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INTRODUCTION

THE POET AND HIS SURROUNDINGS

OF American poets Lowell is one of the most American. Wiser than the eccentric Whitman, wiser than our writers of *Columbiads* and epics of the red Indian, Lowell saw that the real American is not a new being, cut off from the literary tradition of the past. The American is the Englishman in a new world. He has brought with him the language, the traditions, the mental characteristics, the instincts of his ancestors; and he has modified these in accordance with his new environment. He has carried the old life into a new land, and the result, though with something of a "sea-change," is not wholly "new or strange."

Lowell stands, aggressively, perhaps, for the American of English descent, for the American whose "forebears" left England to carry on in a new country the spirit of the old. Few of our poets have studied with greater diligence the models of the past. Few have turned their eyes with such painstaking fidelity to the life about us. For Lowell's world is not conventional.

He does not give us laboriously imagined pictures of England or of Scotland. We have instead, "the hang-bird nests on the elm tree bough," "the icehouse-girdled pond," "half ventu'in' liverworts in furry coats," or "the catbird in the laylock bush." "Not ours," he tells us, "is the Old World's good" or the Old World's ill. We live our own life, with its own native ideals, in a land whose least details appeal to associated emotions.

In the *Pictures from Appledore*, an *Indian Summer Reverie*, *Under the Willows*, the poem on schooldays in the introduction to the first series of the *Biglow Papers*,—in all these, and in many others, one finds Lowell's love for the sights that he saw as a child,—that delighted wonder, that capability for rapture in little things, which makes the poet. It is not the things of which he reads that inspire him,—it is the things that he sees. And to us, who see and delight in the same sights that delighted him, his verse should appeal with deep-felt directness.

Conspicuous in Lowell's writings is his sense of humor. Not that, like many writers, he is inclined to separate the two rôles, poet and humorist; whatever he may have said of his "dual nature," Lowell saw beauty and imagined ideals with the same eyes with which he noted oddities of character or detected the absurdities of pretence. His humor is American,

keen, kindly, wholesome,—earth-born, yet heaven-seeking; never hesitating to proclaim truths however unheard of, to denounce falsehoods however established. In such a spirit lies safety. No sham can flourish in its presence, no wind-bag of grandiloquence resist its thrust. It is the humor, saving, through-seeing, nation-guiding, that gleams from the shrewd face of Franklin, or that smiles at us half sadly from the eyes of Lincoln.

No man possessing keenly this sense can fall deeply into sentimentality. The tearful sentimentalist takes himself with deadly seriousness. To Lowell the amiable insipidities of Willis and Percival were impossible. One half of his nature was on the watch to catch the other half in a pretence. In his letters jest and sober speculation mingle, but do not conflict. Honest humor and wholesome wit—not the cheap sneering that some think witty—can never be irreconcilable with any serious thought worth the thinking. Lowell is the same man in his letters as in his poems. There is no pose to be put off, no mask to be laid aside. He is, in all he writes, outspokenly himself.

Another element to be noted throughout his work is its youth. Shelley has been spoken of as the "eternal child." Perhaps all poets—all of real vitality—must have this eternity of childhood, this protracting of the wonder at the world and delight

in it that all feel in childhood, but that for most of us too soon passes, to "fade into the light of common day." He realized vividly, himself, his youth of spirit. He never, he says in one of his letters, could get to consider himself as anything more than a boy. His temperament was so youthful that whenever people solemnly consulted him, as if his opinion were worth anything, he could hardly help laughing. And he would think to himself, with a suppressed laugh, that the grave inquirer would be "as mad as a hornet" if he knew that he was consulting in reality a boy of twelve, masked by a "bearded visor." And in a letter, written in his old age, he jots down an imaginary anecdote about himself, telling how, passing a "Hospital for Incurable Children," he turned to his companion and said quietly, "There's where they'll send me one of these days."

It is this frank retention of the best of childhood, — its power of delight, its capacity of wonder, its sensitive nearness to the God of nature, that speaks out in the Prelude to the *Sir Lounfal*. The prophecies of the great winds, the benedicite of the druid wood, spoke, in him, to ears that hardly needed the reveille of their spiritual summons. For the poet is he who hears, with ears quickened to the heavenly accents, the mighty voice of unsuspected Sinais, and is its interpreter to men.

There is also to be noted in his work — not unrelated to his undying sense of youthful wonder — a certain mysticism, — a dominating sense of the spiritual world, a sense possibly inherited from Puritan ancestors, which he himself, however, used to trace remotely to his mother's Celtic forefathers in the days of the Scotch Sir Patrick Spens. "One half of me," he wrote to a friend, "was clear mystic and enthusiast." If he had lived in solitude, like the hermits of the Thebais, he had no doubt that he, with them, might have had authentic interviews with the evil one, — and it might indeed have taken but little to make a St. Francis of him. He was never — when alone — a single night unvisited by visions, and once was convinced that he had a personal revelation from God himself. Not a meteor could fall, nor lightning flash, that he did not in some way connect it with his own spiritual life and destiny.

He speaks, at another time, of a "revelation." He was talking, among friends, of the presence of spirits when suddenly, as he was speaking, the whole system of things stood clear before him "like a vague Destiny looming from the abyss." He felt the spirit of God present in and around him, filling the very room with Pentecostal power, making the air itself vibrate with its mighty presence. And even his words, as he spoke to those about him, seemed filled with an influence greater than himself.

It is these qualities that characterize his work. And all these elements were brought into activity under the influence of the new movement in English literature, — the movement of the new or Romantic poets. Wordsworth, Coleridge, Keats, Shelley, Byron, Scott, — all these had broken into song, a new irregular song, shaking off the fetters of the formal couplet, shaking off, too, the artificiality that went with the traditions of Pope and Johnson, and the echo of this new song, reaching America, roused like music in the hearts of our singers here. In our Cambridge group we find the American response to the inspiration of the Lake circle of English singers of half a century before, and of this new-world group Lowell best caught the finer, more ethereal tone. He approaches nearest to the divine dreams of Coleridge.

His poetry is, of course, not without its defects. His verse is not always musical, though he himself had great confidence in his ear. He might be a bad poet, he said, but he declared that he was a good versifier, and wrote with far more ease in verse than in prose. He had studied the subject of versification from beginning to end, and if his poems contained any rough verses, these were intentional. He laid the whole blame on the readers. Yet if the readers went astray, Lowell was really to blame. He left too much to their ears. Knowing how he wanted his lines to sound, he failed

to see that the clew to their rhythmic structure was not obvious. It is not enough that a verse can be read correctly; it must be so constructed that the reader will find it almost impossible to go wrong.

But Lowell's great merit, the excellence that lifts his poetry to the level of really great song, is his compelling perception of eternal truth. His writings abound in quick "flashes," "jewels five words long," thoughts immortally incarnate in ringing epigram. In his prose, in his verse, the same swift power thrills us, — the indefinable unexpectedness of genius.

Such, in quick survey, was the character and genius of Lowell. Look now, rapidly, at the main facts of his life, — at those, especially, that bear on his poetic activity.

Lowell was born in 1819, twelve years after Longfellow. His boyhood is significant. The Cambridge of Lowell's youth was not the Cambridge of to-day. Now one sees busy streets lined with crowded houses; trolley cars rattle by; one must go miles to find the unspoiled country. But the Cambridge of 1830 was the quiet rustic village. In his *Thirty Years Ago*, Lowell describes it as seen from Symond's Hill, on the New Road, the road that followed the river from Watertown. The picture is different to-day, for the hand of man has made many changes, but the general outlines are the same. In the foreground then lay the

town buried in elms, lindens, and horse-chestnuts, — old trees that had stood there when George the Third was king, and that could not, like the Tories that planted them, take disgusted leave of the new republic. Above these stood out the college belfry, the square brown tower of Christ Church, the slim spire of the meeting-house — the invariable landmark of every New England village. Off to the right could be seen the Charles, winding in broad curves through its em-purpled salt-marshes, with their shifting play of light and shade. Beyond these rose, as now, the gently rounded hills of Brookline.

At the end of the New Road towered the six huge willows, made memorable by Lowell in his poem, *Under the Willows* : —

“ Six, a willow Pleiades,
The seventh fallen, that lean along the brink
Where the steep upland dips into the marsh.”

It is to these trees, too, that he refers in the *Indian Summer Reverie* (see lines 253–259). In this *Reverie*, in *Under the Willows*, and in the poem on the school-house, the poem ascribed to Hosea Biglow and inserted in the introduction to the first series of the *Biglow Papers*, we find many details of the country scenes that Lowell knew as a boy. In the latter we find this glimpse : —

“ Ah, dear old times ! how brightly ye return !
How, rubbed afresh, your phosphor traces burn !
The ramble schoolward through dewsparkling meads,
The willow-wands turned Cinderella steeds ;
The impromptu pinbent hook, the deep remorse
O'er the chance-captured minnow's inchlong corse ;
The pockets, plethoric with marbles round,
That still a space for ball and peg-top found,
Nor satiate yet, could manage to confine
Horse-chestnuts, flagroot, and the kite's wound twine,
And, like the prophet's carpet could take in,
Enlarging still, the popgun's magazine ;
The dinner carried in the small tin pail,
Shared with the dog, whose most beseeching tail
And dripping tongue and eager eyes belied
The assumed indifference of canine pride.

.....
Dropped at the corner of the embowered lane,
Whistling I wade the knee-deep leaves again,
While eager Argus, who has missed all day
The sharer of his condescending play,
Comes leaping forward with a bark elate
And boisterous tail to greet me at the gate.”

One can imagine endless details of the life of the country boy. In winter there was coasting and skating ; in summer he could pitch hay, pick berries, wade in the brooks, wander in the woods or along the river. Any country boy can supply the rest. But there was one element in his country life that not every country boy, not every New England boy, can supply. For

the boy Lowell, with his sensitiveness to beauty, his love of nature, must have found in woods, waters, hills, and skies, a charm that to the thousands of others that saw them was unfelt, or was felt in less degree. The poet does not spend his boyhood in indifference to the beauty about him and then suddenly, with the assumption of his poetic rôle, take up appreciation of nature as a profession. His delight, on the contrary, has been with him from the first. The blue of the sky, the song of a bird, the rapid flight of a cloud, the green blaze of the new grass, the flame of the November maple, stir him with an intensity of rapture unfelt by his fellows, and it is this intensity of feeling that drives him, sooner or later, to poetic expression. Lowell observed nature, not because he had decided to be a poet, but because the intensity of his perceptions, his ecstasy in the beauty about him, made him, and would have made him, even had he willed otherwise, the poet that he was. For it was in his boyhood that Lowell learned his poetry, — not the art of expression in rhyme and metre; that he had to acquire little by little, — but the impressions, the pictures, the dreams that live in his lines. These he absorbed, unconsciously, in the fields, woods, and hillsides of that quiet New England town, with its river ebbing indolently seaward, or bringing back, with the flood, waifs of seaweed and scents of the sea.

But his youth was surrounded by something besides the picturesque present of wood and river. About it lay the romance of bygone days. Elmwood was of colonial date, a stately mansion, with wide lands about it and majestic elms arching over it. Such a house is full of the best of the past, — not its decay, but its wealth of association.

It was, so Lowell says, about twice as old as himself. Around it lay some ten acres of open land, and some fine old trees, pine and elm. It was square — four rooms to a floor, and, like all of the old Tory mansions, solidly built, with massive oaken beams, the spaces filled in with brick. For all its trees, it was a sunny house, the sun getting — in the course of the day — a glimpse at every side of it. Within, if you followed up the straight path between the lilacs, and entered, was a quaint staircase with twisted banisters. The rooms were moderately large, "sixteen feet square, and, on the ground floor, nine feet high." While not palatial, it had, like all houses of its type, a stately self-content, an "air of amplitude as from some inward sense of dignity."

The boy Lowell had slept in a garret room, and about the time that the poet wrote the *Vision*, he had returned to this. Here he dreamt dreams and saw visions as he lay alone in the dark, for his mother would not allow him to have a light. She wanted him

to learn not to fear the darkness, and he learned his lesson, though at first in terror, hiding his head under the pillows to shut out the shapeless monsters that his fancy saw thronging round him. But the room was not always dark, — the sun shone upon its windows, from which in winter the boy could look out across the wide marshes of the Charles, brown and barren or buried under white levels of glittering snow.

As spring came on, however, the leaves shut out, bit by bit, all this spacious landscape, till, in May, the poet wrote sequestered from all distraction in a "cool and restful privacy of leaves."

Lowell's first school-days were spent in the "dame-school," described in the introduction to the *Biglow Papers*.

"Propt on the marsh, a dwelling now, I see
The humble school-house of my A. B. C.,
Where well-drilled urchins, each behind his fire,
Waited in ranks the wished command to fire,
Then all together, when the signal came,
Discharged their *a-b abs* against the dame. . . .
She mid the volleyed learning firm and calm,
Patted the furloughed ferule on her palm,
And, to our wonder, could divine at once
Who flashed the pan, and who was downright dunce."

The next step was his being sent, as a day-scholar, to the boarding-school of Mr. William Wells, an Eng-

lishman, who, so far as conditions allowed, carried on his school under the disciplinary traditions of the English schools. He was severe but, fortunately for his pupils, thorough, and Lowell's Latin shows the result of his training. In the collection of Lowell's letters we find a few written during his attendance there. They are very boyish, without the remotest evidence of genius, containing, for example, the information that the writer had "the ague together with a gumbile," that his mother has given him three volumes of "tales of a grandfather," and that the master had not taken his rattan out since the vacation.

This school was near Lowell's home. So was Harvard College, — at least only a mile away, so that when he attended there he was able to spend the night at home. He entered college at the age of fifteen, — not so remarkably early an age for entrance as it is now. Pupils entered younger then. The college buildings had always been a familiar sight to the boy —

"There in red brick, which softening time defies,
Stand square and stiff, the Muses' factories."

His entrance did not compel that breaking of former ties that we find in the lives of others. It was but a new element entering into the old life.

One can trace the influence of his college life upon

his work. Probably the teaching of Professor Channing had no little effect upon his English, as well as upon that of other well-known writers who were at Harvard in those days. Professor Channing, Dr. Hale tells us, met his pupils "face to face and hand to hand," talking over their work with them, with shrewd admonition and kindly irony. Note, too, that it was in Lowell's sophomore year that the young Longfellow entered upon his professorship, with poetic prestige already won, brought into stimulating companionship with students hardly younger than himself.

The influence of contemporary literature was strongly felt,—not the literature prescribed in the curriculum, but literature to which the young men turned of their own eagerness, new live literature, marking the inception and inspiring the development of a new era. Novels innumerable were read and discussed. The defiant recklessness of Byron had still its malign charm. The poems of Keats, Shelley, Coleridge, were not only read, but were memorized, absorbed, to be given out again in varied incarnation. Carlyle's works were appreciated here long before they found appreciation in England, and Tennyson's first thin volume, borrowed from Emerson, was "passed reverently from hand to hand," while some poems were passed from student to student in manuscript, as

a new ode by Horace might have circulated among the young enthusiasts of Rome.

Literature, in short, was the fashion,—as athletics seems to be the fashion now,—and this indulgence had the added charm of being forbidden. Not that the reading itself was forbidden; the zest lay in the manner of enjoyment. Secret societies were at that time proscribed in Harvard. Nevertheless we learn, thanks to Dr. Hale's confessions, that the Alpha Delta Phi led a delightful and unsuspected existence under the very eyes of the authorities. In its room, to which each member had a pass-key, the small circle of the elect read, studied, held literary meetings, and developed that united enthusiasm, that certainty of sympathy, that goes so far toward the making of literature.

This society, with the editorship of the college magazine, *Harvardiana*, made up a conspicuous part of Lowell's college life. To this, of course, must be added the regular scholastic work, the diversion of evening parties, and, now and then, a stroll in the country or an excursion to the seashore.

Lowell's graduation was not brilliant. Not that he was incapable of application; his later work is evidence enough of his diligence. No poet had less of the dreamy inefficiency of a Coleridge. Nor was his literary genius unrecognized. The year Lowell grad-

uated, Dr. Hale tells us, his friends were as sure as all are now that in him was first-rate poetical genius, and that he was to be one of the leaders of literature. The trouble was, in part, that such work as most attracted him was not in those days recognized in the college curriculum. English literature was not formally studied, and the reading that best prepared him for his life-work least prepared him for the artificial exigencies of examination. But this, with his quick intelligence, was not enough materially to impair his standing. The great trouble lay in recklessness with regard to chapel attendance. Chapel in those days was compulsory, and Lowell "cut" six days out of seven. His regularity of reform on the one day—Monday of each week—naturally counted nothing in his favor, and he was summarily "rusticated," that is, sent to live in the rural retirement of Concord. Here, under the staid care of the Rev. Barzillai Frost, he memorized pages of *Locke on the Human Understanding*, and thought of the approaching delights of the August class-day, —delights not for him. What made exile especially bitter was that he was class-poet. His poem had to be omitted from the exercises, and he had to console himself with the warm sympathy that students extend to those afflicted by authority.

After graduation we find Lowell hesitating as to

his future. He had promised his father that he would "give up poetry and go to work." So he plunged into the study of the law. He completed his studies, —for he was diligent,—and even went so far as to rent an office and hang out a sign. Rumor reports that he had a client. It appears from his letters that he wrote some verses that were to win for his broken-hearted Carolinian client the affections of some cold Southern beauty, but this "case" was not strictly professional. Whatever his success, his inclinations soon led him to forsake the law for literature.

In the very small Boston of 1838, where everybody knew everybody, it was not hard for a writer of merit to gain recognition. To gain a livelihood was another matter. Except for the *North American Review*—which unfortunately was not yet in accord with the new spirit—few magazines then paid for articles. Young writers must make magazines for themselves, apologetic magazineettes that tried to live without advertising matter, and that died promptly of sheer starvation. *The Miscellany* was one of these. *The Pioneer* followed it to a speedy death. Yet both contained names that would make the fortune of a modern publisher,—Lowell, Hawthorne, Poe,—of writers then unrecognized, but sure of future recognition.

More important than the actual publication of work was the intimate association of the young authors. What the secret society had done in their college days was carried on by another organization of young men and young women—boys and girls, one might almost say—united in such wholesome companionship as Miss Alcott loves to depict in her stories. The girls called this society the "Band"; the boys preferred to call it the "Club." It was not so much a society as a friendship. The home of each was the home of all. "Among the ten there was the simplest and most absolute personal friendship." Their meetings were informal, and their entertainment ranged from ecstasy over the sonnets of Shakespeare to tuneless and obstreperous choruses of nonsense-songs. It was a group of young people, full of alert life, filled, too, with ardent enthusiasm and high aspiration.

A group so spiritual could not fail to be moved by the anti-slavery agitation. Lowell at first had cared little about this, but we find his interest increasing, till, partly through the influence of Maria White, he became an active worker, closely associated with Garrison, Whittier, and other outspoken abolitionists.

It is about this time that Maria White becomes prominent in his life. At their very first meeting she seems to have impressed him deeply. All who knew her seem to have felt the charm of her personality.

Her picture shows a delicate girlish face, spiritual, nobly beautiful. Lowell tells of a talk with a farmer, a brown-faced giant, whose simple nature was profoundly moved by her spiritual beauty. He had never seen such a face. There was, he felt, as he told Lowell, "something supernatural" about it, something "heavenly and angelic."

It was in the time of his engagement and in the earlier years of his marriage that we find Lowell's poetic powers most active. His first volume of poems was published in 1841. It was called *A Year's Life*. It included little of his best work. In fact, his genius had still to "find itself," his writings were still imitative and experimental. Yet in this volume one finds such strong feeling as that of *Threnodia*, such delicacy as is shown in the *Sirens*, for all its reminiscence of Tennyson, and the sparkling delight of the *Fountain*. A second series followed a few years later, with decided gain in poetic individuality.

There was a practical need for such gain. It was no longer a matter of small concern what work the young poet should take up. His father's affairs had become such that he must make money—or go hungry. And this practical necessity seems to have operated as a not unkindly stimulus. He plunged into his work with a new energy, an energy that resulted in the production of some of his best work.

The period of the writing of *Sir Launfal* was for Lowell, what the year of the production of the *Ancient Mariner* was for Coleridge. In it he awakened to fuller realization of his own powers. His marriage, in 1844, had brought into his life a new sympathy, a new confidence and ambition. It had brought, too, a livelier interest in public affairs,—an influence that was to lead to the composition of the *Biglow Papers*. We find him, at once, in several rôles, the dreamer and preacher of the *Sir Launfal*, the humorist of the *Fable for Critics*, and the patriot and reformer of the *Biglow Papers*.

At the *Sir Launfal* we shall look later. Let us glance for a moment at his other works. The *Fable for Critics* was satire aimed at a real evil. American literature had been stationary, resting complacently on a mistaken sense of achievement. Read Griswold's *American Poets* and you will get some idea of the nobodies that were put on a level with the great masters of literature. The worst of it was that it was held to be patriotic to support their pretensions. Our literary circles were mere mutual admiration societies.

With this spirit Lowell had no sympathy. In his *Fable*, after an introduction, rollicking in puns, conceits, and fantastic rhymes, he takes up one writer after another and points out his merits and demerits,—nor does he spare himself.

“There is Lowell, who's striving Parnassus to climb
With a whole bale of *isms* tied together with rhyme. . . .
His lyre has some chords that would ring pretty well,
But he'd rather by half make a drum of the shell,
And rattle away till he's old as Methusalem
At the head of a march to the last New Jerusalem.”

With regard to the comparison with English authors, we find:—

“But what's that? a mass meeting? No, there come in lots
The American Disraelis, Bulwers, and Scotts,
And, in short, the American everything-elses,
Each charging the others with envies and jealousies;—
By the way, 'tis a fact that displays what profusions
Of all kinds of greatness bless free institutions,
That while the Old World has produced barely eight
Of such poets as all men agree to call great. . . .
With you every year a whole crop is begotten,
They're as much of a staple as corn is, or cotton. . . .
I myself know ten Byrons, one Coleridge, three Shelleys,
Two Raphaels, six Titians, (I think) one Apelles,
Leonardos and Rubenses plenty as lichens,
One (but that one is plenty) American Dickens,
A whole flock of Lambs, any number of Tennysons,—
In short, if a man has the luck to have any sons,
He may feel pretty certain that one out of twain
Will be some very great person over again.”

Lowell believed, and this belief was one of the foundation-beliefs of his character, that the best

patriotism did not forbid fault-finding, but rather demanded it.

“There are truths you Americans need to be told,
And it never'll refute them to swagger and scold.”

And again,

“I honor the man who is willing to sink
Half his present repute for the freedom to think,
And, when he has thought, be his cause strong or weak,
Will risk t'other half for the freedom to speak,
Caring nought for what vengeance the mob has in store,
Let that mob be the upper ten thousand or lower.”

The spirit that made the *Fable for Critics* was the spirit that made the *Biglow Papers*. In one, literary pretence is denounced; in the other, national evils find treatment no less frank. The Mexican war Lowell felt to be a great wrong. He believed, so he wrote in a letter to Thomas Hughes, “that this war with Mexico (though he owned that we had as just a ground for it as a strong nation ever has against a weak) was essentially a war of false pretences, and would result in widening the boundaries and so prolonging the life of slavery. Lowell believed that it was the “manifest destiny” of the English race to occupy the whole North American continent . . . but he hated to see “a noble hope evaporated into a lying phrase to

sweeten the foul breath of demagogues.” Against such an abuse he felt convinced that all honest men should protest.

The papers, written in the dialect that Lowell had heard among the country people about his home, were spirited denunciations of the war and of those politicians who advocated it. Hosea Biglow, an untutored country lad, is supposed to be the writer, and his utterances are accompanied by very pedantic comment by the imaginary Parson Wilbur, a genial but over-learned minister of the gospel. The great achievement of these poems lies in the fact that, like the poetry of Burns, they brought song into touch with life as it is and brought poetic speech nearer to homely idiom. This might not have been the case had the poems confined themselves to their political theme. They had, however, bits of another sort, scraps of living nature, like the story of the *Courtin'* (see p. 75), or the beautiful description of the coming of spring in the *Second Series*.

For the political papers, one stanza may give some taste of their plain-spoken vigor:—

“Ez fer war, I call it murder,—
There you hev it plain an' flat;
I don't want to go no furdur
Than my Testyment fer that;

God hez sed so plump an' fairly,
 It's ez long ez it is broad,
 An' you've gut to git up airly
 Ef you want to take in God.

" 'Taint your eppylets an' feathers
 Make the thing a grain more right ;
 'Taint afollerin' your bell-wethers
 Will excuse ye in His sight ;
 Ef you take a sword an' dror it,
 An' go stick a feller thru,
 Guv'ment ain't to answer for it,
 God'll send the bill to you."

It is from these poems, one may say, from the *Fable for Critics*, and from the *Sir Launfal* and the *Commemoration Ode*, that Lowell won his widest note. It is these, perhaps, that represent, better than others, the variety and scope of his poetic genius.

With Lowell's later life, students of the *Sir Launfal* are not so much concerned. True, the Lowell that wrote the poem had in him the elements that made him what he was later, — poet, critic, editor, professor, orator, scholar, and statesman. But these qualities only slightly affect the character of the poem. Here we can but glance at his varied activities.

Besides being editor of the two little magazines already mentioned, Lowell edited, for a time, the *North American Review*. His literary work, beyond

this, extended itself in the direction of critical articles on various literary subjects, reviews, essays, studies of many kinds. The lecture system was at that time developing, and Lowell, like Emerson, played a strong part in its development. Many of his lectures appear in his published essays.

The professorship of modern languages at Harvard, though in some respects a disadvantage to Lowell's poetic genius, seems, like the years of foreign travel that preceded it, to have enlarged the whole nature of the man. He returned with more cosmopolitan standards, not less patriotic, — as some obstreperous "patriots" proclaimed him, — but more judicious in his patriotism. His scholarship undoubtedly restricted his creative power. Yet it was in itself memorable, and Harvard lost, in his resignation, not merely a stimulating teacher and inspiring singer, but a scholar who combined, as few can, accuracy with enthusiasm.

Lowell's ministry abroad, first in Spain, then in England, marks the last period of his life — if we except the rather pathetic postscript of the closing years at Elmwood. He filled the rôle with distinction and discretion. It was a loss to this country and a deprivation to England when political changes here made his withdrawal necessary. He won the respect of both countries by his tact and statesmanship.

His poetic work, in later life, affords great variety.

Besides the poems included in this volume, there is the majestic *Commemoration Ode*, one of the largest, in dignity of spirit, of all patriotic poems. There are the sharply sketched *Pictures from Appledore*, the thoughtful *Cathedral*, *Under the Willows*, with its exquisite pictures of home scenery, and many more, so many that it takes one long to discover all their beauties. Their merit is not even, but the merit of the best is memorable.

In conclusion: try in your study of these poems to see Lowell as a man, as a young man, such a young man as he was when he set down on paper the words of the *Vision*, a man filled as few are with the sense of the wonder of the world about us, and filled, moreover, with a spiritual perception of the imminence of Heaven, the pervading presence of God. It was such a man wrote this poem, and it was because he was such a man, open to all high impulses, that the poem is what it is, — a beautiful and inspiring utterance of a noble tenderness.

THE VISION OF SIR LAUNFAL

The Vision of Sir Launfal, it is said, was composed almost at a single sitting. The poem shows signs of having been written rapidly. Its merits, its singleness of mood, and impetuosity of movement indicate

speed, while its metrical defects and its obscurities in expression or design are no less significant of haste. Of one thing we may feel sure: The haste that drove the poem to completion was not so much the result of a desire to have it done by a certain time, as the impatience that springs from an author's complete absorption in his subject — that will give him no rest till his ideas have obtained expression.

The poem is peculiar in purpose, form, and structure. The story tells of the young knight who, before setting out on his quest, prays for a vision to guide him. The vision is granted. In it, he sees himself riding out, young, hopeful, exultant in the joy of summer. At the gate of his castle a leper asks an alms. In disgust the young knight tosses him a piece of gold. The leper refuses the gift, for it is offered in the wrong spirit. Then his dream changes. He sees himself, long years after, returning in poverty and old age, in the dead of winter, to a castle no longer his. He is driven from its doors, and, as he sits in the cold, the leper appears once more. Sir Launfal has now no gold to give, but he shares with the beggar his single crust and gives him water from his wooden bowl. Then the beggar casts off his disguise; he is transformed into the Christ, who tells Sir Launfal that this is the true spirit of charity. It is not what we *give*, but what we *share*, that is welcome to

the needy and of blessing to ourselves. The young knight awakens. He hangs up his armor and devotes himself to charity and hospitality. He has learned his lesson.

The structure of the poem is somewhat faulty. The Prelude has, it is true, some connection with Part First. Youth and summer are related, so are summer and warmth of heart. But Lowell seems to confound the two symbolismisms. Summer is at once pride of youth that mistakes scornful bounty for true charity and the warmth of love that tries in vain to invade the castle. The rhapsody over June, notwithstanding its rare beauty, is disproportionately prominent. In the Second Part the description of winter, intended to intensify helplessness and humiliation and impressions of old age, is broken into by the description of the little brook, a description which dwells not on the desolation of winter, but on its joy and beauty.

In unity of structure, the oneness that should exist in the perfect poem, *The Vision of Sir Launfal* is deficient. But this defect is merely incidental. The beauties of the poem, however unrelated, are none the less admirable and inspiring. For while *The Vision of Sir Launfal* is a story, a story with a moral, we must not forget that it is above all a poem. It is a poem not merely because it is in verse,—that is, in rhyme and metre. Advertisements in street-

cars are often in rhyme and metre, but these are not poetry. *The Vision of Sir Launfal* is a poem not on account of its form but on account of its spirit. The writer feels intensely the wonder of what he is describing and tries to make his reader feel it. The mere story he could have told in prose. What he is trying to tell is the magic of the summer world, the cold, crystal beauty of winter, the sunlight that God gives freely to us all, the mystery of human sympathy that God would have us give and that we withhold, all these marvels and many more he feels intensely. And when one feels a thing so deeply that mere words seem too bare to express it, when to these he must add the music of metre and the link of rhyme, then he has left the region of prose and risen into poetry.

The story is a moral story, and the moral is important; for the young Lowell was, as you have seen, a man who took moral lessons deeply. There was in him a mystic vein, a half belief in the direct utterance of God to men, something that made him akin to the young knight that asks this vision from God for his guidance. "Not what we give, but what we share,"—not what we do, but the spirit in which we do it,—that is what tells in our own hearts in the eye of Heaven. That is the central lesson, and this Lowell made his own motto.

A great beauty of the poem lies in the setting, the

perfect description of a perfect day in June, and in that contrasted description of the little brook in winter. It is these, perhaps, more than anything else, that give the poem its greatness. We go to poetry less for teaching than for awakening. We want the poet to interpret to us the message of the skies, of the winds, of the "druid woods," of the eternal sea. And of his moral we get not a cold theological theory of life, but a warm stirring impulse to noble action.

In studying such a poem, read it aloud. Read it slowly, letting it, so to speak, dissolve in the mind, till each word has given up its lesson.

Let your imagination have free wing. Do not be afraid of enthusiasm. Let each picture call up associated recollections from your own storehouse of memory. Try to enjoy, to find the way to enjoyment. For poetry read without pleasure is profitless.

As for the other poems included with the *Vision*, these are not so much intended for study in themselves as for reading in connection with the chief poem studied. For in them one finds reflected other moods of the poet, or often the same moods, even the same pictures in a different setting. And, by reading them all, by laying one beside another, you will feel emerging from them at last the man himself, a new friend, stimulating, inspiring, speaking — though men call him dead — to his living friends in words of noble and uplifting significance.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Lowell's Complete Works are published by Houghton, Mifflin, and Company. The poems and prose works can be obtained separately.

The Vision of Sir Launfal was first published in 1848. A number of editions were struck from the first plates, one appearing as late as 1875. In the collection of his poems appearing in 1857, Lowell made a number of alterations. This text gives, virtually, the final form of the poem, and is followed in this edition. It is followed also in the case of the other poems included, except in a few that appeared only in the earlier collections. Attention is called in the notes to significant variations of text in the various editions.

Biographies of Lowell have been written by E. E. Brown and by F. H. Underwood. *James Russell Lowell*, an Address by G. W. Curtis, will be found suggestive. Edward Everett Hale's *James Russell Lowell and His Friends* is full of interesting information, and has been drawn on considerably in the introduction of this volume. *Lowell's Letters*, edited by C. E. Norton, also afford much material concerning the poet's life, surroundings, and character.

In the periodicals will be found articles almost innumerable. The teacher will do well to instruct the

student in the use of Poole's *Index to Periodical Literature*, which gives the title of each and the volume and page of the magazine where it is to be found. Among these is a study of the *Sir Launfal*, in *Poet-Lore*, Volume VI., p. 47. Both pupil and teacher will do well to consult it.

Studies of Lowell's work as a whole will be found in Haweis's *American Humorists*, in Richardson's *American Literature*, as well as in Nicol's, Pattee's, Paucost's, and Matthews' works on the same subject.

Collateral reading on the subject of the days of Chivalry might take up Lanier's *Boys' King Arthur*, Scott's *Ivanhoe*, *The Talisman*, *The Abbot*, *The Monastery*, Tennyson's *The Idylls of the King*.

The lives of the writers with whom Lowell associated will be certain to cast some light on his own character. Some study of the beginnings of the anti-slavery agitation of New England might be taken up in this connection.

WRITERS OF LOWELL'S TIME

Bryant	1794-1878
Emerson	1803-1882
Hawthorne	1804-1864
Longfellow	1807-1882
Whittier	1807-1892
Poe	1809-1849
Holmes	1809-1894

SUBJECTS FOR COMPOSITION

1. Lowell as Patriot. In his poems, in his prose writings, in his life.
Read, *Biglow Papers*, *Commemoration Ode*, *Political Essays*, *Democracy*, Article, *Nation* LIII., p. 56. *Lowell as Patriot*. Hale's *Lowell and His Friends*. *Lowell's Letters*.
2. Cambridge in the Second Quarter of the Century.
Read, Lowell's *Cambridge Thirty Years Ago*. Hale's *Lowell*, *Lowell's Letters*. Magazine articles, see Poole's Index.
3. The Moral Lesson of the Poem. Compare the *Ancient Mariner*, a poem with a moral, and Poe's *Raven*, a poem without any. Should a poem necessarily teach a moral lesson? Compare pictures and music.
4. Should the Moral of a Poem be Stated. Compare the two versions of *Rhæcus*. Can a moral be implied in a story without being stated at the end? Recall cases. Which method is preferable? Why?
5. Lowell and Coleridge. The man of dreams and the man of action. Show this contrast by comparing their poems. Which has the more active teaching? Which teaches to do, which merely to feel? Apply this to the story of the lives of the men.
6. Lowell's Description of American Scenery. Was this new? What had American writers described hitherto? What English writers inspired him to describe things as he saw them?

7. Lowell's Friends. The value of association to young writers. Mention other cases. Trace the effect of literary companionship on Lowell and his friends. Read E. E. Hale's *Lowell and His Friends*.
8. American Literature and British Literature. To what extent are they one? To what extent independent and to be studied separately? Read Brander Matthews' essay, *Americanism*.
9. Original Poem. A description of spring, summer, autumn, or winter, in the same metre as *The Vision of Sir Launfal*. Do not reproduce the same scenes that Lowell describes.
10. Original Poem (or original prose story). Select appropriate title yourself. A story of feudal times, tournament, crusade, search for the Holy Grail. Read Lanier's *Boys' King Arthur*; *Chanson of Roland*, O'Hagan's translation; Tennyson's *Idylls of the King*.

The teacher can suggest other subjects calling for invention or comparison. It seems better to avoid subjects that call merely for research and compilation. More is gained when some creative use is made of the material collected.

LOWELL'S
THE VISION OF SIR LAUNFAL
AND OTHER POEMS