As weak, yet as trustful also;
For the whole year long I see
All the wonders of faithful Nature
Still worked for the love of me;
Winds wander and dews drip earthward,
Rains fall, suns rise and set,
Earth whirls, and all but to prosper
A poor little violet.

This child is not mine as the first was,
I cannot sing it to rest,
I cannot lift it up fatherly
And bliss° it upon my breast;
Yet it lies in my little one's cradle,
And it sits in my little one's chair,
And the light of the heaven she's gone to
Transfigures its golden hair.

NOTES

THE VISION OF SIR LAUNFAL

The Metre. Except for the first eight lines, the poem is in mixed tetrameter, that is, in lines of four accents, separated by either one or two light syllables. Take, for example, the lines: —

> "Not only around our infancy
> Doth heaven with all its splendors lie."

In each of these we find four stressed or accented syllables:

> Not only around our infancy
> Doth heaven with all its splendors lie.

If we divide these lines into groups, — just as we divide music into bars, — and call these groups *feet*, we shall find that, as one reads the lines aloud, he will naturally hurry the time in groups where there are three syllables, so as to make them take only as long as the feet that have two. That is, no matter how many syllables there are in the foot, the time between accents is the same, the loud syllables coming with the regular beat of a drum. Beat time as you read the verses and you will see this.

In some verse there is a set number of syllables to each foot. Sometimes the feet are regularly of two syllables each, and, if they begin with the light syllable, are called *iambic*. In other forms all the feet are of three syllables, the line beginning with two light syllables. Such lines are called *anapestic*. In this poem the two forms are, as we have seen, combined, with a varied, irregular effect. Perhaps Lowell had in mind the irregular metre of Coleridge's *Christabel*, one of the first poems written in this free style. Some lines, it will be noted, begin with the accented syllable, no light syllable preceding. In short, the chief requirement in this form of verse is merely that there be four accented syllables to the line, more than two syllables seldom intervening between the accents.

There are few lines of three feet, usually at the end of a division of the poem, such as lines 79, 99, 154, and some others that the student can find for himself. One line, 123, has only two feet, and lines 227 and 228 are really parts of a single line printed as two. All these variations are intended to produce certain effects upon the ear. Observe what these effects are and how they are appropriate.

The first eight lines are in five feet, most of them beginning with a light syllable. From the number of feet this metre is called pentameter; from the light beginning it is called iambic. Two lines, the first and fifth, do not begin with a light syllable. In this case, however, there are as many syllables as if they did, like the rest. The difference is that the accent has been made to fall ahead of time, where the light syllable ought by rights to be, just as might happen in syncopation in music.

Be sure, in reading the poem aloud, to bring out the music of the verse. Do not, of course, read it in "sing-song," which takes no account of the writer's meaning, but do not read it as if it were prose. Place the accented syllables regularly, almost as you would do in music, but bring out the full meaning at the same time. You may occasionally vary, retard, hasten, even contradict the rhythmical accent, but the rhythm and the rhyme must always be felt as underlying, — or the verse ceases to be verse. The true poet loves the sound of his verse no less than the thought, — if, indeed, he is able to think of the two as separable: to him they are rather one and indivisible. One should enter his magic land reverently.

PRELUDE TO PART FIRST

The two long Preludes introduce each part. But they do more than that. If they did not, their length, compared with that of what they introduce, would be indefensible. Besides preparing for the story, they give the spirit of it, the mood that it is to exemplify, the lesson that it is to illustrate. It is like a lecture with dissolving views. The poet shows us a landscape embodying the emotional spirit of his story before setting before us the story itself. We get first the mood, then the events with which it is to be associated. The first Prelude gives us the joy of summer, the inspiration that lies in the world of nature about us, a world that is full of reminders of our higher selves. It is full of the rapture of the season when goodness *seems* easy, when resolves blossom unforced. It wanders from thought to thought, perhaps bewilderingly, but always nearing its central theme.

ll. 1–8. The introductory stanza, the prelude to the prelude, gives some hint of this spirit. The poet, like the organist, who sits idly at the keys, and "knows not what he is playing," is to ponder as he will till his subject dawns clearly before him. He must bridge over the gulf between the dreamland of his story and the everyday present. The prelude aims to take up the reader in his ordinary mood and lead him, bit by bit, into the mood of the vision. In spite of this excuse, however, it should be noted that the poet strays too far from his central theme. The poem lacks clear structure and singleness of purpose. Much that is in itself delightful is quite irrelevant to his main object.

l. 6. His **theme** is his subject, the musical idea that forms the basis of a musical composition. Most common "tunes" are all theme. In more complex work the theme is developed, expanded, and varied till a whole musical structure is reared upon it.

l. 8. **Auroral.** Like the flushes of dawn foretelling the coming of the sun.

l. 8. **Wavering vistas.** These glimmers of the dawning subject brighten along the cloud-passages of his vision, passages wavering and fluctuating.

ll. 9–32. In these lines there is a distinct answer to Wordsworth's *Ode on Intimations of Immortality.* It is not a denial so much as it is an amendment, a point of view subtly different. Wordsworth tells us: —

> "Heaven lies about us in our infancy!
> Shades of the prison-house begin to close
> Upon the growing boy,

> But he beholds the light, and whence it flows,
> He sees it in his joy;
> The youth, who daily further from the east
> Must travel, still is Nature's priest,
> And by the vision splendid
> Is on his way attended;
> At length the man perceives it die away
> And fade into the light of common day."

That it does *seem* to fade, Lowell admits, but he denies that this must be, for its apparent fading is owing merely to our blindness. The glory is still there, could we see it. Nature lies about us, full of inspiration for those whose eyes are open; and through sea, mountain, and forest she struggles to rouse the best in us.

l. 12. **Sinais.** Heights where we might, if we would, meet God face to face. But our souls are too little to be concerned about him. We "cringe," rather, and "plot," like Kipling's "little men of little soul," who "awoke to buy and sell again," unconscious of the daily miracles about them.

l. 14. Why **fallen** and **traitor**? Traitor to what? Fallen from what?

l. 15. In what sense do the winds utter prophecies? What may a prophecy do besides predicting? Did all the prophets of the Old Testament predict?

l. 16. **The mountain strives.** How? Why does it suggest strength?

l. 17. **Druid wood.** The Druids held forests sacred; the word seems also to imply comparison between the hoary trees and their aged priests. Think of the opening lines of *Evangeline*. The arms of the trees are outstretched in benediction, "*benedicite*" being the imperative of the Latin word meaning *bless*.

l. 20. **Shouts.** By the dash of its breakers and the roar of the surf.

l. 21. **Earth gets its price.** In apparent denial of the statement of Wordsworth: —

> "Earth fills her lap with pleasures of her own. . . .
> The homely nurse doth all she can
> To make her foster-child, her inmate man
> Forget the glories he hath known,
> And that imperial palace whence he came."

But does not Lowell's "Earth" mean something different from Wordsworth's? Lowell seems to be speaking of the world of men, Wordsworth of the world of nature. Wordsworth's "Earth" seems to have had some element of Lowell's "Heaven."

l. 23. **Shrives.** Receives confession and gives absolution.

l. 25. **At the devil's booth.** Even the pleasures of sin have their price.

l. 27. **A cap and bells.** The marks of the court fool. We trade our lives for some trifle of fame, some mere bubble, worth nothing after all.

l. 30. **'Tis only God.** Realize the force of the contrast between the good of Earth and the good of Heaven. For one "Earth gets its price"; the other is "given for the asking." This seems to have been a favorite idea of Lowell's. In a letter written when he was but twenty-one, we find him saying that at whatever price other things are sold and bartered, —

> "Nature is ever had, free gratis,
> 'Children half-price,' as 'twas of old."

Observe the transition, in line 32, to the next subject. The poet passes on to the idea of June, as the organist, letting his fingers wander as they list, passes from theme to theme till he finds the right one.

l. 33. **June.** June seems to have been Lowell's favorite month. His letters are full of raptures over it, and in *Under the Willows* we find him representing the bobolink as singing in his ecstacy: —

> "June! Dear June! Now God be praised for June!"

Lines 33 to 56 might well be memorized. This is the best passage in literature descriptive of our American summer. Its one fault is that it is not directly helpful to the main purpose of the poem.

Readers not in New England should note that it is the New England June that is described. In other parts of the country, the season that Lowell has in mind appears earlier. But in that part of New England north of Cape Cod the summer comes slowly. "May," as Lowell put it, "is often more like Mayn't," and one must wait till the time when "our Spring gits everythin' in tune."

l. 35. What musical instrument has Lowell in mind? What is the picture?

l. 38. **Murmur** in what? **Glisten** in what?

l. 42. **Climbs to a soul.** The grass and flowers seem to be the soul of the earth, made visible in green life. Note the idea of groping toward the light.

l. 43. "**The flush of life.**" Swinburne has: —

> "The faint fresh flame of the young year flushes
> From leaf to flower and flower to fruit."

It is as if a green flame were kindling and catching everywhere.

l. 45. The **cowslip** of New England is not the cowslip of England, but the marsh-marigold. It grows in marshy meadows, and has a bright flower, not unlike that of the buttercup.

Startles: starts up. Or it may mean, startles the eye with its flash of gold.

l. 46. **Chalice**, of course, means cup. Is there anything appropriate in the fact that it usually denotes a golden, precious. even a sacred vessel?

l. 48. **Some happy creature's.** What kind of creature?

l. 49. **At his door.** At the door of what?

l. 50. Why **atilt**? Why like a **blossom**? What kind of bird had Lowell in mind? — Is it the bobolink?

l. 51. How does this deluge break out? Have you ever seen a bird that seemed to be trying to express the joy of the whole springtime?

l. 54. What, in the metre of this line, makes it a trifle harsh? See also line 49. 53-57. What is her "song"? In what may hers be the equal of his? What *is* the better?

l. 56. **The nice ear.** What does "nice" mean here? See the dictionary. Which meaning fits?

l. 57. **The high-tide.** What is the low-tide of the year, when life seems to have ebbed away? This figure would be especially vivid to Lowell, who, from his windows, could look out in the broad salt-marshes of the Charles and see the inlets and creeks sucked empty and brown at low water, or flooded to the green grass-tops with the great fulness of the new-moon tide. In another poem Lowell speaks of "all life washed clear in the high-tide of the year."

l. 67. Note the effective indirect description in line 67 and the lines following.

l. 71. What is **maize**? What is meant by saying that it has sprouted?

l. 72. Note how this line brings out the blue of both sky and river. See *Indian Summer Reverie*, p. 18.

l. 73. Our American robin, the migratory or red-breasted thrush, not the robin redbreast of England. But, whatever his name, Lowell liked him, and watched his ways. In the *Biglow Papers*, he says: —

> "Thets robin-redbreast's almanick; he knows
> Thet arter this ther's only blossom-snows;
> So, choosin' out a handy crotch an' spouse,
> He goes to plastrin' his adobè house."

With regard to this whole description, it must be noted that spring is a prominent force in all Lowell's letters and in poems. It seems to be the season that he felt most intensely. One finds him dwelling on it in scraps of description throughout his letters. He longs to leave his "lectures and articles," and to be out enjoying it all. It shows him, he says, "what a poet God is." For the whole springtime is God's poem, sung over and over, yet always new. And he declares that he has only now discovered the meaning of the buttercup "in the third stanza" of this divine lay. But he will keep the solution to himself.

l. 77. **Bold chanticleer** was another favorite of Lowell's. Again and again we find him referred to, usually in words not unlike those in the poem. He writes to friends that everything is safe at their house or else their chanticleer lied, "for he crowed with a lusty satisfaction."

l. 78. What is the "new wine of the year"? Compare this figure with that in lines 50–51.

l. 79. Note this line is shorter than the rest, having only three feet instead of four.

ll. 83–85. Goodness is as easy as happiness, or seems as easy. Does the First Part seem to show that it is? Is not this feeling often deceptive, or even a sign of pride and selfishness?

ll. 86–87. What is compared to the clouds that leave no track in the unscarred heaven? What resemblance?

ll. 90–93. What new figure begins in line 90? To what is the new peace of the heart compared? In what lies the resemblance?

l. 91. What are the "rifts"? What picture intended?

l. 93. Why **healed**? In what sense can snow "heal" a crater?

l. 94. Note that the organist has at last reached his theme. The subject has taken shape and the story is to begin. There is no sharp break between the Prelude and the poem itself. The first leads smoothly into the second, with a sudden yet smoothly effected change to the unexpected, giving an impression of dream. Sir Launfal appears as mysteriously yet as fittingly as the ship in the *Ancient Mariner*.

PART FIRST

In prose there would be explanation as to who Sir Launfal was. In a poem so lyric, that is, so emotional and imaginative as this, explanation would interfere with the simple expression of feeling. To stop to explain is to drop into prose, to relapse into the commonplace. Poetry has less patience than prose. One must merely hint the explanation between the lines, and the reader, for the sake of the intensity of the feeling conveyed to him, must be willing to make the added effort necessary to grasp the facts of the story. The poem cannot be skimmed, like an exciting tale in prose, but must be read slowly, with attention to the pictures hinted in every word.

Do not trouble yourself with the historical basis of the story. Lowell, as you may see by the note on p. 93, did have in mind a definite legend. His setting for his story, however, avoids the limitation of any particular place or period. Sir Launfal is the knight of feudal days — probably in or near the period of the crusades. But we no more ask in what year or what county of the "north countree" he lived than we ask in what year or from what port the Ancient Mariner's vessel set sail on her mysterious voyage. The story is true to human life and natural beauty as a whole, — not in any one momentary manifestation.

It will be well for the reader to have a good idea of the world of chivalry, of knights, armor, castles, and of the great religious "quests" of tradition and history. Read Tennyson's *Idylls of the King*, Lanier's *The Boy's King Arthur*, Scott's *Ivanhoe*, *Talisman*, *Abbot*, and *Monastery*, and see if these old-world realities do not assume reality in your mind. Put yourself, in short — so far as in your power lies — in the days described, and in the spirit of the poet. This only of the artificial elements. The out-of-door scenes are the familiar scenes of New England. One needs only to open one's eyes to them.

In explanation of the quest on which the young knight is to set forth, Lowell says: "According to the mythology of the Romancers, the San Greal, or Holy Grail, was the cup out of which Jesus partook of the last supper with his disciples. It was brought into England by Joseph of Arimathea, and remained there, an object of pilgrimage and adoration, for many years in the keeping of his lineal descendants. It was incumbent upon those who had charge of it to be chaste in thought, word, and deed; but one of the keepers having broken this condition, the Holy Grail disappeared. From that time it was a favorite enterprise of the knights of Arthur's court to go in search of it. Sir Galahad was at last successful in finding it, as may be read in the seventeenth book of the *Romance of King Arthur*. Tennyson has made Sir Galahad the subject of one of the most exquisite of his poems.

"The plot (if I may give that name to anything so slight) of the following poem is my own, and, to serve its purposes, I have enlarged the circle of competition in search of the miraculous cup in such a manner as to include, not only other persons than the heroes of the Round Table, but also a period of time subsequent to the date of King Arthur's reign."

While the story of Sir Launfal seems to have been entirely of Lowell's devising, we do find, in early romances, references to a knight of a similar name, and it was probably the reading of these that suggested to the poet the name of his hero.

Sir Launfal, or rather "Lanval," is the hero of a poem written by Thomas Chestre (who lived in the reign of Henry VI.) and to be found in Ritson's *English Metrical Romances*. The story has, in a very few points, a slight resemblance to Lowell's. Sir Lanval

"gaf gyftys largelyche
Gold and sylver; and clodes ryche,
To squyer and to knycht."

On account of his bounty he is made King Arthur's steward. He afterward, like Sir Launfal in his vision, becomes poor, but is supplied by a lady-love — not by the simple process of awaking from a bad dream — with gold and riches.

l. 97. What shows the knight's lack of humility?

l. 100. **Never a bed.** It is not uncommon in old romances, to read of knights watching their armor or sleeping by it on the night before setting out on a quest. The young knight has, too, the hope that some vision will be granted to him. As was shown in the Introduction (p. ix), the young Lowell was not a little of a dreamer and visionary himself.

l. 103. **Rushes** were the ordinary covering for the floor of a castle in mediæval days.

l. 105. With each day the world, for each of us, is recreated. Out of the blank, dark, and apparent annihilation of the night, each sight comes back as if made anew. Shakespeare speaks of sleep as the "death of each day's life."

l. 107. Why like a **cloud**? What is the resemblance? How does the figure help?

l. 108. Why into his **soul**? Why not his mind? Of what nature was the vision?

l. 108. What follows is a dream. Sir Launfal does not actually leave his bed on the rushes till he awakes "as from a swound," in line 328. All between, — the leaving the castle, the sight of the leper to whom he throws the coin, the suffering from cold and want, the apparition of the Christ, — all these are but appearances in his dream, — the Divine Revelation in the hope of which he fell asleep.

l. 109. The picture that follows is seen in his dream. It doubles the impression of the summer picture in the prelude, but does not repeat any definite features of it.

l. 109. Why **flapped over**? Why not *flew over?*

l. 114. Summer is represented as besieging the castle. Note that throughout the poem summer is made symbolic of kindliness, charity, warm human feeling, while the winter seems to symbolize reserve and heartlessness. The cold castle shuts out all the summer's attempts to bring in a warmer, kinder feeling. Just as its chill gray stone refuses to respond to the green flame of the season, so its spirit is inaccessible to any kindly warmth.

l. 115. Winter has retreated. This castle alone represents it in the land of the enemy.

l. 116. **In the North Countree.** In the north of England. The scenery, however, is rather that of New England. The form "Countree" is adopted here partly for quaint effect, partly for rhyme.

l. 118. This selfishness reacts, later in his vision, on Sir Launfal himself. The seneschal "shouts the wanderer away from the porch."

l. 121. **Scale.** Climb up and over.

l. 125. The **tents** are the trees. It is a pretty picture. See how each descriptive touch applies to them.

l. 127. **Fell off.** Why not *died out?* What difference of suggestion?

l. 128. **Surly clang** and **dark arch** give the tone of the castle.

l. 129. What kind of horse was a "charger"?

l. 130. **The maiden knight.** A young knight as unversed in war as a maiden is in the mature life of woman.

l. 131. How would he look? Imagine the picture.

l. 135. Why a **sheaf**? Why "all" the rays? Why had the sun shot the rays over the wall of the castle? To what are they compared?

l. 136. The young knight is in accord with the surly castle only in hardness of heart. In all else he is in accord with the brightness of the summer.

l. 137. Why as a **locust-leaf**? Is it lighter than other leaves? Recall its appearance. Why is it easier to imagine a particular leaf than any leaf.

l. 138. **Unscarred** because he was a "maiden knight," with all his conflicts before him.

l. 146. **The pitcher-plant's cup**. See dictionary or botany for an illustration. Why into a picture of castles and knights, does Lowell introduce a plant peculiar to America? Does it impair the effect? What is the result upon those not familiar with the plant mentioned? In what sense, by the way, did the season "brim" all things up? What previous comparison was a little like this? See lines 57–61.

l. 147. **Made morn**. Came into full day, perhaps somewhat as a vessel may be said to "make port," to "make the coast." Or it may mean that his bright armor *made morning* through the darkness of the arch. The first meaning seems the better here, since we are to see the picture, in this sentence, through Sir Launfal's eyes.

l. 148. **A leper**. Leprosy is among the most repulsive of diseases. In the Middle Ages it was fairly common in Europe. There are many references to it in the Old Testament.

l. 149. **Who begged with his hand**. How does this detail

aid the picture? Note how far it affects the scene that you see in your mind.

ll. 150–154. Are these figures of value? What purpose does each serve. See why each is true, why each brings out the intensity of the young knight's loathing.

l. 155. Not "foul of stature." The phrase modifies only the second adjective. Is "of stature" logically necessary to the meaning?

l. 156. **His dainty nature**. Is there not a touch of scorn in the words? Do not lines 96 and 97 perhaps justify it?

l. 158. **So he tossed him a piece of gold in scorn**. This is the central action of the poem, the wrong deed upon which, as upon the killing of the Albatross in the *Ancient Mariner*, the whole plot turns. Observe that the wrongdoing is not in the gift of gold, but in the feeling that this frees the giver from any claim of sympathy. Sir Launfal wants to evade his responsibilities as a fellow human being, to "compound his obligations" for money.

l. 160. **The poor man's crust**. Compare line 295.

l. 161. Be careful to understand the inverted order. "That which the hand can hold is no true alms." The word alms, though ending with "s," is singular. Be sure you get the spirit of the beggar's words: It is not the gift itself that is of worth but the spirit of love that goes with it.

l. 166. **A slender mite**. A reference to the New Testament. The passage has a significant resemblance to this. It may even have suggested to Lowell the moral of his poem: —

"And Jesus sat over against the treasury, and beheld how the people cast money into the treasury: and many that were rich cast in much. And there came a poor widow, and she cast in two mites, which make a farthing. And he called unto him his disciples, and said unto them, Verily I say unto you, This poor widow cast in more than all they which are casting into the treasury: for they all did cast in of their superfluity; but she of her want did cast in all that she had, even all her living." — Mark xii. 42.

l. 168. **That thread of the all-sustaining Beauty**, that runs through all. Lowell seemed to feel with particular intensity this presence of pervading soul. In one of his letters (see p. ix), he tells how, at one moment, and, while he would not write what he felt, he saw the central secret of all systems. "God," he said, "is the secret, the spring, source and centre of all Beauty."

l. 170. **His alms.** The alms given by him who gives to the God in man.

ll. 170–171. True alms is given not to the hand but to the heart. Compare line 163.

l. 172. **A god goes with it.** Why not "God"? What does this mean? In what sense is it true? **Store** means abundance, plenty.

PRELUDE TO PART SECOND

The prelude of the second part gives us a picture of winter. The setting of the part itself is wintry. There is a double purpose in this. It emphasizes, first, the contrast between the youth and exuberance of Sir Launfal in his pride and the humility of his later mood. And, through this, it shows us that the season when it seems easy for the heart to be true is not so likely to lead it to truth as the season of suffering and humiliation. Besides this, there is a secondary signification: the winter accords with the age of Sir Launfal. Its veins, like his, are sapless and old. For further carrying out of this part of the suggestion, see note on p. 105.

l. 174. The first line is ambiguous in scansion. It might, if it stood in a different context, be read: —

Down swépt the chíll wind fróm the moúntain péak.

It must, however, to accord with the lines that follow, be read: —

Down swépt the chill wínd from the moúntain péak.

It is, as a rule, important that the first line of a new part should show the metre without possibility of mistake.

l. 174. **The mountain peak.** Are there such mountain peaks in England? Was Lowell necessarily placing the peak anywhere near the scene of his story? Does he not speak of it rather as the remote storehouse of the winter's cold?

l. 175. The counting by **summers** implies the unmelting, eternal snow.

l. 176. **Wold** as used here means open moorland, rolling, barren land, where the wind has full sweep.

l. 178. The wind is so keen that it stings the face like sleet.