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LONGFELLOW AND HIS CROSS OF SNOW

BY JAMES M. COX

LONGFELLOW'S SONNET, "The Cross of Snow," written eighteen years after his wife's death and left among his papers, has survived to become one of his most admired productions. Samuel Longfellow, the poet's brother and biographer, first brought it to the world's attention, publishing it in the second volume of the biography. Along with the poem, he added some biographical details which to this day usually serve in paraphrased form as a preface to anthologized appearances of the poem. Writing of Longfellow's grief-stricken anguish during the months following Mrs. Longfellow's death, his brother observed:

In one of his early letters Mr. Longfellow had said: 'With me all deep feelings are silent ones.' It was so of the deepest. No word of his bitter sorrow and anguish found expression in verse. But he felt the need of some continuous and tranquil occupation for his thoughts; and after some months he summoned the resolution to take up again the task of translating Dante,—begun, it may be remembered, years before, and long laid aside. For a time he translated a canto each day. . . . Eighteen years afterward, looking over, one day, an illustrated book of Western scenery, his attention was arrested by a picture of that mysterious mountain upon whose lonely, lofty breast the snow lies in long furrows that make a rude but wonderfully clear image of a vast cross. At night as he looked upon the pictured countenance that hung upon his chamber wall, his thoughts framed themselves into the verses that follow. He put them away in his portfolio, where they were found after his death.¹

The precision of these details—the book of Western scenery, the mountain, the cross of snow—has the kind of finality which discourages speculation. The picture which Longfellow saw in the book of Western scenery, although it may not have been seen in the remarkably neat sequence established by Samuel Longfellow, no doubt did provide Longfellow with the immediate and particular image for his poem. But the bases of poetic response to the image had been formulated much earlier in his poetry. To see just how much earlier, one has but to compare "The Cross of Snow" with the fourth of the six sonnets which accompanied Longfellow's translation of *The Divine Comedy*.² The parallel which immediately appears between the two sonnets, coupled with some significant passages from Longfellow's letters and journals, may reveal that in the *Divina Commedia* sonnets some of Longfellow's deeper feelings were not remaining silent. First, the sonnets.

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.

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 benedight.
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.

The almost identical image patterns of the two sonnets serve to bring into a single and concentrated field of vision situations having at base only a remote similarity. Against this common background the situations define themselves in terms of contrast. In the *Divina Commedia* sonnet, the ice around Dante's heart melts upon

¹ Samuel Longfellow, ed., *Life of Henry Wadsworth Longfellow with Extracts from His Journals and Correspondence*, 2 vols. (Boston, 1886), II, 372. Hereafter cited as *Life*.

² "Divina Commedia IV" first appeared in Longfellow's translation of *The Divine Comedy*, published in 1867 by Ticknor and Fields. Although fourth in the sonnet sequence, it was written more than a year later than any of the other five; moreover—as his journal entry for 6 May 1867 makes clear—the composition of the sonnet was for Longfellow the final act of the long labor of translating Dante: "Showed Fields a new sonnet which I wrote last night, and which is to go into the Purgatory. The Dante work is now all done,—the last word, and the final corrections, all in the printer's hands" (*Final Memorials of Henry Wadsworth Longfellow*, ed. Samuel Longfellow [Boston, 1887], p. 91). More than twelve years later, Longfellow wrote "The Cross of Snow," giving the date of composition as 10 July 1879, eighteen years to the day after Mrs. Longfellow's death.

his confrontation of a rebuking Beatrice clad in seeming snow and flame; but in "The Cross of Snow" Longfellow's heart retains its snowy cross even in the face of the pale and gentle gaze coming from the picture on the wall. To see the two sonnets comment upon each other is to begin to understand how much Dante *could* or, at least, *did* say to Longfellow during the years of grief when Longfellow labored at translating *The Divine Comedy*.

For the images of fire and ice in the *Divina Commedia* sonnet are Dante's, not Longfellow's. The sonnet, written as the second of two accompanying Longfellow's version of the *Purgatorio*, is of course Longfellow's account of and response to Cantos xxx-xxxiii of the *Purgatorio*—particularly Canto xxx, in which Dante is bereft of Virgil's guidance at the moment he comes face to face with Beatrice after his arduous spiritual ascent of Mount Purgatory. Beatrice does appear in garments colored like a living flame ("Vestita di color di fiamma viva" [*Purgatorio*, xxx. 33]), and, as she reproaches Dante for his waywardness in the earthly life, the ice about his heart melts just as the ice atop the Apennines melts before the winds off the African desert (*Purgatorio*, xxx. 85-89). After full confession, Dante drinks from the river Lethe (*Purgatorio*, xxxi. 102), forgetting the misery of his sins, and from Eunoë (*Purgatorio*, xxxiii. 136-138), the twin stream of good remembrance, and so regains a state of purity in the recaptured dream of innocence.

The attraction Longfellow evidently felt toward Dante's dramatic encounter with Beatrice was both old and strong. Canto xxx of the *Purgatorio* was, after all, one of the first passages Longfellow chose to translate from Dante. His version, along with his translations of Cantos xxvii and xxxi of the *Purgatorio*, had appeared among the group of translations he included in his first volume of original poetry, *Voices of the Night*, published in 1839, twenty-eight years before the publication of the complete translation of *The Divine Comedy*. In addition to the unquestionable power of Dante's poetry, there is evidence for believing that Longfellow, in 1839, saw in Canto xxx an image of his own fortunes, since *Voices of the Night* appeared at the precise time when Longfellow was being spurned by Frances Appleton in retaliation for the maudlin thinness with which he had disguised his feelings toward her in his *Hyperion*. That rather flimsy performance, which Longfellow lived to regret, had appeared early in August 1839, four months before *Voices of the Night*. Suffering from the

chill distance at which Fanny was holding him, Longfellow may have gained some solace from the fact that Dante too had, at the very threshold of paradise, been chastised by his goddess.

In any event, Longfellow certainly saw in his relationship with Fanny Appleton a similarity to Dante's long-suffering quest of Beatrice. Meeting Fanny on the street after her response to *Hyperion*, Longfellow recorded in his journal: "Met the stately dark ladie in the street. I looked and passed as Dante prescribes."³ And on 10 May 1843, the day that Fanny finally accepted him into the paradise of her love, he joyously wrote, "Oh Day forever blessed; that ushered in this *Vita Nova* of happiness!"⁴ Probably the clearest indication of how deeply Longfellow had appropriated Dante's vision for his own drama occurs in a letter to Fanny's cousin, J. A. Jewett, written on 23 May 1843, two weeks after he had been accepted. Celebrating his good fortune at finding himself hand in hand with Fanny "in the mystic circle," he goes on to describe the public nature of their courtship. "There has been, from the beginning," he proclaims, "a spice of romance in it, which has taken hold of several exciteable imaginations and thanks to my heedless imprudence, the public has been a kind of confidant in the whole affair. But now, thank God, this imprudence is forgiven and forgotten by the only one of whom I had to ask forgiveness and oblivion of the past;—and reconciliation falls like peaceful sunshine upon the present."⁵

If Longfellow saw in Dante's poetic vision a parallel to his own experience, he discovered in Dante's poetic power inspiration to sustain his own tamer muse. In March 1843, just when his prospects for winning Fanny's hand were taking a favorable turn, Longfellow began methodically translating Dante;⁶ he continued the work after his marriage until his eyes unaccountably seemed to fail. Despite the rewards he gained from translating Dante, Longfellow was uncomfortably aware of the danger of his endeavors. "As to intellectual matters," he wrote to Ferdinand Freiligrath late in 1843, "I have not done much since I left you. A half-dozen poems on Slavery,

³ Quoted in Lawrance Thompson, *Young Longfellow* (New York, 1938) p. 285.

⁴ Thompson, p. 422. Longfellow made this observation on the first anniversary of his engagement.

⁵ Thompson, p. 338.

⁶ On 21 March 1843, Longfellow wrote to Mrs. Andrews Norton: "How different from this gossip is the divine Dante, with which I begin the morning! I write a few lines every day before breakfast. It is the first thing I do,—the morning prayer, the key-note of the day . . ." (*Life*, II, 12).

written at sea, and a translation of sixteen cantos of Dante, is all I have accomplished in that way. I agree with you entirely in what you say about translations. It is like running a ploughshare through the soil of one's mind; a thousand germs of thought start up (excuse this agricultural figure), which otherwise might have lain and rotted in the ground. Still, it sometimes seems to me like an excuse for being lazy,—like leaning on another man's shoulder" (*Life*, II, 15). The rewards of translating Dante were evidently more sustaining than the risks were depleting, however, and in 1853 Longfellow resumed his translation. His journal entry of 1 February 1853 reveals the depth of his attachment to the work of translation: "In weariness of spirit and despair of writing anything original," he lamented, "I turned again, to-day, to dear old Dante, and resumed my translation of the *Purgatorio* where I left it in 1843. I find great delight in the work. It diffused its benediction through the day" (*Life*, II, 232).

What all this evidence points to is that, along with the primal image of himself as poet and that of Mrs. Longfellow as his patron saint, the image of Dante occupies a position near the creative center of Longfellow's imagination.⁷ A glance at the Longfellow chronology reveals that these three subjects became dominant for Longfellow at almost the same time—from 1836 to 1838.⁸ And by 1853, eight years before Mrs. Longfellow's death, Longfellow was already showing a willingness to turn to Dante to sustain the image of himself as poet, as if Dante's work possessed a healing power capable of easing the pain of extended creative failure. This willingness goes far toward explaining why Longfellow, in the depths of his grief, turned almost instinctively toward his sustained translation of *The Divine Comedy* and why that translation could in turn inspire the *Divina Commedia* sonnets, surely some of Longfellow's most impressively original work.

For Dante continued to anticipate Longfellow's experience through all vicissitudes. Thus Beatrice, clad in "garments as of flame"—to use Longfellow's own words—stood in grimly prophetic relationship to the disaster from which Longfellow was recovering, a relationship which C. C. Felton's letter to Charles Sumner describing Mrs. Longfellow's accident makes eminently clear: "Yesterday afternoon, she was sealing a small paper package, containing a lock of one of her children's hair. The light sleeve took fire: in an instant she was wrapped in a sheet of flame, flying from the library to the

front room where Longfellow was sitting. He sprang up, threw a rug round her, but it was not large enough. She broke away, flew towards the entry; then turned and rushed towards him. He received her in his arms, and so protected her face, and part of her person: but she was dreadfully burned: her dress was entirely consumed. . . ."⁹ That Dante's figure of speech should have been realized by Longfellow as a living fact was, of course, a coincidence. But it was a coincidence bearing sharply upon the relationship between the two poets, for Longfellow, more than ever before, could, by referring to Dante's experience, indirectly articulate his own.

Though it is impossible to know the processes of Longfellow's mind, his extended commitment to and his confessed reliance upon Dante's poetry go far toward revealing why the Dantesque drama recapitulated in "Divina Commedia IV" anticipates the drama of "The Cross of Snow," Longfellow's direct and solitary poetic utterance of his own crisis. In Longfellow's "confession" the face of his beloved, instead of sternly rebuking him, displays a gentleness which, coupled with the halo of pale light, enables him to portray her in the manner of a Christian martyr elevated to the loftiest sainthood. Though she lacks the regal bearing and authority Dante bestowed upon Beatrice, just as Longfellow lacked the allegorical audacity which carried Dante beyond association and simile to claim reality for his vision, she is

⁷ Perhaps the clearest indication of how much Longfellow saw his own career in relation to Dante's is to be found in "Mezzo Cammin," the sonnet (written in 1842) in which Longfellow defines his own poetic failures and aspirations against the Dantesque implications of the title. And the night before composing one of his finest, and most personal, poems, "My Lost Youth," Longfellow recorded in his journal: "A day of pain; cowering over the fire. At night as I lie in bed, a poem comes into my mind,—a memory of Portland, my native town, the city by the sea" (*Life*, II, 255–256). Immediately following the entry, Longfellow quoted Francesca's speech in which she mentions having been born in Ravenna, the city by the sea (*Inferno*, v. 97): "Siede la terra dove nato fui / Sulla marina." By itself such a quotation would mean nothing, but in the whole texture of Longfellow's allusions to and quotations from Dante it provides another example of his instinctive wish to define himself by, or to discover his identity in, *The Divine Comedy*.

⁸ I do not mean that Longfellow was unacquainted with Dante's work prior to 1836, but that the period from 1837 to 1843 marks the beginning of his intense and creative devotion to Dante's poetry. For an account of Longfellow's interest in Dante see Emilio Goggio, "Longfellow and Dante," in *Thirty-ninth, Fortieth, and Forty-first Annual Reports of the Dante Society* (Cambridge, Mass., 1924), pp. 25–34.

⁹ Quoted in *Mrs. Longfellow: Selected Letters and Journals of Fanny Appleton Longfellow (1817–61)*, ed. Edward Wagenknecht (New York, 1956), p. 242.

nevertheless Longfellow's queen of heaven. Her fiery apotheosis, however, instead of melting Longfellow's being, froze it; and not even her image, heavenly though it may appear, could thaw the changeless ice about his heart.

Dante, having at the conclusion of the *Inferno* passed the ice-bound hell at the center of the earth, could see and dramatize the moment of leaving the earth as the last melting of the icy hell within himself. His heart *could* thaw in shame, he *could* make full confession, and he *could* secure the pardon which was perfect peace. The whole long melting was at once his confession and his poetry—the record of what he had lived through. Longfellow on the other hand reveals that his frozen heart cannot release the secret woe that grips him. While Dante's act of confession constituted the triumphant spiritual autobiography upon which Longfellow leaned, Longfellow's confession is that he cannot confess.

It is not that Longfellow was shaken by some dark guilt—no shred of evidence indicates that his married life was less exemplary than it was serene. He no doubt felt the inevitable remorse which calamity bequeaths to its sensitive survivors, but wherever his deeps lay neither his agony nor his poetry could sound them. In Dante's poetry, however, Longfellow could, in addition to discovering his own poetic identity, indirectly express that identity through the substance of Dante's vision. Thus the six sonnets which define what *The Divine Comedy* meant to him indirectly but movingly define himself. They are the veiled confessions which both released and withheld the agony he could hardly bear.¹⁰

And yet Longfellow evidently felt that such indirection cut him off from his own creative sources. Apparently such a misgiving prompted him to reply to J. T. Fields's praise of the manuscript of "Divina Commedia IV": "Notwithstanding what you say, the sonnet is poor and feeble. It stands well enough upon its feet, but it has no legs, no body, no soul."¹¹ However harsh this judgment of "Divina Commedia IV" may strike anyone acquainted with the large body of Longfellow's work distinctly inferior

to the sonnet, his observation remains significant. Perhaps at some level of his mind he was trying to discover the missing soul of "Divina Commedia IV" when twelve years later he wrote "The Cross of Snow." In any event, it could hardly have been accidental—particularly in the light of the relationships I have tried to indicate—that Longfellow should choose, to describe his unremitting self-imprisonment, a simile elaborately related to that with which Dante had expressed the climax of his earthly release. Yet it was at precisely such a moment that Longfellow managed one of his deepest reaches, probing beyond sentiment and cliché into the region of self-definition.¹² "With me all deep feelings are silent ones," he had said in his early letter. His ultimate recognition about Dante, and perhaps about himself, may have been that the very great poet, instead of keeping his deepest feelings silent, converts them into the passionate idiom of poetry.

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¹⁰ Paul Elmer More, one of the first critics to see Longfellow's genuine achievement as a sonneteer, recognized the confessional quality of Longfellow's sonnets. He contended that the best refutation to the criticism that Longfellow lacked power to see his limitations "is in the poems of Longfellow, especially those in the sonnet form, which from the time of Petrarch, and of Shakespeare in English, has been the chosen vehicle for poetic confession" ("The Centenary of Longfellow," in *Shelburne Essays, Fifth Series* [New York, 1908], p. 150).

¹¹ *Final Memorials*, p. 91.

¹² The kind of radical reorientation Longfellow had to make in accommodating himself to Dante's world is indirectly but all the more dramatically suggested in the following contrast. On 22 January 1836 Longfellow wrote to his closest friend, G. W. Greene: "For my own part, I feel at this moment more than ever that fame must be looked upon only as an accessory. If it has ever been a principal object with me—which I doubt—it is so no more" (*Life*, I, 218). Against this pious but certainly sincere and characteristic sentiment, there is Longfellow's equally characteristic response to Dante, made on 9 January 1840: "Read five cantos in Dante's *Inferno*. I am struck with the prevailing desire of fame everywhere heard. . . . This was the longing in the soul of Dante, finding its expression everywhere. . . . I know of no book so fearfully expressive of human passions as this" (*Life*, I, 344).