PAUL COLLINS

HE BEING DEAD YET SPEAKETH NOT

Predicting literary reputations is a tricky business. When I was a student at the College of William and Mary, a conservative student newspaper ran a dismissive article headed:

MAYA ANGEWHO?

Visiting Poet Hardly a Household Name

About a year later, Angelou intoned her poem "On the Pulse of Morning" at President Clinton's inauguration. The poem became a best-selling book, and she became . . . well, a household name.

THERE IS A problem with being a household name, though, and that is that sometimes the household disappears. When we peruse modern editions of old literature, we are not reading literature as people of that time experienced it. We are only reading it as we experience it.

To understand the literature of an era as it was known by its own inhabitants, you need to leaf through the actual physical objects of the era, the crumbling acid-rich paper of old books and periodicals.

Read the contents pages of these literary magazines, annuals, or book catalogs. It is a bewildering experience. You might not see any names you recognize; the authors that today we consider the geniuses of an age may have been unknown in their own time, while others who were then considered the pillars of an era have toppled into the dust. History has not changed, but what we wish to remember from it has.

So were you to think on one of the best-selling poets of the nineteenth century—a man who sold upwards of 1.5 million copies, and was proclaimed by Britain's Spectator as having "won for himself the vacant throne waiting for him amidst the immortals . . . adopted by the suffrage of mankind and the final decree of publishers into the same rank with Wordsworth, Tennyson, and Browning"—you might think of Coleridge, Keats, or perhaps Longfellow. They have all passed into worthiness, to be engraved into library cornices and published in cheap student editions. Yet the poet we seek was not any of these men. He is not anybody at all, as far as most readers are concerned, for his works have been out of print for over a century now. It would have been hard for him or anyone else to believe this, for he once seemed unassailable in his position as the most beloved poet in Britain.

MARTIN FARQUHAR TUPPER was not meant to be a poet. Born in 1810, the son of a successful London physician, he was groomed from an early age for a respectable career as a clergyman or a barrister. First he was sent to the petty tyrannies of boarding school at Charterhouse—"Slaughterhouse," his disgusted classmate Thackeray preferred to call it—where he was exposed to both the classics and the sight of a sadistic schoolmaster "smashing a child's head between two books in his shoulder-of-mutton hands till his nose bled." From Charterhouse he was packed off to Christ Church College at Oxford, where he could enjoy much the same view over the quadrangle as George Psalmanazar once had over a century before.

Tupper immersed himself in his studies, spending his spare time pondering theology and poetry, and taking earnest stands like refusing to eat any sugar "by way of somehow discouraging the slave-trade." He was an unusually industrious and sober student, so much so that the young Duke of Hamilton delighted in torturing his pious Christ Church classmate by always using Tupper's name when he signed in late after carousing. But then Tupper was always surrounded by classmates who, though more cavalier in their studies, seemed marked out for greater destinies. In his course on Aristotle his classmates were three future bishops, three future governors general of India and Canada, a future chancellor of the exchequer, and future Prime Minister William Gladstone. One simple problem held Tupper back from dreaming of a fate as lofty as theirs. He could not utter an intelligible sentence.

TUPPER, GROOMED FOR professions that required a mastery of rhetorical skills, faced this cruel irony: he could scarcely speak. Stuttering had plagued him from an early age, and it had been immeasurably worsened by the beatings he received at Charterhouse. Tupper pursued his training for the clergy in the forlorn hope that perhaps someday, somehow, the stutter would go away.

But what Tupper could not speak aloud he could express fluently upon the written page. He had already edged out his friend Gladstone for a college prize for writing, and ever since his days at Charterhouse he had filled composition books with his own verses. As early as 1828 he had tried longer efforts, such as versed proverbs on marriage for the benefit of his cousin Isabelle. "A letter was too light, and a formal Essay too heavy," he later explained, "so I thought I would convey my sentiments in the manner of Solomon's proverbs." His young mind plumbed the topics of wifely duties, children, and, of course, Love:

Hath a seducer known it? Can an adulterer perceive it? Or he that seeketh strange women, can he feel its purity? Or he that changeth often, can he know its truth?

He mailed the verses off to his cousin and then forgot about them. In 1832, at the age of twenty-two, he published his first collection of poetry, Sacra Poesis. It received little notice, but it still encouraged Tupper to continue writing. That same year, his final

term at Oxford, he realized that his stuttering had become hopeless. He could not take a First degree, for it required an oral exam that he was incapable of taking. His fondest hope, of becoming a man of the cloth, drifted further and further away; who would want a preacher who could not preach?

Disappointed, Tupper graduated and moved into his own lodgings, where he pondered what to do with the rest of his life. As determinedly idealistic as ever, he took up vegetarianism, and bought an enormous wheel of Cheshire cheese to live off of. He spent two months eating through part of the wheel until, weakened by this attempt at virtuous living, he gave up and gratefully tore into a mutton chop. Then, like any unemployed college student with an empty larder, he did the sensible thing: he moved back in with his parents.

The young man's first priority was to cure his stammer, and so his physician father brought in an array of the best specialists to "help" his son:

In a purposely monotonous note and syllable by syllable, with a crutch under my tongue, I have read all through in a loud voice Milton's whole Paradise Lost and Regained, and the most of Cowper's Poems! That was the sort of tongue-drill and nerve-quieting recommended and enforced for many hours a day. ... [I was prescribed] emulcents, and then styptics, and was fortunately prevented by my father from some surgical experiments on the muscles of the lip and tongue!

His father, despairing of a cure, sought out a legal job that would allow his son to work silently, and Tupper went to work at twenty-one in Lincoln's Inn, copying deeds and conveyances and studying for the bar exam. He passed the exam on his first try and, assured of a respectable profession, got married the very next day to his cousin Isabelle. His near-total lack of clients hardly seemed to matter, since his wealthy father was happy to support him and Isabelle. But sitting in his empty law office, Martin could scarcely help wondering whether the moral purpose of his life had somehow been lost.

He would soon have his answer. Martin Tupper's true calling had been lying in plain sight all along, in the advice poems he had written for Isabelle years before they had married. They were worthy of an entire book, he now realized. One day in August 1837 as Tupper was leaving the house of an acquaintance on Hampstead Road, the opening lines of his book unfurled in his mind; as the street traffic and pedestrians passed him on the corner, Tupper scrawled on the back of an envelope. Back at his offices, the lines grew, and ten weeks later, he was ascending the dingy staircase of the London publisher Joseph Rickerby, manuscript in hand. It was titled Proverbial Philosophy.

IT IS AN extraordinary document. Tupper, without seeming to realize it, had kicked down the fence between poetry and prose. He did not actually call Proverbial Philosophy poetry—indeed, he claimed to be surprised when one reviewer described it

as such—and yet the lines clearly were not your usual essay ramblings. They were too rhythmic, too parallel in their cadences. But Tupper's invention was as old as the hills. His lines were modeled on the King James Bible, which in turn had been crafted to reflect the content and the form of the Hebrew and Aramaic scrolls that formed the Bible's source documents. These had been meant to be sung, invoked rhythmically.

And so in Tupper we find lines such as these in "Of Hidden Uses," a prescient paean to the ecosystem:

Of the stored and uncounted riches lying hid in all creatures of God: There be flowers making glad the desert, and roots fattening the soil, And jewels in the secret deep, scattered amongst groves of coral, And comforts to crown all wishes, and aids unto every need, Influences yet unthought, and virtues, and many inventions, And uses above and around, which man hath not yet regarded. . . .

Not too long to charm away disease hath the crocus yielded up its bulb, Not the willow lent its bark, not the nightshade its vanquished poison . . . Even so, there be virtues yet unknown in the wasted foliage of the elm, In the sun-dried harebell of the downs, and the hyacinth drinking in the meadow, In the sycamore's winged fruit, and the facet-cut cones of the cedar;

And the pansy and bright geranium live not alone for beauty, Nor the waxen flower of the arbute, though it dieth in a day, Nor the sculptured crest of the fir, unseen but by the stars; And the meanest weed of the garden serveth unto many uses. . . .

Search out the wisdom of nature, there is depth in all her doings; She seemeth prodigal of power, yet her rules are the maxims of frugality: The plant refresheth the air, and the earth filtereth the water, And dews are sucked into a cloud, dropping fatness on the world: She hath, on a mighty scale, a general use for all things; Yet hath she specially for each microscopic purpose: There is use in the prisoned air, that swelleth the pod of the laburnum; Design in the venomed thorns, that sentinel the leaves of the nettle; A final cause for the aromatic gum, that congealeth like moss around a rose; A reason for each blade of grass, that reareth its small spire. How knoweth discontented man what a train of ills might follow, If the lowest menial of nature knew not her secret office? . . .

Man doeth one thing at once, nor can he think two thoughts together; But God compasseth all things, mantling the globe like air: And we render homage to his wisdom, seeing use in all his creatures, For, perchance, the universe would die, were not all things as they are.

Such work earned Tupper respectful if somewhat puzzled notices in British newspapers and magazines—the Spectator called Proverbial Philosophy "a quaint and thoughtful volume," while the Atlas lauded it as "one of the most original and curious

productions of our time." The January 1838 debut of the book was a modest enough financial success that Tupper was inspired to write a second edition later that year. But Tupper's appeal seemed limited; a third edition was so unsuccessful that the publisher shoveled off the unsold stock onto American booksellers. Americans scarcely knew what to make of it at all; one of the few stateside reviewers to read Proverbial Philosophy, the powerful editor N. P. Willis, was so perplexed by the form of the book that he guessed it to have been written some time before ... in the seventeenth century.

Over the next several years, Tupper dallied with a few volumes of more conventional poetry, as well as essays on scientific inventions and morality. It took time for Proverbial Philosophy to soak into the fabric of Victorian culture, and a second series of the book did not appear until 1842, when the London publisher Hatchard issued it. But for those around Tupper who read the manuscript, there was no question: this volume was his life's work. The author's father, no longer young, read the new poem "Of Immortality" with his own fate much in mind:

I live, move, am conscious: what shall bar my being?

Where is the rude hand, to rend this tissue of existence?

Not thine, shadowy Death, what art thou but a phantom?

Not thine, foul Corruption, what art thou but a fear?

For death is but merely absent life, as darkness absent light;

Not even a suspension, for the life hath sailed away, steering gladly

somewhere. And corruption, closely noted, is but a dissolving of the parts, The parts remain, and nothing lost, to build a better whole.

His father was, Martin later recalled, "seriously affected" by the lines, and pressed £2,000 upon his son, enough for him to continue writing for some time without fear of poverty. But success was just around the corner for the younger Tupper. The elderly Hatchard family patriarch, wise after many decades in the publishing business, may have been the only one to see it coming. Meeting his young author for the first time, Grandfather Hatchard placed his hand upon Tupper's dark hair. He had tears in his eyes.

"You will thank God for this book when your hair comes to be as white as mine."

THE 1840S WROUGHT an astonishing transformation. Proverbial Philosophy went through nine editions in that decade alone; the following decade saw twenty-eight

more editions—and this did not include the innumerable pirated editions. Tupper, the man whose speech infirmities seemed to render him Least Likely to Succeed of his Oxford class, saw himself turned into a de facto poet laureate of Victorian Britain. For an era of moralizing—as every era is, in its own narrow and hopeless way—Tupper's truisms were a comforting balm. He was not a mad, bad, and dangerous-to-know Romantic poet; he could be safely pressed into the hands of any young person or spouse in need of Lessons in Life. During the 1840s and 1850s, Proverbial Philosophy appeared in a bewildering variety of guises— cheap reading editions, gilt gift books, even lavish presentation editions meant to be given to young couples on their wedding day. Copies were given on the birth of children, on anniversaries, on any occasion of importance at all.

Ramble through the Highgate cemetery and you soon come face to face with Tupper—or rather, less disconcertingly, with his words. The man whose thoughts served to mark so many births and marriages also became the poet of eternity, whose words on immortality and divine intention were chiseled into headstones and burial vaults.

It was no small help that Tupper was the Queen's favorite poet. Things had not started so auspiciously; when Tupper was preparing the second edition of his book, he had asked if he might dedicate it to the Queen. His request was graciously denied by the Court with a letter explaining that "the Queen cannot permit a Second Edition of any work to be dedicated to her Majesty." Still, Tupper's book made its way into the royal quarters, and Victoria and Albert often read it to their children. And as the Queen did, so did her subjects.

Even the country's official poet laureate, Wordsworth, had a copy of Tupper's work; in his declining years he might have wondered whether this young man was to be his successor. And after Wordsworth's death in 1850, Tupper very nearly was the next poet laureate—but, in the end, Alfred Tennyson just barely edged him out. This hardly affected Tupper's stature. In one typical clothing store ad of the day, a lineup of the latest fashions is pictured on a pantheon of the greatest living authors: Browning, Hawthorne, Tennyson, Longfellow . . . and Martin Tupper.

Inspired by the Crystal Palace exhibition hall being erected near his home, Tupper made the grandest of poetic gestures in his contribution for the Great Exhibition of 1851: "The Hymn of All Nations." This was a simple hymn, but Tupper had contracted scholars to translate it into thirty languages, including everything from Latin to Arabic to Ojibway:

Moonedoo ke ween e gook Noos ke de nah goo me goo . . .

As the public's regard for Tupper expanded, so did the author's ambitions. Tupper poured out a steady stream of patriotic songs, including a Liberian national anthem,

moral fables like "The Crock of Gold," essays on subjects ranging from human-powered flight to opium abuse, translations of old English poetry—and, of course, sheaves of his own poetry.

YOU ARE A success in the eyes of the world when everyone wants to steal from you—and by that measure, Martin Tupper was the most successful man of his generation. Pirate editions of Proverbial Philosophy sprang up like mushrooms, particularly in America, where the weak laws of copyright made English authors irresistible to publishers. Although the British publications brought Tupper a steady if not magnificent income every year, the only money Tupper ever received from America was $400 from the one Philadelphia publisher who was his official publisher. But scores of knockoff editions were printed in every city; Tupper was amused and a little chagrined to constantly receive in the mail from some admirer yet another unauthorized edition of his own work, and he added each of them to the groaning shelf of Tupper editions in his library.

If Americans had at first been puzzled by Tupper, they now threw their arms around him. On New Year's Day in 1848, a Literary World writer marveled at the poet's ubiquity across the land:

The circulation which the works of Tupper have had in this country, is truly astonishing. A circulation, not confined to cities, towns, or villages, but embracing the entire population. The Proverbial Philosophy is found upon the ceritre-table of the metropolitan, in the scanty library of the student, and has gone hand-in-hand with the Farmer's Almanac, into the dwelling of the humblest tiller of the soil.

One of the poet's most ardent admirers was an eccentric Long Island newspaper editor named Walt Whitman, who enthusiastically reviewed Tupper's books in the Brooklyn Eagle. Tupper's weighty oracular pronouncements, the breadth of his far-ranging and hypnotic catalogs of flora and fauna, and his free-flowing lines that defied the conventions of poetry and prose alike—these all struck a chord deep within Whitman, who later commented that were it not for Proverbial Philosophy, his own Leaves of Grass would never have been written.

We can also thank Tupper for some of Whitman's worst poetry. Whitman's masterpieces are mixed in with poems of dreadfully boorish nationalism; and indeed Tupper could be both jangling and jingoistic when the occasion demanded it:

Stretch forth! stretch forth! from the south to the north! From the east to the west, — stretch forth! stretch forth! Strengthen thy stakes, and lengthen thy cords, — The world is a tent for the world's true lords! Break forth and spread over every place, The world is a world for the Saxon Race!

As appalling as these lines sound to us now, they did capture the spirit of an era; even

without his nationalism, Tupper was still capable of whipping up his reading public with such chest-thumpers as "Cheer Up!" and "Never Give Up!"

Thanks to the dubious magic of copyright piracy, such works achieved an even greater circulation in America than in Britain. It has been estimated that in Tupper's lifetime about 250,000 copies of his work were sold in the United Kingdom, while 1.5 million copies were sold in the U.S. It became clear to Tupper that he would simply have to visit America personally, and so in 1851 he arranged a tour of the country. New York City's major newspapers, nervously anticipating his arrival, kept readers updated of the expected arrival time of the Great Poet, and they primed readers by reprinting his work in the papers. In the meantime, Tupper, essentially traveling incognito and pacing about the decks on the voyage over, discovered a copy of Proverbial Philosophy in the ship's library; and after listening to fellow passengers murder its recitation, the poet revealed his identity.

His arrival in New York was a whirlwind of meetings with the great and the famous—dinner with the Astors, meetings with the mayor and the city's leading journalists, and personal introductions to nearly every major writer of the time. Amusingly, he did not care much for the one great Anglophile of the lot, James Fenimore Cooper, whom he found "a cold unpleasant mannered man, and in every way a great contrast to warmhearted Washington Irving."

Tupper was amused by the American obsession with the famous. Hit with constant requests for newspaper interviews (rare in Britain, except for political figures of actual importance), Tupper could open the morning papers in New York and find that "one's extorted opinions on all matter of topics—social, religious, and political—were published by tens of thousands in conflicting newspapers." Americans, too, had an odd fixation on autographs. These were a little more trying on his patience: "At a party my perhaps too exacting hostess put a large pack of blank cards into my hand, posted me to a corner table with pen and ink, and flatteringly requested an autograph for each of her 100 guests!"

Moving on to Philadelphia, home of his official publisher, he found his popularity even greater. Several times he encountered young women who, scissors in hand, were hoping to shear off one of his locks as a keepsake. He avoided any mishaps until, one particularly hot day, he wandered into a tiny barber's shop to get his hair cut. Passing by the next day, he found a MARTIN TUPPER sign in the window, surrounded by gold lockets for sale. Each contained hairs hurriedly swept up from the floor after the author had left.

Tupper took a particular interest in America's reform institutions, and he visited youth houses, schools for the deaf and the blind, and lunatic asylums. Upon his arrival, inmates would crowd around him— at an institute for the blind, he wrote his children, "they flocked about me like bees to touch me." On one such visit in Philadelphia, he

discovered just how far his writing had penetrated into the soul of the hopeful and the hopeless alike: dropping in unannounced on the vast local lunatic asylum, he found his poem "Never Give Up!" posted on every single door. His name did not appear on the poem, though, and he asked the head doctor if he knew who the author was. The doctor didn't—he had simply clipped the anonymous verse one day from a newspaper.

—It is I, Tupper told him.

The doctor was amazed.

What happened next still astonished Tupper four decades later: "He asked if I would allow the patients to thank me; of course I complied, and soon was surrounded by kneeling and weeping and kissing folks, grateful at the good hope my verses had helped them to." In his old age, Tupper would pass over his meetings with mayors and tycoons fairly quickly in his reminiscences. But he remembered the insane asylum.

BACK HOME, TUPPER'S popularity continued unabated through the 1850s, and he settled into the life of an author patriarch, presiding over a brood of artistic children who would stage amateur theatricals in the living room and miniature concerts in the parlor. Three of his ten children had died, a not uncommon ratio for that era. But one tragedy hit Tupper especially hard: the death of a daughter afflicted with spinal ailments at the age of two and half. After her death, all he had of her was a marble statue of her sleeping, modeled in life and then sculpted after the child's death. In the midst of his great fame, there is something heartrending in the accounts of Tupper sitting alone with his little sculpture. And yet Tupper was, in many ways, an utterly optimistic soul. He would show the statue to visitors not out of morbidity, but to marvel at the beauty of the child that had once been his to love. He was a man of truly unaffected emotional simplicity.

Had he cared for the world's opinion, he'd have found his simplicity vulnerable to scorn. Nathaniel Hawthorne, who was as reserved as Tupper was gregarious, penned a detailed and yet offhandedly devastating account of his visit to Tupper's house in his journal on April 2, 1856:

I felt in an instant that Mr. Tupper was a good soul, but a fussy little man, of a kind that always takes one entirely aback. He is a small man, with wonderfully short legs, fat (at least very round), and walks with a kind of waddle, not so much from corpulence of body as from brevity of leg. His hair is curly, and of an iron-gray hue; his features are good, even handsome, and his complexion very red. A person for whom I immediately felt a kindness, and instinctively knew to be a bore. . . .

Tupper is really a good man, most domestic, most affectionate, most fussy; for it appeared as if he could hardly sit down, and even if he were sitting he still had the effect of bustling about. He has no dignity of character, no conception of what it is, nor

perception of his deficiency. . . . He is the vainest little man of all little men, and his vanity continually effervesces out of him as naturally as ginger-beer froths. Yet it is the least incommodious vanity I ever witnessed; he does not insist upon your expressing admiration; he does not even seem to wish it, nor hardly to know or care whether you admire him or not. He is so entirely satisfied with himself that he takes the admiration of all the world for granted,—the recognition of his supreme merit being inevitable. I liked him, and laughed in my sleeve at him, and was utterly weary of him; for, certainly, he is the ass of asses ... if it were not irreverent, I should say that his Creator, when He made Tupper, intended to show how easily He could turn a gifted, upright, warm hearted, and in many ways respectable person into a fool and laughing-stock even for persons much inferior to himself.

Years later, when Julian Hawthorne published his late father's journals, Tupper was deeply hurt by this account of what he had innocently imagined to be a pleasant visit. And yet Hawthorne, in his final lines at least, was absolutely correct in his judgment.

WHEN YOU OPEN a window upon your soul, idiots are prone to come along and throw rocks at it. And so Martin Tupper, whose very simplicity and sincerity in verse made him beloved by one generation, was soon to find himself the target for the next. It is hard to know exactly when the transformation from Great Poet to crashingly boring fogy occurred in the mind of the public. In Tupper's earlier days, his very youth in conquering the States was held by Oliver Wendell Holmes in his Autocrat of the Breakfast Table as something of a liability:

These United States furnish the greatest market for intellectual green fruit of all places in the world. . . . The demand for intellectual labor is so enormous and the market so far from nice, that young talent is apt to fare like unripe gooseberries,—get plucked to make a fool of. Think of a country which buys eighty thousand copies of the Proverbial Philosophy, while the author's admiring countrymen have been buying twelve thousand! How can one let his fruit hang in the sun until it gets fully ripe, when there are eighty thousand such hungry mouths ready to swallow it and proclaim its praises?

But by the 1860s, with the author entering his fifties, there were plenty of countrymen ready to pick up Tupper's now-overripe fruit and fling it right back at him. The children who had once received gift book editions of Tupper for their birthdays were heartily sick of the man.

Tupper, unlike many poets, hadn't conveniently gone away. Rather than getting borne off in his glamorous youth by a bout of consumption, he had aged and stayed very much alive. He could always be counted on for a poem when any sort of national or local commemoration called for it, and was happy to dedicate a poem or two to a good cause or a benefit show. He was particularly keen on promoting kindness to animals, "for I believe in some future life for the lower animals as well as for their unworthier

lord." Furthermore, Tupper's visage was everywhere—even on soapboxes and tobacco ads, though Tupper detested advertising.

His very generosity and omnipresence worked against him. By the 1870s, each week began to bring fresh pummelings by clever young men in humor magazines like Punch, Figaro, and The Comic. One particularly nasty attack was penned by H. C. Pennell:

"Off! Off! thou art an ass, thou art an ass, Thou man of endless words and little sense, Of pigmy powers and conceit immense — Thou art a Donkey! — Take a bit of grass?"

Oh Martin! Oh, my Tupper! thus exclaims A grovling Age, grown envious of thy fames, — Thou boundless sonnets; and Proverbial bays. . . .

Yet will I breathe my pleasant Poems forth Innumerable. Hundreds more — ay tens Of thousands! Sweet ethereal rhymes, I hold ye here! and hug ye — all the lot; — A monstrous pile of quintessential ROT!!

It is little wonder that Walter Hamilton, writing on Tupper in the 1889 volume Parodies of the Works of English and American Authors, was taken aback by how many writers went "to hunt most mercilessly to death his Proverbial Philosophy." Critics wishing to smear a new author would simply call him "a Tupper." Tennyson, who had also lived to an old age, was chagrined to find himself lumped together with Tupper by hostile critics. In fact, so many poets were tarred this way that a new insult, "Tupperian," entered the language. It can still be found in the eternal rest of dead verbiage, deep between the covers of the Oxford English Dictionary.

Even less aggressive attacks—like a parody of Proverbial Philosophy's opening lines, altered to "BEER, hath entered my head / And peopled its inner chamber"—had the cumulative effect of a snowdrift slowly covering up the body of Tupper's work. But Tupper pressed still onward, forced by dire finances—for he lost most of his money in bad investments, an insurance swindle, and in bailing out his dissolute son Martin Jr.—and released two expanded editions of Proverbial Philosophy in the late 1860s. His old friend Gladstone, now Prime Minister, quietly diverted some government funds to his ailing classmate; and, showing that his sympathetic comments on Tupper's fame were no mere pose, Oliver Wendell Holmes also pledged a few guineas to him.

Sales of the new editions were modest but respectable. But even Tupper could now see that his publishing career was slipping into the past. A return tour of America in 1871 was met with enthusiasm in Philadelphia and Manhattan—Tupper noted with satisfaction that in New York auctions his autograph fetched $3.50, while Dickens's went for just fifty cents—but toward the end of his tour, he was facing half-empty houses. And when his old classmate Thackeray, also on tour, was asked by an American what they thought of Tupper back home, he replied crushingly:

"They do not think of Tupper."

TUPPER SPENT HIS old age in his usual tireless way. He dabbled in such inventions as improved horseshoes and glass screw tops for bottles, and contrived a curious proportional voting system; the proportions were of morality, with extra votes being doled out to voters who had met certain criteria of worthiness:

SURPLUS CLAIMS—ONE VOTE EACH

For the Victoria Cross

For the Albert Medal

For faithful domestic service in one family [for] twenty-five years

For field work on the same farm [for] thirty years

As a famous self-taught naturalist

And so forth. In-person voting bothered Tupper to no end. "It is a barbarism and an anachronism," he admonished, and imagined that thanks to the modern postal system, soon all voting would be done by mail.

His last few years were as a convalescent, attended to by his many children. The occasional letter still came from America asking for an autograph, and his devoted daughters always read to him from the paper each day. But they did not tell him of the family's declining finances, or that his writing no longer brought in any money at all. When he died in 1889, even the London Times was inclined to temper its criticism in its obituary: "That he enjoyed a strange and unique position in literature is beyond question. This is a tribute to the British heart rather than to its intellect."

AMAZINGLY, TUPPER'S WORKS have been out of print for over a century now. He had approached twenty-six publishers in 1875, hoping to publish a Collected Works; everyone turned him down. An illustrated 1881 edition of Proverbial Philosophy sold so poorly that his publishers, the Cassell brothers, took to taking swipes at each other in the columns of the Times. Since then, there has only been silence on the topic of Tupper.

It's an ironic fate for a man whose headstone reads, He being dead yet speaketh. Quite to the contrary: Tupper speaketh not. Even as we still read Tennyson and Browning, Tupper has vanished from anthologies and literary histories. Scholars in English literature pass through both an undergraduate and graduate education without ever hearing of the man. This may be because anthologies create a vast gulf between the value of those who are remembered and those who are not, and the effect feeds upon

itself: can this writer be important, a reader may assume, if I have not heard of him before?

When the Times Literary Supplement published a brief retrospective on the man in 1938—one of the few articles written about him in the entire twentieth century—its writer could only conjecture, "Whenever a poet arises who can say what all of the people are saying, and say it all the time, we may see an explanation of the once world-wide popularity of the Proverbial Philosophy; and an explanation of its complete disappearance." And indeed Tupper's poetry did express the morality of his day. When his day passed, so did much of his writing.

It didn't help that Tupper was also capable of writing poems like "The Toothache":

A raging throbbing tooth, — it burns, it burns!

Darting its fiery fibres to the brain,

A stalk of fever on a root of pain,

A red hot coal, a dull sore cork by turns,

A poison, kindred to a viper's fang,

Galling and fretting: ha! it stings again!

And yet not all of Tupper's poetry is so ludicrous, nor all his moralizing so moth-eaten. Tupper still has his charms for the patient reader. But scholars and readers are not always patient people; when they do not see an immediate use for an old writer, they do not file him away or look more closely at their own idea of "usefulness." They simply forget him.

It is a mark of Tupper's utter obscurity today that buying an original Tupper manuscript is cheaper than paying the photocopy fee for his work from a library. There is, in my household, a small space kept for one such autographed manuscript page. It would please Tupper no end to know that even now, he might still reach a growing child or two to impart his proverbial wisdom.