

I could not recall when you so perversely challenged me in the assembly; & it now looks to me as if I must have burned my paper either in town, or when I came home. Let us hope it was so, & drop the matter well. I am in these days and weeks as busy as a candidate for the Freshman Class a week before Examination,—having promised a new book to the Publishers at an early day, and it refuses to be ready. Else I should try to send you a paragraph about Humboldt. As it is, it will be far better to omit any report & only say that Mr E paid a cordial homage to Humboldt, and expressed his delight that he had found on this anniversary the very biographer he would have chosen.

With thanks for your persistent goodwill, Yours

R. W. Emerson

Robert C. Waterston.¹

Longfellow's Motives for the Structure of "Hiawatha"

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THE CRITICAL DISESTEEM of Longfellow's verse hallmarks was perhaps a certainty upon the decline of the poet's inflated reputation shortly after his death in 1882. Despite Edward Wagenknecht's sympathetic mid-twentieth-century reappraisal of Longfellow through biography, and Newton Arvin's more recent effort to establish him without apology as a minor figure in American literature, still it is quite likely that few readers yet confront a poem like "Hiawatha" with an attitude approaching disinterested openness. Howard Nemerov, for one, assures us he cannot, having "between the halves of a football game . . . heard great swatches of 'Hiawatha' droned out over the public address system while several hundred drum-majorettes twirled their batons."¹ Yet if the suggestion of Minnehaha electrically amplified seems today as bizarre as the retrospect of controversy raging over the propriety of Longfellow's unrhymed meter (adopted from the Finnish epic *Kalevala*), still there are other aspects of the poem that ought not to be obscured by current inclinations to banish it to the grade school class-

¹ This letter is published through the courtesy of the American Philosophical Society.

¹ Howard Nemerov, "Introduction," *Longfellow* (New York, 1959), p. 9.

room, to contemporaneous realms of *kitsch* and camp, or to the special province of the cultural historian of the nineteenth century.

For if the poem seems today beyond the pale esthetically, hedging anthropologic truth and misguidedly working, in Longfellow's terms, to "clothe the real with the ideal and make actual and common things radiant with poetic beauty," still it is possible that a significant literary motivation for the structure of "Hiawatha" has been overlooked.² For more than a century since its 1855 publication criticism of the poem has focused either on the romance between Indian composite cultural hero Hiawatha and the Minnehaha of Longfellow's fictive fancy or on Longfellow's perpetuation of Henry R. Schoolcraft's ethnological error in stating that Manabozho and Hiawatha were one.³ Yet it seems plausible that Longfellow's design for "Hiawatha" pertains less to his softening of hard truths for the sake of the picturesque than it does to his attitude toward cultural continuity between the old world and the new.

It was Henry James who found Longfellow "interesting for nothing so much as for . . . the way in which his 'European' culture and his native kept house together." James pondered whether Longfellow's personal harmoniousness derived from "his having worked up his American consciousness to that mystic point . . . at which it could feel nothing but continuity and congruity with his European." He concluded that if "something in [Longfellow's] liberal existence . . . seemed a piece of the old world smoothly fitted into the new, so it might quite as well have been a piece of the new fitted, just as smoothly, into the old."⁴ Longfellow himself has left ample evidence of the importance he attached to evolving cultural continuity. If one may equate his position with that of his character Mr. Churchill in the passage dealing with American literary nationalism in the prose tale *Kavanagh* (1849), then Longfellow certainly anticipated a future time when the "thoughts and feelings . . . of all nations . . . finally mingle in our literature." The culmination of such mingling would be "a kind of universality" in

² Quoted in Edward Wagenknecht, *Longfellow* (New York, 1955), p. 63.

³ See Stith Thompson, "The Indian Legend of Hiawatha," *PMLA*, XXXVII (March, 1922), 128-140. The essay clarifies Indian legends about which Schoolcraft erred and discusses liberties Longfellow took in shaping the poem. For discussion of Hiawatha's Indian antecedents in American literature see Wilbur L. Schramm, "Hiawatha and Its Predecessors," *PQ*, XI (Oct., 1932), 321-343.

⁴ Henry James, *William Wetmore Story and His Friends* (Boston, 1903), I, 311-312.

American literature resulting from "culture and intellectual refinement" achieved "not in the growth of a day," but over centuries.⁵

With processes of literary assimilation established in his mind as a desideratum for the growth of American literature, Longfellow appears, consciously or not, to have designed "Hiawatha" as a groundwork of native materials in a land whereon European culture could plausibly be grafted. Newton Arvin calls attention to an early (1825) essay in which Longfellow suggests that Indian materials will so engage men's imaginations that "our land will become, indeed, a classic ground."⁶ But his "Hiawatha" source materials, replete with polygamy, torture, lust, adultery, scalplings, and white men paradoxically bearing the standard of a higher civilization, yet altogether villainous—these were not in Longfellow's nineteenth century regarded as viable components of an American classicism.⁷ They did not intimate the "culture and intellectual refinement" appropriate to "mingle in our literature." Certainly they could not induce either for poet or reader the rich poetic associations Longfellow used so frequently in poems whose settings are European. Thus, if the Indian in America was to evoke qualitatively the same

⁵ Henry W. Longfellow, *Kavanagh*, ed. Jean Downey (New Haven, 1965), p. 87.

⁶ Newton Arvin, *Longfellow* (Boston, 1962), p. 19. Arvin offers evidence that Longfellow's attitude did not change with time. He writes that "in his old age [Longfellow] wrote to Louise Chandler Moulton, who was about to sail for Europe: 'Please don't get expatriated. Ah, no, life is not all cathedrals and ruined castles, and other theatrical properties of the Old World'" (p. 23n.).

⁷ Discussion of Longfellow's sources and his use of them can be found in Arvin (pp. 154-180), Wagenknecht (pp. 202, 335), and Cecil B. Williams, *Henry Wadsworth Longfellow* (New York, 1964), pp. 156-158. Firsthand perusal of the works of John Heckewelder, John Tanner, George Catlin, and especially of Henry R. Schoolcraft makes clear why it is that virtually all critics (favorable and otherwise) of "Hiawatha" discuss at length Longfellow's remarkable shaping of a unified work from an incoherent mass of material. Taken together, the sources are a farrago of disparate legends, of Indian history, Christian moralisms, and rudimentary sociology and anthropology. Schoolcraft himself would likely have objected to Longfellow's remark that his writings were ill-digested; yet he had an eye toward the American literary imagination that might shape his Indian lore. He remarks in *Oneota, or Characteristics of the Red Race of America* (New York, 1847) that he hopes "herein [to] be the medium of presenting the germs of a future mythology, which, in the hands of our poets, and novelists, and fictitious writers, might admit of being formed and moulded to the purposes of a purely vernacular literature" (p. 246). Schoolcraft's criteria for such a literature are "simplicity, conciseness, and brevity," and he deplors literary works which cast Indians as "English figures, drest in moccasins, and holding a bow and arrows" (p. 247). Nevertheless, Longfellow, according to his Introduction to "Hiawatha," intended the poem for those "who love a nation's legends / Love the ballads of a people," and many of the Indian traits, customs, and incidents Schoolcraft and the others record were far from being lovable, or even acceptable to many readers.

kind of poetic associations as historical-legendary places and personages of Europe, then it was for Longfellow to make the evocation possible by creating a work that would give native American materials some parity with those of Europe, and further make plausible an Indian-Euro-American cultural continuity in America. To do this, he structured his plot so as to reveal American Indians becoming progressively civilized up to the appearance at the end of the poem of the white Christian missionaries, presaging the Caucasian immigration and further indicating a prospective cultural suffusion of Europe into America.

Briefly considered, the plot of "Hiawatha" begins with the promise of a unified social order among tribes scattered or at enmity. The Master of Life, Gitche Manito, smokes the calumet and admonishes the tribes that

All your strength is in your union,
 All your danger is in discord;
 Therefore be at peace henceforward,
 And as brothers live together.⁸

He promises to send a Deliverer (Hiawatha), who later in the poem reinforces social unity when he, an Ojibway, vows to marry Minnehaha of the enemy Dacotahs,

That our tribes might be united,
 That old feuds might be forgotten,
 And old wounds be healed forever. (p. 135)

Still in young manhood, Hiawatha enables his people to escape the vagaries of hunting and foraging for their food. "Must our lives depend on these things?" he asks in a plaintive refrain that prefaces ritual fasting and fighting which culminate in agrarianism signalled by the arrival of Mondamin, corn (pp. 124-126). Hiawatha's next deliverance of his people is his development of picture-writing (pp. 145-147) for sending messages, recording history, and communicating love. Subsequently in the poem he travels abroad

Teaching men the use of simples
 And the antidotes for poisons,
 And the cure of all diseases. (p. 149)

⁸ Citations from "Hiawatha" in my text are to *The Complete Poetical Works of Longfellow*, ed. Horace E. Scudder (Cambridge, Mass., 1893), p. 116. Hereafter page references are listed in the text.

In sum, the plot of the poem, entwined as it is with legends and romance, moves nonetheless from social unification through agrarianism and literacy to medical knowledge. Civilizing progress is marked in each step of a pattern in which the Indians increasingly master their environment. Thus in a poem structurally implying progress, Longfellow manipulates his plot to make the advent of Christianity the civilizing apotheosis of an Indian nation now prepared for it. He is not so fatuous as to suggest for the Indians a future unclouded by miseries, for surely the liquidation of Indian reservations between 1829 and 1843 with its "trail of tears" debacle of western removal beyond Missouri of the Shawnees, Delawares, and Wyandots, among others, made clear to Longfellow the fate of the Indian peoples in America. His poem "To the Driving Cloud" evinces his full awareness of it. Yet Christianity at the end of "Hiawatha" is the common touchstone for whites and Indians. Hiawatha's final admonishment to his people as he departs for the Land of the Hereafter is to pay heed to the missionary Black-Robe chiefs, to

Listen to their words of wisdom,
Listen to the truth they tell you,
For the Master of Life has sent them
From the land of light and morning. (p. 164)

From Hiawatha's view the white men in ships represent vast armed power, though even in his darker vision of tribes scattered "like the withered leaves of Autumn" (p. 162), he does not blame the Europeans for his peoples' fate.

It seems, moreover, that toward the end of the poem Longfellow interjects his own view in rather Whitmanesque terms within the consciousness of Hiawatha when the Indian hero recounts a vision:

I beheld, too, in that vision,
All the secrets of the future,
Of the distant days that shall be.
I beheld the westward marches
Of the unknown, crowded nations.
All the land was full of people,
Restless, struggling, toiling, striving,
Speaking many tongues, yet feeling
But one heart-beat in their bosoms. (p. 162)

That "one heart-beat" of the European immigrants hints at a cultural unity in America which, applied to belles lettres, prefigures the ultimate "universality" Longfellow himself envisioned for American literature. If the Indians seem in the lines above too readily set aside for another social order making incursions on their lands, it might be recalled that Longfellow's "Hiawatha" deals with Indian legend, not history. He infuses the poem with just enough detail of daily life to establish a reality in which the appearance of white missionaries seems plausible. Longfellow at the end of "Hiawatha" conjoins the eternality of Indian legend with historical time. His connecting bridge, built all along, is a limited amount of anthropological detail about circumstances of eating, canoe building, etiquette, flora and fauna, etc. But having shaped the various legends in a unified work that presents the Indians as advancing in civilization, Longfellow is able at the last to suggest a continuity of cultures in America from the primitive yet dignified indigenous to the sophisticated migratory transplanted from the old world. His structural implication is that if whites are to supplant the Indians, still the latter are as he presents them worthy in their own native culture of a historic European on-grafting in America.

Possibly it was the design of Longfellow's plot structure that led him correlatively to prettify Indian life—or mercerize it, as C. F. Fiske describes the poet's sacrifice of earthiness for a surface sheen nowhere to be found in his sources.⁹ Evidence suggests that Longfellow was personally receptive to the original accounts, for his journal entry of July 31, 1854, mentions reading to his boys the Indian story of the Red Swan, a legend in which a detached scalp figures prominently. Yet for Longfellow emphasis on the consanguinity of Indian civilization meant necessary deletion of the brutally sanguine. And if it is true that in "Hiawatha" he violated Indian myths by "insisting upon sentiments which form little or no part of Indian feeling, but which do appeal to the civilized reader,"¹⁰ it might be suggested that Longfellow's attitude toward cultural and literary continuity between the old and new the worlds was his poetic motive for doing so.

⁹ C. F. Fiske, "Mercerized Folklore in 'Hiawatha,'" *Poet-Lore*, XXXI (Dec., 1920), 538-575.

¹⁰ Thompson, p. 139.