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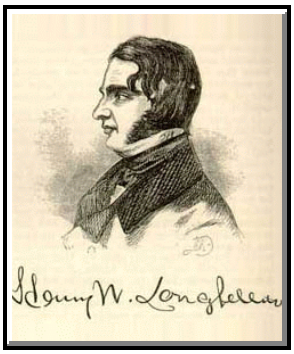
LONGFELLOW AS A TRANSLATOR



The brightest star in the American literary firmament at his death in 1882, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow has lately fallen into the black hole of critical neglect. His reputation has been in slow eclipse for a century, his verse increasingly scorned for its sentimentality and conventional style. Such once-popular works as *The Song of Hiawatha, The Spanish Student,* and *Tales of a Wayside Inn* have been reviled as pale imitations of European models, monuments to bad taste that seem to illustrate all that was wrong with the genteel tradition in American letters. Yet, to his credit, Longfellow was perhaps the most remarkably erudite American of his day, a gifted scholar and linguist who studied at Göttingen, toured Europe four times, taught modern languages at Bowdoin and Harvard Colleges, and translated poetry from eight European languages into English. If Longfellow's ostensibly original poetry is flawed by its overreliance on European sources, then his translations turn this defect to advantage. "As a translator, he was generally admitted to have no superior in the English tongue; his skill was unvarying and absolutely reliable," his friend Thomas Wentworth Higginson once remarked.[1] Despite his other failures, Longfellow exerted an exemplary influence through his translations, which entitles him to modern review.

Throughout the early years of his literary career, Longfellow was primarily a translator and essayist. His adaptations from foreign sources during this period far outweigh

[1] Thomas Wentworth Higginson, *Henry Wadsworth Longfellow* (Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1902), p. 269.

the bulk of his original poems. As early as 1829, a few weeks after returning from his first tour of Europe at the age of 22, he began to experiment with translation, working at first with Spanish poetry. In 1833, he formalized his earliest ideas on the subject in the preface to his translation of the *Coplas* of Don Jorge Manrique: "The great art of translation well lies in the power of rendering literally the words of a foreign author while at the same time we preserve the spirit of the original."[2] He tentatively granted translators the license to "transgress the rigid truth of language," to sacrifice literal meanings if necessary to express a felicitous phrase, because he believed that "certain beauties.. in a good original... cannot be fully represented in the less flexible material of another language." He frankly confessed too that "I have occasionally used the embellishment of an additional epithet or more forcible turn of expression" when he was unable to translate the words of the original text without violating their spirit.[3] Whether or not young Longfellow took unwarranted liberties, he at least understood that a translator inevitably negotiates an uneasy compromise between accuracy and elegance. "Most readers have not the slightest notion of the thought and creative power that goes into a translation," he once observed to the German poet Ferdinand Freiligrath.[4]

In brief, Longfellow served his literary apprenticeship as an aspiring translator devoted to the study of Scandinavian and Romance languages. As he wrote in 1843, translation "is like running a plough share through the soil of one's mind; a thousand germs of thought start up... which otherwise might have lain and rotted in the ground."[5] His friend Horace Scudder later testified, similarly, that "translating played an important part in the

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[2] Quoted in Cecil B. Williams, *Henry Wadsworth Longfellow* (New York: Twayne, 1964), p. 184.

[3] Samuel Longfellow, *Life of Henry Wadsworth Longfellow* (Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1891) I, pp. 200-201.

[4] *The Letters of Henry Wadsworth Longfellow*, ed. Andrew Hilen (Cambridge: Belknap, 1966), III, p. 143.

[5] *The Letters of Longfellow*, II, p. 551.

development of Mr. Longfellow's powers. Before he had begun to write those poems which at once attested his poetic calling, and while he was busying himself with study and prose expression, he was finding an outlet for his metrical thoughts and emotion in the translation of lyrics and pastoral verse, and occasionally of epic and dramatic fragments."[6] Far from postponing his career as a poet, Longfellow's early translations were instrumental to his intellectual and artistic maturation. In fact, he later collected many of his early pieces in *The Poets and Poetry of Europe* (1845), an anthology of translated verse assembled under his direction. Hugely popular and critically acclaimed, this monumental compilation, which surveyed the works of nearly four hundred poets in ten modern languages, introduced thousands of American readers to the non-English verse of Europe and confirmed Longfellow as the pre-eminent American authority on continental literatures. Indeed, no work like it had appeared either in America or England. Its sweep extended from the Middle Ages and early Italian poetry to the mid-nineteenth century and the verse of Heine. The original edition ran to 776 double-columned pages, and in a second edition issued in 1870 Longfellow appended a 340-page supplement.

Over the years, as he sharpened his literary skills, Longfellow increasingly stressed accuracy and fidelity to the original text no less than elegance and grace of translation. This shift in his views can be best documented by reference to his translation of the *Divina Commedia*. In the late 1830s, Longfellow first made a stab at translating excerpts from the epic for his students at Bowdoin. For example, Dante had described the first appearance of Beatrice in canto XXX of the *Purgatorio* as follows:

> Io vidi già nel cominciar del giorno
> la parte oriental tutta rosata,
> e l'altro ciel di bel sereno adorno;
> e la faccia del sol nascere ombrata,
> sí che, per temperanza di vapori,
> l'occhio la sostenea lunga fiata:

[6] Quoted in Williams, pp. 183-184.

cosí dentro una nuvola di fiori
che dalle mani angeliche saliva
e ricadeva in giú dentro e di fori,
sovra candido vel cinta d'uliva
donna m'apparve, sotto verde manto
vestita di color di fiamma viva.

Longfellow's blank-verse rendition of this stanza, first published in his collection *Voices of the Night* in 1839, is melodious if not altogether faithful to the original *terza rima*:[7]

I once beheld, at the approach of day,
The orient sky all stained with roseate hues,
And the other heaven with light serene adorned,
And the sun's face uprising overshadowed,
So that, by temperate influence of vapors,
The eye sustained his aspect for long while:
Thus in the bosom of a cloud of flowers,
Which from those hands angelic were thrown up,
And down descended inside and without,
With crown of olive o'er a snow-white veil,
Appeared a lady under a green mantle,
Vested in colors of the living flame.

Regretfully, Longfellow had decided to sacrifice "the beautiful rhyme that blossoms all along the lines like honeysuckle on a hedge" in order "to retain something more precious that rhyme"–the sense of the poem, "the life of the hedge itself."[8] Yet not only did he revise the meter and abandon the rhyme of Dante, he loosely translated much of the diction. "The difficulty of translation lies chiefly in the *color* of words," as he once noted. "Is the Italian

[7] See *The Poets and Poetry of America* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1870), p. 523.

[8] *The Divine Comedy*, trans. Henry Wadsworth Longfellow (Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1886), p. 15.

'ruscelletto gorgoglioso' fully rendered by 'gurgling brooklet'?»[9] The difficulty was especially pronounced in the early fragment of the *Purgatorio*. For example, the phrase "cominciar del giorno" is less accurately rendered "the approach of day" than "the beginning of day," and "bel sereno" is less accurately "light serene" than "fair serene." Longfellow translated "cinta d'uliva" as "crown of olive," as if the first word in the phrase were "corona." Still, there is a charm to Longfellow's version, and even his blatant liberties with the original text may be rationalized: Is not "light serene," with "serene" as the adjective, better than the more literal "fair serene," with "serene" used in its obsolete form as a noun?

While still in his thirties, Longfellow proposed to translate the whole of the *Divina Commedia*. He worked haphazzardly at Dante for several months, completing work on 16 cantos by 1843, when he was obliged by the burden of his teaching duties to lay the project aside. He returned to it 18 years later, after his retirement from Harvard. During the interim, he doubtlessly increased his familiarity with Italian. Moreover, he painstakingly submitted each passage of translation to a small circle of friends, most often James Russell Lowell and Charles Eliot Norton, for discussion and criticism. Norton later reminisced about this workshop method: "We paused over every doubtful passage, discussed the various readings, considered the true meaning of obscure words and phrases, sought for the most exact equivalent of Dante's expression, objected, criticised, praised."[10] By this time Longfellow was committed to, even obsessed with , producing the most literal translation possible. As he wrote his friend John Neal in 1867,

> A great many people think that a translation ought not to be too faithful; that the writer should put *himself* into it as well as his original; that it should be Homer and Co., or Dante and Co;, and that what the foreign author really says should be falsified or modified, if thereby the smoothness of the verse can be improved. On the contrary I maintain... that a translator, like a witness on the stand, should hold up his right hand and swear to "tell the truth, the whole

[9] Samuel Longfellow, III, pp. 410-411.

[10] *The Divine Comedy*, trans. Longfellow, I, p. 16.

truth, and nothing but the truth."[11]

"The business of the translator is to report what his author says, not to explain what he means," he added in his private notebook.[12] "The only merit my book has," he bragged to another friend, "is that it is exactly what Dante says, and not what the translator imagines he might have said if he had been an Englishman."[13]

Unfortunately, Longfellow exaggerated his accomplishment. He only partly realized his grand ambition. Since its publication in 1867, his three-volume work has disappointed many readers who believe it too contrived and mechanical, Dante astride a hobbyhorse. William D. Howells, who sometimes attended the translation workshop of Longfellow, Lowell, and Norton, complained that by debate and compromise they had distilled the charm from the original text, that they had translated Dante "into the English dictionary rather than the English language."[14] E. C. Stedman averred that "the three divisions seem leveled, so to speak, to the grade of the Purgatorio, midway between the zenith and nadir of Dante's song."[15] Consider the later version of the stanza in canto XXX of the *Purgatorio* in which Beatrice appears:[16]

Ere now have I beheld, as day began,
The eastern hemisphere all tinged with rose,
And the other heaven with fair serene adorned;
And the sun's face, uprising, overshadowed

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[11] Samuel Longfellow, III, pp. 94-95.

[12] Samuel Longfellow, III, p. 411.

[13] Quoted in Edward Wagenknecht, *Longfellow: A Full-Length Portrait* (New York: Longmans, Green, 1955), p. 74.

[14] Quoted in Edward Wagenknecht, *Henry Wadsworth Longfellow: Portrait of an American Humanist* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1966), p. 124.

[15] E. C. Stedman, *Poets of America* (Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1885), p. 211.

[16] *The Divine Comedy*, trans. Longfellow, II, p. 148.

So that by tempering influence of vapors
For a long interval the eye sustained it;
Thus in the bosom of a cloud of flowers
Which from those hands angelical ascended,
And downward fell again inside and out,
Over her snow-white veil with olive cinct
Appeared a lady under a green mantle,
Vested in color of the living flame.

Though technically more correct than Longfellow's earlier version, the changes on balance are visually or metrically awkward (e.g., "orient sky" and "for long while" have been replaced by "eastern hemisphere" and "for a long interval"). In all, however, Longfellow's late version of the *Divina Commedia* was the highlight of his translating career. Despite its defects, it remains one of the standard English versions of Dante over a century after its publication.

Longfellow continued to pursue his interest in translation literally until his death in 1882. His bibliography for that year contains no fewer than four translated works. Yet the mature poet, acutely sensitive to the pitfalls of his profession, understood that translations are at best approximations. In "Prelude to the Translations" (1870), he compared lyrics turned into another language with treasures "deep buried in sea-sands" and asked rhetorically whether they should not remain "locked in their iron chest." Ideally, he finally decided, a translation should prompt the reader to study the original work. As he concluded the "Prelude":[17]

I have but marked the place,
But half the secret told,
That, following this slight trace,

[17] Quoted in Carl Hammer, Jr., "Longfellow's Lyrics 'From the German,'" *Studies in Comparative Literature*, ed. Waldo F. McNeir (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State Univ. Press, 1962), p. 157.

Others may find the gold.

Ironically, such a hackneyed epitaph illustrates Longfellow's inadequacies as an original poet even as it expresses his utter devotion to the task of the translator. Although his own verse is disappearing from anthologies of American literature, his translations warrant wider celebrity.

Source : Gary Scharnhorst, «Longfellow as a Translator», in *Translation Review*, nº 12, 1983, p. 23-27. (The University of Texas at Dallas).