Behind the hill, behind the sky,
Behind my inmost thought, he sings; 25
No feet avail; to hear it nigh,
The song itself must lend the wings.

Sing on, sweet bird, close hid, and raise
Those angel stairways in my brain, 30
That climb from these low-vaulted days
To spacious sunshines far from pain.

Sing when thou wilt, enchantment fleet,
I leave thy covert haunt untrod,
And envy Science not her feat 35
To make a twice-told tale of God.

ALADDIN

WHEN I was a beggarly boy,
And lived in a cellar damp,
I had not a friend nor a toy,
But I had Aladdin's lamp;
When I could not sleep for the cold, 5
I had fire enough in my brain,
And builded, with roofs of gold,
My beautiful castles in Spain!

Since then I have toiled day and night,
I have money and power good store, 10
But I 'd give all my lamps of silver bright
For the one that is mine no more;
Take, Fortune, whatever you choose,
You gave, and may snatch again;
I have nothing 't would pain me to lose, 15
For I own no more castles in Spain!

AIDS TO THE STUDY OF THE VISION OF SIR LAUNFAL

BY H. A. DAVIDSON

THE STUDY OF THE VISION OF SIR LAUNFAL

LOWELL's interpretation of the poet's mission is given in his own words in a letter to his friend, C. F. Briggs, dated February 18, 1846. He writes, . . . "my calling is clear to me. I am never lifted up to any peak of vision — and moments of almost fearful inward illumination I have sometimes — but that when I look down in hope to see some valley of the Beautiful Mountains, I behold nothing but blackened ruins; and the moans of the downtrodden the world over — but chiefly here in our own land — come up to my ear, instead of the happy songs of the husbandmen reaping and binding the sheaves of light; yet these, too, I hear not seldom. Then I feel how great is the office of poet, could I but even dare to hope to fill it. Then it seems as if my heart would break in pouring out one glorious song that should be the gospel of Reform, full of consolation and strength to the oppressed, yet falling gently and restoringly as dew on the withered youth-flowers of the oppressor. That way my madness lies, if any."

The same conception of the poet's high mission as a leader of reform finds expression in many of Lowell's early poems, especially those in a small volume entitled *A Year's Life*, —

"Never had poets such high call before,
Never can poets hope for higher one,
. . . .
For he who settles Freedom's principles
Writes the death-warrant of all tyranny;
Who speaks the truth stabs Falsehood to the heart."

From *L'Envoi*.

But the true inspiration of *The Vision of Sir Launfal* must be sought in Lowell's relation to the anti-slavery cause in its birth hour. With the enthusiasm of early love and superabundant vitality, the young poet entered the lists as the champion of the downtrodden and the oppressed. The movement led by Garrison and Phillips and a score of devoted men was to him none other than a holy crusade. He bewailed the necessity which compelled him to receive money for the contributions of his pen; in his own thought, his words were the expression of burning conviction, poured forth in behalf of fellow beings — even the lowliest and most oppressed.

It is significant that twice in Lowell's life the composition of great poems at fever heat, in an incredibly short space of time, followed many months of polemical writing in prose on the same subject. It would seem as if the man had sweated over his ideas and wrought them into phrases apt to express his meaning until, in his own words, they passed from his memory into the blood, when suddenly the poet's brain took fire, and transmuted into song the deep conviction and the heartfelt emotion of the philanthropist. In the year preceding the composition of the *Commemoration Ode*, in January, July, and October, the *North American Review* contained political articles from his pen, dealing with the issues involved in Mr. Lincoln's candidacy for reëlection. Of this and other poems belonging in the same group he writes, "My blood was up and you would hardly believe me if I were to tell how few hours intervened between conception and completion, even in so long a one as *Mason and Slidell*. So I have a kind of faith that the 'Ode' is right because it was *there*, I hardly knew how. . . . I had put the ethical and political view so often in prose that I was weary of it. The motives of the war? I had impatiently argued them again and again — but for an ode they must be in the blood, not in the memory."

Once before, in Lowell's life, a period of hot partisanship and polemical argument had been followed by the conception and swift composition of a beautiful poem, *The Vision of Sir Launfal*, in which the poet's zeal for the anti-slavery cause found expression. From the beginning, Lowell had conceived of the attempt to root slavery out of the land of the free as a holy crusade; and when, in 1846, he became a regular contributor to *The Standard*, the organ of the American Anti-Slavery Society, he entered on his task as on a holy warfare. He insisted on the privilege of sending contributions either in prose or in verse, as the humor seized him or the muse inspired. During the time that Lowell wrote for this periodical — about four years — his pen was the servant of an almost chivalrous loyalty and devotion to the cause he and his wife had espoused. In different form, prose and poetry alike breathed the same urgent message; when the poet's imagination took fire and he sought a theme for a longer poem than he had yet written, the form of a parable came to his mind, in which the leper at the gate, gruesome, repulsive, and rejected, was no other than the black slave.

Two groups of poems hold an intimate relation to *The Vision of Sir Launfal* and serve to interpret the hidden meaning of the legend. In one of these groups are other poems, written in this period of Lowell's life in the mood that inspired *The Vision of Sir Launfal*. The most significant of these will be found in Group A, pages 16–33. The story of Sir Launfal's adventure is, in truth, the parable of a holy crusade; the knight going forth in search of the Grail reaches his goal, not in the land where Christ was buried, but at the very door of his own castle in the North Countree, when he shared his crust with the loathsome, gruesome thing he saw at his side, and the revealing light fell clear around him. *The Search* (February, 1847) is almost a parallel, a commentary, for *The Vision of Sir Launfal*, the futile search for Christ ending in a "hovel rude" where

> "The King I sought for meekly stood;
> A naked, hungry child
> Clung round his gracious knee,

And a poor hunted slave looked up and smiled,
To bless the smile that set him free."

This is the leper by Sir Launfal's gate in the North Countree.

In *A Parable* (May, 1848), said Christ our Lord, —

"Have ye founded your thrones and altars, then,
On the bodies and souls of living men?
And think ye that building shall endure,
Which shelters the noble and crushes the poor?"
. . . .
. . . "Lo, here," said he,
The images ye have made of me."

And Christ set in the midst of those who named his name, the poet says, creatures so low and degraded that the hem of the garment was drawn back lest it should be defiled.

In *Bibliolatres* (May, 1849), Lowell cried out in passionate impatience with men who worship "light ancestral" and at the same time turn deaf ears to the moaning of the oppressed: —

"What art thou, own brother of the clod,[1]
Bowing thyself in dust before a Book,
And thinking the great God is thine alone?
God is not dumb that He should speak no more;
If thou hast wanderings in the wilderness
And find'st not Sinai, 't is thy soul is poor;
There towers the mountain of the Voice no less,
Which whoso seeks shall find." . . .

Here, also, we find the mountain that strives with the faint-hearted, the Sinai that we daily climb, not heeding, in

. . . "mountain organ-tones
By prophet ears from Hor and Sinai caught." . . .

A sentence in a letter written by Lowell in September, 1848, suggests the typical significance, in his mind, of the mountain in the wilderness, Sinai: — "We may reach our Promised Land; but it is far behind us in the Wilderness, in the early time of struggle, that we have left our Sinais and our personal talk with God in the bush."

[1] The order of the lines in the poem has not been preserved here.

In *Freedom* (June, 1848), "the great winds utter prophecies," —

"Are we, then, wholly fallen? Can it be
That thou, North wind, that from thy mountains bringest,
Their spirit to our plains, and thou, blue sea,
Who on our rocks thy wreaths of freedom flingest,
As on an altar, — can it be that ye
Have wasted inspiration on dead ears,
Dulled with the too familiar clank of chains?"

"Fallen and traitor lives" characterize those descendants of the men that came in the "hero-freighted Mayflower" who shrink back, fleeing God's express design. The beautiful figure of Freedom fleeing morn-ward with light footsteps, gone before the day has risen, is lost in the strenuous urgency of the moralist.

The Present Crisis (December, 1845), that noblest of all Lowell's poems, is the epitome of the very spirit of our Pilgrim forefathers, at the same time great, and narrow, and prophetic of the future. In words thrilling with passionate conviction and enkindled with imagination, the poet lifts the strife of his own time into the plain of world history, and it becomes infinitely great because it marks one step in the advance of the human race.

"Once to every man and nation comes the moment to decide,
In the strife of Truth with Falsehood, for the good or evil side;
Some great cause, God's new Messiah, offering each the bloom or blight,
. . . .
And these mounts of anguish number how each generation learned
One new word of that grand *Credo* which in prophet-hearts hath burned
Since the first man stood God-conquered with his face to heaven upturned."

Careful study of Lowell's prose in the files of *The Standard*, in connection with poems written approximately at the same time, would reveal a close parallel, also, between the expression of conviction in the form of argument and the embodiment in verse of enthusiasm and emotion arising from

conviction; but this is a subject inviting to the critical reader rather than a task for the school room.

But were the expression of conviction, the hidden meaning of the parable, the only purpose dear to the poet's heart in *The Vision of Sir Launfal*, it would not be the noble poem it is. Deep conviction may be the soul of the beautiful work of art in any medium, be it language, or marble, or color, or sound, but it cannot of itself become the essential characteristic of the art form chosen as the means of expression. There must be some imaginative organization of thought to make it a fit subject for a work of art, and the form chosen must be adorned and enriched, as the artist is able, by every means suited to his need which tradition and usage have sanctioned as forms of expression for artistic truth or beauty. *The Vision of Sir Launfal*, serving as an expression of Lowell's belief in the obligation of human being to fellow human being, is nevertheless, intimately, the overflowing of a poet's heart full of the love of nature and the mood of youth. On this side, *The Vision of Sir Launfal* may be studied best in connection with another group of poems belonging also to the same period of early manhood and happiness as the prose and the longer poem. It is especially to note the poet's fondness for the high-tide of the year in June that a number of these poems (Group B, pages 34–88) are included in this volume and referred to here. The material of his observation is essentially the same in the several poems, and the reader feels the note of genuine experience and emotion in the spontaneous, untroubled repetition from various points of view.

Beaver Brook (*The Mill*, January, 1849) is the brook of the second prelude in *The Vision of Sir Launfal*, and in the poem Lowell expresses again the belief which is the keynote of his improvisation in *A Day in June*, that "Beauty underlies forevermore each form of use." *Al Fresco* is full of haunting echoes of descriptions of nature in older verse which had enriched the poet's brain: the "hermit thrush," the "buccaneering bee," the "nunnery of the lily," and,

more than all, the subtler reference to the thought pervading Wordsworth's *Intimations of Immortality*, in

"To-day I will be a boy again,"

and to his own first prelude in *The Vision of Sir Launfal*, in

"What gospels lost the woods retrieve."

The first paragraphs of *Under the Willows* read like another version of "And what is so rare as a day in June."

"June is the pearl of our New England year."
"June! Dear June! Now God be praised for June."

The description of the coming of spring in *Sunthin' in the Pastoral Line*, of the waking up of "Northun natur', slow and apt to doubt," is a close parallel in selection, even in phrase, to the descriptions of the same time of year in *Under the Willows* and in *The Vision of Sir Launfal*. "The robin is plastering his house hard by," in one poem; in the other, when "the gray hossches'nuts leetle hands unfold, the robin-redbreast, mindful of his 'almanick,' goes to plast'rin his adobë house." The identity in mood and in detail of observation is no less marked that in one, the hang-bird flashes; in another the bobolink, the soul of the sweet season, swings. In each poem Lowell varies his choice of phrase or illustration to suit the point of view chosen and the purpose in mind, but the rhythmic pulse attuning the heart of the poet to "the natural way of living" is always the same.

These poems illustrate, also, Lowell's fondness for his own phrases and conceits, and show the frequency with which he repeats himself; perchance, as well, the reason why he so often found the poetic muse "Invita Minerva." In *Beaver Brook* "Warm noon brims full the valley's cup;" in *An Indian-Summer Reverie* "Hebe Autumn fills the bowl between me and those distant hills;" and in *Al Fresco* "The rich, milk-tingeing buttercup Its tiny polished urn holds up, Filled with ripe summer to the edge."

In *Under the Willows*, the poet says, "What a day to sun me and do nothing;" in *The Vision of Sir Launfal*, "We sit in the warm shade and feel how the sap creeps up;"

and Hosea Biglow in the spring "allus feels the sap start in his veins."

The poet's first love is always given to the bobolink. Hosea Biglow writes,

> . . . "June's bridesman, poet o' the year,
> Gladness on wings, the bobolink, is here;
> Half-hid in tip-top apple-blooms he swings,
> Or climbs aginst the breeze with quiverin' wings."

In the coming of spring among the willows, the swallow and the bluebird are no more than forerunners for the true poet of song.

> "But now, oh rapture! sunshine winged and voiced,
> . . . .
> Gladness of woods, skies, waters, all in one,
> The bobolink has come, and, like the soul
> Of the sweet season vocal in a bird,
> Gurgles in ecstasy we know not what." . . .

There is no space here for tracing further Lowell's habit of repeating forms of expression in different poems for similar ideas, and of using over conceits adapted now to one poetic or imaginative point of view, now to another. The illustrations that have been given are no more than suggestions for wider reading and comparison such as any pupil fond of poetry may carry out.

Lowell calls all his war poems improvisations. This seems to be his own characterization of the moment of creation which combined in imaginative unity material long familiar to his thought in other form. In *The Vision of Sir Launfal,* he chose to make improvisation personified in the musing organist building "a bridge from Dreamland for his lay" the mould of form for the poem. Thus the main theme is expressed in a narrative held within another narrative form so slight that it slips away from the reader completely as he goes on. When the opening of Part Second appears the word "Prelude" recalls him, but seems scarcely justified. In *The Ancient Mariner,* Coleridge has employed the same literary device, but with infinitely greater skill. Now and again, the wedding guest, an enforced listener, is brought to the reader's attention, and so perfect is this narrative form, which serves as setting for the tale the mariner tells, that the critic may note each typical step of progress from beginning to moment of climax and conclusion, clearly marked but distinct from the narrative art of the tale itself, which has also its own complete, well-arranged sequence and organization as plot.

In *The Vision of Sir Launfal,* the figure of improvisation is shown first in the gradual approach of the poet to the subject of his narrative. True, he begins with a generalized statement of his theme, — "We Sinais climb and know it not," but this is introduced in the form of a protest. It is not true, as Wordsworth intimates, that heaven recedes from the growing boy as he leaves infancy far behind. Few readers perceive — striving to catch the somewhat obscure meaning — the significance of these words as the announcement, remote and far away, of the real theme of the poem. Then the poet passes on to specify the influences in all nature, animate and inanimate, which strive with the heart of man that he may be led from the wilderness to the mountain heights where the soul talks face to face, as Moses of old, with God. It is but a step from description of these divine influences, manifest in the beauty and teeming life of June, to their effect on the hearts of men, — which at last brings the improvisator to the goal he had in mind from the first, the beginning of his narrative. Then the generalization is dropped in a moment, and henceforth an illustration, in the single instance, of the great truth he has tried to phrase, is substituted. We follow in concrete example the story of how nature and his own heart and many varied experiences compelled one man along the upward way, until, after a weary interval, the light shone around him and he lifted his downward gaze to discover that, unwittingly, he had climbed his Sinai and found the Lord.

Lowell marks the thematic improvisation threading his poem by prolonging the influence of springtime and June into the dream. The June day, introduced first as a mani-

festation of the divinity that dwells in all nature and finds expression in beauty and life, becomes then the influence that moved the knight to the keeping of his vow, and lingered in his memory as he lay on the rushes in his own courtyard. When he fell asleep, the little birds of spring sang on in his dream, and it was, in his vision, as in reality, the one perfect day of all the year. Thus has the poet, advancing, retreating, illustrating, built a bridge, not from, but into, Dreamland, for his lay. The picture of summer in siege around the dark castle, representative of the man's heart before the call to remember his vow came to him, repeats in variation, mingling with the thread of the narrative, the description of the June day, and suggests the *motive* insistently, so that it remains in the mind, as in music the theme holds the ear and is the compelling or dominant note.

The Prelude to Part Second of *The Vision of Sir Launfal* seems to be an attempt to return to the point of view of the improvisator and to create an artistic parallel to the first prelude. Beautiful as are the lines descriptive of the descent of winter from the mountain and the housing of the little brook in his palace of ice, they nevertheless fail of the artistic purpose which the poet designed them to fulfil in his plan. The reasons for this failure must be indicated with the utmost brevity. The attempt to lead the imagination outside of the dream, to the point of view of the improvisator, is unsuccessful, because the moment the reader pictures Sir Launfal sitting at his own gate, cold and shelterless, the parts of the scene are inevitably reversed, and the preceding description of winter and storm becomes no more than the setting of the picture, subordinate to the figure of the old man. In the Prelude to Part First this reversal of parts when the element of human interest enters does not occur, for two reasons; first, the description leads up to the narrative and serves as a means of introduction, and, secondly, the motive which is the beginning of the slight plot, the stirring of purpose in the heart of the knight, is supplied by this means. In Part Second the narrative is under way,

the imagination of the reader is fully committed to it, and there has been no reminder that the action of the story has reality only in the visions of the sleeping knight. The description, further, supplies no motive for the incidents that follow. The attempt to build out of it a contrast in the manner of the earlier figure is not convincing for lack of intimate correspondence between the figure and the meaning. The winter palace in no way typifies or motives the spiritual experience of the returning knight; the contrast between the frost and cold without the castle and the cheering glow of warmth from within seems superficial and unreal, since the life and light of a new spiritual purpose are in the heart of the man on the outside and must enter with him when at last the siege of summer is over.

For similar reasons, the awakening of Sir Launfal at the end fails to quicken the imagination. The narrator has done his work too well. Readers have followed the progress of the tale with such belief in the reality of the passage of time that the mind refuses to turn back or to exchange the thin figure of the old man for the youthful knight who rode forth in the morning. The effort is made difficult by a belief rooted in the minds of us all that such charity and humility as Sir Launfal showed when for the second time he met the leper, arise in proud hearts only after long and bitter experience. The very wording of the conclusion, "The Summer's long siege at last is o'er," lends itself to the persuasion of the mind that the experience of Sir Launfal was a real one, and the result, namely that mingling of new-born purpose and sympathy which ripens only in the flight of years, adds conviction.

In passing, we should note that one element of an ideally arranged narrative is entirely lacking in the story of the poem. Lowell gives his tale a definite beginning and motives sufficiently the going forth of the knight, but he does not indicate, even by remote suggestion, the experiences that changed his spirit and sent him back the humble servant of the lowliest human need. The reminiscent memory of the

old man and the contrast between his earlier and later self go far to supply the omission, and doubtless the difficulty of rounding the narrative without lessening the force of the truth the poet would convey was too great. *The Vision of Sir Launfal* is so full of beauty in all its parts, and so derived from the very sun and wind and bloom of our own land, so instinct with the history and spirit of a young nation, that we all must love it and cherish it in the memory, not in the spirit of criticism, but as a choice inheritance.

A FEW REFERENCES FOR THE STUDY OF LOWELL'S LIFE AND WORKS

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THE INDEBTEDNESS OF THE AUTHOR OF THE VISION OF SIR LAUNFAL TO OTHER WRITERS.

The following note accompanied the first publication of *The Vision of Sir Launfal* in 1848, and was retained by Lowell in all subsequent editions: —

"According to the mythology of the Romancers, the San Greal, or Holy Grail, was the cup out of which Jesus Christ 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."