since it is the core of this work, the very reason which motivates the present investigation. In the long section which the young poet devoted to this topic, the following lines are perhaps the most striking:

In-seeing sympathy in hers, which chasteneth  
 No less loveth, scorning to be bound  
 With fear of blame, and yet which ever hasteneth  
 To pour the balm of kind looks on the wound,  
 If they be wounds which such sweet teaching makes,  
 Giving itself a pang for others' sakes;  
 No want of faith, that chills with side-long eye,  
 Hath she; no jealousy, no Levite pride  
 That passeth by upon the other side;  
 For in her soul there never dwelt a lie.39

---

38 Ibid., p. 191.

39 Ibid., p. 192.

After a few discursive lines he continues:

But her whole thought would almost seem to be  
 How to make glad one lonely human hearth;  
 For with a gentle courage she doth strive  
 In thought and word and feeling so to live  
 As to make earth next Heaven . . . . .<sup>40</sup>

It is quite obvious, from the above quotation, that Maria Lowell's charity was not only humanitarian; but also in perfect conformity with the proverb: "Charity begins at home." She was not all smiles with strangers, and all frown with her kin.

A similar strain, though more remote and dramatic, is found in the poem, The Sirens, which Lowell also kept in his later collection. With a Pressed Flower is another lyric which proclaims his love. He entreats his lady to count the flower-petals well, as one by one she plucks them, to make sure that the number is uneven, because the last petal may whisper the sweet word he had often uttered before.

Of the only three early sonnets preserved, one, formerly addressed To Irene on Her Birthday, pays homage to her judicious use of God's free gifts. It was later printed with the title, To M.W., on Her Birthday.

L'Envoi, which ends A Year's Life, is a timid venture. The author says: "Goe, Little Booke!" Yet he is confident that, should the unpretentious little volume be rejected by

---

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., p. 193.

strangers, there is one heart in which it is sure to find shelter:

And in that home of purity,  
It were no bitter thing to die.<sup>41</sup>

### B. Poems.

In Lowell's second volume, entitled Poems, which was published in 1843, there are few direct allusions to Maria White, yet the whole volume is suffused with her presence. Now, says he in the poem entitled: My Love,

She is a woman: one in whom  
The spring-time of her childish years  
Hath never lost its fresh perfume,  
Though knowing well that life hath room  
For many blights and many tears.<sup>42</sup>

If those three years had brought, in Maria's character, no change, that is, no abatement or loss of vitality; she had matured much quicker and more deeply than her suitor. "She has blossomed like a lily," says he.

A lily-bud; but O, how strange,  
How full of wonder was the change,  
When, ripe with all sweetness, thy full bloom burst!<sup>43</sup>

In the closing lines of Irene, Lowell had compared the fair lady of his dreams to a lone star seen by sailors tempest-tost, and he meant this comparison to be more than a

---

41 Ibid., L'Envoi, p. 209.

42 Lowell, My Love, in The Poetical Works, p. 6.

43 Ibid., Song, to M.W., p. 10.

pretty poetic simile. He resolutely declared: "I shall let my fate be governed by circumstance and influence."<sup>44</sup> And again in his second poem entitled, L'Envoi, addressed to "M. W." he specifies:

I do service for thy queenly gift  
Then best, when I obey my soul, and tread  
In reverence the path she beckons me.<sup>45</sup>

What was that path toward which she beckoned him, if not the newly-beaten path of humanitarian reforms? So we have come to a point where the examination of this influence is necessary to measure its effects on Lowell's character, career, and humanitarian action.

---

<sup>44</sup> Norton, op. cit., p. 48.

<sup>45</sup> Vernon, op. cit., quoting James Russell Lowell, in L'Envoi, p. 21. (The passage quoted here was omitted in later editions of Poems by James Russell Lowell).

## CHAPTER II

### MARIA LOWELL'S INFLUENCE ON JAMES R. LOWELL

The triple influence exercised by Maria White Lowell upon James R. Lowell's character, career, and social activity from the time of their first meeting, is attested by all their biographers, though not by all with the same favorable interpretation. The last of these biographers, Richard Croom Beatty, specifies that , "having grown so far beyond him she was able, in her altogether quiet way, to lead him as she would a flighty boy who, through lack of concentration would be utterly incapable of governing himself." As a Southerner, one of a group not yet conspicuously grateful to the North for its help in removing the curse of slavery from the land, Mr. Beatty was apt to deplore that interference, which contributed in a large measure to change the aspect of Southern life. He even insinuated: "Exactly where did she lead him -- into what absurdities of reform, into what irrationalities of action -- is another matter entirely."<sup>1</sup>

It certainly is another matter. But that the influence was real, there is no possible doubt. Maria's influence acting upon Lowell's wavering character finally determined his career as a writer, and thereby mobilized his literary productions for the service of the Anti-Slavery cause.

---

<sup>1</sup> Richard Croom Beatty, James Russell Lowell, Nashville, Tenn., Vanderbilt University Press, 1942, p. 40.

## 1. General Aspect.

Lowell's rapid transition from one opinion to another is indeed strange. From the writer of decidedly convivial class songs, to the man addressing four years later the annual meeting of the Abstinence Society, there is a wide margin. Let eleven years go by and we find him declining an invitation to address a temperance convention in New York, saying:

I should not have the least notion how to address the Whole World Convention even if I had anything to say to them. I can only declare that I sympathize heartily with any movement that shall promote temperance or shall elevate man or woman socially or morally.<sup>2</sup>

For a time after Maria Lowell's death, he allowed his name to remain on the list of vice-presidents of the Anti-Slavery Society, -- that was all. Nothing less than the Civil War could rouse him from his lethargy and give a new incentive to his heretofore declining ardor. It seems as though the reformer in him had been temporarily submerged. Only his impulsively volatile temperament and unusual sensitiveness could, in all probability, make these somewhat disconcerting changes, possible.

---

2 Thomas Wentworth Higginson, James Russell Lowell's Letter to C.F. Briggs, August 31, 1853, in Old Cambridge, New York, Macmillan, 1900, p. 176.

## 2. Influence on Lowell's Character.

The first two years which followed Lowell's college graduation were the most troubled and unhappy of his life. There were two chief causes for these perturbations: an unhappy love affair, and trouble in finding his true work. He had moments of profound discouragement. Yet, throughout those stormy and distressful years, his character was slowly ripening and his poetic tendency was taking shape. During his entire lifetime, however, he was swayed by so many environmental opinions, that he was never quite certain of himself. Rarely self-reliant, he was, therefore, always glad to find a staff to lean on during the various stages of his metamorphosis. He was lucky to find such a staff in Maria White; for, his almost uncontrolable outflow of youthful feeling left him in danger of falling under the control of morbid impulse. What he required and what he happily found was the serenity and steadfastness of a nature, exalted like his, but devoid of selfishness or exaggeration, and glowing with an ardent desire to foster this or that noble cause.

Lowell soon became conscious of the alterations wrought in his nature and was thankful for it. A sonnet, (written at this period) which was not included in the volume of his complete works, bears the title, On MY Twenty-Fourth Birthday. It is a sigh of relief for this happy change:

Now have I quite passed by that cloudy If  
 That darkened the wild hope of boyish days,  
 When first I launched my slender-sided skiff  
 Upon the wide sea's dim unsounded ways;  
 Now doth Love's sun my soul with splendor fill,  
 And Hope had struggled upward into Power  
 Soft wish is hardened into sinewy-Will,  
 And Longing into Certainty doth tower.<sup>3</sup>

In the above selection Lowell has clearly intimated that his maturer outlooks on life were due largely to the inspirations received during his frequent visits to Miss White. Not only had his love for her quickened his eye of faith, but he had caught a wider view and a firmer hold on the great realities of life through the contagion of her lofty idealism. Her gifts of mind and heart enabled her to enter with complete sympathy into his intellectual life and to direct his genius to its highest aims. In a short poem entitled A Prayer, he begs God to let her live long enough to accomplish that change which he sorely needed.

God! do not let my loved one die,  
 But rather wait until the time  
 That I am grown in purity  
 Enough to enter thy pure clime.<sup>4</sup>

In spite of this overwhelming influence of Maria, it would be false to say that she "handed him the torch."<sup>5</sup>

---

<sup>3</sup> Horace Elisha Scudder, James Russell Lowell; A Biography, Vol. 1, Boston, Houghton Mifflin, 1901, p. 125.

<sup>4</sup> James Russell Lowell, A Prayer, in The Poetical Works of James Russell Lowell, Boston, Houghton, 1890, p. 15.

<sup>5</sup> Scudder, op. cit., p. 121.

He had inherited by birth a rich happy nature, not always serene (he was easily given to anxiety and despair); but without the least alloy of insincerity. Indeed, the profound love which now possessed him was a symbol of peace and contentment.

A deep affection for others lay at the very roots of his nature. Though self-controlled, he was naturally humorous and enthusiastic, companionable and sympathetic. All those who knew him intimately, attested that he was the best of friends and the life of congenial assemblies. They also unanimously testified that he was much more sensitive to others' rights than to his own; most tenderly regardful of their sensitivities when he imagined them. "He did not always imagine them,"<sup>6</sup> says W.D. Howells. Consequently, he was sometimes charged with arrogance, or at least with being self-absorbed and somewhat monopolizing. His wife's influence scarcely tempered this trait, for she was generally inclined to see his nobler side. But her contact kindled to a greater brilliance those qualities which he already possessed and his love transformed the vague stirrings of his heart into more definite purposes. How sure was her faith in him, and how great were the enterprises to which she urged him,

---

<sup>6</sup> William Dean Howells, Literary Friends and Acquaintance, New York, Harper, 1900, p. 225.

may well be seen in the following excerpt from one of her sonnets, published in the March issue of The Pioneer:

I love thee for thyself -- thyself alone;  
 For that great soul whose breath most full and rare  
 Shall to humanity a message bear,  
 Flooding their dreary waste with organ tone .7

The queer duality which made up Lowell's temperament was never stated better than in his own clear-eyed characterization of himself. To Briggs he wrote in 1847: "I find myself very curiously compounded of two utterly distinct characters. One-half of me is clear mystic and enthusiast, and the other humorist."<sup>8</sup>

That streak of poetic mysticism he had inherited from his mother, Harriet Spence. From early youth till his death he had imaginary visions. Besides, he admits that he could never get to consider himself as anything more than a boy. In fact, he blossomed early, but his character matured late. Often hampered by that indolence of temperament, he was unable to revise his writings satisfactorily. He strove, nevertheless, to overcome this characteristic mood of his, and succeeded in accomplishing all the results of strenuous labor. Maria's mystical imagery somewhat fostered that bent in the same direction that Lowell had received from his

---

7 Hope Jillson Vernon, The Poems of Maria Lowell, Providence, Brown University, 1936, p. 63.

8 Charles Eliot Norton, Letters of James Russell Lowell, New York, Harper, 1894, p. 117.

mother. This was, however, a minor matter compared with the revival of trust in his own powers which she imparted to him.

The second cause for Lowell's perturbations had been the immediate choice of a profession. Unable to make up his mind he was confronted with several alternatives for which he felt no inclination whatsoever. The only occupation to which he was attracted was literature, and it seemed scarcely to promise any consistent career and livelihood.

Maria White herself was a poet of delicate power and lofty enthusiasm. She was apt, therefore, to understand his aspirations. In reading some letters written by Lowell during that undecided period, one discovers in almost every line, a sure evidence of his dependence upon her encouragement and sympathy. In such confident and calm atmosphere it was natural that he should choose his future rightly.

Perhaps then first he understood  
Himself how wondrously endued.<sup>9</sup>

By this time he could discern, at least, what was in him and was convinced that he could work steadily. When he wrote triumphantly:

I am a maker and a poet,  
I feel it and I know it,<sup>10</sup>

he wrote with that frank confidence in his future, which his future largely satisfied.

---

<sup>9</sup> Edward Everett Hale, James Russell Lowell and His Friends, Boston, Houghton Mifflin, 1898, p. 87.

<sup>10</sup> Loc. cit.

3. Influence on Lowell's Career.

In 1841, A Year's Life was published, because, as Lowell said, "Maria wishes me to do it, and that is enough."<sup>11</sup> The volume was hardly more than a series of portraits of her, and a record of the growth of the poet's devotion to her. With great concern for its success, Miss White modestly expressed a desire that the book should appear to all complete and finished, so that critics might not complain of the outward form. And, to make things perfectly clear, she added: "I do not wish any thing that can be called trivial."<sup>12</sup>

Two years later Lowell's second volume, entitled Poems, appeared. This book may be taken as an evidence of the author's development, for it marks a greater sureness of himself, a more definite determination of aim, a confidence in powers whose precise range he could not yet measure. His subjects are diverse enough. In Summer Storm there is a tribute to Maria for settling his tumultuous spirit, as the quiet moon after a storm shines peacefully on the calmed sea:

The pale and quiet moon  
 Makes her calm forehead bare,  
 And the last fragments of the storm,  
 Like shattered rigging from a fight at sea,  
 Silent and few, are drifting over me. 13

---

11 Norton, op. cit., p. 60.

12 Vernon, op. cit., Letters, p. 95.

13 Lowell, Summer Storm, in op. cit., p. 7.

Even though Maria possessed lofty ideals she was never lost in the clouds. Her practical temper prompted her to be concerned primarily with the necessities of daily life. She stimulated Lowell to renew his efforts towards self-support. Consequently, he threw his energy into the immediate establishment with a friend, of a literary journal, The Pioneer. Maria looked upon the scheme with mingled pride and anxiety. She only shared partly Lowell's trust in the enterprise. Where he anticipated a sure success, her prudent mind saw a possibility of failure. "I am a better judge of that merchandise than you," she would say.<sup>14</sup> The first number appeared in January 1843. It was a magazine of moderate size, handsomely printed and illustrated with steel engravings. But, being too purely literary and above the general public, it was short-lived. In the introduction Lowell set forth the aim of the journal, and his principle concerning a native or natural literature, that is, a humanitarian literature. There were articles by Byron, Shelley, Coleridge, De Quincey and Lowell himself; stories by Hawthorne; a great wealth of poetry, some of Elizabeth B. Browning's poems; others written by Poe, Jones Very, and Whittier. It was in this journal's third and last issue that Maria's two love sonnets beginning by "I love thee," appeared.

---

<sup>14</sup> Scudder, op. cit., p. 111.

So great was her concern for her future husband's literary success that she even called on his publisher to persuade him to publish the first of James' prose volumes, Conversations on Some of the Old Poets. In the preface of this book Lowell expressed his regrets that "the more refined eye of a woman was not available to chasten his pages." (We know, of course, whom he meant.)

Shartly before her marriage she also wrote to a friend in Philadelphia to inquire about a situation for a literary man. As a consequence, Lowell went to work immediately upon his arrival there, as an editorial writer on the staff of the Pennsylvania Freeman, an Anti-Slavery publication.

In the meantime, Lowell, true to Maria's guidance, had been plunging deeper into Humanitarianism. Out of sympathy for the oppressed, he focussed his attention in particular on the question of slavery in the South. He had imbibed from her the idea that he had a mission to accomplish and, like her, he meant to be true to its calling.

#### 4. Influence on Lowell's Viewpoint concerning Slavery and Temperance.

Henceforth, Lowell was ready to champion all reforms. It must be noted, however, that his humanitarian impulses did not all arise from his engagement to Miss Maria White. He had, apparently, left college as a pleasant young Tory. His



"no native (we underline) intellectual unfolding, but from certain dominant personalities who drew him aside from his natural orbit."<sup>18</sup>

Lowell's best known biographers, Underwood, Hale, Higginson, Scudder, Lawton, Greenslet, Beatty, Clark and Foerster specify that his grandfather Judge John Lowell had been an early abolitionist and the author of the clause in The Massachusetts Bill of Rights by which slavery was abolished in Massachusetts.

James R. Lowell was not so conservative by birth as it is supposed. In reality, the Brahmin and the Democrat in him were like two complementary color-streaks which successively became uppermost according to circumstances, but which were never completely blended. He held within his restless life those somewhat contradictory elements which go to make up a poet and a reformer; but he needed someone to speed him on. At last he had found in Maria White that influential partner, so he was entitled to write:

It is now too late in the day, to sneer at Abolitionists . . . for I suppose that there is not a man in New England who is not an Abolitionist at heart.<sup>19</sup>

---

<sup>18</sup> Vernon Louis Parrington, James Russell Lowell, in Main Currents in American Thought, New York, Harcourt, 1930, p. 462.

<sup>19</sup> Harry Hayden Clark, and Norman Foerster, James Russell Lowell, in the series of American Writers, Boston, American Book Company, 1947, p. XVI.

It is, nevertheless, true that Maria's influence was a determining factor in his intellectual life. She encouraged him to a practical issue, she blew the spark of his latent aspirations into active flame. Up to the time of their engagement, Lowell's abolitionism had remained a mere velocity; it was now quickened, deepened, and applied to a definite purpose.

To atone for the sharp arrow thrust at the Abolitionists in his Class Poem, he wrote on the cover:

Behold the baby arrows of that wit  
 Wherewith I dared assail the woundless Truth!  
 Love hath refilled the quiver and with it  
 The man shall win atonement for the youth.<sup>20</sup>

It was still a time when the name abolitionist signified a fanatic and fool; but the contest had begun, which in due time was to wash out the color-line with blood. Lowell did not fail to perceive in Maria's light, that this much abhorred cause was worth being a poet about. He felt that poetry was a force, a powerful force, which should be put to use. In A Glance Behind the Curtain, he has Cromwell exclaim: "Freedom hath yet a work for me to do." Then he concludes:

So speaks that inward voice which never yet  
 Spake falsely, when it urged the spirit on  
 To noble deeds for country and mankind.<sup>21</sup>

---

<sup>20</sup> Ferris Greenslet, James Russell Lowell, Boston, Houghton Mifflin, 1905, p. 44.

<sup>21</sup> Lowell, A Glance Behind the Curtain, in op. cit., p. 49.

Stirred by the high aspirations of the woman he loved, he was determined, with God's help and with hers, to carry that duty through. In the spirited opening editorial in The Pioneer he set forth his principle:

Everything that tends to encourage the sentiment of caste, to widen the boundary between races, and put further off the hope of one great brotherhood, should be steadily resisted by all good men.<sup>22</sup>

Suiting deed to word, Lowell entered wholeheartedly into the radical movements; he spoke at anti-slavery and temperance conventions; engaged in the service of the Liberty Bell (an anti-slavery annual); contributed much humanitarian writing to such journals as the Anti-Slavery Standard, the Pennsylvania Freeman, The Broadway Journal, and the Boston Courier. He was determined to promote the cause of freedom either by voice or by pen.

#### A. Expressed by Voice.

It was very likely under the impetus given by Maria that Lowell took a place as delegate to the Anti-Slavery Convention held in Boston, November 17, 1840. At the Cambridgeport W. T. A. Society in 1842, he even accepted to give a ten-minute talk. After praising therein the value of abstinence, he exalted the influence of women and their interest in reforms. He ended in a flourish, with the

---

22 Scudder, op. cit., p. 103.

following statement, "The proper place of woman -- at the head of the pilgrims back to purity and truth."<sup>23</sup> He was, it is clear, under the sway of his humanitarian bride. This was the first occasion, but not the last, on which he spoke in the name of reform.

B. Expressed by Pen.

After their marriage, partly for the same humanitarian cause and partly to eke out their meager income, both he and Mrs. Lowell sold verse to Graham's Magazine, (to which Lowell had been a contributor since 1841, under the signature of "H. Percival,") to The Anti-Slavery Standard, and to The Broadway Journal. The Standard, though pitiless in its denunciation of slavery, was neither narrow, bigoted, nor dull. In 1846 Lowell agreed to write once a week, in prose or in poetry, for this journal, the best of anti-slavery journals. He was then living in the midst of the "Society of Friends," breathing an atmosphere of anti-slavery reform; and above all, his wife by his side kept the steady flame of zeal, burning. The great debate on Texas was then raging, so he sent to the Boston Courier some stanzas headed, "Another Rallying Cry by a Yankee," in which he made a passionate appeal to his native state to protest openly

---

23 Norton, op. cit., p. 69.

against the iniquity of the Texas Resolutions, thus holding aloof from any compromise with slavery. The final stanza was an outburst of state independence. It said:

No, if the old Bay State were sunk, and, as in  
 One single ship within her the hope of Freedom  
 Run up again the pine tree flag, and on the  
 That flag should mark, where'ver it waved, the  
 island of the free.<sup>24</sup>

Just then, The Broadway Journal was launched by their friend, Mr. Briggs, who was eager for contributions from both James and Maria. So the winter was spent in this agreeable fashion; Mrs. Lowell translating poems by her husband's side. Her first poem to be published in this periodical, The Wreath, was gladly received. Mr. Briggs said he was very proud to introduce her new name to the public. Lowell sent an article which was really half hers, he said. But it seemed that Mr. Briggs was unwilling to print it because he judged it exactly too radical, and suggested that Lowell put all his abolitionism in rhyme.

Lowell followed his friend's advice. The years 1845 to 1850 were the most active and the happiest of his life. During all this period he wrote incessantly, sometimes for the anti-slavery party in behalf of the great struggle in which he had enlisted; sometimes from a purely poetic impulse;

---

<sup>24</sup> Scudder, op. cit., p. 168.

but always with a stern sense of his mission as a seer. His poetic feeling no less than his character had deepened and strengthened with the years, and 1848 has been called his "Annus Mirabilis." It marked the climax of his literary production. Along with the Biglow Papers which were published in that year, in almost dizzying sequence, came his second series of Poems, A Fable for Critics, and The Vision of Sir Launfal. These works portray all the facets of Lowell's personality. One may discern in them the poet, wit, critic, scholar, and reformer. In a word, one may find Lowell the man.

Prometheus was one of the more ambitious pieces to appear in the first series of Poems. The fire-bringer is pictured as the Spirit of Liberty, who prophesies an age in which Love shall triumph over Strength and win Man back to an enduring peace. Lowell declared that he had made it radical, because he believed that no poet in his age could write much that is good, unless he would give himself up to that distinctive tendency.

In Stanzas on Freedom, a song composed for an Anti-Slavery Picnic, the poet proclaimed that righteousness is always arrayed with the unfortunate, and with the two or three who dare defy the hatred and scoffing of cowardly multitudes. Success gave him new stimulus. Overriding the old "Spence negligence," he tried to put into practice the

Lowell family motto "Seize Your Chance." In his happy home he worked with all the help which love and true sympathy could give him.

His collection called Poems, second series, published at the beginning of the year, abounds in illustrations of the momentous idea: that of Freedom, expressed in terms of human brotherhood. For Lowell, America was, then, the hope of the world. The volume contains, for instance, his stanzas On the Capture of Fugitive Slaves Near Washington. He drew in from New England's native air, a hatred of tyrants. He says that we pile stones of derision upon our Fathers, when we temporize over the slavery question. "Man is more than constitutions." We owe allegiance to the State; but a deeper, truer allegiance to God. "God works for all." Freedom cannot be defined in terms of geographic latitude. Signs that the Negroes' bondage will cease to exist, are already evident; signs, such as those given to Pharaoh in olden times. If the people are blind they will have to cross a Red Sea "whose surges are of gore." . . . "'Tis ours to save our brethren," to win their hearts with "peace and love," lest the Great Avenger take the work from out our hands.<sup>25</sup>

Other verses sing the same chorus throughout the book. Lowell is a lover of freedom, rather than a hater of slavery;

---

<sup>25</sup> Cf., Lowell, On the Capture of Fugitive Slaves Near Washington, in op. cit., p. 83.

one eager to free the unfortunate slaves from bondage. Few sharp darts are thrust, however, at the oppressor. In Trial, he exalts freedom, saying:

Fair only thou, O Freedom, whose desire  
Can light in muddiest souls quick seeds of fire,  
And strain life's chords to the old heroic mood.<sup>26</sup>

He even summoned Miles Standish to rise from his tomb, and denounce New England's compromise with slaveholders. Their Puritan forefathers are ashamed, he declares, to see how their sons "Gild Freedom's Coffin" and drag in the traces the "Spirit of Seventy-Six," with "slavery's lash upon her back." He wants a pure, spotless freedom.

No, Freedom, no! blood should not stain  
The hem of thy white vesture.<sup>27</sup>

So, speaks Miles Standish. But these are only a few of Lowell's controversial poems. Other significant titles are, The Pioneer, Bibliolatry, Anti-Apis. The above quotations have already revealed to what extent, and how adequately he served the Anti-Slavery cause. The sonorous and lofty expressions of The Present Crisis are, nevertheless, the high water-mark of Abolition argument against slavery. In this poem Lowell contrived to fuse those tendencies of poet and preacher, which were sometimes at war in him. The verses are vigorous. A trumpet-call to resist and fight

---

26 Ibid., Trial, p. 48.

27 Ibid., An Interview With Miles Standish, p. 82.



Lowell's great facility permitted him to become a competent, if not a brilliant author in many fields. Yet the truer Lowell of those days of youthful enthusiasm is found in the Biglow Papers. He never expressed his personality more characteristically than in the rhyming of Jaalam's bard. There had never been either a more effective use of the resources of poetic literature in American politics. The first series was a protest not only against the slaveholders' invasion of Mexico, but against war itself. The war went on, but Lowell had well begun a political satire, unique in the English language for its blending of kindly wit, racy humor, and noble wrath. This series of papers, as Ferris Greenslet stated, did not, of course, prevent the Mexican War, nor did it ameliorate any of the post-war conditions, but certainly,-- he went on explaining,-- "It did help notably in unifying public opinion at the North, and in making things exceedingly uncomfortable for the men for whom discomfort was righteous."<sup>31</sup>

In announcing the publication of his paper to a friend, Lowell styled it "A sort of squib." This "squib" introduced by the rustic letter of Ezekiel Biglow to Mister Eddyter,(sic) was to be the first of the afterwards famous Biglow Papers. Inclosed was a poem in Yankee dialect,

---

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., p. 85.

written by his son Hosea, in which the efforts to raise volunteers in Boston, were held up to scorn. The jingle began,

Thrash away, you'll hev to rattle  
 On them kittle-drums o'yourn, --  
 'Taint a knowin' kind o'cattle  
 That is ketched with mouldy corn.<sup>32</sup>

Society was puzzled. Reverend gentlemen, who had not been shocked at the auction of God's images in ebony, considered the poet profane and blasphemous. But the epithets stuck like burrs. The lines were jingling everywhere. Some did not quite understand it; the more cultivated of the Abolitionists, however, were in ecstasies.

The First Series of the Biglow Papers deals mainly with pacifistic humanitarianism. In it the Mexican War is denounced in the name of universal peace. "Ez fer war, I call it murder." . . . "The war is a war fer the spreadin' o' slavery." The war was, indeed, causing many Americans to blush with shame at the use of country by a class for its own ignoble ends; therefore, the racy humor of those sketches in prose and verse, met a warm response at home and abroad.

There is a subterranean passage connecting the Biglow Papers with Sir Launfal. It is the holy zeal which attacks slavery in this fable of a beautiful charity. Lowell made a parable of this tale. In the broadest interpretation of democracy, he sang of the levelling of all ranks in a

---

32 Lowell, The Biglow Papers, in op. cit., p. 173.

common humanity. His wife's continued interest in his work, is attested in a letter where he speaks of The Vision of Sir Launfal as a story which is likely to become popular. Then he adds: "Maria thinks very highly of it." Of The Nooning, (a new book which he was planning to write, but never completed), he says: "Maria invented the title for me, and is it not a pleasant one?"<sup>33</sup> This was in 1850. The impulse of Lowell's wonderful year had lasted over into the following year, but one could notice in him a process of significant change. In the letter just mentioned, he declared his firm intention to turn, for a time at least, from politics to pure poetry. He had definitely made up his mind about it. His writings, thus far, had presented a regular and natural sequence; they were a true record of his life: First, he had served Love and the mere happiness of existence, then Freedom, -- both being the aspect which Beauty presented to him -- now he proposed to serve Beauty herself. He wrote significantly,

Next, if I live, I shall try to present life as I have seen it. In the Nooning, I shall have not even a glance towards Reform . . . Certainly I shall not grind for any Philistines, whether Reformers or Conservatives. I find that Reform cannot take up the whole of me, and I am quite sure that eyes were given us to look about us with sometimes, and not to be always looking forward. . . I am tired of controversy.<sup>34</sup>

---

33 Norton, op. cit., p. 171.

34 Ibid., p. 172 - 173.

As Ferris Greenslet remarked, it is easy to assign a great variety of possible causes for this decision. The indifference to abolition which Lowell suddenly manifested, has generally been attributed to the absence of his wife's influence following her death; but it must be noticed that the letter from which the above quotation was taken, was written in 1850, while Maria was still living. Greenslet has pointed out, moreover, that with the cares and joys of motherhood, together with a growing delicacy of health, Maria Lowell may have been less able to take an active interest in the abolition movement, and to spur her husband to renewed activity in the anti-slavery ranks. Her letters after the birth of her children seem to corroborate this viewpoint, since they show almost no interest in current reforms, all her energy being apparently absorbed in domestic affairs. In that case, the relaxation of her influence might have permitted the more conservative elements in Lowell's nature to become uppermost. Such a conclusion, however, disregards the possibility of Mrs. Lowell herself becoming more conservative. Indeed, some of her remarks and a good number of Lowell's, tend to confirm the opinion that both Lowell and Maria had, by force of circumstances, drifted away gradually from their too fiery partisans. Besides, they had never been in the extreme wing of the Abolitionists. Even before marriage, as early as 1844, at the New England Anti-Slavery Convention

held in Boston, when a vote for disunion was carried 250 to 24, James R. Lowell and Maria White were among those who voted "Nay."<sup>35</sup>

Only a few months before, Lowell, it is true, had taken the defense of the Liberty Party. Although he personally believed that the members were mistaken in many things, he maintained that they were "only in error as to the best means of bringing about the Right,"<sup>36</sup> and therefore, deserved sympathy. Maria herself, who, in her youth, had professed an ardent belief in abolition; and who promoted the cause with a conviction that bespoke a passionate intensity, was not blind to their defects. Speaking of Abolitionists, she said: "They do not modulate their words and voices. They are like people who live with the deaf, or hear water-falls, and whose voices become high and harsh."<sup>37</sup>

Those earnest men and women who cried aloud and spared not, were, nevertheless, an extraordinarily interesting and sympathetic group. The founder and leader of the Society was William Lloyd Garrison whose individual mouth-piece was The Liberator. Its motto was plain and clear: "No union with Slaveholders." He was fearless and ready to

---

35 Greenslet, op. cit., p. 64.

36 Norton, op. cit., p. 74.

37 Emma Elizabeth Brown, Life of James Russell Lowell, Boston, Houghton Mifflin, 1887, p. 58.

carry his humanitarian campaign by force to the extreme limits. Lowell's appeal, on the contrary, was not to force, or to the head, but to the heart. Of Garrison he once said: "Posterity will forget his hard words and remember his hard work."<sup>38</sup>

If Garrison was the flintiest character amongst the militant Abolitionists, Whittier, his eminent collaborator, was certainly the gentlest. Among many lovable men he was perhaps the most lovable. His desire to serve the cause of Liberty, touched his lips with fire. Thus inspired by generous anger, he wrote as he had never written before. His Abolitionist poems have each some blow at slavery, while Lowell thought rather of Freedom.

Beside the two leaders, Abolition attracted in different degrees such personalities as Wendell Phillips, Sidney Gay, Mrs. Maria W. Chapman, Mrs. Lydia Maria Child, Edmund Quincy, Theodore Parker, Thomas Wentworth Higginson, Henry Ward Beecher, Harriet Beecher Stowe, and Ellery Channing. Their activity and agitation gave the country no peace. They were good fighters, outspoken in opinion, unsparing in attack, never heartbeaten, as tough as hickory; they were left no peace either, being daily attacked by commercial newspapers. In reality, their motives were noble and disinterested.

---

<sup>38</sup> Catharine Lee Bates, American Literature, New York, Macmillan, 1898, p, 117.

Lowell, having been offered a prominent place among them, had accepted wholeheartedly. But now, the leaders of the cause to which he had given so amply of his energy, wanted to go further, were determined to pursue their course to its desperate end. It was too much for Lowell. He and Maria were in favor of sustaining the government in the prosecution of the war. They extolled union, just as much as they urged the emancipation of the slaves.

"I do not agree with the Abolitionists in their disunion and non-voting theories."<sup>39</sup> Thus, as early as 1849, Lowell dimly recognized the necessity of organic poise, the necessity of revolving on one's own axis. He openly admitted that his heart was out of tune with abolition writing. And, speaking of his engagement with the Anti-Slavery Standard, he declared that it was not the place for him, the tendency of his mind being too reflective. "It fags me to deal with particulars . . . I throw up our engagement altogether."<sup>40</sup>

The personal appeals of escaped slaves were also weighing heavily upon him and upon his purse, draining the reservoirs of his devotion to them. He was positively "beflead" with runaway slaves who wished to buy their wives. To Sidney Gay, on February 26, 1849 he confides:

---

39 Norton, op. cit., p. 125.

40 Ibid., p. 134.

My great happiness is that I married Maria; my great unhappiness, that I married the daughter of the late A. White, Esq. I cannot shake off the imputation of being rich. This is the ruin of me.<sup>41</sup>

But the heart of his differences remained the same. He had mentioned it the year before in his comment upon Garrison, in a letter to Sidney H. Gay, when he said:

You know that I never agreed to the Dissolution-of-the-Union movement, and simply because I think it a waste of strength. Why do we not separate ourselves from the African whom we wish to elevate? from the drunkard? from the ignorant?

Almost siding with the slaveholders, he continued, imitating Shakespeare in The Merchant of Venice:

Hath not a slaveholder hands, organs, dimensions? Even they are human. The longer I live the more I am convinced that the world must be healed by degrees.<sup>42</sup>

Again, just before leaving for Italy, he wrote:

The farther I can get from American Slavery the better I shall feel. Such enormities as the Slave Law weigh me down without rebound, make me unhappy, and too restless to work well in my own special vineyard.<sup>43</sup>

Lowell's life abroad was not altogether unhappy. Despite his heavy grief at the death of his only son, Walter, he was supported by the affection of so rare a woman as Mrs. Lowell. However, from this time onward, the shadows

---

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., p. 151.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., p. 158.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., p. 188.

of a deeper sorrow were darkening around him. He had begun to realize that the sense of mortal insecurity, which had always troubled and increased his love for Maria, was tragically well founded. Her health was growing more precarious every day. The staggering blow fell on the twenty-seventh of October, 1853.

#### 5. Posthumous Influence.

Lowell gradually recovered his hold on life. Maria had promised to be ever with him, if that were possible. A closer union between two thoroughly poetic natures could not possibly exist. In one of her sonnets composed, doubtless, during these solemn days which preceded the end, she emphasized that formal intention.

In the deep flushing of the Western sky,  
 The new moon stands as she would fain be gone,  
 And dropping eastward, greet Endymion:  
 If Death uplift me, even thus should I,  
 Companioned by the silver spirits high  
 And stationed on the sunset's crimson towers,  
 Bend longing over earth's broad stretch of bowers,  
 To where my love beneath their shades might lie;  
 For I should weary of the endless blue,  
 Should weary of my ever-growing light,  
 If that one soul, so beautiful and true,  
 Were hidden by earth's vapors from my sight,  
 Should wane and wane as changeful planets do,  
 And move on slowly, wrapt in mine own night. <sup>44</sup>

Several biographers have wondered at what they call the curious influence of her death, because, as they say,

---

<sup>44</sup> Vernon, op. cit., p. 62.

instead of making him a stronger reformer in the ways into which she had guided him, the effect seemed to be quite the reverse. But we have already pointed out, and the fact is obvious, that both Lowell and Maria's estrangement from the Abolitionist party, had started in the late forties. The breach had been widening gradually. It was natural, therefore, that a period of uncertainty should follow his bereavement. The very house was dead to him,

For it died that autumn morning  
 When she, its soul, was borne  
 To lie all dark on the hillside  
 That looks over woodland and corn.<sup>45</sup>

Now he sorely missed her constant tokens of affection. A letter written to Mr. Briggs shortly after Maria's death expresses very significantly all that she had meant to him. At the end, referring to an article he had written for publicity, he says that the news of its success only pained him for, (here are his very words), "It came too late to please the only human being whom I greatly cared to please and whose satisfaction was to me prosperity and fame."<sup>46</sup>

In the same letter, he definitely acknowledges her influence on him as really potent and beneficial. Though determined to preserve it as such, he feels, however, an

---

<sup>45</sup> Lowell, op. cit., The Dead House, p. 368.

<sup>46</sup> Norton, op. cit., p. 206.

urgent need for help: "I can only hope and pray that the sweet influences of thirteen years spent with one like her may be seen and felt in my daily life henceforth."<sup>47</sup>

Very soon, other duties sollicitated his attention; and it is worth of notice that until the publication of his essays entitled Fireside Travels in 1864, Lowell published no book. Drawing his conclusions, Parrington seems only too glad to exclaim: "No wonder Lowell later disowned such apostasies."<sup>48</sup>

Yet, both Lowell's and Mrs. Lowell's writings contain statements which intimate that, even in the heat of the anti-slavery campaign, they never lost sight of what Lowell termed, true conservation, one which lies in growth and progress, for, "Whatever has ceased growing has begun to die," he used to say. And again, "There are a great many things to be done in this country, but the first is the abolition of slavery."<sup>49</sup> His connection with the Standard had not altered his position in politics. It found him independent and left him so. Though he respected to the full his several associates, and identified himself with that small knot of earnest but unsparing men and women; his temperament,

---

<sup>47</sup> Loc. cit.

<sup>48</sup> Parrington, op. cit., p. 465.

<sup>49</sup> Scudder, op. cit., p. 208.

his ideals, his humor, no less than his fidelity to Maria's memory, forbade him to shut himself up within the bounds they set for themselves.

Nothing less than a war could arouse in him, for the time being, a more aggressive spirit. Hardly more than ten years had elapsed since the Mexican War, when a greater, a mortal struggle broke out to repress the wrong that the first had caused. He, whose first Biglow had been a plea for peace, now exerted a powerful influence in favor of sustaining the government in the prosecution of that war, and in urging the emancipation of the slaves.

In his second series the humor is more grim, the feeling more intense. It is a riper achievement. One feels the vital stirring of Lowell's mind as moved by the great war. If it was less popular than the first series, it left a deeper impression. His heart, full of the new sorrow at the loss of his favorite nephews, longs for peace. The Biglow Papers form a unique commentary on the Mexican War and the War of Secession. Moreover, the passion for freedom and brotherhood, the emphasis on feeling and imagination, the love of nature, all are expressed so memorably that the two series may well be considered as the representation of the true Lowell.

Maria White Lowell's triple influence was, therefore, still active. Her mission to mankind was being fulfilled

by her faithful and devoted husband. True to her memory he had, once more, taken up the pen in behalf of his country's unity, and for the welfare of suffering humanity.

Without delay, in days of deep sorrow, he had collected a score of Maria's poems into a slender sheaf, to be privately printed and distributed to friends. Thanks to that small edition, after a century, she is now coming into her own, and her expression of Love may now be traced through her living word.

## CHAPTER III

### CHARITY IN MARIA LOWELL'S LITERARY PRODUCTIONS

#### 1. A Sisterhood of Song.

Maria White Lowell's literary productions depict Love in its multiple forms: love of nature, of country, of humanity, of God. In a period when the question of woman's position in society was rapidly emerging from the abolition movement, she held an honorable place among the female voices that early added softness, and at times, strength, to the general American song. Most young educated persons in those days tried their hand at poetry-writing. Our daughters of song are, indeed, quite numerous. No one can enter upon the cursory review of our literature without becoming aware of the part which women have had in its development. Some literary men have voiced their disapprobation at what they termed feminine intrusion. Among these, Nathaniel Hawthorne was probably the most explicit. American literature, he declared, was in the hands of "a damned mob of scribbling women."<sup>1</sup> In an early sketch he had expressed his opinion concerning the unfitness of authorship

---

<sup>1</sup> F.L. Pattee, Century Readings in the American Short Story, New York, 1927, p. 381.

for women, on the ground that "there is a delicacy . . . that perceives, or fancies a sort of impropriety in the display of women's natal mind to the gaze of the world."<sup>2</sup> It is a fact, however, that the author of the first volume of poetry ever published in America was a woman. The more private and intricate speech of verse seems to have been the congenial medium for the American woman's expression. Of these women authors, several, like some of their brethren, have thin voices, no doubt; nevertheless, some genuine poetry was composed by others whose names are veritably deserving of attention, like (to name only a few) Lucy Larcom with her orchard notes; Rose Terry Cooke, so original and characteristic for condensed power and vivid coloring; Helen H. Jackson, whose pieces, mostly in a single key -- and that grave and earnest -- have won the just encomiums of select critics; and finally, our daughter of the isles, Celia Thaxter, whose sprayey stanzas give us the dip of the sea-bird's wing, and in which the sea sings and flashes around her native Isles of Shoals. She literally makes those sea-beaten rocks to blossom. Maria's verse is by no means inferior to the works of those poets, and to other talented New-Englanders.

---

<sup>2</sup> Vernon Louis Parrington, Nathaniel Hawthorne, in Main Currents in American Thought, New York, Harcourt, 1930, p. 448.

## 2. Poetry.

As a poet, Maria White Lowell belongs to that group of singers whose simple expression of tender feelings and sympathetic perceptions were often supported by genuine imaginative faculty. A simple and unlabored accent imparts distinction to her verse. Miss Fredrika Bremer once said that Mrs. Lowell, like her husband, had written some poems "remarkable for their depth and tender feelings, especially maternal . . ." She even added: "her mind has more philosophical depth than his."<sup>3</sup>

If Maria ever aimed at power it was through gentleness. According to her, freedom should be attempered to love by a reverence for all beauty wherever it may exist. Stirred, as we have seen, by the tempo of the age, she was inclined to become a lifelong messenger of love, not necessarily in public championship, but in the eloquent zeal of domestic life. Unlike Lowell, there was for her, no need of undergoing a change, it was the normal channel for her enthusiastic and generous mind. Speaking of his newly acquired attitude toward reform, Lowell positively marks her own steadfastness. In a passage personally addressed to her, and subsequently discarded from his later works, we

---

<sup>3</sup> Hope Jillson Vernon, The Poems of Maria Lowell, Providence, Brown University Press, 1936, p. 34.

read:     And thou meantime, unchanged, except it be  
           That thy large heart is larger, and thine eyes  
           Of palest blue, more tender with the love  
           Which taught me first how good it was to love.<sup>4</sup>

That message of love was carried to the world by means of her poems, whose literary value may be attributed not so much to range or quantity -- they are rather short and few in number -- as to quality and depth. Time is a good sifter of false values; only that which is genuine endures. If there is enough vital excellence in a writer's work to buoy up what is less vital in it, that work will be found afloat in after generations. Maria White Lowell's poetic achievement has stood the test of time. She has survived the change of fashion; and her work is cultivated. Even though part of it is derivative, there are enough true values to lift the whole up to the surface. Among these poems, her own generation, much given to sentimental tears, greatly preferred The Alpine Sheep and The Morning-Glory. But, now that general opinion is more in favor of perfection in form, now that it has rejected some of the antiquated theories of former ages, the favorites are An Opium Fantasy, The Sick-Room, and Africa. These three poems emerge as her best because they exhibit an unusual combination of richness and restraint, imagination and honesty, blended into unity.

---

<sup>4</sup> Lowell, L'Envoi, in James Russell Lowell; A Biography, by Horace Elisha Scudder, Vol. 1, Boston, Houghton Mifflin, 1901, p. 128.

All Lowell's biographers have acknowledged Mrs. Lowell's poetic talents. Conrad Aiken has included her in his historical anthology, American Poetry, as one of the sixty-five American poets worthy of public recognition, and destined to immortality. Miss Amy Lowell once exclaimed after reading aloud the Opium Fantasy: "That is poetry! . . . It is better than anything her husband ever wrote."<sup>5</sup> Lowell, himself, had written to his friend, Mr. Briggs, concerning Maria's poems: "She is quite cutting me out as a poet -- though she laughs when I tell her so."<sup>6</sup> Maria's own conception of a poet's work was, that, "Some things we write are painted in fresco, and become rock with every stroke of the brush, but others may be changed from the first design. All songs seem like fresco painting."<sup>7</sup> Her own songs proceeded, as Lowell once put it, from her "love of God, of Freedom, and of Man."<sup>8</sup> Just as a poem is meant first of all to exist as such, and then to widen the wondering eyes of the reader -- so, Nature was first of all created for God's glory, and then told to whisper to us of its Maker. Mrs. Lowell, accordingly, turned to Nature for inspiration.

---

<sup>5</sup> Foster Damon, Introduction to The Poems of Maria Lowell, by Hope Jillson Vernon, op. cit., p. VII.

<sup>6</sup> Charles E. Norton, Letters of James Russell Lowell, New York, Harper, 1894, p. 203.

<sup>7</sup> Vernon, Letters in op. cit., p. 95.

<sup>8</sup> Lowell, L'Envoi, in Scudder, op. cit., p. 128.

## A. Nature Poetry.

The Wreath (a translation from the German of Uhler) was published in the Broadway Journal of January 1845. It opens on the dewy freshness of a sunny meadow where all is young, and bright, and fair. It is a pen-picture of a lovely child gathering flowers, and of a beautiful lady carrying the symbolic Wreath of Life which successively buds, blooms, produces golden fruits, then fades away. In the very first lines three of Maria Lowell's most cherished topics are named: nature, childhood, motherhood. Nature, wrapped in "sunny meadows and forest bowers"; childhood, artless and graceful; motherhood, tenderly devoted, never tired, never bored, but always ready to help.

Mrs. Lowell's refined taste enabled her to admire and enjoy the beauties of the outside world; and her sympathetic nature responded keenly to the joys and sorrows of others.

In one other translation, The Ring, the sprightly meadow-flowers, the birds of the free air, and the dancing fish, all contend to draw aside the little trusty ring of gold which rolls, bounces and swings, and finally sinks beyond the reach of eyes. So, the young knight draws the conclusion that such is the fickleness of his beloved lady.

In a third poem of this series, entitled The Dying One, Maria uses nature metaphorically, for, as before

specified, its infinite aspects and moods were a source of enjoyment and inspiration to her.

These poetic translations obliged Mrs. Lowell to follow somehow the original compositions; yet, her choice is highly significant. Her own works, in fact, reflect the same constant admiration for God's indefinitely varied gifts to mankind, in Nature's delicate garb. Her feelings for Nature's beauty and moods are authentic, enthusiastic, profound, pervading all her poems, closing about them like a well-fitted garment or an indispensable breathing atmosphere.

In this sympathetic intercourse between Poet and Nature, some relationships are more frequently stressed than others, wherefore they deserve a particular attention. Among these are Nature's lights, hues, shades, and sounds. The sun, by right of importance, occupies a prominent position. Is it not the source of light and fire, a "glowing cup,"<sup>9</sup> from which birds and flowers may quench their burning desires? Sometimes Mrs. Lowell portrays it as the faint glow of dawn, a sunbeam, a "slender ray of finest gold"<sup>10</sup> leaping earthward to feed the hungry flowers; or

---

9 Vernon, Song, in op. cit., p. 44.

10 Ibid., Song of the Flowers to the Sunbeam, p. 66.

else, it is the "flushing of the western sky, the sunset's crimson towers,"<sup>11</sup> or again, "the burnished light that lingers by the Isle of Capri spreading over it a "golden fleece."<sup>12</sup> Then comes the twilight, sometimes glorious, sometimes stealthy and gray, with mournful visions in its wake, such as that of a sick-room or a slave-hut.

But her flowers, how bright and gay she paints them, always fresh and pearly with morning dew. When they sing to the sunbeam, each strives to win a tiny share of the seven-fold colors so marvelously blended. Between the lowly violet that steals but one hue, and the great lily which loves all colors so, that she patiently weaves them into a ray of white light, there is a gentle competition of intermediate values. The rose, for instance, spreads her heart-shaped petals to reflect the red morning clouds, and thousands of small yellow heads "fling a sunny sheen" over "the grass so green." They open their little lids to say, "All thine is ours."<sup>13</sup> But when the sun glides down and disappears behind the gray horizon, they silently fall asleep.

---

11 Ibid., Sonnet, p. 62.

12 Ibid., Memories of Waters, p. 64.

13 Ibid., Song of the Flowers to the Sunbeam, p. 67.

A superficial glance at the above quotations might reveal nothing more than the usual sights which the eye beholds every day in nature. These excerpts might seem purely objective, but upon closer examination we find that it is not so. No eye can probe into the secrets of nature if it has never tried to penetrate, likewise, into the recesses of the human heart, and realize the full gravity of man's life and destiny. Nature can reflect her deeper tones only when observed from these lofty heights.

Though Maria Lowell's personality is never obtrusive, one may find in her slender volume of poems several intimations of her character, and discreet touches of personal feeling. Truly does she enter into the life and movement of nature by a kind of imaginative sympathy, and she brings it home to us artistically by a single inspired line or strophe, as in her short lyric entitled Song. Here, bird and dew, clouds and winds, are addressed by turns, almost enviously, "for they are free." The bird soars in the azure sky and darts toward the sun, the dew drops softly, and, just as softly vanishes; the clouds, like small white sheep, can flock across the night-sky with moon and stars for shepherds, and the singing winds may wander far,

Yet always seem at home,  
And freely play 'twixt star and star,  
Along the bending dome.<sup>14</sup>

---

14 Ibid., Song, p. 45.



The above quotation recalls the idea expressed by William Cullen Bryant in the last stanza of his poem, The Death of the Flowers, though the setting, here, is early morning and springtime, while Bryant's is autumn when the leaves lie dead. He wrote:

. . . not unmeet it was that one . . .  
 So gentle and so beautiful, should perish  
 with the flowers.<sup>16</sup>

The last verse of Mrs. Lowell's poem seems strangely reminiscent of Walt Whitman's O Captain! My Captain! In fact, as we say with Maria, "withered, and cold, and dead," we think of Whitman's well known expression, "Fallen cold and dead."<sup>17</sup> Yet, Whitman's poem was written seventeen years after Mrs. Lowell had written hers.

A short lyric, Necklaces, belongs to the series of verses inspired by the Lowell's travels abroad. It is Maria's expression of delight in a little thread of jasmine blossoms bought in the streets of Malta. She could not forbear to introduce at least one note of tender compassion into it. Each delicate petal, she perceives, is

. . . . . tipped with red,  
 As if in breaking they had bled. <sup>18</sup>

---

<sup>16</sup> William Cullen Bryant, The Death of the Flowers, in American Poetry and Prose, Norman Foerster, Ed., Boston, and New York, Houghton Mifflin, 1934, p. 350.

<sup>17</sup> Walt Whitman, O Captain! My Captain!, Ibid., p. 956.

<sup>18</sup> Vernon, Necklaces, op.cit., p. 55.

It was the finest and sweetest necklace she ever wore, "The very best beneath the sun!"<sup>19</sup> she says.

Maria Lowell's poems are always marked by that charming fancy. All are tender, soft and restrained. She has a way of illustrating the sad and sweet emotions of the human heart by striking similes and metaphors drawn from the most obvious appearances of the outward world. Take, for instance, her description of Cadiz as it gleamed suddenly on the horizon's rim when the Sultana neared the Spanish coast. The picture she uses is that of a bride crowned with orange blossoms, a "bride so fair and dim," by whose white, foamy side, rises a cloudy mountain, and at whose feet flows the shining Guadalquiver rushing towards the sea to blend with the ocean waves, "Fresh sighs for youth and beauty gone forever."<sup>20</sup> The verse is like an invitation to pause and think; an invitation to scan the dark recesses of river and ocean for buried secrets.

Another poem, this one written shortly after the travelers had reached Rome, is, in its conciseness, like a flashing vision, a mere glimpse of the Eternal City as it lay before them in all its glory, wrapped in the deepening shades of night.

---

19 Loc. cit.,

20 Ibid., Cadiz. p. 56.

The first monument that caught her sight as soon as the city gates were passed, was the mighty dome, dimly lighted by the moon's first beams. She saw the fountains tremble in light and shade, and the "pillars of the stately colonnade seemed to be marching by."<sup>21</sup>

At the grave of Keats, she greatly mourned the total absence of all that had been his joy here below. For her favorite poet, she would have trees to talk to him who knew their language well; and flowers to grow and spread over his grave, especially the passion-flowers whose buds, like bells, might "toll away the summer air."<sup>22</sup> So, to "Mother Earth" she complains that only harsh grass and weeds be strewn on the grave of one who loved her well.

Avignon next inspired her, not so much by its prison and castle of the Popes, for, as she expressed it, "of castle and of prison my soul had had its fill"<sup>23</sup>; but by a row of oleander hedges that stood near her window. So she kept turning back from the historic and spectacular sights to their tall refreshing shade, comparing them to "blossomed baskets, lightly poised upon the summer air." Like sentinels they had been the first, both in time and place, to greet

---

21 Ibid., Rome, p. 57.

22 Loc. cit., The Grave of Keats.

23 Ibid., Avignon, p. 59.

the travelers on a cool moonlit night. To Maria they had appeared most lovely then, but lovelier and brighter still, was their "living bloom" under the rays of midday sun, "beneath a sky of blue." Within their shadow the inn-yard lay in a pleasant, quiet atmosphere. Even the peasant-women's chatter seemed "bird-like gossip . . . Enclosed within that sunset wreath of oleanders tall."<sup>24</sup>

In Rouen, Place de la Pucelle, nature, atmosphere, and heraldry are closely connected. Joan of Arc represents

The whitest lily on the shield of France,  
With heart of virgin gold.<sup>25</sup>

In accordance with the legend, Mrs. Lowell beholds the Maiden's soul, as a white dove ascending gracefully through the heated air, to the opening zenith where, having found her goal she rested peacefully.

This poem was the last to appear in Putnam's Magazine, November issue, shortly after the author's death. The Daily Evening Transcript spoke of it as a poem of singular beauty. It said: "We copy it as a gem worthy of the best minds in the poetic world on either side of the Atlantic."<sup>26</sup>

---

24 Ibid., Avignon, p. 58.

25 Ibid., Rouen, Place de la Pucelle, p. 59.

26 Ibid., p. 38.

The New York Times for November 3, 1853, copied the notice from the Transcript, as a tribute to Mrs. Lowell. "How fitting for the last!"<sup>27</sup> exclaimed Lowell.

An unfinished poem, found among her papers and entitled Memories of Waters, was to take its place eventually after those mentioned above. In the fifty-two lines existing, we have a record of those memorable waters which stamped their image in her memory. The first two stanzas are dedicated to the blue Mediterranean, "bluest" of all waters. The whole theme rests on that one detail: color. The pale and cloudy dome of the sky above does not in the least affect its blueness. Out of the splendid vision spread before her -- the sight of earth, sea, and sky; of the clouds, the gleams, the shadows -- she pays homage to hues and shades. She always felt a fresh, child-like enjoyment in nature's colorful aspects. Her heart was in close harmony with the exhilarating atmosphere about her. Since the nature-lover is the true nature-sympathizer, there was complete reciprocity between what nature gave her, and what she, to nature. All the colors of the rainbow are here exalted in turn, or enhanced by contrast, as, when the sunset touches with its golden rays the Isle of Capri; the Mediterranean swells along in bluest pride from her deep

---

27 Norton, op. cit., p. 206.

"sapphire cradle"; as when Lake Como, the "purple one" with its Tyrian curtain, is fringed with green vineyards against a background of snowy peaks. In the last verse of the fourth stanza, the poet merges lake and mountain into a unique picture, saying: "Thy purple is worthy those kings so tall."<sup>28</sup>

From Italy, we follow the travelers to the hills of Scotland where strange waterfalls sparkle under the light of the sun; then, with a slow and hollow din, plunge into dark still pools, the chosen abode of "Giant Despair."<sup>29</sup> This contrast between light and darkness is very striking, indeed.

A second stop, and we are on the Trenton, where a whole galaxy of bright colors, orange and red, green and purple, with flashes of gold and amber undertones, all mingle to form a mottled bed worthy of an emperor's. The river is likened to a

Gay reveller, tossing away . . . wine,  
 . . . golden sherry, whose hue divine  
 Was never sphered in the clustering vine.<sup>30</sup>

Autumn feeds this wine, shaking over its surface a wealth of gay colored foliage. It is a type of glad youth.

---

28 Vernon, Memories of Waters, op. cit., p. 64.

29 Ibid., p. 65.

30 Loc. cit.

May it be forever "hung with garlands of faces all rosy and young."<sup>31</sup> Such is Maria Lowell's wish. Is it not worthy of notice that, in all the poems mentioned above, she presents Nature in its spring or summer garb, a symbol of life, youth and mirth? She names autumn only twice in her poems, and even then, it is arrayed in its holiday apparel of gay shimmering hues.

Her striking sympathy for all young life was thus enhanced by the frequent use of words expressing the idea of early light, of spring, of birth, of life and renovation. How picturesquely she presents those fresh morning scenes, with bright sunbeam and shiny dew, and singing birds and blooming flowers!

In The Sick-Room, spring is

A spirit . . . treading the earth  
As wind treads the vibrating string;<sup>32</sup>

It is a spirit in Angel guise, one she knows and loves, for she writes:

I know thy feet so beautiful,  
Thy punctual feet, O Spring! <sup>33</sup>

Almost equally important with nature's lights, are her sounds. Here, the bobolink; there, the March winds sing

31 Loc. cit.

32 Ibid., The Sick-Room, p. 60.

33 Loc. cit.

in the still air; "Siren voices, drip with the oar,"<sup>34</sup> on the blue Mediterranean; even the French women's gossip seemed to her, (we have noticed it before) like the spring-chats of careless birds in blossoming apple-trees. The hills, the trees, and the flowers; the winds, the clouds, and the dew, all were dear companions to her.

An early poem, The Maiden's Harvest, (printed in the Liberty Bell of 1845) combines both, lights and sounds. First, we behold a Maiden's face, shining "as morning bright," while, harp in hand she passes, singing a song of fertility and cheer. And, as she sings,

She casteth seed upon the ground  
From out her pure white hand,  
And little winds steal up around  
To bear it through the land.<sup>35</sup>

So charmingly does she sing, that the sound of her voice lingers in the air over the dark and barren field long after she has departed. So the next spring remembered her. The sun and air of May, the dropping dew, the winds and rains, all in one accord, moved above "In softly-changing tunes." When autumn came, the golden heads of grain waved and tossed like a bright sea of gold, bending low, heavy with their fruitful burden.

---

34 Ibid., Memories of Waters, p. 64.

35 Ibid., The Maiden's Harvest, p. 43.

Again the maiden passed, Her face, this time, was  
as fair as sunset light. She sang,

In marning-time I sowed this plain,  
Blest may the evening be,  
Which gives back every little grain  
An hundred-fold to me!<sup>36</sup>

Maria Lowell dwells tenderly on those plain sights and sounds of nature; not on nature as a great whole, much less in abstraction, but in its most concrete forms and objects. She writes of the singing bird whose heart is gushing over with melody; she writes of the flower, bathed in dew, fanned by the breeze and kindled by the sunshine, till it bursts its inclosing petals and lavishes its fragrance upon the air. Her philosophy was to gather up all the sunbeams lying in her path and to find sweetness and comfort in the every-day blessings. Her purpose was to try to do some good in the world.

#### B. Patriotic and Humanitarian Poetry.

That cherished purpose, she achieved with the help of her pen, reaching the popular heart best, in a class of poems easy to comprehend and thoroughly human in sympathy; poems of love for childhood and motherhood, poems cheering and strenghtening many a sad and wounded heart.

---

36 Loc. cit.

The Morning-Glory,<sup>37</sup> which has already been mentioned, belongs to this group. The Alpine Sheep was addressed to a friend, a sorrowful mother who had lost a child. It begins by a recollection of her own recent loss, and is based on the parable of the Good Shepherd. She writes:

This parable, by Nature breathed,  
Blew on me as the South-wind free  
O'er frozen brooks, that flow unsheathed  
From icy thraldom, to the sea.<sup>38</sup>

To her, it came like a vision of the Good Shepherd,

Holding our little lamb asleep,--  
While, like the murmur of the sea,  
Sounded that voice along the deep,  
Saying, "Arise and follow me!

The stirring times in which she lived have marked her verse with certain unmistakable signs. America was said to be the land of the free, the cradle of liberty; but liberty, at the time, was a myth exploited by those who claimed its privilege for themselves alone. Yet, the theory of human equality was already beginning to dominate the moral earnestness of the North, particularly in her own community, where all other reforms were considered as subordinate to this. There was, she thought, no better way of doing justice to her feelings and convictions, than in espousing the cause of abolition.

---

37 In a brief commentary on Lowell's poems, William C. Bryant commended only this poem which, in reality, was Mrs. Lowell's.

38 Vernon, The Alpine Sheep, op. cit., p. 47.





veiled, the expression moderate. The word slave does not even appear in it. It is, nevertheless, clearly humanitarian. The poor rejoice as they reap the mysterious grain and

They bless the unseen Giver dear  
Who gave this daily bread.<sup>42</sup>

In 1847, A Twilight Vision was Mrs. Lowell's annual contribution. It is a longer poem, comprising sixteen stanzas of great force. From the very first words the descending shadow of the "stealthy twilight" throws a heavy gloom over hearth and heart. The reality of a happy home recedes, and the vision of a slave-hut far away, takes shape. There, "a woman and a slave, upon her death-bed lay."<sup>43</sup> Such is the mournful setting. Then, the revolting aspect of slavery is set forth. Of all that poor woman's children, not one has been left to assist her in old age and cheer her last moments. The family ties have been broken and the members torn apart. One by one they have been borne away, till, of six only one was spared, though not for long. The accents of the mother's grief are pathetic. With almost bated breath, one follows the sad account of how, for that youngest daughter she toiled and stored for ten long years to buy her freedom. The daughter, now a woman, was active,

---

<sup>42</sup> Vernon, op. cit., The Maiden's Harvest, p. 44.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., A Twilight Vision, p. 67.

beautiful and gay; her mother's joy and pride. Alas! the fatal day arrived. With trembling hands the mother hopefully counted out the money she had saved, but the heartless master simply turned away, saying:

'Ten times the money that lies there was paid  
for her to-night,  
And she must go!<sup>44</sup>

From that day on, the heart-broken mother pined and sighed: "They have not left me even one . . . to hold my dying head."

Thereafter, no encouraging prospect, no hope in life remaining, she longed for death. It came at last, but not so dismal and melancholy as might have been supposed; for, she was encouraged in her last moments, by the moral assurance that the curse of slavery would soon be lifted from the land. Not long, would the "race be to the swift and the battle to the strong."<sup>45</sup>

The vision had vanished, but, in the poet's mind, a momentous question remained, "Do ye remember those in bonds as ye with them were bound?" It is not only in words, but mostly in deeds, that true charity lies.

Year after year, Maria Lowell's poetry seems to have acquired force and weight. Her volume of poems is thin, but

---

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., p. 69.

<sup>45</sup> Loc. cit.

of art, there is no mean order in this little book. What rank she might have occupied among the American poets of the nineteenth century, had she been granted a longer career, it is almost impossible to presume, though her command of poetic art is firm and sound. A just balance of sentiments controls the reactions, and prevents an excess of emotional feeling. Tenderness which springs from true love, is the prevailing note, but it is neither feeble nor tearful. A vibrant tone thrills the ear, while her imagery is never vague or misapplied. The smallest detail is meant to convey some weighty meaning. Her strength of character and depth of feeling are revealed in many a line. There is passion in her verse, but again, it is not stormy.

In Africa, a massiveness of conception and structure, a grandeur of expression beyond anything else she ever wrote, combine to make it her best poem. Liberty and motherhood are, here again, closely linked. Because of this tragic fusion of two major themes, Mr. Damon declared: "It is the only Abolitionist poem I know of, which rises above oratory and propaganda into pure literature."<sup>46</sup> Its sonorous dignity of measure appeals powerfully to the imagination. The dark continent of Africa is portrayed as a great black figure of eternal sadness, a gigantic mother

---

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., Introduction p. viii.



was at its apogee. Thus, years and centuries elapsed, and with the years "their great light quenched in twilight gray."<sup>48</sup> Silently they lay in their winding tombs, awaiting the time when the winds, like mighty spirits, would come to rouse them from their deep, century-long slumber. The Spirit came at last, declaring: "Why sits she here so drear and dead while deep in the heart of the dark continent a new generation of children dances and plays?" With those swarthy, crisp-haired barbarians "erect as palms" Maria's verse rejoices, as light as the "birds that flaunt along the air."<sup>49</sup>

Unhappily, there came another change. Those free careless children of the African soil were borne away by force amid endless sighs and groans. Darkness and desolation stretched once more over the tropical jungle and the sandy sea. The titanic mother again sat, silent, dreary, disconsolate.

Her great lips closed upon her moan;  
Silently sate she on her throne,  
Rigid and black, as carved in stone.<sup>50</sup>

The poem is indeed a living symbol, carved in black marble. The impression produced by Mrs. Lowell's verse is

---

<sup>48</sup> Ibid., p. 49

<sup>49</sup> Cf., Ibid., p. 50.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid., p. 51.

durable. A spirit of vigorous individuality pervades it entirely. Take, for instance, the aspect of that huge figure, its imaginary picture remains stamped upon the mind, almost as vividly as the Egyptian Pyramids themselves.

We have already noticed to what extent the poem Song stressed the idea of freedom. Maria's Abolitionist poems have produced their effect in her lifetime; now they remain as an evidence of her sincere love for all the under-privileged, especially the slaves. Among these, mothers and children, as we have seen, mostly retained her attention and inspired her pathetic accents.

But the members of her family naturally held the first place in her affections. To the Reverend Charles Lowell, James' father, she soon became much attached. While they were in Italy, news came of the father's illness and Maria wished they could immediately sail for home. The last stanza of her poem Rome reflects both her anguish and her ardent desire to be by his bedside in the still chamber with half-closed shutters, "Never to part again."

She did not, of course, underestimate the nobility of matrimonial love, consecrated at the marriage in Cana where virtually was inaugurated the whole successive order of those love-poets, who have shown the world that passion in putting on chastity, put on also tenfold beauty. In four sonnets, her love for her husband glows with the steady

flame of devotion. We know that she had promised to be ever with him after death. In all these poems she addresses him as her "love." The first sonnet had been printed with Lowell's Poems, First Series, under the title: In Absence. In here, she compared the time of his absence to the rugged wintry days, saying that, had she not expected his return in the early spring with the warm March winds, she couldn't have withstood it. James and Maria were two kindred minds, perfectly adapted to each other. Her letters prove this point even better than her poems.

### 3. Prose: Her Letters.

Mrs. Lowell's prose as well as her poetry is free, however, from all affectation. She wrote as naturally as she talked. Well did she know that no pompous phrase, no high-flown expression is equal, especially in letter-writing, to the simple narration of familiar facts and personal anecdotes. How skillfully she enlivened unimportant incidents, mere trifles, the reader may judge. It is a fact that Mrs. Lowell was held in high repute among her friends as a letter-writer. The life which her letters portray, was filled with ideal beauty, the more rare because it remained unchanged till the end. These letters reveal not so much the poet as the woman, wife and mother. The incidents and accidents of every day life are her themes.

Among the letters collected by Mrs. Vernon, one is addressed to her mother, one to her father-in-law, the Reverend Charles Lowell, two to Rebecca Lowell, six to her own sister Lois, eight to a very close friend, Mrs. Francis G. Shaw, and the other twelve to her beloved husband.

#### A. Descriptive Element.

Many of these letters recall her lively, never waning love of nature with which she even identifies her changing moods. She writes: "If I am like the willow to be bent down easily I am like the willow in springing back as soon as the weight is removed from me."<sup>51</sup> She acknowledges thereby her natural optimism. The warm summer sun always revived her, made her sprightly and gay; but for winter she had no particular attraction, it was too bare and too cold for her delicate lungs and her much needed warmth. In the very first letter of the collection we are now studying, is found this remark: "I catch glimpses of the hill looking brown and wintry. Every thing (sic) says 'how cold, how cold!'"<sup>52</sup> Year after year finds her looking forward with delight to the approaching summer with its birds, flowers, warmth, and out-of-door happiness. Elmwood delights her, she lovingly calls it a "great green bower."

---

51 Id., Ibid., p. 111.

52 Ibid., p. 93.

While she was in Italy, she rejoiced in seeing the crocus blossoming everywhere in autumn. "Whole fields," she said, "were purple with their delicate wings, looking like butterflies who had mistaken their season, and come out of the ground before their time."<sup>53</sup>

She greatly admired the city of Florence which is the home and rendez-vous of artists. Its paintings, its arches over the Arno, the merry peals of the city-bells, its ruddy sunsets and snowy mountains, the vineyards that surround it with green and purple strips, all charmed her. In the two last verses of a sonnet with which she concluded a letter to her husband, remembering the happy days spent in that city, she exclaimed:

Florence -- no more my verse shall strive to tell  
The name enthralles me with a double spell.<sup>54</sup>

But Rome had taken a tremendous hold on her heart and imagination. So much so that, were it not for home, she would have been contented to spend the rest of her life in that city. Summarizing her impressions she wrote: "It is like living on a mountain top, the intellectual horizon is so vast and embraces all that is most wonderful in the World's history." And, speaking of the Campagna, she added:

---

53 Ibid., p. 144.

54 Ibid., p. 163.

It is a glorious feature with its ruins & (sic) desolation and with its soft changes through the seasons, from the Spring green which is just creeping over it, back to the brownish hue of winter.<sup>55</sup>

Again, describing that great abundance of green weeds, flowers and foliage waving from the walls in Rome, she says that the tiles on the housetops sometimes have quite a garden upon them. In a letter to her sister Lois, she describes enthusiastically the Etruscan collection in the Vatican, Her attention was arrested principally by the beautiful bronze statues and fragile vases, myriads of them of all sizes and forms, "chaste and simple in design, and with the charm of extreme age hanging about their fragility."<sup>56</sup>

Among other excellent faculties, Mrs. Lowell had a keen sense of observation, and a clever way of describing what she saw. Her delicate humor enabled her to perceive the comic aspect of things and to depict them in a lively fashion. Her correspondence abounds in humoristic traits.

But she hated insincerity. Observing certain guests at a party, she noticed that they assumed an air of being intensely interested in all that was said, an unflagging pleasure, a surprised and delighted expression, in order to

---

55 Ibid., p. 144.

56 Ibid., p. 135.

cover "all the ennui they felt and encourage all the dullness it was their lot to meet."<sup>57</sup> Such an attitude was unpleasant to her. She was against this affected gaiety and vivacity because, she declares, "It cannot be true after the same things have been seen and heard over and over again." She was not altogether right on this point, for, one might suffer to be bored sometimes out of charity, or simply out of courtesy.

#### B. Humanitarian Element.

Mrs. Lowell's letters, though always lively and interesting, were none the less tactful. She was most anxious not to hurt anyone's feelings. As an illustration, a few words from one of her letters to James R. Lowell before their engagement, are significant. "I should have said" (she write in reference to a previous remark of hers) "I hated meanness in people, not 'mean People'."<sup>58</sup> She compared herself, and in general all human beings, to children who, having strayed from their happy homes into the night, seek the shelter of a loving heart. Some, not finding the object of their quest, become steeled and hard, and finally pass from the earth unheeded, uncomprehended and unloved.

---

57 Ibid., p. 107.

58 Ibid., p. 96.

But, encouraged by her faith and hope in God's eternal love, she exclaims:

Surely God never meant this lot for those who carry holy hearts and lofty strength of purpose. Oh no! have not the stars been singing since the birth of Time that we might frame our souls into Chords to chime with the mighty harmony?<sup>59</sup>

Her love for children is nowhere more apparent than in these familiar letters. Few children in the flesh ever lived on paper as vividly as they live here. Some passages are truly delightful. The like of her little Mabel, she asserts (we underline), was never seen. Baby charms and baby talk assume life and interest under her pen. Over and over again the happy mother depicts the child standing in her crib, or climbing up the stairs, or else rehearsing her "dobble, doodle" song for her father's return. Then, having outlived the early stages of existence, little Mab is pictured playing house and sending letters to the "Peep family", or building a house for Spice.

These letters shed light on the Lowells' family-life by recalling that atmosphere of plain living and high thinking in which it was Maria's good fortune to live. All her letters are overflowing with expressions of love and tenderness for her husband. Expressions which are neither forced nor exaggerated, but simple and evidently sincere. It is

---

59 Loc. cit.

a "dear inexhaustible love,"<sup>60</sup> as she calls it. Is he compelled to spend several days in New York, she misses his dear company, but "thought and prayer are busy and fill the void," she says.<sup>61</sup>

Speaking of his betrothed, James R. Lowell had once written to a very close friend: "Hear what she says in one of her glorious letters to me. 'I will espouse sorrow for thy sake, for I have lived long enough and observed life keenly enough to know that not the truest and most exalted love can bar the approach of much care and sorrow.'"<sup>62</sup>

The other members of her family were not forgotten. She always relied on her mother's advice; she generously requitted the affection bestowed upon her by her father-in-law, the Reverend Charles Lowell, and Rebecca Lowell; her own brother and sisters, especially Lois, always held a secure place in her heart.

To some close friends she sent long newsy letters. A most charming one written in 1845 while in Philadelphia, is addressed to her slightly elder friend Mrs. Nathaniel Hawthorne.<sup>63</sup>

---

60 Ibid., p. 177.

61 Ibid., p. 97.

62 Horace Elisha Scudder, James Russell Lowell; A Biography, Boston, Houghton Mifflin, 1901, Vol.1, p. 82.

63 This much prized letter is now in the Rare Book Department of the Boston Public Library.

In these letters the poor and the slaves were not forgotten. They always seemed to be of great concern to her. As early as 1840, in a first extant letter to Lowell she expressed her intense sympathy for human suffering: "I felt sorrowful for days and days after I read Chartism and even now the thought of it is a grief."<sup>64</sup> Recalling Lowell's own idea that men ought to pass their lives in self culture, she replied approvingly:

Is not self culture most noble as it involves the thought of the culture of others: There are enough of the pure and good in live (sic) to level the whole lump of wretchedness and crime. But they steal away to one chosen circle where nothing offends their taste and sensibility. It is not enough to lead sweet lives, calling men 'brothers', but holding away from those who most need aid and example.<sup>65</sup>

Hiram Powers' statue of a Greek Slave had obviously produced a deep impression upon her mind, for, in two subsequent letters she made significant allusions to it, as to "a vision of beauty" towards which one may always look back. Indifference was an attitude which she constantly deplored. "Our good men," she declared, "dream of the perfectibility of human nature, but close their ears to the multitude who cry in every tone for help."<sup>66</sup>

---

64 Vernon, op. cit., p. 96.

65 Loc. cit.

66 Loc. cit.

Maria Lowell opened wide the avenues of her heart enfolding the human world in a kind and loving embrace. Although her husband's biographers have dealt scantily with her, all are unanimous in attesting that kindness was one of her outstanding and endearing qualities. Like mosses that grow in "the great unresting sea" and spread afar, so, (to use her comparison)

. . . from the fresh eternal heart of love,  
Rose endless tokens of the growth below.<sup>67</sup>

Those tokens sprang naturally, from the depths of her heart, which to all appearances, seems to have been an inexhaustible source of love. Nevertheless, whether consciously or not, and without affecting her own originality, she was obviously more or less influenced by the writings of her predecessors.

#### 4. Comparisons and Contrasts.

It is not our intention to determine the degree of influence exerted by German writers, especially by Goethe whose poems she read admiringly, upon her own compositions. Along with the American Transcendentalism of her time, several of Maria Lowell's poems, especially those dealing with slavery, are informed with a strain of fantastic somber

---

67 Ibid., Inscriptions from Shell-Book, p. 89.



In The Slave-Mother, Maria expresses a similar idea with almost the same words. She writes:

And so she cries at midnight with exceeding  
bitter cry.<sup>70</sup>

When Thomson sees no hope whatsoever in this worn-out world, no hope beyond the tomb, and exclaims:

Why throw not off this life, . . .  
And go down to sleep in the grave in everlasting  
rest?

With her Slave-Mother, Maria also cries in anguish:

May I lie within my grave before that day I see,  
When she sits, as I am sitting, with a slave-  
child on her knee!

Yet, a deep abyss separates the two writers. She, hopefully looks up to God as to the only Being who can grant peace and consolation. She prays,

God grant my little helpless one in helplessness  
may die!

While Thomson turns away despairingly, definitely believing that there is

. . . . . no hope beyond the tomb;  
No living and loving God, but blind and  
stony Doom.<sup>71</sup>

Striking resemblances also exist between Thomson's longer poem, The City of Dreadful Night, and Mrs. Lowell's Africa. The two poems consist, likewise, in a series of

---

70 Vernon, op. cit., p. 53.

71 Leider, op. cit., p. 1316.

symbolic visions. One is the image of the city of darkness; the other, the image of the continent of darkness. Both poets have chosen the desert for their setting. It was, no doubt, the most suitable location for the presentation of the dismal themes they planned to develop.

In the former poem, a solitary figure stands "with head uncovered and with streaming hair";<sup>72</sup> in the latter, a gloomy figure sits with folded hands, waiting "with calm despair."<sup>73</sup> Both convey an idea of such profound darkness, that, of Africa it is said:

Her great dusk face no light  
From the sunset-glow could take;  
· · · · ·  
It seemed for her a dawn could never break.<sup>74</sup>

Nevertheless, this seemingly impenetrable darkness is momentarily dispelled on the one hand, by some wild beasts' "terrible eyes of fire" glaring "with a starved desire"; on the other hand, by the lions' penetrating "eyes of flame" that haunt "the reedy shore." In The City of Dreadful Night we notice

That hillock burning with a brazen glare;  
Those myriad dusky flames with points a-glow  
Which writhed and hissed and darted to and fro.<sup>75</sup>

---

72 Ibid., p. 1317.  
73 Vernon, op. cit., p. 47.  
74 Loc. cit.  
75 Leider, Ibid., p. 1317.

In Africa, the level sands send back the sky's fierce glare. Still, the same stalwart figure strides on, austere, without either hope or fear; while the other sits rigid and silent, awaiting the time when, to use her own expression,

. . . the slow moving hand of Fate  
Shall lift me from my sunken state.<sup>76</sup>

These analogies are indeed so striking that the idea of plagiarism spontaneously comes to the mind, but in this case, the plagiarist would be Thomson, since The City of Dreadful Night was written after the year 1870, that is, at least seventeen years after Maria Lowell's death. At the time, however, her poem was generally unknown to the world at large.

The intervening stanzas follow a completely different pattern, due to each one's own imaginary train of thought. Thomson follows his phantom-like self in a lugubrious march across the desert; while Maria witnesses with mingled hope and compassion, the rise and fall of two African generations.

#### B. Compared to Coleridge and De Quincey.

In Africa again, some parts revive the memory of The Rime of the Ancient Mariner. A few words only are the same, some expressions are akin and yet different, for each

---

76 Vernon, op. cit., p. 50.

has a style peculiar to himself, yet there is similarity in their poetic inspiration. The following extracts from Africa will mark this, as

. . . . . dreadful groans  
Stole upward through Earth's ribbed stones.<sup>77</sup>

These groans sound very much like those uttered by the Mariner's dead men on deck, before they stirred and rose.

Then the solitary mother speaks:

And centuries went slowly by,  
And looked into my sleepless eye,  
Which only turned to see them die.

The winds like mighty spirits came,  
Alive and pure and strong as flame,  
At last to lift me from my shame.<sup>78</sup>

Mrs. Lowell had something of Coleridge's visionary power, as several of her poems show. She also had De Quincey's dream-like fancy.

In An Opium Fantasy, her next best poem, she records musically an elusive state of consciousness. Its first stanza, which portrays the effect of the drug upon the brain, is in full harmony with De Quincey's description of a general upheaving of the mind, a complete vanishing of pain, the heavenly bliss experienced by the opium-eater:<sup>79</sup>

---

77 Ibid., p. 49.

78 Ibid., p. 50.

79 Cf. Thomas De Quincey, Confessions of an English Opium-Eater, London, Walter Scott, 1888, p. 48.

Soft hangs the opiate in the brain,  
 And lulling soothes the edge of pain,  
 Till harshest sound, far off or near,  
 Sings floating in its mellow sphere. 80

Once, after reading this poem aloud, Amy Lowell exclaimed:  
 "That is poetry!" The poem's recurrent motif has the true  
 drowsy magic,

The graceful play, a moment stopped,  
 Distance again unrolls,  
 Like silver balls, that, softly dropped,  
 Ring into golden bowls.

The succeeding verses display a fine sensitiveness  
 to tone and hue, while the "fairy flaunting band" of  
 "scarlet-kerchiefed heads" swing and sing in melodious under-  
 tone. It is as light and airy as the "freshning winds" that  
 bend the graceful "poppies red."

#### C. Compared to Emily Dickinson.

Returning to Mrs. Lowell's Sick-Room after this fairy  
 enchantment, one is struck by the sharp contrast. This poem  
 is truly informed by Emily Dickinson's intensely personal  
 theme -- and a very great one, indeed -- the theme of suffer-  
 ing. Maria's Opium Fantasy was an evasion into the realm of  
 imaginary bliss, in order to avoid the realities of pain.  
 The Sick-Room is a cry of despair from the invalid who is  
 aware of the spring flooding the world outside, while her

---

80 Vernon, op. cit., p. 61.

life is wasting away like the wood on her chamber-hearth. Under the stress of emotion and bodily pain she uses poetry somewhat like Emily Dickinson, as a means of escape. This is the most subjective poem she has ever written. In other poems she displayed and emphasized the sufferings of the under-privileged; here, for a moment, the veil of her sweet equanimity is removed, for all to perceive the secret fire which consumed the last months of her short existence.

She feels acutely that contrast between the yearly renewal of outdoor life, and her ever wasting form within. The fifth stanza adds evidence to this impression:

O life, and light, and gladness,  
 Tumultuous everywhere!  
 O pain and benumbing sadness,  
 That brood in the heavy air!<sup>81</sup>

All that made springtime beautiful and desirable: sunshine, flowers, and birds, were now being denied her, and were changed suddenly

. . . into trembling smoke-wreaths,  
 And a heap of ashes gray.

The green landscape is transformed into a landscape of the soul, her own soul which, at the moment is somewhat given to despair.

Emily Dickinson has likewise, in her "repertoire" of gnostic verse, a host of such immortal landscapes. The

---

81 Ibid., p. 60.

psychic injury which turned her in upon herself, filters through her cryptic verse as she writes:

How happy I was (sic) if I could forget  
To remember how sad I am  
Would be an easy adversity,  
But the recollecting of bloom

Keep making November difficult  
Till I, who was almost bold,  
Lose my way like a little child.<sup>82</sup>

Or else she exclaims:

"Escape" is such a thankful word!<sup>83</sup>

Her note-book also contains the following entry:

I never hear the word "escape"  
Without a quicker blood,  
A sudden expectation . . . <sup>84</sup>

But she gradually turned from acute personal feeling to emotion, universal in scope. The problems of good and evil, of life and death, obsessed her.

Maria Lowell who lived in a totally different atmosphere, enjoying a normal and happy life, did not have to bear up with the same moral depressions; yet, with her slowly declining physical strength, her fine intellectual powers were gradually becoming more subtle and spiritualized. A

---

<sup>82</sup> Emily Dickinson, Bolts of Melody, Mabel Loomis Todd, Ed., New York, Harper, 1945, p. 112.

<sup>83</sup> Ibid., p. 120.

<sup>84</sup> Genevieve Taggard, The Life and Mind of Emily Dickinson, London and New York, Alfred Knopf, 1930, p. 127.

vivid consciousness of the nature and destiny of the human soul, of the mystery of death, and life hereafter, also retained her attention. The twice repeated refrain of her poem Song, seems to imply a veiled premonition of her untimely death, even though life was still smiling to her.

She writes:

I would like thine (speaking to the dew)  
   had been my birth,  
 Then I, without a sigh,  
 Might sleep my night through on the earth  
 To waken in the sky.<sup>85</sup>

Whenever death is mentioned, and it is in almost every poem, there is, nevertheless, a ray of hope to pierce the black cloud of sorrow and buoy up the spirit. The Sick-Room is the only poem in which she does not look up to heaven for solace. There is no irreverence, however, such as may be found in the poems of Emily Dickinson, who, in one place, declares that

. . . . the Heavenly Father  
 Leads the chosen child;  
 . . . . .  
 Oftener by the claw of dragon  
 Than the hand of friend.<sup>86</sup>

On another occasion Emily refers to God as "a noted Clergyman,"<sup>87</sup> or else, she salutes Him as "Burglar, banker."

---

<sup>85</sup> Vernon, op. cit., Song, p, 44.

<sup>86</sup> Emily Dickinson, The Complete Poems of Emily Dickinson, Boston, Little, 1924, p. 251.

<sup>87</sup> George Frisbie Whicher, This Was A Poet, A Biography of Emily Dickinson, N.Y., Scribner's, 1938, p. 122.

This flippancy might have annoyed even the most advanced of her contemporaries, had they read such expressions. Maria Lowell merely deplores the fact that her life should waste away so soon, or that "The grave (should) hold its night of grief."<sup>88</sup> But without delay hope is introduced. Not too much unlike Emily Dickinson is she in that respect, for the latter's impertinence or indifference occasionally gives way to hope and love. Such is the case in the two stanzas beginning with, "My God, what is a heart,"<sup>89</sup> or in the following quatrain:

In thy long paradise of light  
 No moment will there be  
 When I shall long for earthly play  
 And mortal company.<sup>90</sup>

With Mrs. Lowell, in The Alpine Sheep we heard the Good Shepherd saying: "Arise and follow me!"<sup>91</sup> In The Morning-Glory she calls God, the "dear Lord." In The Maiden's Harvest she incites the reader to bless the Source and "dear Giver" of all life. The Wreath tells how, when the body lies in the tomb, in Heaven "her rightful wreath she (the soul) gains."<sup>92</sup>

---

88 Vernon, op. cit., p. 70

89 Dickinson, Bolts of Melody, p. 125.

90 Ibid., p. 123.

91 Vernon, op. cit., p. 47.

92 Ibid., p. 70.

The Pilgrimage to Kevlaar is a beautiful hymn of confidence, dedicated to Mary, the Holy Mother of God and our Heavenly Mother,

Oh! thou most Holy Mother  
 Thou Virgin good and pure,  
 Thou Queen of all the Heavens,  
 Thou canst my sorrow cure!<sup>93</sup>

Then comes the glorious invocation: "O Mary, praise to thee!"

The Dying One exalts the moment when the human soul is about to depart for the eternal world, fleeing the "dusty crowds" on earth, to enter the "Holy Grove of Palms" where the "sound of angels' psalms" greet their "sister soul." Upward, triumphantly to "Light's Great Source" she darts. The dream of life, she says, has flown as swiftly as flies the mist of spring-tide. In such a light, death has no terror. The poem ends on this scriptural idea:

Death! where is now thy bitter victory?  
 Grave! where thy victory?<sup>94</sup>

There is a certain mystical insight in all the above quotations. A French historian has defined romanticism "L'invasion du moi dans la littérature."<sup>95</sup> In the light of this definition, Mrs. Lowell may well be called a true romantic, for her poetry is the faithful mirror of her life

---

93 Ibid., p. 72.

94 Ibid., p. 75.

95 Comte D'Haussonville, Lacordaire, in the series Les Grands Ecrivains Français, Paris, (no date), p. 144.

or her feelings. These romantic traits, however, are not unique in her literary work. Of her acquaintance with nature we have given numerous examples. Her love for mankind, and her desire to promote human welfare, was the keynote of her song. In life she looked up to God lovingly and hopefully; in death, says Lowell in allusion to her dispositions, "she was laid in a large upperchamber whose name was 'Peace'."96

Love is, therefore, the recurrent element in her work. Her writings reveal, in a language as delicate as the ideas which they express, her lifelong ideal. She believed that no poetry without a sincere love could be beautiful; for all beautiful poetry must come from the heart.

Maria's poems as well as Emily's did arise from heart-felt emotions. This explains their effectiveness. If a moral lesson is given it is never directly or openly. Their poems are made up for the most part, of delightful, brilliantly-painted word-pictures, and must be read purely for the enjoyment that can be derived from them. In this respect, Mrs. Lowell's poems, especially those now considered as her best, are, for the most part, quite different from her husband's poems.

---

96 Scudder, op. cit., p. 358.

D. Compared to Her Husband,  
James Russell Lowell.

In his Fable for Critics, James Russell Lowell has described himself good-humoredly as follows:

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 the brambles and boulders,  
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. 97

Thus, like other poets of the first half of the nineteenth century he was a preacher almost as much as a singer, and he admitted the fact. His inclination toward didacticism was probably the most cumbersome of his "isms," and likewise, the most detrimental to his fame. It seems to have been an almost inveterate habit with him, to draw a moral lesson from his poetic subjects. For example, let us take the last stanza of his well-known poem: To the Dandelion.

How like a prodigal doth nature seem,  
When thou, for all thy gold, so common art!"  
Thou teachest me to deem  
More sacredly of every human heart,  
Since each reflects in joy its scanty gleam  
Of heaven, and could some wondrous secret show,  
Did we but pay the love we owe,  
And with a child's undoubting wisdom look  
On all these living pages of God's book. 98

---

97 James Russell Lowell, A Fable for Critics, in The Poetical Works, Boston, Houghton Mifflin, 1890, p. 146.

98 Id., Ibid., To the Dandelion, p. 84.

Some of Lowell's contemporaries enjoyed this preaching type of conclusion; others deplored it. In 1896, five years after Lowell's death, Richard Henry Stoddard wrote an article on Lowell in Lippincott's Magazine, which said:

I found in his poems a lyrical quality which was as new in our verse as it was admirable; they sang themselves into life in jubilant melodies of their own making. I found another quality which was not so admirable, and which I wondered at in so poetical a poet, -- the didactic quality. I could not understand why Lowell had cared to write The Fatherland and The Heritage.<sup>99</sup>

Speaking of this same propensity in Lowell, Mr. Scudder also wrote:

There was a preacher in Lowell not merely by inheritance, but in a stirring of a soul that hated evil, and longed to exercise an active influence in righting wrongs. The full strength of this impulse was . . . to find constant expression throughout his life, for a preacher at bottom he was throughout his career.<sup>100</sup>

Maria White Lowell, who kindled in her husband the spark of zeal, never assumed, in poetic form, that preaching attitude. In the last stanza of The Morning-Glory, her apostrophe to Earth vaguely suggests a moral "élan" of faith in God, and hope in eternal happiness. In A Twilight Vision, which has already been stated, she meekly asks this momentous

---

<sup>99</sup> Richard Henry Stoddard, James Russell Lowell, in Lippincott's Magazine, Vol. 50, p. 538, quoted by Charles Wells Moulton, in The Library of Literary Criticism of English and American Authors, Vol. 8, N.Y., Smith, 1935, pp. 17 - 42.

<sup>100</sup> Scudder, op. cit., p. 63.

question: "Do ye remember those in bonds as if with them were bound?"<sup>101</sup> It is the only verse which marks an, ever so little tendency to preach.

The beauties of nature evidently exerted a powerful attraction on both James and Maria Lowell. She sang mostly the youthful and milder charms of spring; he drew pen-portraits of all Nature's moods, from the early spring renewal to the winter frosts and snows. He has abundance and range at his command; but, she too, "wrote easily and with deep feelings," declared Ferris Greenslet. "Her poems have a certain feminine grace not always found in her husband's poems."<sup>102</sup> She pictures the "punctual feet of Spring" as "they slide from far-off mountains" and the sun busily "pluming the wands of the cherry, to lattice the window-pane."<sup>103</sup> So vivid is the representation that it assumes new life and new shapes on the mind's visual screen.

In connection with this vernal picture, Lowell's familiar description of a June day, in *The Prelude to Part First of The Vision of Sir Launfal*, is naturally recalled,--

---

101 Vernon, op. cit., p.69.

102 Ferris Greenslet, Ed., The Poems of Maria Lowell, Copy No. 100, Boston, Houghton, 1907, p. 7.  
(in Rare Book Department of the Boston Public Library.)

103 Vernon, op. cit., p. 60.

so well does it depict the traditional sights annually beheld in rural areas by all New Englanders. And,

What is so rare as a day in June?  
 . . . . .  
 Whether we look, or whether we listen,  
 We hear life murmur, or see it glisten;  
 . . . . .  
 Now is the high-tide of the year.<sup>104</sup>

All nature takes part in this festivity: the cowslip and the buttercup as well as the little bird "atilt like a blossom among the leaves."

In Lowell's poetic collection, nature poems are very numerous, but The Vision of Sir Launfal is the best known and loved in spite of its moralizing tendency; or even, because of this tendency which makes it spiritually beneficial to the reader. For, to use his own expression,

. . . a god goes with it and makes it store  
 To the soul that was starving in darkness before.  
 . . . . .  
 Joy comes, grief goes, we know not how;  
 Everything is happy now,  
 Everything is upward striving.<sup>105</sup>

Lowell's favorite seasons are, accordingly, the riotous June, or the Indian Summer of Cambridge. Under the Willows is a rhapsody on June in New England; An Indian-Summer Reverie is a tapestry of autumnal foliage.

---

<sup>104</sup> Lowell, op. cit., The Vision of Sir Launfal, p. 107.

<sup>105</sup> Ibid., p. 108 - 109.

Oliver Wendell Holmes has called Lowell, "Nature's darling."<sup>106</sup> In fact, he was never on ill terms with Nature; yet, he is pre-eminently the poet of mankind. The weak and the oppressed found in him a courageous and impassioned spokesman. This aspect of his poetry has been amply demonstrated in the second chapter of this research, in connection with Maria W. Lowell's influence. Thus, she and her husband worked hand in hand, with the same undaunted zeal for the sake of Freedom.

Consistent with his belief that the hope of the world was closely linked with the betterment of the outward lot of mankind in general, Lowell made literature the handmaid of reform. In his Ode of 1841 which begins with the words, "In the old days of awe and keen-eyed wonder," he puts forth his creed of human brotherhood; and demands that a poet confront even the "shadow of wrong" in his own time, convinced that there lies

. . . beneath the foulest faces lurking,  
One God-built shrine of reverence and love.<sup>107</sup>

Even though didacticism was the most cumbersome of his "isms," the most vigorous was undoubtedly abolitionism, which enabled him to do what he had always longed to do --

---

<sup>106</sup> Ferris Greenslet, James Russell Lowell, His Life and Work, Boston, Houghton Mifflin, 1905, p. 244.

<sup>107</sup> Lowell, Poetical Works, p. 11.

make a real contribution to literature. His Biglow Papers were wonderful weapons in the service of the Anti-Slavery Campaign. Here, precisely, lies the difference between this poem and Maria's Africa. His, was a weapon, an instrument of propaganda to be used only during a limited period of time; hers, was a mother's lament which transcends history and rises above the fray of political strife and gross ambitions.

Among Lowell's poems The Vision of Sir Launfal stands as a bond between his two favorite themes, Nature and Slavery. The preludes display the natural setting; the first and second parts give a lesson of genuine Christianity. There is also a subterranean passage connecting The Biglow Papers with Sir Launfal: it is the holy zeal which attacks slavery issuing in this fable of Charity. The act by which the knight gives alms to Christ disguised as a leper, illustrates the principle of true love, such as Maria Lowell conceived it.

Some of Lowell's poems, however, are more humanistic than humanitarian. In his introduction to The Fable for Critics, for example, he reverts to Greek Mythology for an inspiration, with Phoebus and Daphne as guides. Other poems are surprisingly pagan, macabre, or fantastic. Extreme Unction is a poem of the macabre type. In Maria's poetry there is nothing of the sort.

On the ground of mysticism, however, Lowell and his wife meet again. Both were inclined toward the supernatural. There was, admitted Lowell, a queer duality of nature in him. In a letter to a friend, he once gave a clear-eyed characterization of himself when he declared: "One half of me is clear mystic and enthusiast, and the other humorist."<sup>108</sup> His visionary faculty was nowhere better illustrated than in his Sir Launfal. Maria White Lowell had, likewise, early been fed with Emerson's ideas. Even though she was never more than a mild Transcendentalist, there remains in her poems visible traces of this tendency. Is there anything more mysterious than her enigmatic African mother?

Of all mysteries, death is, indeed, the most appalling. In our comparison of Mrs. Lowell with Emily Dickinson, it has been shown under what angle she considered this inevitable end. Similarly, the necrophilic allusions are numerous in Lowell's poetry. He always had, moreover, a secret foreboding of his wife's premature death, and for months after the sad event, his old visionary faculty was constantly alive and active. He gave utterance to his sad feelings in a poem called, The Dead House.

---

108 Norton, op, cit., p. 117.

Longfellow, whose daughter Edith was born only five days before the death of Maria Lowell, wrote The Two Angels which, in sympathy, he addressed to his friend.

'Twas at thy door, O friend! and not at mine,  
 The angel with the amaranthine wreath,  
 Pausing, descended, and with voice divine  
 Whispered a word that had a sound like Death.<sup>109</sup>

Though she lived only nine years after her marriage, dying at the age of thirty-two, Mrs. Lowell left a memory that still lingers in Cambridge.

As a poet, Maria White Lowell may not shine as a star of first magnitude; yet, some of her compositions deserve to take place, side by side, with the best of her contemporaries, and even, of our present-day writers. There are in her verse, not a few images as memorable as that wherewith she concludes her poem Africa. These images have both, a great unity of effect and solidity of structure. Her poetry does not date. It is surprisingly modern in tone, and suffused with a high imaginative vigor.

To Thomson's pessimism she added the note of faith. She emulated Coleridge and De Quincey's fantastic visions. She has Emily Dickinson's terseness in many instances, but unlike Dickinson, she faced the realities of life courageously; the anguish of death hopefully. In her nature

---

<sup>109</sup> Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, The Complete Poetical Works, Cambridge Edition, Boston, Houghton Mifflin, 1880, p. 190.

poems, she displayed the same chromatic variety of sounds and shades as did her husband, James Russell Lowell. Her private influence was constant, firm, and sound. She supported the cause of Freedom and tried to interest others in altruistic pursuits. In short, not only did she endeavor to be a perfect spouse and devoted mother; but, she also sang the glories of Nature, and upheld, especially in her writings, the immediate Anti-Slavery cause. By so doing, she fulfilled, through love of Nature and Humanity, the mission of Charity which she believed was hers.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

Beatty, Richard Croom, James Russell Lowell, Nashville, Tennessee, Vanderbilt University Press, 1942, XVIII-316 pages.

Latest full-length analysis of Lowell's life and works. Documented and stimulating for a fresh, though prejudiced view of Lowell's writings regarding the South; and concerning Maria Lowell's influence over her husband.

Brownell, William Crary, Lowell, in American Prose Masters, New York, Scribner's, 1909, pages 271-335.

One of the best among the general critiques on Lowell. The last section deals with his poetry.

Cantwell, Robert, Nathaniel Hawthorne, The American Years, New York, Rinehart, 1948, XIV-499 pages.

Extracts from Sophia Peabody's (Mrs. Hawthorne) diary shed light on her life and the life of her friends, establishing a basis for comparison with Maria Lowell.

De Quincey, Thomas, Confessions of an English Opium-Eater, London, Walter Scott, 1888, XXVIII-275 pages.

An autobiographical account of the author's use of opium; its pleasures and pains. Employed merely, in this research, for the comparison of Mrs. Lowell's poetic dreams and visions.

Dickinson, Emily, Bolts of Melody, Mabel Loomis Todd and Myllicent Todd Bingham, Ed., New York, Harper, 1945, XXVIII-352 pages.

A collection of hitherto unpublished poems by Emily Dickinson. Used as a source of illustrations.

Greenslet, Ferris, James Russell Lowell: His Life and Works, Boston, Houghton Mifflin, 1905, X-309 pages.

A good brief biography, both delightful and scholarly. Chapter VII deals with Lowell's poetry. The book contains some information about Maria White Lowell's life.

Hale, Edward Everett, Jr., James Russell Lowell, in the series of Beacon Biographies of Eminent Americans, Boston, Small and Maynard, 1899, XVIII-128 pages.

Very brief biography. A few facts not mentioned elsewhere.

Hale, Edward Everett, James Russell Lowell and His Friends, Boston, Houghton Mifflin, 1898, VIII-303 pages.  
Valuable for personal reminiscences. Our principal source of information concerning the "Band."

Higginson, Thomas Wentworth, Margaret Fuller Ossoli, Series of American Men of Letters, Charles Dudley Warner, Ed. Boston, Houghton Mifflin, 1891, V-323 pages.

The accent is placed on Margaret Fuller's literary life, only touching upon her life of action in Italy. It is based upon her Memoirs and Letters. An impartial biography which leaves room for subsequent studies.

\_\_\_\_\_, Old Cambridge, in Series of National Studies in American Letters, George Edward Woodberry, Ed., New York, Macmillan, 1900, VII-203 pages.

In pages 145-196 a good succinct criticism is made of Lowell's literary qualities and defects. Maria Lowell is mentioned as having had influence over her husband.

Lowell, James Russell, The Poetical Works, Household Edition, Boston, Houghton Mifflin, 1890, XIII-507 pages.

The first complete one-volume edition of Lowell's poems.

Norton, Charles Eliot, Ed., Letters of James Russell Lowell, Vol. 1, New York, Harper, 1894, VIII-418 pages.

The introduction to volume 1, contains a brief sketch of Maria's physical and moral traits. A few passages confirm what critics have said of her influence.

Parrington, Vernon Louis, Lowell, Cambridge Brahmin, in Main Currents in American Thought, New York, Harcourt, 1930, pages 460-472.

A prejudiced but stimulating interpretation. His views are contradicted by Foerster, Jenkins, and Clark.

Rutheford, Mildred, American Authors, American Literature from Early Colonial to Living Writers, Atlanta, Ga., Franklin Printing, 1902, XXXIX-654 pages.

Besides the well known authors, the book contains short biographical sketches of several minor women writers.

Scudder, Horace Elisha, James Russell Lowell: A Biography, Boston, Houghton Mifflin, 1901, in 2 volumes XIII-455 and 482 pages.

This is the standard biography of Lowell. It is a competent conservative work, of major importance for the first chapter of this research.

Strachey, Lytton, The Last Elizabethan, in Books and Characters, New York, Harcourt, 1922, pages 235-265.

In this essay, Thomas Lovell Beddoes is presented as the unknown lyric and dramatist who had a cult for Death. It helps to understand, to a certain degree, the man whose life and death were as mysterious as his works.

Taggard, Genevieve, The Life and Mind of Emily Dickinson, London and New York, Knopf, 1930, XXI-378-VI pages.

A violent issue with Martha Dickinson Bianchi's book, The Life and Letters of Emily Dickinson. Taggard tries to establish the true personality of Emily and to judge her works accordingly.

Underwood, Francis H., James Russell Lowell, A Biographical Sketch, Boston, Osgood, 1882, VII-167 pages.

A series of sketches presenting Lowell's work in the light of his time.

Vernon, Hope Jillson, The Poems of Maria Lowell, (Mrs. James Russell Lowell) Providence, Brown University Press, 1936, XII-187 pages.

The book contains a short biography of Maria White Lowell, with some unpublished letters. Besides the poems edited by James R. Lowell in 1855, and reissued in 1907; and those that have been copied from periodicals, it contains a certain number of poems found in manuscripts, which are here collected for the first time.

## APPENDIX

### AN ABSTRACT OF

#### The Element of Charity in Maria White Lowell's Writings<sup>1</sup>

The study of the charity traits revealed in the writings of Maria Lowell, aims at showing to what extent this poetic element is present in her literary contributions. Since Maria Lowell is a minor figure among the poets of America, her poems are still generally unknown and, therefore, no attempt has ever been made to bring forward this particular aspect of her writings.

The term charity is taken here in its broad, amplified sense of love, as applied to Nature and Humanity, apart from all philosophical applications.

Environmental conditions being considered basic factors in the formation of character, the placing of Mrs. Lowell in her family, social, and literary milieu, constitutes the first part of this work.

The poetic gifts and humanitarian tendency of Maria's mind awakened not only her own interests in the social problems of the day; but exerted a vital influence on James Russell Lowell's life, quickening his powers into full activity, molding his character, influencing his work.

---

<sup>1</sup> Sister Jeanne-Francoise, O.P., The Element of Charity in Maria White Lowell's Writings, Ottawa, 1955.

Under her pleasant tutelage he was drawn into the current of Abolitionism. But, more important still is the stimulus he received in his inclination for literary pursuits.

To look at nature through Maria White Lowell's poetic insight, is the chief purpose of the third chapter; to discern in a score of her poems the humanitarian tendency of her mind; and, to discover the woman in the familiar letters portraying the simple incidents of the day, is the next.

Comparisons with her husband and with other writers are made and discussed. This forms the main part and brings out the point of this research, namely: that the element of charity, in the guise of love for nature and humanity, is an outstanding characteristic of Maria White Lowell's literary achievement.

F I N I S