BEFORE 1865 no American poet, not even Longfellow, was able to live comfortably or with any sense of security on his income from verse. Since 1865 a few poets have, in their old age, received a dependable, though never sufficient, income from the sale of their collected verse—verse which failed to support them at the time they wrote it. In the 1870’s and 1880’s the Osgood-Houghton, Mifflin firm paid Longfellow, Holmes, and Lowell flat annuities for the right to reprint their past works (the biggest was Longfellow’s—$4,000—at a time when his income from his wife’s estate was double that amount). Though these annuities might have supported the poets when they were young, they were in every case inadequate at the time received. The term “the poet’s life,” therefore, has never had a genuine economic dimension, like the term “physician’s life.” Lip service to the poet’s place in culture cannot alter the fact that society will not support a poet at an economic level higher than mere subsistence, and rarely at that level until age has robbed him of creative energy.

The exclusion of the Edgar Guests, James Whitcomb Rileys, and Robert W. Services from this generalization calls for explanation and definition (Riley’s royalties in 1903 when he was fifty-four were about $23,000). The general assumption in literary history and criticism is that there are only two kinds of poets: “genuine” poets like Emily Dickinson, and “popular” poets like Longfellow and Riley, a Riley being only a lesser Longfellow. Actually, a Riley is as different from Longfellow as from Dickin-
son. There are three kinds of poets, not two: private poets (Dickinson), public poets (Longfellow), and mass poets (Riley). The Rileys are excluded from this history because they are not artists but manufacturers—impersonal producers of a commodity. Riley catalogued his wares in much the same spirit that the modern "pic" magazine allots space to Sex, Babies, Nature, Sport, and Celebrities:

What We want, as I sense it, in the line
O’ poetry is somepin’ Yours and Mine—
Somepin’ with live stock in it, and out-doors,
And old crick-bottoms, snags, and sycamores:
Putt weeds in—pizenvines, and underbresh,
As well as johnny-jump-ups, all so fresh
And sassy-like!—and groun’-squir’ls,—yes, and "We,"
As sayin’ is,—"We, Us and Company!"

Putt in old Nature’s sermonts,—them’s the best,—
And ‘casion’ly hang up a hornets’ nest
’At boys ’at’s run away from school can git
At handy-like—and let ’em tackle it!
Let us be wrought on, of a truth, to feel
Our proneness fer to hurt more than we heal,
In ministratin’ to our vain delights—
Fergittin' even insec's has their rights!

Ner “Night Thoughts,” nuther—ner no “Lally Rook”!
We want some poetry ’at’s to Our taste,
Made out o’ truck ’at’s jes’ a-goin’ to waste
’Cause smart folks thinks it’s altogether too
Outrageous common—’cept fer me and you!—
Which goes to argy, all sich poetry
Is 'bliged to rest its hopes on You and Me.
The “pic” magazine photographs its goods; Riley packages his in rhyme and dialect and comfortably bad English. The important difference is a historical one: writing in 1893 before mass culture producers had acquired the self-confidence appropriate to big business, Riley flatters his customers by identifying himself with them, and guarantees that his product is 99 44/100 per cent free of privacies—unlike that of competitors Edward Young (“Night Thoughts”), Thomas Moore (“Lally Rook”), and F. T. Palgrave (“Treasury” book).

The mass poet, then, writes primarily to exploit a market, and he is on that account excluded from this history. The private and the public poet, in contrast, write primarily to meet a need within themselves, whether that need is for fame, or to teach and lead, or simply to discover and explore themselves. The private poet who makes little or no attempt to reach a public through print (Edward Taylor, Emily Dickinson) is also excluded, but any private poet who develops partly through the attempt to communicate is eligible. But our main concern here is with those writers the bulk of whose work is in verse form (unlike that of Emerson, Poe, and Thoreau) and whose character as men of letters has developed through a prolonged endeavor to reach a general audience rather than a coterie. He not only believes that the verse he writes to answer a need of his own meets a need of his readers, but hopes that there are enough readers to support him in verse-writing as a way of life.

Not all public poets are popular. There are as many degrees of success and failure among public poets as among private, and there are more “mute, inglorious Longfellows” than Miltons. For every Longfellow there are half a dozen Laniers and Tuckermans who were relative failures—that is, in their time. Equally variable is the survival value of public verse. Longfellow and Whittier still have readers after six or seven decades, but the poems of Thomas William Parsons and Richard Henry Stoddard died with them.
Very few public poets were financially successful. Up to 1845 no poet was read more eagerly than William Cullen Bryant. By 1842 *Graham's Magazine* was offering him (and Longfellow) $50 a poem, with a guarantee of one purchase a month, or a total of $600 a year, which was tops for the time and the country. But note the context of the offer: (1) To get the maximum magazine rate, he had to turn out poems at the editor's pace, not the poet's (he sent in only two a year). (2) To maintain the contract, he would have had to continue to produce the kind of poems that *Graham's* wanted. (3) The poems in *Graham's* were instantly reprinted, without payment, by half the magazines in the country.

In the late forties Bryant's collected works were selling at the rate of 1,700 a year, with royalties of $500 a year. He could thus count on $1,100 a year from verse. But by 1848 he was fifty-four years old; he was full-time editor and owner of a newspaper which netted $40,000 a year; and he had been forced into the editorship of this paper by the failure of his early poetry.

The verse of both the private and the public poet originates from the unique privacies of the poet as person. The private poet is concerned not only to preserve that uniqueness but to intensify it through the writing of verse—even at the cost of being rejected for unintelligibility. But the public poet progressively subordinates or submerges his uniqueness. For reasons which are the province of the psychiatrist-sociologist, his sense of separateness is less strong than his social sense. And though his urge to be a moral leader may be shared by the private poet, his wish to be a *spokesman* is not. A writer may through his works be a leader in his old age and after he is dead, but he can be a spokesman only in his time. Representativeness *in his time*, then, is the differentiating quality of the public poet, and it is the quality that makes the fundamental difference between his verse and that of the private poet. For to be a spokesman he must speak in a vocabulary and syntax familiar to his audience in his time, and though these poets have a personal style, as two conversing
neighbors may have two different styles, each is completely intelligible to his audience. The private poet, by contrast, creates a vocabulary which the world must learn as it learns a new language—as it learned, ultimately, but not contemporaneously, the language of Keats, Shelley, Emerson, and Whitman.

In the realm of ideas, the minds of the public and the private poet function with a basic difference. Man's natural condition is a state of conflict between assumptions he inherits from the past (through his parents, his teachers, his minister, and his books) and acquires from the special facts of his immediate and changing environment, and of both of these with what he feels as a unique individual at war with both the past and his environment. Most men simply live with these conflicts rather than try to resolve them because resolution is, emotionally and intellectually, a painful process. And because he speaks for himself only, his resolution is rarely acceptable to any but the very few—few in any age—who get nourishment from the poetic process in itself without reference to specific conclusions.

But the public poet either preserves the conflicts or tries to argue them out in terms the public understands (symbols, slogans). If in preserving conflicts he seems usually to be unaware of them, it is because he takes it for granted that such conflicts are as legitimate in poetry as in people.

For example: The famous public poem "Thanatopsis" is made up of three layers of ideas about the relation between Nature and Morality, deriving from three different areas of Bryant's education. The first comes from current Romantic nature-sentimentalism: Nature sympathizes with those who respond to her. The second came from his readings in Classical stoicism: Nature quite indifferently absorbs everyone back into itself regardless of "response" and without promise of rebirth. The third comes from Christian theology: Live right and you won't mind being absorbed, because (by implication) living right will make a difference in what happens to you after absorption.
If these ideas are not completely contradictory, they are at least unconnected. But since Bryant revised the poem several times long after he came to maturity, and since there is no one unifying image but three separate ones, we can assume that defects in its logic are a result not of oversight but of an attitude toward poetry. This attitude is that poetry is not thought but feeling—the kind of feeling, moreover, that helps us to forget the conflicts among our unanalyzed assumptions and beliefs and even to believe that they make sense.

It is precisely this principle that operates in perhaps the most universally known poem in all history—"A Psalm of Life." A poem full of socially sanctioned, though almost totally unrelated, assertions about Life, Death, and Work, it nevertheless worked like a shot of adrenalin on multitudes who had reason to wonder why they bothered to get up in the morning.

The public poet preserves the conflicts of past and present and of both of these with himself, and his public feels at home with him not in spite of the conflicts but because he preserves them. For example: an "official" assumption of Longfellow's society was that Protestantism, a product of progress and an ally of American enterprise and Manifest Destiny, was superior to all other religions, Christian, non-Christian, and pagan. When Longfellow's Kavanagh, having in the course of his Jesuit training become acquainted with Protestant doctrine, chooses to become a Protestant minister, his choice is in accord with the official doctrine. Yet Longfellow images this act as but "passing from one chapel to another in a vast cathedral." The symbol derives from an inherited system of thinking, known as the "great chain of being," which was "official" among the liberals of eighteenth-century Europe, but inconsistent with the nineteenth-century American conception of progress. In the "chain" all entities, including religions, have their place in the divine scheme of things, and all are "equal" to the extent that they perform a needed function: they are subordinate not to each other but only to the divine plan.
Now Kavanagh, from the point of view of contemporary American assumptions, does not pass from one "equal" chapel to another: he moves into the cathedral itself. Having made his decision, he cannot believe that the chapel he left is as good as the one he enters, for Longfellow expressly states that his Protestantism retains the good and rejects the bad of Catholicism. It is therefore superior to Catholicism, and higher up on the historical ladder of progress.

There is, then, a disparity between Kavanagh's act and the figure used to describe it, and Longfellow allows it to stand, apparently without recognizing it as such. Compare this episode with Emerson's essentially private poem, "The Problem." Here, too, Catholicism is rejected after its attractions are admitted. But all other religions, including Protestantism, are rejected, too, because they require a passive submission to a divine sovereignty inconsonant with the individual's share in divinity. In effect, Emerson is denying the official doctrine of institutional progress, in spite of the pain of excluding himself from institutions which have, he recognizes, produced the bibles and the litanies of the race.

Bryant produced poetry in such moments as were "spare" in the life of a New York editor. Longfellow, as professor, had far more free time; and as retired professor after 1854 he was our first full-time poet. But the financial yield of his work was only relatively greater than Bryant's. The record is as follows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Books</th>
<th>Magazines</th>
<th>Total</th>
<th>Harvard Salary</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>First book of verse</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1839</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1840</td>
<td>$173.00</td>
<td>$46.00</td>
<td>$219.00</td>
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<td>187.50</td>
<td>45.00</td>
<td>257.50</td>
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<td>202.00</td>
<td>315.00</td>
<td>517.00</td>
<td>1,500.00</td>
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<tr>
<td>Marriage</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1843</td>
<td>235.00</td>
<td>100.00</td>
<td>335.00</td>
<td>1,500.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1844</td>
<td>225.00</td>
<td>300.00</td>
<td>525.00</td>
<td>1,500.00</td>
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**Sources of Longfellow's Income—Continued**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Books</th>
<th>Magazines</th>
<th>Total</th>
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</thead>
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<td>First Collection</td>
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<tr>
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<td>1,700.00</td>
<td>100.00</td>
<td>1,800.00</td>
<td>1,800.00</td>
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<tr>
<td>1847</td>
<td>1,100.00</td>
<td></td>
<td>1,100.00</td>
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<tr>
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<td>100.00</td>
<td>1,525.00</td>
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<tr>
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<td>2,861.25</td>
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<tr>
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<td>1,800.00</td>
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<td>2,537.70</td>
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<td></td>
<td>680.10</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>1852</td>
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<td>50.00</td>
<td>1,105.60</td>
<td>1,800.00</td>
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<tr>
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<td>250.00</td>
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<tr>
<td>1854</td>
<td>1,600.00</td>
<td>100.00</td>
<td>1,700.00</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Resignation</td>
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<td>1855</td>
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<td>200.00</td>
<td>3,675.00</td>
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<td>1856</td>
<td>7,400.00</td>
<td></td>
<td>7,400.00</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1857</td>
<td>2,450.00</td>
<td>100.00</td>
<td>2,550.00</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1858</td>
<td>1,660.00</td>
<td>250.00</td>
<td>2,660.00</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>750.00</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1859</td>
<td>1,767.00</td>
<td>50.00</td>
<td>1,817.00</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1860</td>
<td>1,132.00</td>
<td>50.00</td>
<td>1,182.00</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1861</td>
<td>874.50</td>
<td>50.00</td>
<td>924.50</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1862</td>
<td>1,022.50</td>
<td>50.00</td>
<td>1,072.50</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1863</td>
<td>1,131.00</td>
<td>250.00</td>
<td>1,381.00</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1864</td>
<td>2,262.50</td>
<td>300.00</td>
<td>2,562.50</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>120.00</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

A new contract in 1865 resulted in an average yield for the next ten years for collected editions of $3,284, and from 1875 to his death he got a flat payment of four thousand a year for all his old books. The only other poet who came even close to this record was Whittier. His income from books was negligible until he wrote *Snow-Bound*. From that year to 1879, though he sometimes had ten books and editions on the market, and though in 1868 and 1875 printings totaled 53,100 and 49,360, his income from books averaged only a little over $3,000 a year.

Longfellow's average, then, for his first quarter century as popular poet, during much of which time his audience was European as well as American, was $1,844.50. But even these figures do not tell the whole story. The public poet, though he
usually has made his reputation by his lyrics, has, in effect, given his lyrics to the world free, and has derived the bulk of his income from, and diverted the bulk of his production into, non-lyrical literary activity. Almost without exception he has been a storyteller in verse, in fiction, or in drama—sometimes, as in Longfellow's case, in all three. A good 80 per cent of Longfellow's verse is in narrative form; and he wrote six poetic dramas and two "novels." Moreover, Longfellow's long narratives, like *Evangeline*, or connected short narratives, like *The Golden Legend*, had a longer life as separate volumes than the collections of lyrics. Not one of Longfellow's first six—and famous—collections of lyrics was reprinted separately after 1849. Absorbed into collections, they sold widely but not with proportionate returns for the author. But single narratives like *Evangeline* and *Hiawatha* continued their separate existence to the end of the author's life, *Hiawatha* yielding royalties of over $7,000 in its first ten years. It goes without saying that for the public poet, verse in story form is functional for his purpose. It is less obvious that the density of lyric verse makes it poor professional stock compared, for example, to novels, and that readers will not or cannot pay for it in proportion to the work that goes into it. The entire work of an exclusively lyric (and private) poet like Emerson, Whitman, or Dickinson can be compressed into a package that is handed over the counter for a dollar or two. Not so the complete works of a Cooper, a Twain, or a James.

Unread and forgotten now, Longfellow's three fictional and semifictional books in his time were as widely read as his poetry. To 1864 the record of sales is:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Sales</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><em>Outre-Mer</em></td>
<td>6,060</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Kavanagh</em></td>
<td>8,620</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Hyperion</em></td>
<td>14,450</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Compressed into a special edition of two volumes in 1857, they sold an additional 6,500 copies by 1864. The separate printings
of the three works constituted 85 per cent of the printings of the seven separate volumes of verse which had been published up to 1849, the date of *Kavanagh*. For these separate volumes Longfellow’s gross receipts for the prose exceeded that for the verse—$5,427 to $5,350. And comparing the best-sellers in the two groups, *Hyperion*’s sale of 14,450 is greater than *Evangeline*’s separate sale of 14,425 to the same date.

Aside from professional and economic significance, the figures tell us something about reader taste in the mid-nineteenth century. But for the cultural historian there is a more important lesson: Longfellow’s readers knew him not only as poet but also as novelist. If we read him now as poet, we lack the perspective available to his contemporaries—for the prose works state explicitly aspects of Longfellow’s mind that are implicit in, or entirely absent from, the verse.

It is characteristic of the public poet’s gifts and bent that he has frequently been a translator of foreign poetry. Content rather than technique forming the attractions of his own original work, he has assumed the value of rendering the content of foreign works available to the general reader. We are again struck by the fact that although Emerson, Whitman, and Dickinson did little or no translating, the public poets have done much: Bryant—Homer; Longfellow—Dante; Taylor—Goethe. In another sense this activity has stemmed from the scholarly tradition with which the American poet allied himself. Thinking of himself as the heir of European culture, he has associated himself with it through his services in translating Continental classics. Similarly he has put much of his energy into the editing of the works of other poets, especially European (Longfellow, Bryant, Emerson).

(Details on *Poems of Places* *)

The great bulk of American verse in the nineteenth century was, of course, public verse, and its producers included practically

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* Thus in MS.—Ed.
all poets except Poe, Emerson and his fellow Transcendentalists, Whitman, and Emily Dickinson. Yet the popularity of even public verse was an extremely slow growth, and until after 1870 only Bryant, Longfellow, and Whittier achieved “household” or “fireside” status. Compared to Emerson’s annual average, for five years, of 300 copies of his 1847 collection, Bryant’s and Longfellow’s average of 1,500 and 2,000 in the same period was substantial. But Bayard Taylor, in spite of his enormous popularity as travel lecturer, had difficulty getting rid of even his domestic and travelogue verse in any quantity: *Poems of the Orient* (1855) sold 3,500 copies, and *Poems of Home and Travel* (1855), 1,625. In the decade of the 1860’s his collected editions found only 6,000 buyers, and his long “serious” poems of the seventies were flat failures. Bret Harte, whose dialect poems came close to being mass poetry, made a good thing of his 1871 *Poems*—22,850 sales, $3,427 earnings—but his collected poems sold only about 6,000 in the seventies.

All American poets before Longfellow were public poets in method and intention, but none had succeeded in finding security in society as poet. The greatness of Longfellow’s historical position is that he was the first poet to arrive at a clear understanding of his relation to society—indeed, to create a relationship by defining for himself his place in a world traditionally hostile to the living—or at least, to the young—poet.

Essential to that definition was Longfellow’s sense of place in the social structure of his time. From the beginning he was exempt from the penury and the galling sense of social inferiority which, from Shakespeare’s time on, had exacerbated the writer of humble origins in a world in which high culture was dominated by men of high social station. A boy whose paternal grandfather was a state senator; whose maternal grandfather was squire of 10,000 frontier acres in Maine, himself a distinguished Revolutionary War general and a representative to Congress from
Maine; whose father was a Harvard graduate and a lawmaker for both his state and his nation—such a boy knew he "belonged" not only to the present but to the American past. The present provided for him the amenities taken for granted by an educated and comfortably situated, though not wealthy, family—graceful and comfortable living, private schools, foreign travel, and college. A boy from such a background, like any Adams or Channing or Emerson, knew in that day some sort of public leadership was expected of him, and he dutifully considered being a leader as lawyer or minister. When Longfellow chose instead to be a leader as teacher and poet, both he and his family were satisfied that he was fulfilling his social obligation, as well as making a living.

Essential also is the fact that with no expectation of inheriting family wealth, Longfellow learned that his place was among the vast majority of the human race who must make their own livings. For twenty-five years after he joined the faculty of Bowdoin, Longfellow worked for a salary and knew the salaried worker's frustrations and dissatisfactions. This self-reliance was not psychologically affected by his marriage into the wealthy Appleton family in 1843. He continued to teach for eleven years after his marriage, and in only one of these years was his wife's income larger than his earnings. And when he resigned his professorship in 1854, his reputation was so firmly established that he knew he could survive if necessary, though only on a subsistence level, on his income as professional writer.

Whether as professor or as beneficiary of Appleton stocks, Longfellow was financially secure, but this security fostered rather than inhibited his career as public poet. Public poets, like private ones, sometimes write from hunger, but Longfellow's independence from his craft provided the most important material security of all: the knowledge that he need not yield to the pressures of the literary market place in order to survive. To this security we may
charge not only his serene indifference to popular fads in verse but his inalterable determination to write an epic (Christus) which could not possibly attract a wide audience.

Once he was established, these securities were bulwarks, but it was in getting established that he had to meet the central problem: not whether he could be an American poet but whether the literary life was possible in America at all. In 1824, a year or two before Irving gave up belles-lettres for history, Representative Longfellow wrote his son from Washington that the literary career he desired must be very “pleasant” for the man who could afford it. “But there is not wealth & munificence enough in this country to afford patronage to merely literary men.” The words pleasant and merely might have been (and were) a warning of the universal condescension of the man of action to the artist; and the assumption of a relation between wealth and literary creation echoed a traditional British cultural attitude. But all that Longfellow was asking for, or thinking of, at the moment was the opportunity to study history, “polite literature,” and foreign languages for a year or two after he got out of college. Unknowingly, but perhaps instinctively, he was setting a course which by-passed the trap into which Irving had fallen and Poe was about to fall: the illusion that creative writing was professionally possible in the 1820’s except in the field of the novel.

The literary life was possible, but only in terms of the traditional European concept of scholarship. Even as his father penned the letter, a group of young Americans were establishing an American tradition of scholarship as a branch of literary and humane learning inseparable from the learning of Europe. George Ticknor, now professor of modern languages at Harvard and later historian of Spanish literature, George Bancroft, future historian of America, and Joseph Cogswell, our first scholarly librarian, had served their apprenticeship by studying in Germany; and it was from these men that Longfellow got letters of introduction to European scholars and to Irving in Spain, who, in 1826, made
his crucial shift from Geoffrey Crayon to historian. Out of two strains of American cultural experience now came a new combination. Irving had tested the life of the gentleman-amateur writing for the diversion of himself and his audience, and had given it up as degrading and financially precarious. Ticknor, on the basis of a private income, had solved the problem of the gentleman-scholar by basing his studies solidly and safely on European scholarly methods, and had become the first professor of modern languages at Harvard. Longfellow now spent three years abroad collecting notes for essays like any Geoffrey Crayon, but also learning languages and literatures in preparation for a professorship of modern languages at Bowdoin. For years the Irving in him remained in tension with the Ticknor. Bowdoin and later Harvard exploited him as teacher of elementary French and German, and until 1829 funneled his major energies into the writing of language textbooks, translating foreign works, and preparing scholarly articles for sober quarterlies. But the temptation to be an Irving continued, and finally blossomed weakly in a sketch-book imitation called *Outre-Mer* (1835).

Absurd as this jumble of a book is, it is one of three prose works that are indispensable guides to the inner life of a writer whose letters and journals are almost completely unrewarding. (Looking back on his journal—which was little more than an engagement book and weather almanac—at the end of 1853, Longfellow wrote in it, “How brief this chronicle is, even of my outward life. And of my inner life, not a word. If one were only sure that one’s Journal would never be seen by anyone.”) The inner life is in the prose works, disguised, but transparent to anyone ready to put them into the context of the American public writer’s development.

*Outre-Mer* suggests that the writer-reader relationship in America had remained static since Irving had explored it in *Bracebridge Hall* and *Tales of a Traveller* over a decade earlier. Here is Irving’s nervousness about public scorn for the imagina-
tive writer. The anonymous first-person speaker begins by beg­
ing the “Worthy and Gentle Reader’s” indulgence; is persist­
tently conscious that the reader is “busy” and the author “tri­
ivial”; thanks the reader for wasting his valuable time; and ends
by feeling sorry for himself and for the little book which the
“busy world” will so soon forget. There is the same dodging
behind concentric nests of narrators: the “I” becomes a “Pilgrim,”
who reports an antiquarian’s retelling of a story he “found” in
an old “manuscript,” and even these poor strategies are destroyed
by authorial intrusions. Stories alternate with on-the-spot travel
notes, or with lectures that smell of the Bowdoin classroom rather
than of the sweaty Pilgrim.

The most promising note in this jumble seems to be completely
irrelevant: a book review by Longfellow of Sidney’s Defense of
Poetry, lifted out of the North American Review for 1832. But as
Sidney’s essay is the first attempt in English history to make an
outright plea for the validity of imaginative literature as such,
the review is a pathetic revelation of the American poet struggling
to be born. Throughout it throbs the awareness that the busy
public thinks of poetry as “effeminate nonsense” or dangerous
moonshine injurious to the life of action, and of the “vocation of
the poet” as beneath the contempt of “active” men. But implicit
also are the defenses upon which Longfellow was to build his
own career as poet. Poets have been men of action—useful men,
and Longfellow was to be the useful citizen in the career of
teacher which he had just begun. And poetry is useful, not only
in its adherence to the “truth of nature,” but as instruction in
the history of foreign nations.

Longfellow was here already laying the foundations of Ameri­
can public poetry: a poetry, in part, of the past, about which
this country without a past must be forever curious; a poetry
about Europe (“Holy Land,” the Pilgrim calls it) which for the
American had the fascination that the concept of parents has
for an orphan. American poetry was also to be a story-poetry.
Able of the world’s contempt for the mere story-writer, the Pilgrim insists that the world still loves stories, and that this is an age (the new age of Scott and Cooper, one must remember) “more willing to be pleased” than the preceding one. And public poetry is also to find its major audience among young people, especially young girls, who were that portion of the public most endowed with leisure. The Pilgrim sees “in this fair company” the “listening ear of youth,” and he consecrates to “gentlewomen” the love-stuff, and the nature descriptions in his book—the “sweet embraces amongst hills and rivers.” (From Selden, but meaning of Selden changes in this context.)

He was still, in 1835, not poet but scholar, and was to remain so for five more years: between 1824 and 1838 he averaged little over two original poems a year. But in 1838-39 he made the decision which deflected him from scholarship to verse, and the shift is exhibited in his novel Hyperion (1839). Hyperion, like The Sorrows of Young Werther, was a piece of private therapy. The world (in 1839 and a century later) would have been spared a lot of silly speculation about the relation of the book to the author’s love life if Hyperion had been recognized as primarily the spiritual autobiography of a man in the process of becoming a professional poet. Longfellow may indeed have been still sorrowing over the death of his first wife and mooning about the girl who was to become his second. But it is a part-time heroine who appears for the first time in the twenty-first chapter of a book, and stays for only seven out of thirty-six. Mary Ashburton has a function, but it is not the one biographical key-holers think it is.

Hyperion is a campaign by a man who wants to be a poet to make the poet respectable. (It may be historical convention, but writers choose those conventions which serve their private purposes.) Superficially Longfellow appears to be following the tradition of the pseudonymous stand-in, for though the work was published anonymously, the first-person narrator is readily
identified with the "hero." But in the course of writing, Longfellow made a significant change in the name of the hero—from Hyperion to Paul Flemming. Hyperion remained as title to serve as guide to the nature of the hero, but the hero's name is the name of a man, not an apologetic symbol-tag like "Knickerbocker" or "Crayon" or "Pilgrim." Henceforth in American fiction the American artist was to be presented as a man, not as a cute label. Even the anonymity of the book was a gentlemanly gesture rather than a concealment, for, far from striving to keep the authorship secret, Longfellow talked freely about it to his friends, and in the text itself declared that the writer spoke "from these scholastic shades... this beautiful Cambridge."

Though "the reader" is addressed from time to time, and though he is early and strategically made a partner (a description "would make this chapter too long," and "This evening my style flows not at all"), no prologue or epilogue begs his indulgence. Indeed, he is put on the defensive in the very first sentence by being told that he is a "fool" if he asks the author to define a "Poet." Gone is the craven admission of the Pilgrim that the world thinks the writer effeminate. Paul Flemming is described in aggressively masculine terms: he resembles Harold the Fair-Hair of Norway, as presented in the Icelandic Death-Song of Regner Hairy-Breeches who got into mischief with maidens and "handsome widows."

Movement in the book is provided through a travelogue of Central Europe, and scenes, scenery, and historical background motivate the crucial dialogues between Flemming and the Baron of Hohenfels. In arguments that have more edge than anything else Longfellow wrote in his life, the two defend the life of the scholar, the poet, the musician, the artist. Next to the Newgate Calendar, they agree, "the most sickening chapter in the History of Man" is the "Biography of Authors." Just before the young Viking buries himself in "dusty old books" for the winter, they chide the world for deriding the dedicated scholar, and assert
that the “secret studies of an author” are the “sunken piers on which [rests] the bridge of his fame.” Indirectly they draw the reader into an attitude of respect for art by dialogues (which are disguised classroom lectures) on German artists and thinkers, illustrated by translations from their verse, and by relating magnificent scenes and historic names to literary works.

Most important of all, however, is a line of argument by Flemming that suggests why Longfellow never provoked the hostility of the general reader. Every defense of the artist’s and scholar’s way of life and work is accompanied by a defense of the public’s prejudices. A plea for scholars is followed by an attack on the evils of excessive scholarly seclusion from the world of men, and a caricature of a scholar who wants to “die with a proof-sheet in [his] hand.” Sorrow for the “calamities of authors” is balanced by the admission that many of them have “false and exaggerated ideas of poetry and the poetic character,” disdain “common sense,” and wrongfully “keep aloof from their fellow men.” Goethe is great—and very much like Ben Franklin—but too sensual: his Elective Affinities is “monstrous” and his “sinful Magdalens” and “rampant Fauns” remind one of Pompeii. France is quaint, but modern French writers are obscene. The Baron (whose European toleration for the immoral and the non-Christian gives Flemming the opportunity to speak for American orthodoxy) recites the whole of Suckling’s “Why So Pale and Wan,” but is rebuked for quoting from a “licentious age.” A lecture on the “New Philosophy” of Fichte and Schubert is followed by a bull session that sounds like an attack on the New Criticism: the new thought is old stuff dressed up in jargon; at best it is “pleasant speculation” that “leads to no important result”—like a western road, it peters out in a “squirrel track.”

Finally, in this book, Longfellow commits himself to an art attractive to the woman of his day. Mary Ashburton may have been Fanny Appleton (as the rhythm of the two names suggests), but in her seven chapters she is a target less for Flemming’s love
than for his poetry. She is the new American woman, more likely to be trained in academies in numbers exceeding those of men, in courses more closely related to the arts than to the practical sciences. She has time to read and travel, and she has been trained to emote. Mary is a sketcher, and can illustrate Flemming's ballads. She can talk fluently, and listen even more fluently. Flemming pours out to her his theories of nature and art (which are Longfellow's, of course) with an abandon not equaled in his talks with his male companions. When, after hearing his translation of a German lyric, "she turned away to hide her tears," she was behaving like the sympathetic audience that Longfellow was soon to be honestly proud to reach.

Mary's tears were a sociological fact, not the dream of a verse-writing Walter Mitty. While Longfellow was still writing Hyperion, the news that his "Footsteps of Angels" made a colleague's wife "cry like a child" led him to confide to his journal, "I want no more favorable criticism than this." Soon after this poem appeared in Voices of the Night, Mrs. Harrison Gray Otis reported that a friend's little girl could recite the whole of "The Reaper and the Flowers" and had asked that it be "mixed with" her bedtime prayer. Mrs. Otis' German maid had her own copy, and read nothing else.

But he wanted a male audience too. Paul Flemming had a "passion for ballads," and as a boy had known the German Boy's Wonder-Horn by heart. Early in 1840, Longfellow announced that he had "broken ground in a new field," the "National Ballad" being a "virgin soil here in New England. I am going to have this printed on a sheet and sold like Varses with a coarse picture on it. I desire a new sensation, and a new set of critics." Professor Felton said, "I wouldn't," but Hawthorne was "tickled to death with the idea," and wanted to distribute copies to skippers at the customhouse and report their reactions. The ballad was "The Wreck of the Hesperus," and though it was not printed as a broadside, it did appear in a crude "mammoth news-
paper,” a new mass medium of the time. “I have a great notion of working upon people’s feelings,” was the way he summed up this new impulse.

Here at Harvard in 1840 two ancient conflicting traditions of verse-making were come to confluence in an American poet: that of the balladmonger and that of the scholarly gentleman sonneteer of the coterie. Since 1838 he had been yearning to be heard by the man in the street. Even the popular middle-class magazines like the New York Knickerbocker and the Ladies’ Companion, which accepted his work readily enough, had too small an audience to satisfy him in this mood, and he not only trafficked with the new mammoth weekly newspapers of 1839, which claimed circulations of up to 35,000, but considered competing with them with a paper of his own. Increasingly irked by elementary language teaching, he tried again and again to arrange for public lectures packed with his own and translated foreign poetry. At the peak of his restlessness in 1839, he considered deserting the college for Grub Street [to devote himself “wholly to literature”], took careful note of the incomes of professional Grub Streeters like Willis and Ingraham, and planned popular novels, dramas, narrative poems, and more volumes of Hyperion. From Willis came the tempting advice that he was “not quite merchant enough” with his poems.

For a brief moment in 1839–40, but never again afterward, it would seem, Longfellow was a victim of the cultural confusion which for another decade was to deny the would-be professional writer a clear sense of his place in his society. There are signs that he vacillated between taking his poetry, and himself as poet, too seriously and not seriously enough. The impulse to reach the common man through broadside balladry was balanced by regret that his youthful aspiration “to build/Some tower of song with lofty parapet” was dimming. During the applause—and the gossip—that followed the publication of Hyperion and Voices in 1839, he began to enjoy the public’s dramatization of
him as the "artist type." A friend's sister was convulsed to find him at a social gathering wearing a wig—"a compound of red, black, brown, long and straight, hanging over face and eyes," and the friend himself enjoyed teasing Longfellow about the young ladies who imagined him to be "tall, thin, emaciated, with melancholy eyes." Surely Longfellow was laughing at this earlier version of himself when in 1848 in _Kavanagh_ he portrayed the Poet Dandy, H. Adolphus Hawkins who sported loud English waistcoats, whose "shiny hair went off to the left in a superb sweep, like the hand-rail of a bannister," who was publicly lovesick but in private life was "by no means the censorious and moody person some of his writings might imply."

And in Longfellow himself the gentleman successfully battled the balladmonger. In spite of the demand for his verse he wrote few poems, and none "to order"; poetry was still a sacred and private pursuit—"a chaste wife," as he put it, "not a Messalina to be debauched in the public street." If the hawkers of the vulgar _New World_ were able to sell "The Wreck of the Hesperus" to the groundling, the _New World_ was clearly dealing with Longfellow on his terms, not theirs, when it printed such a sedate and conventional rendering of classical mythology as "Endymion."

Nothing better illustrates Longfellow's professional schizophrenia between 1838 and 1846 than the typography and format of his works. At the very moment that "Hesperus" was appearing on the New York newsstands in the wretchedly printed, 12½ cent _New World, Voices of the Night_, containing a scant two dozen lyrics, elegantly printed on fine paper in Cambridge, was selling in Boston bookstores for seventy-five cents. This and successive volumes throughout the forties were also available in expensive large-paper editions, copies of which Longfellow presented to the ladies and gentlemen of the Boston-Cambridge coterie. But in 1845 Longfellow paid for double-column plates of _Voices_, and from these one of Boston's mass-audience publishers printed at least one edition in pamphlet form, on poor
paper, at 12½ cents. In the same year he allowed a Philadelphia publisher to bring out his collected poems, sumptuously illustrated with steel plates, at from $3.50 to $7.00 a copy, but within six months he paid for double-columned plates of these poems which Harpers contracted to use for a fifty-cent paper-covered pamphlet. For almost five years these editions, at the two extremes of price, were the only available "complete poems" of Longfellow. And for five years Longfellow struggled to discover where he belonged between the two economic extremes of buyers that these editions represented.

Even as he vacillated in the years before his marriage in 1843, the cultural-economic situation was experiencing drastic change. Not only were the cheap mass-circulation papers, which had tempted Longfellow with their "common" readers, killing each other off as they lowered their prices in lethal competition; they were lowering their quality to catch new buyers who, barely literate, cared nothing for writers blessed by respectable British patronage. In these papers Dickens' novels were being displaced by anonymous *Mysteries of New York*—or Boston or Philadelphia or Baltimore; and it was only a matter of time before even Professor Longfellow's name would cease to make a poem on "Endymion" palatable to an audience that preferred Mrs. Sigourney on the death of Little Annie. The fifteen dollars a poem they paid him was probably as poor business as the fifty dollars paid him a few years later by *Graham's* was good, for *Graham's* was patronized by readers of truly middle-class incomes and educations. The periodicals, in other words, were seeking and finding their proper cultural levels.

In sum, between 1839 and 1845 Longfellow learned that he had an audience—an audience that included all levels except the two extremes—the story-paper readers at the very bottom and the intellectuals (the Transcendentalists) at the top.

But it would be 1845 before any of the periodicals were financially safe. The depression dragged on—fatally for many
periodical and book publishers—through the early forties. Half the book publishers in the country failed, among them the publishers of *Hyperion*, a potential best-seller, and of Longfellow’s early collections of poems. In the copyright confusion, American novels that had sold for two dollars were driven down to fifty cents, and a poem sold to *Graham’s* was reprinted without permission or payment by scores or hundreds of country papers.

Longfellow’s literary score during these years speaks for the entire profession. From 1840 to 1844, when he became nationally known, when he had four books in print, and when the sales of *Voices* (at seventy-five cents) were a phenomenal 5,300 copies, his income from literature was this:

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<td>1844</td>
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With a Harvard salary of $1,500 it is no wonder that he held on to his academic job, irksome though it was. The sheer drudgery of it had been reduced by the hiring of an instructor to help drill 115 students in elementary French, but “dry research into dusty books” and the dutiful writing of scholarly articles for the *North American Review* had become drudgery too: “I had rather write Psalms.” But he could not eat Psalms.

His double status as professor to the few and writer of Psalms to the many posed a problem. In the non-literary world he felt secure enough, for socially there were no insurmountable barriers between Cambridge and Beacon Street. If, in his wooing of Miss Appleton, Beacon Street was a little standoffish at first, it was probably because he was a “widower and an outsider from Maine.” When he wrote her father in 1853 that he contemplated
resigning his professorship, Appleton replied, "So far as I am concerned your connection with the College is a pleasing circumstance, but your resigning it will give me no 'uneasiness' should you think it expedient to do so.” The wording suggests there is a possibility that some other in Appleton’s set thought differently, but with the Appletons on his side, why should Longfellow care?

What his general public thought of his professorship is another matter. Probably that public was as mixed on the subject as it is now. His vocation was no secret in the East, where literary commentators frequently referred to him (sometimes flatteringly, sometimes pejoratively) as “Professor” Longfellow, but in his works he avoided reference to his specific academic status. “Poet” and “Scholar” are common symbols in both his verse and prose, but not “Professor”; and it is significant that in his last autobiographic prose work, Kavanagh, he appears as “schoolmaster” to small children, a role that could set up no social barrier between him and the common reader.

In Tales of a Wayside Inn the narrators with whom Longfellow can be identified are Poet, Scholar, Theologian, Musician—but there is no Professor. In “The Birds of Killingworth” (narrated by the Poet) the “hero” is master of an academy but he is called “Preceptor,” a title that suggests the role of teacher but not intellectual. None of his references to the university world of the * * * there are many clerks but no “doctors.” And in his summing up in “Morituri Salutamus,” a Bowdoin anniversary poem delivered to an audience fully conscious of his professorial career, the symbolic figure is a medieval “clerk”—i.e., student.

But it is of the essence, in his handling of his problem of status, that in his writings he not only did not conceal but exploited his professorial erudition. His three prose works are loaded with classroom commentary, his poetry is packed with learned, if popularized, allusion to foreign history, myth, and geography; and his translations were evidence that he knew half a dozen European languages. Learning was the traditionally accepted,
and popularly respected, avocation of the gentlemen; learning as paid vocation was a dubious cultural status.

<Tradition was one thing, but performance was another. Readers probably enjoyed his glamorization of Art and Scholarship and delighted in his contempt for aesthetes and intellectuals in Hyperion; but the mass of his readers saw only his verse, and it was his verse itself that had to be the medium of his campaign to make the Poet socially as respectable with the practical citizen as Poetry. In Hyperion his sense of the hostility of the world to the Poet is intense. In most of the poems before 1838 it is implicit. These are in the Romantic “I-me-my” mode of the alien talking to himself or to the solitary “thou” who hears among the deaf; they are full of divisive references to “gifted Bards” and “Poets” who are described rather too explicitly as seeing and understanding more than the common man. In “Excelsior” the separation of Poet and Man is plain. As he himself explained it, but not in the poem, the “youth,” speaking in an “unknown tongue,” is a “man of genius” resisting the lures of ordinary citizenry in the “rough, cold paths of the world—where the peasants cannot understand him.”

But by 1841 he was beginning to get a hearing from the American equivalent of the “Peasant,” and to feel that the Peasant was not the real enemy of the Poet. Again and again in verse of the early forties, and later, he dwelt on the fact that in medieval and Renaissance Europe the “master singers” were laborers and sang for the people. When the crude mammoth newspapers began to beg for his poems, he began to feel that he might be exempt from the nineteenth century’s separation of Poet and Public, and that he need not be limited to the frustratingly small and (abnormally) exclusive audience of the Romantics.>

In “Carillon” (1845), though the chimes (rhymes) scatter “downward” and “in vain,” it is because of work and weariness that common men fail to hear. In “Walter von der Vogelweid” (1845), the birds (“poets of the air”) are starved out as
“unwelcome guests” not by the people but by the “portly abbot.” In “Pegasus in Pound” (1845), conspicuously placed as the proem to an anthology, it is the town officials who fail to feed the poet’s horse, but the people themselves gladly drink from the fountain the horse leaves behind. The point is clear in a poem almost twenty years later: In “The Birds of Killingworth,” the materialistic farmers kill off the “poets of the air” under pressure from a trio (satirized in as contentious a tone as Longfellow ever summoned up) labeled the Squire, the Parson, and the Deacon. The impassioned Poet-Preceptor tries in vain to stop the slaughter, but he gets to “another audience out of reach,/ Who had no voice nor vote But in the papers read his little speech.” These “made him conscious He still was victor, vanquished in their cause.” It is of some interest that he equates the unholy trio with Plato, who, “anticipating the Reviewers, From his Republic banished without pity/ The Poets.” Clearly, the enemies of poetry were not the people but their leaders—[critics and materialists].

When the fifty-cent edition of his poems was eagerly accepted by the Harper Brothers (then noted for their wholly business-like and unsentimental attitude toward literature), and as eagerly bought by the farmers in the western market, which the Harpers controlled, Longfellow was even more certain that the people would read poetry. The instant success of Evangeline, both as a separate (6,050 copies the first two years) in 1847 and as an addition to the Harper pamphlet (1849), confirmed him.

His feeling that the public was not only drinking from the fountain but admiring the horse is expressed in the “Dedication” of The Seaside and the Fireside (1850). In intensely personal and direct address, a multiple “you” replacing the lone “sleepless wight” who hears the poet in the dedicatory poem of The Belfry of Bruges only four years earlier, Longfellow speaks to multitudinous friends whom he will never see, but who have flooded him with fan letters, who consider his books “household treasures,”
and at whose warm firesides he is “no unwelcome guest” but has a “place reserved among the rest,” as one sought and invited. Only ten years earlier in *Hyperion* he had said that the American artist “must wait”—must resist the public pressure which tempts the writer to scrabble for fame and popularity, but instead let the public come to him for what he has to give. If the implication of the “Dedication”—namely, that *one* poet, at least, has conquered the immemorial hostility to Poets and made the people beat a path to his door—sounds a little smug, it is justified: Longfellow had found a common ground. What was that ground?

It was, first of all, the recognition that central in his life and in the life of the average citizen were the unpleasant realities of frustration, failure, weariness, deprival, and death. This “realism” forms the solid base—but not the superstructure—of Longfellow’s standing as a public poet in his time. By a process of abstraction the modern historian, by focusing on the incredible economic expansion and the widening democratic liberties of Longfellow’s and Emerson’s time, has fastened on it a label which is best summed up in a favorite word of V. L. Parrington (one of the busiest of abstractionists)—“ebullience.” But a citizen of 1849, living from day to day, probably did not feel ebullient much of the time. He knew that there was room for everybody out West, that the new railroads would stimulate business, that he would find a new free school system no matter where he went. But he also knew, if he was a laborer, that he worked twelve hours a day; that he might be released from fatigue by the loss of his job next week; that his business, if he was a shopkeeper, probably would fail, for in those days bankruptcy sooner or later was the rule rather than the exception. If he was rich, he might cease to be so in the constant flux of American fortunes. No matter who he was, he could expect, in those days of a still appalling death rate, that he would lose one or some or all of his children, his wife, his brother, his friend. As for the opportunities of social democracy, consider Hawthorne’s testimony in 1851:
In this republican country, amid the fluctuating waves of our social life, somebody is always at the drowning-point. The tragedy is enacted with as continual a repetition as that of a popular drama on a holiday, and, nevertheless, is felt as deeply, perhaps, as when a hereditary noble sinks below his order. More deeply; since, with us, rank is the grosser substance of wealth and a splendid establishment, and has no spiritual existence after the death of these, but dies hopelessly along with them.

It is irrelevant that Longfellow himself never experienced economic disaster. The point is that as a worker in the classroom and at the writing desk, and as a family man, he understood the weariness, frustration, dissatisfaction, and loss that loomed so large in the lives of other men. Whoever thinks of him as a Pollyanna has failed to stay with his verse long enough to feel the emotional weights in his vocabulary. The endlessly reiterated words are "care," "weariness," "sorrow," "burden," "fear," "toil," and "defeat" in contexts relating them to a man's work and a man's family. The prevailing weather is cold, dark, rainy, dreary, chill, damp. A sentimentalist about childhood, he nevertheless, in "To a Child," made his central image a portal beyond which are realms of "darkness blank and drear"; and though his dove-like girl in "Maidenhood" has visions of "fields Elysian," he sees floating over her the falcon-shadow of "sorrow, wrong, and ruth." His "sentimentalized" Europe has fewer sweet villages and carillons than bloody battles, bigotry, wretched serfs, shipwrecks, and murder, and in his vision of the South there are none of the happy cabins and Uncle Toms of cheap northern fiction, only the viciousness and suffering of slavery. A poet like Thoreau could understand but imperfectly the "mass of men" who "lead lives of quiet desperation," because he had learned to do without what they thought they had to have; but a Longfellow, like the average citizen, needing things, needing family, [emotionally] dependent upon friends, needing some sort of recognized public status, could speak freely of the "weight of care,/ That crushes
into dumb despair,\ One half the human race,” which is “Steeped to the lips in misery,\ Longing and yet afraid to die.” If, along with the dark imagery, there is also a recurrent use of words like “comfort,” “balm,” “cheer,” and “sooth,” it was because he felt that the need for comfort was great.

But the comfort he offers is anything but coddling. The youth in “Excelsior,” said Longfellow in explication, perishes “without having achieved the perfection he longed for,” and we are “comforted” only by the assurance that in the freezing air is the promise of immortality. <One by-product of his years at Harvard was that he did not like his work and thereby was able to share (at least in his role as teacher) in the fate of most men.> In “The Goblet of Life,” published in a prosperous middle-class magazine, and one of the poems on which he made his early reputation, the bitter herb fennel, which serves as central image, restores vision and renews strength, but only to the end that the overwhelming miseries of life are rendered endurable until death brings relief.

It will not do to dispose of these dark tones as the product of a literary convention, for they are less pronounced in Longfellow’s juvenilia of the 1820’s, when he, like Bryant and Poe, was indulging in stylish Romantic melancholy, than they are in Michael Angelo, which he was writing at the time of his death in 1882. They were a product of experience—and of the perception that that kind of experience is man’s fate. And they are part and parcel of that substratum of American “ebullience” which made our poets, from Bryant and Poe to Whitman and Dickinson (all indeed, * * * mass faith) sharers in Emerson’s bitter outcry, “Nothing is left now but death. We look to that with a grim satisfaction, saying there at least is reality that will not dodge us.”

It was his identification with the many that gave this member of the American elite the psychic security as public poet which he achieved by 1849. The climax of the argument in the “Dedi-
cation” to The Seaside and the Fireside is that he has made friends with his readers because he has “the same hopes, and fears, and aspirations.”

And his readers exempted him from the common suspiciousness of the Poet partly because of the persistent reassurance in his verse that the Poet is not a creature set apart from other men but a working citizen subject to the same responsibilities and hazards as everyone else. “Nuremberg” reminds us of a time and place when (supposedly) Art enjoyed a universal acceptance rather than a class status because a Hans Sachs or a Dürer or a cathedral stonemason walked among his fellow men as a physical laborer; but even in those days, Longfellow perceived, the alienating misconception was taking shape. In Michael Angelo a condescending cardinal tells a painter that he reveres him as a man “Who lives in an ideal world, apart/ From all the rude collisions of our life,/ In a calm atmosphere,” to which the painter replies, “If you knew the life/ Of artists as I know it, you might think/ Far otherwise.” The poet was even more suspect because the pen was lighter than the brush and the chisel. Hence Longfellow’s persistent equation of the job of writing with “toil,” one of the most recurrent words in his vocabulary, and with toil that ends more often in frustration and defeat than in satisfaction. In “To a Child” he speaks of the struggle “with imperious thought,/ Until the overburdened brain,/ Weary with labor, faint with pain— retain/ Only its motion, not its power.” Nine years later in “Epimetheus” he asked whether “each noble aspiration” must “Come at last to this conclusion,/ Jarring discord, wild confusion,/ Lassitude, renunciation,” and whether a Dante “By defeat and exile maddened” or a Milton “By affliction touched and saddened” must have felt that “All this toil for human culture” was futile.* For forty years Longfellow kept reminding men that he, the Poet, shared with them “the long

* The reference to Milton and Dante is in “Prometheus.”—Ed.
pedigree of toil”—even more explicitly, that “I, who so much with book and pen/ Have toiled among my fellow-men,/ Am weary.

Yet identification has its limits—even for a public poet. Longfellow was intensely aware that, after all, he was not a storekeeper or a land agent but a poet, and that what he had to sell had always been in demand but seldom paid for. The buyer of Longfellow’s works may not have been aware of it, but he was buying poems that advertised poets and poetry; and Longfellow was one of the greatest of all promoters of the arts. Ninety per cent of all the poems he ever wrote contained some favorable reference to poetry, poets, artists, art, scholars, or literature. Bards are sublime, grand, immortal; singers are sweet; songs are beautiful; art is wondrous; books are household treasures. Hans Sachs is remembered after kaisers are forgotten. Michael Angelo is impudent to cardinals. John Alden, the scholar, wins out over Miles Standish, the man of action.

Poetry is identified with the natural and familiar, with great organic processes of nature, rather than with the exotic and the intellectual. Birds are poems, flowers are poems, children are poems, as are seaweed, horses, the wind, and hearth-fire. In Evangeline it is the forest that sings the tradition; in “Daylight and Moonlight” it is the night that interprets a poem unintelligible by day. Poetry is identified with the practical arts: poems are bells, towers, bridges, even strands of rope; poets are architects and sculptors.

But if such devices gave status to poets and poetry, it was, of course, his subject matter and his announced aims as writer that mark him as public poet. Primary and paradoxical is the fact that though the poet’s subject, essentially and necessarily, is himself, Longfellow as public poet had to disguise himself. In the 1820’s such verse as he wrote was as unabashedly in the first person singular as Wordsworth’s, but from 1838 to 1845 when he was trying to find out who he was, the pronominal structure
of his poems was as confused as his mind. The new poems in *Voices* range through the entire scale of I-you-they-we (sometimes, as in the "Psalms," all three in one poem). Only in "Flowers" does his future stand-in, the Poet, appear. In the 1841 volume, third-person poems like "Hesperus" prevail not only in number but in position, but you's are next most frequent. Only two poems are flatly in the "I" mode, and in one of these he stops complaining long enough to tell himself, "Thy fate is the common fate of all." By the fifth volume in 1845 the second- and third-person emphasis is general, and in the few poems where the "I" is not almost completely sterilized, it is again mitigated by the "common fate" theme.

After 1845 the basic style is that of the third person of narrative verse, with the Poet or Scholar or Artist—or even Nature—as the obvious spokesman for Longfellow, or an I-you structure so depersonalized that even in the direct address to the reader, in prologue or epilogue (such as "Weariness" in *Birds of Passage*), the weariness of "I" is expressly an official and vicarious fatigue for you and me. As he grew older, he tended on the one hand to restrict the "I" to sonnets, where the personal statement is authorized and formalized by sonnet traditions reaching back to Petrarch and Shakespeare, and to literally "public" poems like "Morituri Salutamus" where he was expected to speak in his proper person; or, on the other hand, to shift the "I" to speakers in poetic dramas, where a St. John or a Michael Angelo stands in for him as Religious Thinker or Public Artist.

But of course the management of ego was not much of a problem to a man who mourned that he could not get it even into his private journals, and whose private letters are the most barren of all literary letters in the nineteenth century; who excluded from his published works even such partial privacies as his regret that he had produced no great work at the age of forty-two ("Mezzo Cammin") and his memory of the death of his wife ("The Cross of Snow"). He could share with others his
feeling about his children by making them Children (compare “The Children’s Hour” with Emerson’s “Threnody”), or about his friends, who are always the object of his Friendship.*

In the work of such a man “I” is far less significant than “you”—the pronoun which recurs with a frequency in direct proportion to the growth of his sense of public representative-ness—as to his increasing certainty, based not only on the reception of his poems but on his tremendous fan mail, that his values, his brand of spiritual therapy, his kind of self-consolation, were of universal as well as private efficacy. The world had, in 1838, “listened in on” the “Psalm,” a poem so personal, he said later, that “I kept it some time in manuscript, unwilling to show it to anyone.” We are entitled to be skeptical about such a statement concerning a poem, which is dominated by the pronouns we, our, us, and the plural you, which seems about as personal as a statue of General Lee on horseback; but it must be understood that a man capable of choosing, as the vehicle of a statement that seemed private to him, a form as public, as institutional, as the “psalm” or hymn, was by nature and nurture a social and institutional personality rather than an island unto himself. Longfellow (like most of us, to be sure) thought of himself as made up of two personalities—citizen and unique individual, breadwinner and star-gazer, drudge and dreamer, moody animal and disciplined soul. When it became clear to him that his readers identified themselves not only with the drudge-citizen-breadwinner (which was to be expected) but with the unique, dreaming soul which he had thought alien to the world, the instinctive, unconscious use of the plural you of the “Psalm” became the conscious, strategic you of the orator, the leader, the one teaching and speaking for the many.

* This paragraph was written before the publication of Andrew Hilen’s The Letters of Henry Wadsworth Longfellow (Cambridge, Mass., 1966).—Ed.
Teaching is of the essence in all Longfellow’s verse after the “Psalm,” and everything that he taught for the next forty-odd years is implicit in the “Psalm.” If teaching of a sort is a function of all poetry, including the private, the great prerequisite of teaching in public poetry is that truths be lifted out of the complexity in which they generate and reduced to explicit and separable statement. The teachings in the “Psalm” and all later work center on one central “truth”: the necessity and the value of acceptance—acceptance of life’s labors and sorrows. What makes acceptance preferable to suicide is faith in two unprovable: the value and satisfaction inherent in work, carefully done, for its own sake; and immortality. And the two are one. Although he sometimes presents immortality as the comfort of reunion of the bereaved with the dead, his major emphasis on the concept is that it promises permanent physical rest as the sequel to work.

Austere as this program sounds, it does not exclude as values the pleasures of life: the pleasures of friendship, of family life, of nature, of the arts, are endlessly reiterated and set in balance against the sorrows. And, indeed, the assertion that there is a balance constitutes some of the comfort or balm he advertised his poetry as offering. The concept of balance pervades his verse, not only in the form of innumerable pairs of verbal opposites (sorrow-delight, toil-rest, soothe-affright), but in larger units like the Tales of a Wayside Inn, where the Theologian, for example, atones for his story of the vicious religious fanatic, Torquemada, by telling of a kindly monk in “The Legend Beautiful.”

Yet even as he asserts the balance, he denies it by putting his thumb on the wrong side of the scale. The “Psalm” argues the balance concept not only through verbal pairs like “enjoyment-sorrow” but through prosody—each end-stopped line and couplet balanced against the next; but how can enjoyment be in balance when seven out of eight stanzas mention or imply death? The summing-up stanza in “Haunted Houses” is:
Our little lives are kept in equipoise
By opposite attractions and desires;
The struggle of the instinct that enjoys,
And the more noble instinct that aspires.

But there can be no equipoise when one instinct is “more noble” than the other, particularly when we note that from “Excelsior” to Christus aspiration is associated with frustration and death. In Wayside, where dark tales are literally and specifically alternated with light ones, the firmness and authority of his story of Charlemagne’s terrifying power is in sharp contrast with the feebleness of his anecdote of Charlemagne as a kindly, forgiving monarch. A poet whose first three collections of verse were dominated by themes of death and loss and sorrow, and whose last ten years were devoted to four poetic dramas of tragic subject and tone, may have thought balance but certainly did not feel it.

<When we look at the record of the middle years, the fifties and sixties, we are tempted to wonder whether such relatively cheerful performances as Hiawatha and Miles Standish were not the result of audience pressure. Certain it is that these “happy” books sold better and faster than the sadder ones:

Happy
Hiawatha—50,771 / 13 years, average: 4,000 minus
Miles Standish—29,424 / 7 years, average: 4,000 plus

Sad
Evangeline—28,005 / 22 years, average: 1,300
Golden Legend—9,848 / 13 years, average: 757
But—New England Tragedies—15,500 / 1 year
Christus—5,980 / 2 years (6 different editions), average: 2990

Balanced
Wayside—22,000 / 2 years, average: 11,000
Moreover, after *Wayside*, when he stuck to his tragic vein, the sales of his individual volumes declined drastically. Yet these figures can be accounted for by so many complicated trade factors that they cannot be taken too seriously as a guide to reader taste or Longfellow’s response to it; and above all, by the time he died the great majority of his sales were in the field of collected editions, and we have no way of knowing what these readers preferred. But a man who could shift from the cheerful and popular themes of *Hiawatha* and *Miles Standish*, to the evenly divided sunshine and shadow of *Wayside*, to tragic poetry, was obviously not responding to audience pressure.

Balance, then, no doubt served his doctrine of acceptance and resignation, but though repeatedly asserted, it is rarely demonstrated convincingly. His exploitation of it was probably never questioned by his readers because it was in accord with the “Common Sense” which they thought they learned by observing the simplest laws of nature, but which had actually been drilled into them by a culture still dominated by eighteenth-century rationalism and Newtonian physics. <And if the disparity between the assertion of balance and the demonstrated imbalance of the story-poems and dramas was not apparent, it was because most readers did not suspect (as they do not now) that poetry should have a logic of its own.>

Longfellow’s persistence in clinging to an inherited way of thinking without questioning closely its relevance to his own society was a cause at once of his immediate success and his long-run failure. For his public, like himself, clung the more determinedly to the rural-mercantile eighteenth-century frame of thought even as the facts of the new urban machine world were making that kind of thought irrelevant. So it was that his readers welcomed verse in which there were towns and villages but not cities except those attached to the adjectives “crowded” and “hot”; in which there were no factory workers, no businessmen, no salesmen, no staple-crop farmers, no slaves (after 1842)—only
blacksmiths, cloggers, and other holdovers from the images of an agrarian-handicraft economy; no railroads (except the one in Kavanagh that destroys the rural quiet of the town).

It was perhaps a stroke of luck for this public poet that he got no satisfaction out of his vocation, teaching, and equated it with drudgery and exasperation; for he was living in a world which increasingly hated its work, in which machines were rendering the making of things meaningless for the maker, in which farming was less and less the source of a well-rounded subsistence and more and more a struggle with the market, banks, and railroads, and in which Arthur Miller Salesmanship not only increased but took the forms of Barnum, Bonner, and Beecher in the fields of amusement, publishing, and religion. In such a world he could urge that action, that work, is an end in itself, an anodyne, and ignore the question of lasting results. And thus it is that though his blacksmith begins and finishes something each day, the reward mentioned is not a perfect horseshoe but rest for the aching back; that the Hesperus skipper’s restless will to act is favorably presented, though it leads to nothing but pointless sacrifice of life; that in the “Psalm” we are to “Trust no Future,” which in context means that we are to act without hope of meaningful results.

This doctrine of submission was, of course, in accord with both the Christian principle of endurance for the sake of the hereafter, and with that still widely taught doctrine of the preceding century, the static “chain of being,” which counseled that each individual take satisfaction in his predestined place in the chain. As Longfellow put it in “The Builders,” where we are urged to do our work well, whatever it is:

Nothing useless is, or low;
Each thing in its place is best;
And what seems but idle show
Strengthens and supports the rest.
But in so far as Longfellow identified himself with Art rather than with the world of gainful and futile employment, he had to take a different view of results. Not only had the labor of the Artist historically and continuingly eventuated in results of value to others, but the Artist had always achieved an Immortality that amounted to something more than the pleasures of not working and of reunion. Longfellow's poems are full of the assumption that the Artist was in this respect a man apart. But of what comfort was this to his non-artist audience? To be sure, Longfellow draws the non-artist into the general area of promise of results and immortality by vaguely attaching the world of Art to the world of Action without even demonstrating the existence of non-artistic activity. In the "Psalm" we are told, after being exhorted to Action, that great men have left foot­prints; but since the prints are immediately described as giving "heart" to a shipwrecked brother, it is pretty obvious that the prints are those of a poet like Longfellow. The blacksmith's work at the forge is equated with "burning deeds" as well as thoughts; but in Longfellow's work as a whole he denies fame to the deeds of the "Councils and Kaisers" of Hans Sachs's day, and denies dignity to "active" Miles Standishes while granting it to scholarly John Aldens. True it is that again and again he looks longingly back to a day when physical work, action, and Art were tied together; when cobblers sang; when cathedral masons "wrought with greatest care,/ Each minute and unseen part"; but the total impression his verse gives is that, since the Renais­sance, all work except that of the Artist has gone into the market place and thus lost its meaning. When he declared himself, directly and personally, in "Morituri Salutamus," at the age of sixty-eight, he dichotomized the "scholar and the world" and made the latter the equivalent of

The market-place, the eager love of gain,
Whose aim is vanity, and whose end is pain!
But even as the world of Art and thought was becoming established in Longfellow's mind as the only world in which work has intrinsic value, and even as the world was convincing him that his art was valued, a change was taking place in his thinking about his purpose and his future as poet. The change almost resulted in his ceasing to be a popular poet, as far as new works were concerned, in the last fifteen years of his life.

To understand what happened, we must go back to the Longfellow of 1849, who, with the success of *Evangeline* singing in his ears and happily convinced that his work was getting results, acknowledged in his "Dedication" that his long wait for acceptance had come to an end. This Longfellow is revealed in *Kavanagh* (1849), the most literally autobiographic work he ever wrote. Though a really bad novel (too obviously, he was "using up" material he did not wish to waste), it sold almost as well (about 6,500 the first eighteen months) as *The Scarlet Letter*, which appeared a year later. It had all the "balance" that Hawthorne's book lacked. In it one girl loses, the other wins. One man is a dreamer, the other a doer. Humor (one comic male, one comic female) is balanced with pathos (one frustrated woman, one frustrated man), "realism" with "romance."

Though "the names have been changed to protect the innocent," it is perfectly plain that the author distributed his personal history and his professional problems and his trials and errors among the male characters. Churchill, the would-be author, is by fate a harassed schoolmaster and the father of five, his aspiration to write frustrated by pupils, domestic life, and the intrusions of other matters.

The frustrated Churchill is Longfellow's picture of the self he outgrew in the 1840's: dedicated to Art, but producing only scraps; trusting to be inspired by books which only drew him into sterile dream and reverie, so that "while he mused the fire burned in other brains"; expending his imagination on the strange and exotic, and missing the significance of the newer and
familiar life; attributing to domestic care and an irksome profession the failure that was in himself, lacking, as he did, the "all-subduing will the fixed purpose that sways and bends all circumstances to its uses."

Kavanagh, though a preacher, is presented as a leader, a public mentor, definitely the poetic and scholarly type, and endowed with European learning, his sermons full of European story. Himself endowed with family estates in Maine, he marries the daughter of a wealthy and influential person, and moves into their mansion, goes to Europe with his wife for one year, and stays three. A minor character, Hiram Hawkins, the poet-dandy, is a caricature of the Europeanized Longfellow of 1838.

Kavanagh, like Longfellow, combines the culture of Catholic Europe with the psychology of Protestant America that Longfellow saw himself as becoming. The scion of an ancient European Catholic family, he was nurtured on the Lives of the Saints and educated in a Jesuit College in Canada. But after his mother's death, Reason (the search for intellectual and spiritual truth) leads him away from that "august faith" of "crystalline turrets" and "dark, terrible dungeons," and he becomes a Protestant, bringing with him "all he had found in [Catholicism] that was holy and pure and of good report," "its zeal, its self-devotion, its heavenly aspirations, its human sympathies, its endless deeds of charity," but "not its bigotry, and fanaticism and intolerance." As Protestant clergyman he is in sharp contrast with his orthodox, fundamentalist predecessor. He affirms and consoles, and in his tower study meditates "the great design and purpose of his life, the removal of all prejudice, and uncharitableness, and persecution, and the union of all sects into one church universal." His life is one of "active charity and willing service." And above all, he is the leader with the will (unlike Churchill) to make his dream prevail. Though "suspicions of his orthodoxy" spring up in "many weak but worthy minds," and though he realized the danger that he "might advance too far, and leave his congrega-
tion behind him,” he courageously attacks their prejudices and succeeds in drawing “the main current of opinion” with him. This was the history of Unitarianism.

Before the year 1849 was out, Longfellow began to write the book that Churchill would never get around to but which had been in Churchill-Longfellow’s mind since 1842. Longfellow would cease to be a mere writer of lyrics and become a Dante, a Milton. He would be the architect of a “tower of song,” an epic work of theme and profoundness which would find in the story of man’s treatment of his gods, and religious institutions’ brutal treatment of man, a fit expression for “the trouble and wrath of life, for its sorrow and mystery.” At the same time, his epic would be an apologia, a justification of his preoccupation with Europe, for which he was being constantly blasted by “isolationist” critics, whom, in turn, he had attacked in Chapter XX of Kavanagh (a chapter often reprinted but never seen in this its proper context). For here at last would be proof that the American cannot understand his religious condition unless he understands the European past which was Longfellow’s major poetic stock.

This was a large order for a poet who had been devoted to simplicities rather than complexities, and he never filled it. *Christus: A Mystery*, which came out in 1872, contained only three parts of the story, loosely connected: Christianity in the Holy Land, the Middle Ages, and Colonial America. It was a flat failure. In spite of Longfellow’s reputation, and in spite of the publisher’s expert marketing of it in six different editions to suit every pocketbook, less than six thousand were printed, and no one knows how long it took to sell these. Yet two parts of it, published earlier and separately, were moderately successful—*The Golden Legend* (1851), 9,848 copies in 13 years, and *The New England Tragedies* (1868), 15,500, the sales of which stopped in one year.

Why had this “great design and purpose” of his literary life come to so little? For one thing, *Christus* is cast in one of the least popular of all literary forms, poetic drama; to a stage-
loving public it was not drama at all; and to many of his poetry fans, the long stretches of blank verse, lacking the definite rhythms and rhymes of his characteristic verse, were not poetry. And some readers might have been warned off by a word which they had never before seen on his title pages but which appeared twice on this one: tragedy.

But we are more concerned with the intrinsic failure of the book and the “great design” from which it came. For this failure we must look into his thinking on the problem of progress in the totality of his work. Inseparable from his project was the problem of progress. Material progress he simply ignored, but ethical progress he tried to cope with. In general, Longfellow’s historical assumptions were those of his generation: paganism, no matter what its virtues, was inferior to Catholicism, no matter what its faults; Catholicism, no matter what its strength, was inferior to Protestantism, no matter what its weaknesses; and a “religion of humanity” must eventually displace doctrinaire Protestantism.

He had no trouble with the first phase of this formula. The Jew, though better than the Pagan, is excluded from the march of progress because, unlike the Christian, he looks backward in time even as he reads backward in his books (“The Jewish Cemetery at Newport”). The pagan Indian can hardly be allowed to waste the soil of his hunting grounds while “down-trodden millions [of Christians] starve in the garrets of Europe” (“To the Driving Cloud”). The old Norse gods perished because their “law of force” was challenged by the meek Christ’s “law of love.” But at this point the formula began to fail him. For his tales of Christianity are dominated not by a meek Christ triumphant but by a suffering Christ who is worshiped by greedy and venal monks, vicious Torquemadas, and witch-hunting Justice Hathornes and Cotton Mathers. Theological bickering is exhibited as equally corruptive in the scholastics and Martin Luther of The Golden Legend, and Cotton Mather of The New England Tragedies; and the Theologian of Wayside, speaking presumably in the year 1861 in Massachusetts, hears a preacher
ranting about hell-fire, and asks, "Must it be Calvin or Methodist? Must it be Athanasian creeds, Or holy water, books and beads?" True, there were meek, pious Moravians and Quakers, and in a little village in Maine an enlightened Unitarian named Kavanagh made some headway with his "weak but worthy" brethren, who had sponsored his fundamentalist predecessor; but of these Longfellow never wrote anything but anecdotes: they never found a place in his epic. The measure of his naïveté as a historical thinker, of his inability to reconcile his knowledge of history with his inherited convictions, is perfectly reflected in his desire to add a third drama to his two New England Tragedies—the scene to be laid among the Moravians of Bethlehem—in order to "harmonize the discord of the New England Tragedies, and thus give a not unfitting close to the work." He would thus, apparently, have tacked a happy ending to what was obviously a tragic history, and "balanced" the blight of Protestant fanaticism against the piety of a forgotten religious community. This is as far as he would let himself think toward the triumphant "Charity" of "the Present."

Religious and ethical progress, then, was something that Longfellow "thought," but he could not believe in it sufficiently to make it operate in an extended, unified work of art. <And it is possible that as he got deeper into his study of religious history after 1849, he gradually ceased even to think it. For a decade or so after he began, he took side trips off his main road to write popular poems like Hiawatha and Miles Standish, in which sunshine and shadow were more or less balanced. Hiawatha might have been contributory to his epic, but at its end, in looking to the future, he somewhat less than candidly depicted the Indian as happy to be dispossessed by Christians. In Wayside (1863) where he used many by-products of Christus, the balance between good and evil is so mechanical (even statistical, if one counts the happy and the sad stories) that the effort to find equipoise seems desperate. The middle sixties were dominated by his translation of The Divine Comedy, the mood of which per-
meated Christus.> His verse thereafter, both lyric and narrative, is overwhelmingly poetry of death and despair, two words which appear in the last lines of his last work, Michael Angelo, who as he works on his figure of the dead Christ says,

What darkness of despair!
So near to death, and yet so far from God.

But Christus was a failure not only of intellect but of art itself. That Longfellow thought and felt in terms of parts rather than wholes is plain. The fate of Christus is implicit in the very symbols he found in pledging himself to the "loftier strain" in 1849: the "broken melodies" which had breathed through his soul would, he hoped, "unite themselves into a symphony." <Of course, melodies do not unite themselves into symphonies any more than stones unite themselves into a cathedral. And his> Even more common than the song-symphony in his art-imagery is a block-tower allusion. From 1846, in "The Builders," to 1872 to the " * * * " of Michael Angelo, he saw the poet as a builder surrounded by blocks and filled with yearning to build a tower with them. The block is always primary: "Each minute and unseen part" must be wrought with care, "for the gods see everywhere." But the tower is never described. The image functions with pathetic if unconscious candor in Michael Angelo where he described what he had been doing all his life:

Men build their houses from the masonry
Of ruined tombs;
So from old chronicles, where sleep in dust
Names that once filled the world with trumpet tones,
I build this verse; and flowers of song have thrust
Their roots among the loose disjointed stones,
Which to this end I fashion as I must.
Quickened are they that touch the Prophet's bones.
But of course “loose disjointed stones” no more unite themselves into a house than melodies unite themselves into a symphony. “These fragments I have shored against my ruins,” says Eliot in 1922 at the end of The Waste Land. But Longfellow in the midst of the Gilded Age, to which he firmly closed his eyes, held on to the illusion that it was the past rather than he that was in ruins, and that he could build without a blueprint.

The failure of religious institutions—the failure, therefore, of progress itself—is clearly implied, though never expressly stated, in the work culminating in Christus. Longfellow, the public poet, had ceased to believe in one of the major tenets of the public [faith], a tenet which in 1849 he thought he shared with the people and made the subject of an epic on which his final and permanent reputation would rest securely. The people probably never noticed his defection. They received the parts of Christus respectfully, if languidly. It took thirteen years to sell 10,000 copies of The Golden Legend; about 15,000 copies each of The New England Tragedies and The Divine Tragedy (part I of Christus) were printed, but the sale of both seems to have stopped in about a year. When the whole appeared as Christus (1871), the publishers desperately tried to get rid of a total printing of 6,000 in six different editions to suit every pocket-book. Even this record was a tribute to his reputation rather than to Christus, and Longfellow seemed to know it. They kept right on reading what he considered his lesser works in all editions, in ever-increasing quantities. By 1869, over one-third of a million copies of his works had been sold, and in the early seventies his collected works were selling about 15,000 a year, at one time in six different editions. The rest of the world was busy with translations that eventually numbered 708 in twenty-four different languages.

His pleasure must have been wry indeed to see a new and expensive edition of a single poem—“The Building of the Ship”
—selling at the rate of 2,000 a year in the seventies when *Christus* was being received in respectful silence, and such somber poetic dramas as *The Masque of Pandora* and *Judas Maccabæus* barely got a hearing, for this affirmative lyric with a happy ending had come out in 1849, in the year he embarked on *Christus*; and perhaps equally wry to see “The Hanging of the Crane,” a “family” poem based on an idea he had tried to give away to another poet, eagerly bought on the newsstands in the biggest lower-class family story-paper in America—Bonner’s *New York Ledger*.

And while his works were flooding the world in the seventies, his new productions became gloomier and permeated with the smell of death and frustrated aspiration. Except for a bitter picture of a corrupt and luxurious papal regime in Michael Angelo’s Rome, after 1873 the history of religion as subject matter drops out of his verse. The prevailing preoccupation of the last nine years is Art, and faith in Art as a way of life displaces the old faith in mankind’s collective religious aspiration. It is a bitter faith, stripped even of the pretense that the despair of the artist is “balanced” by any reward but the drive to create which keeps him alive. Great art, if it is achieved, is immortal, but the artist himself can never know whether his great effort will be failure.

One persistent note in this late verse of the most famous of all living poets was disillusionment with fame. Again and again, the “plaudits of the crowd” are named vanity. This poet who has been praised for the wrong things finds that the “fame of his poems is his, and not his,” and when he (as St. Francis) feeds the birds “With manna of celestial words,” he “knows not if they understand.” Nothing avails but work. “Have faith in nothing but in industry,” Michael Angelo tells Benvenuto, “And work right on through censure and applause, Or else abandon Art.” Gone is the assertion of the early poems that the artist’s “toil” is like that of everyone else. For there can be no “common
ground” in the new conviction that creative work is the “divine Insanity of noble minds,” a “malaria of mind,” a “fever to accomplish some great work that will not let us sleep.”

There is a significance hard to define in the fact that Longfellow turned to the subject of the Great Artist in the same year that he began Christus. In 1850, when he began The Golden Legend, he also wrote a part of Act III, Scene IV of Michael Angelo, which takes place in the Coliseum. To Michael it is a marvel of art, “the rose of Rome.” To Cavalieri the rose smells of “a people/ Whose pleasure was the pain of dying men,” and suggests that Michael’s work is nobler than that of the Coliseum builders because “its end and aim are nobler.” Michael sees no connection between the beauty of the structure and the use to which it was put: he is obsessed with the superiority of Roman artists to himself, a pupil, not a master, and can only hope that he can learn. A parallel is here. Longfellow, who so often in talking of the immortals saw himself as a “humbler poet,” stirs himself to great effort by seeing in the humility of Michael Angelo a replica of his own, and justifies his derivativeness (for which he was often attacked), by seeing in Michael Angelo a similar dependence on predecessors. In the “Dedication,” which anticipates the finale of The Waste Land’s “These fragments I have shored against my ruins,” Longfellow writes, “Men build their houses from the masonry/ Of ruined tombs. ./ So from old chronicles, where sleep in dust/ Names that once filled the world with trumpet tones,/ I build this verse. ./ Quickened are they that touch the Prophet’s bones.” And in Michael Angelo’s world, Longfellow sought “Shanti.”

The voice of Cavalieri, arguing in effect the superiority of the Christian Michael Angelo to the pagan architects, is probably the voice of Longfellow contemplating Christus in 1850. But so, too, is the voice of Michael the Artist arguing the irrelevance of religious partisanship in art and later bitterly resenting the critics who find him “wanting/ In piety and religion, in proportion/ As
I profess perfection in my art.” Although religion is Michael Angelo’s patron, it offers as many vexations and obtuse interferences as Longfellow’s patron, the public. The external framework of the play is designed to reveal the Renaissance world of art as a vital world in which, although some artists sell out to their patrons, and others are talented playboys, the representative man is Michael Angelo, despairing over his failures, combatting misunderstanding, ignoring applause, and creating simply because he has to create. Tortured by aspirations in art he thinks beyond his ability, his great work, St. Peter’s, unfinished after decades of labor, and under attack by critics, he asks the unarticulated question of all Longfellow’s later poems:

How will men speak of me when I am gone,
When all this colorless, sad life is ended,
And I am dust? They will remember only
The wrinkled forehead, the marred countenance,
The rudeness of my speech, and my rough manners,
And never dream that underneath them all
There was a woman’s heart of tenderness.
They will not know the secret of my life,
Locked up in silence, or but vaguely hinted
In uncouth rhymes, that may perchance survive
Some little space in memories of men!
Each one performs his life-work, and then leaves it;
Those that come after him will estimate
His influence on the age in which he lived.

Michael Angelo and the writer of “Morituri Salutamus” are one. The old poet, cheering himself with thoughts of Sophocles, Chaucer, and Goethe writing masterpieces in old age (though too honest to think that old age is anything but old age—“not strength, but weakness,” “some living sparks ./ Enough to
warm, but not enough to burn"), will not write an *Oedipus* or a
*Canterbury Tales*, "But other something, would we but begin."

At the end of the line, the world's most successful poet, and
the first American professional poet, was paying the penalty
private poets do not pay. The man who at the age of thirty-
two had declared he had a notion to work on the public's
feelings, who in 1850 might have said with greater justifications
than Goethe,

What were I without thee
O my friend the public?
All my impressions monologues
Silent all my joys [sorrows].

who had attempted, as his major opus, a theme which he could
not finish on the socially acceptable terms in which he had hope-
fully begun it—was, at the age of seventy, not enjoying the
peace of the poet whose work had been a means of finding
himself, but was baffled by a public still reading *Hiawatha* while
it ignored his major opus; was disillusioned about the acceptance
he had enjoyed; was still querulous about critics, and wondering
about his rating with posterity—in other words, was worrying
about what readers thought of him. [American Poet must wait—
wait for what? Acceptance.]

Side by side, the scores of poems about and references to
writers who "made it"; the statements that "making it" in your
time is no good; the wish to die.