

JAMES RUSSELL LOWELL:  
THE FIRESIDE TRAVELER

The life of James Russell Lowell has been given sufficient attention by his biographers so as to illuminate most of the stages of his literary career. The year 1851-52, which Lowell spent in Europe, however, has not received this distinction. In fact, there has been a lack of curiosity about Lowell's Italian visit which may account for the unwillingness to go beyond the standard opening to this subject: Lowell sailed from Boston on July 12, 1851 with his wife, their two children, a nurse, and a goat.

Fortified by these preliminary facts, few critics have shown much inclination to poke beneath the surface. A rapid summary of Lowell's motives for visiting Italy, the health of his wife, his means of financial support, and the dates of their itinerary constitute the sum of inquiry. As a result, we are left with the suspicion that Lowell's Italian venture was singularly dull and deserves no further comment. Foremost among the offenders is Charles Eliot Norton who included only two of Lowell's letters from Italy during the year abroad, besides supplying little information in his connecting narrative. Similarly, Horace Scudder passed over Lowell's fifteen months in Europe rather quickly, and even Henry James was unable to add much to this otherwise full account of the American exiles in Rome. So the pattern continues down to the latest biography, though the trip to Italy is really beyond the scope of Leon Howard's detailed survey of Lowell's early years.

What, then, is the significance of this silence, if silence it be? Norton was quick to see that his defence of Lowell's privacy against « vulgar curiosity » could be taken as an admis-

sion that there was something to hide. Yet such a proposition about Lowell's life is unlikely and most of us are content with Norton's denial of a dark episode. But scandalous revelations aside, there is need for a closer examination of Lowell's interest in Italy. The year 1851-52 has been stressed because it was Lowell's first visit to Europe and the year for which he recorded his responses in *Leaves from My Journal in Italy and Elsewhere* (1854). There is however, no deliberate attempt to restrict this study to that single year or to dig up new information about the Lowells in Rome. The focus is primarily an analysis of what Italy meant to Lowell and how his writing about Italy reveals the nature of his cosmopolitanism.

When Lowell sailed to Europe for the first time at the age of thirty-two, there seems to be in retrospect, a certain inevitability about his choice of country. His education, interests, ideas, and friendships with Italophiles such as William Wetmore Story and Longfellow all helped to sharpen his awareness of Italian art and culture. Lowell began to study Latin at the age of six; and by the time he had gone through William Well's Grammar School and Harvard, he had received the customary sound knowledge of the classics for a young man of his environment and mental ability. While at Harvard, Lowell enrolled in Italian for six terms, from December 1835 to December 1837; and by the end of that year he would have been able to read any of Dante's works in the original<sup>1</sup>.

As a supplement to this education which did much to orientate Lowell towards Italian culture, his awareness of the European tradition was doubtlessly stimulated by the current ideas of writers such as Irving, Cooper, Ticknor, Allston, Cole, Greenough, Powers and Story. These American pilgrims went to the Old World for the same basic reason: the United States, although a great nation with incomparable national scenery, was nevertheless culturally young. Europe, on the other hand, was, in the words of Washington Irving, « rich in the accu-

1. M. J. CHESLEY, « James Russell Lowell's Interest in Dante », *Italica*, XXXVI (June, 1959), 77.

mulated treasures of age. Her very ruins told the history of times gone by, and every mouldering stone was a chronicle ». Irving goes on to set down the mood in which he embarked on his first trip abroad in 1815: « I longed to wander over the scenes of renowned achievement, — to tread, as it were, in the footsteps of antiquity, — to loiter about the ruined castle, — to meditate on the falling tower, — to escape, in short, from the commonplace realities of the present, and lose myself among the shadowy grandeurs of the past »<sup>2</sup>.

Thirty-eight years later, Lowell came close to echoing Irving's thoughts when he wrote in his « Journal »: « What we always feel the artistic want of at home is background. It is idle to say that we are Englishmen, and that English history is ours too ». What made it difficult for Americans, Lowell continued, was that they had dissociated themselves from the regions in which history had developed.

History without the soil it grew in is more instructive than inspiring, — an acquisition, not an inheritance. It is laid away in our memories, and does not run in our veins. Surely, in all that concerns aesthetics, Europeans have us at an immense advantage. They start at a point which we arrive at after weary years, for literature is not shut up in books, nor in art galleries: both are taken in by unconscious absorption through the finer pores of mind and character in the atmosphere of society<sup>3</sup>.

If Americans were to overcome this immense disadvantage, there was only one solution: to substitute the unsatisfying medium of instruction for the reality of direct experience.

Lowell's first sight of Europe came after seventeen days at sea, and in the « Journal » he noted « a strange thrill » on seeing the « cream-colored blur » of the coast of Spain. At last his plans had matured, and by August 26, 1851, the family was safely housed in Florence. Two months later, the Lowells

2. WASHINGTON IRVING, *The Sketch Book*, Knickerbocker Edition, I (New York, 1894), 3.

3. JAMES RUSSELL LOWELL, « Leaves From My Journal in Italy and Elsewhere », *Fireside Travels*, Lowell's Works, I (Boston, 1904), 136. Future reference to this edition will be found in the text.

and the Storys settled in Rome, which fulfilled an old dream of William's. On January 30, 1850, Story had written to Lowell from Berlin: « Sometimes I think — it is a dream, but a delightful one — that nothing could be so satisfactory and so easy as that we should make a little colony in Rome and there live in that old old home. Of all the places in the world it is the true spot for us »<sup>4</sup>.

There can be little doubt about the sincerity of Story's attachment to Italy and his wish to belong to the scenes and atmosphere which he admired. Lowell, on the other hand, did not reciprocate Story's wish to found an expatriate colony. New England rather than Rome was Lowell's « true spot » and the more time he spent away from America, the more ardently Lowell waited for his return. But it was not until Lowell experienced the reality of foreign travel that he discovered that his response to Italy the country did not measure up to the intellectual promises of Italy as a symbol of the past.

Symptomatic of this dichotomy of Lowell's attitude towards Italy is the opening of the « Journal » itself. When faced with the problem of introducing his subject matter effectively, Lowell shirks it by relieving his mind of its accumulated erudition. A mass of allusions to authors of the past obscure the initial focus and retard any narrative interest the book has. The subject of Italy is not even introduced until Lowell has tried to explode some of the « twaddle » written about the sea, to which he adds his own reflections about sea serpents and the mysterious interests that the world held for early travelers. References to Lucretius, Petrarch, Dante, Calderon, Wordsworth, Montaigne, Milton, Marco Polo, Thomas Browne, and Longfellow, to mention some of them, are brought in « by a truly talented circuitousness »<sup>5</sup> to pad the opening. An

4. WILLIAM WETMORE STORY, Letter to Lowell, *William Wetmore Story and His Friends From Letters, Diaries, and Recollections*, by HENRY JAMES, I (New York, 1957), 209-210.

5. RICHMOND CROOM BEATTY, *James Russell Lowell* (Nashville, 1942), p. 115. Mr. Beatty is the only recent biographer of Lowell to deal with the « Journal » in any depth.

introduction to the chief mate follows, then after a brief tribute to the cleanliness of an English inn at Malta, the heart of the work is reached.

Once on course, Lowell immediately sheers off again. It is not until Fielding, Goethe, Ovid, Pepys, Montaigne, and Boswell are tacked on that he finally settles down with his first observation about Italy, which is one that hardly required a 6,000 mile voyage to confirm: « To the American, especially if he be of an imaginative temper, Italy has a deep charm. She gives him cheaply what gold cannot buy for him at home, a Past at once legendary and authentic, and in which he has equal claim with every other foreigner » (« Journal », p. 148).

One would think that a critical sensibility as sharp as Lowell's would have insured the author against the pitfalls of what he himself called the « peripatetic lectures ». Yet the irony is even more obvious for after this display of learning, Lowell advances the idea that the successful travel book is one which tells what the author has actually seen. « In ninety-nine books out of a hundred does not the tourist bore us with the sensations he thinks he ought to have experienced, instead of letting us know what he saw and felt? » (« Journal », p. 146). In practice Lowell is so far from his theory that the opening almost becomes an unconscious parody of the type of travel book he condemned. The subject of Italy is smothered under a tedious blanket of learning, and it appears that although Lowell had the urge to write, he had little to say.

A possible interpretation of Lowell's flabby and discursive style at this point in the « Journal » is that the style is a mask of his real thoughts as opposed to his declared ones. Lowell knew that Italy was the centre of art and civilization and he knew what the appropriate reaction ought to have been. But since he is unwilling to reveal the discrepancy between what he expected and what he experienced, Lowell turns instinctively, as it were, to lengthy and erudite references « like a cuttlefish squirting ink ».

The « facts » which are disguised by the pages of false enthusiasm are, of course, Lowell's disappointments with his

actual experiences in Italy. Before Lowell had visited Rome he told his father that « I find nothing abroad which, after being seen, would tempt me away from Elmwood again. I enjoy Art here, but I shall equally enjoy it there in the retrospect »<sup>6</sup>. Then shortly after the family had settled in Rome, Lowell assured his sister-in-law that « there is no particular danger at present of my becoming attached to 'furrin parts'. I have found nothing yet so good as Cambridge, & am neither so enchanted with the people or the scenery as Story thought I must be ». The peasants were dirty and ignorant and Lowell was depressed by their superstitious outlook. « Modern Rome », he continued, « is not much, & sometimes, as I look from the Pincian, I think that the best thing about it is that the hills look like Brighton » (*Maria Lowell*, p. 137).

Both of these comments offer interesting insights into Lowell's attitude towards traveling. Going abroad is a matter of temptation for Lowell and, once tempted, the pleasures of sin rarely equaled his anticipation of enjoyment. However, when the plunge had been made, Lowell's chief concern was to enjoy the art of Italy with the intention of enjoying it in retrospect at home. One begins to suspect that Lowell would have preferred to have gone on with his study of Italy comfortably seated by the fire in his library at Elmwood, rather than continuing with the hardships of foreign travel. As Mrs. Lowell remarked, one of the things which gave her « a little home feeling » in Rome was the sight of a bundle of *Examiners* and *Athenaeums* « and James selecting his segar with particular satisfaction, and giving the fire an express arrangement, and then drawing up his chair to it and putting his feet on the fender, beginning to read » (*Maria Lowell*, p. 135).

If Lowell left his fireside at Elmwood with some misgivings, it seems likely that he was temporarily borne along by the enthusiasm of Story for Italy. But as the letter to Mrs. Howe indicates, Lowell soon began to question Story's judge-

6. Lowell, letter to his father, *The Poems of Maria Lowell with Unpublished Letters and a Biography*, by HOPE JILLSON VERNON, Brown University Studies, II (Providence, 1936), 131.

ment. A divergence of opinion developed between the two friends which became a regular subject for debate in the quiet winter evenings of Rome. In one side there was Story putting the case for the expatriate: « Every day that I live here I love Italy better and life in America seems less and less satisfactory » (*William Wetmore Story and His Friends*, I, 253). Time only hardened this feeling and Story's dissatisfaction with New England turned into a broad indictment of American life.

We love nothing, we criticize everything. Even the very atmosphere is critical . . . The heart grows into stone . . . There is no hearty love of anything, for we are afraid of making a mistake . . . I disbelieve in the superior honesty of the Americans (*William Wetmore Story and His Friends*, I, 298-299).

On the other hand, Lowell countered Story's criticism by arguing that the advantages of the Old and New Worlds were reciprocal. In « Cambridge Thirty Years Ago » he suggested that « an orb and a balanced life would revolve between the Old and New as opposite, but not antagonistic poles, the true equator lying somewhere midway between them » (*Fireside Travels*, p. 3). Nevertheless, despite this idea of a compromise, Lowell's heart was as deeply rooted in New England as Story's was in Rome; but it was not until Lowell had lived in Italy that he found himself on this side of the fence. Once in Europe, Lowell's ideas crystalized and he soon began to question his bookish enchantment with Italy. He suggested to Story that « the wisest man was he who stayed at home; that to see the antiquities of the Old World was nothing, since the youth of the world was really no farther away from us than our own youth; and that . . . we had also in America things amazingly old » (*Fireside Travels*, p. 11). In a similar vein, Lowell began to think that his interest in material antiquity was « most factitious ». « The relations of the races to the physical world (only to be studied fruitfully on the spot) do not excite in me an interest at all proportionate to that I feel in their influence on the moral advance of mankind, which one may as easily trace in his own library as on the spot » (« Journal », p. 247).

Story's reaction to these sentiments was to charge Lowell with provincialism, a charge which, as Lowell tells us, he bore serenely. After all, the experiment had not proved useless for, if nothing else, it had helped Lowell organize his thinking. In « Cambridge Thirty Years Ago » Lowell reflected on his experience: « The wise man travels to discover himself; it is to find himself out that he goes out of himself and his habitual associations, trying everything in turn till he find that one activity, that royal standard, sovran over him . . . toward which all the . . . powers of his nature . . . gather joyfully, as to the comon rallying-point of their loyalty » (*Fireside Travels*, p. 10).

The common rallying-point of Lowell's loyalty, as he quickly discovered, was his faith in America. Europe was a place « where men had done living for the present » while America was a land of potential. « And if, in our rapidly moving country, one feels sometimes as if he had his home on a railroad train, is there not also a satisfaction in knowing that one *is* going *some* where? » (*Fireside Travels*, p. 10).

It is unfortunate that Lowell did not spend more time on the development of these ideas in the « Journal » and abandon the loose organization of his personal diary in which he recorded his observations as they came to him. The result would have made the « Journal » a more substantial travel book, and further analysis by Lowell of his ideas about Italy and America would have been welcome. Nevertheless, the « Journal » is not without interest in this respect for Lowell does attempt to continue the debate about the Old and New Worlds with Story. Admittedly the manner is rather oblique, but by attempting to combat Story's arguments, Lowell develops an attack which foreshadows Mark Twain's in *Innocents Abroad* (1869). Briefly, Lowell's dissatisfaction with Europe sharpened his insight into the sham of foreign travel. Lowell soon noticed how absurd the veneration for Europe was and, like Twain, he laughed at the Americans for taking the tour of enlightenment too seriously. « What tortures have we not seen the worthiest people go through in endeavoring to get up the



appropriate emotion before some famous work in a foreign gallery, when the only sincere feeling they had was a praiseworthy desire to escape. If one does not like the Venus of Milos, let him not fret about it, for he may be sure she never will » (« Journal », p. 147).

Even the British, who ought to have known better, were just as likely as the culturally deprived Americans to make themselves « the gulls of what we call classical antiquity ». One day Lowell observed three young Englishmen going through the Vatican by catalogue and number « in a fashion which John Bull is apt to consider exclusively American. 'Number 300!' says the one with catalogue and pencil; 'have you seen it?' 'Yes', answer his comrades, and, checking it off, he goes on with Number 301 ». Having seen the agonies of many pilgrims in their desire to have « the correct sensation before many hideous examples of antique bad taste », Lowell's heart warmed to the business-like British, who were « doing their aesthetics in this thrifty auctioneer fashion. . . . Europe were worth visiting, if only to be rid of this one old man of the sea » (« Journal », pp. 248-249).

The next step in this liberation was to set forth one's own responses to the glories of the past. Unlike Twain, Lowell was more receptive to the painting and sculpture of Italy, and he took pleasure in learning to recognize the styles and techniques of the various masters. Nevertheless, Lowell shared Twain's fondness for comments that were iconoclastic, to say the least.

Shall I confess it? Michael Angelo seems to me, in his angry reaction against sentimental beauty, to have mistaken bulk and brawn for the antithesis of feebleness. He is the apostle of the exaggerated, the Victor Hugo of painting and sculpture. I have the feeling that rivalry was a more powerful motive with him than love of art, that he had the conscious intention to be original, which seldom leads to anything better than being extravagant.

As though surprised at himself, Lowell did add that, on second thoughts, his criticism was « perhaps somewhat niggardly », so he turned to give his doubts about domes instead.

« In Rome they are so much the fashion that I felt as if they were the goitre of architecture. Generally they look heavy. Those on St. Mark's in Venice are the only light ones I ever saw » (« Journal », pp. 240-242).

Regretably, as in other parts of the « Journal », Lowell's thoughts wander off and he remains inconclusive on the subject of art and cathedrals. His iconoclastic criticism was more tentative than Twain's, which may be the result of a greater degree of timidity on Lowell's part. It was one thing to offer a counter argument to Story's eulogy on Italy and another to rite a book like *Innocents Abroad*.

There is also another factor to be reckoned with. Lowell's response to Italy was a complex one and it would be foolish to simplify everything he said as a reply to Story. Undoubtedly some of his remarks may be interpreted in this context, for the fact that the Edelman Storg is so frequently referred to shows that Lowell was writing with a particular audience in mind. However, Lowell was a free agent who was as likely to praise as well as criticize. When Lowell found something he admired, like the impetuosity of the Italians for example, he followed up by reflecting about his own countrymen. America, he said, seems a land without thunderstorms. The nation is materialistic, and in proportion as the commercial instinct dominates, do not Americans also become dispassionate and incapable of electric emotions? Men cannot live by intellect alone. « On the whole, I am rather inclined to like this European impatience and fire, . . . and sometimes find myself surmising whether a people who, like the Americans, put up quietly with all sorts of petty personal impositions and injustices, will not at length find it too great a bore to quarrel with great public wrongs » (« Journal », p. 201).

Apart from general observations about Italians, the « Journal » contains several interesting reflections on some of the institutions of their country. Inevitably the Roman Church was discussed, but unlike most of the visitors who recoiled in Protestant horror, Lowell offered an imaginative defence: « Suppose that a man in pouring down a glass of claret could

drink the south of France, that he could so disintegrate the wine by the force of imagination as to taste in it all the clustered beauty and bloom of the grape, all the dance and song and sunburnt jollity of the vintage ». This is what the great poets do for us, and it is what the Catholic Church does for religion, « feeding the soul not with the essential religious sentiment, not with a drop or two of the tincture of worship, but making us feel one by one all those original elements of which worship is composed » (« Journal », pp. 228-229). This was the one church, Lowell thought, which had been loyal to both the heart and soul of Man, that had clung to her faith in the imagination, and that had refused to give over her symbols and images « to the perilous keeping of the iconoclast Understanding ».

If the Catholic Church did not stir Lowell to anger, there was always the condition of the beggars. Practically every literary traveler from Macaulay to Twain has come away with his indignant story of the prevalence of begging and the continual cry for alms. Lowell, however, treated this « institution », as he called it, with sympathy and humor. « They are a merry race, on the whole », he concludes, « and quick-witted like the rest of their countrymen ». In support of the latter point, Lowell tells how he tried to confuse a begging friar who asked him for a subscription towards the repair of of his convent. « Ah, but I am a heretic », Lowell replied. « Undoubtedly », shrugged the friar, « but your money is perfectly orthodox » (« Journal », p. 246).

These observations of Lowell's indicate that there were rewarding experiences in Rome which compensated for his disenchantment with Italy. Indeed, once the family had been settled and brighter news about his father's health received, Lowell enjoyed himself. There were private theatricals in which he took part, long walks in the sun, and a pleasant mild winter. His wife was happy too, rejoicing in « day after day and week after week of sunshine », which came as a welcome relief from the bleak New England winter. Thus, in later years, Lowell looked back on this happy interval with pleasure, and the pro-

spect of returning to Italy continued to have a special thrill for him. « The foreboding of Italy fills me with new life and soul », he wrote to W. J. Stillman after spending a « wretched winter » in Dresden in 1856<sup>7</sup>. And of all the European cities which Lowell had visited, it was Florence that won his special affection. Lowell suggested that Florence may well rank next to Athens as a city of inspiration to men for « there is no modern city about which cluster so many elevating associations, none in which the past is so contemporary with us in unchanged buildings and undisturbed monuments »<sup>8</sup>.

These are strange observations, one might add, for the writer who declared that the wisest man was he who stayed at home. Altogether, Lowell spent almost thirteen years on the continent. However, after the 1851-52 trip, Lowell's visits were for more business-like reasons. He took his professorship of Modern Languages seriously and spent much of his time abroad mastering written and spoken French, Italian, German, and Spanish, besides eight years in Madrid and London as a diplomat. Moreover, these years away from America served, in one sense, only to heighten his nostalgia for his home country. He frequently complained of homesickness and longed to get back to his « reeky old den at Elmwood » (Norton, II, 111). To his daughter he confided that « the fall of dynasties is less to me than the dropping of a calf by one of Ned's favorite cows, and I would rather hear how you are dressed than see all the museums of Europe »<sup>9</sup>.

Nevertheless, Lowell did not allow these sentiments to cloud his understanding, and while his reflections on Europe were often critical, he avoided being negative and destructive. Lowell realized, perhaps better than any of his contemporaries,

7. LOWELL, letter to W. J. Stillman, *Letters of James Lowell*, ed. CHARLES ELIOT NORTON, I (New York, 1894), 257.

8. LOWELL, « *The Shadow of Dante*, » by Maria Francesca Rossetti (Boston, 1872), *The North American Review*, CXV (July, 1872), 140.

9. LOWELL, letter to his daughter, *New Letters of James Russell Lowell*, ed. M. A. WOLF HOWE (New York, 1932), p. 163.

the intellectual inheritance America received from the Old World and was always ready to acknowledge it. Also, since Lowell tried to practice what he preached, his reaction towards Europe was generally free from a narrow and chauvinistic spirit. There is, in fact, a distinctly cosmopolitan tone to his thinking which is recognizable early in his career. In his Introduction to *The Pioneer*, Lowell warned that while America lacked her own writers, a national literature was something to avoid for anything « that tends to encourage the sentiment of *caste*, to widen the boundary between races, and so put off the hope of one great brotherhood, should be steadily resisted by all good men »<sup>10</sup>.

It is no exaggeration to say that Lowell himself was one of the good men who attempted to marrow the boundaries between the races. Admittedly, the realization of one great brotherhood was an ambitious prospect for him to have entertained, but it is to Lowell's credit that he infused his work with this hope; and as either a social reformer or literary critic, his concern for men and literature knew no national boundaries. Paradoxically though, it was not until Lowell visited Italy that he understood how deeply he was rooted in his own native soil. As his friend Leslie Stephen remarked, « Cosmopolitan as he was, with the literature not only of England but of France and Italy at his fingers' ends, the genuine Yankee . . . was never far below the surface » (Norton, I, 409).

But the words of one friend, however perceptive, rarely embody the whole man, and Stephen's brushing off Lowell as a Hosea Biglow is not an adequate estimation of his cosmopolitanism. If we are to adopt some kind of terminology to characterize Lowell's response to Europe, it might be more profitable to refer to Margaret Fuller. Over a hundred years ago she listed Americans in Europe under three headings: the servile American, who came abroad to spend his money and indulge his tastes, the conceited American, instinctively proud

10. LOWELL, *The Pioneer: A Literary Magazine*, introd. by Sculley Bradley, *Scholars' Facsimiles and Reprints* (New York, 1947), p. 1.

and bristling, and the thinking American. It is to the latter class that James Russel Lowell belongs —

a man who, recognizing the immense advantages of being born to a new world and on a virgin soil, yet does not wish one seed from the past to be lost. He is anxious to gather and carry back with him every plant that will bear a new climate and new culture. Some will dwindle; others will attain a bloom and stature unknown before. He wishes to gather them clean, free from noxious insects, and to give them a fair trial in his new world. And that he may know the conditions under which he may best place them in that new world, he does not neglect to study their history in this <sup>11</sup>.

This was the balanced life that Lowell aspired to and, to paraphrase Henry James, if Lowell was American enough in Europe, in America he was abundantly European <sup>12</sup>.

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11. MARGARET FULLER OSSOLI, *At Home and Abroad, Or Things and Thoughts in America and Europe* (Boston, 1856), pp. 250-252.

12. HENRY JAMES, « James Russell Lowell », *The Atlantic Monthly*, LXX (January, 1892), 37.