

The WEDDING OF TECHNIQUE TO PURPOSE

Longfellow, the Scholarly Poet of the Heart

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Prepared for the Zeit/Sprunge conference
Paris Lodron University, Salzburg, Austria
Dec. 1-4, 2005

The historic house that was Henry Wadsworth Longfellow's home throughout his adult life also served George Washington as headquarters during the Revolt of the Colonies against England. The home figures prominently in *1776*, the latest historical work by the distinguished author David McCullough. I begin my address with a quote from McCullough:

"The older I get, the more convinced I am that we can never know anything if we don't feel it. There's a wonderful line from my piano teacher: 'I hear all the right notes but I hear no music.' You can get everything factually correct and miss the truth, just as you can have some of the facts wrong and hit the truth dead-on."

My name is Layne Longfellow. I am a Board Member of the Friends of the Longfellow National Historic Site. We support the employees of the National Park Service, who care for Longfellow's great home and its artifacts with competence and conscientiousness.

I bear the last name of one of America's most beloved poets, to whom I am related as a very distant cousin. I

have been invited here to discuss my adaptations of his poetry, in which I believe I have hit the truth dead-on and created music, though I have not played all the right notes. I am 68 years of age, and, like McCullough, “the older I get, the more convinced I am that we can never know anything if we don’t feel it.” And so I have played the notes of Longfellow’s music as I feel them.

I am not doctrinaire about my adaptations; I do not believe they represent the only way to read or to understand Longfellow; I do not believe that Longfellow **MUST** be adapted to be enjoyed by all people; I do not believe that my adaptations do or should replace Longfellow’s originals. The comparison between the original and my adaptation provides an excellent pedagogical tool for teachers and artists; in my own live readings I include Longfellow’s originals **and** my adaptations.

But here is why I have adapted his honored originals: Henry Wadsworth Longfellow has gone from being the world’s most-read, most-beloved poet to a position of ignominy so severe that schoolchildren, who once could recite him at length, now do not recognize his name.

Recently, a former US Poet Laureate asked Americans to list their favorite poems, and published these in two volumes. No American selected any Longfellow poem as a favorite in Volume 2; only one Longfellow work was selected for Volume 1. That selection was the “Psalm of Life,” a work not held in high regard in poetic circles. An 80-year-old minister from Longfellow’s Boston area chose it. A century ago, such volumes

would have amounted to little more than a compendium of the “Best of Longfellow,” so popular was he among his countrymen.

Harper's magazine, of which he was one of the intellectual founders, said of him in 2002, [Only] “A few fine-tuned intellectuals can still enjoy...Longfellow...” [-- Guy Davenport, “Reviews”] This is both tragic and unjust, and I will mourn it in Longfellow's own words, taken from one of his poems:

“O ye dead Poets, who are living still
Immortal in your verse, though life be fled,
And ye, O living Poets, who are dead
Though ye are living, if neglect can kill,...”
[Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, “The Poets,” 1878]

Longfellow's storied magnanimity and equanimity would accept his literal death; his artistry and sense of greatness would mourn his literary death. He is killed by neglect. He is immortal **not** in his verse, but as historical icon, preserved as his splendid homes.

His verse deserves better. I believe that the purpose, the heartfelt meaning, of Longfellow's poems is obscured by the techniques of the 19th century. He was so proficient at these techniques, and adopted them so willingly and so thoroughly, that they have come to define him. In my view, they have come to CONfine him.

But for perspective, let me establish Longfellow's stature in the firmament of 19th century world letters. I have here a copy of a small edition of selected poems.

His work was so popular, and these homely editions so widely distributed, that they are typically of little value, either for scholars or for sale on the ubiquitous eBay.

This one, though, is different. It was initially presented as a prize to the top student of the Class of 1896 of the Gallia Academy, a private school. That erstwhile young gentleman proceeded to adorn his prize with what we call “marginalia,” notes and clippings from the era. I will read aloud the most extensive clipping. Entirely independently, this article was also recently uncovered by Prof. Dr. Christoph Irmischer, who sadly was forced to withdraw from the faculty of this symposium due to family illness.

This tale appeared in “The Independent,” a popular periodical of the time. I read it as a means of conveying to this international audience the magnitude of Longfellow’s international presence in the 19th century:

“An incident described ... by Prof. E. A. Grosvenor gives a striking illustration of the fact that Longfellow’s poems have *sung themselves into the hearts* of men and women of many nationalities. [italics added] The incident occurred in 1879 on board the French steamer Donai, bound from Constantinople to Marseilles.

’One evening, as we were quitting the Straits of Bonifacio, some one remarked at dinner that though Victor Hugo was born in Paris, the earliest impressions of his life were received in Corsica, close to which we were passing. One of the party spoke of him as the exponent of what is best in humanity.

The Russian lady exclaimed in English to the gentleman who had last spoken: “How can you, an

American, give to him the place that is occupied by your own Longfellow? Longfellow is the universal poet. He is better known, too, among foreigners than any one, except their own poets.”

Then she began repeating,

“I stood on the bridge at midnight,
As the clocks were striking the hour,
And the moon rose o’er the city,
Behind the dark church tower.”

She added, “I long to visit Boston that I may stand on the bridge.”

In the company was an English captain returning from the Zulu War, a typical British soldier, with every characteristic of his class. As soon as the Russian lady had concluded, he said, “I can give you something better than that,” and began in a voice like a trumpet:

“Tell me not in mournful numbers
Life is but an empty dream.”

His recitation of the entire poem was marked by the common English upheaval and down-letting of the voice in each line; but it was evident that he loved what he was repeating.

Then a tall, lank, gray-haired Scotchman, who seemed always communing with himself, suddenly commenced:

“There is no flock, however watched and tended,
But one dead lamb is there.”

He repeated only a few stanzas, but apparently could have given the whole poem had he wished.

For myself, I know that my contribution was “My Lost Youth,” beginning:

“Often I think of the beautiful town
That is seated by the sea;
Often in thought go up and down

The pleasant streets of that dear old town,
And always my youth comes back to me.”
A handsome, olive-cheeked young man, a Greek
educated and living in England, said, “How do you like
this?” Then he began to sing:

“Stars of the summer night!

Far in yon azure deeps,
Hide, hide your golden light!

She sleeps! My lady sleeps! Sleeps!”

The captain of the Donai was not her regular
commander, but an officer of the national French navy,
who was in charge only for a few voyages. To our
astonishment, in accents so Gallic that one discerned
with difficulty that he was attempting English, he
intoned:

“Zee seeds of neet fair valeeng fast,

Ven trough an Alpeen veelage past

A yout, who bore meed snow and eece

A bannair veed dees strange deveece,

Excelsiorrrr!”

None of the other passengers contributed, but already
six nationalities had spoken – Scotch, Russian, Greek,
French, English, and American. As we rose from the
table and went up on deck to watch the lights
glimmering in Napoleon’s birthplace, Ajaccio, the
Russian lady said, “Do you suppose there is any other
poet of any country, living or dead, from whom so
many of us could have quoted? Not one. Not even
Shakespeare or Victor Hugo or Homer.”

Thus was the reach of this man Longfellow, and the
respect for him.

I have been asked to do a presentation of my personal adaptations of his poetry. That will be a live reading that incorporates the elements of performance -- music, rhythm, emotion, anecdote, humor, narrative. I will read -- I will perform -- tomorrow evening.

But prior to doing what I do, I have been asked to clarify the principles that guide me in the doing of it. As you all know well, the process of adaptation is intuitive and nonrational, and personal above all; it is an extension of the poet's own creative process, and beyond the reach of rational analysis. Any understanding of the creative process is done in hindsight, and uses an entirely different cognitive style from the creative one - rationality, analysis, and linearity.

Diana der Hovanesian, the Armenian poet and translator, has said: "The goal of the translator is to create the best possible poem in the new language." That is, the translator employs intelligence, learning, sensitivity, and integrity in order to convey the truth of the original poet, not in order to render the most literal restatement of the original poem.

I have adapted 19th century written text for presentation to a 21st century audio audience. This is an act of simultaneous multiple translation - from 19th to 21st century and from written text to recorded speech. My goal is to present the best possible Longfellow poem in the new language of 21st century audio recording.

I am deeply moved by the poetry of this very distant relative of mine. When I read it aloud, my voice deepens, my metabolism changes, I lose a sense of immediate surroundings, and the outcome is just me reading Henry to Henry. I believe I read this work well, and in doing so I intend to restore it to its rightful honor and respect. Longfellow himself abhorred reading aloud in public, and rarely did it, though his dear friend Charles Dickens did so frequently, to Longfellow's great pleasure and admiration.

My expertise is in oral interpretation – I was gathered into the Speakers Hall of Fame 20 years ago, and had been a professional orator for some years before that time. That is what I can contribute to Longfellow, and to the Friends of the Longfellow National Historic Site.

In my eagerness to lend to Longfellow's work – to his purpose – the technique of my own practiced voice and style, I labored three years to translate written text into spoken word, from the eye to the ear, across 150 years. I believe, as Hermann Hesse has written: "The best servants of the new may be those who know and love the old, and bring it forth into the new."

I placed my finished CD recordings into the front cover of a little book of eighteen Longfellow poems, some well known and beloved, others obscure and unfamiliar. Longfellow's texts are reproduced exactly as Longfellow published them, complete with archaic punctuation. These faithfully reprinted original texts are accompanied by my personal adaptations, recorded on CD.

My adaptations are neither presented nor represented as being the original source works. My adaptations are clearly labeled as adaptations on the cover, on the title page, and on the CD, and their differences from the originals are detailed in the book's pages. I explicitly caution the reader against attempting to listen to the recordings while reading the texts. They differ so definitely but subtly that the experience will be quite unsettling, and neither the original nor the adaptation will be enjoyed.

Let me demonstrate one such difference. I will play two recordings of Sonnet 4, a work prepared by Longfellow as his preface to his translation of Dante's *Purgatorio*.

This first is read by a major American poet, and was recorded some years ago. It is an exact reading of the written text.

[Play older recording of #4]

I was myself nearly seduced into terming this reading to be more "historically accurate." Yes, the written text that he reads reprints the historical document. But the moment that he intones the first word, we have left historicity behind, and entered the realm of personal interpretation. There is no reason to believe that Longfellow would have read the poem as this poet did, nor even that another male of this reader's era and poetic achievements would have read it in the same way. It is interpretation; it is necessarily personal. Once the historical record is left behind, we emerge into artistry.

And so to my own reading, recorded in 2003, musical setting by Michael Hoppe`, the English composer. My readings are presented against a musical background for two reasons: First, the modern mind multitasks, and the cognitive mind focuses better if the non-cognitive mind is occupied. Many people are able to listen to the poems more alertly if the spoken words appear as prominent “figure” against the “ground” of ambient music.

Second, the music amplifies the atmosphere that the poem establishes. I would try to capture the tone of the poem in my reading, then Michael donned his headphones, surrounded himself with my recorded reading, then surrounded that reading with his composition, literally setting the poem’s MEANING to music rather than fitting melody to verse.

The poetry floats on Michael’s music, which reflects it back without a ripple, its mood and its meaning mirrored by his composition. Here is the example:

[Play Longfellow recording of #4]

I will pause now, to invite your comments on the differences and similarities in the two readings.

[Open for Q & A]

My adaptation of this Longfellow poem derives from this premise:

The **purpose** of creating poetry is to *express* MEANING that is FELT by the poet, to *convey* that FELT MEANING to others, and to create an approximation of that felt

meaning IN others. Longfellow's "Sonnet 4" created in me a sense of passion and contrition; of love; of regret and remorse and redemption. That is the purpose of the poem, in my view, and that is what my reading tries to convey. You surely cannot know **this** poem unless you feel it; it is a poem entirely ABOUT feelings. Here, in this poem, my adaptation hits the truth dead-on and I hear music.

But I made other adaptive changes that I would not make again; they are changes made for the wrong reasons. But, once the work is released, I must own it and own up to it, and simply cringe each time the error passes by.

For example, in "Tales of a Wayside Inn," Longfellow wrote, "Before the blazing fire of wood, Erect the rapt musician stood." I read instead, "Before the blazing fire of wood, The rapt musician stood – erect!"

That is an error of artistic judgment on my part. I chose to adjust the author's emphasis, and that is not my province to do. I made the error because I did not stay true to my own guiding principle. This change did not further Longfellow's purpose and clarified nothing.

But here is a different example: In a poem about the death of his beloved wife Fanny, Longfellow refers to her life as "benedight." Not only does the spell-check on my computer put a red flag on that word, the word was even archaic in Longfellow's time. You can use such a word in print, but if you read the word "benedight" to a recorded OR live audience, you'll lose them right there.

The printed page allows the reader to luxuriate in unusual words; the recording loses them right there, trying to figure out that word while the meaning of the poem simply flows on. They are lost. I elided the word, and allowed the meaning to flow uninterrupted, though the rhyme scheme got jostled. It is true – I altered the form of the original work in order to assist the listener in following its meaning. In the live or recorded reading, in the domain of the spoken word, narrative becomes more salient, and narrative is best served by the dramatic.

Billy Collins, another former US Poet Laureate, has said, “What reads well to the eye is not necessarily what reads well to the ear. Audiences teach you the difference between these two over time.”

I’ve already expressed my admiration for Longfellow’s dual accomplishments of global popularity and international scholarly repute. But there is a third aspect to the man – for years, he was also the single father of five children. As Christoph Irmscher has written, rarely did anyone in 19th century literature express the tenderness of fatherhood so movingly as did Longfellow in his crystalline poem, “The Children’s Hour.”

In this poem, too, I deleted a reference that seemed not to serve the purpose of the poem for today’s audiences. Longfellow wrote, “I think of the Bishop of Bingen, and his Mouse Tower on the Rhine.” I believe the poet’s attempt here was to educate, to broaden. This can be successfully done in written text; in audio

recording, the listener – especially the young listener – is lost.

Here I will make my one criticism of Longfellow: He was so learned, and so much given to being the “teacher,” that he had a tendency to show off. “Benedight” was archaic even in his time; the invocation of the Bishop of Bingen’s Mouse Tower does not float the imagination on the stately Rhine, but serves to break the enchantment of a verse that is otherwise elegantly elemental and primally powerful.

My goal was to adapt the work for 21st century listeners with whatever technique would accomplish Longfellow’s purpose. I would use his own words so long as I judged that they would not interfere with his own purpose.

Yes, I fully realize the hubris of such a statement.

Yes, I accept the responsibility inherent in basing an adaptation on such a principle.

I released my very personal project initially on a very limited basis. And here is the very first reaction that I received from a major critic and editor:

“Thank you for your letter and recording....I put it on last night—and was horrified. To be perfectly frank with you, I think the entire project is misconceived. ... your readings do a grave disservice to the poems. ...your ‘readings’ of the poems are presumptuous. What is the point of deleting or changing words, lines, stanzas? Nor are your readings properly attentive to

the rhythms of the lines, or to their rhymes. Were you trying to make HWL relevant – or worse, hip? A foolish enterprise. Better...to take him at his word, read what's there, and try to put it over. To make the poems into 'easy listening' is, frankly, faking it.....”

This man has not only a strong reputation as critic, editor and poet; he also has a strong Longfellow credential. But in the harshness of his insistence that the notes be played exactly right, he misses Longfellow's music. Longfellow was unfailingly civil and genteel and decorous, and would not have delivered such a harsh screed to an unknown reader attempting an homage to his work. I was left with this question: What is it about my work that has left this man so overwrought?

But then the most interesting thing happened. An even more distinguished author and critic, with an even more impressive Longfellow credential, wrote a letter that included these direct quotes:

“...your CD is brilliant! Your well-spoken readings are strong! Your packaging is magnificent! The music and the total auditory impact right! ...brilliant!”

This man's endorsement would, because of his position and his stature, have silenced all critics. BUT he chose not to endorse the work publicly. Why? Because I had altered the texts.

And then I came to a possible explanation: The reading of poetry is not considered to be an adaptive art form. The “reader” is to be a stenographer, a microphone, a

duplicating and documentary device. Reading poetry is not an art form; there is no art in oratory.

I began to wonder if my reception might have been different had I titled my work, “Longfellow **Interprets** Longfellow,” or labeled my adaptation as “performance.” But I fear that the category of “performance” would require me to arrive wearing a false beard, greatcoat and striped pants.

Poetry consists of words carefully chosen and placed by a poet. Altering the words or their arrangement is considered to be altering the poem’s essence, thus it is considered to be sacrilege and necessarily destructive. Such changes are not acceptable to some conservators of Longfellow even if his reputation and readership have declined catastrophically and the changes are intended to stem that decline. In this view, Longfellow is what he was, and should be judged on that basis by history and contemporary culture, even if that leads to indifference and neglect.

But this is my position: TEXT is not sacred. Truth is sacred. We are not religious fundamentalists, following unthinkingly the canon as handed down. If the TRUTH of Christ’s and Muhammad’s teachings were seen as more valuable than the literal texts, the world would be ever so much better.

Fundamentalist rigidity, whether religious or political, is the scourge of civilization; rigidity in artistic interpretation is the death of art. If artistic refurbishment can return a great artist to his proper position, that is all to the good.

I have learned a great deal in this pursuit over the years. I learned, for example, that Longfellow himself had suffered the slings and arrows of critical contempt in his own attempt at homage through adaptive translation – his great epic “Hiawatha.” This poem is now so central to the American mythology that it is virtually impossible to understand the critical abuse that Longfellow received, from accusations of plagiarism to those of shallowness and exploitation. He repeatedly questioned himself and his work in his journals. In the end, it was the support of other poets, people of like mind and heart to his own – Emerson, Hawthorne – that saw him through and let him know the value of his own work.

At a very dark hour in my own soul, things began to turn. Longfellow’s oldest living direct descendant, the matriarch of the clan, heartily endorsed my recordings, began buying them in quantity to distribute to family and friends, and began to address me as “Cousin.”

And then I received this letter from a legendary poet and songwriter, the sort of like-minded supporter who provided succor and affirmation to Longfellow: “I must congratulate you on your reworking of the poems. Wordsworth said that he wished to create a poem so natural that the folk would take it into their mouths and pass it down, making it their own, rearranging, changing, removing and adding words. That is what you have done with Longfellow's somewhat laboured poetry. It seems a cooperative venture between you and him, a bridge across time.”

Building bridges across time is of course the very topic of this symposium, and so let's move now to this more general theme, the translation of 19th century art into the art of the 21st century. We'll return to Longfellow's own departures from text and historical truth.

Having been invited here by representatives of the Department of Dance Studies, I have begun to learn of that world. I was privileged to be in the audience for the performance of Diana Vishneva in the title role of *Giselle* at the New York Ballet earlier this year. The NYT reviewer counted it as a performance for the ages. I saw this interpretation, based on the classical original of 1841, as not just the original but the one and only, until your Prof. Dr. Jeschke guided me to the film of the Swedish *Giselle*. I offer you two brief segments, the traditional conception and the modern, representations of the same moment in the music and the narrative.

This first excerpt is from the American Ballet Theatre production of 1968, choreographed by David Blair, IN THE FASHION OF JULES PERROT AND JEAN CORALLI, AS FIRST STAGED IN 1841, when Longfellow was 34 years old and a young member of the Harvard faculty. (The portrait that adorns the cover of my book/CD is Longfellow in 1841.)

The program notes for this production, written in 1987, say, "Having been performed in the same format now for over 160 years, *Giselle* is the world's oldest repertoire ballet." And so *Giselle*, in the 1841 staging, featuring Carla Fracci and Erik Bruhn:

[Screen ABT *Giselle*]

This staging, this choreography, this conception is still performed world-wide, of course, and likely will be for a very long time to come. 160 years is prologue.

For Swedish choreographer Mats Ek, 160 years also suggested it was time for an alternative. "Dancing Times" magazine writes, "...it was with his re-interpretation of the classic Giselle in 1982 that Ek became internationally known, for his work marked the beginning of a new epoch in the history of dance." This must be seen to be understood, so allow me to show it prior to further discussion. This is from 1982, the Cullberg Ballet, choreography by Mats Ek, featuring Ana Laguna and Luc Bouy:

[Screen Ek Giselle]

Artistry in service of the source --translation into a new language, a new idiom, employing movement and staging techniques not yet developed when the original setting was conceived. **To love the original is to bring to bear all available technique to give it new life, to ensure its viability in a new world, for a new audience.** Ek's work seems radical, revolutionary, futuristic, guided by a non-historic vision, but note this - it is in service of the original source material!! The elegance of the work is made possible by its classical underpinnings; it rests firmly, if not formally, on the original music of Adophe Adam, the original libretto of Saint-Georges and Gautier, and, at an even deeper, almost mythical level, on the original inspiration for the ballet, Heinrich Heine's *De Allemagne* of 1835.

And so let me ask you to comment on the similarities and differences of the two productions, the two conceptualizations:

[Q & A]

My own comments: In 1841, emotions are represented; in 1982, emotions are presented. The expression of feeling is stylized and controlled in 1841; by 1982, Ek expresses the passion of Giselle with the full use of the vocabulary of Dance – the broad, sweeping, nearly limitless range of movements available to the human body within gravity. Freedom of expression – emotional AND physical – expanded from the early 19th century into the late 20th.

Energy. I felt free to show only a one minute, ten second excerpt from the classical version; more would have grown tedious for those who are not versed in classical ballet. But from 1982, there was little chance of boredom in nearly four minutes of the full *pas de deux*. The broader movement vocabulary, the wild, almost feral, expression of passion and yearning and joy in this new Giselle challenges the mind, tears open the heart, fertilizes the soul.

These contrasting interpretations of a time-honored source exemplify the progression of technique and expressiveness through 150 years of Western art. The one does not replace or negate the other. Each has its audience and its position in the repertoire. The more recent owes its existence and pays homage to its elder.

Need I say that these same observations and principles apply to the reading of Longfellow?

The connoisseur of 19th century literature, or of Longfellow, will not find his lexicon difficult; the *balletomane* will not be restless while spending two full hours in 1841. Similarly, objections to my adaptations of Longfellow occur when the person is previously familiar with the particular poem. In the absence of a pre-conditioned expectation, even the schooled listener does not sense a violation of Longfellow's sensibility.

I encountered Mats Ek's *Giselle* with an awareness of the existence of its predecessor, but without an immersion in it or a commitment to it. Had I not known it at all, I would have felt appreciation without surprise. Knowing of the predecessor allowed me the enjoyment that context can provide. I could feel the expansive enlargement of the 19th century vocabulary as an expression of respect for the original.

And so to the visual arts: I recently visited El Greco's *View of Toledo*, where it hangs in the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York City.

[Show slide of painting]

Next to it the curator had placed this inscription:
"The approach is interpretive rather than documentary. **It seeks to portray the essence rather than to document its actual appearance. In Aristotelian terms, it substitutes poetic for historic truth.**"

Specifically, El Greco moved the cathedral to the west of the intervening mountain. It deserved to be seen, as part of the truth of Toledo. It conveyed what he believed to be the truth of what he saw, not before his eyes, but before his heart, before his inner knowing. By putting this truth before the viewer's eyes he put poetic truth before historic truth. He revealed his own hierarchy of truths, and thereby revealed his mastery.

Longfellow gave us this, in an exquisite poem titled "The Fire of Driftwood
The Devereux Farm at Marblehead":

"We sat within the farmhouse old,
Whose windows, looking o'er the bay,
Gave to the sea-breeze damp and cold
An easy entrance, night and day.

Not far away we saw the port,
The strange, old-fashioned, silent town,
The lighthouse, the dismantled fort,
The wooden houses, quaint and brown."

The location and perspective of the Devereux farm, about which this is written, is known today as it was known in Longfellow's time. AND IT IS NOT POSSIBLE NOW, NOR WAS IT POSSIBLE WHEN LONGFELLOW VISITED, TO SEE THE HARBOR AND THE LIGHTHOUSE FROM THAT FARMHOUSE. El Greco moved a cathedral; Longfellow moved an entire waterfront.

But he was called to task for it! In 1849 he received a letter admonishing him that he had misrepresented the scene, its contents, and the view. Longfellow readily

admitted that he had done exactly that, having visited the harbor and the lighthouse during his visit to the Devereux Farm.

But Longfellow wished to “portray the essence rather than to document its actual appearance”; his approach was “interpretive rather than documentary;” he substituted poetic truth for historic truth. There was more music to be played than could be found in the right notes.

There is an irony here that I cannot resist: In my adaptation of “The Fire of Driftwood,” I deleted the verse that makes reference to the harbor and the lighthouse. Did I, in so doing, render Longfellow more acceptable, more literal, more historically accurate? I could have saved him a bit of trouble. On the other hand, he could have saved himself a bit of trouble had he stuck more closely to the original. I can empathize with that.

As I will make clear tomorrow evening, Longfellow was a man of great social conscience, and had the courage to state his convictions openly, to rest the honor of his work on his principles. In “Hiawatha,” he attempted to humanize the “noble savage” for those of European ancestry; in his collection of anti-slavery poems he denounced slavery in America 20 years before the Civil War divided his country; and in “Evangeline” he preserved for history the story of the forced deportation, by the English, of the French settlers of Nova Scotia.

Let me summarize, very briefly, a struggle of centuries: French settlers, called the Acadians, inhabited the northeastern shores of Canada, an area that is now Nova Scotia. The French and the English fought for and alternately won sovereignty over the region. The French settlers signed an oath of neutrality; they just wanted to be left alone by whoever should rule in the moment. But the English distrusted this pledge of neutrality. Without warning they deported the Acadians, and scattered them along the North American shore and in France.

This ethnic cleansing, this deportation, might well be lost to any general historic attention were it not for one of Longfellow's most influential poems – "Evangeline." That great epic, set in the village of Grand Pre, begins with five of the immortal words of American poetry: "This is the forest primeval."

But there was no great primeval forest surrounding Grand Pre. Indeed, the village's name translates "Great Prairie," and the signal accomplishment of the Acadians was the construction of a system of dykes that transformed the marshes that met the sea into exceptionally fertile farmland.

But Longfellow knew that you could not plant the TRUTH of the village and the TRUTH of the misfortunes of the Acadians into the hearts of readers with the phrase, "This is the marshland primeval." No, this would not do, and so he adopted poetic truth as a means of securing historic truth. He wrapped the Acadians in a forest of his own invention, and preserved and protected them by so doing.

It is imperative to acknowledge that Longfellow worked assiduously to serve historical and geographical accuracy. He did not play fast and loose with facts. His own version of the Evangeline tale required two years in the writing, and relied heavily on the work of Thomas Chandler Halliburton, a historian of the Acadians, their culture, and their homeland.

BUT NOTICE: Halliburton's historic truth, though essential to Longfellow's poetic truth, has not secured his own place in history, save in his Acadian homeland. By sharp contrast, Henry Longfellow – though he was not Acadian himself and never visited the area -- is honored in the Acadian culture from Nova Scotia to Louisiana, where Acadians are known as "Cajuns." Longfellow's heroine, the maiden Evangeline, is the dominant symbol of the Acadians, from her graceful standing statue in Grand Pre to the seated figure in St. Martinsville, Louisiana.

Longfellow's pursuit of the essence of the facts, poetic truth, has burned their memory into historic truth. You could not know the plight of the Acadians unless you could feel it.

And lest there be any possibility that anyone might not feel the Acadian story to the depths of their being, Longfellow not only wrapped the Acadians in a forest of his own invention, he then draped the history of the Acadians across the slight shoulders of two teen-aged lovers, separated on their wedding day by the deportation. The poem chronicles their lifelong search for one another throughout North America, and their

reunion as Gabriel, now old, dies in the embrace of Evangeline.

This tale existed in Acadian legend, and was presented to Longfellow orally. He termed it, "... the best illustration of faithfulness and constancy of woman that I have ever heard of or read." He added, "I want very much to write a poem of it." And write a poem of it he did! He exploded it into a massive poem, told in hexameter, which he termed "...the stateliest measure ever moulded by the lips of man." In 1848 he wrote to Robert Bigsby, "To a great many readers the metre must be a stumbling-block; but I could not avoid it. Like the flight of the swallow the hexameter soars and sinks at will, now grazing the ground in its long sweep, now losing itself in the clouds. The story of the poem is true; which makes it only the more tragic." There we have it -- the cultural history of a people as told in a love story. Had it not soared on the grandeur of hexameter, it might be melodrama, a Gothic romance novel.

And so to my point, my realization of the character of Longfellow that shaped my adaptations of his work: In every case of his opting for poetic truth over historic truth, he has vigorously and deliberately embraced the romantic, the pastoral, the emotionally evocative, the heart-based interpretation, the version laden with longing and sentiment and genuine feeling, the picturesque, the memorable, the idea cloaked in imagery that is indelible.

Longfellow is stereotyped as the good and grey poet, the last stalwart of the classicists, giving way (and

good riddance) to the first of America's REAL poets, Whitman and Dickinson. THEY were the groundbreaking poets of the imaginative and the personal and the heartfelt, capable of emotional range not previously known or allowed.

I say no. I say free Longfellow from the strictures of his age, strictures that he graciously and willingly self-imposed, and read him aloud with his passion and longing intact. Your reward will be that the great and good heart that underlay the unfailingly civil and gentle man will be revealed to be also the throbbing heart of the poet, the heart that we so readily associate with Poe, and which Poe so publicly found lacking in Longfellow.

Give Henry the public voice that he eschewed out of humility and gentility and civility, and there is available the Scholarly Poet of the Heart, whose great mind allowed him to speak from his heart directly to the hearts of his fellow man, no matter their country of origin. Longfellow freely, readily, and admittedly chose poetic truth over historic truth. In interpreting him, I have sought to overlay my own poetic truth in a manner that would reconvey his poetic truth.

“The Poet of the People,” he was called. All people, not just North Americans. And all ages, not just the Victorian sensibility. Consider the remarkable accomplishment that this is – the Harvard professor, the first translator of Dante into English, the man whose library encompassed the seven languages in which he published translations and the twelve languages with which he had a comfortable familiarity

– this man composed poetry so popular that it could be recited from memory by the six nationalities present on the steamer Donai. Queen Victoria’s diary records Longfellow as being the only dignitary to visit Buckingham Palace for whom the servants hid behind curtains to catch a glimpse. And there it is, the very definition of the man -- hosted by royalty and read by servants.

And is this giant, this great translator, to languish without being translated into the popular lexicon and rhythms of our own time? It requires only an alert mind and an open heart to hear his fulsome mind and to feel his good heart in these texts that have been given down to us, that we might make them our own and know their truth.

Dr. Francoise Paradis, herself Acadian, gave me finally the understanding of my own work that I had missed. She wrote, “Henry Longfellow was called ‘The Poet of the People.’ He could not have earned that sobriquet had he not spoken to the hearts and been understood in the hearts of the people. But the 21st century listener must engage the mind as filter in order to translate the unfamiliar 19th century vocabulary and construction. And so we read him with our minds, not our hearts. Your readings allow Longfellow once more to speak directly to the heart of the listener.”

May that be so.

Thank you.