

LOWELL'S AMERICANISM.

A LETTER BY THE POET CONCERNING HIS POEMS OF 1875, "THE WORLD'S FAIR" AND "TEMPORA MUTANTUR."



SOME time before the World's Fair of 1876 was held in Philadelphia, Mr. Lowell made a visit to Europe, and was absent from home for a considerable period. On his return in 1875 he wrote two brief poems for "The Nation," which were entitled respectively "The World's Fair, 1876," and "Tempora Mutantur." In these he described certain dangerous symptoms of the body politic. The characterization—as would be expected—was not only terse and pungent, but was enlivened by that unflinching critical humor which made his "Biglow Papers" of a former period famous. It was the voice of correction and warning, however, not a homily of despair. He spoke truth to the country for the republic's sake. The following lines are a fair sample of the tone and direction of the poems. Mr. Lowell, speaking for Brother Jonathan, recommends the exhibition of some of our political inventions of that day :

Show 'em your Civil Service, and explain
How all men's loss is everybody's gain ;
Show your new patent to increase your rents
By paying quarters for collecting cents ;
Show your short cut to cure financial ills
By making paper-collars current bills ;
Show your new bleaching-process, chief and
brief,
To wit : a jury chosen by the thief ;
Show your State legislatures ; show your Rings ;
And challenge Europe to produce such things
As high officials sitting half in sight
To share the plunder and to fix things right ;
If that don't fetch her, why, you only need
To show your latest style in martyrs—Tweed :
She 'll find it hard to hide her spiteful tears
At such advance in one poor hundred years.

In "Tempora Mutantur" occur these lines :

A hundred years ago,
If men were knaves, why, people called them so,
And crime could see the prison-portal bend
Its brow severe at no long vista's end ;
In those days for plain things plain words would
serve ;
Men had not learned to admire the graceful
swerve

Wherewith the Æsthetic Nature's genial mood
Makes public duty slope to private good.

But now that "Statesmanship" is just a way
To dodge the primal curse and make it pay,
Since Office means a kind of patent drill
To force an entrance to the Nation's till,
And peculation something rather less
Risky than if you spelt it with an s ;

With generous curve we draw the moral line :
Our swindlers are permitted to resign ;
Their guilt is wrapped in deferential names,
And twenty sympathize for one that blames.

The public servant who has stolen or lied,
If called on, may resign with honest pride :
As unjust favor put him in ; why doubt
Disfavor as unjust has turned him out ?
Even if indicted, what is that but fudge
To him who counted-in the elective judge ?
Whitewashed, he quits the politician's strife,
At ease in mind, with pockets filled for life.

It happened that these caustic lines punctured the politician's pachydermatous hide, and awakened resentment. A large proportion of the press (and particularly that part of it which was of his own political faith) pursued him with no polite epithets, and with not a little persistence. It was charged that he was no true American ; that he was, in fact, a snob ; that he had elbowed against dukes and lords so much and so long that he could not any longer tolerate Democracy. And for many weeks this and other equally puerile nonsense went on unrebuked.

It occurred to me at last to say what was obvious, and record my sympathy with Mr. Lowell's position. That his character and motives were above all need of defense I knew, but such a shocking perversion of his ideas and intentions was altogether too flagrant to pass unnoticed. I therefore took up the cudgels for what seemed to me to be true ; and, under the title of "Mr. Lowell's Recent Political Verse," volunteered, in the "Christian Union" of December 15, 1875, a defense of his friendly chidings.

In response to this article Mr. Lowell wrote me the letter given below. It was impliedly confidential, and for many years I have strictly kept it so ; but I have concluded, and am sup-

ported by others in thinking, that this privacy is no longer called for. As it has now really become a part of history, and of Mr. Lowell's biography too, the public is entitled, I am sure, to read from a pen that will serve it no more, a pen that has given the country inestimable benefit, honor, and fame, the meaning of those much-abused poems.¹

Joel Benton.

ELMWOOD, 19th January, 1876.

DEAR SIR: I thank you for the manly way in which you put yourself at my side when I had fallen among thieves, still more for the pithy and well-considered words with which you confirm and maintain my side of the quarrel. At my time of life one is not apt to vex his soul at any criticism, but I confess that in this case I was more than annoyed, I was even saddened. For what was said was so childish and showed such shallowness, such levity, and such dullness of apprehension both in politics and morals on the part of those who claim to direct public opinion (as, alas! they too often do) as to confirm me in my gravest apprehensions. I believe "The World's Fair" gave the greatest offense. They had not even the wit to see that I put my sarcasm into the mouth of Brother Jonathan, thereby implying and meaning to imply that the common sense of my countrymen was awakening to the facts, and that *therefore* things were perhaps not so desperate as they seemed.

I had just come home from a two years' stay in Europe, so it was discovered that I had been corrupted by association with foreign aristocracies! I need not say to you that the society I frequented in Europe was what it is at home, that of my wife, my studies, and the best nature and art within my reach. But I confess that I was embittered by my experience. Whenever I went I was put on the defensive. Whatever extracts I saw from American papers told of some new fraud or defalcation, public or private. It was sixteen years since my last visit abroad, and I found a very striking change in the feeling toward America and Americans. An Englishman was everywhere treated with a certain deference: Americans were at best tolerated. The example of America was everywhere urged in France as an argument against republican forms of government. It was fruitless to say that the people were still sound when the Body Politic which draws its life from them

showed such blotches and sores. I came home, and instead of wrath at such abominations, I found banter. I was profoundly shocked, for I had received my earliest impressions in a community the most virtuous, I believe, that ever existed. . . . In the Commonwealth that built the first free school and the first college, I heard culture openly derided. I suppose I like to be liked as well as other men. Certainly I would rather be left to my studies than meddle with politics. But I had attained to some consideration, and my duty was plain. I wrote what I did in the plainest way, that he who ran might read, and that I hit the mark I aimed at is proved by the attacks against which you so generously defend me. These fellows have no notion what love of country means. It is in my very blood and bones. If I am not an American, who ever was?

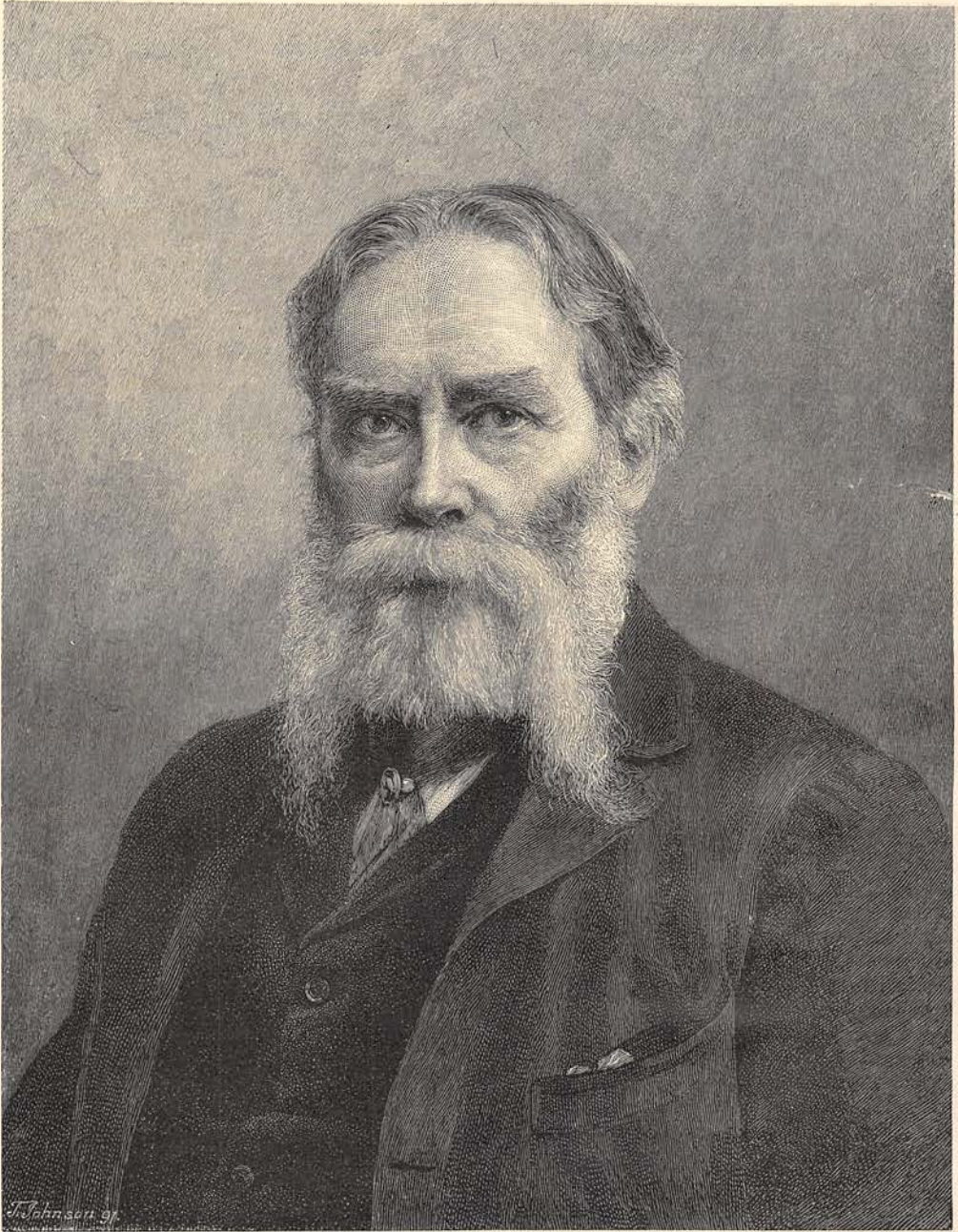
I am no pessimist, nor ever was. . . . What fills me with doubt and dismay is the degradation of the moral tone. Is it or is it not a result of Democracy? Is ours a "government of the people by the people for the people," or a Kakistocracy rather, for the benefit of knaves at the cost of fools? Democracy is, after all, nothing more than an experiment like another, and I know only one way of judging it—by its results. Democracy in itself is no more sacred than monarchy. It is Man who is sacred, it is his duties and opportunities, not his rights, that nowadays need reinforcement. It is honor, justice, culture, that make liberty invaluable, else worse than worthless, if it mean only freedom to be base and brutal. As things have been going lately, it would surprise no one if the officers who had Tweed in charge should demand a reward for their connivance in the evasion of that popular hero. I am old enough to remember many things, and what I remember I meditate upon. My opinions do not live from hand to mouth. And so long as I live I will be no writer of birthday odes to King Demos any more than I would be to King Log, nor shall I think *our* cant any more sacred than any other. Let us all work together (and the task will need us all) to make Democracy possible. It certainly is no invention to go of itself any more than the perpetual motion.

Forgive me for this long letter of justification, which I am willing to write for your friendly eye though I should scorn to make any public defense. Let the tenor of my life and writings defend me.

Cordially yours,

J. R. LOWELL.

¹ This letter appears here with the consent of Mr. Lowell's literary executor, Charles Eliot Norton, Esq.—EDITOR.



ENGRAVED BY T. JOHNSON.

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A. Lowndes.