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## JOHN LIVINGSTON LOWES, SCHOLAR-TEACHER

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For many years after 1918 graduate students in Harvard's Widener Library noticed a man probably no taller than John Keats—one, too, who understood that poet's being sensitive about his stature—charging through the stacks with as much speed as stacks permitted, not as much as a football field would have made possible; even if he was only verifying a reference, observers felt he was making the scholastic equivalent of a touchdown. John Livingston Lowes, born at Decatur, Indiana, on 20 December 1867, was not a youth even in 1918, but in succeeding years his hair and small mustache remained dark, untinged by gray, and his movements lively, for there can be no loitering in paths that lead to Xanadu. Youths said to have speculated that he wore a wig abandoned such notions when they saw a barber giving him a shampoo. Sometimes he smoked a pipe as he walked across the Yard to a lecture hall. According to tradition, once or twice, growing more intent on the coming lecture, often to a large audience, he thrust his pipe in his pocket before entirely extinguishing what glowed within, setting his coat afire.

To be sure, in a figurative sense the aim of John Lowes was to kindle. He realized how electric effects require two poles, but he hoped to do for others what a great teacher had done for him. He was sure that only mastery of a subject could extract from it the highest degree of interest but that facts must be interpreted with imaginative vision so as to stir intellectual curiosity. In talking to a large class, perhaps consisting of both undergraduates and graduate students, he liked to raise questions not always answered either by his auditors or himself, leading at least some to investigate those questions in the library, thus taking a step toward intellectual independence. Such a goal apart from its vehicle is an abstraction. When Lowes stepped to the lectern on which he laid the bag usually containing books (for him reading from books was more suitable than quoting from papers) students knew they would soon hear a booming voice but not *vox et praeterea nihil*.

A few students may have preferred instructors who did not seek to stimulate but only to convey masses of information that such students could echo in examinations. When undergraduates tried to offset inadequate preparation by seeking help from a commercial group in

the business of coaching students by using notes made of lectures during a preceding year, Lowes amused the class by quoting from a student's paper passages that he branded as "musty." When he sometimes allowed undergraduates to bring books to an examination if they wished, reporters for a city newspaper wrote of what they considered a surprising innovation. The students, however, discovered that examinations were intended to test powers of synthesis and interpretation necessarily grounded on memory of their reading and that limitations of time made much consultation of books unprofitable. Undergraduates were sometimes asked to write essays in class. Graduate students in classes also open to them were expected to write more extensive papers on topics approved by the instructor, requiring research.

The teacher-scholar had been born with extraordinary mental capacity, including an astonishing memory, and, the son of a Presbyterian minister, was reared by parents who valued good books. He graduated with first honors from Washington and Jefferson College (in Washington, Pennsylvania; founded in 1781) and for three years after his graduation (1888-91) taught mathematics while earning an M.A. degree. Then, with his father's example in mind, he entered the Western Theological Seminary, from which he graduated in 1894. In 1894-95 he studied at the universities of Leipzig and Berlin. Among other advantages in studying abroad was adding a better knowledge of German to a linguistic equipment that was to include command of the classical tongues, Italian, and French, besides proficiency in others, like Old French and the older periods of English. Goethe became a mentor whom he often quoted. Lowes had been licensed to preach, though it is not recorded that he ever occupied a pulpit. After his death, John S. P. Tatlock, a friend and for some years a Harvard colleague, wrote that Lowes "might be thought an illustration of the frequent enrichment of university teaching through the mental and moral energy, refinement and cultivation of men who in earlier generations would have gone into the Church."<sup>1</sup> Lowes's intimate knowledge of the Bible, of theology and the great divines, left its mark on what he wrote; if an essentially religious man may be viewed, as he is in the philosophy of John Dewey, as a man devoted to ideal ends, Lowes remained concerned in the welfare of others. When he returned from Germany, he was Professor of Ethics and Christian Evidences at Hanover College, in his native state, Indiana, but the title did not cover all he taught and soon it became (1901-02) Professor of English Language and Literature.

In the fall of 1902 Lowes entered the Harvard Graduate School and at once came under the spell of George Lyman Kittredge, whom he always considered one of the two really great teachers he had encountered during a period of eleven years spent in graduate and professional schools. Those who have studied Shakespeare or Chaucer or *Beowulf* under Kittredge do not need to be told why Lowes was attracted to one he always liked to think of as his master, a man of overpowering personality who could communicate, and on occasion create, the dramatic, whose complete command of a subject under discussion could throw light on it from his unique range of reading and experience. He could electrify as well as inform, and was a nonpareil in the direction of graduate students. It is safe to surmise that during their discussions of Lowes's thesis on Chaucer's *Legend of Good Women*, which Kittredge directed, some cigars passed from master to disciple. At one time most Harvard graduate students in English heard that, at the time of Lowes's doctoral examination, Kittredge remarked with satisfaction that it had been more like a conference of scholars than an examination.

Before returning to Harvard as a member of the faculty, Lowes held two professorships of English literature, the first at Swarthmore College (1905-09) and the second at Washington University (1909-18), St. Louis, where he was briefly also Dean of the College (1913-14), a teacher to whom an edition of the annual was dedicated as a token of esteem. An appeal to his loyalty, according to Tatlock, resulted also in his serving as Dean of the Graduate School at Harvard during 1924-25; he was also Chairman of the Department of English for a short time. He was regarded as a skilled administrator but got rid of such duties as soon as he could do so gracefully, for he always preferred teaching.

In 1912 Lowes published an edition of Shakespeare's *All's Well That Ends Well*, a volume in the Tudor Shakespeare series. Few readers consider it one of Shakespeare's better plays—a play in which Lowes, like other commentators, found the central interest in the character of Helena. One could still turn to the notes and glossary as aids to understanding the text, and, if not already versed in such topics, could find tidbits like the explanation of “making a leg” as bowing by “drawing one leg backward” or of some Elizabethans' custom of wearing toothpicks “in the hat or on a ribbon.”

Lowes was probably asked to edit the Shakespeare play because of his articles on Chaucer in learned periodicals. To the satisfaction of most scholars, including W. W. Skeat, editor of the great Oxford text of Chaucer, Lowes proved that, of the two versions of the Prologue to *The Legend of Good Women*, the version printed as the earlier version was really a revision. Study of the French poets Deschamps, Froissart, and Machaut made clear the conventions of older verse adapted in that Prologue. Modern readers may justly admire Chaucer's tribute to the daisy but should not accept as autobiographical lines some earlier commentators interpreted as meaning that the poet—a middle-aged diplomat and a shrewd man of affairs—arose early in the morning to see the daisy. He portrays that flower as surpassing others in beauty and fragrance, but he must have known that the English daisy is odorless and that the wild rose can be more beautiful. French poets had developed a cult of the daisy, beginning with praise of a woman named Marguerite, in French a word meaning both "daisy" and "pearl." It became conventional to use superlatives of the flower. After the poet falls asleep, the god of love and Alcestis, queen of women whose fidelity in love gives them a place among Cupid's saints, appear. Alcestis wears a crown of daisy-like flowers above the gold ornament on her hair, the gold corresponding to a color added to the white of the daisy, and the crown is made of a pearl (the other meaning of *marguerite*).

In 1918 Lowes returned to Harvard as a professor of English literature. In that year also he delivered the Lowell Institute lectures published as *Convention and Revolt in Poetry* (1919), a book that established his reputation far beyond academic circles. It was timely in touching upon a new movement in poetry, his friend Amy Lowell being among its leaders, and later pages, treating of poetry as a reflection of the English spirit as early as "The Battle of Maldon," recall the great war then raging. But it was concerned with central and recurring movements and influences in the history of poetry, and is still pleasantly instructive. In illustrating adaptations of conventions and revolt against them, Lowes could draw upon an acquaintance with poetry of many centuries and nations; one is not surprised that he chose some from his studies of Chaucer. A salient passage shows how cleverly that poet draws upon contemporary conventions to indicate the womanly traits of the Prioress, not submerged by her status as a nun. Incidentally, anyone who wishes to understand the Prioress better should in addition read the chapter on her in *Medieval*

*People*, a charming book by Eileen Power, and find historical substantiation. Lowes's acquaintance with medieval poetic convention was not lightly gained; for instance, he had read the 4800 eight-line stanzas of Deschamps, as well as much else by that poet, more than once. His knowledge of another kind of convention was based upon research for his article explaining "the lover's malady of Hereos," the symptoms of which Chaucer attributes to Arcite in "The Knight's Tale."<sup>2</sup> Lowes had found that the malady was described in detail by the famous physicians Chaucer himself mentions. *Hereos*, related to *Eros*, became associated with other words, including one for "hero," so that for the first time Lowes could explain not only the passage in Chaucer but also Robert Burton's "heroical love," emphasized in a section of *The Anatomy of Melancholy* that analyzes love-melancholy. Burton's literary masterpiece was also, as Sir William Osler recognized, a medical book, though Osler was probably unaware of the extent of Burton's indebtedness to medieval medical treatises. Polonius's description of Hamlet's supposed madness also reflects the medical ideas about melancholy associated with frustration in love. In discussing conventions, Lowes pointed out that the recoil from them may be extreme, as when Donne likened a flea to "a marriage temple"—a flea biting both the poet and his lady.

Some reviewers considered *Convention and Revolt in Poetry* the most discerning book on poetry in its generation. *The Road to Xanadu* (1927), the author's masterpiece, reached a wider audience in America and Europe. The *Yale Review* once included it in a short list of outstanding books published in the twentieth century. Imaginative vision that made the journey to Xanadu possible for the author, linked with skill in exposition, brought to some readers' minds the analogy with a detective novel. No other book had probed so deeply into the imaginative processes that create poetry or into a poet's mind. It is an adventurous journey on which the reader is led as the author interprets the rich associations out of which two poems by Coleridge grew. Encountered were many things besides old voyagers, "alligators and albatrosses...Cain, and the Corpo Santo; Dioclesian, king of Syria, and the daemons of the elements...meteors, and the old Man of the Mountain, and stars behind the moon...swoons, and spectres, and slimy seas; wefts, and water-snakes, and the Wandering Jew." Unlike much source-hunting, often abused—some of which may cast light on the nature of an author's originality or the extent to which his work is autobiographical or even aid interpretation of meaning (as was true of

more than one of Lowes's articles on Chaucer)—the long investigations for *The Road to Xanadu* had resulted in a work of art. To the revised edition of 1930 Lowes added "Addenda and Corrigenda"; for some small additions he was indebted to Alice Snyder, who later set forth more ideas of her own about *Kubla Khan*.

Graces of style are apparent—as in all of Lowes's other books—to the many readers of *The Road to Xanadu*. A masterful memory for apt quotations and beautifully adapted phrases did not bring to every reader the pleasure of recognition. Lowes once confided that a reviewer of *Convention and Revolt in Poetry* had praised him for a phrase used by Emerson. Other authors have had similar experiences. Unlike the scientist, the literary scholar cannot claim that the results of his research have obvious practical utility, though such a statement overlooks the pleasure of knowing. Beauty is useful, too, and sometimes literary scholars, in adding to the appreciation of literary beauty, have created works that may be read with pleasure. Thus they add a grace to the merely factual claim of accuracy.

The scholar's hope of reaching a wider audience depends on something more than expository skill that may suffice for scholarly articles, as Lowes suggested in an address delivered at a convocation for the conferring of advanced degrees at Brown University in June of 1932. He could not accept a fashionable dichotomy of scholar and teacher, though he was aware that learned men can be dull and that the superficial can be popular with students and administrators. We may suspect a distinction between those who can teach and those who create the illusion that they are teaching, though this distinction is not at once apparent to their classes. If a pleasant voice and manner disguise superficiality, the hungry sheep may look up but not be fed. "You cannot have," Lowes declared, "too many facts, unless—and here's the rub—you ossify in them." Those who once espoused the critical doctrine that nothing but the text of a poem has anything to do with its interpretation might consider an illustration that may seem less than pointed to some wielders of Alexandrian jargon. Lowes quotes extracts from Dorothy Wordsworth's journal about William's writing "The Butterfly," "The Cuckoo," and "My Heart Leaps Up" in the space of a few days in which he was also concerned with the "Ode on Intimations of Immortality." Lowes found, and felt, new meaning in the early stanzas of the great ode. Imaginative vision distinguishes the great teacher, Lowes explains. The questing scholar does not content himself with the notes of yesteryear in teaching, but imparts

freshness and spontaneity because he is constantly enlarging his own horizon. Lowes liked to use the incident of Newton's observing the fall of an apple to suggest the role of learning in research. It was only because of Newton's store of information that the fall of an apple set him on the path of his great discovery. Lowes could have used his own research as a similar illustration. The word *Hereos* encountered in his reading led him to understand "the lover's malady," but only because he remembered the relevant passages in Chaucer and Burton. The main subject of his lecture, however, was the relation of scholarship to teaching. He believed that students should be familiar with the great masterpieces before engaging in the kind of research that attempts to unearth new facts. For the sake of perspective, his address, published in the *American Scholar*,<sup>3</sup> could be read with profit by any teacher or graduate student. Douglas Bush is obviously correct in referring to it as Lowes's credo. Incidentally, I cannot find that Newton's classes at the University of Cambridge were crowded. If they were not, the fact could not be related to personality or teaching methods. University authorities would not have sought the opinion students might have had of their great master; one may remember, too, that Newton's was a century in which Thomas Gray was appointed to a professorship but delivered no lectures.

Early in 1932 Lowes gave six lectures on Chaucer at Swarthmore College; these were published in 1934, according to the terms of the William J. Cooper Foundation, with the title *Geoffrey Chaucer and the Development of His Genius*. Lowes enjoyed coming back to the college where he had once taught and renewing old acquaintance and friendship "nat newe to bigynne." He dedicated the book to George Lyman Kittredge, "Myn owene maister deere." Kittredge was pleased with a book that he considered a happy supplement to his own lectures in *Chaucer and His Poetry*.<sup>4</sup> "Backgrounds and Horizons," Lowes' introductory chapter, helps to bridge the gap between the poet's time and ours. Lowes discussed all the great poems, including *The Parliament of Fowls*, of which Kittredge had said little in *Chaucer and His Poetry*. Lowes's choice of material is somewhat different, too, in "The World of Books" and in treatment of *The Canterbury Tales* as a Human Comedy. Chaucer's poetry was for him, as for his master, the poetry of life. In pointing out the simple folktale pattern Chaucer uses in beginning his stories, he quotes the first two lines of "The Nun's Priest's Tale," which readers will remember as a simple statement that an aged widow was living in a small cottage. Lowes adds that he had



written that part of his lecture at an inn, regrettably not the Tabard, and then had gone upstairs; when he reached the landing he heard one woman say to another: "His mother was a widow, and had a little trimming store in Chester." The pattern of the statement reminded him again how near Chaucer was to everyday living and conversation. For his interpreter as for the poet himself, poetry is not something apart from life; it is life itself—"life taking form."

This does not mean that poetry must not be artistic. "The Art of Geoffrey Chaucer," originally an address to the British Academy, of which Lowes was a corresponding Fellow, appeared in *Essays in Appreciation* (1936), which included "The Noblest Monument of English Prose" (the King James Bible, of course) and "The Pilgrim's Progress," both worthy of their subjects. "Two Readings of Earth," on Meredith and Hardy, is a treatment of the outlook of these poets by a critic who believed that an interpreter of poetry needs to be poetic in spirit. In "An Unacknowledged Imagist" he reflects the relish he must have felt in printing several passages from Meredith, selected from his prose, as verse, to show how they read like imagistic poems. Amy Lowell is also the subject of an essay.

Naturally a scholar whose writings interested a wide public could count on recognition. Lowes became Francis Lee Higginson Professor of English Literature at Harvard in 1930, before filling an appointment to the first George Eastman Visiting Professorship at Oxford (1930-31), where he was made a Fellow of Balliol College. In 1933 he became a Senior Fellow in the ranks of the Fellows organized by President Lowell and in the same year served as president of the Modern Language Association of America. He was awarded honorary degrees by Oxford, Harvard, Yale, and five other institutions. The prestige-conferring organizations that sought him as a member—Lowes may have thought of them as "solemn troops and sweet societies"—included the American Philosophical Society, of which Benjamin Franklin was an organizer, the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, and the National Institute of Arts and Letters. In St. Louis, New York, and London, he could relax in clubs, being what Doctor Johnson would have regarded as a clubbable man; in Boston his clubs were the Saturday and the Club of Odd Volumes. A friend notes that, unlike an English wit who prepared means to introduce his own witticisms, Lowes was inclined to prepare the ground for others. In his writing his wit sometimes manifests itself in adapted phrases.

Even after passing the traditional threescore and ten, a man of

Lowes's energy and enthusiasm as a teacher found it difficult to retire; an admiring friend and colleague, Bliss Perry, who had retired in 1930 at the age of seventy, gently persuaded him to retire in 1939. His family life, like his professional career, had been happy. In 1897 he married Mary Cornett of Madison, Indiana; a son was born to the couple. Mrs. Lowes was known as an understanding wife and hostess in university circles. A visiting professor, Sir Maurice M. Bowra, the Greek scholar, comments on Lowes's genial conversation and states that during his visits he had not seen Mrs. Lowes. Evidently he did not know of her invalidism and increasing blindness during her last years. Aware of her husband's dependence upon her, she expressed the hope that she might survive him, as she did, dying only a few weeks after him. Lowes had planned to write on John Keats a book worthy to stand beside *The Road to Xanadu*. The Keats room in the Widener Library, which contains many books and manuscripts collected by Amy Lowell, may recall for some of us her glowing tribute to Lowes as a generous and friendly guide to her own biographical research. But while poetry is imperishable or can perish only with the race that cherishes it, a fine brain is at the mercy of Time's chariot. Lowes died of a cerebral hemorrhage on 15 August 1945. One may think of him as not only a great scholar-teacher but also one who, like Keats, enjoyed affinity with "Souls of poets dead and gone."

### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> From J. S. P. Tatlock's obituary of Lowes in *The American Philosophical Society Year Book 1945* (Philadelphia, 1946), pp. 379-381. For some facts I am indebted to this summary and to Douglas Bush's sketch in the *D. A. B.* My personal impressions are partly based on having three courses with Lowes and auditing others.

<sup>2</sup> "The Loveres Maladye of Hereos," *MP*, 11(1914), 491-546.

<sup>3</sup> "Teaching and the Spirit of Research," *ASch*, 2(1933), 28-38.

<sup>4</sup> *Chaucer and His Poetry* has not been superseded. The fifteenth printing by the Harvard University Press appeared in 1970, containing as introduction a vivid portrayal of Kittredge by B. J. Whiting, Kittredge's student and friend, who succeeded F. N. Robinson as a teacher of Chaucer.