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Longfellow's Poems on Slavery

by JANET HARRIS

FOR MOST of the twentieth century, it has been fashionable to dismiss Longfellow as a poet of fanciful romances, a kindly bearded father figure who wrote poetry suited only for a child's memorizing. To a certain extent, this portrait may be valid, but perceptive critics are recognizing that these romances contain mythic elements and remembering that the beard was grown to cover scars received while trying to put out his wife's flaming clothes in a fire that caused her death.¹ However, the picture of the gentle poet explains in part why Longfellow became the "household poet of America; the laureateship was conferred on him by popular response, immediate, spontaneous and continuous."² Although critics often disparage what is popular and suspect that there may be an inverse relationship between popularity and literary quality, in 1908 John Macy rightly pointed out "that it is a noble fate to be for many years the poet most cherished by a million hearths. The multitudinous electorate may not crown the highest poetry, but whatever it does choose and long adore is indubitably important in history" (p. 99). And it is from a historical perspective more than for literary merit that *Poems on Slavery* should be considered.

The significance of *Poems on Slavery* can best be clarified if the work is examined in the context of the antislavery movement in Maine. In *Go Free: The Antislavery Impulse in Maine, 1833-1855*, Edward O. Shriver points out that "of the states in the North, Maine was one of the least likely to burn with the fires of abolition."³ Isolated from the centers of the conflict by geography and a small Negro population, the citizens of Maine nevertheless became involved during the early 1830's in the issues publicized in the Portland Colonization Debate—whether the primary concern should be the resettlement of free Negroes in Africa or the freeing of all slaves in the South. The debate could not be resolved because the contending groups did not have the same object in view: "The one wishes to rid the country of the *free* colored people, the other the curse of slavery" (Shriver, p. 9). In 1833 several Maine men signed the Declaration of Sentiments when the American Antislavery Society was formed in Philadelphia.

1. Edward Wagenknecht, *Henry Wadsworth Longfellow: Portrait of an American Humanist* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1966), pp. 172-174.

2. John Macy, *The Spirit of American Literature* (New York: The Modern Library, 1908), p. 99.

3. Edward O. Shriver, *Go Free: The Antislavery Impulse in Maine, 1833-1855* (Orono, Maine: University of Maine Press, 1970), p. 111.

After 1833 Maine antislavery societies multiplied but with little real effect on the slavery situation in the South. Shriver suggests that the story of Maine abolition societies is one of "a weak, isolated group of organizations which in their feeble way mirrored for Maine people the agony of the whole nation and which contributed, in however oblique a manner, to the keeping of an unpopular issue before an unappreciative public" (p. iv). Longfellow's *Poems on Slavery* reflect in literary form the contribution of his native state.

Henry Wadsworth Longfellow had already established his reputation before he turned his attention to the slavery issue. Born in Portland, Maine, February 27, 1807, he grew up in the coastal town where he enjoyed the nearby woods and forests, the color and bustle of the harbor, and above all the sea; from these experiences he would draw his major poetic images for the rest of his life. As Hirsh⁴ reports, in 1821 Longfellow entered Bowdoin College and upon graduation was offered a professorship in languages on the condition that he would study in Europe at his own expense. In 1826 he sailed for Europe to spend three years in France, Spain, Italy, and Germany. In 1834 he accepted a post at Harvard College and again went to Europe for further study. By 1842 when he returned from a third European trip, he had published two volumes of prose travel sketches, a two volume romance, and two volumes of poetry. While voyaging from Europe in 1842, Longfellow spent fifteen days below deck in rough seas. During this time he wrote seven of the eight poems which appear in *Poems on Slavery*. He said they were composed "to beguile the tedium of a sea voyage."⁵ When he arrived home, he entrusted the poems to his friend and publisher, J. Owen.

Poems on Slavery appeared in 1842, probably by December 15. The eight poems included "To William E. Channing," "The Slave's Dream," "The Good Part," "The Slave in the Dismal Swamp," "The Slave Singing at Midnight," "The Witnesses," "The Quadroon Girl," and "The Warning." The last poem was taken, in part, from "The Soul" which appeared in *The Knickerbocker Magazine* for January, 1835. With the exception of "The Good Part," the poems were reprinted in 1843 by the New England Anti-Slavery Tract Association as an eight-page pamphlet without title but with the notation at the top of page one that "The Association is happy to present to the public, in the first number of their series, the following beautiful *Poems on Slavery* by Professor Longfellow."⁶

Critical reception of these poems ranged from labelling them "beautiful" and "moving" to calling them "insipid" and "dangerous." Whit-

4. Edward Hirsh, *Henry Wadsworth Longfellow* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1964), pp. 6-10.

5. Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, *Poetical Works* (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin and Company, 1886), I, 84. All additional references to Longfellow's works are to this edition and cited in the text.

6. Luther Livingston, *A Bibliography of the First Editions in Book Form of the Writings of Henry Wadsworth Longfellow* (New York: Burt Franklin, 1908), pp. 31-33.

7. Herbert Gorman, *A Victorian American: Henry Wadsworth Longfellow* (New York: George H. Doran Company, 1926), p. 238.

tier's enthusiasm prompted him to suggest that Longfellow run for Congress and to guarantee that he would win.⁸ Margaret Fuller, writing in the *Dial*, denounced *Poems on Slavery* as "the thinnest of all Mr. Longfellow's thin books; spirited and polished like its forerunners; but the topic would warrant a deeper tone."⁹ Henry Ware, Jr. insisted that the poems were "all one could wish them to be—poetic, simple, graceful, strong, without any taint of coarseness, harshness, or passion'" (Thompson, p. 332). In effect, Ware described the criteria for poetry of mid-nineteenth century popular taste. Hawthorne was stunned by Longfellow's choice of subject: "I was never more surprised than at your writing poems about slavery. . . . You have never poetized a practical subject hitherto."¹⁰ Hawthorne had previously compared Longfellow to a sunflower, "no more conscious of any earthly or spiritual trouble" than a blossom.¹¹ Samuel Ward wrote to Longfellow that he admired the poems, but being "fresh from among the Negroes, I pity the master more than the slaves" (S. Longfellow, I, 429). Longfellow seemed satisfied with his work; he wrote his father: "How do you like the Slavery Poems? I think they make an impression; I have received many letters about them. . . . Some persons regret that I should have written them, but for my part I am glad of what I have done. My feelings prompted me, and my judgment approved and still approves" (I, 85). Because of Longfellow's prestige and the controversial issue involved, the poems received attention out of all proportion to their literary merit. He was warned that he could expect a "rib-roasting from the South," and the editor of *Graham's Magazine* explained that he could not review the work because the word *slavery* "was never allowed to appear in a Philadelphia periodical" and the publisher objected even to printing the name of Longfellow's book (S. Longfellow, I, 426, 431). As Perry Miller points out, none of these evaluations involved literary excellence; readers were concerned only with the social issue.¹² Later critics have not shared this entrenchment with the slavery controversy and have dismissed *Poems on Slavery* as an inferior work.

Several factors influenced Longfellow in writing *Poems on Slavery*. As a youth he read Benjamin Lundy's *Genius of Universal Emancipation* in his father's library. In Brunswick he considered writing a drama on the subject of Toussaint l'Ouverture so "that I may do something in my humble way for the great cause of Negro emancipation'" (S. Longfellow, I, 424). By temperament Longfellow opposed slavery. A Unitarian, he believed in the essential goodness of man and in the capacity of Christianity to aid in the progress of humanitarian causes (Hirsh, p. 21). As a close personal friend of Charles Sumner, Longfellow found a strong tie to the antislavery

8. Cecil B. Williams, *Henry Wadsworth Longfellow* (New York: Twayne Publishers, Inc., 1964), p. 29.

9. Lawrence Thompson, *Young Longfellow* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1938), p. 332.

10. Samuel Longfellow, *Life of Henry Wadsworth Longfellow* (Boston: Ticknor and Company, 1896), I, 431.

11. F. O. Matthiessen, *American Renaissance* (London: Oxford University Press, 1968), p. 227.

12. Perry Miller, *The Raven and the Whale* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1956), p. 32.

movement. Kennedy¹³ reports that among the unpublished letters of Sumner are several requests for Longfellow to speak out through his poetry on the slavery issue. A pacifist, Longfellow did not respond quickly, but letters indicate Sumner was “highly gratified” with *Poems on Slavery*. While in Europe, Longfellow met Ferdinand Freiligrath, a young German poet whose “romantic poems about negroes, wild animals, and little-known regions of the earth showed him how he could turn antislavery sentiments to some account by combining them with word-pictures” (Thompson, p. 331). Longfellow’s first letter to Freiligrath after the appearance of *Poems on Slavery* acknowledges this influence: “In ‘The Slave’s Dream’ I have borrowed one or two wild animals from your menagerie” (Thompson, p. 332). In London, Longfellow spent ten days with Dickens while he was completing *American Notes*, and Longfellow writes of the “grand chapter on slavery” which catalogues vividly the cruelties of slaveowners (S. Longfellow, I, 421). With all of these impressions fresh in his memory, Longfellow composed *Poems on Slavery*.

The poems are sentimental in tone, rhetorical in style, and melodramatic in content; in effect, they are little more than “tracts in verse.”¹⁴ Gorman points out that they “lack the iron of great controversial poetry”; they are gentle little attempts “to grapple poetically with a problem that already called for giants” (Gorman, p. 238). The volume is dedicated “to William E. Channing” and commends him for his book, probably *Slavery* (1835):

The pages of thy book I read,
And as I closed each one
My heart, responding, ever said,
Servant of God! Well done!

Go on, until this land revokes
The old and chartered Lie,
The feudal curse, whose whips and yokes
Insult humanity. (I, 86)

In a prefatory note to the first edition Longfellow writes that he had not heard of Dr. Channing’s death when he composed this poem: “I have decided, however, to let it remain as it was written, in testimony of my admiration for a great and good man” (I, 85).

“The Slave’s Dream” and “The Slave in the Dismal Swamp” are picture poems which sentimentalize the Negro. “The Slave’s Dream” recounts the vision of a slave as he lies asleep in a rice field. He recalls his native land where he was a king with a wife and children. He sees flamingos, lions, and hyenas; he smiles:

He did not feel the driver’s whip
Nor the burning heat of day;

13. W. Sloane Kennedy, *Henry Wadsworth Longfellow* (Cambridge: Moses King, 1882), p. 66.

14. Joseph O’Neill, “Longfellow: Preacher and Poet,” *Thought*, XXXI (1956), 577.

For death had illumined the Land of Sleep
 And his lifeless body lay
 A worn-out fetter, that the soul
 Had broken and thrown away! (I, 89)

“The Slave in the Dismal Swamp” describes a “hunted Negro” cringing like a wild beast while he listens to the distant baying of pursuing hounds. A “poor old slave, infirm and lame,” the Negro bears the curse of Cain (I, 91). Robert H. Morrison¹⁵ believes that Longfellow modeled this poem after Thomas Moore’s “The Lake of the Dismal Swamp.” Verbal echoes in the poem as well as external evidence indicate that Longfellow knew Moore’s poem. He mentioned Moore in his diary and cherished an inkstand, wastebasket, and notebook which Moore had used. Longfellow had not visited the Great Dismal Swamp of North Carolina and Virginia, but Moore did in 1803 and wrote his poem shortly after. “The Slave Singing at Midnight” relies on sound to create a picture of a lonely Negro chanting a psalm of David, a psalm of victory. The narrator is moved by the contrast between the singer’s song and his bondage:

And the voice of his devotion
 Filled my soul with strange emotion;
 For its tones by turns were glad,
 Sweetly solemn, wildly sad.

Paul and Silas in their prison,
 Sang of Christ, the Lord arisen
 And an earthquake’s arm of might
 Broke their dungeon-gates at night.

But, alas! what holy angel
 Brings the Slave this glad evangel?
 And what earthquake’s arm of might
 Breaks his dungeon-gates at night? (I, 92–93)

Brooks suggests that these poems lack the indignation of strong protest poetry because everything that passed through Longfellow’s imagination turned into music and pictures.¹⁶ This tendency is at once the charm and the weakness of his poems.

Ironically one of the poems proved too “strong” for the New England Anti-Slavery Tract Association. In the 1843 reprint of *Poems on Slavery* “The Good Part” was omitted without explanation. The poem describes a woman who dedicates her life and fortune to the abolition of slavery:

For she was rich, and gave up all
 To break the iron bands
 Of those who waited in her hall,
 And labored in her lands.

15. Robert H. Morrison, “An Apparent Influence of Thomas Moore on Longfellow,” *Philological Quarterly*, XXXIV (1956), 198–200.

16. Van Wyck Brooks, *The Flowering of New England* (New York: E. P. Dutton and Company, Inc., 1952), p. 316.

Long since beyond the Southern Sea
 Their outbound sails have sped,
 While she, in meek humility,
 Now earns her daily bread.

It is their prayers, which never cease,
 That clothe her with such grace;
 Their blessing is the light of peace
 That shines upon her face. (I, 90–91)

Perhaps the Association realized that northern wealthy abolitionists might not be prepared for such a sacrifice or such a reward.

The next two poems picture slavery in massive and then individual terms. In “The Witnesses” Longfellow visualizes a sunken slave ship and “skeletons in chains with shackled feet and hands.” When other slave ships pass with their human cargo, the “bones of slaves” cry “We are the Witnesses!” (I, 93–94). “The Quadroon Girl” approaches the ballad form that Longfellow enjoyed so much. The poem relates the story of a beautiful girl sold by her owner:

“This soil is barren—the farm is old”
 The thoughtful Planter said;
 Then looked upon the Slaver’s gold,
 And then upon the maid.

His heart within him was at strife
 With such accursed gains:
 For he knew whose passions gave her life,
 Whose blood ran in her veins.

But the voice of nature was too weak;
 He took the glittering gold!
 Then pale as death grew the maiden’s cheek,
 Her hands as icy cold.

The Slaver led her from the door,
 He led her by the hand,
 To be his slave and paramour
 In a strange and distant land! (I, 95–96)

Newton Arvin believes that Longfellow “falls into a deplorable vein of theatrical sentiment that betrays the unreality of his inspiration.”¹⁷ A more balanced assessment might be that this response is predictable from a romantic poet so far removed from the physical presence of slaves, and a man of letters immersed in romantic literature.

The last poem in the volume, “The Warning,” had been written as part of a Phi Beta Kappa poem in 1834 (Thompson, p. 202). In the thematic structure of this book Longfellow effectively places “The Warning.” The volume begins with a tribute to Channing, a strong advocate of abolition, and a reference to the “dread apocalypse.” The next six poems depict in various ways the cruelties and injustices of slavery. Finally in “The

17. Newton Arvin, *Longfellow: His Life and Work* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1962), p. 78.

Warning” Longfellow speaks to the United States, foreseeing the violence to come. Identifying slaves with Samson, the poet warns,

There is a poor, blind Samson in this land,
Shorn of his strength, and bound in bonds of steel,
Who may, in some grim revel, raise his hand,
And shake the pillars of this Commonweal,
Till the vast Temple of our liberties
A shapeless mass of wreck and rubbish lies. (I, 97)

Apparently this warning satisfied Longfellow’s social conscience, at least the need to express himself openly and poetically on controversial issues. Gorman suggests that after *Poems on Slavery* Longfellow turned “away from life again, uncontrollably drawn to far-away, dim, romantic vistas of the imagination” (p. 239). Parrington expresses the same attitude by proposing that Longfellow, “having got safely back to his library . . . shut the door on the whole vexatious question of slavery.”¹⁸ Perhaps these judgments are too harsh, but Longfellow’s attempt at reform poetry ended with this volume; his concern for the plight of his country did not.

Allen¹⁹ reports that Longfellow believed poetry should elevate the soul to an ideal realm and should provide delight. A subject such as slavery offered little inspiration for delight; instead, as Newton Arvin indicates, the poems in this volume may be too much the product of Longfellow’s “conscious and conscientious good will, too little the product of the imagination” (p. 78). The most memorable poems in the volume are those which create a scene in the reader’s mind: the quadroon girl’s face as the smile vanishes and she turns pale with the realization that her father-owner is selling her; the old slave, battered and scarred, cringing in the swamp; a pathetic slave, once a king in his native land, dying alone in a rice field; a Negro slave singing of victory for the Children of Israel; and the sunken slave ship with the manacled bones of its cargo. These poems present stereotyped images but just the sort that people in Maine far from actual slavery might envision, especially if that person happened to be a romantic poet. Although *Poems on Slavery* probably had little effect technically on future poets, its impact on the period cannot be completely ignored. Sentimental treatments of slavery did much to foster sympathy for the antislavery cause.

Publishing this volume in 1842 took courage for a man who cultivated public acclaim. He even allowed the New England Anti-Slavery Tract Association to reprint the poems in an area that could hurt the sales of his other works. These poems would be considered mild today, but at the time, written by Professor Longfellow, they were important. Their effect was such that when Longfellow’s complete works were published in Philadelphia, *Poems on Slavery* was omitted, without authorization, for politi-

18. Vernon Louis Parrington, *The Romantic Revolution in America 1800-1860* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1927), p. 441.

19. Gay Wilson Allen, *American Prosody* (New York: Octagon Books, Inc., 1966), p. 157.

cal reasons.²⁰ President Lincoln would later acknowledge his awareness of the power of the pen when he told Harriet Beecher Stowe, “‘So you’re the little woman who made the book that made the great war’” (Spiller, p. 563). *Poems on Slavery* was not as influential, but Longfellow’s reputation lent support to the abolition movement even though he never became a true abolitionist; in fact he favored Elihu Burritt’s plan for “compensated emancipation” (Wagenknecht, p. 56). Samuel Longfellow (I, 424–425) describes the various facets of the antislavery movement at the time Longfellow published *Poems on Slavery*. Colonizationalists wanted to free the slaves on the condition that they were sent to Africa. The Liberty Party, including Whittier, preferred political action. Abolitionists demanded immediate emancipation and refused to vote under a “slaveholding Constitution”; William Lloyd Garrison and Wendell Phillips led this group. In addition there were many slavery opponents who joined no formal organization; both Emerson and Longfellow belonged to the latter group. Longfellow remained a sympathetic bystander to the abolitionist movement.

Although he may have turned to other subjects for his writing, he continued to be a strong opponent of slavery. Wagenknecht (p. 57) relates that in 1854 Longfellow felt uncomfortable in the presence of two Southern clergymen even though slavery was not discussed. Not temperamentally inclined to controversy, Longfellow nevertheless could not contain his anger when a Florida judge insisted that “do unto others” meant merely that a man should treat his slaves as he would wish to be treated if he were a slave. “‘If you were a slave,’” Longfellow retorted, “‘the thing you would wish most of all would be your freedom. So your Scripture argument for Slavery is knocked into a cocked hat’” (p. 57). On another occasion Longfellow referred to Garrison as “‘a Traitor to his country’” (p. 56). When the cause of abolition became inextricably linked to war, Longfellow found his sympathies divided. Although his family possessed a distinguished military background, Longfellow opposed war and could not associate himself with its advocates.

In American literature poets had been slow in turning to slavery as a subject for poetry. While attempting to develop a national literature, they preferred to praise America rather than point to her faults. In the North it was long considered bad form to “expose the skeleton in Freedom’s closet” (S. Longfellow, I, 424–425). But in the poetry of John Trumbull, Timothy Dwight, Joel Barlow, and David Humphreys there are references to slavery although frequently to slavery in the Indies or some distant land.²¹ Spiller (pp. 565–566) reviews the poetic abolition statements. Although Bryant strongly opposed slavery, he kept the controversy out of

20. Robert Spiller, et. al., *Literary History of the United States* (London: The Macmillan Company, 1969), p. 564.

21. For specific lines see Vernon Louis Parrington, *The Connecticut Wits* (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell Company, 1954) pp. 78, 93, 206–209, 317, 389.

most of his poetry; one early poem, "The African Chief," describes a savage too noble to remain in bondage. Soon after 1840 several poets followed Whittier's lead in poetic denunciations of slavery. James Russell Lowell and William Lloyd Garrison were the most forceful; William E. Channing (the younger) and Freneau published antislavery poems. Later Emerson, Thoreau, Whitman, and Melville spoke against slavery, though not always in poetry. Like Longfellow, most of these poets were caught between their condemnation of slavery and their hatred of war. But their poetry was a contribution to the greatest moral, political, and social dilemma of their times. In this historical perspective, Longfellow's *Poems on Slavery* deserves recognition.

In *The Intricate Knot: Black Figures in American Literature, 1776-1863*, Jean F. Yellin contends "The major Afro-American writers have said that the black man in America is unnamed and unseen. Yet his dark figure is ubiquitous in our fiction; the American imagination was as obsessed in the nineteenth century by the black as it is today," (p. vii). Perhaps the greatest proof of this statement is that even a poet such as Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, a man seemingly accustomed to dwell, at least in his literature, in the world of fancy rather than reality, was touched by the obsession with slavery. That his literary response lacked force and lasting effect cannot be denied. That his motivation, like that of the citizens of Maine, stemmed from an independent spirit and a love of human freedom should not be disregarded.

Carrollton, Texas