

Longfellow's "The Cross of Snow" and Milton

ALICE HALL PETRY

Written eighteen years to the day after the fatal burning of his beloved second wife, Fanny Appleton, and posthumously published in 1886 in Volume II of the *Life*, "The Cross of Snow" has proved to be one of the most enduring poems in the literary canon of Henry Wadsworth Longfellow:

The Cross of Snow

In the long, sleepless watches of the night,
A gentle face—the face of one long dead—
Looks at me from the wall, where round its head
The night-lamp casts a halo of pale light.
Here in this room she died; and soul more white
Never through martyrdom of fire was led
To its repose; nor can in books be read
The legend of a life more benedict.
There is a mountain in the distant West
That, sun-defying, in its deep ravines
Displays a cross of snow upon its side.
Such is the cross I wear upon my breast
These eighteen years, through all the changing scenes
And seasons, changeless since the day she died.
July 10, 1879¹

Given Longfellow's achievement in this moving and finely wrought sonnet, one can only be surprised by the dearth of critical attention that it has generated.² A major factor in this lamentable situation would appear to be the seeming finality of James M. Cox's 1960 essay "Longfellow and His Cross of Snow," which argues that the inspiration for the sonnet was Dante's *Divina Commedia*, and in particular *Il Purgatorio*, Cantos XXX-XXXIII. Cox's argument seems valid as far as it goes, even though there is some justice in Edward Wagenknecht's assertion that he does "not discern the resemblances that Mr. Cox thinks he perceives" between "The Cross of Snow" and "Divina Commedia IV,"³ the sonnet that Longfellow composed in 1867 as an epigraph to his translation of *Il Purgatorio*. Wagenknecht does not elaborate on his reservations; but a close examination of the texts reveals the limitations inherent in the Dante/Longfellow argument and, concomitantly, suggests a more direct literary

source for "The Cross of Snow": John Milton's "Sonnet XXIII," "Methought I saw my late espoused Saint."

As Cox recounts, Longfellow's interest in Dante was long lived and quite personal. One of the first portions of the *Divina Commedia* which he chose to translate was *Il Purgatorio*, Canto XXX, in which Beatrice appears to Dante after his long ascent of Mount Purgatory. This translation was included in Longfellow's *Voices of the Night* (1839), nearly three decades before the publication of his complete translation of Dante's epic.⁴ On a more personal level, Longfellow evidently perceived in his early courtship of Fanny Appleton certain parallels to Dante's pursuit of Beatrice.⁵ Cox's discussion of "The Cross of Snow" rests upon these two facts, coupled with the content of Cantos XXX-XXXIII. The content of these four cantos was encapsulated by Longfellow in his sonnet "Divina Commedia IV":

Divina Commedia IV

With snow-white veil and garments as of flame,
 She stands before thee, who so long ago
 Filled thy young heart with passion and the woe
 From which thy song and all its splendors came;
 And while with stern rebuke she speaks thy name,
 The ice about thy heart melts as the snow
 On mountain heights, and in swift overflow
 Comes gushing from thy lips in sobs of shame.
 Thou makest full confession; and a gleam,
 As of the dawn on some dark forest cast,
 Seems on thy lifted forehead to increase;
 Lethe and Eunoë—the remembered dream
 And the forgotten sorrow—bring at last
 That perfect pardon which is perfect peace.⁶

The similarities between 1867's "Divina Commedia IV" and 1879's "The Cross of Snow" are readily apparent: a man has a vision of the woman, now dead, whom he once loved; the woman is associated with whiteness and fire; a mountain is mentioned. But with the exception of the first element, these similarities are superficial and/or coincidental. The snowy mountain clearly has no relation to Colorado's Mountain of the Holy Cross, the picture of which Longfellow first saw a dozen years later and developed into the brilliant controlling image of "The Cross of Snow."⁷ The woman's fiery clothing—"garments as of flame," as Longfellow puts it (cf. *Purg.*, Canto XXX, line 33)—would appear to be a clear connection between (1) Dante and "Divina Commedia IV" and (2) the latter and "The Cross of Snow." Cox makes this point: "That Dante's figure of speech should have been realized by Longfellow as a living fact was, of course, a coincidence."⁸ He may be right, but the irony of this could not have been lost on Longfellow. How puzzling, then, that "Divina Commedia IV" is so utterly lacking in power or poignancy: it seems impossible that it was composed only six years after Fanny burned to death when her dress caught fire. The only element which would suggest strongly that Longfellow had Dante in mind, either directly (*Il Purgatorio*) or indirectly, ("Divina Commedia IV") as he composed "The Cross of Snow," is the vision of the dead lady-love; but this is an element from the venerable tradition of the *donna angelicata*,

a tradition which Longfellow could have encountered in any number of poets, including John Milton.⁹ It is the basis of Milton's "Sonnet XXIII" (1658):

Sonnet XXIII

Methought I saw my late espoused Saint
 Brought to me like *Alcestis* from the grave,
 Whom *Jove's* great Son to her glad Husband gave,
 Rescu'd from death by force though pale and faint.
 Mine as whom washt from spot of child-bed taint,
 Purification in the old Law did save,
 And such, as yet once more I trust to have
 Full sight of her in Heaven without restraint,
 Came vested all in white, pure as her mind:
 Her face was veil'd, yet to my fancied sight,
 Love, sweetness, goodness, in her person shin'd
 So clear, as in no face with more delight.
 But O, as to embrace me she inclin'd,
 I wak'd, she fled, and day brought back my night.¹⁰

I would argue that this sonnet is as likely to be a source of "The Cross of Snow" as is Dante.

Anyone who reads the three sonnets under consideration will be struck immediately by the fact that the impact of "Divina Commedia IV" is quite unlike that of "Sonnet XXIII" or "The Cross of Snow." Longfellow himself lamented that "Divina Commedia IV" is "poor and feeble. It . . . has no legs, no body and no soul."¹¹ This should come as no surprise, since this sonnet is simply a summary of what happens in Cantos XXX-XXIII of *Il Purgatorio*, presented as a second-person narrative addressed to Dante. In contrast, both "Sonnet XXIII" and "The Cross of Snow" are painfully private: each is the first-person account of a widower's vision of his beloved wife. In "Sonnet XXIII," Milton recounts how he envisioned his late wife—either Mary Powell or Katherine Woodcock¹²—as he slept, but the image of her vanished when he awakened. "The Cross of Snow" also is set at night and involves a vision of the dead wife—in this case, an imaginative response to her picture ("A gentle face—the face of one long dead—/ Looks at me from the wall"). Whereas "Divina Commedia IV" is based purely upon literature, both "Sonnet XXIII" and "The Cross of Snow" are grounded in apparently real, intense personal experiences. Those experiences gain particular poignancy in that both Milton and Longfellow posit their late wives as goodness incarnate: quite literally, as "espoused Saints." Out Dante-ing Dante, who is credited with the creation of the *donna angelicata* tradition, Milton writes how his wife "Came vested all in white, pure as her mind," and despite her veil, "Love, sweetness, goodness, in her person shin'd" clearly. In "The Cross of Snow," Longfellow develops the notion of wife-as-saint into the predominant metaphor of the octave. Mesmerized by Fanny's picture on the wall, Longfellow notes how around her head "The night-lamp casts a halo of pale light," an image which triggers the invidious comparison of Fanny and the martyred saints of hagiography: "soul more white/ Never through martyrdom of fire was led/ To its repose; nor can in books be read/ The legend of a life more

benedict." The canonization of their late wives is a far cry from the presentation of Beatrice, either in "Divina Commedia IV" or in *Il Purgatorio*. Longfellow actually is being quite charitable in speaking of her "stern rebuke" in "Divina Commedia IV," for Dante presents her at some length as cold and vindictive, berating Dante for his sinful life. As Dorothy L. Sayers remarks, "for a canto and a half [Beatrice] heaps reproaches upon him, showing no mercy, hammering him into such a state of speechless tears and misery that we feel we cannot bear to see any grown man so publicly humiliated. But she goes on and on until she breaks him"¹³ The overwhelmed Dante bursts into tears under Beatrice's verbal assault (Canto XXX, lines 94 ff.), and eventually faints (Canto XXXI, ll. 88-90). There is no comparison between Beatrice's tirade and sarcasm¹⁴ and loving, silent "dumb-show" behavior of the wives of Milton and Longfellow. Milton notes how "to embrace me she inclin'd"; Longfellow remarks how Fanny's "gentle face" would watch him at night—a poignant reversal of the nineteenth-century practice of the living "watching" the dead or dying.

Where "Divina Commedia IV" and Dante most clearly part company with "Sonnet XXIII" and "The Cross of Snow" is in their endings. The contrite Dante, revived from his swoon, finds himself immersed in the River Lethe (Canto XXXI, ll. 94 ff.), from which he then drinks (Canto XXXI, l. 102), just as later he drinks from the stream Eunoë (Canto XXXIII, ll. 127 ff.)—acts which take "away the emotional memory of sin" and restore "the memory of all good deeds."¹⁵ Milton and Longfellow are considerably less fortunate. Milton finds that, with the evaporation of the dream-vision of his wife, "day brought back my night"—a paradox which refers not only to his blindness, but also to the depression which his widowhood engendered. By the same token, "The Cross of Snow" ends with Crucifixion imagery and a paradox conveyed through polyptoton: "Such is the cross I wear upon my breast/ These eighteen years, through all the changing scenes/ And seasons, changeless since the day she died." Far from finding the "perfect peace" granted to Dante in "Divina Commedia IV," both Milton and Longfellow are clearly in deep despair. Indeed, the mutual reference to mountains in Longfellow's two sonnets points up this disparity eloquently. In "Divina Commedia IV," we find that the ice about Dante's heart "melts as the snow/ On mountain heights" and that "a gleam/ As of the dawn on some dark forest cast" appears on his forehead. In sharp contrast, the controlling image of "The Cross of Snow" is appropriate precisely because the snowy cross on the mountain-side is "sun-defying." The inertia, coldness, and darkness are far more akin to the perpetual night of Milton's existence as a blind widower.

The textual evidence suggests, then, that Milton's "Sonnet XXIII" is an important source for "The Cross of Snow." There also is biographical evidence in support of this. It is a well-established fact that Longfellow had become familiar with Milton's works in his childhood; eventually Longfellow came to be "a great admirer" of his writings, and even composed a sonnet in tribute to him, which was included in *The Masque of Pandora, and Other Poems*, a volume published just four years before the composition of "The Cross of Snow."¹⁶ More cogently, Edward

Wagenknecht points out that to console himself after the death of his first wife in Holland in 1835, Longfellow would copy Milton's "Sonnet XXIII" into his journal.¹⁷ In fine, "Sonnet XXIII" was very much on his mind as he simultaneously mourned Mary Potter Longfellow and began the courtship of his second wife, Fanny Appleton. James M. Cox may be correct in surmising that Longfellow had resurrected and reworked "Divina Commedia IV" when he created "The Cross of Snow"; but it seems just as likely that he was drawing upon the Milton/ Mary/ Fanny association he had so painfully forged in Europe in the mid-1830's.

Rhode Island School of Design

NOTES

¹I follow the text of "The Cross of Snow" in Samuel Longfellow, ed., *Life of Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, with Extracts from His Journals and Correspondence* (Boston: Ticknor, 1886), II, 373. Longfellow had married Fanny Appleton on July 13, 1843. Her fatal burning occurred on July 9, 1861, and she died the following day; her funeral took place on July 13, 1861, what would have been the Longfellows' eighteenth wedding anniversary.

²For critical appraisals of "The Cross of Snow," see James M. Cox, "Longfellow and His Cross of Snow," *PMLA*, 75 (1960), 97-100, as well as "Longfellow's 'The Cross of Snow'" by Robert A. Durr in *Explicator*, 13 (March, 1955), Item 32, and Newton Arvin's comments in *Longfellow: His Life and Work* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1963), pp. 305-06.

³Edward Wagenknecht, *Henry Wadsworth Longfellow: Portrait of an American Humanist* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1966), p. 233, n. 13.

⁴Cox, p. 98.

⁵Cox, p. 98.

⁶The text of "Divina Commedia IV" is from Longfellow's translation of *The Divine Comedy* by Dante Alighieri (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1895), p. 248.

⁷Samuel Longfellow recounts the incident in the *Life*, II, 372-73. Interestingly, Fanny had to bear her own white cross: as Cornelius C. Felton wrote to Charles Sumner, at her funeral "a cross of white roses lay upon [Fanny's] breast." Letter dated July 14, 1861; cited in Edward Wagenknecht, *Mrs. Longfellow: Selected Letters and Journals of Fanny Appleton Longfellow (1817-1861)* (New York: Longmans, Green, 1956), p. 243.

⁸Cox, p. 99.

⁹Of course, Milton himself was inspired by Dante: see, for example, Leo Spitzer, "Understanding Milton," *Hopkins Review*, 4 (Summer 1951), especially pp. 18-23. However, as with all great writers, Milton was no slavish imitator of anyone. It is his unique rendering of "Sonnet XXIII" that concerns us here.

¹⁰I follow the version of "Sonnet XXIII" in *John Milton: Complete Poems and Major Prose*, ed. Merritt Y. Hughes (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1975), pp. 170-71.

¹¹Letter to James T. Fields, dated May 6, 1867; cited in *The Letters of Henry Wadsworth Longfellow: 1866-1874*, ed. Andrew Hilen (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1982), V, 133.

¹²For discussions of the confusion over the identity of the wife, see Fitzroy Pyle, "Milton's Sonnet on His 'Late Espoused Saint,'" *Review of English Studies*, 25 (1949), 57-60; William Riley Parker, "Milton's Last Sonnet Again," *Review of English Studies*, NS 2 (1951), 147-52, and Professor Pyle's response, pp. 152-54; John T. Shawcross, "Milton's Sonnet 23," *Notes and Queries*, 201 (May, 1956), 202-04; and John T. Shawcross, "Notes on Milton's Amanuenses," *Journal of English and Germanic Philology*, 58 (1959), 29-38.

¹³Dorothy L. Sayers, *The Divine Comedy: II: Purgatory* (New York: Penguin Books, 1959), p. 26.

¹⁴Mark Musa, *Dante's Purgatory* (Bloomington: Indiana Univ. Press, 1981), p. 327, notes to ll. 73-74.

¹⁵Musa, pp. 339-40, notes to ll. 101-02.

¹⁶See the *Life*, I, 11; Cecil B. Williams, *Henry Wadsworth Longfellow* (New York: Twayne, 1964), pp. 82, 146. Williams remarks that Longfellow "felt a kinship of spirit" with Milton (p. 146).

¹⁷Wagenknecht, p. 161.

Copyright of *Essays in Literature* is the property of Western Illinois University and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.