

LONGFELLOW

Until recently, like most people, all I knew of Longfellow was *Hiawatha*. I knew the tune anyway. A conversation with a friend who admitted to a liking for the now unfashionable poet convinced me that it was time to fill another gap in my reading. After all, there was on my bookshelves a rather handsome edition of his poems, inscribed 'To Rowland [my father] from Dorothy [my mother] with wishes for a Happy Christmas and a very Happy New Year, Dec 1936', unopened since I inherited it.

I turned, not to *The Song of Hiawatha*, though I intend to read that soon, but to a poem called *Evangeline, A Tale of Acadie*, which caught my attention because of its long lines that read more like prose than verse. 'This is the forest primeval,' it begins. 'The murmuring pines and the hemlocks, bearded with moss and in garments green, indistinct in the twilight, stand like Druids...' But to demonstrate the poetic-prosaic-verse-epic qualities of Longfellow's long, irregular line, it will be better to quote some of them in full.

*In the Acadian land, on the shores of the Basin of Minas,
Distant, secluded, still, the little village of Grand-Pré
Lay in the fruitful valley. Vast meadows stretched to the eastward,
Giving the village its name, and pasture to flocks without number.
Life had long been astir in the village, and clamorous labour
Knocked with its hundred hands at the golden gates of the morning.
Then as the wind seized the gleeds and the burning thatch, and, uplifting,
Whirled them aloft through the air, at once from a hundred housetops
Started the sheeted smoke with flashes of flame intermingled.*

The musical quality of Longfellow's line in this and other poems like it is immediately felt but hard to define. In the absence of metre and rhyme, the cumulative effect of stressed syllables is what gives the line rhythm and shape. To that is added the effect of alliteration, most obviously in the second pair of lines with its 'hundred hands' and 'golden gates' or the last three with their 'hundred housetops' and 'flashes of flame', but also in patterns of sound that are less obvious but no less pervasive: 'vast meadows stretched to the eastward', for example.

Evangeline is a long poem, though less than half the length of *Hiawatha*, one of several in which Longfellow turns history into legend. His narrative poems set out to chronicle America in the way that Virgil chronicled Rome, Holinshed England, Dante Florence. (Longfellow made his own translation of Dante.) In *Evangeline*, the burning of a village by the British, the villagers' long journey west and, in particular, Evangeline's lifelong search for Gabriel, to whom she is betrothed, become elements in a national epic.

*Thus dwelt together in love these simple Acadian farmers, -
Dwelt in the love of God and of man. Alike were they free from
Fear, that reigns with the tyrant, and envy, the vice of republics.*

Another poem that uses the same long line is *The Courtship of Miles Standish*, in its day one of Longfellow's most famous poems. Historians, irritated perhaps by the success of a poem that purported to be historical but was mainly made up, considered it at best 'a pleasant little fairy tale'. The tale is set in Plymouth, so named by the Plymouth Brethren who sailed from England on the Mayflower, and concerns the rivalry between two of them, Miles Standish

and John Alden, for the hand of the beautiful Priscilla. As in *Evangeline*, Longfellow's story has little to do with the particulars of history and everything to do with the universals of human nature, especially as they contribute to the values that underpin the founding of America and the creation of its national epic.

Longfellow makes frequent use, in this poem and others, of a poetic device that links his epic to Homer's, the extended simile.

*He spoke, and such a murmur rose, as on a lofty shore
The waves make when the south wind comes, and tumbles them before
Against a rock, grown near the strand, which diversely beset
Is never free, but here and there with varied uproars beat.*

That was Homer in the *Iliad*, as translated by Chapman. This is Longfellow.

*Anger was still in his heart, but at times the remorse and contrition
Which in all noble natures succeed the passionate outbreak,
Came like a rising tide, that encounters the rush of a river,
Staying its current awhile, but making it bitter and brackish.*

Whether or not Longfellow's imitation of Homer was part of a deliberate effort to give his poem an epic quality, he understood how the Homeric simile could be used to convey subtle and complex meanings. He does not go so far as to adopt the Homeric epithet, as in 'rosy-fingered dawn' or 'wine dark sea', but the epithets he uses are Homeric in all but their repetition. John Alden is 'the fair-haired, taciturn stripling' just once and once is enough to tell us all we need to know.

After these two narrative poems, I turned to *The New England Tragedies*, two verse dramas. *Giles Corey of the Salem Farms* reads like an early version of *The Crucible*. But Longfellow's drama is the work of a poet, not a playwright, meant to be read, not acted, like Tennyson's *Becket* or Byron's *Manfred*. Written in short scenes, the story we know so well from Arthur Miller's play is told simply and effectively. The scenes in which Mary Walcott feigns demonic possession in front of the investigating magistrate and minister are like sketches compared to Miller's, but sketches that Miller must surely have known when he wrote his play.

*Mary (starting up): Look there! Look there!
I see a little bird, a yellow bird,
Perched on her finger; and it pecks at me.
Ah, it will tear my eyes out!*
Martha: I see nothing.
Hathorne: 'Tis the Familiar Spirit that attends her.
*Mary: Now it has flown away. It sits up there
Upon the rafters. It is gone; is vanished.*

In Miller's play, more theatrically, the scene becomes a conversation between Abigail and a bird.

Abigail: Why do you come, yellow bird?
Proctor: Where's a bird? I see no bird!
Abigail: My face? My face?
Proctor: Mr Hale –
Danforth: Be quiet!

Proctor: Do you see a bird?

Danforth: Be quiet!

Abigail. But God made my face; you cannot want to tear my face. Envy is a deadly sin, Mary.

There is even, in another verse drama, *The Divine Tragedy*, a passage that seems to prefigure lines by T.S.Eliot.

The things that have been and shall be no more,

The things that are, and that hereafter shall be

The things that might have been, and yet were not,

The fading twilight of great joys departed,

The daybreak of great truths as yet unrisen,

The intuition and the expectation

Of something, which, when come, is not the same...

It is impossible that a poet so widely read in his lifetime and for a generation or two after should not have left behind a legacy in the work of other writers. He was a poetic craftsman who wrote to be read, a poet and a story-teller, a public poet, a national poet. It is not just that Longfellow has gone out of fashion but that the idea of poetry as an expression of national feeling and of the poet as someone who gives a voice to other people, not just to himself, has lost the currency it once had. That may or may not be a good thing, but it is not a reason to neglect a poet whose work is full of surprises and, apart from anything else, a very good read.

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