The Mission of the Poet.
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The Mission of the Poet

Emerging from the territory of the past, whose confines have been slowly but surely receding for centuries, men stand today in a broader, more comprehensive light than at any time which history records. Ideas of narrowness and superstition which, by their very age and blindness, made men afraid to attack them, have been explained and dissolved, and the true representative of the life of the nineteenth century takes a broad, liberal view of all which goes to make up the real world life. No longer are the myriad things of earth and air considered as separate and unrelated; they are, on the other hand, like the organs of the human body, parts of one infinitesimal mechanism. Each works for the benefit of the other, and everything, great and small, animate and inanimate, human and divine, has its place to fill in the ever-widening picture, its duty to perform in order that the whole may be done.
As it may be said that the system in which we live is composed of smaller worlds, each on the same general, but of course vary much smaller plan. The vegetable world, the animal kingdom, the geologic system, all add their vast and important elements; and last and greatest in creation and development appears the universality of mankind, endowed with qualities which raise it far above its contemporaries and surrounding, yet showing in its composition the same variety in form, appearance and substance which is seen in other integral parts of the whole, and in the whole itself. I simply call attention to this uniformity of nature, in order that all may be considered on this broad basis; for just as I believe the great Father of Nature was placed as it is to make a fertile valley between the American desert and the rocky slopes of the Appalachian Mountains, so I believe that the Poet of all ages has had, has, and ever will have a mission to fulfil.
a garden of fruitfulness, beauty and strength to nourish
and bring to its best.

And just as there are but few such rivers as the
Mississippi, so there are but few men endowed with
those inborn qualities which characterize a poet. He
breathes the same air which gives life to other men;
he has the same business dealings with the world
which other men have, yet he is different from them all.
He lives in a manner unlike the existence of the
masses, but only because he has the power to make his
life unlike theirs. Save some things which are hered-
itary, men start with a foundation of great similarity,
and the edifice which they raise upon this foundation
depends almost wholly upon the individuality of the
builder. Looking at the poets of the world, we find them
to be men who have developed themselves further than
their contemporaries, men who have felt from their
some of the manifold thoughts and things of
which the lyric muse has sung, and who have with
determination worked to present their thought to their
fellow beings.
To be successful and influential, the poet must
be a keen, observing student of human nature. He must
study the lives of others to see and understand what there
is in them of value and interest. He must feel that symp-
athy for them which nothing but his own experience can
bring. He must weave himself into the mutual life of
nature and humanity so that he can feel them both,
make himself one with them, and bring them more and
more together. And he must have that which is hardest of
all to acquire, the power of expressing his thoughts in
words which shall reach the hearts of his readers and
hearers. He must have more than the nameless thrill
which shoots through the human breast at the sight
of a beautiful picture, a suffering animal, or a fleeting storm. He must have the knowledge, strength, and emotion to interpret this feeling, to give it to men in words which they can understand from sympathy and experience, not logic; and he who has finest, clearest access to the soul-life of mankind is the truest, greatest poet.

Endowed with such qualities as these, and with the ambition to go onward and upward which these qualities inevitably bring in every healthy nature, a man is fitted, and ought, to do something for his fellows. Everyone can do something and ought to do all in his power in this direction, in which lies the real sweetness of life and worth of existence. Certainly then he who is more richly blessed than others with gifts which he may sham has so much the greater responsibility upon himself, so much the greater duty to the rest of the world. No man has a right to keep anything absolutely, selfishly to himself. This age
is indebted to all others for what it now is, for it is but a natural result. We are all infinitesimal parts of the working, throbbing world of today, and no one has the moral right to keep from others that which may be of any use to anyone.

Giving them no responsibility out of proportion to their strength, I nevertheless think that poets of all time have had an important work to do. And never has it been more important or more powerful than it is today, when science, education, and invention have brought men nearer a level than they have ever been. It is true that they are still very far from a common standing-ground, but they are nearing it constantly, and the means of communication between the extremes of elevation and depression are becoming constantly more complete. To better the condition of average humanity is the great question of the world today, and no one of
education or influence is totally free from some responsibility in this matter. It is a problem which has been growing graver and mightier since civilization began, the elements in it have made and destroyed governments which seemed more lasting than granite, and still it is unsolved. And its solution can not come from any one mighty, superhuman man, but must be brought about by thousands of civilized beings, working through centuries for a common result.

Believing that the poet's peculiar powers have fitted him to do comparatively much for others, I believe that in this direction lies the truest life-work of such men as Tennyson and Browning, Lowell and Longfellow, Wordsworth and Bryant. And an important work it is, for it is to remain, strong, vigorous, and helpful, long after its architects have gone to their eternal home. It is to be handed down not simply
from one library shelf to another, but from the heart of father to son, from the soul and brain of each generation to its successor. For a closer consideration of this subject (though it is almost too broad to be closely considered), let the poet's duty be divided, as follows:

I. To afford men a means of rest and refuge from the prosaic lines of business life.

II. To broaden their views of human life, nature, and character, and give them visions of nobler ideals and better things to live for.

III. Develop to the fullest extent possible the feeling of sympathy between man and nature, as an attempt to reach the broadest, truest life of this universe.

The first poetry of which we know anything was sung. Out of the music of the ancient minstrel came the poetry, rather than out of the poetry came...
The task of these bands was to give rest and recreation to the nobles who patronized them, and time, scientific investigation, and advance in human thought have but broadened and increased this power of the singer of early times. Instead of hearing only of the knightly deeds of some hero, the progress in civilization, thought, and education of man has brought it to pass that we now hear descriptions of the pleasures and trials, successes and failures, of our daily life. Instead of the wealth of poetic inspiration and expression being denied to all except the very rich and powerful, the printing press has brought this same wealth close to the hearts and lives of the common people of today, the workers of the age. And this has been needed most by those from whom it has been longest kept away. We never appreciate anything so much as that which
we really need, and for that very reason the works of Longfellow and Whittier do more, and are more deeply felt and loved, in the home of the family of workers than in the mansion of the millionaire. It is not physical but mental weariness that makes men wish for an early death, and it is to this tired, longing mind that the sympathetic poet gives the cordial of quiet and rest. That which a man can feel from his own experience, which he knows to be his own, will never fail to aid him. Why, we do not know; it may be because there is comfort in the feeling of sympathy which arises, it may be from some other hidden cause, but for some reason the help comes. Such poems as "The Day is Done" have a place in the life of humanity today that nothing else can fill. Tennyson's "Docksley Hall" and "Break, Break, Break," and Wordsworth's "Ode on Immortality" have refreshed and strengthened many a weary reader when no one
Seemed able to reach the source of the sorrowful burden.
And, most beautiful of all, Longfellow's "Evangeline" is loved
as a living character, giving as it does an eternal example
of the real divinity - which there may be in a true human
affection. Such poems have a wonderful
  power to quiet
The restless pulse of care,
And come like the benediction
That follows after prayer.

Another thing which the poet of today can do, is to
render material assistance in broadening the views of men,
and in showing them visions of higher, better things for
which to live. This is an important element in the onward
march of civilization, and becomes a greater and
greater one as progress is made in other directions.
Being thus essential as it is, no one is better fitted to
promote advancement in this direction than he who
has the character of the real poet. For he lives in two worlds. First in his sphere of thought and mental action, studying, thinking, surrounding himself with the latest and most advanced ideas of present and past. He learns from others, creates in himself, and then comes forth into the world of suffering and toil, giving to it the result of his work, clothed in the peculiar verbal raiment which makes it attractive to all.

He has that acquaintance with the people of the world which enables him to know how to reach them. He has the power of expression which gives him the means of reaching them, he holds in his hand an instrument which may be made to act as a powerful lever in the mental improvement of the age. The world of steel and iron, of steam and electricity, will always receive its full share of attention. But in man's ideas of a broad, developed physical universe, he is in danger
of forgetting the soul—life of his fellows. The poet is
the one of all others to guard against this unintentional
neglect, and Longfellow and Tennyson are as much
needed in their sphere, are of as much value and
do as much good, as are Edison and Ericsson in the
world of the harnessed lightning and iron. Of no more
importance and depth of meaning is Prof. Thurston's
magnificent prophecy concerning the advancement of
science, than the dying poet's prediction that the time
will come

When this our holy Church
Shall melt away in ever-widening walls,
And be for all mankind, and in its place
A mightier Church shall come, whose covenant word
Shall be the deeds of love. Not Credo thus——
Ave shall be the pass-word through its gate.
Man shall not ask his brother any more
Believeth thou? but Lovest thou? till all
shall answer at God's altar, Lord, I love."

What more unselfish ideal of the perfect brotherhood of
man could be held, and in what more attractive,
impressive way could it be given to the world? In such
thoughts as these, in such words as I have quoted, lies
the poet's power to elevate and better his fellow-
creatures; he can influence them in a way to which
no others can attain, and he ought never to miss an
opportunity for so doing. The more a man is given
to do with, the more ought he to do, for we have nothing
which should remain dormant or hidden, nothing
which should not be turned to some use.

But the noblest part of the duty of the poet, the
part for which he is fitted far above any one else
in the mass of humanity, is to develop to the fullest
extent the feeling of sympathy between man and
nature. In various degrees of intensity this feeling has existed since the beginning, but never so generally and clearly as now. One barrier after another has been broken down, and the crumbling ruins illuminated by the light which banishes gloom from the inner as well as the outward life of man. Rivals he may have in his other works, but in demonstrating the unity of the universe, in bringing men to understand and appreciate it, no one is so well prepared as He who walks with God upon the hills. And sees, each morn, the world arise anew, bathed in light of Paradise. He hears the laughter of her hills, her melodies of many voices, and greets her while his heart rejoices. She to his spirit undefiled.
Make answer as a little child;
unveiled before his eyes she stands
And gives his secrets to his hands."

Here lies that work which is most peculiarly
his own. He of the poetic temperament feels far more
than any other this uniformity of nature, and touch
with gentleness, sympathetic fingers the corresponding chord
in the souls of mankind. He feels that mental, spiritual
ether which pervades the breadth and depth of
the universe, and has the power to reveal and
communicate his feelings to those who surround
him. He sees life and loneliness in everything
about him; to him
"The storm, the wind. The lightnings' flash
Give forth, unasked for and alike, their beauty;
to him, above all others, God has given the power
to draw into closer and more eternal union the
infinite creations of His hand.

Thus I believe that the poet has a distinct and
important duty to perform for his fellow creatures, in
bringing rest and courage, in broadening man's ideas
and raising his ideals. He works in common with
others, his labors as fruitful and important as theirs.
But in strengthening the transparent bonds which clasp
the universal life together, in raising men nearer
to the image of their Creator, lies his noblest, holiest work.
And when the last cloud of ignorance and superstition
has vanished before the sunlight of knowledge and
truth; when all mankind shall derive its sweetest,
most comfort from the life of Nature which is
through, and around, and above us, when the
selfish, principle of world life shall be fixed
in the soul of man too firmly for earthly doubt or
questioning, then will the mission of the poet be
fulfilled. Till that time comes, the poet's grandest
work will lie in bringing man nearer to his ideals,
nearer to the best that is in him, nearer to his God.

Conclusion.

Believing that the principle of doing for others is thor-
oughly established, I have prepared to base my statements
concerning the mission of the poet upon his fitness and
ability to do, and upon what he has done. Without pre-
etting to more than touch upon so large a subject, I have
written this concerning it. Hoping that those into whose hands
this manuscript may fall during its brief existence will
lay it down with a better, truer recognition of the value of
poetry, of the power and worth of the poet.

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