The parson was working his Sunday's text,—
Had got to fifty, and stopped perplexed
At what the—Moses—was coming next.
All at once the horse stood still,
Close by the meet'n'-house on the hill.
First a shiver, and then a thrill. 14
Then something decidedly like a spill,—
And the parson was sitting upon a rock,
At half past nine by the meet'n'-house clock,—
Just the hour of the Earthquake shock!
What do you think the parson found,
When he got up and stared around?
The poor old chaise in a heap or mound,
As if it had been to the mill and ground!
You see, of course, if you're not a dunce,
How it went to pieces all at once,—
All at once, and nothing first,—
Just as bubbles do when they burst.

End of the wonderful one-hoss shay.
Logic is logic. That's all I say.

James Russell Lowell 1819–1891

As a poet, essayist, editor, and public gentleman, James Russell Lowell reflected the taste of nineteenth-century America. Like Longfellow and Holmes he was one of the literary Brahmins who thought themselves to be the "untitled aristocracy" of Boston—
and hence of all America. Lowell was born in Cambridge, Massachusetts, into an honored New England family. At Harvard he was the class poet, and not long after his graduation he published his first volume of poetry, A Year's Life (1841). In a single year, 1848, he established himself firmly in New England's literary hierarchy by publishing four volumes that represented his most notable literary achievement: Poems; Second Series; A Fable for Critics; The Biglow Papers; and The Vision of Sir Launfal, a Christian parable in verse that became his most frequently reprinted work.

As a young man Lowell was an ardent reformer; he crusaded for abolition, temperance, vegetarianism, and women's rights. But as he grew older he became a conservative spokesman for the dominant and comfortable society that honored him. For thirty years he was a professor of literature at Harvard, filling the position vacated by the poet Longfellow. He was the first editor of the Atlantic Monthly and editor of the pres-

tigious North American Review. He received honorary degrees from both Oxford and Cambridge. And for his political service to the Republican party he was made United States ambassador to Spain (1877–1880) and to England (1880–1885).

Through his lifetime Lowell was a prolific writer of poems, essays, and literary criticism, and in his last years he was considered to be America's most distinguished man of letters. His poetry was fluent, cultivated, and facile; his dialect verse and his rhymed satire crackled with witty commentary on the follies of his age and on the character of his literary contemporaries, among them Poe, who was "three fifths of him genius and two fifths sheer jufge," and Thoreau, who "watched Nature like a detective." Yet Lowell's preference was for the mannered elegance of a poetry filled with "classic niceties." His life and his writings were detached from the human concerns of such writers as Whitman, whom Lowell thought a humbug. As a result, his own efforts to unite art and ethics produced a moralizing literature in many ways typical of New England's "schoolroom" poets, gentlemen who, once exalted in reputation, are today best understood as emblems of the orthodoxy and the genteel hopes of an age that has long since passed away.


TO THE DANDELION

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14Shudder, tremble.

110

110

120

120

1858

TO THE DANDELION

Dear common flower, that grow'st beside the way,
Fringing the dusty road with harmless gold,
First pledge of blithe May,
Which children pluck, and full of pride uphold,
High-hearted buccaneers, o'erjoyed that they
An Eldorado 1 in the grass have found,
Which not the rich earth's ample round
May match in wealth, thou art more dear to me
Than all the prouder summer-blooms may be.

Gold such as thine ne'er drew the Spanish prow
Through the primeval hush of Indian seas,
Nor wrinkled the lean brow
Of age, to rob the lover's heart of ease;
'Tis the Spring's largess, which she scatters now
To rich and poor alike, with lavish hand,
Though most hearts never understand

1Legendary city of gold.
The Age of Romanticism

To take it at God's value, but pass by
The offered wealth with unrewarded eye.

Thou art my tropics and mine Italy;
To look at thee unlocks a warmer clime;
The eyes thou givest me
Are in the heart, and heed not space or time:
Not in mid June the golden-cuirassed bee
Feels a more summer-like warm ravishment
In the white lily's breezy tent,
His fragrant Sybaris, than I, when first
From the dark green thy yellow circles burst.

Then think of deep shadows on the grass,
Of meadows where in sun the cattle graze,
Where, as the breezes pass,
The gleaming rushes lean a thousand ways,
Of leaves that slumber in a cloudy mass,
Or whiten in the wind, of waters blue
That from the distance sparkle through
Some woodland gap, and of a sky above,
Where one white cloud like a straw lamb doth move.

My childhood's earliest thoughts are linked with thee;
The sight of thee calls back the robin's song,
Who, from the dark old tree
Beside the door, sang clearly all day long,
And I, secure in childish piety,
Listened as if I heard an angel sing
With news from heaven, which he could bring
Fresh every day to my untainted ears
When birds and flowers and I were happy peers.

How like a prodigal doth nature seem,
When thou, for all thy gold, so common art!
Thou teachest me to deem
More sacredly of every human heart,
Since each reflects in joy its scintillating gleam
Of heaven, and could some wondrous secret show,
Did we but pay the love we owe,
And with a child's undoubted wisdom look
On all these living pages of God's book.

1845

from THE BIGLOW PAPERS, FIRST SERIES

NO. I.

A LETTER

From Mr. Ezekiel Biglow of Jaalam to the Hon. Joseph T. Buckingham, Editor of the Boston Courier, Inclosing A Poem of His Son, Mr. Hosea Biglow.

Jaylem, June 1846.

Mister Eddyter—Our Hosea wuz down to Boston last week, and he see a cuvetin Sarjent a struttin round as popier as a hen with 1 chickin, with 2 fellers a drummin and fifin arm him like all nater. The sarjent he thout Hosea hedn't gut his i teeth cut cos he looked a kindo's though he'd jest com down, so he cal'd him to look him in, but Hosy woodn't take none o' his sarse for all he hed much as 20 Rooster's tales stuck onto his hat and eenamost enuf brass a bobbin up and down on his shoulders and figurined onto his coat and trousers, let alone wuter nater hed sot in his featers, to make a 6 pounder out on.

wal, Hosea he com home considerabral riled, and arter I'd gone to bed I heem Him a thrashin round like a short-tailed Bull in flitme. The old Woman ses she to me ses she, Zekle, ses she, our Hosee's gut the chollery but suthin anither ses she, don't you Bee skerred, ses I, he's ouny amakking potty ses I, he's ollers on hand at that ere busynes like Da & Martin, and shure enuf, cum mornin, Hosy he cum down stares full chizzle, hare on eend and cote tales flyin, and sot rite of to go reed his vares to Parson Wilbur bein he haint aney grate shows o' book larnin himself, bimeby he cum back and sed the parson wuz dreffle tickled with 'em as i hoop you will Be, and said they wuz True grit.

Hosea ses taint hardly fair to call 'em hisn now, cos the parson-kind o' slucked off som o' the last vares but he told Hosee he didn't want to put his ore in to tetch to the Rest on 'em, bein they wuz verry well As they wuz, and then Hosy ses he sed suthin a nuther about Simplex Mundishes or sum

1. Published anonymously (1846–1848), the first Biglow Papers were Lowell's protest against the Mexican War (1846–1847) and the spread of slavery. The Papers were presented as the work of a young New England Yankee farmer, Hosea Biglow. "H. W." was Hosea's parson, the Reverend Homer Wilbur, who "edited" Hosea's verses before their publication and whom Lowell created as a pedantic contrast to the versifying bumptain, Hosea.
2. Recruiting sergeant. To fight the Mexican War, the federal government sent out a nationwide call for volunteers. Massachusetts was asked to provide one regiment.
3. Conceited.
5. I.e., come down from the backcountry.
7. A brass cannon that shoots a six-pound ball.
8. Choleric, out of humor.
9. "Aut insanit, aut versus factit."—H. W.—Lowell's note. The Latin is Parson Wilbur's misquotation from the Suetonius (Book II, Satire viii, line 117) of the Roman poet Horace: "He is either insane or he is making verses."
10. Day and Martin, shoe-polish makers who advertised in verse.
11. I.e., full speed.
12. Parson Wilbur was quoting Horace (Book I, Ode v, line 5): "simplicem munditiam," "simple elegance," i.e., unsophisticated.