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THE LEGACY OF
HENRY WADSWORTH LONGFELLOW

Once upon a time (and it wasn't so long ago), the so-called "household" or "Fire-Side" poets pretty much made up what Barrett Wendell of Harvard University called "the literature of America." Wendell devoted almost half of his still readable survey, published in 1900, to New England writers. Some of them would shortly be demoted by a new generation of critics, but at the moment, they still constituted "American literature" in the popular mind.

The "Boston constellation" — that was Henry James's term for them — had watched the country coalesce from a shaky union of states into a transcontinental nation. They had lived through the crisis of civil war and survived, loved, and honored. Multitudes recognized their bearded benevolent faces; generations of school children memorized and recited stanzas of their iconic poems. Among these hallowed men of letters, Longfellow was the most popular, the most beloved, the most revered. He was also the most invertebrately "literary," the least tempted to stray into the public arena. Oliver Wendell Holmes — physician, scientist, lecturer, professor of anatomy — happily and busily cultivated literature as his principal avocation. James Russell Lowell, besides turning out copious streams of verse, pursued an active career as editor, reformer, teacher, diplomat, and political essayist. John Greenleaf Whittier (whom Robert Penn Warren considers the most powerful and original poet of the group) harnessed his muse to the issues and isms of the day: temperance, abolition, and other "great interests of humanity." "Strictly speaking," Hawthorne remarked, "Whittier did not much care for literature."

Longfellow, Hawthorne's Bowdoin classmate, *did* care for literature, continuously and unremittingly. He had consecrated himself to poetry when the literary vocation was still



Henry Wadsworth Longfellow at Cambridge. The literary reputation of America's most popular poet has waxed and waned. His success owed much to a capacity for identifying with the tastes and values of his readers, foreign as well as domestic. MHS photo.

suspect and literary entertainers like Hawthorne heard ancestral voices chiding them from the spirit world:

“What is he?” murmurs one grey shadow of my forefathers to the other. “A writer of story books! What kind of business in life, — what mode of glorifying God, or of being serviceable to mankind in his day and generation, — may that be? Why the degenerate fellow might as well have been a fiddler.”

Eighteen-year-old Longfellow, stuck in his father's law office, got an equivalent and equally chilly rebuke in 1825 after confessing his literary longings to the distinguished magazine editor, Theophilus Parsons, Jr.

“There is a stage in the progress of a bright mind (warned his mentor) when the boy has thrown away his toys and models, but the young man is still a child as to value things more by their elegance and power of amusing than by their usefulness. He plays with books and thinks he is working when he is only playing hard.”

Thanks to his remarkable talent and good connections, Longfellow managed in his own way to play with books and to play hard, to have his cake and eat it too, to be a poet and to thrive. But he owed his tremendous success, both in the United States and abroad, less to the breaks of fortune, or, in William Charvat's words, to his “shrewd, aggressive, and intelligent management of the business of writing,” than to his identification with the tastes and values of his readers, foreign as well as domestic. Dickens, Tennyson, and Ruskin thought well of him. Baudelaire borrowed some of his lines and translated parts of the first canto of *Hiawatha*. Cambridge and Oxford awarded him degrees. The heroine of Charles Kingsley's novel, *Two Years Ago*, en route to join Florence Nightingale's corps of nurses, carried with her the Bible and *Evangeline*. Queen Victoria invited him to an audience at Windsor Castle, where, it should be noted, he was the favorite of her servants.

To be sure not all of Longfellow's contemporaries shared Victoria's admiration, most notably the Transcendental coterie who held even loftier notions of the "Poet" than his. Margaret Fuller enumerated what she took to be Longfellow's limitations more bluntly than Emerson or Whitman ever did, but neither disagreed essentially with her judgment. "Longfellow," she wrote, "is artificial and imitative. He borrows incessantly, and mixes what he borrows, so that it does not appear at the best advantage. He is very faulty in using broken and mixed metaphors. The ethical part of his writing has a hollow second hand sound." Even so, she conceded, he possessed "elegance, a love of the beautiful, and a fancy for what is large and manly, if not full sympathy with it. His verse breathes at times much sweetness; and if not allowed to supersede what is better, may promote a taste for good poetry. Though imitative, he is not mechanical."

Margaret Fuller pronounced this verdict before Longfellow had published some of his best verse; it reflects the minority opinion of her day and isn't very far off the mark from the critical consensus of our own. But, no amount of special pleading can make Longfellow more than he actually was — a gifted but lesser poet who wrote a small amount of genuine poetry and who occasionally surpassed himself. He has been praised and chided for both the right and the wrong reasons. Barrett Wendell, to take one example, objected to the figure in the famous line from "A Psalm of Life" — "footprints on the sands of time," because the image queerly mixed up "the beach of Robinson Crusoe with the unimpressible contents of hour glasses." Margaret Fuller was only the first of a long line of critics who complained of Longfellow's imitativeness. Poe made a great to-do over Longfellow's so-called plagiarisms, an inaccurate as well as an ungenerous charge. The unconscious echoes of Tennyson and others in Longfellow's verse can be attributed, rather, to his unusual responsiveness to virtually every kind of poetic expression. This sponge-like capacity made him an ideal collector and promoter of poetry and partially accounts for his immense importance as a cultural force.

And here we confront a puzzle. How could such a large cross section of the American people supposedly dedicated to material pursuits, an audience for whom literature at best occupied only a marginal place in their daily lives, take Longfellow into their hearts and come to regard him as a national treasure?

The answer frequently given, and often with pejorative or condescending overtones, is that Longfellow arrived on the national scene at the right time and found a body of readers especially taken with noble and inspiring thoughts couched in comprehensible verse. If a few of his literary contemporaries complained of his didacticism, his bookishness, his merchandizing of world literature, the public, then and later, relished his moral tags (all the more truthful for being encased in rhyme) and enjoyed his poetic trips to storied Europe. These were the people, according to John Macy, "who have the gravest troubles and the fewest troublesome ideas, who are not interested in the intensest expression of the tragedies, stresses, and ecstasies of life, but who take elementary ideas deeply to heart and seek plain elementary answers to daily perplexities, who like a touch of strangeness in their poetry but do not understand it if the language is too strange." And these were the people who understood Longfellow very well, found him tuneful, refined, and patriotic. Probably few of them savored the craftsmanship that enabled him to convert their sentiments and daydreams into polished and well-made verse, but he was positive proof that America could produce a genuine artist as well as cotton and corn and steamboats.

At least one of his contemporaries, whose allegedly indecent book outraged all but a handful of reviewers, understood and appreciated Longfellow's accomplishment. Learning of his death, Walt Whitman paid tribute to the "dead bard" and "songster" who had been ungraciously faulted for his "want of racy nativity and special originality." True, Whitman said, Longfellow's "voluminous works" were marked by "an idiosyncrasy, almost a sickness of verbal melody." Certainly he was no revolutionary. "He brings nothing offensive or new,

does not deal hard blows." But Whitman hailed him nonetheless as "the sort of bard and counteractant most needed for our materialistic, self-assertive, money-worshipping, Anglo-Saxon races, and especially for the present age in America — an age tyrannically regulated with reference to the manufacturer, the merchant, the financier, the politician and the day workman — for whom and among whom he comes as the poet of melancholy, courtesy, deference — part of the mellow twilight of the past in Italy, Germany, Spain, and in northern Europe — poet of all sympathetic gentleness — and universal poet of women and young people. I should have to think long if I were ask'd to name the man who has done more and in more valuable directions, for America."

This shrewd and generous appraisal from a poet in almost every respect Longfellow's antithesis might have been profitably pondered by Longfellow's detractors before and after his eclipse. Longfellow was indeed a civilizer like his own *Hiawatha*. He broke through the insularity of his countrymen, and by opening "New World consciousness" to "Old World sympathies" (I borrow these phrases from Henry James), he corrected their nationalistic squint without flouting their moral predispositions. If they scorned the past, immersed as they were in present and future concerns, he was drenched in it. He had walked the streets of ancient cities, visited the churches and castles described in his verse, studied the histories of the Italians, the French, the Icelanders, the Portuguese, Dutch, and Germans — and translated their poets.

Longfellow's pictures of foreign places, the range of his vast reading, his allusions to "The Arabian Nights," the Talmud, Boccaccio, the legends of southern and northern Europe, understandably made him a favorite, as Whitman pointed out, of young readers who longed for a richer and more various literary fare. A later generation might find it hard to conceive why Longfellow's poetry electrified his contemporaries, but there is no question that it did. Edmund Clarence Stedman, presumably writing about himself, likened the experience of



Professor Longfellow at Craigie House, Cambridge. MHS photo.

discovering Longfellow to that of a youth whose Puritan "Sunday outlook" — plain, colorless, rigid, dismal — was suddenly and marvelously altered by exposure to a "graceful Gothic church." To "nature's picturesqueness," Stedman recalled, the "one relief hitherto afforded" the spiritually starved "which even Calvinism endured without compunction, — was added a new joy, a glimpse of the beauty and sanctity of human art." Whether or not Emily Dickinson caught that "glimpse" in Longfellow's verse one can't be sure, but in her early letters he appeared as the "gracious author" whose sentimental poems on death — especially "The Reaper and the Flowers" and "Footsteps of Angels" — touched her graveyard sensibilities. Repeatedly she quoted lines from his dreary and edifying "The Rainy Day."

Another young reader of different temperament and even more openly admiring was George Templeton Strong (in my view America's greatest diarist.) He came across Longfellow's

"The Beleagured City" in 1839 when he was nineteen years old, and he straightway pronounced it "worthy of the author of *The Ancient Mariner*." Poe had called this poem "a palpable imitation" of his own "The Haunted Palace" and denied Longfellow "the Future." Not so young Strong. To him Longfellow was the "first American poet who promises to be remembered a century hence." Was there any living English poet, he asked himself in a 1845 entry, "who stands above him?" None, he concluded, "even if one omit to take into account the purity and healthiness of his tone of thought, the solemn, earnest, inspiring notes that give to almost everything he has written a character and feeling like that of some austere piece of sacred music."

As Strong matured, he ceased to refer to Longfellow so reverentially. ("Looked at Longfellow's *Song of Hiawatha*," he recorded in 1855. "Regret I don't admire it. People call it 'Song of High Water, or Rejoicing of a Clam'.") Eventually Longfellow's name dropped out of Strong's diary, but not before the "solemn, earnest, and inspiring notes" of the Cambridge poet had sunk into the nation's consciousness. Longfellow had become a marmoreal presence, Craigie House on Brattle Street a shrine to his idolatrous countrymen and to swarms of foreign visitors whose tedious invasions he reported in his journal. Here is the entry of August 22, 1879:

As I was standing at my front door this morning, a lady in black came up and asked: "Is this the house where Longfellow was born?"

"No, he was not born here."

"Did he die here?"

"Not yet."

"Are you Longfellow?"

"I am."

"I thought you died two years ago."

Between 1821 and 1882, Longfellow received more than 20,000 letters from nearly 7,000 different correspondents, and these didn't include over 1,300 requests for autographs and hundreds of birthday greetings.

The most popular poet in the English language, here and abroad, still had his critics, but he'd outlived his traducers (most notably the waspish Poe, now blackballed by the genteel guardians of culture) and occupied a prominent niche in the American pantheon along with such figures as Lincoln, Grant, Emerson, John Brown, Mrs. Stowe, and Hawthorne — all of whom, commented William Dean Howells, managed “to have hit the fancy of our enormous commonplace average.”

Longfellow's public image remained undimmed until at least the end of the first decade of the next century. To the lettered men who determined the literary canon, he was the model for what one of them called “the squires of poesy.” All the same, between the end of the Civil War and his death in 1882, a disparagement of his verse is detectible — covertly in the encomia of worshipful literati, less guardedly in their private communications. Americans, Constance Rourke remarked in her classic study of American humor, have always enjoyed deflating their loftiest public truths and burlesquing national heroes and national pieties. “Excelsior,” “The Village Blacksmith,” and “A Psalm of Life” (read as secular hymn) offered targets to parodists like Bayard Taylor — poet, traveler, and translator. Taylor considered himself a member of Longfellow's court. He also enjoyed, as he put it, “sporting around” the sacred poets of New England “like birds or cats or lizards.”

In 1872, the *Atlantic Monthly* published Taylor's *Diversions of the Echo Club*, a book inspired by the imitations of older and more renowned poets he and his cronies had dashed off in the 1850s during their tippling sessions at Pfaff's beer-cellar, the haunt of New York's literary Bohemia. The Club members, Taylor insisted, eschewed either “ridicule” or “incidental depreciation.” And when the name of Longfellow came up in their conversations, they rendered him his due. “No one of our poets,” a member of the Echo Club declares

has deserved better of our countrymen than Longfellow: he has advanced the front rank of our culture. His popularity has naturally brought envy and disparagement upon him; but it has carried far and wide

among the people the influence of his purity, his refinement, and his constant reference to an ideal of life which so many might otherwise forget. As a nation, we are still full of crudity and confusion, and his influence, so sweet and clear and steady, has been, and is, more than merely a poetic leaven.

And yet as the discussion continues, the moralizing penchant in Longfellow's early poems is cautiously alluded to (however skillfully he is said to blend the moral and imaginative elements) and the hallmarks of his most popular poems — bookishness and didacticism, conventionality and want of poetic power — are gently intimated.

Nor is he too noble and pure to escape the satirist's needle. In Taylor's parody, entitled "Nauvoo," the dreaming Longfellow broods over the Mormon temple at Nauvoo, Illinois, and tries without much success to compare Joseph Smith ("hardly to poetry fit") with other founders of ancient religions, "Scandinavian, Greek, Assyrian, Zend, and the Sanskrit." He who has "explored the mysteries hidden in Talmudic targums," and "Backward spelled the lines of the Hebrew graveyard at Newport,/Studied Ojibwa symbols," must now tune his strings "to the names of Joseph and Brigham" and to the "multitudes wan, diseased, and decrepit of spirit" who "Came and heard and believed and builded the temple at Nauvoo." And then comes the anti-climactic and slightly wicked conclusion:

All is past; for Joseph was smitten with lead from a pistol,
 Brigham went with the others over the prairies to Salt Lake.
 Answers now to the long, disconsolate wail of the steamer,
 Hoarse, inarticulate, shrill, the rolling and bounding of ten-pins,
 Answers the voice of the bartender, mixing the smash and the
 julep,
 Answers, precocious, the boy, and bites a chew of tobacco.
 Lone as the towers of Afrasiab now is the seat of the Prophet,
 Mournful, inspiring to verse, though seeming utterly vulgar:
 Also—for each thing now is expected to furnish a moral—
 Teaching innumerable lessons for whoso believes and is patient.
 Thou, that readest; be resolute, learn to be strong and to suffer!
 Let the dead Past bury its dead and act in the Present!
 Bear a banner of strange devices, "Forever" and "Never!"
 Build in the walls of time the fane of a permanent Nauvoo,
 So that thy brethren may see it and say, "Go thou and do
 likewise!"

“The literary historian, Charles Richardson, after acknowledging Longfellow’s goodness, his contributions as a civilizer, pronounced him a poet of limited genius.”

Taylor’s lighthearted spoofing didn’t go down very well, although it caused less dismay and puzzlement than Mark Twain’s notorious gaffe at the celebration of Whittier’s seventieth birthday in 1877, where the presence of Emerson and Longfellow, the *Boston Advertiser* reported, “gave a reverend, almost holy air to the place.” This was the occasion, you’ll remember, when Mark Twain interrupted the flow of fulsome tributes and told the story of three western ruffians who passed themselves off as Whittier, Emerson, and Longfellow. Bayard Taylor would never have said that “Mr. Longfellow was built like a prize-fighter,” as Mark Twain did, but his Longfellow parody, like Mark Twain’s funny story, went unappreciated in Boston. His *Diversions*, in fact, drew a rebuff from Dr. Josiah Holland, editor of *Scribner’s* and popular author and lecturer (Mark Twain once described him as a “perambulating sack of choloroform”) who had praised Whittier at the birthday banquet for helping “to save the American nation from the total wreck of distruction of the sentiment of reverence.

By the last decade of the nineteenth century and the first years of the twentieth, that sentiment was beginning to wane. Coincidentally, Longfellow’s critics became more open in their reservations about his greatness. There had always been, said one of them, “a distinct undercurrent of protest against the

poet's easy popularity." After Longfellow's death, adulation lessened; left-handed compliments laced with condescension increased — and no longer in *sotto voce*.

The literary historian, Charles Richardson, in 1892, after acknowledging Longfellow's goodness, his contributions as a civilizer, pronounced him a poet of limited genius. He was "pleasing but not imaginative." His works contained a good deal of "genial twaddle" of "temporary rather than ultimate value." Eight years later in his suaver deprecation, Barrett Wendell said that Longfellow was less stirred by what he experienced than by what he read and "chiefly, if not wholly, by noble and beautiful records of facts long since dead and gone." His very popularity, Wendell suggested, almost implied a weakness: the "sweet sincerity" that made his resounding commonplaces "more dear than richer wisdom" also provoked "a reaction against him among the fastidious." And William Dean Howells, reviewing a biography of Longfellow in 1902, did not contest the author's list of Longfellow's short-comings. That is to say, as Howells put it, his verse was sometimes "didactic rather than artistic; smooth and pleasing rather than strong and moving; gentle, cultivated, refined, rather than bold, native, and robust."

But perhaps Paul Elmer More in his essay, "The Centenary of Longfellow," made the most damaging case against the poet since Poe — not, to be sure, with Poe's malice. It was in sum, a warm and appreciative tribute to a beloved author who "attained the noble distinction of living in the mouths of men," yet all the more devastating because of its candor. Any reader of Longfellow, More observed, whose mind is stored "with the works of great poets" will find in his pages "dulled echoes of finer music." His mind moved on the lower plane of the imagination. What most endeared him to his readers was the effortless way he framed their "own daily thoughts and emotions." He required of them no violent readjustment of their "ordinary moods," and he touched them with his "facile pathos."

Clearly the American literary canon was in the process of revision, and although the full extent of impending demotions and promotions wouldn't be apparent until the 1920s, a corps of sapper-critics had wittingly or unwittingly begun the job of undermining established reputations. In the repudiation of much of the old culture, Longfellow, not surprisingly, was targeted by a new generation of rebels and iconoclasts as the embodiment of the genteel spirit, the poet of purity, cleanliness, ideality, respectability, and conservatism, and as the relic of a defunct tradition. Having abandoned the "old proprieties" and respect for reticence, they spoke out, like the Concord transcendentalists before them, against the downgrading of feeling in the name of correctness.

From 1910 on, the call was for an intense, strong, and immediate kind of poetry that drew upon life as it was subjectively registered, not upon literary borrowings — a poetry neither pontifical nor routinely romantic. And as "imitation" became the most insulting epithet in the lexicon of the new criticism, the reputation of the master-borrower necessarily suffered.

Once again the old charge of sermonizing was sounded, only this time with particular vehemence. "Poems of the insistently didactic type" by Longfellow and other New England writers, said Louis Untermeyer, killed the poetic spirit: "all things in and out of nature, from a chambered nautilus to a village blacksmith, are used to point a specious and usually irrelevant moral — obfuscate and twist the normal views of the young reader until his vision becomes narrow and myopic."

Van Wyck Brooks, writing about the same time, was less dismissive if no less crushing. Longfellow, he said, should never be criticized "from the point of view of 'mere literature'." Better to see him as beautifully typical of his tradition. His poetry was "in large measure, what the barrel-organ is to music; approached in a hypercritical spirit, he simply runs on and there is an end to the matter." Kindly but firmly, Brooks classified him in the phylum of "agile moralist" whose charming and melancholy verse, emblematic "of the vacuity and

impermanence of so much American idealism," appealed to the confused emotions of teen-agers.

Ludwig Lewisohn agreed. In his "story" of American literature published by the Modern Library in 1932, he asked rhetorically: "Who, except wretched schoolchildren, now reads Longfellow?" Occasionally, Lewisohn went on, minor poets managed to transmute "impassioned spirit into intelligible personal form," but Longfellow lived "outside the soul of the world." He could sink as low as Ella Wheeler Wilcox in "The Rainy Day" and soar as high as Daniel Webster in the last lines of "The Building of a Ship"; he could tell "pleasing or pathetic or picturesque anecdotes" in borrowed forms; his narrative verse and lyrics could "still give pleasure to a sub-literary public." But to serious minds he had nothing to say.

These critical put-downs signified a shift in literary sensibility. They weren't really ad hominem attacks, because at this point Longfellow wasn't considered important enough either to abuse or defend. He had become a kind of national joke to the anti-establishment crusaders during the teens and twenties, a prototype for both the "Puritans" (their catchword for everything stultifying and repressive in American life) and the "decaying class of literary Brahmins" (Mencken's words) ... "grounded almost entirely upon ethical criteria." E. E. Cummings caught the Mencken intimation in his poem about "the Cambridge ladies who live in furnished souls" and "believe in Christ and Longfellow, both dead"

Longfellow's reputation among the literati hadn't entirely vanished. His presence flickered in the early verse of Edward Arlington Robinson. Robert Frost, the title of whose first book, *A Boy's Will*, was taken from a fine Longfellow poem, could still startle his walking companions by quoting isolated passages from *Evangeline* and praising the rhymes of the poet he had enjoyed since childhood ("He's a pretty good poet after, all" he said); but Frost's approbation went against the consensus. Even more so did Van Wyck Brooks's accolade to Longfellow in his best seller, *The Flowering of New England*. Two decades

earlier he had sniffed at Longfellow's thin "barrel-organ" muse. Now in 1936, he likened it to "a music box charged with the poetry of the world" and hailed him as a cultural benefactor, a member of that New England literary set whose social thoughts, moral passion, and artistic feeling "spoke for the universal republic of letters." But Brooks's literary opinions in the thirties carried little weight with the young modernists.

He wasn't the only one to read Longfellow sympathetically during the era of F.D.R., but Longfellow's minority claque — largely academic scholars — tended to discount the accommodating laureate of the populace in favor of the craftsman and metrist, the author of a small body of poems unburdened by relentless analogizing. It was hardly a new tack. Thirty years earlier, both Howells and Paul Elmer More had confessed their preference for Longfellow's later and less egregiously didactic poetry. Although "obscured by the bulk of his more popular verse," they agreed, it nonetheless exhibited "greater firmness and fineness." In the post World War II years, critics also tried to separate the subtle artist from the household message-bringer — but without much success.

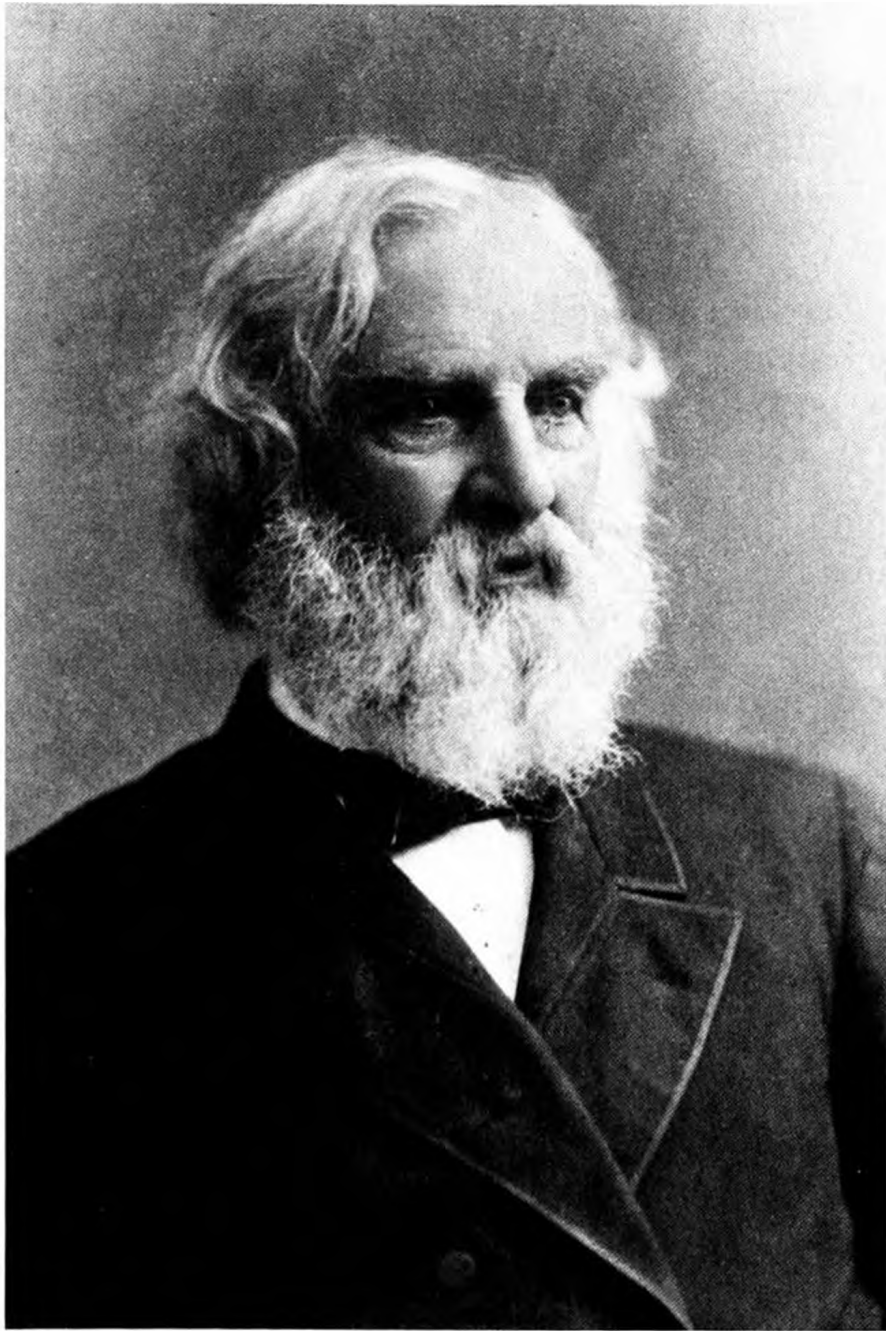
They failed, I suspect, because, whether intentionally or not, Longfellow himself conflated the two audiences he had defined in 1833 in his prose work, *Outre-Mer*: "one of the castle and the court; another of the middle classes and the populace." As his most perceptive interpreters have pointed out, many of his so-called "court" poems have a didactic flavor, and the common reader — the alleged devourer of his inferior stuff — wouldn't, I suspect, have been so touched by his poetic sermons had they been less mellifluous and fluent. The authentic Longfellow is present in both the "castle" and the "court," in his best and worst poems. Any effort to make him palatable to modern taste by removing the moralizing passages from his verse or by rearranging and excising embarrassing stanzas does violence to his intentions.

If I'm right, then we must ask ourselves: is there a redeemable Longfellow, a Longfellow for our times, lurking behind the official bearded mask? Can he be made accessible to readers

for whom poetry must be, in the words of Newton Arvin, the most searching and sensitive of Longfellow's critics, "emotionally perplexed," "intellectually hard-earned," and "stylistically dense?" Probably not. Yet for more catholic readers (I mean those whose preconceptions about what poetry is or should be don't prevent them from reading and enjoying works of the lesser poets), Longfellow offers rewards. In his own day, he catered to the untutored and the refined alike, in our day to neither, although a sophisticated poet and critic, Howard Nemerov, has uncovered nuggets in Longfellow ore simply by a little digging. He makes no claims for him as a major talent but finds his "truly poetical" productions "undiminished by time." In such poems as "The Rope Walk," "Aftermath," "The Fire and Drift-Wood," in the unfinished "Michael Angelo," and in isolated passages throughout his works, Longfellow (I quote Nemerov) maintained "beneath his gentleness a fair share of that unyielding perception of reality which belongs to good poetry wherever and whenever written."

But where does that leave the vast volume of his work? The narrative poems, the poems stuccoed with learned references ("seminars in criticism and comparative literature," Nemerov calls them), the edifying poems about children and motherhood and death, the rhymed Baedekers, the exhorting homilies — have they been too summarily degraded? Longfellow considered much of his popular poetry as good as any he ever wrote. Was he hopelessly wrong?

Newton Arvin has suggested terms for three kinds of popular verse which are helpful in categorizing Longfellow's poems: "folk," "mass-cult," and "demotic." Folk poetry he described as the poetry of people out of touch with a "reading and writing culture." By mass-cult poetry, he meant the mechanical doggerel — sentimental, melodramatic, humorous — once printed in magazines and newspapers. Edgar Guest was one of its eminent practitioners. It addressed subjects like the death of infants, the torments of drunkards, mother love, and recollections of old oaken buckets. "Demotic" poetry Arvin



defined as “a kind of writing” directed to “a very wide body of more or less educated but not sophisticated or exacting readers.” The audience for demotic poetry kept expanding during the eighteenth century; but its great period, of course, was the nineteenth century, the age of Scott, Tennyson, Browning, and Longfellow. Never before or since had demotic verse meant so much to so many people.

Longfellow's poetry had only a second or third hand connection with the folk, although he apparently borrowed storytelling techniques from the broadside ballads peddled in the Portland of his youth. Some of it skirts the mass-cult ("The Village Blacksmith" and "The Children's Hour" come to mind). But most of it is clearly written in the demotic vein, pleasing but not perplexing, easy to recite, easy to memorize — and easy to parody. Indeed, the frequent parodying of his poems is a measure of the degree to which they passed into public memory. Private or esoteric poetry doesn't invite the spoof. It demands too many readings. It's not intended to be sung or chanted, and it's hard to learn by heart. Longfellow's poems offer no such obstacles, even though his patronizers, I think, often overlook the artfulness of his simplicity. His verse narratives, irrespective of their other virtues or defects, display the metrical facility and finish of a master craftsman. One has only to contrast his moralistic poems with the mass-cult effusions of the poetasters to see Longfellow's striking superiority. This isn't to say that language and moral blend happily in his popular verse. Too often a promising poem is spoiled for us by the message-pointing "thus" or "so" that telegraphs the bathetic fuller explanation.

For example, "Seaweed" (the sea always seems to have brought out the best in Longfellow) opens with four rousing and moral-free stanzas:

When descends on the Atlantic
 The gigantic
 Storm-wind of the equinox,
 Land ward in his wrath he scourges
 The toiling surges
 Laden with seaweed from the rocks:
 From Bermuda's reefs; from edges
 Of Sunken ledges,
 In some far-off, bright Azore;
 From Bahama, and the dashing,
 Silver-flashing
 Surges of San Salvador;

LONGFELLOW'S LEGACY

From the tumbling surf, that buries
 The Orkneyan skerries,
Answering the hoarse Hebrides;
And from wrecks of ships, and drifting
 Spars, uplifting
On the desolate, rainy seas; —
Ever drifting, drifting, drifting
 On the shifting
Currents of the restless main;
Till in sheltered coves, and reaches
 Of sandy beaches,
All have found repose again.

Then comes the fatal exhortation: “So when storms of wild emotion/Strike the ocean/Of the poet’s soul” etc., and two more superfluous stanzas follow before the quietly precise conclusion.

But perhaps we are too quick to reject out of hand all of his poems that make a moral statement. Longfellow’s sermonizing wasn’t a product of spurious or perfunctory feelings; it came from the heart. Its authenticity, however, makes it no more acceptable to readers who have been taught to distrust the explicit and the didactic and to sanction only the poetry that tells it “slant.” And it’s a bold poet, nowadays, who dares to preach. Eliot did on occasion; so did that latter-day Victorian, Ezra Pound, (dubbed “Longfellow’s grand-nephew” by T. E. Lawrence), and Wystan Auden got away with it, — but I can’t think of many others among the moderns who did, or do. Longfellow preached without inhibition, never with Miltonic power but now and then with an unfeigned and affecting directness, as in the closing lines of his unremarkable poem, “The Challenge.”

For within there is light and plenty,
 And odors fill the air,
And without there is cold and darkness,
 And hunger and despair.

And there in the camp of famine,
 In the wind and cold and rain,
 Christ the great Lord of the army
 Lies dead upon the plain!

Something of this honest directness is present in the last stanza of his anti-slavery poem, "The Warning," flawed like most of the others in his untypical pamphlet, *Poems on Slavery*, but conveying, all the same, an impressive moral earnestness;

There is a poor, blind Samson in this land
 Shorn of his strength and bound with bonds of steel,
 Who may, in some grim revel, raise his hand
 And shake the pillars of this Commonweal,
 Till the vast temple of our liberties
 A shapeless mass of wreck and rubbish lies.

Unambiguous statements such as these don't pass muster any longer. Social poetry inspired by war and politics since Longfellow's day has generally been of the forcible-feeble variety. Contemporary poets are seldom tempted to address public issues, and on the rare occasion when they do, they are likely, as in the case of Robert Lowell, to be oblique and ironic. These are the qualities conspicuously missing, as I've suggested, in Longfellow's sincere and straightforward verses. But I think he showed good sense in trying to steer clear of the public forum. Writing poetry for him was a way to reconcile differences, not to exacerbate them. He preferred to touch the more humane feelings of his readers, to sooth them while reminding them as well of their moral responsibilities as Christian and civic men, to encourage their patriotic pride by recalling the legends and history of their country. No more than Emerson, Thoreau, Whitman, and Melville could he shut out the turbulence of the times — his letters plainly show as much — but he lacked the will and the imagination to fuse personal and public concerns in his verse.

In recent years, Longfellow's reputation, if not entirely extinguished, has dwindled to the point where he is hardly more than an extended footnote in American literary history, or an object lesson on the perils of elevating the ethical at the expense of the imaginative. But his plunge into near oblivion is hardly a cause for national jubilation. The lesser poets in other countries, Newton Arvin reminded us, have survived "the most serious upheavals of taste"; and their works have been reprinted in "thoughtful critical editions" with an appreciable enrichment of the "general consciousness." That Longfellow has not thus far been honored tells us a good deal about ourselves and our times: I mean our preoccupation with major canonical writers and indifference to writers of the second and third class; our want of curiosity about the past, its tastes and assumptions; our seeming inability to praise one writer without denigrating another; our habit of blowing up a literary reputation to absurd dimensions and then pricking the balloon.

It might be argued that the prestige of Longfellow and his school had to be deflated before the more vital and electrifying poetry of modernism could get a hearing, that in complex societies high culture has always been a minority culture. Even so, there was a time when Longfellow — the habitue of "refined society," the beneficiary of books and travel — could write for the cultivated without ever affiliating with what Howells called "the fine world of literature ... that sniffs and sneers, and abashes the simpler-hearted reader." Hence, it seems to me, the Cambridge *Hiawatha* deserves a place in the lower echelons of Matthew Arnold's "great men of culture," to the extent that he acted on the Arnoldian principle of divesting knowledge of all that is "diffuse, abstract, professorial, exclusive" and making it "efficient outside the clique of the cultivated and the learned." He simultaneously instructed, uplifted, and entertained his far-flung constituency; they in turn cherished him as the articulator of their aspirations. So completely had he been absorbed into the national culture that shreds and patches of his verse stuck in the memories of those who derided him and deplored his influence.

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As one of Ludwig Lewisohn’s “wretched schoolchildren” who memorized a few of Longfellow’s poems out of choice and more by assignment, I can’t comfortably reject him. Along with a diverse company of worse and better writers, he widened my literary boundaries and gave me pleasure, and I wince a little every time a supercilious critic shoots an arrow into his all too vulnerable hide. Mostly, however, he is ignored. The Longfellow once so indiscriminately praised now meets indiscriminating indifference, but whereas the praisers at least read him, the ignorers do not.

I don’t want to end my talk this evening with a call for his restoration in the nation’s schoolbooks. After all, he isn’t the first or last casualty of the periodic revolutions of taste or shifts in the climate of sensibility (“Every hero,” said Emerson, “is a bore at last”), and this isn’t the time or place to hold a wake for a dead reputation. Yet the implications of Longfellow’s slip into obscurity may be worth a brief comment.

His audience had been a mixed one — the well-to-do and the educated, and readers from simpler backgrounds — but it shared certain moral and aesthetic assumptions. It took for granted that there was a poetic vocabulary and subject matter, that “serious” poetry might best be defined as the expression of elevated thought in elevated language. It enjoyed humorous and unserious poetry, too, but relegated wit, paradox, and irony to lighter exercises of the imagination. No such coherent body of poetry readers now exists in the United States.

Nor is there any longer an agreed upon concept of poetic diction or poetic subject matter. Modern poets, despite the recent appointment of an American poet-laureate, aren't expected to perform a public function, to celebrate or commemorate historical occasions. When they happen to write about comparable public events, they do so in highly personal and individual ways. There's no such thing as a recognized poetic style, although modern poetry has its distinguishing hallmarks. It is private poetry even when it is publicly autobiographical and confessional. It tends to be compressed and allusive, difficult, technically inventive, chary of the decorative, of extended and explanatory analogies — in short, everything Longfellow's poetry is not. Understandably, modern poets have bypassed Longfellow and his school in favor of literary ancestors or powerful contemporaries with whom they feel a closer affinity.

The audience for modern or post-modern poetry (mostly poets, would-be poets, captive students, and a limited number of poetry lovers) is small, but then, as Wystan Auden once observed, highbrow poetry has always been written for a narrow segment of the literate public. Hence it is much less vulnerable to whims and fads and shifts of taste than what I've been calling demotic or popular poetry, and relatively unaffected by the mass production and commercializing of the arts for an audience it has never catered to.

The same can't be said of popular poetry. As Auden noted, the popular poem, whether crude or refined, was once "as custom-built as the most esoteric sonnet." Both the hawker of a ballad about hanging a pirate and the Brattle Street fabricator of a poem about the ship of state or a skeleton in armor were composers of discrete and unique artifacts written for a well understood body of readers and listeners. Mass-produced culture, in contrast, is almost by definition impersonal, "a kind of entertainment offered for consumption like any other form of consumer's goods and to be judged in the same way." The "esthetic nihilism," as Auden put it, that resulted from the

perfecting of the mass-media machinery was bad for everyone. The lowbrow lost “all genuine taste of his own; the highbrow became a snob.” Longfellow flourished before the inundation of market-managed cultural products, and however outmoded we find his line of poetic goods, it suited for a long time the tastes of his readers — the discriminating and the less critical alike.

I have made the story of Longfellow's effacement (not, of course, in Portland) the subject of the concluding talk in this series. Looked at in one way, the story is simply an example of America's indifference towards its ‘makers and finders’ — Longfellow ending up stuffed like the extinct passenger pigeon and assigned to an unobtrusive corner in the national literary museum. Looked at in another way, his effacement can be read as a small paragraph in American cultural history. He faded because his talents were not timeless, and perhaps because he had outlived his usefulness. An increasingly complex and heterogeneous society no longer required the services he once performed for a relatively homogeneous nineteenth century clientele: all-purpose supplier and spreader of culture; spinner of travelogues; chronicler of the Republic; homilist and uplifter.

Even so, his continued neglect amounts to a national loss. American literature isn't all that rich and various that we can afford to discredit or forget so good a poet. Portland's celebration of his life and literary career provides an occasion to review his accomplishments and to re-see his poetry. It might be likened to a gleening — or better, a gathering-in of Longfellow's aftermath.

“Aftermath” happens to be the title of one of his best poems. He used the term in its original sense — to signify “a second crop of grass in the same season.” It is an elegy on his autumnal years. Let me read it to you:

When the summer fields are mown,
When the birds are fledged and flown,
And the dry leaves strew the path;

LONGFELLOW'S LEGACY

With the falling of the snow,
With the cawing of the crow,
Once again the fields we mow
 And gather in the aftermath.

Not the sweet, new grass with flowers
Is this harvesting of ours;
 Not the upland clover bloom;
But the rowen mixed with weeds,
Tangled tufts from marsh and meads,
Where the poppy drops its seeds
 In the silence and the gloom.

It may be that we've arrived too late on the scene fully to share Hawthorne's "vast satisfaction" in the poetry of his college friend, but reading Longfellow again offers us a second harvest as he drifts further into the past.

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Longfellow Family Tree

