

22 QUOTATIONS



James Russell Lowell

(1819-1891)

James Russell Lowell is one of the conservative New Englanders with Oliver Wendell Holmes, Sr. and Henry Wadsworth Longfellow—a rationalist in the Neoclassical aesthetic tradition of Benjamin Franklin. Called the “Boston Brahmins,” they stood apart from the revolutionary Transcendentalists out in Concord and were critical of their pretensions and “mysticism.” Lowell is at his best in passages of “A Fable for Critics” (1848) and was especially severe on Thoreau and Margaret Fuller. Though a patrician from a distinguished old family, he became increasingly democratic.

ORDER OF TOPICS: slavery, Puritanism, “Graves of English Soldiers at Concord,” freedom, Cooper, Poe, Hawthorne, Fuller, himself, old age, Thoreau, Emerson, Transcendentalism, literary criticism, Genius, wisdom:

SLAVERY

They are slaves who fear to speak
For the fallen and the weak.

PURITANISM

Puritanism, believing itself quick with the seed of religious liberty, laid, without knowing it, the egg of democracy.

It was in making education not only common to all, but in some sense compulsory on all, that the destiny of the free republics of America was practically settled.

Mishaps are like knives that either serve us or cut us, as we grasp them by the blade or the handle.

GRAVES OF ENGLISH SOLDIERS AT CONCORD

Our papers don't purtend to print on'y wut Guv'ment choose,

An' that insures us all to git the very best o' noose.
They came three thousand miles, and died,
To keep the Past upon its throne;
Unheard, beyond the ocean tide,
Their English mother made her moan.

FREEDOM

I first drew in New England's air, and from her hardy breast
Sucked in the tyrant-hating milk that will not let me rest;
And if my words seem treason to the dullard and the tame,
'Tis but my Bay State dialect—our fathers spake the same.

And 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.

COOPER

He has drawn you one character, though, that is new,
One wildflower he's plucked that is wet with the dew
Of this fresh Western world, and, the thing not to mince,
He has done naught but copy it ill ever since;
His Indians, with proper respect be it said,
Are just Natty Bumppo, daubed over with red...
And the women he draws from one model don't vary,
All sappy as maples and flat as a prairie.

POE

There comes Poe, with his raven, like Barnaby Rudge,
Three fifths of him genius and two fifths sheer fudge,
Who talks like a book of iambs and pentameters,
In a way to make people of common sense damn meters,
Who has written some things quite the best of their kind,
But the heart seems all squeezed out by the mind...

Nature fits all her children with something to do,
He who would write and can't write, can surely review.

HAWTHORNE

There is Hawthorne, with genius so shrinking and rare
That you hardly at first see the strength that is there;
A frame so robust, with a nature so sweet,
So earnest, so graceful, so lithe and so fleet,
Is worth a descent from Olympus to meet...
When Nature was shaping him, clay was not granted
For making so full-sized a man as she wanted,
So, to fill out her model, a little she spared
From some finer-grained stuff for a women prepared,
And she could not have hit a more excellent plan
For making him fully and perfectly man.

FULLER

...But there comes Miranda—*Zeus!* Where shall I flee to?
She has such a penchant for bothering me too!
She always keeps asking if I don't observe a
Particular likeness 'twixt her and Minerva;
She tells me my efforts in verse are quite clever;
She's been traveling now, and will be worse than ever;
One would think, though, a sharp-sighted noter she'd be
For all that's worth mentioning over the sea,
For a woman must surely see well, if she try,
The whole of whose being's a capital I:
She will take an old notion, and make it her own,
By saying it o'er in her Sibylline tone,
Or persuade you 'tis something tremendously deep,
By repeating it so as to put you to sleep;
And she well may defy any mortal to see through it,
When once she has mixed up her infinite me through it.
There is one thing she owns in her own single right,
It is native and genuine—namely, her spite;
Though, when acting as censor, she privately blows
A censor of vanity 'neath her own nose.

Here Miranda came up, and said, "Phoebus! You know
That the Infinite Soul has its infinite woe,
As I ought to know, having lived cheek by jowl,
Since the day I was born, with the Infinite Soul;
I myself introduced, I myself, I alone,
To my Land's better life authors solely my own,
Who the sad heart of earth on their shoulders have taken,
Such as Shakespeare, for instance, the Bible, and Bacon,
Not to mention my own works; Time's nadir is fleet,
And, as for myself, I'm quite out of conceit—"

"Quite out of conceit! I'm enchanted to hear it,"
Cried Apollo aside. "Who'd have thought she was near it?"

...As if Neptune should say to his turbot and whittings,
I'm as much out of salt as Miranda's own writings'
(Which, as she in her own happy manner has said,
Sound a depth, for 'tis one of the functions of lead).
She often has asked me if I could not find
A place somewhere near me that suited her mind;
I know but a single one vacant, which she
With her rare talent that way, would fit to a T.
And it would not imply any pause or cessation
In the work she esteems her peculiar vocation,—
She may enter on duty today, if she chooses,
And remain Tiring-woman for life to the Muses."

Miranda meanwhile has succeeded in driving
Up into a corner, in spite of their striving,
A small flock of terrified victims, and there,
With an I-turn-the-crank-of-the-Universe air
And a tone which, at least to my fancy, appears
Not so much to be entering as boxing your ears,

Is unfolding a tale (of herself, I surmise,
For 'tis dotted as thick as a peacock's with I's).
Apropos of Miranda, I'll rest on my oars
And drift through a trifling digression on bores...

There was one feudal custom worth keeping, at least,
Roasted bores made a part of each well-ordered feast,
And of all quiet pleasures the very *ne plus*
Was in hunting wild bores as the tame ones hunt us....

HIMSELF

There is Lowell, who's striving Parnassus to climb
With a whole bale of *isms* tied together with rhyme,
He might get on alone, spite of brambles and boulders,
But he can't with that bundle he has on his shoulders,
The top of the hill he will ne'er come nigh reaching
Till he learns the distinction 'twixt singing and preaching.
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,
As the head of a march to the last new Jerusalem.

OLD AGE

As life runs on, the road grows strange
With faces new, and near the end
The milestones into headstones change,
'Neath every one a friend.

THOREAU

Among the pistillate plants kindled to fruitage by the Emersonian pollen, Thoreau is thus far the most remarkable... He seems to me to have been a man with so high a conceit of himself that he accepted without questioning, and insisted on our accepting, his defects and weaknesses of character as virtues and powers peculiar to himself.... Thoreau had no humor...he was not by nature an observer. He only saw the things he looked for, and was less poet than naturalist. Till he built his Walden shanty, he did not know that the hickory grew in Concord.

EMERSON

His oration before the Phi Beta Kappa Society at Cambridge, some thirty years ago, was an event without any former parallel in our literary annals, a scene to be always treasured in the memory for its picturesqueness and its inspiration. What crowded and breathless aisles, what windows clustering with eager heads, what enthusiasm of approval, what grim silence of foregone dissent!

The Puritan revolt had made us ecclesiastically and the [American] Revolution politically independent, but we were still socially and intellectually moored to English thought, till Emerson cut the cable and gave us a chance at the dangers and the glories of blue water. No man young enough to have felt it can forget or cease to be grateful for the mental and moral nudge which he received from the writings of his high-minded and brave-spirited countryman.

TRANSCENDENTALISM

What contemporary, if he was in the fighting period of his life, will ever forget what was somewhat vaguely called the "Transcendental Movement" of thirty years ago? Apparently set astir by Carlyle's essays... Every possible form of intellectual and physical dyspepsia brought forth its gospel.... The word

“transcendental” then was the maid of all work for those who could not think... Some had an assurance of instant millenium as soon as hooks and eyes should be substituted for buttons. Communities were established where everything was to be common, but common sense... All stood ready at a moment’s notice to reform everything but themselves.

It was simply a struggle for fresh air, in which, if the windows could not be opened, there was danger that panes would be broken, though painted with images of saints and martyrs....the Protestant spirit of Puritanism seeking a new outlet and an escape from forms and creeds which compressed rather than expressed it.

I look upon a great deal of the modern sentimentalism about Nature as a mark of disease.

LITERARY CRITICISM

A wise skepticism is the first attribute of a good critic.

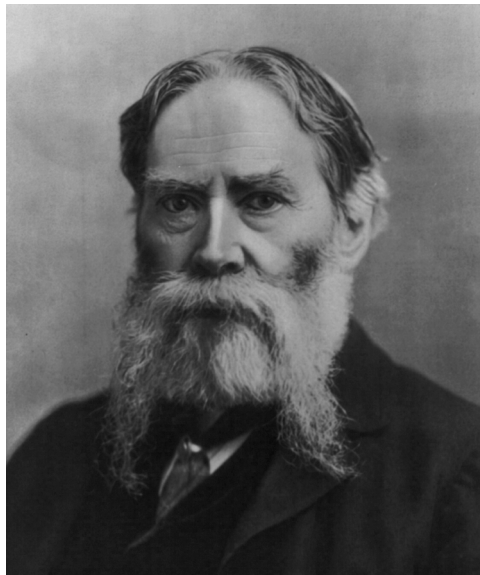
What a sense of security in an old book which Time has criticized for us.

GENIUS

Talent is that which is in a man’s power; genius is that in whose power a man is.

WISDOM

The wisest man could ask no more of Fate
Than to be simple, modest, manly, true,
Safe from the many, honored by the few;
To count as naught in world, or church, or state;
But inwardly in secret to be great.



James Russell Lowell