




SHADES OF HIAWATHA

Staging Indians, Making Americans

1880-1930

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bronze warrior taller than the Statue of Liberty and closer to the mouth of New York harbor, performing a sign of welcome. These were all phases of the same remaking of alien natives into model Americans, models for those immigrant aliens whose multilingual and multicultural impact on the meaning of American seemed more menacing than the threat once posed by the intractable savage. Lift him up, they said, so all can see what the "first," the "true" (and now truly nationalized) American looks like: the red man before he vanished or got shoved down the manhole. This figure, a construction of the white imagination and filling the need for a contemporary romance of nationality, resembles nothing so much as a shade of the old storybook familiar, Longfellow's ever-recurring Hiawatha.

ONE

Singing Hiawatha

We wait in the darkness!
 Come, all ye who listen,
 Help in our night journey:
 Now no sun is shining;
 Now no star is glowing
 Come show us the pathway:
 The night is not friendly;
 She closes her eyelids;
 The moon has forgot us,
 We wait in the darkness!

—Darkness Song (Iroquois)

A man who is possessed by his shadow is always standing in his own light and falling into his own trap. —Carl Jung, *Four Archetypes*

Whether or not Chief Sea'thl ever said "The White Man will never be alone," the words ring true as someone's wish. A curious, sadly comic history of having "the Indian" nearby is told in a steady antebellum flow of white actors performing Indians on stage and in print: Pocahontas, Metamora, Uncas, and Chingachook, and the crowning figure of the tradition, Longfellow's companionable Hiawatha. Distinctions between real and imagined characters evaporate; the historical Metamora or Metacom, known to his seventeenth-century Puritan adversaries as King Phillip, became on stage as fictive as Longfellow's celebrated hero. Except for a few antebellum memoirs and essays by natives such as Black Hawk, William Apes, and George Copway (Kah-ge-ga-gah'-bowh), white authors and audiences set the

terms whereby indigenes returned as shades of memory and myth. The settler culture, creating the Indian in the image of its own needs, haunted itself with ghosts of its own making.

And with no more charming a ghost than Longfellow's misnamed Hiawatha, the most congenial of all the white man's Indians. While his name is that of an actual figure, the legendary Mohawk founder of the Iroquois Confederation, the better-known Hiawatha was born in Longfellow's poem as a transfigured version of a mythical Ojibway culture-hero known by various names including Manabozho, which Longfellow did not find melodious. Almost at once Longfellow's *Hiawatha* leaped from page to stage, from print to performance and worldwide fame. Its popularity and prestige reached a new level in the United States at the turn of the century in pageants, staged spectacles, song and dance, and drama performed by natives of many tribes, a pan-Indian fusion event. By the early twentieth century, the poem had been translated into virtually all the world's languages, including Latin, Hebrew, Ojibway, and Yiddish; it had become a "Universal Hiawatha."¹ The reemergence of Longfellow's living ghost in these unsettled years we can take as keynote of the transformation of "Indian" into "first American."

I

An exuberant reception greeted the appearance of *The Song of Hiawatha* in Boston bookshops in November 1855. In the first six months about fifty thousand copies crossed the counter, matching the record-breaking sales of an American book five years earlier, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, a work with which it shared certain affinities: liberality of emotion, grandeur of effect, national cogency—and readability. Shortly before the poem's publication, the nation's and soon the world's best-loved poet, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, had resigned his post as professor of modern languages at Harvard and soon became the first poet in America's history to earn a living from writing alone. He hardly needed the wealth of his wife's family, the mill-owning Appletons, after they made him a wedding gift of his spacious

Cambridge house.² Further fame and glory and riches awaited him. "An unprecedented success for a poem," he remarked with obvious delight over initial sales figures.³

The success of *The Song of Hiawatha*, interestingly, owed something to a flutter of controversy in the form of parodies, attacks on the poem's moral weight as a mere "Indian" poem and, more pointedly, on its originality and authenticity. "Showers of parodies and shots of ridicule," as one reviewer wrote, only called attention to the poem and gave it a chance to prove itself against detractors. "The book has been fortunate in having excited controversy," another reviewer remarked, "whereby hundreds have been led to examine it from pure curiosity, and then, as a natural consequence, been won by its charming pictures and sustained euphony."⁴ Controversy played into the hands of the poem.

A popular theory about poetry, partly as a result of Longfellow's own teaching and writing, underlay the praise of "charming pictures and sustained euphony": an assumption that by pictures and verbal images rendered in harmonious sound and regular meter, great poetry captures the reader with a soothing sense of the real. To the "regret" expressed in the *Boston Daily Evening Traveller* "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 aborigenes," and to the charge of plagiarism in the *National Intelligencer*, which found resemblance to the Finnish *Kalewala* [*sic*] ("the poem is only an imitation, not a creation"), another reviewer defended the poem as both "original and aboriginal all over": "Through the whole structure there is the smell of the wild woods, the dash of forest waters and lakes, and the sweetest beauty of bird, and flower, and sky, in their wilderness state." The review hailed "Hiawatha as the greatest contribution yet made to the native literature of our country." "Native" linked to "wild woods" and to "nature" took care of the charges both of savage silliness and imitation of a European poem. These terms of praise in the earliest reviews have clung to the poem throughout its popular history, a defense and celebration of the incorporation of "Indian" into the national narrative.⁵

Hiawatha handily overcame accusations of silliness, imitation, pla-

gicism only to face a more sophisticated critique starting in the 1890s. In a paper titled "A Lawgiver of the Stone Age," read to a meeting of the American Association for the Advancement of Science, the anthropologist Horatio Hale documented in detail the error perpetrated by Longfellow's chief source, Henry Rowe Schoolcraft, a prolific amateur ethnographer specializing in secondhand information who had identified the Mohawk Hiawatha with Manabozho, "a fantastic divinity of the Ojibways." Without looking into the matter further—he might have learned of the historical Hiawatha from Morgan's *League of the Iroquois*, but there is no evidence he read this work—Longfellow took Schoolcraft's word, and in his "charming poem . . . by an extraordinary fortune, a grave Iroquois lawgiver of the fifteenth century has become, in modern literature, an Ojibway demigod." It was as if a Chinese traveler "had confounded King Alfred with King Arthur, and both with Odin."⁶ Soon the story of "the real Hiawatha" began to appear in the press, with no apparent effect on Indian performances of Hiawatha pageants, testimony to the superior power of a charming poem over scientific ethnography. But students of the Iroquois continued to insist on separating the historical from the poetical Hiawatha. Longfellow's "ethnographical boner," wrote an anthropologist in 1948, "had the happiest results for our literature," if not for our history. Folklorists took up the case, charging Longfellow with shrinking the figures of his poem, moralizing away "the primitive awe and scrupulousness with which savage man approaches the great commonwealth of nature upon whose generosity his livelihood depends."⁷ He missed the significance of animism in the legends he poeticized and did "violence," in Stith Thompson's words, "both to the original myth [of Manabozho] and to the spirit of the life which he depicts in *The Song of Hiawatha*."⁸ The popular performances occurred simultaneously, in short, with damaging criticism of the poem. The poem had sacrificed its real-life sources for the sake of telling a charming tale whose magic—this seemed the point of the sacrifice—enhanced a political vision.

"There is something in the poem," Longfellow mused, "which has taken hold of the popular fancy."⁹ Within weeks of publication he referred to "readings, recitations, and the like." Under the title of "The

Hiawatha Mania," a columnist in the Philadelphia *Bulletin* wrote, "Poetical mothers christen their children by the un-christian names of Hiawatha and Minnehaha; ship-builders name their crafts by the same euphonious titles; and last of all, adventurous ladies, disregarding the rights of authorship, recite Hiawatha in Indian costumes, with a background of wigwams and forest scenery, and crowds gather to hear the strange and novel performance."¹⁰ There was something of the spectacle about the poem from the start, including the controversy that furthered its popularity. For the wise and learned Dr. Oliver Wendell Holmes, leading Brahmin of the poet's circle, there was also something of the physical in the poem's appeal. In "The Physiology of Versification," he said of *Hiawatha*'s octosyllabic measure with long-short beats (trochaic tetrameter) that "it follows more exactly than any other measure the natural rhythm of respiration." In remarks at a memorial after the poet's death in 1882, he added, "In this most frequently criticized piece of verse work, the poet has shown a subtle sense of the requirements of his simple story of a primitive race by choosing the most fluid of measures, that lets the thought run through it in an easy sing-song, such as oral tradition would be sure to find on the lips of the story-teller in the wigwam."¹¹ The reader's confidence that every line will reach its end with satisfying regularity, while drawing pictures of what another reader called "those poor painted children of the western forest," is one reason for the poem's instant and long-lasting popularity.

In the "friendly and flowing savage" stanzas of "Song of Myself," Walt Whitman named the desire both he and Longfellow addressed, the same wish Chief Sea'thl was reported to have prophesized in the same years: always to have "the Indian" nearby.

Wherever he goes men and women accept and desire him,
They desire he should like them, touch them, speak to them, stay
with them.

As if in ignorance of the terror that had already been unleashed against natives in the West and Southwest (let alone the decimation of the Eastern tribes long since accomplished), both poets portray the

desirable figure as pacific and well intentioned toward those who took their land and ravaged their lives. The difference of address of the two books may obscure their kinship of motive, which was to find a mode in poetry to keep the indigenous alive as an idea and an ideal in the evolving national culture. But the differences in the mode are significant. *Hiawatha* is a story, a magical narrative with elements of conventional romance, and the poet told it in a meter that makes for easy reading.¹² Whitman invented a new form, more lyric than narrative, an unmetred epic of the self that offered unbounded and shameless intimacy with the reader; the "friendly and flowing savage" lines can be taken as a figure for Whitman's own verse and himself as a new savagelike American poet:

Behavior lawless as snow-flakes, words simple as grass, uncomb'd
head, laughter, and naiveté,
Slow-stepping feet, common features, common modes and
emanations,
They descend in new forms from the tips of his fingers,
They are wafted with the odor of his body or breath, they fly out
of the glance of his eyes.

Ed Folsom reads these lines as Whitman's evocation of an "emerging new white American savage," a figure distilled from the indigene in order to "replace the native savage,"¹³ a view that can be extended to include the poet's use of the "friendly and flowing savage" to promulgate a new and anti-Longfellowian American meter, diction, and poetic purpose: "Slow-stepping feet, common features, common modes and emanations . . . new forms from the tips of fingers."

Whitman cajoled his readers to accept the voice of his poem as that of an actual person, a nonliterary effulgence of life on the streets, "one of the roughs," the printed word as alive as flesh and blood. "This is no book," he wrote. "Who touches this touches a man." Such a challenge to the border between art and life doubtless confused and distressed readers in the 1850s who were accustomed to the distance and decorum of Longfellow, whose polished meters and satisfying rhymes stood protectively between the work and the artist. Longfellow drew

his readers into a decorous circle to hear a tale they yearned to hear. Like Harriet Beecher Stowe, he had lessons to teach. He made himself present to his readers as a learned but sympathetic voice, heart and head fused in the persona of "the poet." To say that *Hiawatha* stepped out of the poem onto the stage confirms the essential point: It wasn't Longfellow but *Hiawatha*, not the poet (as Whitman insisted) but "the Indian" transfigured as national myth, who crossed from print to performance. Whitman's reaction late in life to "Emerson's Books" includes this indirect appraisal of the author of *Hiawatha*:

It is always a make, never an unconscious growth. It is the porcelain figure or statuette of lion, or stag, or Indian hunter . . . appropriate for the rosewood or marble bracket of parlor or library, never the animal itself, or the hunter himself . . . What would that do amid astral and bric-a-brac and tapestry, and ladies and gentlemen talking in subdued tones of Browning and Longfellow and art? The least suspicion of such actual bull, or Indian, or of Nature carrying out itself, would put all those good people to instant terror and flight.¹⁴

Whitman's "savage" exchanged the commonplace derogation of that term for a celebration of the uninhibited expression of "such actual bull, or Indian, or of Nature carrying out itself" (including fornication) that Whitman wanted to identify with America.

A pleasing poem that sets out to absorb simple "children of the woods" into the national story was bound to be greeted in the tense year of 1855 with a certain relief by a public whose nerves were on edge: In Boston, there was news of the trial of the captured fugitive slave Andrew Burns and rumors of bloodshed and worse to come from Kansas and Nebraska. Archaism of language, harmonies of sound, and a meter that sounds itself out as both learned and simple, of both the study (head) and the fireside (heart), made for reassurance. The poem affected readers the way the Falls of Minnehaha affected *Hiawatha*, "Calling to him through the silence": "Pleasant is the sound!" he murmured, / "Pleasant is the voice that calls me!" The

poem gave the illusion of a “song” recuperated by the miracle of art from dim regions of the nation’s prehistory: battles with monsters, magical flights, encounters with ghosts, the planting of corn and invention of language. The poem’s very lack of intellectual complexity or a dialectical argument unfolding by inner dialogue and tension delivers a Hiawatha already prepared for appropriation as theatrical spectacle, easily removed from the poem, an uncomplicated tableau vivant figure, less a character than a picture against the background of a meter itself readily translatable into a score. In many ways the staged Hiawatha fulfills the poem, though there is more to the poem than a simple scenario. Read within the horizon of ideas that Longfellow assumed (and Whitman rejected) about what poetry is and what good it does, *Hiawatha* captivates from opening to closing lines. For William Butler Yeats the secret of Longfellow’s great popularity was that “he tells his story or idea so that one needs nothing but his verses to understand it.”¹⁵ *Hiawatha* triumphs also for the vision of conquest it sublimates: the white man’s arrival, the hero’s departure. Unlike Virgil’s Turnus, nor like Tecumseh and Black Hawk in real life, he does not stand and fight but quietly slips away.

II

Is it possible to take *The Song of Hiawatha* seriously today? A “white-elephant,” writes one disenchanted scholar recently, a mere “cardboard concoction,” insipid, shallow, “an ethnocentric armchair fantasy.”¹⁶ True, *The Song of Hiawatha* is a concoction (an oblique allusion to melting pot?), but by itself that is no damning indictment. As Newton Arvin wisely wrote, “there are a good many things worse than *The Song of Hiawatha*.”¹⁷ The linguist Dell Hymes has proposed a less injurious description than “concoction”; he prefers “multicultural composite,” since the meter was taken, via a German translation, from the Finnish *Kalevala* (Longfellow may have encountered the trochaic tetrameter also in Spanish poems by Lope de Vega and perhaps, most intriguingly, from a poem by Heine on a Jewish theme, “Prinzessin Sabbat”); the legends were chiefly Algonquian-Ojibway, the hero



“Hiawatha,” studio portrait by Heyn and Matzen, Omaha, Nebraska, c. 1900. (Library of Congress)



“Swift of foot was Hiawatha,” postcard published by M. A. Whedon, Minneapolis, Minnesota, c. 1900. (Author’s collection)

Ojibway by tribal legend though by name Iroquois, his bride's name, Minnehaha, a Dakota word meaning waterfall. Moved by the idea that nationality in literature called for autochthonous materials, Longfellow dipped into many pots in fashioning a faux indigenous hero who performs his feats not as Ojibway (the recurrence of Ojibway words is the closest the poem comes to cultural specificity) but as "Indian."

Asking in his journal in 1847 whether the words "national literature" can "mean anything," Longfellow noted that the United States already had a "composite" national character, "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 the most national."¹⁸ An Indian poem promised further to universalize the national "composite," adding a red tint to the cauldron (in the absence from Longfellow's list, we note, of black Africans), and thereby to render the poet more truly national.¹⁹ Aspiring national bards had earlier tried their hands at epic "Indian poems," a sorrowful minor tradition of tortured heroic couplets, doomed warriors, and maidens fading away.²⁰ The aim was to make the white nation seem an outgrowth of red roots. Only Longfellow in verse and Cooper in prose succeeded in creating credible narratives of this material, winning the credence of large audiences.

The "something" in the poem that bemused Longfellow endowed Hiawatha with the power of return almost two generations later as ghostly presence, a shade fated always to vanish again, always to come again and reperform the act of vanishing. One something was the panoramic mode of the storytelling through an array of "romance" scenes: Hiawatha raised in the woods by his grandmother Nokomis, his wrestling high on a mountain cliff with his father Mudjekeewis, the West Wind, his contriving out of a birch tree a magical canoe that's powered by his wishes, his similarly magical moccasins and mittens, his epic underwater combat with Kenabeek the sea monster and his slaying of the evil magician Pearl-Feather, both recalling underworld episodes in classical epic and medieval romance, the wooing of Minnehaha and the magnificent wedding feast with its dancing and story-

telling, Minnehaha dancing nude at night to bless the cornfields, the death scenes of the Orpheus-like Chibiabos, the mischievous shape-shifting trickster Pau-Puk-Keewis slain as a man then changed into an eagle, the strong man Kwasind done in by the Little People, the Puk-Wudjies, and a stricken Minnehaha, victim of famine and disease. Like *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, and a mark of the midcentury culture of sentiment it shares, *The Song of Hiawatha* speaks to the heart with gestures of endearment by loving grandmother, loyal friends, and tender wife, and acts of great physical prowess aided by benign magic. Not only are the scenes prepared, as it were, for stage performance; they are already performances on the stage of the poem's simple meter, mostly end-stopped lines and repeated names and phrases. The poem seems to read itself the way Hiawatha's canoe moves effortlessly on wings of unconscious desire. A "national folk epic," writes a recent commentator, as close to "European Romantic obsession" as America is likely to enjoy.²¹

But "national folk epic" doesn't ring quite true. The legends don't flow from a river of tales already familiar to Longfellow's readers. Nor has the poem functioned as folklore, except insofar as Indian performances at the turn of the century and the modern commercialization of "Hiawatha" and "Minnehaha" qualify as folk expression. Indeed, to portray himself as artificer, Longfellow counted on the exotic character of the legends rather than their familiarity. He spoke of the poem as "This Indian Edda," identifying it with the Old Norse or Icelandic collection of ancient legends, assimilating the poem to a tradition of Northern European culture; the term subliminally implied translation of native texts into a form that not only attached the prestige of Europe to it but also attested to the predominantly Anglo-Saxon literary culture of Longfellow's readers. To make an American epic of Hiawatha one had to stage him in an Nordic epic-romance discourse.

The poem was "founded," Longfellow explained in "Notes," on stories of "a personage of miraculous birth, who was sent among them ["the North American Indians"] to clear their rivers, forests, and fishing-grounds, and to teach them the arts of peace." "Into this old tradition," he continues, "I have woven other curious Indian leg-

ends."²² The weaving brought all the separate elements together into a single narrative, the "song" or myth of Hiawatha. But underlying the explicit myth there is the mythos of the poem itself, its own story of origins and artifice, a mythos centered on the figure "Longfellow," who situated himself between reader and text. The mythos has Longfellow not only as artificer, as skilled engineer of verse, but also as mediator. The artificer whose art is to deny itself, as Virginia Jackson skillfully argues,²³ brings "Indian" home, makes that figure familiar as one who readies the ground (clearing the rivers, teaching arts of peace), then clears the ground of himself, leaving behind a ghostly trace of epic "song."

Mediation began with Longfellow's access to the legends, the mental culture of his Indians. The poem's "Notes" and "Vocabulary" of Ojibway-Algonquian words assures that the poem is seen as derived from sources accessed through Longfellow's reading of some eight authors and editors, including George Catlin, John G. E. Heckewelder, Mrs. Seth Eastman, John Tanner (author of a popular captivity narrative), and most prodigiously, Henry Rowe Schoolcraft. Strangely for a poet-scholar who had mastered many European languages and devoted significant energy to translation, Longfellow apparently made no effort to learn Ojibway, did not consult an Ojibway dictionary, and constructed the "Vocabulary" (including "Ugh, yes") from Schoolcraft and perhaps Eastman and Tanner. No native author appears among the sources.

On June 13, 1849, Longfellow noted in his journal: "To tea came Kah-ge-ga-gah'-bowh, the Ojibway Chief, and we went together to hear Agassiz lecture on the 'Races of Men.' He thinks there were several Adams and Eves."²⁴ Louis Agassiz held that hierarchical differences of "race" among humans resulted from "polygeny" or separate "creations." The idea enlisted "nature" in defense of slavery and other inequalities based on skin color. Kah-ge-ga-gah'-bowh, also known as George Copway, came with a gift of his published autobiography; his reaction, if any, to Agassiz's doctrine of polygeny goes unrecorded. When Copway had lectured in Cambridge the previous year, Longfellow remarked in his journal, "A rambling talk, gracefully delivered, with a fine various voice, and a chief's costume, with little bells jangling upon it, like the bells with pomegranates of the Jewish priests."²⁵

Kinship of Indians and Jews evidently seemed to Longfellow a normal association. Copway, the only Ojibway he is known to have met, was conspicuously absent from Longfellow's "Notes." Later, Copway named a daughter Minnehaha after Hiawatha's wife.²⁶ In 1859, commenting on Kah-ge-ga-gah'-bowh's fall into poverty, indebtedness, and public disgrace, Longfellow linked him derisively with *Hiawatha*: "I fear he is developing the Pau-Puk-Keewis [the trickster destroyed by Hiawatha] element rather strongly."²⁷ Rather than a liability, the absence of native sources for *Hiawatha* suggests an idea of mediation through reading and study, as if an oral culture as foreign as that of the "North American Indian" could be learned only from the writings of white authorities capable of interpreting what they recorded.

"The stories in *Hiawatha* are all real American Indian stories," wrote the poet's brother Samuel in 1882, "taken down by Schoolcraft & others from Indian story-tellers in the wigwams."²⁸ The image of wigwam storytelling flowing directly into the ear of Schoolcraft and from there, in Schoolcraft's "plain, spare, prose form," into the "fancy & poetic language" of the poet, is at the core of the poem's own mythos. Although in private Longfellow had complained that Schoolcraft's writings were "a mass of ill-digested material," in "Notes" he praised "his indefatigable zeal in rescuing so much of the legendary lore of the Indians."²⁹ In his zeal, Schoolcraft had in fact neglected to acknowledge that his own indispensable source was his wife, Jane, daughter of John Johnston, a cultivated Anglo-Irish fur trader, and Neengay, an Ojibway woman (granddaughter of the important chief and ally of the French Mamongazid). When Schoolcraft arrived at Sault Sainte Marie in 1820, he was a geologist in the expeditionary party of General Lewis Cass exploring the sources of the Mississippi River with an eye for deposits of precious metals; he was welcomed into the cultivated Johnston mixed-blood household and fell in love with the poised, talented, and multilingual Jane, who encouraged and guided his growing interest in the Ojibway language and legends. We have these revealing details from Janet Lewis's remarkable documentary novel, *The Invasion*.³⁰

The novel shows Schoolcraft fumbling to make sense of his forays into Ojibway oral culture. He was guided and helped by Jane and other family members who indeed had the tales directly from the

mouths of winter storytellers. Schoolcraft excised the scatology and polished the prose, and in 1839 he brought out two little volumes of *Algonic Researches* as his own gatherings from native mouths. Jane among others appeared in the acknowledgments, though not her mother, who likely contributed tales of her own and whose prestige in the Ojibway community eased Schoolcraft's access. Jane died of a fever in 1842. Longfellow himself makes a cameo appearance in the novel, poring over Schoolcraft's "ill-digested" volumes in his "roomy study in Cambridge." Having settled on an Indian epic and a "simple primitive rhythm, as suitable for a simple primitive tale," nothing remained "but to read and indite." "He went on with his 'fairy tale,'" replacing Manabozho with Hiawatha because of "that awkward *zh*," thereby "descending unaware from the mythic to the merely historical." Because he drew mainly on Schoolcraft's early small volumes, the novel shows us that Longfellow's poem grew from "materials which had, as it were, been selected for him by Jane Schoolcraft," though he did not realize this.³¹

In 1856, capitalizing on the poem's success, Schoolcraft brought out a small volume of recycled tales, *The Myth of Hiawatha and Other Oral Legends*, dedicated to Longfellow for his demonstrating "that the theme of the native lore reveals one of the true sources of our literary independence."³² Longfellow had long held the same idea. In an essay in 1831 on Sir Philip Sidney's *Defense of Poetry*, he had urged that, to achieve a literature "as original, characteristic, and national as possible," poets should listen to Indian speech such as the "last words" of the aging Choctow chief, Pushmataha: "I shall die, but you will return to your brethren. As you go along the paths, you will see the flowers and hear the birds, but Pushmataha will see them and hear them no more. When you come to your home, they will ask you, where is Pushmataha? And you will say to them, He is no more. They will hear the tidings like the sound of the fall of a mighty oak in the stillness of the wood." If American writers paid attention to words like these, they'd "give a new and delightful expression to the face of our poetry."³³

In his writings of the 1840s, Schoolcraft had struck a similar note. "No people can bear a true nationality which does not exfoliate, as it were, from its own bosom, something that expresses the peculiarities

of its own soil and climate." Echoing the German philosopher Johann Gottfried von Herder, who had argued that the uniqueness of cultures derives from their singular folk traditions, Schoolcraft asked whether any better sources for American literary nationality could be found than "the history and antiquities and institutions and lore, of the free, bold, wild, independent, native hunter race?" In Indian lore lies "the germs of a future mythology."³⁴

Longfellow and Schoolcraft agreed that "true nationality" derives from a nation's "singular folk traditions," and that in the absence of a "folk," the United States had its Indians, sadly "vanishing" but gladly rich in accessible lore. But how to process this lore (or ore) as *American* literature? Indians were "a rude and ignorant race," Schoolcraft, Longfellow, and other subscribers to the "romantic racism" of the Herderian *Volkgeist* school believed in the 1840s and 1850s. How could such benighted peoples provide raw material for the "nationality" of a "civilized" people? The logic of Schoolcraft's views on this conundrum was typical. True, natives live mired in fear and superstition, in "necromancy, witchcraft, and demonology." "Everything is mysterious which is not understood; and, unluckily, they understand little or nothing." Because they understand nothing, their language relies on symbols, personifications, metaphors, figures of speech, which prevent self-reflection; they cannot speak on abstract subjects without graphic symbols, the "wild pictography" of their language. Schoolcraft's most telling indictment of native "mentality" was that it cannot give account of itself. "There is no word in the Indian language that means savage. They had no use for such a word." He saw small hope that they would accept "reclamation" offered by Christianity and civilization. They would "pass away from the earth." Still, since their diction was "simple and pure," their sentiments often "exalted," and their legends "tributes to the best feelings of the heart," they offered hope through translation such as Schoolcraft's for the "true nationality" so anxiously desired in the fractured 1850s.³⁵

Schoolcraft describes his method of processing the ore in a vivid passage of utmost condescension.

Nothing can exceed the Doric simplicity of an aboriginal tale. It admits of scarcely any adjectives, and no ornaments . . . The

closest attention, indeed, is required, in listening to, and taking notes of an original legend, to find language simple and childlike enough to narrate what is said, and to give it, *as said*, word by word, and sentence by sentence. A school boy, who is not yet smitten with the ambition of style, but adheres to the natural method, of putting down no more words than are just necessary to express precise ideas, would do it best. And when this has been done, and the original preserved in the words of the Indian story teller, it is often but a tissue of common events which would possess very little interest, were it not for the mystery or melodramatic effect, of their singular mythology. To imitate such a tale successfully, is to demand of the writer an accurate knowledge of Indian manners and customs, often his history and traditions, and always his religion and opinions, with some gleams of the language.³⁶

All the processor needs by way of literary equipment is "language simple and childlike enough" to convey the native's child-like mentality and culture and assure the effect of primitiveness desired in a national mythology of origins.

Out of stories so processed and refined, Longfellow fashioned a felicitous romance that made the Indian even more accessible and reliably present than did Cooper. Ignoring the paradox that absorption of "low" autochthonous materials into a "higher" discourse necessarily dilutes the forms, most of Longfellow's favored readers believed that the poem was a true expression of the aboriginal. "As a whole it represents wonderfully well that infantile character of Indian life," wrote the historian George Bancroft, "when the inferior animals were half-and-half the equal companions of man, and external nature was his bosom friend."³⁷ Moncure Conway went farther: "What the greatest poets have done for their lands Longfellow has done for his," "perhaps the only American Epic," comparable to Homer's *Iliad*, Dante's *Inferno*, and Goethe's *Faust*. Longfellow himself called his Indian hero "a kind of American Prometheus."³⁸

Longfellow had seemed to solve the problem of transfiguring "infantile" natives into ancestral heroes on the order of the great epic he-

roes of Europe. There is no original "song of Hiawatha" and Longfellow made no pretense that there was, though in the Introduction the master narrator presents the entire poem as the song of "the singer Nawadaha" who dwelt "Round about the Indian village."³⁹ Nawadaha, apparently Schoolcraft's Iroquois name, alludes to Longfellow's major source. The entire poem is presented as stories repeated by the narrator "as I heard them / From the lips of Nawadaha." Not itself an actual translation, the poem incorporates translation into the reading experience. Ojibway words pass fluently into English: "Called Waywassimo, the lightning, / And the thunder, Annemmekee."⁴⁰ Local parsing of native words recruits the reader as participant in the process of distancing savage phonemes as savagely picturesque. Rather than an effort to get inside Ojibway mentality through its speech, the aim is to replace the savage word with an English lexical equivalent while retaining its aura of difference. Presuming that the primitive cannot survive contact with the superior culture of the invaders, cannot change, cannot even recognize itself and thus must pass away, the poem incorporates native words for the delight of uttering them like childish syllables and then supplies civilized meanings for them.

At how many removes does Longfellow's poem stand from the actual poetics of tribal verse and storytelling? The canto on Hiawatha's childhood includes a little song, a lullaby, for which we luckily have a documented origin. Longfellow based it on Schoolcraft's account of how he came upon "Chant to the Fire-fly," how he "walked out one evening" to a lawn on the St. Mary's River in northern Michigan to catch the "shouts and wild dancing" of some Ojibway children. They were singing to the flitting of fireflies, and Schoolcraft gives first a transcription of what he heard as "wild" sounds: "Wau wau tay see! / Wau wau tay see," then a "literal translation": "Flitting-white-fire insect! Waving white-fire-bug! Give me light before I go to bed! Give me light before I sleep. Come, little dancing white-fire-bug! Come little flitting-white-fire-beast! Light me with your bright white-flame-instrument—your little candle." "Meter there was none," he remarked, "at least of a regular character; the words were the wild improvisations of children in a merry mood."⁴¹ He then provides meter and reg-

ularity, producing an English ballad Longfellow then improved upon in his own meter.

Here are a few lines of Schoolcraft's poem:

Fire-fly, fire-fly! bright little thing,
Light me to bed, and my song I will sing.
Give me your light, as you fly o'er my head,
That I may merrily go to bed.

And Longfellow, in the voice of Hiawatha:

Wah-wah-taysee, little firefly,
Little, flitting, white-fire insect,
Little, dancing, white-fire creature,
Light me with your little candle,
Ere upon my bed I lay me,
Ere in sleep I close my eyelids.⁴²

Compare Longfellow's sweet melody with this recent version by Dell Hymes.

Flitting white fire, flash light for me
Before I sleep, *ey way!*
Come, come, *ey way!*
Flitting with white fire,
Flitting with white fire,
Bright white instrument of flame!
Bright white instrument of flame!

The anthropologist and poet Edward Sapir remarked that the Algonquian verb was itself an Imagist poem. An ear conditioned to identify Indianness in poetry with the spare diction and lightly inflected speech of Imagist verse will most likely prefer Hymes's version. The difference from Longfellow's line is literally measurable, in the sense that Hymes takes actual measure of the syllabic form of the original, counting stresses rather than metrical feet. As charming and tender

and even precise an effect as Longfellow achieves—Gordon Brotherston speaks of his “loving attention to native text” and his inclusion of Indian words (Brotherston goes on to say that Longfellow celebrates his hero “only on condition that he disappear”)—still, he pressed the firefly into a four-stress meter foreign to the original recorded spoken lines. Hymes writes that *Hiawatha* does “not disclose a poetic form native to Native Americans,” not surprising, he adds, considering that “the poetic form of their oral narratives indeed had not yet been recognized.”⁴³

III

Angus Fletcher has said that “*Hiawatha* can be read as an implicit treatise on the nature of language.”⁴⁴ Rather than an explicit theory, the poem gives demonstrations, events of reading.

Ye, who sometimes, in your rambles
Through the green lanes of the country, . . .
Over stone walls gray 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!

Who is the “ye,” the role assigned to the reader? A Rambler drawn to country graveyards, most likely a reader familiar with Thomas Gray’s “Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard,” given to elegiac musings and appreciation of the “homely,” which implies a social position more high than low. “Half-effaced inscription” gives one figure for the

work of the reader; so does the implied act of listening while reading: "Read this Song of Hiawatha!"

It's assumed as a given that the song comes from a distant place and time, an aboriginal antiquity, and that it comes in the tangible form of a ruin, again conflating reading silently and hearing. Ruins, hieroglyphs, various inscrutable ciphers held a particular fascination for antebellum American culture, as we see in Thomas Cole's paintings, in Poe's tales, and throughout Melville's fiction. The idea of the vanishing Indian implied that the "red man" was already a ruin. In his sonnet "Eliot's Oak," Longfellow wrote of "sounds of unintelligible speech . . . Of a lost race, long vanished like a cloud." His posture in the Introduction to *Hiawatha* joins the conventional trope with this difference: To compare the reading of the song of Hiawatha with the reading of an old New England gravestone places Hiawatha within a space sacred to national memory, claiming him as kin in a kinship that remains to be worked out, invented through the reader's acts of translation, cognate with the poet's act of weaving disparate strands into a single narrative. To "read the song" is to recognize that recovery of Hiawatha requires that speech be transposed into writing, oral replaced with written culture, literate and literary at once. The very act (versification) by which the written "rescues [the oral] from oblivion" terminates the oral as living culture. Rescue or preservation destroys what it saves. Reading the "rude inscription" of "the song of Hiawatha" embodies the entire logic of displacement enacted in and by the poem, oral giving way to literate, low to high, savage to civilized, "Indian" to Euro-American.

Displacement and transcendence occur throughout the poem. In the process of his being translated from "song" to written poem, Hiawatha goes about his own world translating and interpreting, functioning as intermediary between savagery and civilization, between "Indian" and "American." He talks with animals and birds and to trees, as in the lilting account of making his canoe: "'Give me of your bark, O Birch-Tree! . . . Give me of your roots, O Tamarack!'"⁴⁵ It's by his language skills that Hiawatha proves his kinship, his eligibility to be ancestor to the nation, one of its founders. The proof appears most vividly in what can be taken as the heart of the poem, the canto

called "Picture-Writing." Longfellow described it as an "intermediate Canto . . . rather curious than poetical."⁴⁶ It follows "Blessing the Cornfields," in which the ineffable Minnehaha dances naked (and decorously unseen) at midnight amid the sprouting corn to a lovely music—"No one but the Midnight only / Saw her beauty in the darkness"—and is followed by "Hiawatha's Lamentation" at the death of his friend, the singer Chibiabos. The poem takes a downward course thereafter through battle with sly deceiver Pau-Puk-Keewis, the death of Kwasind, the appearance of ghosts, famine, Minnehaha's death, until "The White-Man's Foot" appears, requiring in the final canto "Hiawatha's Departure." "Picture-Writing" is intermediate, then, marking a major transition from peace and happiness to grief and sorrow, from triumphs over dragons and giant underwater creatures, a wedding feast, the sprouting of the corn, to grief, violence, death, and departure. By "curious" Longfellow may mean that the picture-writing canto offers not an epic action but a meta-action, a reflection on the reading of the poem itself; it places the heart of the poem, the implicit treatise on language, in the reader's hands.

The canto has Hiawatha "walking / In the solitary forest, / Pondering, musing in the forest, / On the welfare of his people." His musing represents Longfellow's vision of the sources of human language, origins that recall the "half-effaced inscription" of the Introduction by centering on the effects of time and death: "'Lo! how all things fade and perish!' Men die and are forgotten, 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!'" Sequoyah (also known as George Guess) gave similar reasons for inventing a Cherokee alphabet.⁴⁷ How can humans redeem the speech that dies on the air as soon as uttered? How can one overcome time and space, all distances that separate?

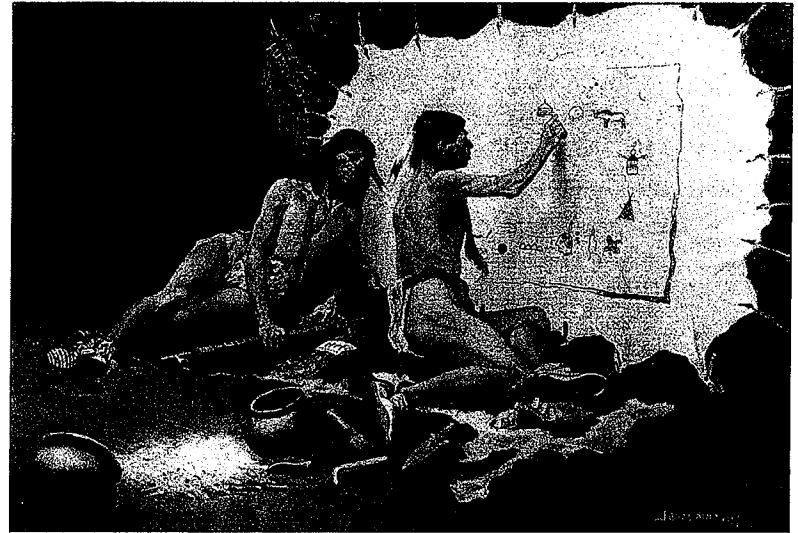
"Face to face we speak together,
But we cannot speak when absent,
Cannot send our voices from us
To the friends that dwell afar off;
Cannot send a secret message,

But the bearer learns our secret,
 May pervert it, may betray it,
 May reveal it unto others."

Human treachery joins space and time as enemies of the communion among people that Hiawatha (and Longfellow) cherishes as the highest value, embodied in friendships such as Hiawatha's with his mate Kwasind, of whom he says earlier in the poem, we "spake with naked hearts together." Hiawatha then takes "his colors" from his pouch and begins to paint "many shapes and figures, / Wonderful and mystic figures, / And each figure had a meaning, / Each some word or thought suggested."⁴⁸

By providing mnemonic figures, Hiawatha's invention of picture writing overcomes the absence of tangible forms of tradition. "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." Hiawatha's "we" shares with the poem's readers the posture of bending over a grave marker, squinting to read and to know. Indian and American seem to meld in this "we," giving the white reader to understand that ignorance of Indian "fathers" can be overcome by reading Longfellow's poem, its ventriloquism of Nawadaha's singing, a song that would otherwise remain wordless without "translation" of what the savage (however gentle) Hiawatha can only draw as picture.

Hiawatha draws and interprets iconic figures for his people, teaching the possibility of defeating death through writing: "Footprints pointing towards a wigwam / Were a sign of invitation, / Were a sign of guests assembling; / Bloody hands with palms uplifted / Were a symbol of destruction, / Were a hostile sign and symbol." Many of the details here—the making and reading of pictographs, as well as the general theory of the origins of writing in graphic mnemonic devices, the effort to preserve oral language by means of a pictorial system—were drawn from an essay on pictographs by Schoolcraft. Arguing that "these figures represent ideas—whole ideas, and their juxtaposition or relations on a roll of bark, a tree, or a rock," Schoolcraft concluded that "picture writing is indeed the literature of the Indians," which was a singularly obtuse remark from a collector of oral tales and



Frederic Remington, "Indian Picture Writing," 1890. (Library of Congress)

songs.⁴⁹ "Indian languages," he wrote in 1856, "are peculiarly the languages of symbols, metaphors, and figures."⁵⁰ Longfellow had already gathered a similar notion of the primitiveness of metaphor from his reading of the eighteenth-century philosopher and historian Giambattista Vico, who taught that in the figurative speech of poetry lay the rudimentary origins of civilization; the first culture heroes and law-givers, Vico famously asserted, were poets.⁵¹ Longfellow's poem delivers a Hiawatha who, while confined to the Indian or "savage" stage, becomes an imagined link, a point of transition and continuity with the next and higher stage, the new world that arrives in the penultimate canto of the poem as "The White-Man's Foot."

Language, interpretation, poetry itself occupy the foreground of the entire poem. Translation is fundamental to the kind of knowledge the poem proposes, knowledge of origins, of sources, of the firstness upon which the American nation is founded. The "Vocabulary" or glossary lists 140 Ojibway words in English characters. The poet mediates languages, literatures, and cultures. *The Song of Hiawatha* performs its work as a pretended translation that obliterates in order to preserve (in an antithetical form) the imagined spirit of Indian aboriginality. The illusion of the translation, the illusion that Longfellow's verse is as transparent as pictures, is the poem's ultimate act against the native and for the nation; in Virginia Jackson's words, "translation of 'them' into 'us.'"⁵² The poem grounds itself in paradox: It makes Hiawatha or "the Indian" disappear in the act of seeming to give him voice; its own metrical and figurative system disarticulates aboriginal culture from its own systems of thought and speech by subsuming the aboriginal into the Anglo-Saxon nationality of the narrative verse form. The poem thus constructs a "white man's Indian" by suggesting that we can hear the picture speech of natives only by means of the mediating voice of the poet.

The poet-narrator's own metaphors sustain this illusion of translation of picture into word. Here is Mondamin, the youth "Dressed in garments green and yellow," the tassel-headed ear of corn, who has come as a person in answer to Hiawatha's prayers for a source of food more dependable than beasts of the waters and woods. He has "Come to warn you and instruct you, / How by struggle and by labour / You

shall gain what you have prayed for." They wrestle for three days, then Mondamin instructs:

"Make a bed for me to lie in,
Where the rain may fall upon me,
Where the sun may come and warm me;
Strip these garments, green and yellow,
Strip this nodding plumage from me,
Lay me in the earth, and make it
Soft and loose and light above me."

Vico wrote about the earliest peoples, "Their poetry was at first divine, because they imagined the cause of things they felt and wondered at to be gods. This is now confirmed by the American Indians, who call gods all the things that surpass their small understanding."⁵³ And Schoolcraft: "the Indian's necessities of language at all times require personifications and linguistic creations."⁵⁴ In the following passage Longfellow's repetitions strung along the four-beat trochaic meter induce a dreamlike spell, a mood of submission and consent to the gentlest stirrings of air and light as animistic signs.

Can it be the sun descending?
O'er the level plain of water?
Or the Red Swan floating, flying,
Wounded by the magic arrow,
Staining all the leaves with crimson,
With the crimson of its life-blood,
Filling all the air with splendor,
With the splendor of its plumage?⁵⁵

The question "Can it be the sun descending?" brings the reader into the verse as both sophisticated observer and willing believer (by suspense of disbelief) in the literal (or pictorial) truth of metaphor. Metaphor gives access to the mind imagined as capable of seeing the dying sun as a dying swan—not "like" or "as if," but "as." This exquisite passage is typical of the guileless subtlety by which Longfellow

throughout encourages a double awareness on the part of his reader. The interrogative mode allows the reader a space for self-recognition as witness to an alien world, a world accessible only by acts of translation, aided by upwelling of forgotten beliefs and fears.

Fly backward with me, the poem cajoles, backward through translation to an original magical world, a primary field of being and consciousness. The magical nature of the poem's restored universe is segmented into higher (human) and lower (plant and animal) realms and inhabited by figures in the guise of "characters" who are really energies or forces of nature or personifications of primal tribal functions: hunter, warrior, storyteller, magician, lawgiver, planter of corn. Translation reveals its subtext of utopian aspiration toward an imagined "primitive" for sustenance of the imagined nation.

Recall how much of the poem is cast as conversation between speaker and listener. Here are the opening lines:

Should you ask me, whence these stories?
 Whence these legends and traditions,
 With the odors of the forest,
 With the dew and damp of meadows,
 With the curling smoke of wigwams,
 With the rushing of great rivers,
 With their frequent repetitions,
 And their wild reverberations,
 As of thunder in the mountains?
 I should answer, I should tell you,
 ". . . I repeat them as I heard them
 From the lips of Nawadaha,
 The musician, the sweet singer."

Ask, answer, tell, lips, singer—against the background of the natural sounds of reverberating rushing water and thunder, primordial sounds as if of the first days—recall the arts of repetition, of the passing of story from mouth to mouth: "I repeat them as I heard them." Here is Longfellow up to his own civilized magic, as if the reading of the poem were an encounter with first, primordial, aboriginal things.

Metaphoric language enriches the soil of Longfellow's epic, the ground on which myth arises as if naturally in the modes of action, episode, and story: myth that begins with the Great Spirit's bright promise to "send a Prophet to you, / A Deliverer of the nations, / Who shall guide you and shall teach you." And its dark side: "If his warnings pass unheeded, / You will fade away and perish!"⁵⁶ The story follows from the miraculous birth of Hiawatha, the death of his mother Wenonah (who had been raped by the West Wind, an allusion to sexual violence otherwise repressed), his nurturing by grandmother Nokomis (who, in passing, entertains a bear as a lover), his honing the skills of hunting and gathering and healing and talking with animals. He clears streams, builds ships, slays monsters, marries, plants corn, and invents writing. Then follows decline and fall, a new culture arrives, a new stage prefigured by the Black Robes of the White-Man's Foot. Again we detect the presence of Vico and his cyclic theory of history as a succession from an age of gods (Gitche Manito) to an age of heroes which is also the age of poetry (Hiawatha), to an age of men, of "Humanity" (the Black Robes, Christianity).

As early as his 1832 essay on Sidney's *Defense of Poetry* and throughout his career, Longfellow worried that the displacement of poetry by "utility" and intellectualism threatened to install what Vico had called a "barbarism of reflection."⁵⁷ The pedagogical aim of *The Song of Hiawatha* was not only to make "Indian" the national ancestral figure but also to reinstall a love of poetry, of the magic of meter and figurative language, in a nation that in the ominous year of 1855 was about to commit civil self-destruction. The figure of Hiawatha carried a full weight of moral and political meaning for his author who, while he composed his romance in 1854, fretted in his journals over the tumultuous state of the Union and, in particular, the justice of returning Anthony Burns to his aggrieved "master."⁵⁸ A mythical poem, Longfellow's "fairy tale" descended still further, in its deepening darkness and melancholy, into the "merely historical," especially the impending conflict over the domination of one race by another.

IV

Janet Lewis's *The Invasion* provides insight into the political and historical unconscious of Longfellow's effort to write a myth of America, into the secret, forbidden knowledge the poem represses: not slavery as such but the dispossession of another dark-skinned people. Though he does not include among his sources any works on the history of U.S.-Ojibway relations, or any historical accounts of transactions and treaties with the natives, Longfellow in the end floundered more deeply into history than he apparently realized. Lewis's novel juxtaposes the poem with the fact that just months before it appeared in 1855, the Ojibways had signed under duress a treaty with the United States abandoning certain territorial claims in exchange for certain payments to tribal members along with U.S. citizenship. Lewis writes with fine irony about *Hiawatha*: "Many a child had pages of it by heart before, in accordance with the Treaty of 1855, the bands were dissolved and the Ojibway nation ceased to be a reality."⁵⁹

Longfellow's friend Ferdinand Freiligrath remarked, in the preface to his German translation in 1856, that the ending left something to be desired. Longfellow too felt the "contact of Saga and History too sudden. But how could I prevent it unless I made the poem very much longer? I felt the clash and concussion, but could not prevent it nor escape it."⁶⁰ The concussion appears in the penultimate canto when, after the arrival of the white Christians clad in black, Longfellow gave his hero a final prophetic vision that might have been written by a nationalist historian like Bancroft:

I beheld the westward marches
Of the unknown, crowded nations,
All the land was full of people,
Restless, struggling, toiling, striving,
Speaking many tongues, yet feeling
But one heart-beat in their bosoms.
In the woodlands rang their axes,
Smoked their towns in all the valleys,

Over all the lakes and rivers
Rushed their great canoes of thunder.⁶¹

Hiawatha appears now in a new guise as retrospective historian, historian not of aboriginal America (as Schoolcraft's "primitive," he would not have been capable of this) but of the white nation to be. And because his vision of what will be takes form as a narrative about what has already been, Hiawatha impresses his seal of approval on postaboriginal America, the new industrial nation of immigrant masses, smoke-filled cities, and thundering engines. It's the demise of the magical aboriginal world that makes the nation possible, just as surely as the very possibility of Hiawatha as a figure of white imagination rests on the certainty of his eventual departure, a feat accomplished symptomatically by the poem itself. The prospect is not bright.

"Then a darker, drearier vision
Passed before me, vague and cloud-like;
I beheld our nation scattered,
All forgetful of my counsels,
Weakened, warring with each other:
Saw the remnants of our people
Sweeping westward, wild and woful,
Like the cloud-rack of a tempest,
Like the withered leaves of Autumn!"

"All forgetful of my counsels": Hiawatha lays blame on his own people, their inability to transcend their "savage" character, though the smoke of factories and railroads and engines of destruction inject a not-so-covert anxiety on Longfellow's part about the full meaning of "the white-man's foot." Does his lamentation for the loss of the unified aboriginal world include a note of the poet's fear of losing an older white American world for whom "Edda" had immediate meaning? The poem suppresses these hints of a jeremiad. Overtly, Hiawatha brings his people to a certain point; the necessary history of culture determines the people's forgetfulness, that the white foot appear and

the hero depart, leaving his legacy to be sung to the white-footed nation as an inheritance mediated by the new singer, the national poet and culture bearer, Longfellow.

We can watch in his journal as Longfellow arrived at a hero who knew enough to step aside in the path of the white men. Hiawatha's farewell vision legitimated the Christian nation of immigrants. That it is Christian in the full sense of the word seems confirmed by two jarring lines in the "message" of the "Black-Robe chief" about Jesus: "How the Jews, the tribe accursed, / Mocked him, scourged him, crucified him." A few years later Longfellow published "The Jewish Cemetery at Newport," which ends with the words "dead nations never rise again." The covert equation of the Jews with Indian nations suggests at the least that Longfellow did not imagine that ghetto Jews from "narrow streets and lanes obscure" would come in masses among the "unknown, crowded nations" that several decades later filled America's smoking towns.

Deviating from previous (white) authors of Indian epics, Longfellow chose to write in the mode of epic-romance rather than of history, to found the poem on traditional lore rather than on unhappy chronicles of warriors, tomahawks, and bloody scalps. His most significant step was the naming of his hero. At first he was called Manabozho, after the Ojibway-Algonquian character in oral culture whose paradoxical behavior—playful and serious, rowdy and civil, devious and loyal, lover of chaos and maker of order—makes him both trickster and culture-hero, a well-known paradox. "A combination or antagonism of culture hero and trickster is a characteristic of North American mythology," writes Géza Roheim. Paul Radin adds, "Trickster is at one and the same time creator and destroyer, giver and negator, he who dupes others and who is always duped himself. . . . He possesses no values, moral or social, is at the mercy of his passions and appetites, yet through his actions all values come into being."⁶² This is exactly the wrong sort for a poet who wanted an Indian hero who was both acceptable in polite society and capable of founding an aboriginal tradition for a white Christian nation.

Of Manabozho, Schoolcraft wrote that he represented "the idea of an incarnation . . . the great spirit-man of northern mythology." But

he was also "rather a monstrosity than a deity, displaying in strong colors far more of the dark and incoherent acts of a spirit of carnality than the benevolent deeds of a god." His bravery, strength, wisdom, "high exploits," clashed with his "low tricks." Uncomprehending of and uncomfortable with this simultaneous love of order and love of chaos, Schoolcraft put the contradictions down to something inscrutable and "carnal" in Indian character. That Longfellow's Hiawatha derives from this baffled and offended understanding of Manabozho cannot be stressed enough. In an early passage, which he later deleted, Longfellow's hero showed as a shape-shifting trickster; as a squirrel he chats away with other squirrels, even addresses an Indian boy in squirrel talk. But the poet changed course and the poem stripped its hero of all "low" trickster traits, transferring them to the character of Pau-Puk-Keewis.⁶³

The change of name was the decisive act in Longfellow's refurbishing of his hero. "Hiawatha is Iroquois," Longfellow explained to a friend; "I chose it instead of Manabozho (Ojibway) for sake of euphony. It means 'the Wise Seer, or Prophet'—Hiawatha the Wise."⁶⁴ This name change and transfer of meaning from one culture language to another salvaged his hero as acceptable mediator between stages of civilization, as Promethean culture-hero and prophet of the nation. By euphony, Longfellow intended more than sound alone. Both names fit the meter, but Hiawatha came with better credentials.

How and where did Longfellow find the name Hiawatha? The common wisdom is that he repeated a mistake made by Schoolcraft, who in several passages of his books conflated Hiawatha, the Iroquois sachem, with the archetype to which he assigned the name Manabozho.⁶⁵ In 1901, after ethnographers began picking away at the poem, Longfellow's daughter Alice wrote that her father, "feeling the need for some expression of the finer and nobler side of the Indian nature . . . blended the supernatural deeds of the crafty sprite [Manabozho] with the wise, noble spirit of the Iroquois national hero, and formed the character of Hiawatha." Her Introductory Notes to a later edition of the poem include a lengthy passage from Hale's 1881 paper, an apparent sign that this volume was meant to incorporate the historical Iroquois Hiawatha into an official version (sponsored by the

poet's family and publisher) of the hero's name, no longer a choice based on euphony alone but also on meaning.⁶⁶ Whatever the truth about Longfellow's motives, he seemed to have been moved by a quality or essence rather than an actual character or person. He chose a euphonious name for a euphonious character.

Hiawatha was portrayed in Iroquois history and lore as "the equable man," writes William Fenton, "the ideal chief who put public concern over self and family . . . Hiawatha grieved over corruption in government, blood feud, and repeated acts of reprisal by sorcery . . . He conceived a scheme of a vast confederation to ensure universal peace." In short, he was the epitome of a "founding father."⁶⁷ He confronted the Onondaga tyrant and sorcerer Thadodaho and combed the serpents out of his hair, setting his mind straight and converting him to the cause of unity and peace. His name means "He Who Combs," "that is, who straightens out the kinks in men's mind."⁶⁸ Longfellow divested him of Iroquois associations, and especially the conflict within him between a "low" body of unruly appetite and a "high" visionary spirit. Here is John Bierhorst's summary of the legend in his introduction to "The Ritual of Condolence," the central Iroquois ritual:

According to legend the great league was conceived by the hero Hiawatha, who had himself been afflicted by a morbid state of mind. One day, so the story goes, he noticed the reflection of a new face in the surface of the water. Not recognizing it as his own, he looked up and saw peering over his shoulder the beautiful figure of his second self, a seemingly real personage to whom mythmakers have given the name of Deganawidah ("the Thinker"). It was Deganawidah who persuaded Hiawatha to give up the practice of cannibalism and to become, moreover, the advocate of a Great Peace. Having reformed himself, Hiawatha proceeded to reform his people.

It's the Deganawidah face that entranced Longfellow, and he repressed the cannibal for the sake of the saint, redeeming the ambiguous trickster as "an American Prometheus."⁶⁹



Grace Chandler, "Hiawatha in Early Manhood, Indian Play at Wayagamug, near Petoskey, Michigan," postcard, c. 1904. (Author's collection)

At what price in fidelity to sources, historical resonance, and emotional power? "I have always one foremost satisfaction in reading your books," Emerson wrote in thanks for the gift of the book in November 1855, "—that I am safe." It's a "wholesome" poem, he added, "sweet and wholesome as maize; very proper and pertinent for us to read, and showing a kind of manly duty in the poet to write." Four months earlier Emerson had written to another poet in appreciation for his book. *Leaves of Grass*, he wrote in a famous letter to Walt Whitman, is "the most extraordinary piece of wit and wisdom that America has yet contributed . . . I give you joy of your free and brave thought . . . I find the courage of treatment which so delights us, and which large perception only can inspire." Courage, bravery, largeness of perception, power are conspicuously absent from Emerson's praise of Longfellow's "Indian poem." Emerson continued to Longfellow, "The dangers of the Indians are, they are really savage, have poor, small, sterile heads,—no thoughts; and you must deal roundly with them, and find them in brains. And I blamed your tenderness now and then, as I read, in accepting a legend or song, when they have so little to give."⁷⁰ To be generous toward Emerson, who elsewhere found much to admire in native cultures, we can take his strong words to mean that he did not think that native speech and culture readily converted into the familiar. The safety of Longfellow's wholesome poem, he seems to mean, is purchased by making the aboriginal warrior compliant in his own undoing. At the core of the poem, Emerson helps us see, lies a "civilized" though ambivalent desire to subdue the primordial and at the same time to appropriate it, to ingest it as a sacrificial meal, to win access by means of translation (or the illusion of such) to secret sources of the aboriginal world. The poem is an amulet against a forbidding future, the poem as a bit of civilized magic of its own.

Eponym not only of the poem but also of a whole way of unalienated being, Hiawatha emerged from Longfellow's imagination as the generic "white man's Indian," the hidden name of every staged Indian who comes to us with melancholic eyes and sorrow in his speech, teaching ancient wisdom while lamenting the inevitable loss of ancient ways and native land, promising always to leave and always to return. Singing the song of Hiawatha in the midst of a national crisis that

threatened to undo the civil order of the republic, and at the peak of the first great rush toward an industrial-capitalist order, Longfellow sensed the perils of a rapidly changing world, of an old order crumbling and the new prospect dimmed by smoky mills and noisy engines. In the final canto Hiawatha departs "With a smile of joy and triumph, / With a look of exultation, / As of one who in a vision / Sees what is to be, but is not."⁷¹ The vision of an American future under "the white-man's foot" has wiped from his brow "every trace of sorrow."

Traces of sorrow are not so blithely erased from the reader's brow. Treachery, violence, ringing axes, and murky towns, a future "restless, struggling, toiling, striving," with peril piled upon peril at the poem's climax—these invite us to read through and behind and beneath the exultation and triumph to a less confident vision and see the clash of Longfellow's myth of American origins with the clouded future already visible to him. Hiawatha promises to return, to "come again to see you." But the people know better; they say "Farewell forever." "And the forests, dark and lonely, / Moved through all their depths of darkness." The poem itself moves through darkness, leaving the reader in the end stranded on a beach squinting after Hiawatha fading into the blackness of night, a finality where vision fails. "And the waves upon the margin / Rising, rippling on the pebbles, / Sobbed: 'Farewell, O Hiawatha!'"⁷² "Terminally epic," in Gordon Brotherston's apt words, "the hero follows the solar walk not through its circuit but just westward to annihilation in the 'fiery sunset.'"⁷³

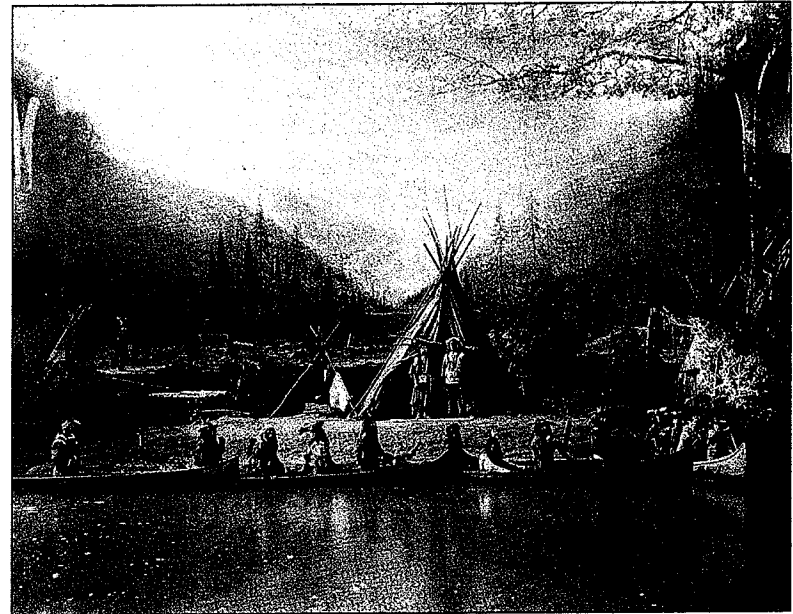
In 1873, *Hiawatha: The Story of the Iroquois Sage, in Prose and Verse*, by an otherwise unknown author named Benjamin F. DeCosta, was published. It is, as far as I know, the first notice of the fact that Longfellow's hero was a misconstrual of his historical namesake. "The Red Man in North America has alternately been the victim of the poet and the politician," DeCosta wrote, but "a new 'Hiawatha' is among the possibilities of the future," a poem that would give credit to the political form of the confederacy: "essential republicanism in this country began with the League of the Five Nations, who were taught the advantages of the system by Hiawatha; all of which is worthy of finding expression in a peculiarly American poem." Sad to report, DeCosta's own effort at such a poem was wretched.⁷⁴ But the idea of

a new Hiawatha, true to his name and to his dual nature, trickster and culture hero, cannibal and civilizer, Indian teacher to the nation, plants a teasing thought. Might the old progenitor yet return in another guise?

V

Early in 1900, a Boston newspaper reported "A Hiawatha Revival" in progress. Anyone who recalled "the persistent and almost savage criticism" of Longfellow's poem, the article explained, "cannot help being surprised at the changed position it occupies in men's minds today." The use of "savage" to characterize the still reverberating charges against the poem catches our eye, especially as a counterpoint to the "love, affection and tradition" attributed to a group of "native denizens of Indian blood" who made a visit to the poet's home in Cambridge to pay their respects. Things had turned around. The reference to "men's minds" also rings as significant in light of the article's discovery that "there is a virile tone" to the poem after all, which will "associate the personality of the poet with primal American life more than anything else he wrote." The visiting Ojibways were disappointed to learn that "the chronicler of their joys and sorrows was no more." But Longfellow's daughter Alice received them cordially and accepted an invitation for her and her party to "come and see us and stay in our royal wigwam on an island in Hiawatha's playground . . . We want you to see us live over again the life of Hiawatha in his own country."⁷⁵

Hiawatha redux: living "over again" as performance, as spectacle, as sacrificial host: a meal set for the nation. This was not exactly the new Hiawatha DeCosta imagined, but the spectacle form of his reappearance did revive the Longfellow construction as modern ritual. Just as "savage criticism" implied that he himself had suffered some degree of sacrifice for the sake of upholding a norm of literary propriety, so Longfellow had contrived a "departure" scene, an Indian "assumption" of a dead or dying god figure redeeming a nation that had in real life spilled oceans of blood and inflicted immeasurable bodily



A scene from an outdoor production of *Hiawatha* in 1902, possibly at the Philadelphia zoo, showing Indians in four canoes and Hiawatha and Minnehaha in front of their tepee. (Library of Congress)



"Hiawatha Legends," postcard, 1905. (Author's collection)

pain to achieve its dominance. Slaughter subsumed as destiny—"unproductive expenditure," in Georges Bataille's words, for the sake of disguised symbolic reenactment of the past—seemed a necessity at a time swollen with an excess of goods, guilt, and national angst. Repeated performance of gentle Hiawatha's farewell passion displaced and substituted for a history of actual blood sacrifice—the murder and beheading of King Phillip, the massacre of his people, the assassinations of Crazy Horse and Sitting Bull, killing of Big Foot and his band at Wounded Knee—and it gave the nation an aesthetized version of its own unspoken historical memory. With blood no longer running and the tribes apparently "pacified," the expanding and diversifying United States could now enjoy a solacing national memory, a perennial ritual of violence sublimated as art. This was a neat turn on the "regeneration through violence" of the lost frontier experience.⁷⁶

Already a popular theme for illustrators of numerous editions of the poem and for prominent painters including Albert Bierstadt, Hiawatha took his place among national folk heroes of song and legend, something like an Indian Paul Bunyan. In drawings, paintings, sculptures, illustrations, photographs, and cinema, he reappeared at the turn of the century newly pictorialized. Profusely illustrated editions of *Hiawatha* like Frederic Remington's in 1890 gathered schoolchildren around an imaginary fireplace to hear and see and recite the familiar cadences; picture postcards displaying scenes from the poem flooded the nation; statues by Daniel Chester French and African American sculptress Edmonia Lewis further ennobled the poem's ingratiating hero. In pageant and image he was given speech, song, and dance to enhance his presence as living over again the story of his good works and his departure. The Hiawatha revival included coloring books for children, photographs of performances, popular ephemera, revisions of the poem into a multimedia cultural event. The poem became important to a movement among composers who wanted to revitalize and nationalize American music in the Western tradition with Indian themes, resulting in further Westernization of the Hiawatha figure; Dvořák based two movements of his *New World* symphony in the 1890s on episodes from the poem, and the Anglo-African composer Samuel Coleridge-Taylor was dubbed the "Hiawatha man"

for his Brahmsian cantatas, often performed by black church choirs. And the spectacle form for presenting Indianness, already established as "historical" in Wild West shows, reached a kind of apex in 1909 with the staging of "The Romance of the Vanishing Race" at the Wanamaker Department Store in Philadelphia and New York, an elaborate confection of images, lantern slides, moving pictures, and music whose centerpiece was a filmed version of *The Song of Hiawatha*.

A new element in all this was the participation of natives in reviving the fiction that Longfellow's Hiawatha was an actual Indian figure. A 1891 photograph by Francis Benjamin Johnson shows a class of Indian students at the Carlisle School; a blackboard surmounted by a portrait of George Washington lists topics under discussion: "Hiawatha's Childhood; Nokomis, Who was she? Why was she called daughter of the moon?" As Lonna Malmshemer writes aptly, this photograph shows native students "in the very act of disappearing" into a view of themselves and their tribal past as transfigured into Euro-American poetry, just as they themselves undergo transformation, sitting at their desks, their noses in the book (except for the young man on his feet reciting the poem for the white teacher on her feet at the right), into what Luther Standing Bear would call "imitation white men." In the photograph, Indians perform their abandonment of their Indian selves by accepting Longfellow's Hiawatha as their own.⁷⁷

Starting in 1881 and running for about thirty years, Indian students performed a staged reading of "Scenes from Hiawatha" at Carnegie Hall in New York and in other theaters and summer resorts in New England. In a letter to Longfellow's grandson in which she enclosed a copy of the script, Cora Folsom, a sympathetic teacher of Indian students at the Hampton Institute, explained that the performances began as an attempt to raise money for a stained-glass memorial to Pocahontas in an Episcopal church in Hampton. It was included as late as 1919 on a program at the school for "Indian Citizenship Day," perhaps in celebration of Indian veterans of World War I who were made citizens in reward for military service.⁷⁸

But the event to which Alice Longfellow was ceremoniously invited in 1900 represented a striking new turn in Hiawatha perfor-



Francis Benjamin Johnson, "Classroom at the Indian School, Carlisle, Pennsylvania," 1903. (Library of Congress)



Soule Art Company, "Give your children, O Father!" The Kempton Pictures, 1904. (Author's collection)

mances. From her narrative and from newspaper sources, we learn that the visiting Indians were in Boston "to illustrate Indian life" at a Sportsman's Show. They were to be accompanied by the old chief Buk-wij-ji-ni-ni, son of the famous chief Shing-wauk, from whom some believed Schoolcraft first heard the legends of Hiawatha by word of mouth, though "it is said" (according to an article in *Everybody's Magazine* reprinted in a Cambridge newspaper) that Buk-wij-ji-ni-ni himself believed "to his dying day," which happened to occur just before the trip to Boston, "that he told the legends personally to the author of Hiawatha." He charged his successors Kabaooa and Wabunosa to make the invitation, which was graciously accepted by the Longfellow daughters.

It happened, wrote Alice Longfellow, that the expedition to Boston had been arranged by a "Canadian gentleman" who "had been cherishing the idea of training the Indians to perform scenes from 'Hiawatha' in the forest on the shores of the 'big sea water'" (which was actually Lake Huron, not Superior, the "Gitche Gumee" of the poem). L. O. Armstrong of Montreal, apparently in the employ of the Canadian Pacific Railway, had translated sections of the poem into Ojibway. In 1901 a pamphlet with Armstrong's Ojibway version printed opposite lines from Longfellow's poem appeared under the imprint of the Canadian Pacific Railway Company along with information about how to reach the location, near Desbarats, Ontario, and Peto-skey, Michigan. Coincidentally, Ernest Hemingway's parents had a cabin nearby. At age two or three, about the time the Hiawatha pageants got under way, the Hemingway child amused his parents by performing passages from *Hiawatha*. Spending his summers there while growing up, Hemingway became intimate with local Indians; he used the region as the site of several stories of initiation in the 1920s such as "Indian Camp" and "The Three-Day Blow." Come visit "the land of the Ojibways," the railway pamphlet suggested, and see the "Ojibway Indian Play." A further inducement was that "Canoe trips with Fishing and Shooting can be enjoyed there in their perfection."⁷⁹

The Longfellow party loved the performance on a rugged offshore island, the daughters were initiated into the tribe ("the redmen expressed a deep and sincere national feeling," said one newspaper ac-

count, "in electing the poet's daughters as daughters of their tribe"), and an expanded annual event was launched; it was performed more than fifty times in 1902, sixty-two the following year, and its three hundredth performance occurred in 1903 when the production went on the road. By then an elaborate musical score had been added. A pamphlet published in 1914 by the Grand Rapids & Indiana Railway Company (entrepreneurs on the American side were hardly lax) described added amenities in Petoskey for tourists: a bathing beach, a dining hall with "genuine 'HOMECOOKING,'" and an Indian handicraft shop where one could purchase hundreds of pictures in "platinum etching and oil . . . from the Studio of Grace Chandler Horn." Her photographs of the site and performers adorn the pamphlet as they do a handsome publication of the poem, called "The Players' Edition," brought out by Rand McNally in 1911. The Ojibway performers, we are assured in the preface (repeated in the 1914 pamphlet) "are intensely proud of the legends connected with their early life, are proud of the grandeur, of the wealth of their traditions that Longfellow's poem had made immortal." Many of the performers claimed descent from "hereditary chiefs" like Shing-wauk and Buk-wij-ji-ni-ni.⁸⁰

Longfellow himself "had no idea," remarked a writer in *Everybody's Magazine*, "that the time would come when men would be able to see in the flesh the romantic characters created by him from the ancient legends of the Ojibways." Press coverage of the 1900 event added an important dimension, stressing how the theatrical performance realized the poem by visualization. But "in the flesh" barely states the extent of Hiawatha's new visibility. With smaller cameras and faster film, and refinement of halftone reproduction of photographs in newspapers, in magazines, in brochures, and on cards, the imprint of flesh on film could be reproduced and circulated with ease. The persons, events, and settings of the poem appeared live on stage and again in mass-produced images. In 1904 in Boston a series of thirty consecutive photographs by the Soule Art Company appeared, apparently for use in school, a protocinematic telling of the familiar narrative that foreshadowed the filmed versions soon to come. Photographic visibility lent a sense of closeness to Hiawatha and his staged

gestures, a new intimacy with the figment of Longfellow's imagination materialized first as performance and then as image. Employed to extend the visibility of performance into a universally available experience, photography became a key resource of spectacle.

"It may not be generally known," wrote *Everybody's Magazine*, "that the legends embodied in the 'Song of Hiawatha' are genuine; that the Indian names and words employed are identical with those used among the Ojibways, and that the geographical locations are correct." By time of the 1911 "Players' Edition," the location had a new, Indian-sounding name: "Way-ya-ga-mug, near Petoskey, Michigan." "As is shown by the photographs," the preface continues, "no artificial stage or painted scenery is used. The forest itself, through the trees of which gleam the white tepees of the Indian village, forms a fitting background." As for the performers, "they are living out what, to them, is life, real life."⁸¹

"Real life," we learn, was in large part reconstructed with ethnological assistance. "Unfortunately for romance," a Boston newspaper explained, "the Ojibway learned the arts of the white man at the expense of many of his own." Examples of "good" Indians, "the best types of aboriginal American in existence," were few, and the Ojibway "contact with the white man has cost him his nationality and dominion." Presenting their "real life" in theatrical form would have the happy result of "reviving" among them "knowledge of their own ancient customs, ceremonials, arts and styles of dress"; it would make better performers of them.

Armstrong found drawings and photographs in the ethnological collections of the Smithsonian Institution to teach local Ojibways "forgotten skills in the art of porcupine quill and bead embroidery." Longfellow's Hiawatha gave an occasion, as the press presented the event, for a Canadian-English artistic entrepreneur to "restore" their forgotten culture to the Ojibways, including a chance for Christian Indians to perform rites of their ancient religion that Longfellow had sympathetically preserved. The performance invited comparisons with the "mystery" play, a "religious observance" like the famous German passion play at Oberammergau. Longfellow's "fairy tale" became flesh at Way-ya-ga-mug as a lost ritual recovered, and the Indian per-

formers had a chance to perform their loss in someone else's version for the pleasure of white audiences and perhaps their own fun: Sacrifice was sublimated as entertainment.

The conviction that this was real life was a paradoxical effect of theatricality, the spectacle mode of the performance. Here are excerpts from the description in *Everybody's Magazine*:

After the audience had assembled in front of the stage, on the green slope, . . . signal-fires were lighted here and there at the back of the wigwam. The dense smoke caused by burning birch-bark soared aloft through the trees, and in response to this primitive summons a number of Indian braves attired in the war panoply of their tribes came hurrying through the wood from various directions. As they approached the stage they reduced their pace to a walk and finally to a stealthy, crouching tread . . .

When all were gathered on the stage, facing one another with glowering looks, a loud voice, that of Gitche Manito, the Mighty, suddenly called them in the Ojibway tongue to cease their warring . . . the braves cast off their deerskin garments, dropped their weapons and dashed into the lake, where they speedily cleansed themselves from their hideous war-paint . . . the Indians sat down in a large circle, and, one after another, took a puff from the peace-pipe . . . This was the end of the first act.

The cleansing is the key. The spectacle gives us an Indian assuredly "genuine" in his speech, setting, costume, and accoutrements. Within a few years, music by Frederick R. Burton was added, making for "a musical-dramatic-spectacular work," in the words of the Boston *Evening Transcript*. Expanded with a full orchestra and "white singers disguised as Indians . . . to sing the more complex passages," the troupe held regular performances at the Lake Huron site and also brought the elaborated spectacle to New York, Philadelphia, Boston, and Chicago as "adjunct" to local Sportsman's Shows. "Great crowds" watched the shows with eagerness and awed attention, "striking evi-

dence of the strong hold the poem has taken upon English-speaking people"—proof again that Longfellow had caught and preserved "whatever is high and good and human in the redman."⁸²

Newspaper accounts suggest how audiences understood what they witnessed. There are good Indians, the ones portrayed by Cooper and Longfellow, "noble tribes of warriors" not to be confused, one article instructed its readers, with "poor degenerate Indians," the "hapless creatures as creep about the stations and reserves in the west." Hiawatha and his wife "were of a different and far nobler model, and we may all regret that they have practically vanished from the earth." Proof of Hiawatha's nobility is his "knowing and foretelling the fading out of his race." Do we need remind ourselves it is Longfellow's ventriloquism of which the writer speaks? "Hiawatha had to depart, and the new times had to arrive for America's sake and humanity's, as no one could better have sung than the gentle and gifted poet." That Longfellow's vision was honored by the reliving of faded nobility in spectacle of song and action was taken as "singular proof of the power of true poetry to influence history . . . and shows how deeply the American bard must have entered into the spirit of the ancient races whose disappearance was proceeding under his eyes." By performance the good Indians were being reclaimed simultaneously as modern Christian Americans (though still Ojibway, still native, still "colored") and noble tribal people. To be sure, the performers understood that they were playing roles, but their mimesis was all the more effective because white audiences believed they were performing their own genuine "mystery play," the "fairy tale" composed by Longfellow in his Cambridge study not so long ago.⁸³

Newspaper commentary constructed the performance as that of Indians putting on their ancient fading selves in both historical and mythical pageantry, enacting the return of Hiawatha in his perpetual act of departing "for America's sake." This Indian minstrelsy reached a peak during what the historian David Glassberg calls a "pageantry craze," when casts of hundreds and thousands mobilized by "pageant masters" acted out episodes from the histories of towns and cities all over America. A scarcity of living Indians in the East led to recruitment of Boy Scouts and the Improved Order of Red Men to perform