Epic in American Culture

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When Lydia Sigourney died in 1865, she was one of the best-selling American poets of the century. One of the few who outdid her in sales was Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, a lawyer’s son from Maine who by 1865 had published over 100,000 copies of his volumes of poetry, from his early collection *Voices of the Night* to the book-length poems *Evangeline* and *The Song of Hiawatha*—and that only accounts for the US market; he outsold Tennyson in Britain. He had brought Paul Revere from an obscure local legend to a Founding Father with his 1860 “Paul Revere’s Ride”; crafted blacksmiths, ships, clocks, arrows, and legend-bearing banners into national icons; and coined phrases including “ships that pass in the night,” “the patter of little feet,” “footprints on the sands of time,” and “a boy’s will is the wind’s will,” the last providing Robert Frost with the title for his first book of poetry, *A Boy’s Will*. Yet that tells only one side of Longfellow’s accomplishments. By 1865 he had also been a professor of modern languages at Bowdoin and Harvard; given the first lectures on Goethe in the States (among those attending the first series in 1837 was a Harvard senior named David Henry Thoreau); edited a mammoth anthology of non-Anglophone European literature, in which he did many of the translations himself; written articles for the
North American Review on Anglo-Saxon, French, Spanish, Italian, Swedish, and German literature; started a renaissance in English hexameter poetry by daring to use the classical meter in *Evangeline*; built up a readership that stretched to South America and across Europe to India and China; and corresponded with scholars and illuminati in no fewer than five different languages. By the end of the decade, he would have an audience with Queen Victoria, receive honorary degrees from Oxford and Cambridge, and be gorgeously photographed by Julia Margaret Cameron. In 1865, he was completing the first American translation of Dante’s entire *Divine Comedy*, a specially bound edition of which would be sent by the US government to Florence in that year to honor Dante’s six hundredth birthday, helping to seal Longfellow’s reputation as the nation’s greatest literary ambassador of his age.

The internationality of Longfellow’s work, in both what and who influenced him and what and whom he influenced, is easy to miss, because few expect to find it in his poetry. Longfellow, like Sigourney, was a much-beloved poet for a mass reading audience who identified with the figure of goodness and decency that spoke to the themes of hope, loss, home, and faith that mattered to them but were so difficult to put into words. This version of Longfellow was easy to love, but also easy to deride among critics who preferred “serious” or “challenging” literature; in a letter thanking Longfellow for a copy of *Hiawatha*, Emerson commented on how much his 11-year-old son, Edward, enjoyed the poem, and he gave his own appreciation of reading the poet’s work: “I have always one foremost satisfaction in reading your books that I am safe—I am in variously skilful hands but first of all they are safe hands.”1 This was an almost viciously backhanded compliment from the man who wrote his famous letter to Whitman about *Leaves of Grass* in the same year. Yet if Emerson was cloyed by what he saw as the sentiment and conventionality of *Hiawatha*, his lame criticism (later in the same letter) that Longfellow had falsely made a degenerate race seem cultured shows that the Concord sage had little idea what the Cambridge poet was doing in his “Indian Edda,” as Longfellow liked to call it. Longfellow had selected a meter from a German translation of an obscure Karelian poem and borrowed plot elements from that poem—which was currently celebrated as a triumph of Finnish nationalism and a monument of what Goethe called *Weltliteratur*, or world literature, in Europe—in order to show both the nation and the world that Native Americans were just as worthy of cultural recognition as any Northern European people might be. Americans in search of a “native” literature that would use national material in a national way, as Emerson declared that Whitman was doing, would
little suspect how large a world Longfellow was writing in when he wrote his tales of the chief at Gitche Gumee.

Longfellow’s fall from the canon of American literature is a well-known story by now and is wrapped up with the nationalism and New Critical poetics advocated by early twentieth-century poets and critics. While the growing body of scholarship that has emerged on Longfellow since Lawrence Buell’s 1988 Penguin edition of his poems has freshly opened up discursive worlds of sentimentalism, world literature, translation, tourism, and children’s poetry (among other areas), Longfellow is still treated more often as an interesting writer than as a great one. This chapter can be read as an apology for Longfellow’s greatness, but only insofar as it is the first sustained treatment of Longfellow as a practitioner of long-form poetry. Being fluent in classical Greek and Latin, as well as most of the languages of western and central Europe, Longfellow was probably more widely read in Western epic tradition than any other American of his century, and the bold formal experiments and transnational perspectives that Longfellow brought to bear on that epic tradition would not only help create American literature in his day but offer readers in our day new ways of considering American literature’s place in the world. And contra Ezra Pound’s “Pact” with Whitman, this new look at Longfellow reveals that the Cantos, that sprawling project that begins in the middle of Homer’s Odyssey and plows straight through Dante via a host of other European literary landmarks, might have more to do with the man that Pound claimed as a great-uncle than the one he claimed as a “pig-headed father.”

_Evangeline_ as Weltliteratur: Longfellow’s Transnational Poetics

The conception and composition of Evangeline: A Tale of Acadie is well documented, largely thanks to the scholarship of Manning Hawthorne and Henry W. L. Dana. Longfellow first conceived of the story after hearing a tale recounted in a conversation with Rev. Horace Lorenzo Conolly, an Episcopalian rector who had heard the story in turn from an old Acadian woman. According to Conolly, a legend in Nova Scotia told of a pair of lovers who were separated on their wedding day by the British expulsion of Acadian peasants from Nova Scotia during the Seven Years’ War—an event named by Acadians _le grand dérangement_—and who spent the rest of their lives searching for each other, only to find each other at the moment of death. Conolly and others had initially encouraged Nathaniel Hawthorne to write a story based on the legend, but Hawthorne found the story
too dark for him to feel confident in expressing appropriate pathos. Instead, he “offered” the story to Longfellow by introducing him to Conolly, and even when Hawthorne published a story on *le grand dérangement* in his 1841 collection *Famous Old People*, he carefully excluded any mention of the legend of the separated lovers. In fact, he even included in his story the statement, “Methinks, if I were an American poet, I would choose Acadia for the subject of my song.” To drive his point home, Hawthorne sent Longfellow a presentation copy of his book, and after the publication of *Evangeline*, he added a line to subsequent editions of his own Acadian story acknowledging that the “most famous of American poets” had indeed written the wished-for poem and had thus “drawn sweet tears from all of us.”

Hawthorne’s commentary on *Evangeline* brings out the tension that helped to make the poem such an international success, both at its first appearance and throughout the next century: the grandeur of epic and the tenderness of elegy. This tension has also served to obscure the poem’s claims to high literature, as Robert Kendrick has argued that the centrality of mourning in Phillis Wheatley’s epyllia and “To Maecenas” both defined and disguised her own epic ambition. In the case of *Evangeline*, the semantic halo of unrhymed hexameters and the Odyssean scope of the heroine’s travels in Part 2 constantly run up against the quiet, passive pathos of the lovers’ devotion and the emphasis on the woman rather than the man as the most heroic lover. In his review of *Evangeline* for the *Salem Advertiser*, Hawthorne declared early on that the story was “as poetical as the fable of the Odyssey,” and that in Longfellow’s hands the story is told “with the simplicity of high and exquisite art,” so that the “pathos [is] all illuminated with beauty.” While the simplicity of Homer’s art might be said to be characteristic of the original *Odyssey*, pathos illuminated by beauty is not one of Homer’s most renowned qualities. Echoing Schlegel’s use of “epic” as a term of comparative rather than positive identification, Hawthorne describes *Evangeline* as a simile for the *Odyssey*, not a successor to it. The review concludes with a discussion of Longfellow’s hexameter lines, the most controversial aspect of the poem for early reviewers; Hawthorne admits that the choice of meter “may be considered an experiment,” one to which “the first impressions of many of his readers will be adverse.” Even as the hexameter formed the gold standard among classical poetic forms, the use of such a meter in English was seen as either woefully imitative or bewilderingly avant-garde. However, Hawthorne argues that Longfellow’s particular talent with the hexameter line would eventually win the reader over, and that “we cannot conceive of the poem existing in any other measure.”

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Arvin notes that in a mood of self-parody, Longfellow recomposed the description of the mocking-bird in Part 2, Canto 2 in heroic couplets—perhaps as a way of reassuring himself that his choice of unrhymed hexameters was preferable to alternative traditional forms. Together with the Odyssean narrative and what Arvin calls the “quasi-epical announcement of the theme” in the prologue, hexameters gave *Evangeline* an unusual place in the epic tradition, balancing classical poetics and modern discourses of sentiment. As James Russell Lowell put it, *Evangeline* struck contemporary readers as a poem “not ancient nor modern, its place is apart / Where time has no sway, in the realm of pure Art.”

Yet even for Longfellow hexameters were not solely an epic form, nor even an extended narrative form. In his 1845 *The Belfry of Bruges and Other Poems*, published the same year as his mammoth anthology *The Poets and Poetry of Europe*, Longfellow included the poem “To the Driving Cloud,” a lament in hexameters in the voice of an exiled “chief of the mighty Omahas,” neither at home in the white man’s city nor secure on the prairies quickly filling with “the breath of these Saxons, and Celts, like the blast of the east-wind.” By the time the poet-professor had completed *Poets and Poetry*, he had almost twenty years of experience as a professional translator, and “To the Driving Cloud” highlights Longfellow’s interest in translating not only words and poems but also forms. The overall success of the Omaha lament encouraged Longfellow to continue writing in hexameters, and he began work on *Evangeline* just before the publication of *The Belfry*.

While Homer and Virgil (and to a lesser extent Ovid) were still the most illustrious poets to use hexameters by Longfellow’s time, German poets had begun to embrace the meter in the late eighteenth century, most notably Goethe in his “domestic epic” *Hermann und Dorothea*. The meter may have served what Goethe considered one of the prime functions of epic poetry, that of slowing down or deferring the action of the poem. The meter had also been used in the German translation of the *Iliad* that Carlyle used in his study of Homer (see chap. 4), as well as in the Swedish author Esaias Tegnér’s *Frithiofs Saga*, which Longfellow had reviewed at length for the *North American Review* in 1837, and from which he translated, at times in hexameters. Critics have often noted the similarities between the plots and the heroines of Goethe’s poem and Longfellow’s, and they have shown that the source for the “forest primeval” and the rest of the Acadian landscape came not from Nova Scotia but from Tegnér’s descriptions of Sweden. The importance of noting the similarity between the forms as well is that the form signified the work’s participation in a tradition both venerably old and radically new, and the hexameter in this new tradition became the
meter not only of the *Iliad* but of stories of loss and attempted recovery of a national ideal, wrapped up in the pastoral imaginary at least as much as in an ideology of heroism. What may be called the *pastoral heroics* of romantic hexameters presents a hero, such as Evangeline, whose literary purpose is not so much to astonish her readers by her exploits as to inspire admiration and imitation through her quiet though remarkable strength and virtue.

The intense visuality of Tegnérs’s and especially Longfellow’s hexameter works suggests J. M. W. Turner’s Epic Pastoral. This new hybrid genre drew on the canons of academic history painting while situating the grand architecture of European history in picturesque scenes of farmland, rolling hills, and anonymous peasants—as history painting became a ruin of itself in Britain, painters of elevated pastoral placed the literal ruins of that history into the larger narrative of ecological change and continuity, thus giving the landscape painter (and his subject) a rhetorical edge over the humanism of history painting. Not only was the subject bigger than ever before; now it could contain what before constituted the greatest subjects of art. Longfellow’s *Evangeline* starts with a similar move. Rather than singing of arms or the man, the first sentence reads like a bardic caption for a Thomas Cole canvas: “This is the forest primeval.” From these initial lines, the “pines and the hemlocks” are personified, “murmuring,” “bearded with moss” and wearing “garments green,” standing like “Druids of eld” and “harpers hoar, with beards that rest on their bosoms.” And the next set of lines makes clear that while this wilderness was once inhabited, the farms are “waste,” and those who lived on them “scattered like dust and leaves,” leaving behind only “tradition”—a “mournful tradition, still sung by the pines of the forest,” which, as it were, have taken the role of bardic rememberers in the absence of more articulate singers.

This Epic Pastoral, with its timeless tone of lament, stands in tension with the rustically ordered time of the georgic life of Grand-Pré. In a poem whose meter already foregrounds the idea of duration, the Acadians live a life marked by the civil order of the clock as well as the natural order of the seasons. The first appearance of a clock in the poem coincides with a scene in which Evangeline and her father Benedict Bellefontaine sit quietly in their house; as the father sings fragments of songs from Normandy, the daughter works at her spinning wheel. All is domestic tranquility, almost to the point of a religious hush, as the text intimates: “As in a church, when the chant of the choir at intervals ceases, / Footfalls are heard in the aisles, or words of the priest at the altar, / So, in each pause of the song, with measured motion the clock clicked.” The tick of the clock is a sound always present but only accidentally heard in the absence of other sounds.
The clock provides ambient noise, like the footsteps in the aisle, but it is also somehow the center of the action, as the priest’s words, which in the Catholic liturgy of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries are not heard by the congregation but rather overheard in the occasional silences of the choir. This not heard but overheard click would have likely called to the minds of Longfellow’s readers another clock the poet had famously described two years earlier, in “The Old Clock on the Stairs,” which presides over the lives of a family across the generations, always saying “Forever—never! / Never—forever!” as its pendulum swings (51). This poem, which appeared in *The Belfry of Bruges* with “To the Driving Cloud,” grew out of Longfellow’s fascination with the French divine Jaques Bridaine’s description of a clock’s pendulum perpetually repeating “Toujours, jamais! Jamais, toujours!” in *le silence des tombeaux*—the silence of the tombs (828). If, like the priest in church, the clock holds the secret to the real story of *Evangeline*, Longfellow’s readers have been prepared to expect that the real story will soon descend into death. The first simile of the scene also casts an ominous gloom over an ostensibly cheery fireside: “In-doors, warm by the wide-mouthed fireplace, idly the farmer / Sat in his elbow-chair and watched how the flames and smoke-wreaths / Struggled together like foes in a burning city” (65). The contented Bellefontaine seems undisturbed by such a likeness, likely because, unlike the poem’s reader, he does not see it, or rather he cannot read it. The poem’s visuality slips into literacy, a consciousness more available to *Evangeline*’s readers than to the characters it portrays.

Literacy vies with orality in the next mention of the clock. As the scene of the farmer and his daughter unfolds, we learn that they are waiting for the blacksmith and his son, *Evangeline*’s beloved; once they arrive, everyone waits for the notary Leblanc’s arrival. The clock’s less direct association with waiting in the poem establishes the act of not acting alongside the terrible fatalism of “The Old Clock on the Stairs,” coupling the two elements that will most profoundly define *Evangeline*’s life. Once the notary arrives, the second mention of a clock appears, as the description of the new visitor moves from his hair to his glasses that bespeak “wisdom supernal” to his family: “Father of twenty children was he, and more than a hundred / Children’s children rode on his knee, and heard his great watch tick” (69). Here the ominous detachment of the clock in the hall gives way to the intimate heartbeat of the watch in the waistcoat, which grandchildren hear as they lean against their grandfather. Yet even this moment is not all tenderness. The lines immediately following explain how Leblanc gained his wisdom at a great cost: four years’ detainment as a prisoner of war—and by the French, on
accusation of the notary’s sympathies toward the English. Leblanc has already lived the tragedy of accusation, exile, and captivity that now awaits the entire village of Grand-Pré. And while he himself eschews “all guile or suspicion,” he forgets nothing: the notary is also the keeper of both official town records and traditional town legends. He is a master storyteller who entertains with ghost stories and anecdotes of folk medicine, “whatever was writ in the lore of the village” (69). Separation between notarized writing and oral “lore” disappears in the person of the notary, who, instead of offering reasoned conjecture on the sudden appearance of British warships in the harbor, tells a fable that he had learned while in prison—a story to answer the new events of the day that “was the old man’s favorite tale,” which “he loved to repeat... When his neighbors complained that any injustice was done them” (70). The story, instead of surprising its audience into quiet philosophy, is as mechanical a response to others’ grumbling as the tick of Leblanc’s watch, and the blacksmith whose grumbling induced the story sits “Silenced, but not convinced” (71).

The official business of the notary’s visit soon commences, and the evening concludes when “the bell from the belfry,” ringing “the hour of nine, the village curfew” (72), summons the visitors to their homes. If the earlier click and tick of the clock suggested a universal finality, a much more local finality appears here as the role of time in the policing of Grand-Pré jars the reader out of bucolic domesticity and into civil society. This jarring, though the function of the order of local law, foreshadows the awful “summons sonorous” of the bell’s toll the next day, this time accompanied by a drum sounding “over the meadows” as the British officers summon the Acadian men to the church for an announcement. Inside the church, the drum echoes “with loud and dissonant clangor”; the sound is quickly engulfed by the “silence of the crowd,” while the women wait outside in the churchyard, dans le silence des tombeaux. The British commander announces that the Acadians, as a result of alleged hostility toward Britain, are to be removed from Nova Scotia and all their lands are to be seized by the Crown. Shock runs through the audience and then their collective rage sparks a near-riot, until the appearance of the priest, Father Felician, who seems the clock on the stairs come to life:

Raising his reverend hand, with a gesture he awed into silence
All that clamourous throng; and thus he spake to his people;
Deep were his tones and solemn; in accents measured and mournful
Spake he, as, after the tocsin’s alarum, distinctly the clock strikes. (77)
The tocsin, an old French word for an alarm bell, seizes attention here not through ringing but by “a gesture,” a “reverend” but violent movement that creates a space of silence for the “deep . . . tones and solemn” that follow. And in a rare moment in American epopee, Father Felician pushes the power of visuality even further by using an _ekphrasis_ to admonish his congregation—an _ekphrasis_ that seems to come to life as he describes the image. Pointing to the crucifix behind the altar, he cries,

Lo! where the crucified Christ from his cross is gazing upon you!
See! in those sorrowful eyes what meekness and compassion!
Hark! how those lips still repeat the prayer, “O Father, forgive them!”
Let us repeat that prayer in the hour when the wicked assail us,
Let us repeat it now, and say, “O Father, forgive them!” (77)

The _ekphrasis_ accomplishes its work; the congregation acts as an extension of the description by repeating “O Father, forgive them!” in response.

Now prisoners in their own church, the men of Grand-Pré join their priest in prayer, and the bell that announced the curfew and the military summons now rings a call to prayer, the “Angelus” at sunset. The time of day is finally trumping the o’clock, preparing the Acadians for their journey from georgic paradise to Epic Pastoral. Yet the clock has not yet been destroyed; the heartbeat of Evangeline’s home will finally die only with her father, who emerges from the church on the day of deportation looking “Haggard and hollow and wan, and without either thought or emotion,/ E’en as the face of a clock from which the hands have been taken” (83). Grand-Pré’s time is now over; the bustle of the village falls silent on this day, and “from the church no Angelus sounded” (82); the only sound is the cows lowing while they wait for milkmaids that will never return for them.

The physical death of the village, which gives Benedict Bellefontaine the shock that finally kills him, comes in fire as British soldiers torch the buildings while their former tenants watch from the shore. In this apocalyptic scene, nature threatens to destroy itself:

Loud on a sudden the cocks began to crow in the farm-yards,
Thinking the day had dawned; and anon the lowing of cattle
Came on the evening breeze, by the barking of dogs interrupted.
Then rose a sound of dread, such as startles the sleeping encampments
Far in the western prairies or forests that skirt the Nebraska,
When the wild horses affrighted sweep by with the speed of the whirlwind,
Or the loud bellowing herds of buffaloes rush to the river.
Such was the sound that arose on the night, as the herds and the horses
Broke through their folds and fences, and madly rushed o’er the meadows.

(84)

In a striking simile anticipating the frontier landscape of the second half of the poem, Grand-Pré’s animals leave their own domestic spaces for the wildness of exile, a fate awaiting their former owners—a fate commenced with the burial of Bellefontaine on the shore and the departure that leaves behind “the dead on the shore, and the village in ruins.” The clock in Evangeline’s house has been silenced by the fulfillment of its own fatal prophecy.

Evangeline’s first half may be described as an idyl, a georgic-pastoral poem depicting “the home of the happy.” Yet even as these words close the invocation at the poem’s outset, the happiness of Grand-Pré has quickly vanished into an epic of exile reminiscent of the Odyssey and the Aeneid. The second half of the poem opens in medias res, with language borrowed directly from Virgil:

Many a weary year had passed since the burning of Grand-Pré,
When on the falling tide the freighted vessels departed,
Bearing a nation, with all its household gods, into exile,
Exile without an end, and without an example in story. (86)

Right away, the epic language sounds a dissonant chord with the narrative of the Acadians. They may have carried images of saints, as good Catholics might, but did they carry “household gods”? Is this exile without an example, even as allusions by this point in the poem have included not just Aeneas’s Trojans but also Ishmael and Hagar (with other biblical parallels clearly in the background)? What critics such as McWilliams have labeled as the problems of imitation in modern epic poetry actually involve the most interesting creative tensions in works including Evangeline as well as more canonical texts such as Paradise Lost and Camões’s Lusiads, which use the language of epic to universalize their stories while simultaneously claiming to supersede those stories that came before. This move borders on cliché, as almost every major epic convention does, and this border helps ensure for writers as popularly successful as Longfellow that their works will relate to the largest possible audience through internationally recognized generic signposts. The idea of ships bearing a nation, while already bound up in the American mythologies of Columbus and the Mayflower Pilgrims, extended over the Atlantic to stories of Aeneas in Italy, Brutus in Britain, Madoc in Wales,
and Beowulf in Denmark, just to name a few. Longfellow’s poem tapped a vein that was at once most universal and most national, even as it narrated the particulars of a people before virtually unknown even to Americans, much less Europeans. A few lines after this Virgilian opening, Longfellow stops the narration of Evangeline’s search for Gabriel with a new invocation, complete with an epic simile:

Let me essay, O Muse! to follow the wanderer’s footsteps;—
Not through each devious path, each changeful year of existence,
But as a traveler follows a streamlet’s course through the valley:
Far from its margin at times, and seeing the gleam of its water
Here and there, in some open space, and at intervals only;
Then drawing nearer its banks, through sylvan glooms that conceal it,
Though he behold it not, he can hear its continuous murmur;
Happy, at length, if he find the spot where it reaches an outlet. (89)

Longfellow here prepares the reader for the long view of Evangeline’s narrative, a view heightened by the increased focus on American scenery in the second half—from the Mississippi to Louisiana bayous to Texas and Nebraska prairies, and eventually into the poem’s first and last city, Philadelphia. Evangeline has once and for all made the transition (if there ever was one to begin with) from idyl to epic.

The clock is eerily absent from the second half of Evangeline, replaced instead by the calendar (seasons and months) and times of day (morning, afternoon, evening). Even when the heroine reaches Philadelphia, the bells of the church steeples have no meaning beyond worship—and worship in forms foreign to the maiden-turned-nun. She hears on a Sunday morning “the chimes from the belfry of Christ Church” and “Sounds of psalms, that were sung by the Swedes in their church at Wicaco” (112). Evangeline hears these sounds, but they barely register as she walks not to church but to a hospice where she cares for the sick and dying. It is here that she discovers Gabriel, forty years later, on his deathbed, and the reunion that brought tears to so many Victorian readers’ eyes closes the poem—almost. After Evangeline murmurs, “Father, I thank thee!” the narrator leaves the tender scene with a sudden bardic turn: “Still stands the forest primeval,” presented in contradistinction to the now-dead lovers who lie together in a Philadelphia cemetery. In the closing lines of the poem, the narrator reveals that the ruined village at the beginning still does in fact shelter settlers, new settlers unfamiliar with the Acadians or their stories—all except for a few stragglers who
managed to return after *le grand dérangement*, in whose houses the young women

repeat Evangeline’s story,

While from its rocky caverns the deep voiced, neighboring ocean
Speaks, and in accents disconsolate answers the wail of the forest. (115)

In the end, the oral presence of the ocean and the forest contains and silences the Acadians, giving voice to what they can barely remember and what they cannot relate to the foreigners outside. If Grand-Pré has been decisively conquered by the poem’s conclusion, the landscape of Acadia stands unvanquished against the literate, military tyranny of the British empire.

The chronology of *Evangeline’s* setting is crucial to this nature-versus-empire narrative and will conclude our discussion of the poem. The expulsion of the Acadians takes place in 1753, just before the commencement of the Seven Years’ War. Evangeline, Gabriel, and Father Felician wander through the country throughout the war, then the American Revolution, and finally the yellow fever epidemic of 1793 in Philadelphia, in which Gabriel and Evangeline die at the end of the poem. The epidemic, which shut down what was then the nation’s capital for most of the summer, and which Charles Brockden Brown described in gothic detail in works such as *Arthur Mervyn*, barely registers in the narrative; Evangeline seems unaffected by the cataclysms of history that occur around her. Much of her western journey anticipates the imagery of nineteenth-century expansion, from Gabriel’s coonskin hat to Basil Lajeunesse’s Texarkana rancho. While the heroine’s own quiet story seems strangely untouched by her world—her greatest virtues of patience and fortitude serve to detach her from her circumstances, even as her grief is apparent throughout the story—she becomes a vehicle for the portrayal of not only forty but a hundred years of American history, right up to Longfellow’s own time. Like Cole’s versions of Turnerian Epic Pastoral, Longfellow’s poem not only provides a picture of what has been lost—Grand-Pré, the frontier, national innocence—but also establishes an index whereby an audience may “measure” how far the present situation has strayed from the ideal. The independent farmer, the self-made man, and the willful yet remarkably self-controlled heroine all emerge out of a rhetoric of an epic past, somehow realizable in the present but clearly not yet realized. How could America come to itself before the bittersweet moment of recognition emblazoned by Evangeline and the dying Gabriel? Longfellow attempted an answer to this question eight years later with his most successful and controversial poem,
based, like *Evangeline*, on American narratives and international epic conventions: *The Song of Hiawatha*.

### Into the Pantheon of World Poetry: My Hiawatha’s Journey

In his journal Longfellow recorded on April 19, 1854: “At eleven o’clock, in No. 6 University Hall, I delivered my last lecture,—the last I shall ever deliver here or anywhere.” The lecture concluded Longfellow’s final course on Dante at Harvard and marked a difficult turning point in his career; after over twenty years of teaching, the scholar would turn to his poetry full-time, and at a period in his life during which he had written virtually no poetry since 1851. Just a few months before the end of the Dante course, the beleaguered professor had closed his journal for 1853 with an unusually frank lament: “How barren of all poetic production, and even prose production, this last year has been! For 1853 I have absolutely nothing to show. Really, there has been nothing but the college work.” However, two months after his retirement, Longfellow recorded that his muse had returned: “I have at length hit upon a plan for a poem on the American Indians, which seems to me the right one, and the only. It is to weave together their beautiful traditions into a whole. I have hit upon a measure, too, which I think the right and only one for such a theme.” Both the measure and the plan to “weave” a collection of stories into a “whole” were inspired by the Finnish epic *Kalevala*, which Longfellow reread at the beginning of June 1854, probably in a German translation. The American poet’s choice of sources would be a point of fascination and controversy among his readers throughout his lifetime, as well as a site of contestation for scholars reading his work through the other side of the Civil Rights Movement. *The Song of Hiawatha* appeared in late 1855, at a moment of escalating sectional tensions and political uncertainty fueled by debates over slavery and territorial expansion. While the poem was to speak to the current political crisis, the message conveyed by Longfellow’s intertextual strategy to his international audience was that the United States was ready to declare its own cultural legitimacy in European terms, and *Hiawatha* would seal Longfellow’s fame abroad as the preeminent American poet of his day.

Even during the “silent period” of his last years at Harvard, Longfellow returned to his earlier ambitions to combine the universal and the national. In the fall of 1853, Longfellow’s last lecture on Goethe benefited from his recent careful rereading of Johann Peter Eckermann’s *Conversations with Goethe*. Eckermann,
a disciple of Goethe who had carefully recorded years of table talk and published his transcripts in 1835 as a posthumous tribute to his hero, had created an international sensation with his *Conversations, or Gespräche*, and Longfellow had likely already read the book in the original German. The occasion for his rereading was the republication of the recently deceased Margaret Fuller's English translation in 1852. While Longfellow seldom wrote marginalia in his books, and indeed rarely annotated them at all, his copy of Fuller’s *Conversations* is underlined and annotated throughout as he traced Goethe’s theories of originality, authorship, and canonicity. Among the many passages Longfellow marked was one of Goethe’s most famous comments on literature: “National literature is now rather an unmeaning term; the epoch of World literature is at hand, and each one must strive to hasten its approach.”¹⁸ In one of the few instances of retaining German nominal capitalization, Fuller here translates *Weltliteratur* as “World literature,” pointing to the seminal importance of the concept not only for Goethe but for his international readers, and specifically for Fuller’s Concord- and Boston-based cohorts who had turned to German thought for guidance in fashioning an American intellectual culture.

Angela Sorby’s recent work on Longfellow’s vicissitudes as a “schoolroom poet” sheds light on how the poet’s reception after his death has obscured the more sophisticated elements of his writing, sometimes by outright deletions from the text. One of the most influential redactions is that of the beginning of *Hiawatha*; most American schoolchildren between 1880 and the 1970s who memorized the supposed opening of the poem learned the following lines:

By the shores of Gitche Gumee,
By the shining Big-Sea-Water,
Stood the wigwam of Nokomis,
Daughter of the Moon, Nokomis.
Dark behind it rose the forest,
Rose the black and gloomy pine-trees,
Rose the firs with cones upon them;
Bright before it beat the water,
Beat the clear and sunny water,
Beat the shining Big-Sea-Water. (157)

These lines launch the reader (or reciter) into mythic space, a far-off wilderness whose landscape echoes the “forest primeval” and “deep-voiced neighboring ocean” that open *Evangeline*, thus drawing a close connection between the tone
and imagery of the two poems. But these are not the lines with which Longfellow originally opened his poem; the “shores of Gitche Gumee” actually appear only some sixty lines into the third canto of the poem, entitled “Hiawatha’s Childhood.” Much has been elided in this redaction, not least of which is Mudjekeewis’s highly sensual seduction of Hiawatha’s mother, as well as his immediate abandonment of his pregnant lover and Nokomis’s lament over her daughter who had “in her anguish died deserted” (157). Hiawatha’s mythic importance as the ultimate noble savage, the universal hero of cultivated mind and gentle though strong spirit, stands in sharp contrast to his scandalous origins, and much of the sexuality of the poem—including a later canto that describes Minnehaha’s fertility ritual in which she walks nude around a corn field—has been expunged from the version of Hiawatha that remains in public memory. And it is in these moments that some of Longfellow’s most subtle intertextual echoes appear. In “Hiawatha’s Childhood,” the account of the hero’s birth introduces a peculiar epithet: “Thus was born my Hiawatha, / Thus was born the child of wonder.” The second line translates the German concept of Wunderkind, the child prodigy, but the first line contains a more obscure allusion in the phrase “my Hiawatha.” As professor of modern languages at Harvard, Longfellow wrote and lectured on monuments of Spanish literature, including a work he usually referred to as the Poema del Cid. As Longfellow knew, however, the original title of the twelfth-century Castilian poem was the Cantar del Mio Cid, or “The Song of My Cid.” The convention of using the possessive is at least as old as Homer and belongs almost exclusively to oral (or previously oral) poetic traditions as a way of drawing the poet and a character together; Longfellow uses the phrase “my Hiawatha” twelve times in his poem, emphasizing the intimate interpersonal connection between the hero and his poet-advocate, who himself tells a story that he learned through another relationship:

I repeat them [the tales] as I heard them
From the lips of Nawadaha,
The musician, the sweet singer. (141)

This explanation of the poet’s source appears in the opening lines of Hiawatha’s “Introduction,” one of the most unusual opening sections of any epic in Western literature. The poem opens as one side of a hypothetical conversation that immediately places the reader as both a listener and a potential interlocutor—potential because the speaker begins in the subjunctive:
Should you ask me, whence these stories?  
Whence these legends and traditions[?] 

. . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . .

I should answer, I should tell you,  
“From the forests and the prairies . . . [”] (141)

Here Longfellow’s speaker establishes a rather pedagogical stance: he waits for questions, anticipates their wording, and suggests his answers, all while the interaction between listener/reader and speaker/poet exists only in possibility. Yet the choice of “should” rather than the Kiplingian “if” signals the expectant attitude of the poet, who not only waits for questions but proleptically hastens their appearance. Questions of origins (“whence these stories?”) and questions of identity (“who was Nawadaha?”) go unasked, yet they must be asked, and the poet prepares a historical and civic education for the time when the reader is ready to ask those questions.

That a poet would write for the purposes of civic education was something of a commonplace in the generations preceding Longfellow, but that commonplace had received serious challenges from authors such as Byron, Poe, and Heine, who insisted that the individual author’s genius overrode considerations of art’s contribution to the common good. Longfellow sought to overcome what he called “spirit of the age, [which] is clamorous for utility, for visible, tangible utility,—for bare, brawny, muscular utility”;20 however, he did so from the attitude of a reformer rather than an iconoclast.21 Resisting what he saw as the antisocial, the morbid, the destructive tendencies of writers such as Byron and Poe, Longfellow believed that a writer’s greatest duties are to himself or herself, and next of all to furthering the moral development of his or her readership. But of course, Longfellow’s own model for public life was the statesman who had previously occupied his house on Cambridge’s Brattle Street: General George Washington.

Longfellow was a lifelong student of Washington’s life, and his residence in what had become known as the Craigie House, combined with his friendship with Jared Sparks and his enthusiasm for Washington Irving—both men wrote major biographies of Washington—kept “the Father of his Country” continually in Longfellow’s mind. The poet wrote most famously of Washington in the poem “To a Child,” addressed to Charles Longfellow, the already famous poet’s young son:

Once, ah, once, within these walls,  
One whom memory oft recalls,
The Father of his Country, dwelt. . . .
Up and down these echoing stairs,
Heavy with the weight of cares,
Sounded his majestic tread;
Yes, within this very room
Sat he in those hours of gloom,
Weary both in heart and head. (39)

Longfellow’s own identification with Washington as a father leads him to follow his hero’s ghost through the house, from the entryway to the stairs (where a copy of Houdon’s bust of Washington looked down on visitors to the house from the landing on the main staircase), and into Charley’s nursery, where Longfellow believed Washington had slept during the siege of Boston. However, the visitation is only to Longfellow, not to his energetic and oblivious son, the hallowed confines of whose nursery “[a]re now like prison walls to thee”:

But what are these grave thoughts to thee?
Out, out! into the open air!
Thy only dream is liberty,
Thou carest little how or where. (39–40)

Longfellow as poet must protect Washington’s memory against the forgetfulness of the rising generation, and poems such as “Paul Revere’s Ride” served to do just that for generations in American schoolrooms. However, celebration is not Longfellow’s only intent as a public poet; “To a Child” was published in *The Belfry of Bruges*, along with “The Occultation of Orion,” which critics in recent decades have read as a provocative meditation on the tension between war and peace in history, and “To the Driving Cloud,” Longfellow’s early hexameter experiment that reflected on the disappearance of the Native American from the continental landscape. As Robert Ferguson has argued, Longfellow was deeply invested in the pressing political questions of his day, such as the abolition of slavery, sectionalist tensions in Congress, and the ethics behind westward expansion. Yet Longfellow’s unwillingness to participate in politicking extended to his refusal to write occasional poetry, either before or after he became famous; after declining an offer from George Curtis to write a patriotic poem after the eruption of the Civil War, Longfellow noted in his journal, “I am afraid the ‘Go to, let us make a national song,’ will not succeed.” The next sentence in the journal entry, however, shows that the poet’s skepticism came not from personal taste
but from a belief that truly national works cannot be manufactured, but are organic expressions of culture: “It will be likely to spring up in some other way.”

Longfellow’s version of Washington’s grand inaction helped to maintain his image as a nationally representative figure, but it caused problems for his writing analogous to those that had faced Washington’s hero-worshipers: if he would not write the great national poem on demand, how could he write such a poem without giving in to the pressure of the moment? *Hiawatha*, with its organic, preliterate past and its emphasis on remembrance as the path to salvation, was Longfellow’s answer to this problem amid the turmoil of the mid-1850s. The first canto, entitled “The Peace-Pipe,” describes a meeting of hostile nations called by Gitche Manito, the chief god. The god makes a pipe from “the red stone of the quarry,” “fashion[s] it with figures,” and smokes it as “a signal to the nations” (144). As the nations gather, feuds revive and violence breaks out, but Gitche Manito speaks “with voice majestic” as he raises his right hand to compel their silence. The god declares to his children that “All your strength is in your union, / All your danger is in discord” (146), wearing the veil of political allegory very thin indeed. He then announces that he will send “a Prophet . . .  A Deliverer of the nations” (146–47) who will teach the reconciled tribes how to improve their lives. But this deliverer’s role is not solely that of a pedagogue but also that of a messianic suffering servant who “shall toil and suffer with you” (147). This deliverer is, of course, “my Hiawatha,” a savior of the people in the tradition of not only the Cid—a freedom fighter who expels enemies from his homeland—but also Christ, who sacrifices his life for those he loves. Following on the ideal of heroic patience that permeated *Evangeline*, Longfellow depicts Hiawatha as a hero of human proportions. Numerous critics even in the 1850s observed that the magical deeds of young Hiawatha somehow fail to magnify the warrior into an Achilles, but it is reasonable to think that Longfellow never intended such a magnification. As Virginia Jackson has shown, Canto 14, “Picture-Writing,” is the heart of the entire poem; Longfellow shows Hiawatha’s greatest moment as a moment of bringing his people from orality to literacy as a better means of remembering the past, a means that did not rely on individual people but could belong to the entire culture. However, from this moment the narrative also declines quickly. Even in the “Picture-Writing” canto, the first use that the Iroquois make of writing is to mark graves with totems “inverted as a token / That the owner was departed” (230). And telling the story of Gitche Manito and the other gods leads seamlessly to phantasmagoric “Headless men, that walk the heavens,” and from there to the carnage of an Iroquois *Iliad*:
Bodies lying pierced with arrows,
Bloody hands of death uplifted,
Flags on graves, and great war-captains
Grasping both the earth and heaven! (230)

This final image of the larger-than-life warrior is precisely the image that Hiawatha rejects for himself, but in rejecting it he ensures his own peaceful, all too peaceful demise.

The next canto, “Hiawatha’s Lamentation,” narrates the murder of Hiawatha’s close friend Chibiabos, the greatest of all poets. Hiawatha’s initial response is tantamount to a nervous breakdown, but out of his trauma comes his own poetry in lamenting his loss, and revenge on the murderer soon follows. However, the downward slope is now inexorable. Kwasind, Hiawatha’s other closest friend, dies apart from the hero, ambushed by wood-spirits; the cantos following Kwasind’s death, “The Ghosts” and “The Famine,” literally bring death home to Hiawatha, as his wigwam is haunted by ghosts of refugees (possibly echoing the victims of the Indian Removal?), and a food shortage that even his abilities as a farmer and hunter cannot amend claims the life of his wife, Minnehaha, who, despite her own fertility rites for the land earlier in the poem, leaves her husband without an heir. Hiawatha has now lost everything but his authority, and the time is ripe for “The White Man’s Foot,” the penultimate canto, which is named for a plant said to move west ahead of white settlers. In this canto, Hiawatha has a vision of the white man’s arrival in Iroquois territory, in which the thrilling prospect of Euro-American migration gives way to “a darker, drearier vision”:

I beheld our nation scattered,
All forgetful of my counsels,
Weakened, warring with each other[.]

And here the imagery from “To a Driving Cloud” returns with a vengeance:

[I] Saw the remnants of our people
Sweeping westward, wild and woful,
Like the cloud-rack of a tempest,
Like the withered leaves of Autumn!” (272–73)

Just as certain as the triumph of the Euro-American settler is the eradication of the Native American peoples. The westward course of (white) empire is inexorable in the poem, and the fault seems to lie with the natives themselves—their
dispersal is punishment for their failure to keep Gitche Manito’s covenant concerning his “Deliverer of the nations”:

If you listen to his counsels,
You will multiply and prosper;
If his warnings pass unheeded,
You will fade away and perish! (147)

Hiawatha’s time is all but spent, and his mission to deliver his people seems a great failure. All he can do now is greet the first white men to his lands and then depart without a struggle.

Critics have long wrung their hands at the ending of Hiawatha, usually along the lines of either Newton Arvin’s aesthetic critique that “there is no painful complexity, no rich contradictoriness” in the ending, or Cecilia Tichi’s account of what she perceives as the poem’s ideology: “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.” In a poem that seems to celebrate the cultural richness of the Iroquois and Algonkin nations, the figure of the epitaph in the introduction comes full circle as the slow death of the Indian nations begins with the coming of the whites. As Gordon Brotherston has argued, what could have been an admirable poem descends into a devastating justification for race death as Manifest Destiny: “[A]ll [Longfellow’s] loving attention to native text has its categorical price: Manabozho/Hiawatha is celebrated only on condition that he disappear. Terminally epic, the hero follows the solar walk not through its circuit but just westward to annihilation in the ‘fiery sunset’; and upon leaving, he orders his people to concede all to the new representatives of the ‘Master of Life.’ Hence, they simply self-destruct, ensuring that all territory is vacated in principle even before the whites invade.” Yet this interpretation, in its rush to condemn Longfellow’s willingness to let the red man die, ignores the political urgency of the opening cantos concerning the threat of disunion. Hiawatha’s role as bringer of culture was meant to unify warring nations and exchange peace and prosperity for distrust and violence; politics fueled by envy and blind force destroyed his friends, and then his wife, and the hero who had mustered his greatest strength through coalition (as in his marriage to the Dacota woman Minnehaha, meant to reconcile rival nations through the union) finds himself friendless in his last hours. Disunion has undone Hiawatha, and he now must stand by and watch destiny fulfill itself.
So how do we make sense of Hiawatha’s “exultation” in meeting the white men? Is this meeting of the races truly meant to be a solution to the Indians’ fatal flaws? If so, it is a strange solution indeed. For the white men that Hiawatha meets are not farmers, ranchers, or industrialists, but French Jesuits, “the Black-Robe chief . . . With his guides and his companions” (274). Longfellow’s fascination with Catholicism had made itself known in Evangeline, as we have already seen, and his reworking of a minnesinger’s saint’s legend in his 1851 The Golden Legend elicited the comment from the poet’s wife that the work was “almost too Catholic, and rather dangerous to publish in these excited times!”

Portraying Hiawatha’s encounter with the Jesuits in the mid-1850s was also potentially dangerous, as rumors flew of Jesuits infiltrating the United States on a mission from the Vatican to dissolve the country. In any case, the fact that Catholic missionaries, rather than Puritans or other Protestant settlers, should be the potential saviors of the Algonkins may well have served to criticize Protestant America’s self-righteousness rather than to praise the supremacy of the whites. The “Priest of Prayer” comes not to seize land but to win souls, and he delivers his message of salvation to all the elders of Hiawatha’s people, who respond rationally and cordially:

We have listened to your message,
We have heard your words of wisdom,
We will think on what you tell us.
It is well for us, O brothers,
That you come so far to see us! (276)

As at the start of the poem, hope lies in union, but union fostered by dialogue rather than by fiat. The Algonkins’ tendency to stop talking is what leads Gitche Manito to call his great council, and it is also what leads Hiawatha to invent picture writing so that knowledge will not be lost. It is not the inadequacy of orality that necessitates the rise of literacy, but the failure to use orality effectively. Longfellow may well have been thinking of Daniel Webster’s infamous 1850 “Constitution and Union” speech, in which the senator supported the passage of the Fugitive Slave Act (see chap. 2); shortly after Hiawatha’s publication, dialogue in Congress over the slavery question broke down traumatically when Preston Brooks, a representative from South Carolina, caned Longfellow’s closest friend Charles Sumner while the latter was on the floor of the Senate in 1856—the caning was in response to Sumner’s increasingly ad hominem attacks on Southern politicians in his speeches.
In Longfellow’s mind, the specter of civil war in the United States and the destruction of the Indian nations were ominously related. Like Cole in his painting cycle *The Course of Empire*, Longfellow largely adhered to Herder’s philosophy of history: nations rose and fell in a cyclical pattern, such that one nation conquering or displacing another nation is no guarantee of the victor’s greater virtue or longevity. The importance of preserving lost cultures, whether that of the ancient Hebrews or of the fading American nations, was partly to remind later generations of the parts of humanity that have been lost in the name of progress and superiority. The abruptness of the poem’s ending suggests both the cataclysmic nature of the Herderian cycle, as someone like Cole might interpret it, and the cultural tensions inherent in *Hiawatha’s* most famous literary source, the *Kalevala*.

In the preface to his “authorized” German translation of Longfellow’s “Indian Edda,” *Der Sang von Hiawatha*, Ferdinand Freiligrath argued that instead of “Edda” the poem should “more rightly be called an Indian Kalewala [sic].” Freiligrath expresses his admiration for Longfellow’s ability to weave his various literary and anthropological sources organically together into the poem, but he also objects to the ending: “In this respect only the conclusion of the poem may appear doubtful, insofar as the tale and poem make almost all too abrupt and sudden an impression. Hiawatha, the son of the West-Wind, the grandson of Nokomis who fell from the moon, suddenly shakes the hand of seventeenth-century French missionaries! As unmatched in spirit is the tale told of the same cultural-historical [culturhistorische] moment, the coming of Christendom, in the Kalewala!” Despite the numerous articles that appeared in the wake of *Hiawatha’s* publication pointing out parallels between Longfellow’s poem and the *Kalevala*, no mention of the relationship between the two epics’ endings has been made in modern criticism, even in a monograph dedicated to comparing the works. Much of the early debate revolved around the question of plagiarism—did Longfellow take too much from the poem, or at least too much without acknowledgment?—but the strange similarity between the closing cantos of each poem highlights the complexity of Longfellow’s intertextual strategies, as well as the nature of his ideas concerning the relationship between epic and the nation.

The *Kalevala* did not exist as a single narrative until Elias Lönnrot synthesized dozens of transcriptions from oral performances of Karelian epic cycles. This synthesis, arranged in fifty cantos and including several hundred lines added by Lönnrot to aid narrative coherence, was Longfellow’s source not only
for meter but also for organizing principles. Longfellow himself worked with transcriptions of oral tales, via ethnologists such as Henry Rowe Schoolcraft, and the introduction balances the speaker on the very edge between orality and literacy that Lönnrot approaches in his reworking of the Karelian songs. By referring to the poem as his “Indian Edda,” Longfellow further identified himself with the previous work of compilers of epic material, in this case the thirteenth-century Icelandic poet Snorri Sturluson, whose Prose Edda was not only to serve as a guide for later poets and historians in the Icelandic tradition but also to give its name to an earlier collection of heroic poems now known as the Poetic or Elder Edda. The blurring between earlier poet and later compiler that characterizes the composition of the Eddas and the Kalevala is part of Longfellow’s own temporal slippage in his work. While most of Hiawatha takes place in an inaccessible mythic past, the final canto, as Freiligrath noted, unexpectedly thrusts the story into history, such that a mythic hero and an anonymous but historical Catholic missionary can meet in the same poem. The arrival of European Christianity, despite Hiawatha’s hopes for the future, seems to drive the hero off. This parallels the final canto of the Kalevala, where some of Lönnrot’s most telling editorial work occurs.32

Most of the Finnish epic up to this point recounts the deeds of Väinämöinen, a bard with magical, almost Promethean powers; through his strength and cunning, the Karelian people find their unity even while losing their greatest treasure, the mysterious Sampo, in a civil war. With the destruction of the Sampo Väinämöinen’s power wanes, and the last canto begins abruptly with Lönnrot’s refashioning of Orthodox legends of the Virgin Mary, now a Karelian maiden named Marjatta, those legends themselves local folk versions adapted from Russian saints’ legends. When the time for the infant Christ’s baptism and naming arrives, Väinämöinen is called on to judge whether the child, who has no identified father, should live. The old bard, envious of the child’s obvious power, decides the baby must be killed, and in response the two-week-old Christ rebukes and banishes his unjust judge. Väinämöinen then sails into—and possibly over—the sunset, and the poem concludes in a modern Orthodox Finland. Christianity’s capacity to both disrupt old cultures and consolidate new ones in their place is a dominant feature of both the Kalevala and Hiawatha, and the hero’s departure in the face of the gospel (presented in the older idioms of Catholicism and Orthodoxy rather than Protestant ones) makes for a disturbingly easy resolution in both poems. Lönnrot constructed his poem in the name of promoting Finnish national culture, in a country that had suffered foreign occupation for centuries,
with Russia finally displacing Sweden about a century before the *Kalevala*’s compilation. Longfellow also had clear nationalistic purposes in writing *Hiawatha*, although his nationalism sought to balance a kind of cultural universalism with national belonging figured through the union of native and European cultures.

This patently romantic approach to culture, in the spirit of Goethe’s *Weltliteratur*, was not lost on Longfellow’s German translator, who asserted, “Thus is the poem a humanist and yet also a specifically American one. . . . Longfellow, one can indeed say, has among Americans first discovered America in poetry.”

As Longfellow is the greatest among American poets, so he is also one of the greatest among all poets: “In the pantheon of World Poetry [*Weltpoesie*],” which Freiligrath credits Herder with devising, “the ‘Song of Hiawatha’ is not lacking.”32 To create a truly American epic, in Freiligrath’s as well as in Longfellow’s mind, is to create an epic that reaches across nations and even oceans. The poetic source for *Hiawatha* lies not so much in the Old World, as critics such as Tichi would argue, but in the “old country,” the marginalized Karelian culture that stood in the mid-nineteenth century for Finnish national pride, just as the fading memory of American nations destroyed by waves of European settlers served as both a warning and a shared history, in the tradition of Sacvan Bercovitch’s “American Jeremiad.” As in Whitman’s case, Longfellow saw himself as an epic poet whose duty it was to bring the nation to a sense of itself, but also to alert the nation to the dangers threatening it from within. At the same time, this warning could translate to European readers as a celebration of what makes America distinctive—its distant past, now all but reduced to an epitaph. The only way to epic *kleos* or glory, for Hiawatha as for Achilles, is through loss and mourning.

**Private Poetry and the Loss of a Public:**

*Dante and Christus*

Mourning would become a new motive in writing for Longfellow in the years following *Hiawatha*’s publication. Or rather, it would return as a motive; the poet had lost his first wife, Mary, following complications from a miscarriage while traveling in Europe in 1835. A few years later, Longfellow alluded to his loss (he had been Mary’s nurse in her last days, and almost never spoke of her death) as “a care that almost killed” in his sonnet “Mezzo Cammin,” a meditation on his lack of poetic production by the age of thirty-five (671).34 He had published several of his most popular poems by then, including “A Psalm of Life” and “The Village Blacksmith,” many of them clearly motivated by his grief over losing Mary. When
Longfellow’s second wife, Fanny, the mother of their five children, died of burns when a candle flame caught her dress in 1861, he was left physically and emotionally incapacitated for weeks. Fanny had run in a panic into her husband’s study as the flames enveloped her dress, and Henry’s efforts to smother the flames with a blanket had left her alive but burned beyond recovery. Henry himself had sustained burns to his hands and face so severe he could not leave his bed the day Fanny was buried, and he found shaving almost impossible even after he healed; the trademark white beard that appears in most pictures of Longfellow dates only from this time, a cover for scars that would continually remind him of his loss.

By early 1862, the poet had determined to translate the *Divina Commedia* into English. He had already translated all or most of the *Purgatorio* in the 1850s, and he turned next to the *Paradiso* before translating the *Inferno*. Following the printing of *Inferno* for the Dante celebration in Florence in early 1865, Longfellow gathered a group of friends to assist in revising the translation in what became known as the Dante Club, a circle recently depicted in Matthew Pearl’s novel *The Dante Club*. As he prepared the final translation, Longfellow included extensive annotations and “illustrations,” or literary and critical extracts that shed light on the respective canticles of Dante’s work. Yet while the scholar of Italian literature was clearly at work in Longfellow’s Dante, the poet also found his own ways of making himself heard. Longfellow chose blank verse for his translation in order to allow the greatest freedom for rendering the Italian idiom. He wanted the translation readable, but not without the American reader feeling the otherness of the Florentine Dante, as well as the strangeness of a narrative where characters include Homer, Virgil, and Ulysses, in addition to a range of people Dante had known on the streets of Florence.

The line between the translator-as-guide and the translator-as-poet blurred in a series of six sonnets that Longfellow wrote about his process in translating the *Divine Comedy*. The sonnets were first published as “Divina Commedia” in the poet’s 1866 collection *Flower-de-Luce*, and a pair of the sonnets appeared before each of the three canticles when the full *Divine Comedy* translation was published in 1867. The poems read within the translated work as glosses on Longfellow’s experience of the poem, but in the absence of a prose preface, they necessarily become guides to the poem as well. The first sonnet develops the image of a “laborer” who enters a cathedral to lay down his “burden” and pray, while the “noises of the world retreat.” At the volta in line 9 (Longfellow used the Petrarchan form almost exclusively in his sonnets), Longfellow envisions himself as the laborer, with his translation work as his cathedral. The simile portrays him as a laborer, but
Longfellow's work breaks off for translation—this is an act of devotion, not one meant for the market, and as he prays in his translating, the “tumult of the time disconsolate” gives way to transcendence, where “the eternal ages watch and wait” (480). The waiting at the end suggests not the full transcendence of heaven, but rather the respite of a brief glance beyond the rush of time; Longfellow asks his readers to share the act of worship that translating Dante was for him.

Many of the subsequent sonnets follow the narrative of exploring a cathedral, inspecting the faces in sculpture, walking the aisles, gazing at sunlit windows; the great surprise in the midst of this architectural survey, however, is that Longfellow himself becomes a character in the *Divine Comedy*, as he sees the “poet saturnine” in the “gloom / Of the long aisles,” and “strive[s] to make my steps keep pace with thine” (480). Longfellow here casts himself as the Dante figure following Dante-as-Virgil, extending the genealogy of master and apprentice poets. The Cambridge poet’s interest in such genealogical projection is clear from his choice of epigraph for the full translation, a couplet from Spenser’s *Faerie Queene*, Book IV, Canto 2: “I follow here the footing of thy feete / That with thy meaning so I may the rather meete.”35 Spenser is here speaking of Chaucer, and the pun on “feet” points to metric imitation as well as striving for following in the line of the master. Longfellow, working as he was in a metrical form very different from Dante’s *terza rima*, faced a difficult dance in “keeping pace” with Dante, and by foregrounding his struggle in the prefatory sonnets, he presents himself much more as a fellow poet than as a mere translator. This was certainly an appropriate stance for the publication context of the poem; Longfellow’s *Divine Comedy* appeared as the first in a series of translations of world classics that Ticknor & Fields (and later Fields & Osgood) used to celebrate both the firm’s reputation for elegant editions and the accomplishments of American poets who could harness the greatest poetry of all time. The series was devoted to works of the epic tradition, including William Cullen Bryant’s translations of the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* (1870, 1871), Bayard Taylor’s version of Goethe’s *Faust* (1871), and C. P. Cranch’s *Aeneid* (1872); the list of titles indicated that what Americans thought constituted the epic canon had changed over the previous fifty years or so, but starting the series with Longfellow also consolidated that poet’s status as America’s premier translator-poet. This point became further emphasized in the 1885 Riverside edition of Longfellow’s works, when in the *Inferno* volume Houghton Mifflin included as the frontispiece a photograph of a marble bust of Longfellow, rather than an image of Dante. I have yet to find another translated work that places the translator’s portrait rather than the author’s on the frontispiece, but Longfellow’s
status as an author who “discovered” poetic matter for Americans gave him pride of place even over the master he claimed to be following in his sonnets.

Of course, Longfellow continued producing a substantial amount of original work after his Dante project, but the line between translating and authoring continued to blur as he became increasingly devoted to the sonnet and dramatic poem forms. After building a career based on a reputation for simplicity and accessibility (whether that fairly represented his work or not), Longfellow finally found the time, vision, and energy to complete an ambitious project that he had been considering since 1841, a history of the life of Christ and his influence on the world since: a pointed return to the closing books of Paradise Lost, but with the intention of exploring that history rather than merely deploying it for the sake of the telos. The Golden Legend, the first piece of what Longfellow envisioned as his crowning work, was not written until 1851. From the start Legend was intended to be the second part of a trilogy of dramatic poems that would treat “the various aspects of Christendom in the Apostolic, Middle, and Modern Ages.” The poet would go on to write a prose drama on John Endicott’s persecution of the Quakers (while he was writing his hexameter Courtship of Miles Standish in the late 1850s), then turning that play into verse after the Civil War and pairing it with a drama about the Salem Witch Trials to form The New England Tragedies. Though Longfellow envisioned writing a drama about the Bethlehem Moravians—the same topic that Sigourney had taken up in “Zinzendorff”—he used his New England pair as the third, “Modern” part of his larger poem. The Divine Tragedy, a retelling of the life, death, and resurrection of Christ intended as the first part of the poem’s chronology, was finally completed in 1871. Around these three (or four) previously published pieces, Longfellow then composed a dialogue between an angel and the prophet Habakkuk as an “Introitus”; interludes of the Abbot Joachim (after The Divine Tragedy) and Martin Luther (after The Golden Legend); and a “Finale” monologue by St. John the Divine to complete Christus: A Mystery, which appeared in three volumes in 1872.

This poem, if it was to be taken as a single poem, was clearly complicated and difficult to take in. Longfellow had long planned Christus to be an intricate work. On finishing work on his popular collection The Seaside and the Fireside (1850), Longfellow wrote in his journal, “And now I long to try a loftier strain, the sublimer Song whose broken melodies have for so many years breathed through my soul in the better hours of life, and which I trust and believe will ere long unite themselves into a symphony not all unworthy the sublime theme, but furnishing ‘some equivalent expression for the trouble and wrath of life, for its sorrow and
its mystery.” *The Golden Legend* followed soon after Longfellow wrote this entry, and nearly all of Longfellow’s biographers and critics who have written on *Christus* have quoted this passage as the poet’s declaration of his intent (he never provided a preface or other substantial gloss on the project). The sheer scale of Longfellow’s ambition has largely escaped critical attention, however. He speaks of the poem as a “Song” conveyed by “broken melodies,” but he desires this to grow into a “symphony.” A lifelong lover of music and opera and an accomplished pianist, Longfellow chose music rather than painting for his metaphor in describing his most ambitious work, and while critics have noted the darkness of intent in the quoted lines about “trouble” and “sorrow,” no scholar has previously identified the source, despite the poet’s reference to that source in the next paragraph of the journal entry. Fanny Longfellow had just been reading John Ruskin’s *Seven Lamps of Architecture* aloud to her husband, who was taken with Ruskin’s “magnificent breadth and sweep of style.” Christus was to share in the aesthetics not only of music but of architecture as well.

The lines Longfellow quoted from Ruskin come from the chapter on the “Lamp of Power,” in which Ruskin explains the challenges and possibility of conveying sublimity in architecture. Observing that painters had recourse to color and shading in creating sublime effects while architects had only the shadows thrown by direct sunlight, Ruskin argued that any piece of art must reflect the shadows of lived experience in order to be true, and thus sublimity could not be ignored in architecture—some “equivalent expression” must be adapted from other aesthetic vocabularies in order to make “this magnificently human art of architecture” ring true. That Longfellow would range so widely in his aesthetic conception of *Christus* suggests the sweeping, unprecedented nature of what he was attempting to do. While Longfellow was treating a grand subject in a way to accent its sublimity, he was choosing not to do so within any generic framework that would be recognized as epic—only the aesthetic effect would be tied to that tradition. What he was doing was like *Paradise Lost*, but it was just as much like a Beethoven symphony or the San Marco cathedral in Venice. Using the relatively obscure form of the closet drama, Longfellow planned to open up the power and the tragedy of Christ’s life and influence across almost two millennia. This would be not merely a poem, but an aesthetic and religious experience, as indicated by its subtitle, *A Mystery*. While clearly alluding to the medieval mystery plays, the single word “mystery” carries senses of religious scenes of meditation (as in the mysteries of the Catholic Rosary), as well as of the bewildering fact of life, “its sorrow and its mystery,” as Longfellow had quoted from Ruskin. As with Melville’s *Clarel*,...
which was subtitled “A Poem and Pilgrimage in the Holy Land,” critics have not fully acknowledged the spiritual nature of the claims made for the difficult, often uninviting but impressive poetry of Christus.

The web of aesthetic and religious analogies became even more complicated when Longfellow named his opening dialogue an “Introitus.” The predominance of the Latin of Catholicism runs throughout the poem—the title Christus is also the name of Christ’s character in The Divine Tragedy—and Longfellow uses the older term for the introductory rite of the Mass. The sense of movement and procession is key to the effect of the Introitus; Habakkuk, the prophet of mercy, has been interrupted from bringing food to poor farmers so that an angel could transport him with food to Daniel, who is keeping vigil in the lions’ den. This piece ushers the reader into the most sacred part of the work, as The Divine Tragedy moves between scenes adapted from tradition or invented by the poet and scenes that are rendered, in a surprising reprisal of the Dissenting epic tradition described in chapter 1, in a very close (for most critics, too close) paraphrase of the Authorized Bible into blank verse. The curious mixture continues throughout the drama, with Christus sounding the most biblical of all the characters, and the epilogue returns to the multivalent mystery of the whole work: headed “Symbolum Apostolorum,” it is simply an antiphonal recitation of the Apostles’ Creed, with each of the Twelve (with Matthias, not Judas, of course) taking lines in turn. The use of the ancient name of the Creed as the “Symbol of the Apostles” emphasizes its proximity to Christ’s life, but the distinctly antidramatic presentation of it suggests both the antiphonal liturgy of the Introitus-as-form and the rapid movement from life to doctrine that the development of the church brought about. Christ’s call to Peter to feed his lambs in the closing scene of the drama might be the high point of the influence of love in Christus, but the response of belief is, as the rest of the work demonstrates, shot through with light and dark possibilities. The epilogue of The Divine Tragedy recasts the “mystery” as a meditation on the meaning of belief itself, a theme that will continue through the dangerous (though ultimately contained) excesses of veneration in The Golden Legend and the lethal excesses of orthodoxy in The New England Tragedies.

Indeed, the place of belief in world history seems to hang in the balance by the time St. John enters in the “Finale.” The apostle is “wandering over the face of the Earth,” not on a mission from God as Habakkuk was but lost both geographically and existentially. He muses on the fall of empires and nations that leave no trace, while
Longfellow’s Pantheon

Longfellow’s Pantheon

evil doth not cease;
There is war instead of peace,
Instead of Love there is hate;
And still I must wander and wait[.]39

Though on the brink of despair, John still anticipates some final resolution, yet he sees little hope for it in the wake of the mystery. As he asks the big questions (“doth Charity fail? / Is Faith of no avail?”), he insistently takes the long view (472). His answer to the seeming failure of love in The New England Tragedies comes as an extended simile:

The clashing of creeds, and the strife
Of the many beliefs, that in vain
Perplex man’s heart and brain,
Are naught but the rustle of leaves,
When the breath of God upheaves
The boughs of the Tree of Life,
And they subside again!

The violence of religious conflict is terrible, but in the face of eternity it means little compared to Christ’s call to follow God’s will. The teacher’s words bring images of the living Christ to John’s mind, and he moves from the simplicity of the Galilean’s ministry to a vision of the cyclical fall and return of the Church:

Poor, sad Humanity
Through all the dust and heat
Turns back with bleeding feet,
By the weary road it came,
Unto the simple thought
By the great Master taught.
And that remaineth still:
Not he that repeateth the name,
But he that doeth the will! (473)

The difference between belief as confession (the “Symbolum Apostolum”) and belief as the motive for love (Habakkuk’s mission of mercy) is the ultimate distinction, left for the reader to judge whether the right kind of belief will prevail—in the reader, before anyone else.
For the closet drama form necessitates the fiction of a reader personally and actively engaged with the text, using imagination to bring the scenes to their fullest expression and meditating on the meanings of those scenes. In no other work, not even in Hiawatha, does Longfellow foreground the act of writing so consistently and with such profound reflection. Habakkuk’s angel informs him that he has been honored by God because “thou art/ the Struggler” who has served others “with deed and word and pen” (3): a reflection of Longfellow himself, who had repeatedly lamented in his journals that he had not been able to say all that he wanted to, or to work as much on Christus as he desired. Nor has Habakkuk’s work ended in the Introitus. The Angel gives him a new task, one that, as it closes the section, seems to take in the entire balance of the work:

Awake from thy sleep, O dreamer!
The hour is near, though late;
Awake! write the vision sublime[.] (4)

The Habakkuk scene is one of the few moments in his works where Longfellow figures the struggle of writing, though he himself had experienced it so frequently in his life. Remarkably, that figure appears again in the Joachim interlude, as the abbot thinks of himself as reliving St. John’s exile on Patmos (where the Apocalypse unfolds before the apostle), and he remembers his pilgrimage to the Holy Land where “first I heard the great command, / The voice behind me saying: Write! . . . And I have written” (130). Joachim exults in the triumph of Love and the goodness of God as a new age, the “coming of the Holy Ghost,” at the turn of the second millennium (132), and his rest comes in large part because he has fully obeyed his “great command”:

My work is finished; I am strong
In faith and hope and charity;
For I have written the things I see,
The things that have been and shall be[.] (133)

Following the “Symbolum Apostolorum,” Joachim finds wholeness even in isolation, but the isolated writer would not find peace at the dawn of modernity.

Martin Luther begins his soliloquy by writing his famous hymn, Ein’ feste Burg ist unser Gott, and reflecting on his ability to enjoy “a heart of ease . . . Safe in this Wartburg tower” (303). Longfellow intersperses the stanzas of Luther’s hymn throughout the monologue, giving the text in his own translation rather than the now-standard version by his fellow Unitarian and Harvard professor
Frederic Henry Hedge, “A Mighty Fortress Is Our God”; while critics have noted that Hedge’s text scans better, Longfellow uses his gloss of the German to bring out key hints that Luther’s mind is not all peace and piety. Hedge opens his version thus: “A mighty fortress is our God, / A bulwark never failing.” Longfellow’s version echoes the tower that Luther cites as his physical source of safety: “Our God, a Tower of Strength is he, / A goodly wall and weapon” (303). But in celebrating the Almighty’s defense, he also signals the potential for aggression. As Luther continues, he calls down curses on the Pope, on Catholic heretics, and especially on “Erasmus the Insincere!” (307). After this latest execration, however, he turns to his distant friend, Philip Melancthon, who, it turns out, is the true recipient of the hymn, as he alone can read both for the praise of God and for the personality of Luther in the sympathetic way that the writer craves:

My Philip, unto thee I write.
My Philip! thou who knowest best
All that is passing in this breast . . .
My Philip, in the night-time sing
This song of the Lord I send to thee;
And I will sing it for thy sake,
Until our answering voices make
A glorious antiphony,
And choral chant of victory! (308)

The antiphon of the Introitus and the “Symbolum Apostolorum” is now remedi- ated into writing, and the hymn becomes a form of epistolary exchange before it can even be sung—and as Luther sings it for the sake of his friend, it seems that the hymn is just as much about the cohesion of the community as anything else, the very bond that the atrocities of The New England Tragedies were meant to protect. And yet, the intimacy of the gift between Luther and Philip mirrors the intimacy that the closet drama posits between author and reader, the only two performers of the scene, together in mind though distant in space and time. Christus is as much about the dynamics of writing as it is about the nature of belief, and the two indeed hinge in the poem on similar virtues of faith, hope, and love.

Longfellow had in fact designed his opus with a tripartite structure not only in terms of historical ages but also in connection with the three theological virtues; later editions of Christus would indicate in the table of contents that the first part was about hope, the second about faith, and the third about love. This element
of the structure has caused frustration among critics, because the reality of The New England Tragedies is that love does not win out: John Endicott is left to mourn his son, crying “Absalom!” as his final scene ends, and Giles Corey lies dead in the last page of his play. Arvin has objected to this as a failure of consistency, a key contributing factor to his final takeaway that “one is forced to wonder what Longfellow is really saying at the end of it all.” Buell finds Christus to be “stitched together,” following William Dean Howell’s assessment that “the parts are welded, not fused, together.” Yet some of this perceived inconsistency derives from the fact that Longfellow is not only addressing what Buell calls “the failure of the ideal of charity to realize and sustain itself” but also what such huge ideals as Faith, Hope, and Charity look like in individual lives and in decidedly local places. For all the sweep of Christus, almost everything in it happens at a pedestrian’s-eye view. After Habakkuk enjoys his vista of Babylon’s illuminated skyline, the central plays stay on the hills of Galilee and Odenwald, the streets of Jerusalem, Salzburg, Salerno, and Salem; the lives of individual people are the main objects of dramatic interest.

This is what creates the shock of St. John’s long view while “wandering” the globe at the end—this is a perspective unavailable through eighteen hundred years of history, and it is the only one out of chronological order (unless this is a vision of spiritual haunting, but that is for another study). As John looks for the end of struggle, and along with it the end of writing, we find Longfellow consigning himself to the ages, having created a work that asks for a kind of reading that almost no one could be ready to bring to it: from the liturgy of the Introitus to the plays and interludes, ending with the symphonic “Finale,” Christus is indeed a mystery, but one meant to be contemplated rather than merely consumed and explained. On the other side of the Civil War, of his second wife’s death, and of his journey through Dante, Longfellow seems to no longer want to be understood, at least not in the facile ways that many of his readers approached him. The layers of translation, of scholarship, of writerly craft, and of spiritual longing had finally come together, and if no one sang its praises, he at least had made his “equivalent expression.” In that way, Longfellow’s postwar career paralleled that of Herman Melville, whose own thinking about the nature of career in the epic tradition is the focus of the final chapter.