

LONGFELLOW IN ITALY, WITH UNPUBLISHED LETTERS OF LONGFELLOW AND HOWELLS *

Longfellow visited Italy twice, the first time as a young man when he spent three years in Europe preparing himself in modern languages for a professorship at Bowdoin College. He spent the whole of 1828 in Italy, mostly in Rome which was the town where he settled most contentedly. At first, as a letter to his mother written from Florence on Jan. 23, 1828 shows, he was disheartened and longed for Spain where he had happily spent the preceding nine months:

The fact is I am homesick for Spain. I want to go back there again. The recollection of it completely ruins Italy for me¹.

In Rome, however, he was happier, and wrote to his brother Stephen on 28 June 1828:

I have been so delighted with Rome that I have extended my residence much beyond my original intention².

In fact he stayed on through the summer, at considerable risk to his health.

A record of this first visit to Italy appeared on *Outre-Mer: A Pilgrimage Beyond the Sea* which was written in 1833-34 and published in 1835. The form of this youthful travelogue was based on Irving's *Sketch-Book*, and the similarity was noted at once in a contemporary review in the Lon-

* This paper is the result of research conducted for the Associazione Anglistica Italiana, sponsored by the Consiglio Nazionale delle Ricerche.

1. H. W. LONGFELLOW, *Works*, Boston 1886. Vol. I, p. 142.

2. *Op. cit.*, vol. I, p. 147.

don *Spectator* which declared « There are two Richmonds in the field ». Most critics were less generous and the comparison with Irving, though natural, has been unfortunate, for Longfellow's book is generally set aside as, in the words of Edmund Hirsh, « inferior to the *Sketch Book* that it too obviously imitates »³.

Yet there is much that is fresh in the *Pilgrimage*, and there is a power of observation and, more surprisingly, a touch of irony which makes even the standard set piece of the Colosseum by moonlight acceptable reading today. Read in an anthology I suspect that very few would attribute the following lines to Longfellow:

It is now past midnight. The moon is full and bright and the shadows lie so dark and massive in the streets that they seem a part of the walls that cast them. I have just returned from the Colosseum, whose ruins are so marvellously beautiful by moonlight. No stranger to Rome omits this midnight visit, for though there is something unpleasant in having one's admiration forestalled, and being as it were romantic aforethought, yet the charm is so powerful, the scene so surprisingly beautiful and sublime, — the hour, the silence, and the colossal ruin have such a mastery over the soul, — that you are disarmed when most upon your guard, — betrayed into an enthusiasm which perhaps you had silently resolved you would not feel . . . and the cross that stands in the centre of the arena looked like a dagger thrust into the sand⁴.

The use of lights and shadows suggests the Rome of Hawthorne's *Marble Faun* rather than what we now think of as Longfellow, and the above description stands very well against Hawthorne's own description of the Colosseum by moonlight, or against Poe's poem, again a night piece.

In another scene of *Outre-Mer* Longfellow approaches even closer to Hawthorne. This is in a description of the dead

3. EDWARD L. HIRSH, *Henry Wadsworth Longfellow*, Minneapolis, 1964, p. 14.

4. H. W. LONGFELLOW, *Works, cit.*, vol. VII, p. 251.

Carmelite friar, borne to his funeral through the streets on an open bier:

It has been a rainy day, — a day of gloom. The church bells never rang in my ears with so melancholy a sound; and this afternoon I saw a mournful scene, which still haunts my imagination. It was the funeral of a monk. I was drawn to the window by the solemn chant, as the procession came from a neighbouring street and crossed the square. First came a long train of priests, clad in black, and bearing in their hands large waxen tapers, which flared in every gust of wind, and were now and then extinguished by the rain. The bier followed, borne on the shoulders of four bare-footed Carmelites; and upon it, ghastly and grim, lay the body of the dead monk, clad in his long grey kirtle, with a twisted cord about his waist. Not even a shroud was thrown over him. His head and feet were bare, and his hands were placed upon his bosom, palm to palm, in the attitude of prayer. His face was emaciated, and of a livid hue; his eyes unclosed; and at every movement of the bier his head nodded to and fro, and with an unearthly and hideous aspect. Behind walked the monastic brotherhood, a long and melancholy procession, with their cowls thrown back, and their eyes cast upon the ground; and last of all came a man with a rough unpainted coffin on his shoulders, closing the funeral train⁵.

The similarities of vocabulary with Hawthorne's chapter XX and chapter XXI of *The Marble Faun*, « The Burial Chant » and « The Dead Capuchin », are natural enough, given the identity of the subject. Both dead monks are barefooted, for both the Carmelites and Capuchins are barefoot orders. The same features strike both onlookers: the tapers, the *livid* or *purplish* hue of the uncovered face, the open eyes. Certainly it is interesting to think that Hawthorne may have read Longfellow's much earlier description of a dead monk and that it may have contributed to his own description in one of the key scenes of *The Marble Faun* but we have no evidence that this was the case. I wish rather to notice that we find the

5. *Cit.*, vol. VII, pp. 249-250.

same kind of romantic sensibility in Longfellow that Hawthorne was to turn so much to his purpose later.

There is much in *Outre-Mer* (which an early critic, Francis H. Underwood, unaccountably described as « a series of gay sketches and legends »)⁶ which links Longfellow to Hawthorne and to Poe. What I want to stress is that Longfellow showed an awareness of this mood of romantic decadence even earlier than they did. It reached him of course through the English romantics. In *Outre-Mer* and in his letters of the period he mentions Thomson (whose « Castle of Indolence » he quotes), Byron and Shelley. Certainly his love of tombs and grave-yards was directly derived from the sepulchral and twilight poetry of the end of the eighteenth century, and even perhaps in part from the novels of terror. A considerable proportion of the three short chapters of *Outre-Mer* devoted to Italy is concerned with tombs and death. It was perhaps natural for him to visit the room where Tasso died, and also Tasso's tomb in the church of Sant' Onofrio, but why, we wonder, did he wander round the cemetery at Leghorn and go to the trouble of copying a long and not particularly inspiring inscription?

I copied the following singular inscription from a tomb-stone in the Protestant cemetery at Leghorn. It is the epitaph of a lady, written by herself, and engraved upon her tomb at her own request.

« Under this stone lies the victim of sorrow,
Fly, wandering stranger, from her mouldering dust,
Lest the rude wind, conveying a particle thereof unto thee
Should communicate that venom melancholy,
That has destroyed the strongest frame and liveliest spirit.
With joy of heart has she resigned her breath,
A living martyr to sensibility! »

How inferior in true pathos is this inscription to one in the cemetery of Bologna:—

6. FRANCIS H. UNDERWOOD, *Henry Wadsworth Longfellow: a biographical study*, Boston 1882, p. 72.

« Lucrezia Picini
Implora eterna pace »⁷.

His comment on the two epitaphs shows something of the taste which marks the whole of *Outre-Mer*, except the sentimental introduction and epilogue, but, written when Poe was penning his first tales, it shows the same kind of sensibility. Longfellow was undoubtedly much less involved than either Poe or Hawthorne, he went less deeply into the darkness and gloom and was much surer that the sunshine outside could and would remove the chill, but this early work of his leaves us wondering what he might have written if success had not come to him easily with the exploitation of his more sentimental vein.

For in Florence, to which he devotes only a few pages, the works of art which struck him most deeply, and of which he leaves a vivid description, are the plague scenes of Zumbo. Longfellow's impressions of these delicate works of art destroyed by the 1966 Florentine floods are striking in their grasp

7. The « Bologna » epitaph was almost certainly taken by Longfellow from Byron, who had found it in Ferrara. In a letter to John Murray dated Bologna June 7 1819 Byron wrote: Some of the epitaphs at Ferrara pleased me more than the more splendid monuments of Bologna; for instance: —

« Martini Luigi
Implora pace ».
« Lucrezia Picini
Implora eterna quiete ».

Can anything be more full of pathos? Those few words say all that can be said or sought: the dead had had enough of life; all they wanted was rest, and this they « implore ». There is all the helplessness, and humble hope, and deathlike prayer, that can arise from the grave — « *implora pace* ». This letter had already been published (MOORE, *Letters and Journals of Lord Byron*, London 1830, vol. II, p. 218) when Longfellow wrote *Outre-Mer*, and he seems to have borrowed the epitaph (and the sentiment) from Byron, misquoting it by jumbling it with Martini Luigi's, and misreading the comment so that he understood that it was to be found at Bologna and not Ferrara. In a letter to Hopner which Moore also gives (p. 216) Byron records the same epitaphs, and in this version it is not very clear whether the *Certosa* in question is at Bologna or Ferrara. This may have been the version Longfellow knew.

of the atmosphere of horror the tiny waxen figures conveyed⁸. Both the choice of subject and a certain relish in the description would seem more in keeping with the taste of Poe than that of the later Longfellow.

In the Florentine museum is a representation in wax of some of the appalling scenes of the plague which desolated this city about the middle of the fourteenth century, and which Boccaccio has described with such simplicity and power in the introduction of his Decamerone. It is the work of a Sicilian artist, by the name of Zumbo. He must have been a man of the most gloomy and saturnine imagination, and more akin to the worm than most of us, thus to have revelled night and day in the hideous mysteries of death, corruption, and the charnel house. It is strange how this representation haunts one. It is like a dream of the sepulchre, with its loathsome corpses, with « the blackening, the bursting of the trunk, — the worm, the rat, and the tarantula at work ». You breathe more freely as you step out into the open air again. . .¹

Longfellow's next visit to Italy was made instead as an old man, when in 1868-69 he toured Europe as the great national poet of America. Already many Italian translations of his works existed, and he was honoured in Rome as in all the capitals of Europe. On the occasion of this visit he made the acquaintance and secured the friendship of Don Michelangelo Caetani, Duke of Sermoneta and of his English wife, the Duchess Margherita. Don Michelangelo was already the friend of many men of letters, not the least of whom had been Walter Scott. Of Don Michelangelo Longfellow had written, in a letter to George W. Green, dated Rome, January 30 1869:

The most sympathetic and cultivated man I have found here is the Duca di Sermoneta; about my age, but totally blind. He can

8. See MARIO PRAZ, *Bellezza e Bizzarria*, Milan, 1960, p. 254 ff. for the impressions made on writers by Zumbo's works. Longfellow was a forerunner of all those quoted by Praz, with the exception of De Sade.

9. H. W. LONGFELLOW, *Works, cit.*, vol. VII, pp. 233-34.

repeat the *Divina Commedia* from beginning to end. We have long conferences together ¹⁰.

In the archives of the Caetani family in Rome there is the following unpublished letter, written by Longfellow four years after his meeting with Don Michelangelo ¹¹. The bereavement referred to is the death of the Duchess in 1872, and Longfellow is recalling the loss of his own second wife, Fanny Appleton, who was burnt to death in 1861, a grief which overshadowed the rest of Longfellow's life. The biblical quotation in the letter is a blending of two texts, both from Job 40 ¹². Neither of these texts is very appropriate but Longfellow probably remembered them as connected vaguely with Job's lamentations rather than intending any specific reference to his own « vileness » or « wickedness ».

Cambridge, Mass. Feb. 2

1873

My Dear Sir,

After long delay, I have at length had the great pleasure of receiving the likeness of yourself, which you were kind enough to send me last Summer by W. Hooker. I am delighted with it, and have it in my study, where it constantly reminds me of you and your family, and all your hospitality and kindness to me in Rome, « *nei di che furono* ». Ah, how often I think of those pleasant days, and wonder if I shall ever see Rome again!

I have heard, my Dear Sir, with great sorrow, of your recent bereavement. I know what that grief is, and lay « *my hand on my mouth, and my mouth in the dust* »; but my silent sympathies are with you and with your household.

10. *Op. cit.*, vol. III, p. 128.

11. This letter belongs to the Fondo Michelangelo Caetani, and is kept in the Caetani archives. I am very grateful to Mr. Hubert Howard for permission to print it here, and for his courtesy in allowing me to read in the archives.

12. v. 4: « Behold I am vile; what shall I answer thee? I will lay mine hand upon my mouth ».

v. 12-13: « ... tread down the wicked in their place. Hide them in the dust together; and bind their faces in secret ».

In the affairs of Italy I take great interest. She seems to me, at this distance, more an united nation now, than she ever has been since the old days of Rome. No nation has produced greater men, in every direction of the human faculties than Italy.

With renewed expressions of most affectionate regard, and kindest remembrances to your family, I am, my Dear Sir,

Yours truly

Henry W. Longfellow

Another unpublished letter by Longfellow to be found in Rome has the interest of being an autograph letter in Italian. His command of the language reminds us that as a young man he wrote an Italian grammar, that for years he was Professor of modern languages at Harvard, and that he was a translator of Dante. The letter published here is among the Ettore Novelli papers in the Biblioteca Angelica, and refers to a patriotic poem written by Ettore Novelli¹³ and sent to Longfellow by a certain « Signora » to whom this letter is addressed. Written in the margin, in another hand, are the words « il Marsala ». This was the title of a poem by Novelli published in pamphlet form in 1875. The same poem is almost certainly the subject of a letter written by Howells, in view of the closeness of date and Howells' reference to « l'ardente patriottismo ». Howells' letter of acknowledgement, like Longfellow's, is addressed to a « Signora » who must have been the sender of the poem and a friend of Novelli's, as the letters were passed on to and kept by him. The letter of Howells was carefully translated, possibly by a Miss Brewster whose name appears in another hand in a corner (or was she the mysterious sender?). Novelli, as he declared more than once in his letters to his friend Giulio Carcano, the translator of Shakespeare, knew no English.

13. Ettore Novelli, 1822-1900, an Italian poet and writer who was for a time librarian of the Biblioteca Angelica, where his papers are now preserved. I wish to thank the librarian of the Biblioteca Angelica for permission to consult these and other manuscripts, and for permission to print the following letters of Longfellow and Howells.

« Io, a mia vergogna, non so nemmeno un'acca o un v doppio dell'inglese »: a letter written on 3rd. April 1857 with reference to a letter of introduction Novelli gave Harriet Beecher Stowe to Carcano, and explaining why he did not meet her himself in person. Howells' letter, of which the original is unfortunately not preserved among Novelli's papers, is most scrupulously translated: the Riverside Press becomes « fiume riva stamperia ». As Novelli's poem *Marsala* is no longer easily available I will quote a few lines, sufficient I think to give an idea of its style and quality:

...
 Osanna osanna: consolato e santo
 Di tante madri e vedovate spose
 Scenda in silenzio per le guance il pianto
 Perenne; e dal palagio a la capanna
 Osanna in terra, e in cielo osanna osanna.

...
 Non io non io te scorderò, Marsala,
 Scalo de' mari e de l'Italia scala.
 E qui, in tuo onor, v'è gala,
 Che mai più grande non ne vidi alcuna;
 Per te venimmo a porto e Italia è una . . .

It is worth noticing that Howells did *not* include anything of Novelli's in the anthology of Italian verse which he published in 1887 under the title *Modern Italian Poets*. No doubt he was already familiar with the genre, where the patriotism is more evident than the poetry, a kind of patriotic verse now preserved only in so many yellowing pamphlets, but still alive in the librettos of operas. Howells and Longfellow must have received many such tributes, and we can only admire the courtesy with which, as the following letters show, they were acknowledged. The weight of Longfellow's correspondence when he was at the height of his fame is shown by his comment in a letter to G. W. Green of December 23, 1872:

A snowstorm. Read, and write letters, — I begin to think I shall never write anything else ¹⁴.

or again by the comment in his Journal for February 19, 1873:

This morning I counted the letters to be answered on my table. They are fifty-two. Thus is my life riddled to pieces ¹⁵.

Yet the following letter, which he took the trouble to write in Italian, shows no trace of exasperation:

Chiarissima Signora,

La prego di gradire i miei sinceri ringraziamenti per il bel poema ch'Ella ha avuto la gentilezza di mandarmi, e per le parole amichevole [*sic*] e graziose, che rendono il dono ancor più grato.

Ho letto il poema con sommo piacere. È pieno di vigore, e di bellezza; e se tal volta non ho ben inteso qualche allusione storica, ho nondimeno sentito sempre l'estro poetico.

Colla maggiore stima

Di Lei

Umil.mo Servo

Enrico W. Longfellow

Howells' letter, of which only the following extremely literal translation is preserved among the Novelli papers, reads:

Ufficio dell'editore

dell'Atlantic Monthly (mensile)

The Riverside Press (fiume-riva stamperia)

Cambridge. Massachussetts.

Giugno 15 1876

Cara Signora,

Devo ringraziarla, benché tardi, pel poema del Commendatore Novelli — Nella mia vita attiva e preoccupata non ho ancora letto. Quando l'avrò fatto, avrò il *piacere* di scriverlene. —

L'ho appena letto e la prego di dirgli quanto io sento l'ardente patriottismo: quanto dolce e musicale io l'ho trovato tutto. Egli ha

14. H. W. LONGFELLOW, *Life, cit.*, vol. III, p. 213.

15. *Op. cit.*, vol. III, p. 216.

l'arte di tutti i grandi Italiani di fare la politica nazionale d'interesse poetico universale. Ho sentito l'altro giorno il Sig. Longfellow lodarlo per quella bellezza di dettagli che colpisce ogni lettera.

La ringrazio

Suo dev.mo

W. D. Howells

So two of the most eminent American men of letters left these brief testimonials to their interest in and sympathy with Italy.

BARBARA ARNETT MELCHIORI