

Longfellow's Tradition; or, Picture-Writing a Nation

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Die Kunst ist nur Gestaltung.—Goethe

In 1840, after finishing "The Wreck of the Hesperus," Henry Wadsworth Longfellow wrote to a friend in Rome: "The *National Ballad* is a virgin soil here in New England; and there are good materials. Beside[s] I have a great notion of working upon *people's feelings*. I am going to have it printed on a sheet, and sold like *Verses*, with a coarse picture on it. . . . Nat. Hawthorne is tickled to death with the idea. [Cornelius Conway] Felton [professor of classics and future president of Harvard University (1860–62)] laughs, and says 'I wouldn't.'"¹ The amusement of his fellow market-conscious author, on one hand, and the mild surprise of his colleague at Harvard, on the other, neatly mark the distance Longfellow desired to span in his national poetry. Longfellow's twentieth-century editor glosses the poet's designs on "a virgin soil" of popular taste as his "gusto at the prospect of sending his poetry further down the social ladder," an aim that "oddly foreshadows Whitman. It is ironic that the self-proclaimed bard of the American

¹ Longfellow to George W. Greene, 5 January 1840, in *The Letters of Henry Wadsworth Longfellow*, ed. Andrew Hilen, 6 vols. (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1966–82), 2:203.

This essay first took shape as a paper given at the American Literature Association symposium on the American Renaissance, Cancún, Mexico, December 1997, and was inspired by the contributions of Mary Loeffelholz and Shirley Samuels, copanelists on "Poetry and the Faces of Nationalism in the American Renaissance." My thanks to them and to Priscilla Wald, who responded with characteristic generosity to our panel. This essay has also benefited from the responses of members of the Comparative Literature Colloquium at the University of Michigan and from the comments of Yopie Prins.

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masses was much less successful in reaching them than the supposedly elitist Cambridge professor, who proved readier to speak to the American people in language they could understand."² But was Longfellow's conversion of a folk tradition to a literary tradition that looked like a folk tradition in fact a way of making literature accessible? Or was it a way of making "good materials" accessible to the literary types who were the implicit audience for his "great notion"? Did the amplification of the adjective signal that the reception of Longfellow's poetry would erase the difference between the two? Did the Smith Professor of Belles Lettres and translator of eighteen languages become a faux bard not by proclaiming himself the voice of the people, as Whitman did, but by the odder strategy of making his poetry look as if he did not write it at all? Longfellow never did publish broadside ballads with pictures on them, but he did write the nineteenth century's best-selling poems, made to be read as if they were pictures, as if reading were self-evident, as if their elaborate classical meters were really a transparent language. What Longfellow imprinted was perhaps not a national literary tradition but the much more historically persistent fantasy that a nation might *become* a literature.

One of the most interesting aspects of the version of the literary that Longfellow helped inaugurate is that it has been so successful that its premises have become invisible. Hence the editor who sees Longfellow as "readier" than Whitman to speak in the vox populi and the other recent champions of Longfellow who lament that "as a poet, competing for attention in our modern age of anxiety and irony, Longfellow has fallen from his great height" or that "when a literary culture loses its ability to recognize and appreciate genuine poems like 'My Lost Youth' because they are too simple, it has surely traded too much of its innocence and openness for a shallow sophistication."³

² Lawrence Buell, ed., introduction to Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, *Selected Poems* (New York: Penguin, 1988), xviii.

³ Angus Fletcher, "Whitman and Longfellow: Two Types of the American Poet," *Raritan* 10, no. 4 (1991): 139; Dana Gioia, "Longfellow in the Aftermath of Modernism," in *The Columbia History of American Poetry*, ed. Jay Parini (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), 85.

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These signs that in the late twentieth century Longfellow has come to seem an antidote to “anxiety and irony” and to stand for the “innocence and openness” that contemporary literary culture has lost testify to the enduring illusion of Longfellow’s project, as well as to what may be most modern about it. To the extent that poems like “The Children’s Hour,” “The Village Blacksmith,” “Paul Revere’s Ride,” *Evangeline: A Tale of Acadie*, and *The Song of Hiawatha* have become associated with an audience that poetry can no longer hope to have in the United States, they have been taken to be the property of that audience, to enfranchise readers in a literate culture from which they are also assumed to be excluded. From an early moment in Longfellow’s reception, the poems have been cast as the spontaneous overflow of popular feeling rather than as its representation. So Felton could write in 1862 that “in the range of American poetry, it would not be easy to find any that is so readily remembered, and that has sunk so deeply into the hearts of the people, and that so spontaneously rises to the speaker’s tongue in the pulpit and the lecture-room.”⁴ When what has been learned, as we say, “by heart” becomes the heart’s unbidden expression, it seems as if hearts could speak in public. Longfellow’s poetry has “work[ed] upon *people’s feelings*” so well that it can be mistaken for feeling.⁵

That impression demands a new class of literary currency, as a British reviewer suggested in 1862:

It must be remembered that the men to whom the genius of poesy has distributed its noblest of gifts have mostly written for a limited class of readers. *Paradise Lost* has never been a popular poem; *Hamlet*, *Macbeth*, and *The Tempest* can hardly yet be said “to take” with the people. Tennyson’s poetry is not for the million; and Wordsworth is still “like a star, dwelling apart.” It may be said, in reply to this, that poets of less caliber are not much complimented by being told that their popularity is mainly owing to the fact that the best poetry is not the most highly appreciated; and this may be granted. But here is another side to the story.

⁴ Cornelius Conway Felton, “Henry Wadsworth Longfellow,” *North American Review*, July 1862, 141.

⁵ For a discussion that informs my own study of the relationship between memorization and performance in nineteenth-century American poetry see Mary Loeffelholz, “Who Killed Lucretia Maria Davidson? or, Poetry in the Domestic-Tutelary Complex,” *Yale Journal of Criticism* 10 (1997): 271–93.

To gain the ear, to stir the pulses, to delight the imagination, of the thousands and tens of thousands on whom the highest efforts of poetic genius are comparatively lost, is no mean triumph. Mr. Longfellow has done this. . . . no writer exhibits a better combination of those general qualities which make poetry pleasant and lovable.⁶

This reviewer takes for granted that the English canon may *be* a canon because by the late middle of the nineteenth century “the best poetry is not the most highly appreciated.” That “poetic genius” may not “make poetry pleasant and lovable” is an assumption that the reviewer shares with the poet who imagined printing his poems with coarse pictures on them. Reviewer and poet also share the recognition that such a version of the canon “for” the educated few necessitates “another side to the story,” a correlative version of a poetry that is, by association, “for” the many. Further, the version of the literary that is popular—and, not incidentally, American—territory is the domain of affection rather than of thought. When poetry is “lovable,” so memorable that it rises from page to tongue as if it had been there all along, it disappears into its reading as if reading were not reading but perception (matter for “the ear,” for “the pulses,” for “the imagination”). It is at that point so thoroughly derivative that it becomes authentic, so artful that it becomes natural, so modern that it seems to define a fall into modernity, so literary that it distinguishes the literary as what it is not. As J. A. Harrison of the University of Virginia put it in 1881, in Longfellow’s poetry “the dust of libraries has become an illumined dust.”⁷

My text for testing some of these ambitious claims about Longfellow’s ambition is one section of *Hiawatha*, his most infamously popular poem. Published in the same year as the first edition of *Leaves of Grass*, the poem begins by directing the reader to view its thousands of lines of trochaic tetrameter as coarse pictures writ large, as the “rude inscription” of a more innocent age:

Ye who love a nation’s legends,
Love the ballads of a people,
That like voices from afar off

⁶ *Eclectic Magazine*, February 1862, 31.

⁷ Harrison, “Henry Wadsworth Longfellow,” *Literary World*, 26 February 1881.

Call to us to pause and listen,
 Speak in tones so plain and childlike,
 Scarcely can the ear distinguish
 Whether they are sung or spoken;
 Listen to this Indian Legend,
 To this Song of Hiawatha!

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 Ye, who sometimes, in your rambles
 Through the green lanes of the country,
 Where the tangled barberry-bushes
 Hang their tufts of crimson berries
 Over stone walls grey with mosses,
 Pause by some neglected graveyard,
 For a while to muse, and ponder
 On a half-effaced inscription,
 Written with little skill of song-craft,
 Homely phrases, but each letter
 Full of hope and yet of heart-break,
 Full of all the tender pathos
 Of the Here and the Hereafter;
 Stay and read this rude inscription,
 Read this Song of Hiawatha!⁸

The fiction that a book that sold thirty thousand copies in its first six months might be read both as the voice of a people and as their epitaph is here also the fiction that poetic writing may be as ingenuous and indigenous as the “tones so plain and childlike” that it claims to record. By establishing a parallelism between the “pause” necessary to hear distant voices and the “pause” conventional in graveyard poetry, the prologue makes the hearer of the unbidden welling up of native song obey the rules that educated readers are customarily bidden to follow. The *siste viator* [stop, traveler] convention inscribed in the last stanza amounts to a directive to readers familiar with the poetry of, say, Thomas Gray (which is to say, almost all barely educated readers of English verse) to view “the ballads of a people” buried here as analogs to “the short and simple annals of the poor” in the “Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard.” As John Guillory convincingly argues, the invitation in the “Elegy” to pause and read commonplaces on the com-

⁸ *The Song of Hiawatha*, vol. 2 of *The Works of Henry Wadsworth Longfellow*, ed. Samuel Longfellow, 14 vols. (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin, 1886), 115–6.

mon fate of commoners gives common readers access to a literature they cannot read: "The cultural entitlement that for Gray is defined by classical literacy, by his immense learning, is . . . acquired by his readers at a *discount*, at the cost only of acquiring the vernacular literacy requisite to reading the poem."⁹ Both in its form and, especially, in its circulation as a pedagogical text, Gray's poem reworks "the vernacular precisely in order to *estrangle it from itself*, to invent a kind of vernacular Latin," which amounts to the difference between what we ordinarily call ordinary language and poetic diction (124).

The importance of Guillory's reading for my reading of Longfellow's invocation of Gray is that it allows us to see that *Hiawatha* makes not only classical literacy but vernacular literacy available at a discount. Gray's poetic-diction-as-vernacular-Latin becomes Longfellow's vernacular-Latin-as-illiterate-song. According to the prologue, a classically and canonically authorized reading experience is made possible by "homely phrases," familiar yet estranged by their half-effacement and metrical rehearsal. The poem takes to heart the advice that the sixteen-year-old Longfellow (then at Bowdoin) received from his mother after having written to her that he was (as his college curriculum required) poring over Gray and that what he took to be Gray's obscurity contributed "in the highest degree to sublimity." His mother wrote back that she knew only the "Elegy" and admired it "for its truth and simplicity, . . . I presume you will not allow it any sublimity. Obscurity is favorable to the sublime, you think. It may be so, but I am much better pleased with those pieces that touch the feelings and improve the heart than with those that excite the imagination only and raise perhaps an indistinct admiration. That is, an admiration of we know not exactly what."¹⁰

⁹ Guillory, *Cultural Capital: The Problem of Literary Canon Formation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), 121. Readers of Guillory and of Bourdieu will notice how indebted I am to their senses of "distinction," although I would also suggest that these pages on Longfellow are one step in addressing the difference that the American context of academic and popular cultural distinctions may make in the British and French cases on which they focus.

¹⁰ The exchange is cited by Lawrance Thompson, *Young Longfellow (1807-1843)* (New York: Macmillan, 1938), 37. Longfellow's youthful imitation of Gray may be compared to the success he obtained by becoming the American Gray. As his friend Charles Sumner wrote in 1843: "I had rather be the author of 'Psalm of Life,' 'The

In 1855, over thirty years later, Longfellow seems to have turned his mother's excellent definition of sublimity as the "admiration of we know not exactly what" toward a simplicity limned with obscurity. The "rude inscription" that is the poem *Hiawatha* thus presents as the print version of popular song the learning of Professor Longfellow and represents his immense poetic erudition in the guise of a script as "written with little skill of song-craft." The ruse is not expected to fool anyone; on the contrary, by embedding the classical, the canonical, and the pedagogical in "tones so plain and childlike," Longfellow endows his readers with the advanced literacy they do not have to grasp to possess. They are given an indistinct admiration for interpretive skills they do not have to know they have.

And that's not all. As Angus Fletcher remarks, "*Hiawatha* can be read as an implicit treatise on the nature of language, on a basic semi-otic level of analysis (and this is quite easy for any reader to do, once he notices that the poem is all about language)" (141). Echoing the poem's reiterated reassurance ("quite easy for any reader to do"), Fletcher takes up where Longfellow leaves off. While the contemporary critic seeks to put his readers at ease with literary theory (as if to say that university literature professors just obscure what for the rest of us is common sense), the nineteenth-century poet puts his readers in the position of being able to decipher several languages in which they did not know they were so fluent. Further, since the "half-effaced inscription" of the poem marks not only a poor, neglected rural grave but the memorial of a vanishing aboriginal culture, American readers can feel as if what "Indian Legends"—indeed, what Indians—vanish into were *them*. While the transliterated Ojibwa terms that the poem so obsessively translates ("When the heron, the Shuh-shuh-gah"; "Mahng, the loon, the wild-goose, Wawa"; "He had mittens, Minjekahwun"; "Strangled Kahgahgee, the raven"; "Mighty Peboan, the winter"; etc.) do not require the vocabulary that Longfellow provided with his notes at the back of the text, the quasi-scholarly apparatus serves as a pleasurable reiteration of what "any reader" of the poem already knows. In

Light of the Stars,' 'The Reaper and the Flowers,' and 'Excelsior,' than those rich pieces of Gray. I think Longfellow without rival near his throne in America" (cited by Thompson, 341).

Hiawatha poetry becomes a language estranged from itself not in Guillery's sense of "a kind of vernacular Latin"—a vernacular that one would have to go to school to read—but in the strange sense that one can see layers of European poetic tradition in it by "reading" the original language of America in English, right here at home (hence the thousands of "household" editions of the poem).¹¹ In this way the persistent elegiac strain in Longfellow's poem surely participates in what Lora Romero has identified as "the historical sleight of hand crucial to the topos of the doomed aboriginal: it represents the disappearance of the native not just as natural but as having already happened."¹²

But *Hiawatha* not only actively joins the American campaign to "disappear" native cultures by appearing to chronicle genocide passively as a *fait accompli*; it makes the passage of one American language into another—of the *native* into the *nation*—the vehicle of that disappearance. As Romero suggests, the figure of the doomed aboriginal is instantiated within "a larger antebellum cultural discourse in which the ethnographic and pedagogic overlap" (116). For Longfellow, this overlap matched the intersection of the sphere of the professor of modern languages and the sphere of what one rather nasty reviewer of *Hiawatha* called "our own pet national poet": a theory of the American national character, the distinguishing mark as well as the personification of a cultural ideal of a native derivative poetic language.¹³

I want to devote the rest of this essay to the "Picture-Writing" section of *Hiawatha* (XIV), and especially to Longfellow's borrowing of the first American ethnographer's depiction of Indian ideographic characters as cultural inscriptions that doom Indians to a prenatal, prevernacular, prefigurative literature redeemed in Longfellow's own

¹¹ Longfellow's success in bringing home the foreign is, of course, hardly a new idea of his popularity. See, e.g., Christabel F. Fiske, "Mercerized Folklore," *Poet Lore* 31 (1920): 538–75.

¹² Romero, "Vanishing Americans: Gender, Empire, and New Historicism," in *The Culture of Sentiment: Race, Gender, and Sentimentality in Nineteenth-Century America*, ed. Shirley Samuels (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 115.

¹³ "We cannot deny that the spirit of poesy breathes throughout the work, . . . but we cannot but express our regret that our own pet national poet should not have selected as the theme of his muse something higher and better than the silly legends of the savage aborigines" ("Hiawatha," *Boston Daily Traveller*, 20 November 1855, 5).

national, vernacular, richly figured verse. But first we should consider that *Hiawatha's* inclusion of Henry Rowe Schoolcraft's descriptions of Indian culture (which Longfellow begins by acknowledging in his notes) may have been motivated by what Longfellow already thought about modern belles lettres. Just before beginning *Evangeline* in 1847, Longfellow wrote in his journal that "much is said now-a-days of a national literature. Does it mean anything? Such a literature is the expression of national character. We have, or shall have, a composite one, embracing French, Spanish, Irish, English, Scotch, and German peculiarities. Whoever has within himself most of these is our truly national writer. In other words, whoever is most universal is also the most national."¹⁴ The concept of *Weltliteratur* that Longfellow took from Goethe turns in the American context to a personage of world letters, a miracle of trans-European breeding.¹⁵ Because in this view the New World sums the Old, "we have" in the United States all of the root characters without having to have, as it were, their character: specific languages melt into a polyglot "composite," which can be thought "universal" in the sense that in it plural "peculiarities" disappear into one common "expression." This "national character" is the liberal idiom of *Hiawatha* or, as Longfellow famously wrote in his notes to the poem, of "this Indian Edda."

Much has been made of Longfellow's bad faith in Europeanizing native traditions, but little has been said of the notion of Europe involved in *Hiawatha's* translation of "them" into "us." This is surprising, since Longfellow's occupation as professor of modern languages was informed by a very particular notion of how the European translated into the American. In effect, as instructor in all of the languages

¹⁴ Entry for 6 January 1847, cited in *Life of Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, with Extracts from His Journals and Correspondence*, ed. Samuel Longfellow, 2 vols. (Boston: Ticknor, 1886), 2:73-4. This edition contains the only published version of Longfellow's extensive journals.

¹⁵ Gioia notes Longfellow's "visionary sympathy for Goethe's concept of *Weltliteratur*, the dialectic by which national literatures would gradually merge into a universal concert" (76). Gioia is surely right about Longfellow's debt to Goethe (he taught the first class offered in the United States on *Faust*), although Longfellow's lecture notes and language texts show a more complicated relationship between national literatures and "a universal concert" of world literature than the term *dialectic* would suggest.

he names (and in several he does not), Longfellow was the universal national character he described. In 1845, ten years before *Hiawatha* appeared, Longfellow published the first popular version of the curriculum he was developing in comparative literature at Harvard, *The Poets and Poetry of Europe*. On the title page we find an epigraph from Gray: "From Helicon's harmonious springs / A thousand rills their mazy progress take." By implication Gray's "Progress of Poesy" has become Longfellow's progress of European poetry for American readers. If *Hiawatha* was intended as an "Indian Edda," then *The Poets and Poetry of Europe* was Longfellow's European Edda, in all of the possible derivations of the word that are listed in the preface to the section "Icelandic Language and Poetry":

Of the name Edda, Mallet says: "The most probable conjecture is that it is derived from an old Gothic word, signifying Grandmother." This conjecture, however, seems rather improbable. That of Rūhs is better: "Edda is the feminine form of *Othr*, which signifies Reason and Poetry, and is therefore called Poetics, or a Guide to the Art of Poetry." Olafsen derives the name from the obsolete verb *aeda*, to teach, which seems the most probable etymology. Of these poems numerous specimens will be given; though, it is to be feared, the reader will find them too often like the songs of the Bards in the old Romance, who "came and recited verses before Arthur, and no man understood those verses but Kadyri-ath only, save that they were in Arthur's praise."¹⁶

From the root of the Gothic grandmother to the feminization of poetry in poetics to an obsolete verb for teaching, this conjectural philological indulgence on the part of the anthologist tells American readers just what they do not want to know: a foreign folk tradition needs a scholar with a funny name to translate it for them, and his translation will render their familiar language stranger than they thought. While *The Poets and Poetry of Europe* sold well, its conversion of the native into the national remained a transparently pedagogical exercise aimed at educating American readers in the literatures contained in its 780 pages without, as the preface states, "any poetic defi-

¹⁶ Longfellow, *The Poets and Poetry of Europe* (Philadelphia: Carey and Hart, 1845), 31. Later in life Longfellow admitted that the eye trouble he suffered in 1845 had prompted him to have Felton write many of the notes in this volume, so the Edda etymology may be Felton's—or Longfellow in a Feltonish mode.

niton, or . . . any theory of art" (v). Because the idea of an anthology is to present its selections as self-evident—as poems from which readers can choose for themselves—and the idea of a translation is to make legible an unreadable language, Longfellow's gratuitous etymology for Icelandic folk song cycles obscures the lucidity his book promises by exposing the scholar's choices to the reader's view. Ten years later in *Hiawatha* Longfellow reversed the strategy by making the obsolete roots of bardic song seem as familiar as the speech of everybody's grandmother while giving a lesson in poetics that anyone (even women, who were of course the main consumers of nineteenth-century literature) could understand.

When Longfellow read Schoolcraft's *Historical and Statistical Information* in 1854 ("three huge quartos, ill-digested, and without any index"), he found a section on "Indian pictography" that must have seemed a perfect illustration of the universally available composite he wanted European languages to look like to American readers.¹⁷ Longfellow had resigned from Harvard in February and had written in January that he was "reading with delight the Finnish *Kalevela*" (*Life*, 2:247). The epic cycle in trochaic tetrameter (or, as he called it, after Latin scansion, "dimeter") met the chronicle by the Indian agent and self-styled ethnographer where *The Poets and Poetry of Europe* had ended: the borrowed meter allowed Longfellow to render his translation of European folk song into the figures of an American translation of a foreign language already present on native soil. Better, according to Schoolcraft, the written language of these indigenous foreigners seemed to require no translation at all, since it was made not of letters but of pictures. So in section XIV of *Hiawatha* (which, we are told in the notes, takes place "on the southern shore of Lake Superior, between the Pictured Rocks and the Grand Sable") we read that "in

¹⁷ Schoolcraft, *Historical and Statistical Information Concerning the History, Condition, and Prospects of the Indian Tribes of the United States*, 3 vols. (Philadelphia: Lippincott, Grambi, 1851). The plates from these volumes, "collected and prepared under the direction of the Bureau of Indian Affairs per act of Congress of March 3, 1847," are reproduced courtesy of the Rare Books Division, Department of Rare Books and Special Collections, Princeton University Library. My thanks especially to Annalee Pauls, who generously prepared these lovely photographs of the paintings originally copied by one "Capt. S. Eastman, U.S.A." Longfellow's journal entry for 26 June 1840 is included in *Life*, 2:248.

those days," or in the vanished past that the poem begins by elegizing, Hiawatha said:

"Lo! How all things fade and perish!
From the memory of the old men
Fade away the great traditions,
The achievements of the warriors,
The adventures of the hunters,
All the wisdom of the Medas,
All the craft of the Wabenos,
All the marvelous dreams and visions
Of the Jossakeeds, the Prophets!

"Great men die and are forgotten,
Wise men speak; their words of wisdom
Perish in the ears that hear them,
Do not reach the generations
That, as yet unborn, are waiting
In the great, mysterious darkness
Of the speechless days that shall be!

"On the grave-posts of our fathers
Are no signs, no figures painted;
Who are in those graves we know not,
Only know they are our fathers.
Of what kith they are and kindred,
From what old, ancestral Totem,
Be it Eagle, Bear, or Beaver,
They descended, this we know not,
Only know they are our fathers.

"Face to face we speak together,
But we cannot speak when absent,
Cannot send our voices from us
To the friends that dwell afar off;
Cannot send a secret message,
But the bearer learns our secret,
May pervert it, may betray it,
May reveal it unto others."

(219)

For these reasons Hiawatha invents picture-writing: to preserve the memorial trace, to create a history, to transmit a history, to claim an inheritance, to establish kinships, to disseminate presence across distance but also to keep communication private. In brief, Hiawatha invents writing to invent culture, although we know that the culture

he invents is already dead precisely because he inscribes it in a writing that marks all of these functions of the written as "primitive." As Schoolcraft wrote: "Picture-writing was the earliest form of the notation of ideas adopted by mankind. There can be little question that it was practised in the primitive ages, and that it preceded all attempts both at hieroglyphic and alphabetic writing" (1:341). Thus even as we watch Hiawatha make a culture, we are meant to decipher its undoing in the very alphabetic vernacular that makes available to us "the earliest form of . . . notation," which letters have now extinguished. Each stanza of the opening of the picture-writing section makes this extinguishing obscurely clear: the Ojibwa words in the first stanza have already been translated in the poem so many times that we are supposed to recognize them ("Medas" [medicine men], "Wabenos" [magicians]) as common (if not, we can always consult Longfellow's vocabulary), and we already know from the prologue that the poem is to be read as the epitaph (which is like but is *not* the epitaph in pastoral elegy) of forgotten men. In the third stanza we are reminded that their descent is our own, that "they are our fathers." It seems plain enough that descent would be recorded on grave posts, but the idea that the dead would be descended from particular "ancestral Totem[s]" might give one pause. Since *totem* is an American English word taken from the Ojibwa root *nintōtem*, "family engraving, mark," it is more than a translation of an Indian name; it is that name made over for vernacular use. Such words mark the distance between American language and English colonial usage at the same time that they colonize the supposedly obsolete roots from which they derive. How could Hiawatha be saying that his emerging culture needs writing in order to trace its lineage back to characters that, by definition, would already have to have been written by the culture that was to make sure that lineage came to an end? The answer may be traced through Longfellow's reading of Schoolcraft's interpretation of picture-writing as "the expression of national character."

The first set of illustrations (and there are hundreds) in Schoolcraft's account of "Indian pictography" are six Chippewa and Dakota "grave posts" (fig. 1). The fifth post in the series (in the middle of the bottom line of three) Schoolcraft glosses as follows:

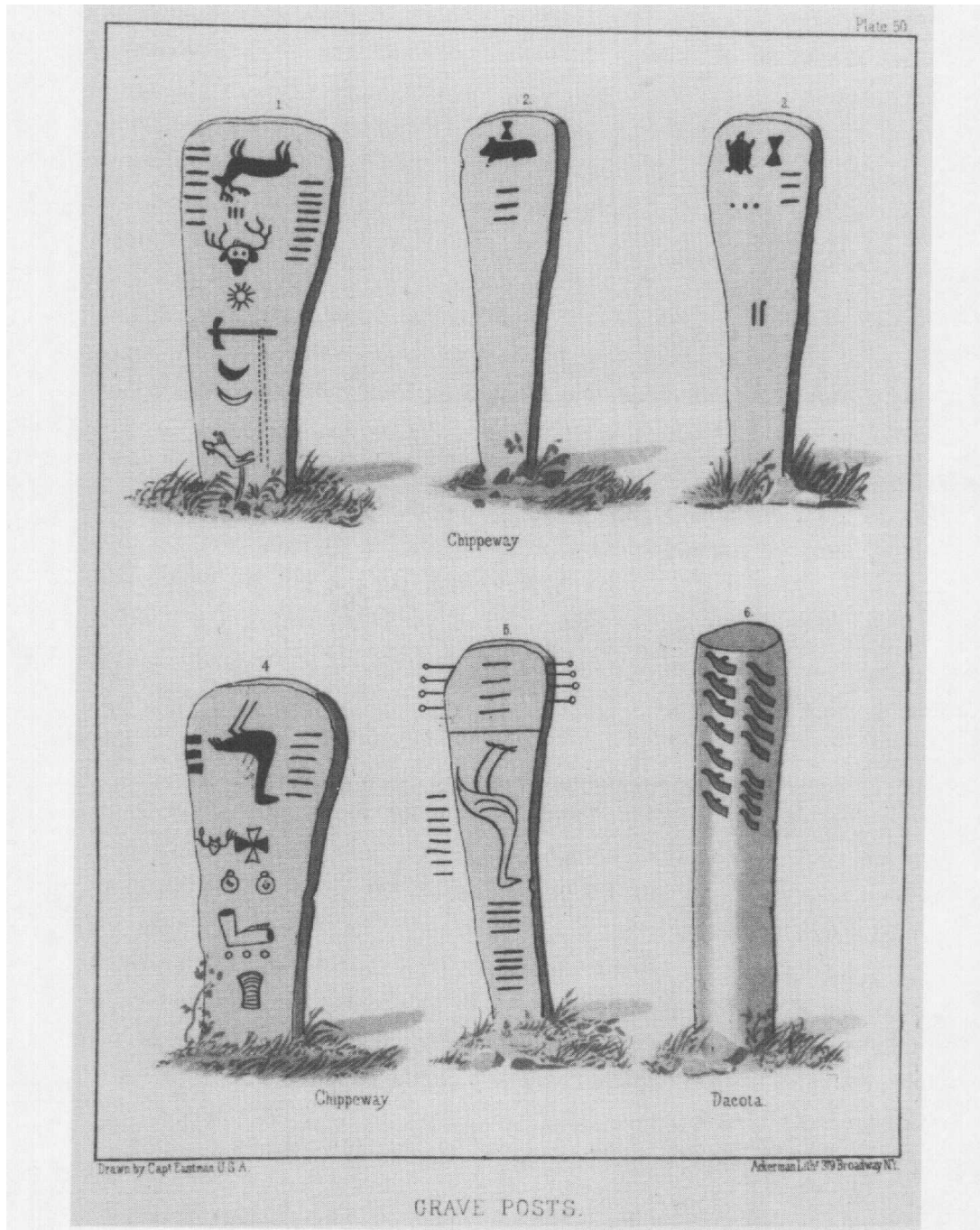


Figure 1. Chippewa and Dakota "grave posts"

The reversed bird denotes [the deceased's] family name, or clan, the crane. Four transverse lines above it, signify that he had killed four of his enemies in battle. This fact was declared, I was informed, by the funeral orator, at the time of his interment. At the same moment, the orator dedicated the ghosts of these four men, who had been killed by him in battle, and presented them to the deceased chief, to accompany him to the land of spirits. The four lines to the right, and four corresponding lines to the left of these central marks, represent eight eagles' feathers, and are commemorative of his bravery. Eight marks, made across the edge of the inscription-board, signify that he had been a member of eight war parties. The nine transverse marks below the totem, signify that the *orator* who officiated at the funeral, and drew the inscription, had participated himself in nine war parties. (1:357)

Who could read this? “Denotes,” “signify,” “represent,” and “signify” twice more seem to say that this description is a *reading* of the grave post, but if so, it exposes an extreme case of what the linguistic anthropologists Michael Silverstein and Greg Urban call “a looseness of fit between metadiscursive encoding (in genre or status/role) and actual discourse practices.”¹⁸ To decipher the variously placed blank lines, our translator requires an informant privy to the discourse of the funeral orator; what is “written” on the post is not what is written in Schoolcraft’s book, because pictography does not pretend to contain its own interpretation. The metadiscursive and the discursive can be joined only by an interlocutor who translates blank lines back into oral tradition. The need for such a translation is what Schoolcraft finds wanting in picture-writing: it allows no vernacular literacy, since the system “is largely mnemonic, and it is essential to their [the pictures’] explanation that the interpreter be acquainted, not only with the characteristic points and customs of their [the Chippewas’ and Dakotas’] history, but with their peculiar mythology, idolatry, and mode of worship” (1:333). The key word here—the same word used by Longfellow for what must be transcended by the national “composite”—is “pecu-

¹⁸ Silverstein and Urban, eds., *Natural Histories of Discourse* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 9. Silverstein and Urban include recent anthropological discussions of “looseness of fit” and analyses of “institutions in which attempts are made to tighten the fit, to fix the relationship” (9). My thanks to Michael Warner for guessing how important this book would be to my thinking about the “natural history” of nineteenth-century American poetry.

liar." Curiously, the ethnographer finds the limits of pictography in its ethnocentrism. The writing in which Hiawatha invents his culture is doomed to be possessed by the literate few, who interpret it to those who are unfamiliar with the "peculiar" aspects of any given inscription. This is why picture-writing is, in Schoolcraft's view, "primitive": "The gradation between a heap of stones, a barrow, a mound, a teocalli, and a pyramid, are [*sic*] not more marked as connected links in the rise of architecture, than are a representative figure, an ideographic symbol, a phonetic sign, and an alphabetic symbol, in the onward train of letters" (1:342). The "onward train of letters" is like (exactly like) Longfellow's onward train that leads to the universal "national character" of modern American culture, with this difference: the ideographic symbol becomes the perfect figure for modern American vernacular poetry precisely because it only seems more accessible than the alphabetic writing that vanquishes it in its insistent translation. As George Saintsbury remarked, "The constant repetition of barbaric words with their English synonyms [may] overpass the effect of strange terms in poetry, and begin to produce rather that of reading a lexicon."¹⁹ When the lexicon becomes legible, so do the interpretive powers of the "universal" scholar, who prints for the masses what only the initiate can know.

Schoolcraft makes a quite complicated (or jumbled) case for the incipient symptoms that prove that American Indian pictography is already aboard the "onward train of letters" toward the phonetic signs and alphabetic writing that for him (as for most eighteenth-century thinkers about the origins of language) meant modern cultural progress.²⁰ In a conventional reading of the Rosetta Stone, Schoolcraft

¹⁹ Saintsbury, "Longfellow's Poems," in *Prefaces and Essays* (London: Macmillan, 1933), 337. The essay was originally published as the preface to a British edition of Longfellow in 1907.

²⁰ For a useful account of typologies of writing and letters from the eighteenth century to the "new media" of the twentieth see Roger Chartier, "Representations of the Written Word," in *Forms and Meanings: Texts, Performances, and Audiences from Codex to Computer* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1995), 6–24. Chartier's reading of Vico's political classification, which "links theocracy to divine writing, aristocratic government to heroic symbols, and popular freedom, be it republican or monarchic, to vulgar letters" (8), seems especially suggestive for Longfellow's project as well as for the claims that some have made about his poetry's profoundly democratic effect.

gives particular attention to the nineteenth-century finding that among the stone's hieroglyphic, demotic, and ancient Greek inscriptions, the Greek one is a "*translation*," and this revelation prompts his conjecture (based on that of contemporary German philologists) that Egyptian hieroglyphics are "phonetic" (1:348). If prefigurations of "alphabetic characters were known in Asia about 3317 years before the discovery of America" (1:343), then we may "employ the pictorial art to aid in denoting internationalism" (1:344). If Schoolcraft can trace in the archaeology of picture-writing the beginnings of an alphabet (fig. 2), then he can also suggest that American aboriginal culture was translated to the New World from the very old one—from the Semitic world that modern European culture had already displaced (as Schoolcraft puts it, the discovery of the Rosetta Stone is "what the world owes to the French invasion of Egypt" [1:349]). (The not uncommon theory of Semitic kinship between old East and old West also emerges at a bizarre moment in Longfellow's journal in 1849 when he describes Kah-ge-ga-gah'-bowh, an Ojibwa chief and lecturing sensation, as dressed in "a chief's costume, with little bells jangling upon it, like the bells and pomegranates of the Jewish priests" [*Life*, 2:137].) While the symbols that Schoolcraft prints as an alphabetic arrangement are still inaccessible without translation, the form in which he prints them—their lineation, numeration, sequential framing; in short, their *graphology*—makes them look protoalphabetic. Gradually, "primitive" culture comes to look in these pictures more modern, although also more "primitive"—even, to return to Longfellow's way of phrasing the desired effect, more directly representative of "*people's feelings*" (hence, perhaps, the recent use of such pictographs in politically correct sentimental marketing, which is why figure 2 also looks like an ad for Starbucks).

The odd fit between Longfellow's translation of the Old World to the New and Schoolcraft's translation of American Indian inscriptions as old writing destined to become (already "denoting") modern letters obviously opens more questions about the nineteenth-century genealogy of writing than this essay can hope to close. One of those questions turns on the alliance of writing and power that is implicit in the subjection of the primitive to the modern in Schoolcraft's evolutionary schemata as well as in my own caricature of the modern com-

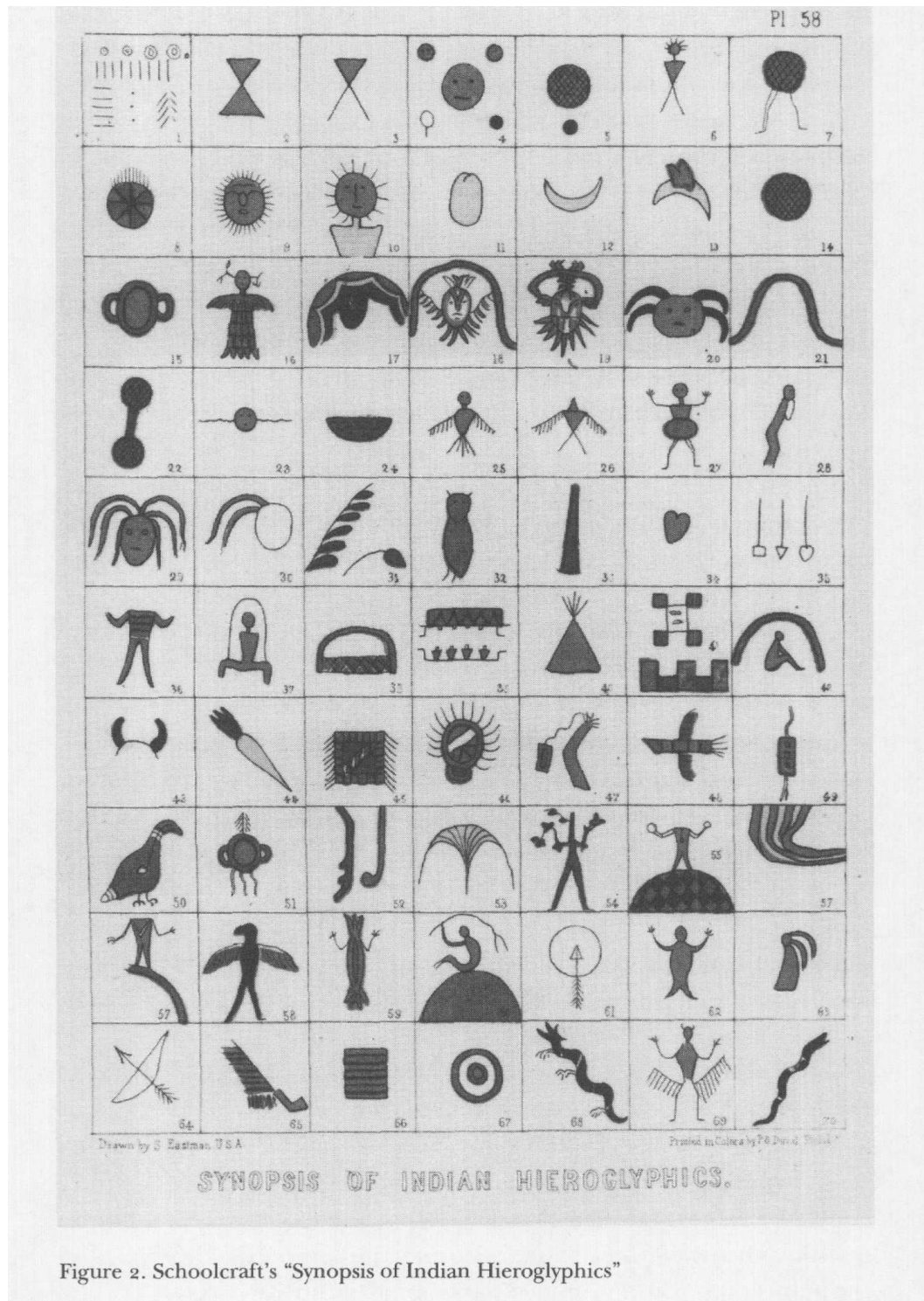


Figure 2. Schoolcraft's "Synopsis of Indian Hieroglyphics"

mercial exploitation of pictography. Certainly the progressivist view of primitive writing that Longfellow took from Schoolcraft rhymed with his view of American poetry as the summation of the European world, but the power supposed by the literary tradition that Longfellow proposed needs to be scrutinized carefully. On one hand, one is tempted to agree with Claude Lévi-Strauss that if one uses writing (as Schoolcraft and Longfellow do) as the most basic criterion by which to distinguish “civilization from barbarism,” then “the primary function of writing, as a means of communication, is to facilitate the enslavement of other human beings.”²¹ This would be the most cynical view of Longfellow’s claim to represent “*people’s feelings*” in print. On the other hand, Jacques Derrida is right to point out that Lévi-Strauss’s hypothesis

is so quickly confirmed that it hardly merits its name. . . . It has long been known that the power of writing in the hands of a small number, caste, or class, is always contemporaneous with hierarchization, let us say with political difference; it is at the same time distinction into groups, classes, and levels of economico-politico-technical power, and delegation of authority, power deferred and abandoned to an organ of capitalization. . . . This entire structure appears as soon as a society begins to live as a society, which is to say from the origin of life in general, when, at very heterogeneous levels of organization and complexity, it is possible to *defer presence*, that is to say *expense* or consumption, and to organize production, that is to say *reserve* in general. This is produced well before the appearance of writing in a narrow sense, but it is true, and one cannot ignore it, that the appearance of certain systems of writing three or four thousand years ago was an extraordinary step in the history of life.²²

Derrida’s point is that the notion of writing as treacherous, as a fall from the innocence of speech, as potentially controlling, as dangerous and divisive is one of the oldest ideas in the book; political difference must be produced by many societal structures for which writing takes the rap. My point in invoking this shorthand version of the Lévi-Strauss–Derrida debate over the nature of “primitive” writing is simply

²¹ Lévi-Strauss, *Tristes Tropiques*, trans. John Russell (New York: Criterion, 1961), 291.

²² Derrida, “The Violence of the Letter: From Lévi-Strauss to Rousseau,” in *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore, Md.: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976), 130–1.

to suggest that both ideas were current for readers of Longfellow in a surprising form. While American readers may indeed have been suspicious of literariness "in the hands of a small number, caste, or class," Longfellow also gave them a figure for a writing emptied of exploitative power, not the pale shadow of authentic speech but its picture, its broadside expression. Hiawatha states that his invention of writing is intended to defer presence, to delegate authority, to keep secrets. But what he also promises, what Longfellow promises, is that everyone will be able to read the language of deferral, of distinction, of concealment because it is merely the published imprint of each and every heart.

Such is the explicit promise of the longest series of pictographs that Longfellow "read" in Schoolcraft, "the Love-Song":

The most subtle of all medicines,
The most potent spell of magic,
Dangerous more than war or hunting;
Thus the Love-Song was recorded,
Symbol and interpretation.

First a human figure standing,
Painted in the brightest scarlet;
'Tis the lover, the musician,
And the meaning is: "My painting
Makes me powerful over others."

Then the figure seated, singing,
Playing on a drum of magic,
And the interpretation: "Listen!
'Tis my voice you hear, my singing!"

Then the same red figure seated
In the shelter of a wigwam,
And the meaning of the symbol:
"I will come and sit beside you
In the mystery of my passion!"

Then two figures, man and woman,
Standing hand in hand together,
With their hands so clasped together
That they seem in one united;
And the words thus represented
Are: "I see your heart within you,
And your cheeks are red with blushes."

Next the maiden on an island,
In the centre of an island,

And the song this shape suggested
 Was: "Though you were at a distance,
 Were upon some far-off island,
 Such a spell I cast upon you,
 Such the magic power of passion,
 I could straightway draw you to me!"
 Then the figure of the maiden
 Sleeping, and the lover near her,
 Whispering to her in her slumbers,
 Saying: "Though you were far from me
 In the land of Sleep and Silence,
 Still the voice of love would reach you!"
 And the last of all the figures
 Was a heart within a circle,
 Drawn within a magic circle;
 And the image had this meaning:
 "Naked lies your heart before me,
 To your naked heart I whisper!"
 Thus it was that Hiawatha,
 In his wisdom, taught the people
 All the mysteries of painting,
 All the art of Picture Writing.

(222-4)

Figure 3 represents the pictographic version of the Love-Song that Longfellow would have seen in Schoolcraft's printing of it. I in turn print all of Longfellow's "*translation*" of the Love-Song to ask what sort of translation it claims to be. Given Schoolcraft's view of American Indian pictography, how can Longfellow's poem claim that "the Love-Song was recorded, / Symbol and interpretation"? Isn't interpretation precisely what ideographic symbols—even if they contain phonetic elements—leave out? Isn't the interpretation what picture-writing cannot record? Perhaps the slip into the passive voice is occasioned by the tetrameter, but their grammar dictates that the lines must mean that both "symbol and interpretation" can be not only read but written. As they are—by Longfellow. In Schoolcraft's chapter "The Character of the Indian Race," Longfellow would read the following translation of the pictures designated by Schoolcraft's subscripted numerals:

Figure 1 represents a person who affects to be invested with a magic power to charm the other sex, which makes him regard himself as a monedo, or god. He depicts himself as such, and therefore sings—It is

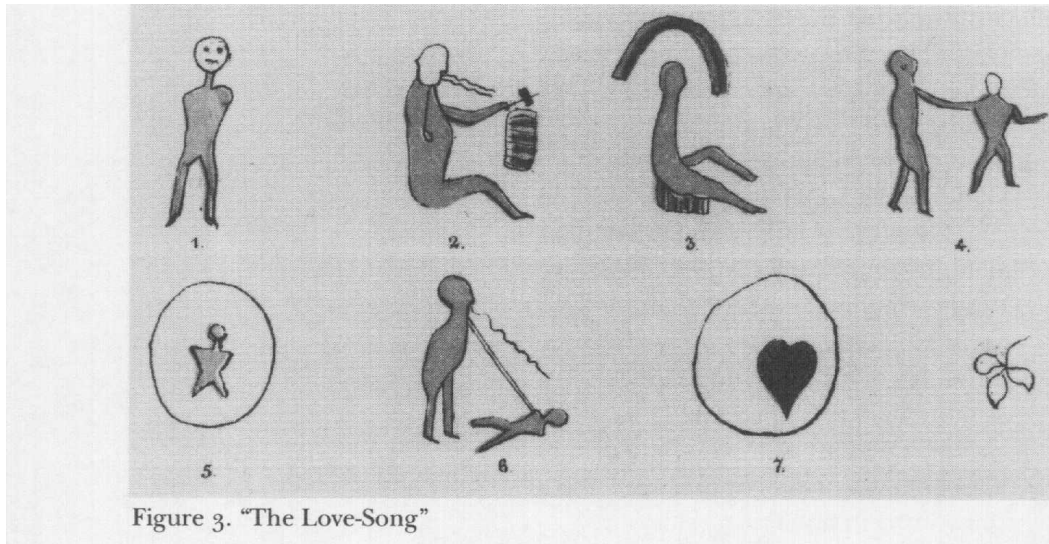


Figure 3. "The Love-Song"

my painting that makes me a god. In No. 2, he further illustrates this idea by his power in music. He is depicted as beating a magic drum. He sings—Hear the sounds of my voice, of my song; it is my voice. In No. 3, he denotes the effects of his necromancy. He surrounds himself with a secret lodge. He sings—I cover myself in sitting down by her. In No. 4, he depicts the intimate union of their affections, by joining two bodies with one continuous arm. He sings—I can make her blush, because I hear all she says of me. In No. 5, he represents her on an island. He sings—Were she on a distant island, I could make her swim over. In No. 6, she is depicted asleep. He boasts of his magical powers, which are capable of reaching her heart. He sings—Though she was far off, even on the other hemisphere. Figure 7 depicts a naked heart. He sings—I speak to your heart. (1:403)

The only difference between the Schoolcraft and Longfellow translations makes all the difference: Schoolcraft's repeated references both to the pictures evident in his text ("No. 5 . . . No. 6 . . . Figure 7") and to the memorized song that accompanies them ("He sings— . . . He sings—") point away from the sequence as self-sufficient script toward the sequence as performance. In *The Song of Hiawatha* both the pictographs and the singer are folded into the poetic text that seems to show and tell itself. It can pretend to do what picture-writing cannot precisely because it *is* a poetic text; the all-too-evident meter tightens the fit between metadiscursive encoding and actual discourse practices by making genre into the graphic as well as the lyric song. Such use of genre makes the writer "powerful over

others" because it represents the inanimate, impersonal printedness of the best-selling poem in American history not as writing but as intimately magic paint. If for Gray poetic diction became "vernacular Latin," for Longfellow it became the dream of a *lingua communis* no longer linguistic, of perfect recognition, of infinite transmission. It made reading look like seeing.

By making American Indian pictures into English metrical script, Longfellow figured as "power" features that Schoolcraft considered the essential errors in pictography. Whereas in Schoolcraft's rendition "the element, or unit in picture-writing" is that "in every case the nations mistook a picture for a god" (1:422)—mistook writing for magic, read figures literally—what we immediately see when comparing the pictographic text in figure 3 to Schoolcraft's translation and then to Longfellow's is that the images themselves cannot be read literally at all. If we erase Schoolcraft's numerals, we might even begin to wonder whether the pictures "read" left to right. Might Indian pictography not obey the same rules as the "Hebrew book" in Longfellow's "Jewish Cemetery at Newport," in which the vanished Jews are said to have "read / Spelling it backward" (*Works*, 3:36)? What Schoolcraft thought backward about Indian script, its inability to disseminate its own interpretation, is rectified in *Hiawatha* with the ease of cultural displacement. There, as magically as the Love-Song effects its power, as surely as each beat of every octosyllabic line follows on the one before it, the figurative "meaning" of each symbol is, literally, recorded, as if it illustrated the symbol itself, like a ballad with a coarse picture on it. Whereas without the poem's self-contained interpretations the narrative elements in figure 3 would seem less than evident (are these characters of different sexes? Since they all correspond to figures "alphabetized" in figure 2, are they part of a vocabulary? Is the smaller figure within the bottom left circle a baby? How has the top left figure lost its arms? Are the figures between the two circles connected by love or death?), the final image does seem to speak for itself. The "naked heart" at the center of the circle appears to be as close as the American appropriation of native pictography can get to a universal sentimental notation. Or is it? What Longfellow's lines have done is to pretend that each picture tells a story by telling the story themselves. Yet the image of the heart in a circle may also be an image for the precedence of fig-

PICTOGRAPH. A.

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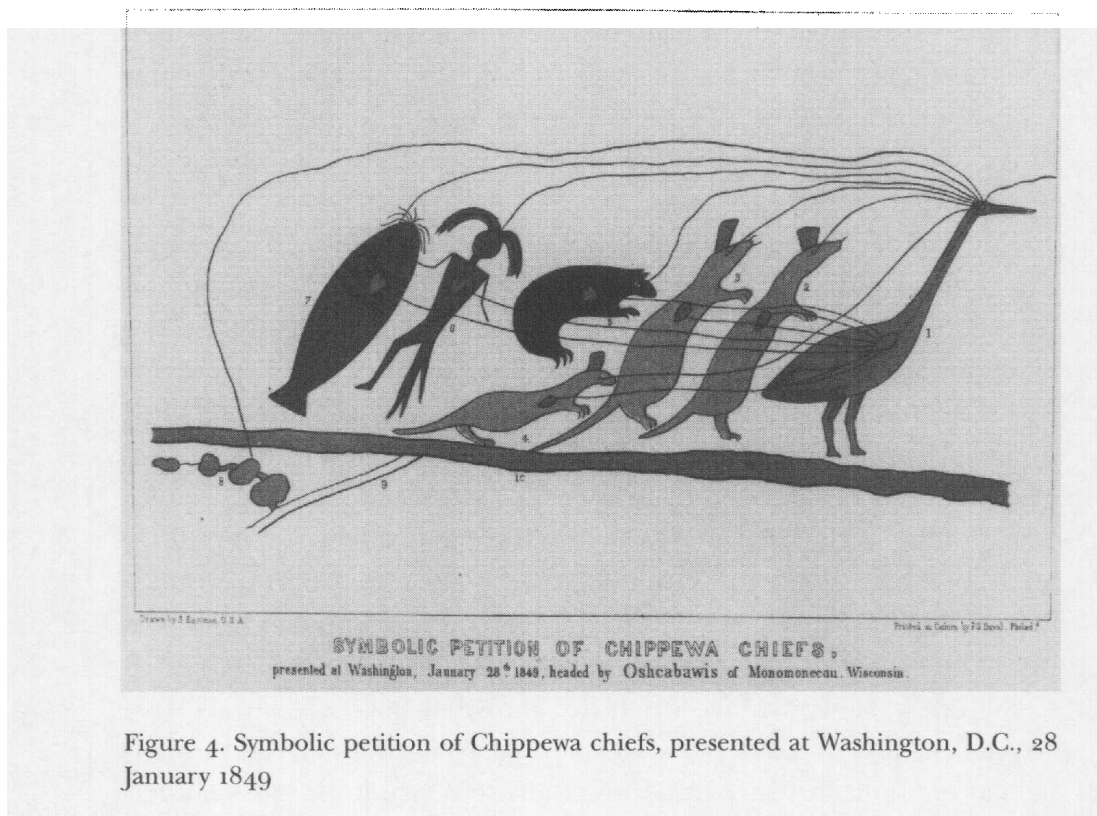


Figure 4. Symbolic petition of Chippewa chiefs, presented at Washington, D.C., 28 January 1849

ure over phrase, for the universal humanity of a transnational Symbolic.²³ It is an image of what Longfellow's readers have always liked to say of his poetry: it appeals to every heart.

Or does it? Schoolcraft's chapter on American Indian pictography closes with an image that seems to see *Hiawatha* coming. Figure 4 represents, Schoolcraft tells us, a "symbolic petition of Chippewa chiefs" of

²³ Lauren Berlant has called the archive of American hieroglyphic images the "National Symbolic" and has suggested that "the collective possession of these official texts—the flag, Uncle Sam, Mount Rushmore, the Pledge of Allegiance, perhaps now even JFK and Dr. Martin Luther King—creates a national 'public' that constantly renounces political knowledge where it exceeds intimate mythic national codes" (*The Queen of America Goes to Washington City: Essays on Sex and Citizenship* [Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1997], 103). See also Berlant, *The Anatomy of National Fantasy: Hawthorne, Utopia, and Everyday Life* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991). My essay traces Berlant's archive back to an earlier inflection of the "hieroglyphic," or to a point in the evolution of the importance of the "Symbolic" for a sense of the "National."

different tribes who joined together in 1849 to request that the president of the United States return the lands ceded to him by an earlier treaty. In this document totemic animals are joined by the eyes “to symbolize *unity of views*,” and the “heart of each animal is also connected by lines with the heart of the Crane chief, to denote *unity of feeling and purpose*. If these symbols are successful, they denote that the whole forty-four persons both *see* and *feel* alike—THAT THEY ARE ONE” (1:417). This document documents the Chippewas’ own attempt to represent their pictography as the self-evident evidence that tribal groups belong to a composite national identity, that writing confers power by making hearts speak in public. It represents a united tribal attempt to use nineteenth-century imaginary terms for nationhood—and, not incidentally, for shared literacy—as a strategy to bargain with the military nation-state. It depicts writing as the *vox populi* rather than the *vox Dei*, as the universal view of peculiar peoples. It employs “primitive” pictographs as if they really were a common language in a distinctly modern design.²⁴ Of course, the attempt was not successful. The president could not read picture-writing.

But everyone in the nineteenth century and well into the twentieth could read Longfellow. To return to the terms of mass appreciation with which we began, as Dana Gioia has commented with jealous awe, Longfellow’s poetry “exercised a broad cultural influence that today seems more typical of movies or popular music than anything we might imagine possible for poetry” (65). Exactly. By imaging poetry as a medium for language that everyone could understand without knowing how to read, Longfellow managed to make a verse as apparently available, and as limited of access, as Schoolcraft’s rendition of picture-writing or as Longfellow’s own joke about the perfect medium for the “*National Ballad*.” What Longfellow’s friend Oliver Wendell Holmes

²⁴ Of the many current views of the theoretical constitution of the modern nation that are relevant to my suggestions see especially Stathis Gourgouris, *Dream Nation: Enlightenment, Colonization, and the Institution of Modern Greece* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1996), 3: “The nation exemplifies the predicament of the Enlightenment insofar as it bears its central philosophical paradox: it is at once particular and universal. The exclusivity of nationality is spoken through a universalist anthropological utterance, in what is not only a doubling of meaning but a dubbing.”

called (after Byron) “the fatal facility” of *Hiawatha*’s meter sank into the hearts of so many readers that people still recite the poem’s opening lines as soon as the title is mentioned.²⁵ In this way *The Song of Hiawatha* became an inscription of national character, a symbol still in need of interpretation—writ so large it’s disappearing.

²⁵ Holmes’s extraordinary essay “The Physiology of Versification” contains the speculation that octosyllabic verse corresponds to the natural rhythm of respiration and that therefore “the very fault found with these . . . lines is that they slip away too fluently, and run easily into a monotonous sing-song” (*The Works of Oliver Wendell Holmes*, 13 vols. [Boston: Houghton, Mifflin, 1892], 8:317).