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As One Who From a Volume Reads: A Study of the Long Narrative Poem in Nineteenth-Century America

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AS ONE WHO FROM A VOLUME READS: A STUDY OF THE LONG NARRATIVE
POEM IN NINETEENTH-CENTURY AMERICA

A Thesis Presented

by

Sean Leahy

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ABSTRACT

Though overlooked and largely unread today, the long narrative poem was a distinct genre available to nineteenth-century American poets. Thematically and formally diverse, the long narrative poem represents a form that poets experimented with and modified, and it accounted for some of the most successful poetry publications in the nineteenth-century United States. Drawing on contemporary theories of form and situating these poems within their literary-historical context, I discuss how our reading practices might be shaped by a greater attentiveness to the long narrative poem. My analysis will focus upon a small set of poems from across the nineteenth century, centering on works by Lucy Larcom and Henry Wadsworth Longfellow. More than mere recovery, this project aims to illuminate a tradition in which poets ambitiously melded genres, claimed poetry's place to shape public discourse, and thought deeply about the reading practices available to their audience. Along the way, I consider how the dominant critical categories in the study of poetry have occluded these poems, and what these poems might offer in terms renewing or revitalizing our analytical tools and concepts.

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INTRODUCTION

In his late essay “The Poetic Principle” (1850), Edgar Allan Poe maintained that “a long poem does not exist.” Even if there were authentic long poems, he suggests, Poe doubts they could ever be popular with his contemporary audience (“The Poetic Principle” 71). Of course, the archive of nineteenth-century American poetry strongly contradicts Poe’s claims. Not only did long poems abound, but they were critically well-received, popular with audiences, and remunerative for authors. Long poems were, in fact, an integral feature of the verse culture of America in the nineteenth century. Poe even indulged in the practice himself.¹ And yet, Poe’s opinion on long poems has purchase on literary history, which has elevated certain kinds of poetry—namely the short lyric poem—over others, treating the long poem in America, with the glaring exception of Walt Whitman’s “Song of Myself,” as though it were nonexistent. In the past two decades, many scholars of American literature have begun to reconsider the traditional story of nineteenth-century American poetry, particularly the aspects of verse culture that had long been undervalued, understudied, swept aside in embarrassment, or outright disparaged. As Meredith McGill suggests, the critical desire to escape or ignore so many features of the literary field in the nineteenth-century is likely “a strong sign that we need to take them seriously” (“American Poetry” 290). Thus, in this project, I turn to long narrative poems, examples of which abound although they have not attracted critical attention as a coherent genre. Because there is no critical commonplace for what attracted

¹ With *Eureka: A Prose Poem* (1848), though without the positive reviews, a wide audience, or financial success. Characteristically, Poe is cagey about the genre to which his speculative essay might be consigned. The introduction notes *Eureka* could be considered a “Book of Truths,... Art-Product,... [or] a Romance... Nevertheless, it is as a Poem that I wish this work to be judged after I am dead” (6). Elsewhere Poe suggests the universe “is but the most sublime of poems” (130).

American poets to this form, my project looks to identify a tradition that literary history has otherwise overlooked. More than mere recovery, this project aims to illuminate a tradition in which poets ambitiously melded genres, claimed poetry's place to shape public and private discourse, and thought deeply about the reading practices available to their audience.

I focus primarily upon two poems—*An Idyl of Work* (1875) by Lucy Larcom and *Tales of a Wayside Inn* (1863) by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow—that are paradigmatic of these generic qualities. Longfellow's place in literary history far exceeds Larcom's, although the two knew one another and belonged to Boston's thriving literary culture. In different ways, they represent two trajectories suffered by much popular nineteenth-century poetry in America: where Larcom has been largely forgotten, Longfellow went from respect and success to dubiousness and disparagement. Their long poems belong to a larger set of poems for which we do not have a generic history. What attracted these poets to the long, formally heterogeneous form? What does the formal heterogeneity of these long poems yield? What aspects of verse culture do these poems capture? And why do they rarely get read today?

In assembling this set of poems that do not fit neatly into the traditional account of American literary history, I am treating the term "long narrative poem" broadly, and I emphasize formal variety in the choice of works that fall within this type. Poems that fit within the scope of this study—some are treated in-depth, while others receive only passing mention—include narratives (often book-length) composed in verse and touching upon broadly nationalistic themes, especially in the re-imagining of historical (sometimes mythic) moments from the colonial era forward. Chronologically, they span much of the

nineteenth century, from Joel Barlow's *The Columbiad* (1807) to Lucy Larcom's *An Idyl of Work*. Poets that returned to the long narrative form on multiple occasions in their careers include Henry Wadsworth Longfellow (*Evangeline* (1847), *The Song of Hiawatha* (1855), *The Courtship of Miles Standish* (1858), and *Tales of a Wayside Inn*, Lydia Sigourney (*Traits of the Aborigines of America* (1822), "Zinzendorff" (1837), "Pocahontas" (1840), "Vale of Wyoming" (1845), and others), and John Greenleaf Whittier (*Snow-Bound: A Winter Idyl* (1866) and *The Tent on the Beach* (1867)). Some of the long poems would become canonical for a period of time, while others—like Maria Gowens Brooks's *Zophiël* (1833) or Josiah G. Holland's *Katharina* (1867)—enjoyed contemporary success without a lasting impact. Thematically and formally diverse, I nonetheless suggest these poems fit Caroline Levine's formulation of genre "defined as a customary constellations of elements into historically recognizable groupings of artistic objects, bringing together forms with themes, styles, and situations of reception" (14). Still, it should be noted that drawing boundaries between genres often is an impossible task, as the borders of genre are always porous, shifting, or on the move. The goal of this project, therefore, is not so much to create a taxonomy of the long narrative poem as to perform something closer to a "critical description"² that offers up some of the genre's components, that attempts to describe those components in action, and that considers the consequences of this analysis not only for our understanding of the nineteenth-century literary field but for the reading practices we apply to nineteenth-century poetry.

²For "critical description" as a new methodology for literary studies, see Marcus, Love, and Best 3.

Historical poetics is one field that has sought to take seriously overlooked works such as these. It has revisited the wide-ranging poetic production of nineteenth-century America in order to tell a different story about the literary history of the United States. The familiar narrative, associated with those critics such as John Carlos Rowe and F. O. Matthiessen who formulated and propagated the concept of “the American Renaissance,” begins with the assumption that American literary history is marked by its break with European tradition. The works of nineteenth-century American literature that would come to be prized in the twentieth century (and beyond) were prose works, while the inclusion of a handful of poets within this tradition privileged poetic originality exemplified by the work of Walt Whitman, Emily Dickinson, and Herman Melville. As critics have repeatedly pointed out, the problem with this story is that it reads an incipient modernist aesthetic into the work of these great American originals, positing a progressive teleology from imitation to iconoclasm. Perhaps the most strident claim for American poetry as original (or exceptional) comes from Roy Harvey Pearce’s *The Continuity of American Poetry* (1961), in which Pearce writes that “the ‘Americanness’ of American poetry is, quite simply, its compulsive modernism” (5). Against this narrative, the work of historical poetics has shown renewed attention to the formal and historical concerns surrounding nineteenth-century poetry “in an effort,” in Christopher Phillips’s words, “to recover practices and ideologies of reading, writing, performing, and consuming poetry in a range of social contexts and forms” (7). Drawing upon this work, as well as on other critics concerned with matters of form, the three chapters that follow analyze the figures of genre, the poet, and reading from within the poems and from without.

In addition to the reading strategies outlined by the practitioners of historical poetics, I follow Levine's proposed method for "understand[ing] the relations among forms—forms aesthetic and social, spatial and temporal, . . . material and metrical" (23). Levine's goal is to marshal what literary criticism does best—"reading for complex interrelationships and multiple, overlapping arrangements"—in order to "track . . . the many organizing principles that encounter one another inside as well as outside the text" (23, 16). My focus here will be upon overlapping arrangements primarily within poetic texts, in which poets combine a variety of forms, such as the epyllion and the historical survey (Sigourney's *Traits*) or ballad and saga (Longfellow's "The Saga of King Olaf"). I also necessarily look outwards—towards related prose texts by the authors under study but also, to a lesser degree, to the social forms these texts engage—in order to consider the long narrative poem as the generic space in which authors explored poetry as a shaping force in social relations and in public discourse. That is, rather than treating these literary texts as secondary or "epiphenomenal" to the contexts out of which they emerge, I wish to show how the poets who turned to the long narrative poem imagined their texts and their craft as "one of many iterable structures and patterns that are constantly shaping experience" (Levine 94).

Levine's desire to closely describe the many patterns at work in and around literary texts utilizes the protocols of close reading while departing from its basic assumptions about coherence and totality, assumptions that derived from the "unified wholeness" that New Critics like Cleanth Brooks saw at work in the short lyrics they read (Levine 33). The poems I focus on in this project, then, form a different set of texts from which to consider the reading practices that might best be employed to gain a better

understanding of the field of poetry in nineteenth-century America. The goal here is not to upend the practices that sustain literary-critical reading; instead, I want to consider what alternatives might be revealed in the poems which were written and read as the study of literature became professionalized, poems which no longer meet the standards for what professionalized reading would become. If my project achieves any of that at all, it will be through the modest but valuable gains that arise from returning to forgotten, devalued, or dismissed poetry with fresh eyes and new (or renewed) tools. To that end, it will be worth considering some of the tools and terms I use throughout.

Genre & Form

In *Forms* (2015), Levine distinguishes form and genre while acknowledging their proximity. Levine suggests, as I noted above, that genres are “customary constellations of elements” like theme, style, and “situations of reception,” while “forms are organizations or arrangements that afford repetition and portability across materials and contexts” (14). In the modern era, the understanding of genre has shifted, according to John Frow, from thinking of genre as a set of rules to approaching genres as “organically developing species,” as a series of recurring “textual features,” and as “conventions of reading” (57).³ The Aristotelian notion of classification, developed in the Renaissance and highly refined in the eighteenth century, would come to be replaced by a theoretical—rather than descriptive—approach, as developed by the German Romantics. Goethe, for example, delineated between the *Naturformen* of epic, lyric, and dramatic modes which would contain the *Dichtarten*, or historically contingent genres that might abound at any one

³ The following summary draws on Frow 55-78.

time. The latter develop (like species), while the former are unchanging modes of expression of “lucid and detached narration,” enthusiastic expression of the self, and speaking on another’s behalf, respectively (Frow 60). Subsequent genre theory, beginning with Benedetto Croce, sought to break free of any of the taxonomic and descriptive impulse, to show even the falseness (or the impossibility) of the concept of genre all together. This culminates in Derrida’s essay “The Law of Genre,” which claims that “within the heart of the law itself, [there is] a law of impurity, a principle of contamination” (57). It is because of these critiques of genre as a classification system, Jonathan Culler notes, “that the notion of genre has not fared well in literary studies of the past decades... which suggests it is indeed time to take up the question of genre anew” (21). Today’s theorists of genre, therefore, have largely abandoned the notion that genres are in any way “natural” or “essential” to instead attempt to understand how they morph through time but also how they *behave* in specific historical contexts. This latter view is put most pointedly by Michael C. Cohen, who suggests that “[g]enres are not just categories in a taxonomy; they are historical agents” (“Getting Generic” 155). This is to say that a better understanding of a poem’s genre will derive from the vantage point of its particular context in such a way that “reconsider[s] questions of poetic form, reading, circulation and address” (“Getting Generic” 153). Cohen’s (and Levine’s) emphasis on historical situatedness is shared by other theorists of genre, such as Virginia Jackson and Yopie Prins.⁴ This means, for my case, attending to aspects of the poetic cultures in

⁴ Alternatively, other theorists of genre consider the category to have a transhistorical value, more detached from “situations of receptions,” to what Culler calls a “set of norms or structural possibilities” (“Lyric, History, and Genre” 66). In practice, this allows him to consider a transhistorical account of the lyric, which incorporates historical contingencies while still maintaining a broad conception of the lyric through time.

which the poems I analyze circulated and to which they were addressed. Those aspects might include the publishing practices of the era, the ways in which poetry was read and performed, as well as the theories of prosody then current.

While genres can be considered at different scales (a point Wai Chee Dimock makes when considering genre as “a world system”), “form,” according to Levine, encompasses a broader range of objects, scales, and levels of complexity, from the periods that scholars use to define the temporal boundaries of a study to the periods that dot the end of their sentences. To narrow (somewhat) the focus onto literary writing, the bedrock forms are prose and poetry. “What distinguishes *poetic* form,” according to *The Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics*, “is the line that is a poet’s determination” (Wolfson, 497-498). And yet, even this distinction becomes troubled by a long narrative poem like Sigourney’s “Vale of Wyoming,” which incorporates prose in the form of extended explanatory notes. I am interested in these collisions of form within the long narrative poem, and I suggest that “formal heterogeneity” is a generic feature of the long narrative poem. The degree to which this heterogeneity is “rough” or “smooth,” to borrow David Duff’s terms, varies greatly among these poems but is nonetheless present in each.⁵ Some forms that will be considered here include the building blocks of poems, including meter and rhyme. Additionally, social forms, such as the institutions and public arena in which poetry was read or discussed, will be considered, as these poets often firmly grounded their poems in specific contexts.

⁵ See Duff, *Romanticism and the Uses of Genre* 176-187

Length & Narrative

Finally, there are the elements that I use to designate the genre of the long narrative poem. As a descriptor, “long” raises the question of, “As compared to what?,” and the long narrative poem’s implied opposite is the short lyric that has become the preferred object of literary analysis. *The Columbiad* is an undoubtedly long poem, and Barlow’s large and elaborate first edition sought to materialize the poem’s epic ambitions. Other long poems, like Whittier’s *Snow-bound*, while printed in an individual edition, seem intended to be read in a single sitting. While there is no cutoff, per se, these poems run to the hundreds of lines, a sufficient length in which a narrative may unfold and the interaction of forms and genre (what I refer to as “formal heterogeneity”) may develop. In many cases, these long narrative poems circulated as published books, rather than being published in periodical form. This latter point, however, is not a hard and fast rule, as some long narrative poems incorporate previously published short poems, whole cloth, into their narrative frame. Additionally, there is the matter of portions of these works being anthologized or truncated following their publication. Even when a poem is unequivocally long, such as *Tales of a Wayside Inn*, length becomes variable when we consider the poem’s circulation.

With this in mind, when we think back to Poe’s “Poetic Principle,” the long narrative poem therefore would seem to conform to his assertion that the long poem does not exist, but is instead only “series of minor poems” (71). However, it is important to think about on what aesthetic grounds Poe makes these claims, what, for Poe, is “that vital requisite in all works of Art, Unity” (71). For Poe, what constitutes a poem is its

unity, wholeness, and totality, which can only be appreciated—the “profound and enduring effect” of which can be impressed—“at a single sitting” (71). While the panache of Poe’s essay might make us hesitant to accept his claims, the qualities of true poetry he outlines nonetheless would come to define how poetry was read in twentieth and into the twenty-first centuries. The fullest expression of aligning the poem with a wholeness and closure is perhaps Brooks’s *The Well-Wrought Urn*. In Levine’s summary of the history of criticism, the ascension of the New Critical preoccupation with unifying the heterogeneous elements of poetry was then mapped to the liberal democratic state, “endorsing a poetic *e pluribus unum* against the implied shadow of enforced Stalinist unity” (30). This parallel between poem and politics precipitates the backlash by later deconstructive critics who sought to undermine this notion of wholeness by showing—as Derrida would in “The Law of Genre”—that each containing form, be it literary or political, is necessarily constituted by some “outside” and therefore exclusionary and constraining. In questioning the validity of these deconstructive critiques and calling for a “renewed formalism,” Levine suggests that we should not look for analogies between politics and literature, or assume that the former produces the latter; instead, closely attending to the intricacies of form might allow us to better grasp how the many forms present within and around literary works collide, interact, shape, or contradict one another. The long narrative poem, I hope to show, is composed of unifying forms although it is not grasping towards totality, does not insist on wholeness as being constitutive of a poem’s success.

Narrative is critical to the view that these poems might contain unifying forms without ultimately representing or expressing closure. In considering the appeal of formal

heterogeneity to these poets, I draw again on Levine. Narrative, Levine says, “best captures the experience of colliding forms” (*Forms* 19). The collisions afforded by narrative can help us think through different sets of interrelations—in social as well as literary terms—that these poets bring together in their work. “[N]arrative privileges interactions of forms over time,” something the long narrative poem enacts, thereby becoming a unique genre in which to study the interplay of genres in a manner “[u]nlike a taxonomic chart that organizes forms into separate categories” (Levine 20). With its emphasis on the unfolding of events in time rather a singular moment of reflection or realization, narrative poetry does offer counterpoint to the conception of poetry-as-lyric that Virginia Jackson has identified as the status of poetry in Western poetics.⁶

Certain assumptions about narrative poetry have contributed to the “lyricization” of all poetry, and Meredith McGill has noted how narrative has been set against that of lyric, so much so that critics historically used the ballad form to “define the boundaries of literariness itself” (McGill “What is a Ballad?” 156). But, as these long poems showcase, narrative can be an important tool for the poet to probe poetic composition and reception. Narrative affords the poet the opportunity to observe poetry in action, to describe how

⁶ Jackson analyzes a series of misunderstandings that have made the lyric “the genre most isolated from history” (*Dickinson’s Misery* 55). The lyric has become detached from its social ties and “literal circumstances,” which is reflected in the interpretive strategies of lyric reading, the style of interpretation most widely applied to poetry from the late-nineteenth (and, from the 1940s, in particular) forward (*Misery* 56). The result is what Jackson calls “lyricization,” whereby all poetic genres get collapsed into one genre—“poetry”—which is understood to be lyric. The lyric is a “transcendent poetic genre,” one “abstracted” from the forms of circulation (Jackson and Prins 3). Instead of a plurality of genres, poetry is now assumed to posit a persona that addresses an imaginary reader. Despite a persistent backlash against New Criticism in the latter half of the twentieth century, the movement’s solidification of the lyric as both a stand-in for the poetry in general and the marker of the literary would become an accepted, if unacknowledged, aspect of literary interpretation.

poems can shape communal relations, and to ground poetry in particular social situations. In my analysis, I argue that poets employ narrative frames in order to construct the space to consider the dialectic between author and audience. For Larcom and Longfellow, there is no poem without an audience; but as they show within their formally heterogeneous texts, it is crucial to recall that there are many different genres of poetry and many different kinds of audiences. This returns us to McGill's point that the ballad had long been used to police the boundaries of the literary. If assumptions about the ballad form put it in opposition to the lyric, Longfellow and Whittier's use of both, for example, shows that the boundaries between the two forms were porous and that there was traffic between the two. Narrative, beyond these two examples, is often punctuated by lyric gestures. For example, as Jonathan Culler notes, the form of the refrain (prevalent in "The Saga of King Olaf" in Longfellow's *Tales of a Wayside Inn*) "disrupts narrative and brings it back to an atemporal present of discourse" (50). Many long narrative poems incorporate such disruptions in an exaggerated fashion, such as Josiah G. Holland's *Kathrina*, which breaks up the blank verse tale with lyric interludes that recapitulate through reflection the events narrated in the poem's preceding chapters. In fact, the traffic between narrative and lyric modes seems to be integral to the long narrative poem, and the exaggerated ways in which genre showcases these kinds of collisions is part of what makes these poems interesting and illuminating. By turning to the interactions of forms, the unfolding of narrative in these long poems is as much about storytelling as it is about seeing the different rhetorical resources of the poet at work. Long but without insisting on length, narrative but without insisting on story: the long narrative poem helps us reconsider the trajectory of literary history that reflects, as Jackson and Prins describe

it, “the modern emergence of lyric as a genre, the decay of the genre system, and the movement to replace historical poetic genres by a transhistorical theory of lyric” (7).

Such a trajectory stabilizes the concept of “poetry” and makes the genealogies of the reading practices we employ today are largely invisible to us. This can make alternative routes to reading poetry difficult to see, but these long narrative poems are filled with a rich array of depictions of poetry, its composition, and its reception. I draw my title from “The Saga of King Olaf,” which can be seen as the extreme end of the collision of forms: Not only does Longfellow draw upon (and even invent) a different verse form for each of the poem’s twenty-two sections; but the story itself weaves together Norse and Christian cosmologies, republican and monarchical history, and domestic and political dramas, without relying on poetic form to stabilize or reflect the content of the story. At one point, a *skald*—later suspected to be the wraith of Odin—appears to sing the praises of the king, offering lessons from the “runes and rhyme / Made by the gods in elder times” and reminding the king that “silence better is than speech” (96). The narrator describes the *skald* “[a]s one who from a volume reads,” an interesting anachronism that nevertheless reveals this performance of poetry nested within overlapping notions of reading. Orality and literacy, performance and print, recitation and silent reading, public poet and lyric persona, sender and receiver: Longfellow puts these many forms into play, without necessarily resolving their differences or seeking to integrate them neatly. But even with careful attention being paid to these works, there is no returning to the diverse, public, and performative verse culture of the nineteenth-century. If we encounter Longfellow’s poetry, it will likely not be in parlor or performed on stage. Instead, it will be read in volumes—in special collections,

in anthologies, or in critical editions—and will inevitably be influenced by the very critical categories that have occluded this poetry for so long. I return to these poems that twentieth-century critical categories have made difficult to read in order to see what, if anything, they might offer in terms renewing or revitalizing our analytical tools and concepts.

The following chapters attempt to elaborate the points above through readings of a selection of long narrative poems. In the first chapter, I look at the Lucy Larcom's *An Idyl of Work* to discuss the formal heterogeneity of the long narrative poem. More prominently than other long narrative poems, *An Idyl of Work* incorporates a mixture of verse genres, sometimes in integrated ways but often by prominently juxtaposing different meters, modes, genres, and even outside sources. I address how Larcom's emphasis on not only verse forms but verse performance and reception illustrates how poetry mediates social relations. Thanks to advances in print technology, expanding literacy, and a widening number of venues (such as dailies, magazines, pedagogical manuals, and anthologies) in which poems could circulate, poetry was "everywhere and nowhere at once" in the nineteenth century, according to Michael C. Cohen (*Social Lives* 6). Larcom takes on the ubiquity of poetry not once but twice: first as poetry in *An Idyl of Work*, followed fifteen years later with her prose autobiography, *A New England Girlhood*. I analyze the formal differences between the parallel scenes in which Larcom portrays the tactics the mill-girls took to circumvent proscriptions against reading, showing how these common readers often approached poetry as an object that is socially enmeshed and adaptable to everyday life.

In chapter two, I continue my discussion of formal heterogeneity, but I shift my focus from poetry's role in private relations to the political dimensions of poetic address. I use Longfellow's *Tales of a Wayside Inn* to show how formal heterogeneity registers a self-conscious portrayal of poetic composition. As a master of many verse forms and traditions (so much so that he was accused of plagiarism), Longfellow's body of work includes multiple examples to draw from. I argue that the *Tales* showcases the way in which Longfellow sought to bring together the many different forms his poetry could be said to take: as new and previously published work; in book or magazine form; in a variety of meters; spanning history and geography; as original and derivative work; as lyric, ballad, blazon, Saga, and even prose. In readings of "The Sicilian's Tale" and "The Birds of Killingworth" that consider the way the poet's performance aids in structuring social relations, I discuss how his poet-figure acts as a node for the various forms (literary, cultural, historical, and social) that Longfellow conjoins in his tales.

Chapter three addresses the figure of the reader that is prominent in these works. In long narrative poems, poets' engagement with and reworking of a diversity of verse forms often rehearse the ways the characters within the poems engage with and rework texts. Therefore, rather than a dichotomy between the writer of poetry and his/her reader or between the original act of creation and the passive act of reading, the uses of poems and the users of poems could be thought to exist along a continuum. This chapter returns to Larcom and Longfellow, both of whom are deeply invested in strategies for reading poetry, though offer very different representations of it. Whether describing, guiding, or anticipating the reader, these poems, far from being "unreadable," are in fact obsessed with reading (Cohen, *Social Lives* 12). Through the unfolding of narrative and the

collisions of forms, the long narrative poem narrates not a singular sense of or method for reading but a plurality of them, attentive to historically situated practices and contexts.

CHAPTER ONE: LUCY LARCOM'S FORMAL HETEROGENEITY

Early on in Lucy Larcom's 1874 book-length poem *An Idyl of Work*, a group of Lowell "mill girls" entertain one another while the flooded Merrimack River has "made the factory-wheels / Drag slow, and slower, till they stopped" (*Idyl* 12). The work stoppage inspires an exchange on the meaning of the word "lady" (delivered in the form of a lyrical debate between Roman goddesses), after which one of the poem's three protagonists sings a "a grand psalm-tune / Married to one of Watt's old-fashioned hymns." The mood shifts from "thoughtful" to ebullient as their group veers from intellectual and etymological dispute to spiritual and aesthetic song (*Idyl* 21). Others join the singer Eleanor, and soon "psalms bubbled into songs, / Songs into ballads," as Eleanor's "unschooled notes fled on" through a selection of ballads by Robert Burns, "Touch[ing] many an ancient border-melody, / And slipp[ing] through carol, roundelay, and catch" (*Idyl* 22).

Larcom consistently crowds different verse forms upon each other in her "strange medley-book" (*Idyl* 36). Her principal characters also show a penchant for debate, and the poem includes multiple scenes in which the mill girls discuss topics of personal and public import, including self-improvement through learning, their labor's complicity in the slave economy, the efficacy of strikes, and the rugged beauty of New England. These diverse topics command the girls' attention, but share space with an ongoing preoccupation with poetry. Throughout, Larcom not only names the verse genres with which these girls were intimately familiar and describes those genres in performance; but she also quotes from a variety of sources, including popular hymnals and Larcom's own previously published poetry. Although largely forgotten today, Larcom was a prolific

poet and well-respected editor in the latter-half of the nineteenth century. She is most famous for chronicling life in the Lowell mills, where she worked as a child following her father's death, beginning as a bobbin doffer (a role she makes passing mention of in *Idyl*) at the age of eleven. She contributed poems to *The Lowell Offering*, the magazine run entirely by the girls of the mills, which has since become an essential artifact for understanding the culture of the New England mills. Formal schooling would have been difficult to attain for the many young women employed by the mills, but the informal network of writing and publication, as well as the proliferation of texts circulated among the girls, provided Larcom with an early literary education that put her in correspondence with John Greenleaf Whittier, one of the country's most famous poets at the time.⁷ Following a decade as a teacher in Illinois, Larcom returned to Massachusetts to join the faculty of Wheaton College before beginning a career in publishing in earnest during the 1860s. In her role as editor and through her friendships with Whittier and Annie and James T. Fields, Larcom would become an integral figure of New England literary life. Working primarily as an editor, and long associated with the children's magazine *Our Young Folks*, Larcom would eventually achieve literary success with the publication of her autobiography, *A New England Girlhood* (1889). Her reputation, however, remained largely dormant for many decades in the twentieth century, as evolving tastes would come to view much of her brand of poetry as retrograde and imitative.⁸ In recent years, however, scholars like Jennifer Putzi and Mary Loeffelholz have renewed interest in

⁷ For more on her friendship and mentorship with Whittier, see Rudy Smith 301-320.

⁸ *Ibid.* 301.

Larcom's poetics, and her writings on the Lowell mills have become essential artifacts for that era of American history.

To a contemporary reader, Larcom's book may appear as a surprising and idiosyncratic artifact. *An Idyl of Work* seems to revel in an almost anarchic mixture of forms despite a plot that resembles a conventional female *Bildungsroman*. It is an episodic miscellany that foregrounds neither narrative nor the many individual poems it quotes in full. With Larcom's text, we find the most exaggerated version of the formal heterogeneity displayed by long narrative poems of the nineteenth century. In *Idyl*, generic hybridity propels the narrative forward: More prominently than other long narrative poems, Larcom's *Idyl* uses the story to narrate the poem's own formal mixing. Her use of interpolated verse is tightly woven into the fabric of her story and storytelling; or, as one of her characters says while looking upon the overflowing Merrimack: the "[w]oof of poetry / Through some coarse, homely warp forever runs" (*Idyl* 25).

The poem's title makes obvious reference to Alfred Lord Tennyson's cycle of narrative poems *Idylls of the King*, which Tennyson began to publish in 1859. Larcom's poem, of course, turns on the experiences of lower-class working women rather than on the exploits of the nobility. Larcom similarly subverts her other Tennysonian of *The Princess* (1847), which focuses upon the education of aristocratic women told in a medley of forms. Mary Loeffelholz has described *Idyl* as an "anthology-poem," which acknowledges not only a formal resemblance to anthologies but also cites the roles these poets sometimes occupied within the literary marketplace.⁹ Drawing on Loeffelholz's

⁹ Loeffelholz describes the "anthology-poem" as "proper vehicle for Larcom's ambition" to author a book length autobiographical poem ("A Strange Medley-Book": Lucy Larcom's *An Idyl of Work* 11).

work, Stefanie Markovits classifies Larcom's poem as a "verse-novel," a popular Victorian form whose exemplary specimen, *Aurora Leigh*, proved to be enormously influential on both sides of the Atlantic.¹⁰ Both Markovits's and Loeffelholz's analyses are invested in the formal heterogeneity of Larcom's poem and importantly draw out its connection to the field of cultural production from which *Idyl* emerges. But both critics subordinate the poem's form to either a narrow historical period (as in Loeffelholz's emphasis on the post-bellum literary field) or another form (as in Markovits's emphasis on the generic mixing of the novel as a blueprint for the verse-novel). However, I would argue that *An Idyl of Work* should be viewed in light of a longer tradition of extended narrative poems that poets had been turning to for nearly a century in America. The long narrative poem illustrates the proliferation of genres available to poets in the nineteenth century, and Larcom uses this interplay of genres to indicate how poetry shaped and structured social relations within the mills. I begin this chapter by comparing scenes that recur in *Idyl* and her prose autobiography in order to illustrate how Larcom represents poetry as a shaping force. While both works recount specific elements of the author's past, poetry affords Larcom the rhetorical resources to not only understand but enact the social relations of life in the mills, showing the mixture of forms to generate the affective bonds between—and not simply to mirror—the mixture of girls from different parts of New England within the mills. Then, by turning my attention to Larcom's description of the Merrimack River, I further account for *Idyl*'s exaggerated formal heterogeneity by suggesting that Larcom makes a meta-argument about the nature of genre. Bringing

¹⁰ For her discussion of Larcom's engagement with a transatlantic tradition, see Markovits 239-249.

diverse poetic forms into contact with one another in a single poetic work, her poem imagines genres not as distinct and inert categories but as mutually shaping structures.

Mill Life in Poetry and Prose

Larcom's personal and professional history serves as a potent reminder of the diversity roles within the literary marketplace that writers filled in the nineteenth century. Just as the reading public embraced a wide range of poets and a wide range of genres (not simply the Romantic lyric), so did poets work in an array of genres and even in an array of professions tied to literature. Shelley wrote novels, Byron wrote dramas, and the literary annual became a lucrative site within which these authors could publish their work. Meanwhile, Wordsworth contributed to travel guides and the essay was explored as a primary (for Hazlitt and De Quincey) or secondary (by Coleridge and Shelley) form through which to explore Romantic themes.¹¹ The same held true for the phenomenally popular female poets of the era, such as Felicia Hemans and Letitia Landon, both of whom assumed editorial roles during their careers. In practice, authorship in the nineteenth-century was a diversified activity, and while the "Big Six" who loom large over nineteenth-century literature are remembered primarily for their poetic achievement, they did not abjure writing in poetic genres other than the lyric and in fact wrote prodigiously in forms other than poetry. In America at this time, we see poets filling many editorial roles. Famed poets like John Greenleaf Whittier and James Russell Lowell and ran important newspapers and magazines. In addition to her phenomenally successful

¹¹ For more on the diversity of the literary field in the era of British Romanticism, see Cox 10-34.

poetry, Lydia Sigourney published educational and conduct manuals while also editing souvenir books. She even earned income supplying her name to the title page of *Godey's Lady Book* as a kind of stamp of quality, according to Gary Kelly (25). Longfellow held professorships and wrote grammar textbooks before being able to make a living off of his poetry. The diversified professional environment in which these authors participated becomes the subject of poetry at this time, as a poem like James Russell Lowell's "A Fable for Critics" attests; but, the multifaceted careers of these poets is largely downplayed in subsequent literary history which would go on to coalesce around a Romantic figure of the author detached from these networks.

In *An Idyl of Work*, Larcom ranges across verse forms in a manner reminiscent of her editorial career, which brought Larcom into contact with a wide of variety of literary expression, up and down the ladder of taste. By the time Larcom published *Idyl*, she had had a successful career as an editor, especially with her years overseeing the successful children's magazine *Our Young Folks* from 1865 until 1873. Additionally, she found success as an anthologist, organizing collections of her own verse as well as anthologizing poems by themes (religious poems or poems for children, for example). Collaborating with John Greenleaf Whittier, she compiled texts for his two successful volumes, *Child Life in Poems* and *Child Life in Prose*. Deeply enmeshed in New England's literary culture in her later years, her work would continue to be published and anthologized after her death, her poetry finding purchase in school recitation manuals and collections of children's poetry. However, it was by chronicling her early years—before becoming a poet or editor or before becoming an educator and moving to the frontier of Illinois—that Larcom achieved modest literary fame. The works for which Larcom is

chiefly remembered—*An Idyl of Work* and *A New England Girlhood*—chronicle mill life in 1830s and 1840s.

Larcom's *Idyl* is an autobiographical portrait of her early years at Boot Mills. The poem centers on three mill girls—Esther, Eleanor, and Isabel—in a loosely tied-together narrative. They read poetry, attend church, and discuss the matters of the day. Eleanor and Esther decamp to the mountains in New Hampshire, where they are taken in by the wealthy Mrs. Willoughby and continue their discussions of poetry while exploring the landscape. Isabel, the most fiercely independent of the trio, is seduced by Mrs. Willoughby's embezzler nephew, but frees herself from the affair eventually. The poem concludes with Eleanor's sentimentalized death, after Esther marries a doctor and Isabel finds work and refuge in Mrs. Willoughby's care. The poem does not explicitly reference the diverse roles Larcom played in the literary market, and yet there are parallels. Loeffelholz suggests that the formal heterogeneity of *Idyl* "literalized the matrix of print culture out which they emerged" ("Strange" 13). *Idyl* undoubtedly illustrates the "embedded structures" that constitute and shape the literary field, as the circulation and reception of poetry is a central theme of the poem (Loeffelholz, "Strange" 13). However, I would argue that Larcom also shows a greater interest in verse forms themselves as social agents than Loeffelholz allows. Larcom's interest in genre is evident in her metaphorical exploration of the work of genre in *Idyl* as well as in the way she revises the same scene between her two autobiographical works, *An Idyl of Work* and *A New England Girlhood*.

A New England Girlhood hews more closely to the facts of Larcom's life, while *Idyl* is a kind of historical fiction. Nevertheless, the later autobiography rehearses many

of the same scenes as the long poem. *A New England Girlhood* is also a medley of sorts that incorporates long passages of verse; however, it relies less on formal mixing than the poem, instead closely following the conventions of autobiography. In her preface to *Girlhood*, Larcom turns to photography to offer a theory of the form, stating that the ideal autobiography should be “a picture of the outer and inner universe photographed upon one little life’s consciousness” (*Girlhood* 5). She turns to the autobiographical form to document the relationships among “schoolmate, workmate, and teacher”, rather than tell a “personal history” (*Girlhood* 7-8). Larcom then wonders if poetry is best equipped to relay personal history: “I sometimes think I have already written [my personal history], in my verses” (*Girlhood* 8). Though conventional, her discussion of the affordances and deficiencies of each form not only suggests her attentiveness to genre but also offers a justification for the impulse to return to the same material, first as poetry, then as prose. Her prose autobiography—retrospective, descriptive, and analytical—maps the relationships within Boot Mill and the structures that govern the girls’ relationships and encounters with literature. Larcom’s poem, on the other hand, sets these structures in motion, showing how these many verse forms help bind the girls together, mediating relations and greasing the wheels of mill life.

In both texts, Larcom depicts a world sodden with books, magazines, and papers. Larcom devotes considerable space to the act of reading (discussed at greater length in Chapter Three) and enumerates the various texts that Larcom would have encountered in her youth. The “Mill-Girls’ Magazines” chapter in *Girlhood* discusses the literary publications handled by the young employees themselves. The existence of *The Lowell Offering* and *The Operatives’ Magazine* would seem to suggest an unquestioned embrace

and promotion of literacy by the owners of the mill; however, Larcom reveals that the owners enforced rules that limited the girls' reading to certain areas and spaces. Despite the orders against reading, the girls flouted the posted prohibition, as a scene that appears in both *An Idyl of Work* and *A New England* makes clear. In the autobiography, Larcom describes the workarounds of the proscription against poetry in the mill:

The printed regulations forbade us to bring books into the mill, so I made my window-seat into a small library of poetry, pasting its side all over with newspaper clippings. In those days we had only weekly papers, and they had always a "poet's corner," where standard writers were well represented, with anonymous ones, also. I was not, of course, much of a critic. I chose my verses for their sentiment, and because I wanted to commit them to memory; sometimes it was a long poem, sometimes a hymn, sometimes only a stray verse (*Girlhood* 176).

Larcom then goes on to discuss the "window-gems" she pasted near her loom, by Hemans and Landon, aligning herself with the two most famous female poets of the British Romantic tradition. She first quotes Hemans ("Better Lands" and "Kindred Hearts"), and then speculates about Landon's "Mont Blanc": "I wonder if Miss Landon really did write that fine poem to Mont Blanc." Larcom will return to the question of authenticity later after a magazine editor accuses her of plagiarism (calling her a "literary thiefess") when Larcom sought remuneration for her first published poem.¹² Both her

¹² "The little song 'Hannah Binding Shoes' . . . was brought into notice in a peculiar way,—by my being accused of stealing it, by the editor of the magazine. . . . [T]his editor lost my note and signature, and then denounced me by name in a newspaper as a "literary thiefess;" having printed the verses with a nom de plume in his magazine without my knowledge. It was awkward to have to come to my own defense. But the curious incident gave the song a wide circulation" (*Girlhood* 271).

speculations on Landon and her own reflections on plagiarism suggest the “culture of reprinting,” the name Meredith McGill applies to the antebellum literary marketplace. McGill shows that poetry circulated more freely in this era because it was governed by a looser (or largely absent) copyright regime. This emphasis on reprinting and the wide circulation of texts “shifts the locus of value from textual origination to editing and arrangement, placing authorship under complex forms of occlusion” (*Culture of Reprinting* 39). *The Lowell Offering*, which was published from 1840 until 1845, represents a prime example of this culture of reprinting. Larcom’s first published work appears in the *Offering*, which was “filled, and, for the greater part of their existence, edited by mill-girls” (*Girlhood* vii). The mill girls behind *The Lowell Offering* in effect recreated something much like the broader literary culture—including not only their own publications but reading a “society,” as well—on a micro scale.¹³ This periodical contains not only reprintings but also unauthorized reworkings of poems by the likes of Hemans. Jennifer Putzi notes that what we might construe as literary theft can instead be read as a “democratization of literary property,” exemplifying a verse culture in which mill girls perceived themselves as conversant in and in conversation with the leading poets of the time (159). Rewriting poems, pasting them in windows, or committing them to memory: these are the activities addressed in *A New England Girlhood* that appear enacted in *Idyl of Work*.

¹³ Before describing the proscriptions on reading by the mill owners, Larcom notes forming a “little society for writing and discussion” for which the members wrote up “a Constitution and By-Laws, and named ourselves ‘The Improvement Society’” (*Girlhood* 174).

The poem reimagines the scene in which the boss outlaws reading as generative, framing the girls' response as a collective enterprise. In *Idyl*, Larcom shows the constraints imposed by the mill owners ultimately did not stifle creativity; instead, the girls produced novel responses to their conditions. In the earlier long poem, Larcom recounts the "printed regulations" in the voices of her principle characters:

Then Eleanor: "I wish there were no rule
Against our reading in the mills. Sometimes
A line of poetry is such a lift
From the monotonous clatter."

"To the praise
Of mill-girls be the need of such a rule,"
Said Miriam Willoughby. "Far be the time
When no one shall have reason to forbid
Fruit now desired. And yet I wonder much
How you could be obedient."

Esther smiled:
"We are not; we rebel; at least, evade.
Few girls but keep some volume hid away
For stealthy reading. Some tear out the leaves
Of an old Bible, and so get the whole;
For books, not leaves, are tabooed. Others paste
The window-sills with poem, story, sketch;
No one objects to papering bare walls. (*Idyl* 127-129).

The passage praises a fragmented view of literature composed of "leaves" or "sketch [and] story," selected, compiled, and held together by the mill girls. The "papering [of] bare walls" imagines poetry as common property, to be papered over, replaced, memorized, unbound, or freely circulated. Following the passage, Esther goes on to name the contents of her "memory-book," which includes the work of Whittier, Bryant, Shelley, and Coleridge's "Mont Blanc,"¹⁴ which reverses the gender of the author of

¹⁴ Presumably, Larcom is here referring to Samuel Taylor Coleridge's "Hymn before Sun-rise, in the Vale of Chamouni" (1802).

“Mont Blanc” (Landon) that Larcom names in the same scene in her autobiography. Next to these male canonical poets in her memory-book, Esther includes “more waifs of lovely verse.” These “waifs” are the nameless or anonymous poems that proliferated in magazines and dailies at this time. Esther goes on to recite one of these “waifs” at the others’ request called “Her Choice,” a poem that would be reprinted separately in Larcom’s collected works.

This scene, like many others in *Idyl*, confirms a fact that contemporary literary history still struggles to contend with about nineteenth century America: that “[p]oetry was everywhere.”¹⁵ But what kind of verse do the mill-girls read, perform, and write, exactly? Many different kinds, as *An Idyl of Work* is interwoven with metrical variety. The poem contains seventeen interpolated poems, many of which Larcom had previously published elsewhere. It also includes snippets from works by other poets and quotes from the bible, in addition to enumerating many other poems (as Esther does with the contents of her memory-book). The narrative frame is told in blank verse, though it is frequently broken up by dialogue in a way that resembles the verse-novel *Aurora Leigh* or its American replica *Kathrina*. At times, the dialogue constitutes the bulk of the blank verse, and the poem can begin to resemble a verse drama. Even prose turns to verse in *Idyl*. After attending Sunday mass, Eleanor tells the absent Isabel that the “sermon was like poetry”; and, indeed, the pastor delivers his sermon in verse (*Idyl* 67). Later, when Mrs. Willoughby writes her nephew Ralph, she includes two poems in the text of her letter, which we then realize are written in the same blank verse as the letter itself. In each case,

¹⁵ On the multiple modes of circulation for and general abundance of nineteenth-century poetry, see Kete 17.

Larcom sets the poems apart typographically with a heading that signals the shift from narrative to poetic performance. The interpolated poems also include significant metrical variation, from the blank verse narrative and from one another. The poem “Her Choice” is a lightly feminist lyric told in long, fifteen-beat couplets. “The Loaf-Givers” is a colloquy conducted in octets of alternating rhyme in lines of seven and eight beats. The ballad “Peggy Bligh’s Voyage” recounts a Massachusetts legend about a witch who eventually has her revenge on the captain of ship that abandons her. Told in standard ballad rhythm and nested within the broader apparatus of *Idyl*’s narrative frame, “Peggy Bligh’s Voyage” pays homage to Coleridge’s “Rime of the Ancient Mariner” when Peggy is thought to turn into the shrieking gull that follows the fogbound ship (*Idyl* 42).

The contrast between narrative and performance is almost always stark, so much so that the narrative frame would seem to have more in common with prose than poetry. Yet, Larcom’s project is about the contrast of poetic forms as they are enacted and received. Because these lyric interruptions occur *within* a narrative, they are not presented as atemporal discourse but rather firmly embedded in a situation of reception: the poem is performed by an identified speaker, to an identified audience, often in response to a specific problem, event, or occurrence.¹⁶ The seemingly artificial nature of poetic form—the contrivances of rhyme, rhythm, meter, or line break—are set against the real (or, at

¹⁶ In Celeste Langan’s reading of Scott’s *Lay of the Last Minstrel*, a similar “narrative frame plus performance” structure suggests the remediation of poetry in print, reinforcing the “audiovisual hallucinatory” effect produced by the reading of poetry becoming largely confined to the printed page. By evoking an “oral poetic tradition,” Scott is “recognizing how the print medium turns *all* verse into a balk and silent screen” (63)

least realistic) events of Larcom's life in the mills.¹⁷ What creates the tension is not just the constraints placed upon language by poetic form, but a tension within the poetic language itself, between narrative and lyric. Larcom juxtaposes verse genres, from the blank verse narrative frame to the devotional couplets of "Helper and Friend," a prayer Eleanor offers up while bending over the loom. The narrator describes Eleanor's poem as "hid within the noise,— / A bird's note in a thicket," punctuating the murmur of the blank verse (where the narrative is told) with the more pointed and structured meter of the devotional lyric (*Idyl* 83). Larcom's poem offers a kind of reportage via collage, her poem's narrative realism lying in constant tension with the variety of verse forms that the poem showcases.

The two artifacts—*Idyl* and *Girlhood*—chronicle her early life from two distinct perspectives, with Larcom the author performing a deliberate crossing over of the border between prose and poetry. By migrating her history across these two broad generic distinctions, *A New England Girlhood* reiterates the formal tensions that animates *An Idyl of Work* on a different scale, throwing into greater relief the distinction between narrative (increasingly the domain of prose) and lyric (the domain of poetry). Writing *A New England Girlhood* may mark Larcom's acknowledgment of the decline of poetry's prestige during the so-called "Twilight of the Poets," and its inability to report on events the same way prose can; but *Idyl* also articulates mill-life in a manner that is distinct from the more conventional autobiography Larcom would go on to write. In her prose

¹⁷ Renker looks to Larcom's "realist poems" as evidence that "realist poetic practices at this time were divergent and heterogeneous rather than monolithic in form, content, and style" ("Women Poets and American Literary Realism" 291).

autobiography, Larcom maps the literary field of the Lowell mill-girls: her prose recounts the explicit ways in which the girls recreated the institutions of literature within the community of the mills. The retrospective nature of prose autobiography, its aspiration to be “a picture of the outer and inner universe photographed upon one little life’s consciousness,” is perhaps better suited to this task: more fully committed to narrative telling, Larcom’s prose can trace the connections between her and fellow “workmate[s]” more coherently (*Girlhood* 5, 8). She turns to prose to describe and analyze the alliances, networks, and bonds among the mill-girls from a perspective that is entirely retrospective. Poetry, on the other hand, is the thing that facilitates or mediates these relationships. The emphasis placed on performance in *Idyl* treats poetic genres as active agent in social relations, not necessarily a byproduct of those relations. Instead, poetry forges new connections, instructs listeners, provides succor, or gives voice to a spontaneous overflow of feeling. By placing old poems in new contexts, Larcom suggests the power of poetry to reticulate relationships, a point or node from which multiple possibilities might emerge. Prospective rather than retrospective, projective rather than introspective, poems within *An Idyl of Work* are active ingredients of a social world, constantly shaping and being shaped by its participants and their environment.

The long narrative poem form, with its conscious mixing of genres, allows Larcom to bring so many different verse forms into contact and thereby rehearse the ways poetry could circulate and how it could facilitate communal bonds. Larcom’s interest is in the sheer variety of genres and the affordances of each, with each individual poem or verse form producing its own effect. The lulling ballad meter of “Peggy Bligh’s Voyage” helps take Ruth’s mind off her sorry state; the “rhythmic murmuring” of a poem about

apple blossoms solidifies the spiritual bond shared Eleanor and Esther. It may not be that *Idyl* gets closer to the truth of Larcom's "personal history," but the resources of poetry both initiate feelings of kinship and allow Larcom to represent the strengthening of affective bonds. More so than prose, poetry can perform this dual role: mediating relationships out there in the world while also communicating those relationships in a text. While her poem is largely interested in capturing and enacting the social relations of mill life, Larcom also makes space in *Idyl* to address the sheer variety of resources at the poet's disposal. The long narrative poem is a genre that incorporates various genres and often reflects upon its own heterogeneity; with *Idyl*, we have a paradigmatic example of this that moves one step further by offering a reflection upon the work of genre itself.

Channeling "Far Off Sources"

When Larcom turns to the long narrative form in 1875, she uses it to capture mill life as well as the forms of popular engagement with poetry in the 1830s and 1840s, a crucial time in the formation of a national literature in United States. For Larcom, of course, this is a revisioning, a reimagining. From a distance of roughly four decades or so, Larcom writes at the dawn of the so-called "Twilight of the Poets," a phrase coined by critic and anthologist Edmund Clarence Stedman, when poetry was said to be losing its cultural primacy to prose, the form that was thought to be the proper vehicle for realism.¹⁸ Larcom shows the earlier period to be a time of great poetic diversity and one in which the common reader—or, a specific subset of the common reader—easily

¹⁸ See Renker, "'The Twilight of the Poets' in the Era of American Realism, 1875-1900" 135-156.

traversed transatlantic sources, old and new.¹⁹ And despite the mill's seemingly enclosed world, Larcom registers the links between the factory space and the politics of the day. The poem encompasses a series of events and topics that include a visit from Dickens, analyses of the slave economy, and debates over the efficacy of labor stoppages. It captures the 1830s poetic field in a manner affirmed by contemporary scholarship: as an admixture of "temporal distortions," geographic overlap, and generic diversity (McGill, "Introduction" 5).

Idyl offers a unique account of mill life in the United States, but the poem's focus is squarely on the variety of verse genres that Larcom drew on throughout her career. How does the poem manage these colliding forms? As noted in the introduction, Caroline Levine suggests that narrative bears witness to "interactions of form over time," and Larcom's strategy for portraying life in the mills includes the interaction of social and institutional forms as well as those of poetry (6). Because the various lyrics are set within a narrative frame, they are intended to be read with each other, not as wholly discrete poetic units. That said, each poem represents a genre or form: a ballad, a song, an elegy, a psalm, a prayer. They are woven into the narrative through various means: requested by others, performed extemporaneously, or even "read" over the shoulder of characters. In these different ways, the poems are integrated into the plot: a poem like "The Loaf-Giver," near the beginning of *Idyl*, not only showcases one of the girls' poetic talents but

¹⁹ Transatlantic exchange was not specific to the 1830s and 1840s, of course, but marked the era in which Larcom wrote, as well. As Mary Loeffelholz notes, with *Idyl*, "Larcom's ambition was... to produce nothing less than a book-length, autobiographical, blank verse poem on the making of a poet, a composition that would take its place in a transatlantic poetic conversation" ("A Strange Medley-Book": Lucy Larcom's *An Idyl of Work*" 9).

also establishes character, outlines an argument, and ultimately contributes to the tension necessary for a story to unfold.

Larcom also provides metaphorical threads throughout the poem that help secure the interpolated poetry to the narrative frame. With these metaphors, particularly that of the river that powers the mills, Larcom engages the work of genre. By juxtaposing so many different genres, Larcom on one level simply documents the variety of verse forms a poet might use—or rather, she documents *formal variety* as such as the province of the poet. However, by presenting this formal variety in performance, Larcom considers these verse forms as objects in motion not inert categories. These verse forms circulated among writers and readers, established communal bonds, and became a rhetorical resource for understanding and engaging with one's social world. She seems to be thinking of how these verse forms take shape and how the poet might manage them, as the motifs that dominate the poem suggest. The commonplace link between poetry and weaving, for example, is the dominant metaphor in *Idyl*, one which foregrounds the poem's intertextuality and lays bare the compositional practice of the poet:²⁰ Larcom's work assembles themes and forms from a variety of sources in order to construct the "glorious raiment" of the poem (*Idyl* 28). With its overt mixture of genres, Larcom's poem shows what John Frow (drawing on Bakhtin) calls the "reality-forming dimensions of genre" (48). For Bakhtin, a genre is an evolving entity which resides in the present, and yet "always *remembers* its

²⁰ David Duff points out that "genre is often treated as one of [intertextuality's] constitutive units...[but t]he apparent ease with which these two concepts are assimilated with or defined in terms of one another belies, however, the theoretical tensions between them, and conceals too the historical fact that the development of the theory of intertextuality owes its success partly to its circumvention of the problems traditionally associated with the concept of genre" ("Intertextuality versus Genre Theory" 54).

past.”²¹ According to David Duff, a constitutive feature of genre is a dialectic of past and present “archaism and innovation,” between the generic expectations that the author relies on and the alterations and interventions that her new work makes (*Romanticism* 120). This temporal dimension is critical to the work of *Idyl*, as the poem finds various means—structurally, narratively, and formally—of making the past present.

However, the “swollen river” also suggests a geographic axis critical to the composition of the long narrative poem. Larcom’s portrayal of the geographic dimension of genre—also central to Longfellow’s poetics, as I discuss in the next chapter—ties poetry to national traditions but does not fix those traditions in place. If the looms’ textiles suggest the work of the poet, then the “swollen river” suggests the source that powers that work. Larcom uses the Merrimack to think through the generic elements the poet draws on as well as the work of genre itself. An ever-present backdrop to the poem, the Merrimack diverts the girls’ attention from their “carol, roundelay, and catch”:

Meanwhile the river rose, and downward bore
Strange booty, stolen from the upper farms,—
A fence, a hen-coop, torn roots of old trees,
And once a little cottage, half unroofed.
That stopped the music, and the singers three
Leaned out in wonder, while their thoughts went up
To the stream’s far-off sources. (*Idyl* 23)

The “Strange booty” seems a chaotic mess, the product of destructive natural forces. But Larcom’s protagonists are safely separated from the river (in fact, their idleness is in response to the river’s discord), and the Merrimack’s controlling flow allows the medley of detritus to become a source of “wonder” for the girls. Larcom layers her affiliative

²¹ Quoted in Duff, *Romanticism and the Uses of Genre*, 120.

metaphors, where a tree's roots, a river's headwaters, and a poem's sources are all in play in this passage. The genres Larcom draws on arrive from unseen sources and continue on after the mill-girls take what they need.

The scene indicates both the expansive geographical scope that constituted the girls' highly localized lives²² as well as the broad reach of poetic affiliation that Larcom emphasizes in her story. Larcom details life within the mills, from the little nameless girls who "change the bobbins" to the older girls pasting "window-sills with poem, story, or sketch" (*Idyl* 48, 129). But Larcom also skillfully brings together multiple genres, in a gathering move which gestures towards her career as poet, editor, and anthologist. Therefore, generically rich poetic affiliation that spans both time and geography is available to both poet and mill girl. Larcom indicates the mill girls' access and attachment to poetry not only through their numerous performances but also with the international cast of the girls' bookshelf:

From Eleanor's home. The bookshelf swung between
Two simple prints,—the "Cotter's Saturday Night"
And the "Last Supper," dear to Esther's heart,
Though scarce true to Da Vinci. On the shelves
Maria Edgeworth's "Helen" leaned against
Thomas à Kempis. Bunyan's "Holy War"
And "Pilgrim's Progress" stood up stiff between
"Locke on the Understanding" and the Songs
Of Robert Burns. The "Voices of the Night,"
"Bridal of Pennacook," "Paradise Lost,"
With Irving's "Sketch-Book," "Ivanhoe," Watts's Hymns,
Mingled in democratic neighborhood. (*Idyl* 43)

²² The mills were famously whole communities unto themselves, comprising work, education, and living quarters for many of its young female employees, as Larcom portrays in *A New England Girlhood*.

The bookshelf functions metonymically for Larcom's conceptualization of genre, as the locus (much like the mill) or a series of overlapping forms, both spatially and temporally disparate but held together and reconstituted in the poetic act.

The bookshelf gives a kind of material support to the various genres that Larcom deploys in her poem. However, despite its variety, it is nonetheless a static representation of the work of genre, and therefore her image of the river becomes the more powerful way to think about what informs both reading and writing. In *A New England Girlhood*, Larcom describes her first published work, "The River," as a "poemlet" about the inspiration of the river and its "Cheering...presence mild" meandering through "Cultured fields and woodlands wild" (*Girlhood* 179). In *Idyl*, the river has become a more complex image, one which accounts for the way forms might travel to or from the "democratic neighborhood" of the girls' bookshelf. The active river hovers between defining expectations and being a source of surprise: Its banks generally contain, but shift; "noiselessly along [it] goes," until it swells and idles the looms; the headwaters will deliver a constant stream, but will occasionally be the source of "strange booty," as well. By looking beyond the weaver or her loom, by looking out the mill's windows, Larcom considers not just the act of composition, but the active nature of the poet's sources. For Larcom and the mill-girls of her poem, genre and verse forms do not come to a standstill like the looms but are instead active categories to be used, revised, and shared.

CHAPTER TWO: LONGFELLOW'S FORMAL HETEROGENEITY IN PUBLIC

Writing to Anne Fields in 1875, the year Osgood and Co. (successor to Fields's husband's firm, Fields, Osgood, and Company) would publish *Idyl of Work*, Lucy Larcom notes a conversation with Henry Wadsworth Longfellow at a reading given by Ralph Waldo Emerson in Cambridge.

Mr. Longfellow was there, and I had a pleasant talk with him. He spoke of the book he is preparing and told me he wants to put into it "Hannah Binding Shoes."²³

The scene suggests the close links among the New England literary luminaries of this era, one in which the business of literature can be conducted alongside a reading of "Emerson's noble paper on 'Immortality'" (*Life, Letters, and Diary* 178). Larcom's intricately-metered lament—an early poem for which she would be wrongly accused of plagiarism—ponders mortality as it tells the story of a widow who spends twenty years at her window watching for her lost fisherman husband. Each stanza ends with a refrain—"Hannah's at the window, binding shoes"—whose hypnotic repetition belies a return that will never occur, and the repetitive labor takes on the force of character definition: the gerund phrase of the title itself reads almost as though it were Hannah's full name. The occasional poem, sorrowful but slight, would eventually be one of several of Larcom's poems to appear in *Poems of Places* edited by Longfellow. Despite its grand size, *Poems*

²³See Dulany Addison 179.

of Places could be surprisingly granular in scope: Longfellow links “Hannah Binding Shoes,” along with three other Larcom poems, to Beverly, Massachusetts, in his table of contents. In Longfellow’s anthologizing vision, tradition can scale up to whole countries (such as Iceland) or down to individual rivers (The Mondego in Portugal) and small island chains (Isles of Shoals). Longfellow’s editorial touch is exceedingly light, setting major and minor poets as well as intellectual centers and scenic backwaters side-by-side. Christoph Irmscher’s description of the anthology’s “emphasis on heterogeneity and multiplicity rather than homogenizing predictability” might work well as a characterization of Longfellow’s wider oeuvre (*Longfellow Redux* 211). The massive undertaking—thirty-one volumes in all—was the culmination of Longfellow’s career, a hefty materialization of a career dedicated to melding numerous regionally and temporally distant traditions and verse genres. Longfellow was not alone among his peers to rely on many different verse genres in his work, although literary history has often overlooked this aspect of nineteenth-century verse culture. As critics recover the heterogeneous verse culture of nineteenth-century America, less has been said about heterogeneity itself as a formal tool relied on by poets.²⁴

In this chapter, I use Longfellow’s *Tales of a Wayside Inn* to look further into the affordances of formal heterogeneity. In *Tales*, Longfellow makes a notional space (the “Wayside Inn”) out of a real place (the Sudbury Inn) in order to rehearse poetry as a form

²⁴ The anthology form would be creatively and financially productive for Longfellow, Larcom, and others in the post-Civil War era, having a prominent influence on individual poems written by these poets, not just as a collection, as Loeffelholz has argued in “Anthology Form and the Field of Nineteenth Century Poetry.” However, rather than being a new form to emerge later in the nineteenth century it instead marks a later, complex version of the formal heterogeneity that had been constitutive of the long narrative poem throughout the century.

of public address in a number of ways. As in *An Idyl of Work*, Longfellow's characters perform a variety of verse forms, situating *Tales* in the generically-rich moment in which it was produced. However, Longfellow extends the role of the poet to include a political dimension, as his poems occupy public squares and the corridors of power, intervening in the affairs of the community. With Larcom, poems bind together the mill girls for whom the mill was the wider world; in Longfellow, the poet more fully engages in the public sphere, using the diverse resources of poetry to shape the institutions of public life.

The scale at which the poet may intervene in public discourse varies from small to large, local to national (or transnational), modest to ambitious. The long narrative poems in nineteenth-century America similarly spanned scales small and large: they recast familiar and popular legends, translated folk tales, portrayed life inside of a cotton mill, or rendered the collegiality and leisure of publishing professionals. But long narrative poems also mapped national destiny, retold episodes from colonial history, mobilized poetic language to offer anthropological accounts of indigenous peoples, revised and resituated the epic, and sought to bind together a country at war with itself. Longfellow exemplifies these diverse ambitions with his complex poetics, which drew from diverse traditions, informed by Goethe's theory of *Weltliteratur* and yet still winning a wide audience. Longfellow's long narrative poems, and *Tales of a Wayside Inn* in particular, can help us understand these ambitions because they offer a more extensive engagement with the other domains in which he worked: translation, lecture, criticism, pedagogy, and even as a collector of international literature. Poe mockingly called him "Professor Longfellow," and yet that persona is on full display in *Tales*, perhaps his most ambitious poem. Poetry is embedded everywhere in this poem: in the poems each character

performs, in public disputes, in religious ceremonies, on wall décor, in print, in everyday speech, and in nature. The long narrative poem allows Longfellow to make forms consistently overlap and collide in *Tales*, from the small scale to large, while also allowing him to show how the poet can help us manage so many colliding forms. Longfellow marshals the full extent of his learning in order to imagine the figure of the poet might be an “instrument for improving the condition of society, and advancing the great purpose of human happiness” (“Defense” 63). His heterogenous poetry explores the many ways in which poetry, rather than merely growing out of its age, might be a shaping force within an age.

Professor Longfellow

The trajectory of Longfellow’s reputation is often taken as exemplary of the impact of lyricization. Once the most widely-read and beloved poet in America, Longfellow’s work all but disappeared from the critical conversation during the course of the twentieth century except as a foil to the iconoclastic poetics of Whitman, Dickinson, or Melville.²⁵ His simple rhymes, broadly nationalistic subject matter, and sheer ubiquity make him an easy target for charges of un-seriousness or as “a poet of all sympathetic gentleness” and “general human heart and taste.”²⁶ He was a poet with whom children could correspond and whose home could unwittingly become a living museum.²⁷ What

²⁵ For example, F.O. Matthiessen in *The American Renaissance* distances Whitman’s “turning to oratory,” which, like work songs and sea-chanties, was “always closer to the masses” and therefore “more authentic than something Longfellow read in a book and tried to copy” (567).

²⁶ Walt Whitman in *Specimen Days*, cited by Jackson, “Longfellow in His Time” 238.

²⁷ These scenes are described in Sorby Iand Imscher, *Longfellow Redux* 7, respectively.

modern criticism has largely lost sight of by reducing Longfellow to little more than the poet with an “almost sickness of verbal melody,” however, is the variety (and specificity) of genres in which Longfellow worked and the variety of approaches he took to working within those genres (Whitman 226): replicating, revising, importing, updating, or mimicking. Nevertheless, Poe recognized Longfellow’s mastery of genre and famously launched charges of plagiarism in response, calling the poems of “Professor Longfellow” the “most barbarous class of literary robbery” (“Voices” 678).²⁸ Later critics would see Longfellow’s pursuit of formal variety as little more than “sharing in a literary convention” (Matthiessen 34). Matthiessen suggests his language was merely “gracefully decorous,” preferring to “break through the conventional style of writing” as Emerson and his acolytes did (34). This judgment inevitably derives in part by the wide embrace of his poetry and the poet’s general ubiquity. It cannot be denied Longfellow’s poetry often found purchase in many of the institutional state apparatuses—honored with schools named after him, places associated with his poems turned into tourist sites, his poetry committed to heart by generations of American schoolchildren—that helped to formulate and reproduce American identity, primarily in the decades following the Civil War.²⁹ However, approaching genre, as Matthiessen does, as mere convention easily absorbed

²⁸ For a discussion of the construction of authorial identity Poe works towards in the “Little Longfellow War,” see McGill, *Culture of Reprinting* 207-214).

²⁹ Sorby discusses the quick absorption of Longfellow—or, rather, “Henry Wadsworth Longfellow,” referring to the figure associated with his widely circulated poems as a “man without qualities”—into the American school system because his poems offered the “promise of access to middle-class conventions” (29). Matthew Garner traces the steps by which “Paul Revere’s Ride” went from being published in an 1861 issue of *The Atlantic* to being a “standard” in many pedagogical manuals, suggesting that the “success of the poem must be seen not as the inevitable outgrowth of the American people’s spontaneous affection for it, but rather an achievement of the New England establishment, in whose varied interest the poem and its hero could be usefully deployed (134).

into middle-brow culture mischaracterizes the work of genre and dilutes the power of the poet's craft while also denying the intentions of Longfellow's project.

For "Professor Longfellow," his poetic oeuvre relied upon extensive knowledge of diverse poetic forms while also drawing upon ideas explored in his essays, lectures, philological expertise, and his work as an editor. Failing to account for his prose works (as well as his other professional pursuits) alongside his poetry repeats a distinction of poetry from prose that is a projection of twentieth-century criticism, a distinction that, as Michael C. Cohen suggests, "would have been baffling in the nineteenth century" (*Social Lives* 12). Longfellow put his poetic ambitions on hold after his father helped secure a professorship at Bowdoin College for him.³⁰ Following graduation, he embarked on a tour of Europe to gain aptitude in various languages in order to take up the College's first Professorship in Modern Languages.³¹ In this role—in which he gave public lectures, translated and wrote textbooks, and even served as college librarian—Longfellow developed the beginnings of Comparative Literature in America. In the years that followed, he wrote scholarly essays on language, national character, and poetry, and he would gain familiarity in Swedish, Danish, and Icelandic while preparing for a position at Harvard. Goethe would become the subject of an extended series of Longfellow's lectures in 1837 and 1838, which included extemporaneous translations alongside observations of Goethe as a "citizen of the world who nonetheless encapsulates every aspect of his nation's culture" (Calhoun 132). Goethe would be a kind of prototype for

³⁰ Irmischer, *Longfellow Redux*, 9.

³¹ "Modern languages" represented a new discipline at this stage (1820s), and Longfellow's vision for educational reform derived from the German and French university models he encountered on his tour. The following biographical information is drawn from Calhoun 67-83.

Longfellow, and Longfellow would go on attempt to work out this concept of global citizenship not only in his lectures but through his poetry, as well.

Despite early successes in student publications, Longfellow delayed writing poetry during the years that he devoted to teaching, translating, editing, and essay writing. After years of teaching, he began publishing poetry (beginning in 1839 with *Voices in the Night*), and his poetry would become another forum for his ideas, a place in which to put into action the theories of literature and language that he had been working through in his lectures and essays up to that point.³² When he does settle down to begin as a poet in earnest, Longfellow's transnational and scholarly apprenticeship years undoubtedly reappear in his poetry. These poems were an immediate hit, and yet the sources of his formal choices could hardly be construed exclusively as "popular," as the response to *Evangeline* (1847) suggests. While the poem was an enormous success, *The North American Review's* early review acknowledges *Evangeline's* entry into a tradition of poems that attempted to transfer the Greek meter into English, showing that the poem did not lack for inventiveness nor for an engagement with academic prosody.³³ Similarly, he turned to an obscure Finnish epic with its own complex compositional history for his immediately successful and much parodied trochaic tetrameter in *The Song of Hiawatha*

³² In fact, even delaying his serious foray into poetry until age thirty-two aligns with his accusation, leveled in an 1832 review of Sidney's *Defense of Poetry*, that the "precocity of our writers" had led to the "effeminate and unmanly character of our literature" ("Defense of Poetry" 77). Writing at the age of twenty-five, seven years before his first published collection, Longfellow suggested that "[p]remature exhibitions of talent are an unstable foundation to build a national literature upon" ("Defense" 77).

³³ Phillips notes that Hawthorne, in his review of *Evangeline*, wrote that Longfellow's use dactylic hexameter "may be considered an experiment." Phillips suggests that for Longfellow's contemporaries, "the use of such a meter in English was seen as either woefully imitative or bewilderingly avant-garde" (223).

(1855). Finally, as Virginia Jackson stresses in her account of “Longfellow in his time,” he followed the best-selling *Tales of a Wayside Inn* with his 1867 collaborative translation of *The Divine Comedy* (“Longfellow in His Time” 256). Longfellow’s accessibility and the popular modes of circulation of his work tend to obscure the cosmopolitan nature of his poetic project and the conscious mixing of and experimentation with genre and form.³⁴ The innovation in Longfellow’s work followed the terms of his theory of poetry, which neither sought to break with Old World forms nor approached form and genre as inevitably restrictive to the poet’s sensibility or creative powers. Whereas contemporaries and later readers have derided Longfellow’s transporting and transforming long form poems as imitative, Phillips locates “creative tensions” brought forth when Longfellow assembles a large audience “through internationally recognized generic signposts” (229). Drawing upon European traditions put Longfellow at odds with the main currents of the American literary scene in the early decades of his career. Authors, editors, and critics, some associated with the Young Americans movement, sought to establish an authentic national literature that grew out of and reflected the character of the young country, one that repudiated what Melville called the American penchant for “flunkeyism” towards the verse traditions of Europe (146).³⁵

³⁴ “Conscious mixing” can be a tricky thing to trace, but it is clear that Longfellow and others are drawing from specific traditions and authors in composing their long narrative poems. In his study of Epic in the American tradition, Phillips “foreground[s] authorial intention” when analyzing the “anchored innovation” of poets like Barlow, Sigourney, and Longfellow. “[W]ith the usual caveats of indeterminacy and the reader’s role in making meaning,” Phillips suggests that “countenancing authorial intent is one way of keeping a historicized perspective on the [epic] canon” (14).

³⁵ For more on the aesthetic ideals as well as the copyright advocacy of the Young Americans, see McGill’s *Culture of Reprinting*, 199-204.

The Tales of a Wayside Inn, a series of poems told by an internationally mixed group of travelers bound within a narrative frame, represents a highwater mark for Longfellow's experiments in bringing diverse forms and genres in contact. The Sudbury Inn, where the poem is set,³⁶ is unusually saturated with poetry. Within the fanciful space, only one character is identified as a poet, though each inn-dweller takes up the mantle of poet during his stay. At the center of many of the interpolated poems, a figure emblemizes the work of the poet. Even the inn itself is limned in the language of poetry, the firelight "play[ing] inaudible melodies" on the details of the room and illuminating the "jovial rhymes" emblazoned on the Landlord's coat-of-arms (*Tales* 4). With poetry embedded throughout this notional inn, Longfellow imagines poetry suffused in different ways throughout the spaces in which we live. The participants are "of different lands and speech," literate in and representative of different national traditions; and yet, it is the "delicious melodies" of poetry that links each to each, poetry becoming, if not a *lingua franca*, then at least a point, a node, at which these diverse figures can meet (*Tales* 5). The figure of the Landlord, who proudly touts his inn's Revolutionary (and earlier) bona fides, brings forth the elements of the past still deeply imbricated with the present. The Spanish Jew from Alicant, whose tale of the Angel of Death is derived from the Talmudic tradition, embodies the globalized trade networks that not only moved goods around but stories, as well. The Musician's Tale, the longest

³⁶ Correspondence with his publisher, James T. Fields, shows Longfellow's concern over the title he had originally planned for the collection—*The Sudbury Tales*, the title under which the book was originally advertised—and its echo of *The Canterbury Tales*. (Discussed in Austin 147.) While dampening the potential for accusations of imitation, the revised titles also has the effect of not reducing the structure of *Tales* to a single source text. The narrative frame does identify the specific town (Sudbury) and tavern (Howe's Tavern), but the revised title allows the text to more easily enter into a universalized generic tradition.

and by far most complex offering, deploys a rich variety of meters and verse forms to relate a mix of stories from the Sagas. The Theologian, despairing of the “reign of violence” captured in the Musician’s Tale, nonetheless offers a story of the Inquisition and Torquemada. Through meant to cheer the crowd, the Poet’s tale is also steeped in the violence of a bird-culling that allegorizes the role of the poet in the public sphere.

For his characters, Longfellow not only draws upon colleagues or collaborators, but he also takes aspects of his own poetic career and rewrites them in the form of the tales and interludes. For example, the Student was based Henry Ware Wales, a Harvard graduate who would later endow a Sanskrit Professorship at the college. Though based on Wales, the Student’s “fastidious taste,” “passion and delight” for romances, and facility with language is reminiscent of Longfellow, and even the student’s decision to rework a tale directly from *The Decameron* creates a hall-of-mirrors effect that evokes Longfellow’s multifaceted career and his wealth of learning (*Tales* 7). Using repetition, incorporating scholarship, and emphasizing the bounded but connected roles of public life, Longfellow creates a richly layered text that claims the public role of the poet through a complex poetic artifact.³⁷ If *Tales* is unabashedly cosmopolitan in nature, the poem nonetheless projects an image of the poet situated in a particular place and time,

³⁷ Much of the original *Tales of a Wayside Inn* has been overshadowed by the way in which it became a piecemeal American icon. For one thing, the setting has a tighter hold on the public imagination than the poems set there: the Sudbury Inn—the “wayside inn” of the poem and later to be renamed following the *Tales*’ success—likely invites more visitors these days than the long poem does readers. And if readers encounter the longer poem at all today, it is in the shard of “Paul Revere’s Ride,” which in the *Tales* is titled “The Landlord’s Tale.” The decomposition of the poem over time, however, does not stand in distinction to the poem’s composition over a series of years and in a series of venues; indeed, the poem, composed as it is of heterogenous parts, may invite a reading that resists smoothness or wholeness in favor of one that appreciates what Duff calls the “rough-mixing” of many long nineteenth-century poems.

which the long narrative form allows Longfellow to rehearse in many different contexts. In “The Sicilian’s Tale” and “The Poet’s Tale,” Longfellow creates characters that rework the arguments that he put forward in his earlier essays, creating with poetry an “immediate presence” that can make “visible in its actions” the theories that he offers in his earlier essays (“Defense” 68). Reproducing the poet-figure from one context to the next to show the extent of poetry’s claim upon the world, Longfellow shows the poet is more than an arbiter of taste or manipulator of form. Primarily through his mastery of language and form, the poet mediates the social relations that constitute a community.

The Sicilian’s Tale: Translation and Transformation

The Sicilian’s tale, “King Robert of Sicily,” is a story of transformation, though one that obscures its most transformative moment behind a fantastical and divine façade. Although he only makes a brief appearance, the humble clerk at the beginning of the poem becomes the node for the overlapping forms (literary, cultural, historical, and social) that Longfellow conjoins in his tale. The story offers a moral of Christian humility and conversion, and the narrative is propelled by Longfellow’s focus on language and translation. Longfellow reworks his experience as a mediator between language, culture, and form in order to imagine how this knowledge might be used to influence the hapless king. The clerk himself is not expressly aware that his skills as translator could produce such a powerful outcome, but his poetic intervention into public life manages to impose order by melding together two seemingly incommensurate traditions—sovereign power and religious power. The story is ultimately about the resources of language and the power of translation to create unexpected bonds and promote meaningful transformation.

The Italian language was a lifelong infatuation of Longfellow's—from his early travels³⁸ to the end of his career, when he completed the first American translation of Dante's *Commedia* (1867). While a professor at Harvard, Longfellow published "History of Italian Language and Dialects" (1832) in the *North American Review*. Nominally a review of a history of the language by an Italian scholar, Longfellow uses the review to sketch a history of its literature and put forward a theory of what binds language to national identity. As Christoph Irmscher points out, Longfellow's portrait of linguistic history stresses "regions rather than the nation, diversity over unity" (*Longfellow Redux* 161). In the review, Longfellow does not portray linguistic history as teleological; instead, he states that "the Italian language is brought to its highest point of literary culture before the close of the 14th century," a time when authors were utilizing the "vulgar tongue," precipitating a later "contest" between Latin and Italian for supremacy on the peninsula ("History" 301). The literature of the 14th century mobilized and mastered the vulgar tongue, according to Longfellow, and the central part of his essay is devoted to enumerating "marked and well-defined characteristics" of the seventeen major dialects of Italian ("History" 303).

"History of Italian" shares concerns that will reappear in the Sicilian's tale, with significant modifications; however, the essay contains a roadmap for what Longfellow will put into action in his later poem. When the essay turns to Sicilian (as dialect and literature), Longfellow calls it the "mother-tongue of the Italian muse," noting that it is the "first of the Italian dialects which was converted to literary use" ("History" 303). As

³⁸ During which he was mistaken for being Italian, according to Irmscher, "Cosmopolite at Home" 68.

Longfellow delves into the literature and literature of Sicily, he consistently toggles between genre and type, class and example. Although classified as the mother-tongue, Sicilian is not given primacy of place in Longfellow's linguistic taxonomy; instead, Longfellow notes that what marks Sicilian as a dialect is how it "exhibits vestiges, more or less distinct, of all the ancient and successive lords of the island" (303). He singles out the predominance of Arabic on the northern side of the island, Greek and Provençal on the southern, before exhibiting three "peculiarities" of the Sicilian dialect through "specimens" of its homegrown verse form: *canzonette* ("History" 304). A refinement of the *canzone* preferred by the 14th century Sicilian school of poets, the *canzonetta* (or *canzonette*), a form that would be later used set to song elsewhere in Europe by German and English composers. Turning to poetry for his specimens, Longfellow follows on the claims he makes in his review of "The Defense of Poetry," that poetry is more than mere aesthetic expression. It is evidence for studying the history of a language and a people; but, it tells history in its own way, with an immediacy and action that the "intellectual phenomena" of history lacks ("Defense" 68).

Modeled after his Harvard colleague Luigi Monti, the Sicilian is a revolutionary with deep knowledge of the "Immortal Four" poets of Italy (Petrarch, Dante, Ariosto, Tasso) as well as Boccaccio and Meli. In the Sicilian's introduction, Longfellow acknowledges his debt to *The Decameron*, calling its author the "story-telling bard of prose" whose "joyous Tuscan tales" make the Florentine landscape "Remembered for Boccaccio's sake" (*Tales* 9-10). The Sicilian's contribution is a conventional morality tale in which King Robert of Sicily finds himself usurped by an angelic lookalike after Robert "scornfully" calls the words of the *Magnificat* "seditious" (*Tales* 56). Reduced to

playing jester to this counterfeit but benevolent king, King Robert eventually sheds his acrimony, devotes himself to penitence, and is restored to his throne as a pious ruler. Told in heroic couplets, the tale traffics in Catholic “pomp and blare” that Longfellow held in high regard, seeing in the performance of traditions—though less so in the actual administrators of faith—the “coincidence of past and present,” according to Irmischer (*Longfellow Redux* 179). King Robert’s usurper flawlessly fulfills the role, while King Robert becomes the inversion of his former role as a jester. As he tries to regain his rightful place, the crowds shout at him “the mock plaudits of ‘Long live the King!’” (*Tales* 60). King Robert is “speechless” when he first sees the Angel on his throne, his relation to language entirely from his vantage point as the jester. Whether he declares himself king or is declared to be king, neither statement has the force it once had; the words are more or less meaningless (or what meaning they have is inverted) now due to the new order of things.

One’s position *vis a vis* language—who has access to the meaning of it and who does not—is where the trouble in the poem begins. King Robert does not know what he is overhearing when a group of chanting priests pass by him at vespers. To him, the *Magnificat* sounds like a “burden or refrain,” although one passage catches his attention.

What he has “caught” he seems to know bears on him:

He caught the words, “*Deposuit potentes
De Sede, et exaltavit humiles;*”
And slowly lifting up his kingly head
He to a learned clerk beside him said,
“What mean these words?” The clerk made answer meet,
“He has put down the might from their seat,
And has exalted them of low degree.”
Thereat King Robert muttered scornfully,
“’Tis well that such seditious words are sung

Only by priests and in the Latin tongue;
For unto priests and people be it known,
There is no power can push me from my throne!” (*Tales* 59-60)

The short passage performs a complex series of translations and substitutions, putting into question a number of power dynamics. First, it is unclear whether King Robert opposes the ritual or the specialized language, whether the root of the issue is the monks’ adherence to a higher sovereign or their special access to meaning. As King Robert’s later struggles to declare himself king suggest, Longfellow draws an intimate link between the ritual and language which the king fails to understand early on. The *Magnificat* scene subtly introduces a mediator to bridge a divide between priestly and kingly offices. Here, the learned clerk assumes critical importance, despite being a humble servant: Without his intervention, no story could unfold. Translation makes possible transformation. The clerk translates the rarified language of the priests into the language understandable by the king.

Within the story, the sacred text is translated into Sicilian, although Longfellow presents it in English, precipitating yet another transformation: the learned clerk’s translation derives from the King James’ Bible, meaning that Longfellow has imported the Protestant tradition into the heart of Catholic Italy. While the clerk seems emblematic of an educated class that would rise to prominence in an increasingly secularized West, he is not a mere functionary or scrivener factotum. Instead, the clerk proves to be the one with some mastery over language. Because of this mastery, the competing powers—secular and religious—ultimately will flow through and be connected by the clerk. Like the translator or importer of literature, the clerk does not author something new or original; instead, his innovation is to bring different forms into contact and establish new

arrangements. Longfellow suggests that this mediating role—whether it is played by clerk, translator, or poet—can be an agent of change for social structures, and here, the clerk reorients the sovereign’s relationship to his people and to his faith. The clerk’s intervention leads to a transformation: The King is restored, yet newly humbled. King Robert remains “appareled as in days of old” but is now surrounded by courtiers devoted to prayer (*Tales* 68).

In “King Robert of Sicily,” Longfellow relies on conventional meter and rhyme and the plot follows a predictable, moralizing pattern. At a formal level, Longfellow hardly seems to aspire to great complexity, yet the poem does repeat the heterogeneity of the *Tales* as a whole by making, as I note above, the incorporation and performance of another text—here, the *Magnificat*—central to the work the poem does. Without the poet-like figure of the clerk, such contact between the sovereign and the church, between Latin and vulgar, would not have been directed into action, the affairs of the State would not have been transformed. For Longfellow, poetry becomes a matter of public concern, a point he has made in his prose work but which he attempts to actively portray in his poetry. “King Robert of Sicily,” a poem-within-a-poem, performs a translation of its own by reworking an essay Longfellow had published three decades prior. The transformation from prose essay to poetic story-telling follows the trajectory of Longfellow’s career, just as Longfellow weaves together multiple traditions within the short narrative poem to tell the story of public transformation.

The Poet’s Tale: Pedagogue as Poet

The Sicilian's tale traverses multiple public arenas and multiple languages to realign the relationship between sovereign and religious power. Although not a highly public figure himself, the clerk helps conjoin the competing power structures through a brief lesson for King Robert. His translation and mediation have a pedagogical function, instructing King Robert on the nature of Church tradition which is maintained and communicated through the performance of biblical verse. In closing *Tales of a Wayside Inn* with "The Birds of Killingworth," Longfellow further links poetry and pedagogy in the Poet's tale, which centers around the figure of the Preceptor who teaches not only the town's children but offers a lesson in poetry, compassion, and the body politic for the men of the town. It is yet another extension of poetry into political discourse, though this time the performance by the poet-figure is more obviously public. While the Poet's tale does not address the nation, the small-scale agrarian community would seem to parallel America, at least an imaginary version of it in colonial times. The players, the dispute, and the scope of the tale differ widely from the Sicilian's tale, and yet the two poems are held together by Longfellow's public vision of the poet as a translator and mediator within a communal setting.³⁹

In stanzas of *ottava rima*, the Poet tell the story of a bird culling in the town of Killingworth "in fabulous days, some hundred years ago" (*Tales* 190). The specific poetic form that Longfellow turns to is an anachronism that performs yet another series of translations. The poem relocates a storied Italian stanza in a provincial American setting,

³⁹ At one point, "The Birds of Killingworth" detours to the private sphere via a discussion of printed matter. This is discussed in the next chapter. However, like "King Robert of Sicily," the performance of poetry in "Birds" is primarily in a public space and the resources of poetry are marshaled to intervene into a public dispute.

while the use of *ottava rima* in the timeframe of the poem “predates” the stanza’s popularization in English by Lord Byron by half a century or so. It is a subtle, translational, and transatlantic gesture that both situates and abstracts, although this “ambivalence” does not detract from the poem’s point that poetry is a shaping social force.⁴⁰ The use of *ottava rima* abstracts, because it connects the Preceptor to the polyglot figure of the poet who links the diverse tales together; it situates, because the form is so clearly used to address a specific public within the poem.

Tired of poor crop yields, the farmers in town “doom with dreadful words / To swift destruction the whole race of birds” that has eaten their seeds (*Tales* 191). All of the songbirds die in the ensuing “massacre,” which only brings more misery as “[h]osts of devouring insects crawled, and found / No foe to check their march” and lay greater waste than the crows ever did (*Tales* 201). To remedy this, the town repeals the law,

although they knew
It would not call the dead to life again;
As school-boys, finding their mistake too late,
Draw a wet sponge across the accusing slate. (*Tales* 202)

The following spring, a wagon “[a]ll full of singing birds” arrives to restock the depleted forest (*Tales* 203). The poem closes with the woods again filled with a variety of birdsong, and the Preceptor—the one voice of dissent against the bird-culling law—marries his “fair Almira” once order is restored to Killingworth.

Longfellow frames the action of “The Birds of Killingworth” with a lyrical depiction of spring awakening. The poem rehearses the vernal assemblage of birds three times, first as a ceremonial procession, then as prayerful congregants, and finally “Like

⁴⁰ “Ambivalence” is Stephen Burt’s term. See “Longfellow’s Ambivalence.”

foreign sailors, landed in the street / Of seaport town” (*Tales* 190). In each case, “jocund Spring” is a clamoring of voices, with diverse participants adding of the “oaths and gibberish” which the townspeople read as “mingled with universal mirth... [and] prognosticating woe” (*Tales* 191). When the action of the poem picks up, local leaders soon subject the clamoring birds to town law. Longfellow uses the narrative frame within “The Birds of Killingworth” to query the risks and consequences of sounding one’s voice in the public square. The risk derives from addressing a public that is ill-equipped to understand the message: The farmers and the authorities of Killingworth can only hear the nuisance crows amid the variety of birdsong. With the figure of the Preceptor, Longfellow not only deploys the rhetorical resources of poetry but also shows the importance of being attentive to the diversity of effects of poetic language.

Following the formula present throughout Longfellow’s long narrative poem, “The Birds of Killingworth” performs the *Tales* in miniature. The embedded poem uses the same structure of *Tales*, gathering various character types in one setting in order to offer a public performance within a narrative frame. Each time Longfellow repeats this gesture, his public poet (emblemized as a clerk, preceptor, messenger, and such) addresses a different concern, a different crowd, through different poetic tools. The long narrative poem’s form allows Longfellow to toggle between repetition and difference, pattern and novelty, tradition and originality. Longfellow’s formal choices are diverse enough that he seems to be exploring the ways the poet can shape contexts, rather than be a byproduct of those contexts. As Caroline Levine suggests, “poetry can impose an order of its own” and does not necessarily have to “mirror rhythms in the world” (79). The Preceptor in “The Birds of Killingworth” wishes to impose order upon the social and

legal makeup of a community, but his order is implicitly about respecting the range of voices that might participate in public life. According to Longfellow, the ethic of the poet relies on his sensitivity to sound, and the Preceptor is able to distinguish, name, classify, evaluate, and communicate the variety of birds he hears. To the thrush, he assigns the carol; to the jay, jargon; to the blue-bird, melody; and to the linnet and meadow-lark, song. This is not merely wordplay by the Preceptor but an acknowledgment that these birds each voice a “dialect” of their own (*Tales* 196). The Preceptor’s sensitivity to sound allows him to individuate among the heterogenous birdsong. He shows that the value of the birds is not that they work in chorus as a smooth whole; rather, their composite song constitutes the beauty of spring, and it is their medley that the Preceptor uses to link the birds to the role of the poet.

At the heart of the poem is a debate among the Preceptor, the Deacon, the Parson, and the Squire. Gathering in the town-hall with the local farmers, these four men debate and determine the town’s response. The Squire, Deacon, and Parson are in favor culling, and only the Preceptor, coming down from “[t]he hill of Science,” stands to defend the birds (*Tales* 192). Calling to mind the ancient quarrel between poetry and philosophy, the Preceptor cites Plato’s banishing of the poet to draw a parallel to the desire to massacre the birds. In the speech, the Preceptor marshals the resources of poetry to argue against the disruption the culling will eventually cause. The Preceptor makes the point that the culling contradicts the lessons he tries to teach the farmers’ children, that in and of itself the killing would be immoral. But he also frames the issue as one with social consequences, consequences that will inevitably disturb the networked bonds of the community as a whole. First, he likens the “birds who make sweet music” to balladeers

and Troubadours, figures who not only set rhyme to melody but also were thought to report news and facilitate courtly love. He later makes the point that the “feathered gleaners” the birds perform an essential function in the harvest by keeping the insects at bay (*Tales* 195, 197). As symbols for the work of poets, the birds as “gleaners” also references their ability to subtly perceive, gather, and communicate bits of information otherwise passed over by the rest. The order of things depends upon these tuneful intermediaries, and therefore the issue is not simply a moral one but a social one. While we may identify an ecologically sound basis to the Preceptor’s argument,⁴¹ we might also note that the Preceptor is sensitive to the connective tissue of community which is held together by the various voices that will contribute to public debate.⁴² Poetry not only helps to facilitate and mediate relationships, as we saw in Larcom; the Preceptor’s facility with poetry allows him to read and communicate this to his fellow townspeople, shaping the community accordingly.

Much like the Sicilian’s poem, “The Birds of Killingworth” does not aspire to formal complexity or originality. The Poet’s tale consists of simple language, short lines, regular meter, and uncomplicated rhymes – the kind of conventional poetry that Longfellow has long been accused of perpetrating. However, our understanding of the poem is enriched when our reading of it is situated. First, the poem rehearses the nested poem-within-a-poem form of the *Tales*, making a self-conscious gesture towards the

⁴¹ Calhoun 233, cited in Loeffelholz, “Anthology Form” 229.

⁴² Longfellow does not stop there, as I will explore in the next chapter. Later circulated in print, the speech goes on to reach “another audience out of reach, / Who had no voice nor vote in making laws” (*Tales* 200). This audience—the women of Killingworth—“in the papers read his little speech,” and the Preceptor wins their approval, although neither his speech nor their support stops the culling (*Tales* 200).

formal heterogeneity of the longer poem as a whole. Second, Longfellow extends the connection to *Tales*' heterogeneity by assigning so many verse forms to the "feathered gleaners" of Killingworth, as though he were taking account of the *Tales*' poetics as a whole. As with Larcom, Longfellow's long narrative poem reworks ideas the author puts forward elsewhere in prose, using the narrative form as the vehicle to authorize the political dimensions of the work of poetry. The poem's conventionality does not prohibit it from being generative: Longfellow's theories about poetry, language, and power are enacted in these poems. Rather than a set of rules that constrain the poet, the conventional verse forms contained within the long narrative frame instead establish new sets of relations or transformations within specific contexts.

CHAPTER THREE – READING (IN) THE LONG NARRATIVE POEM

In *Tales of a Wayside Inn*, Longfellow offers a public vision for poetry as an “instrument for improving the condition of society, and advancing the great purpose of human happiness” (“Defense” 63). As I have argued in the previous two chapters, the verse culture of nineteenth-century America understood poetry as a social force, which Longfellow and Larcom narrate in their long poems: poetry binds people together, prompts transformation through translation, or creates and articulates connections across the interlocking components of a community. Such a vision, it would seem, departs from the action that poetry is primarily subjected to today: reading.⁴³ Reading, of course, is a fluid and multivalent term, one that can be difficult to pin down. Reading poetry may involve reading silently to oneself or aloud for an audience, but more often the reading of poetry involves some kind of analysis (to offer a “reading”). As practitioners of historical poetics argue, our protocols of reading have abandoned all other uses of poetry in favor of critical reading that derives from a conception of poetry that is synonymous with a theory of the lyric. The qualities that align with the genre of lyric are not present—or are secondary—in long narrative poems. In its reliance on narrative, its resistance to wholeness, its adherence to (and modification of) tradition, its vision of sociality, and (as I explore in this chapter) its emphasis on specific audiences, the long narrative poem does not fit well into the rubric of a modernist aesthetic. Thus, the long narrative poem, like

⁴³ By “reading” I mean dominant and institutionalized forms of literary analysis. For a discussion of New Criticism’s “increased investment in the university” as the site for professionalized reading practices, see Guillory 131-175. For discussions of the rise of lyric reading as the preeminent form of literary readings, see Jackson, *Dickinson’s Misery*, 92-110, and Cohen, *Social Lives* 1-15; Leah Price investigates the alternative (particularly material) routes to literary reading in *How to Do Things with Books in Victorian Britain*, 19-44.

much of nineteenth-century poetry according to Michael C. Cohen, is—within the purview of literary criticism, at least—both “unread” and “unreadable” (*Social Lives* 12).

So, there is a certain irony when we see that not only were long narrative poems widely read, but the poems themselves are heavily invested in the act of reading. The final generic feature of the long narrative poem I wish to discuss is the prominence of scenes of reading within the poems themselves, yet another reflexive gesture that emerges from the genre’s formal heterogeneity. How to manage so many genres at once? How to navigate the proliferation of print? In what ways will the destiny of the country be legible? These are questions raised by the long narrative poem and the many ways of reading figured in these poems. The frequent collision of forms indicates that the long narrative poem thrived in an era when poetry was not yet treated as an abstract and transcendent concept stabilized and made legible by academic styles of reading. In addition to being a genre “about” genre as well as “about” the work and role of the poet, the long narrative poem consistently depicts the act of reading, making reading constitutive of the story the author wishes to tell. For these authors, there is no poet without a reader, and very often it is a defined audience to whom the poem is addressed or directed.

In this chapter, I return to Larcom and Longfellow, and I look closely at how audiences are figured within these texts and what those audiences suggest about the methods of reading that held currency at the time these poems were published. The large casts of these poems participate in diverse scenes of reading, and through those audiences, both poets imagine reading as an embodied and historically situated activity. The reader within these poems (just like the prospective reader of these poems) is not

detached from context or history, and therefore engages poetry in a number of ways: encountering it in social venues, being subject to rules about reading, collecting fine editions, performing her own poetry, sharing a personal library with others, or overhearing poems on the other side of the door. Although a sense of private reading is not altogether absent from these poems, it is clear that the literary culture Larcom and Longfellow describe is one in which the isolated study of poetry is not the ideal encounter with a text. Instead, it is one of a plurality of valued reading practices.

While Larcom and Longfellow use similar strategies to incorporate scenes of reading into their poems, nevertheless they do address reading differently following the distinctions (local/private versus national/public) between their poems that I highlight in the first two chapters. These are not stable distinctions, of course, as Longfellow explores the intimacy of reading and the bonds it facilitates in private or local spaces across many of his poems. Larcom, on the other hand, clearly connects not only the mill but the literature the mill girls read to national and transnational networks. *An Idyl of Work* documents the embodied performance and reception of poems within the narrative frame of the longer poem. Larcom offers a plurality of reading practices very nearly without comment, paying close attention to the readers engagement with poetry in terms of the “usage” and “wear” of the materials of poetic circulation: pencils, paper, magazines, and books. The trajectory the girls follow prepares them for a life of piety and middle-class respectability, with education providing the map to get there. And while reading clearly serves those purposes, Larcom also depicts reading with many other things in mind: as a pastime, a form of succor, an intellectual pursuit, and a means of being disobedient. Returning to *Tales of Wayside Inn*, we see the reading of poetry is emphatically public

and performative. The men gathered in the tavern trade tales and embrace the conviviality fostered by poetry among an international cast of strangers. And yet, within the poems themselves, Longfellow shows a good deal of concern for the interpretation of poetry in a manner that Larcom does not. His poems model the kind of reception that Longfellow's poetry might receive. I turn to Longfellow's famously beloved and maligned poem, "Paul Revere's Ride," to show how form and audience come together in the poem. Embedded within *Tales*, "Revere" directs the reader outward to both the narrative frame of the longer poem and the intertexts to which the narrator "Revere" refers his readers. Longfellow attempts to manage the reader's experience in a way that Larcom's documentation of reading practices does not. He nonetheless remains attentive to the embodied reception of "Revere," imagining the pedagogical situation that the poem's subsequent reception history would enact.

Verse Cultures

Thanks to a rapidly expanding market for literature, the ways in which readers encountered poetry changed dramatically in the nineteenth-century, a fact that both Longfellow and Larcom document. In their long narrative poems, both are keen to portray poetry as something that one did not just read from a volume. While Longfellow's inn-dwellers cite their sources, we understand that they are not reading from a book. Larcom's mill girls toggle back and forth between memorized performance and reading from the page. Each poet—and Longfellow, especially—will equivocate between oral and print cultures, or poetry heard and poetry read. The boundaries between oral and print were not fixed as this time, although nineteenth-century readers would have

recognized a difference between the two. For example, the assumption that ballads were products of an oral, collective culture would have been a commonplace understanding for many nineteenth-century readers.⁴⁴ But Larcom and Longfellow's poems suggest that the two cultures cannot be easily separated. Take, for example, the Student in *Tales* who is besotted with books:

A youth was there, of quiet ways,
A Student of old books and days,
To whom all tongues and lands were known,
And yet a lover of his own;
With many a social virtue graced,
And yet a friend of solitude;
A man of such a genial mood
The heart of all things he embraced,
And yet of such fastidious taste,
He never found the best too good.
Books were his passion and delight,
And in his upper room at home
Stood many a rare and sumptuous tome,
In vellum bound, with gold bedight,
Great volumes garmented in white,
Recalling Florence, Pisa, Rome. (*Tales* 7-8)

As noted before, the Student shares much in common with Longfellow, particularly in his knowledge of foreign “tongues and land” mixed with a firm commitment to his own. These apparent paradoxes—“friend of solitude”—also play out when he offers his tale. Longfellow's Student is seemingly comfortable while moving easily back and forth across different “situations of reception” (Levine 14):

“Now listen to the tale I bring;
Listen! though not to me belong
The flowing draperies of his song,

⁴⁴ Meredith McGill suggests that Francis James Child's massive ballad collecting project—published in 1882, but begun in the decades previous—worked to solidify this identification of “the ballad with collective not individual art, anonymous not authored texts, and oral performance rather than writing” (“What is a Ballad?” 160).

The words that rouse, the voice that charms.

...

Only a tale of love is mine,
Blending the human and divine,
A tale of the *Decameron* old,
By Fiametta, laurel-crowned,
While her companions lay around,
And heard the intermingled sound
Of airs that on their errands sped,
And wild birds gossiping overhead,
And lisp of leaves, and fountain's fall,
And her own voice more sweet than all,
Telling the tale, which, wanting these,
Perchance may lose its power to please." (*Tales* 28-29)

When he steps forward to perform, the Student presents his tale as both written *and* sung. Call it youthful exuberance or capriciousness, but the Student seems to contradict himself at every move, or at least he appears to be unable to firmly stabilize the poem, its author, or its mode of telling. When he exhorts his auditors—"Listen!"—a second time, the reader is reminded that the poem is legible as both words on a page and as sound. The "lisp of leaves" doubles things again: the lisp of a tongue vocalizing what is written on the page – the poet assumes a crowd for his reading.

Adding further complication, the Student embeds his tale in layers of tradition. The story we read is a re-telling, but the Student wants us to know about the original telling. In offering these citational signposts for his reader, Longfellow is constantly abjuring originality in favor of a combination of traditions. Larcom shows something similar when the mill girls claim the greats as their own only to revise them. This is yet another distinction these poems trouble: between author and reader. When Larcom's mill girls rip out and revise the poetry, we can see how the uses of poems and the users of poems could be thought to exist along a continuum. Everyday readers borrowed and

revised famous works in a way that today we might recognize as plagiarism. Jennifer Putzi describes how the poetry of the mill girls was labelled “imitative and... uninteresting” by later scholars for whom their sentimental verse either did not conform to modernist aesthetics or to assumptions about the voice of working-class poets (157). Other forms of imitative verse circulated, from the “imitation aesthetic” of giftbooks to the “parlor authorship” practiced by middleclass women, particularly in the antebellum period.⁴⁵ Larcom’s and Longfellow’s poems, of course, translate these practices into a more “literary” form, using them as motifs within their narratives to explore the relationship between author and audience. *Idyl* and *Tales* may not offer explicit invitations to readers to rework their poems (Larcom’s would seem too heterogenous to perform in the fashion poetry is performed in the text itself); nonetheless, Longfellow and Larcom acknowledge this collaborative reader—not one who interprets, but who performs—as a necessary predicate of the poet.

“As well forbid us Yankee girls to breathe”

In the preface to *An Idyl of Work*, Larcom states that her text “does not claim completeness either as poem or as narrative” (vii). Unlike her autobiography, in which she questioned the authenticity of her memories, Larcom here is stating a truth about the form of her text. Rather than the complete “picture” her memoir would aspire to be, she embraces the composite nature of her poem: It is merely a “sketch” intended to capture the “prosaic” life in the mills; there is no one lead character, but many; the story is

⁴⁵ McGill, *The Culture of Reprinting* 39; and Susan S. Williams, cited in Putzi 156.

episodic, miscellaneous, and heterogeneous; the regularity and monotony of the work of the weavers stands in contrast to the constantly shifting form of the poem. How to read such a text? Larcom does not provide the same signposts for interpretation like Longfellow, nor do her characters ventriloquize the reception of her work as Longfellow's do. Instead, Larcom documents the many reading practices that emerged in response to the variety of verse genres available to a nineteenth-century audience. Sometimes the girls read individually, sometimes they read collectively, but they never seem to go long without reading of some form even when instructed not to. When the girls find ways around the rules against reading in the mill, Esther suggests that the owner might as well "forbid us Yankee girls to breathe / As read; we cannot help it" (*Idyl* 129).

Esther's hyperbolic and enthusiastic statement manages to capture reading as an act that is both embodied (as life-sustaining) and situated (as a trait shared among the Yankees) for the characters in *Idyl*. The verses throughout are linked to the beat of the heart, such as when Larcom describes how "Ruth's voice / Died softly into reverie, while her heart / Kept time to this inaudible undertone" (*Idyl* 175). But respiration is the primary link between poetry and embodiment in *Idyl*. Many of the interpolated poems begin with reference to an act that gives greater texture to the performance than the unspecific verb "read" might. When introducing a poem, Larcom will describe a girl as "musing," "humming," or "murmuring." More than simply saying or performing or reading, Larcom offers a more precisely embodied delivery that also affects the auditor, causing the listener to "croon of to sleep" in a "gentle, wave-like trance" (*Idyl* 36, 42).

Larcom pays close attention not only to the ways in which the girls read but to the material artifacts of reading, as well. If the scenes above suggest the body responding to

the elements of poetry, then Larcom is also attentive to the marks a body leaves on books. The most obvious of these are the ways the girls tear books and magazines apart, only to reconstitute them for their own use. The owners forbid “[b]ooks, not leaves” on the factory floor, so in order to learn the Bible by heart the girls must tear it to pieces (*Idyl* 129). They do the same to construct their

strange medley-book of prose and rhyme
Cut from odd magazines, or pages dim
Of yellow journals, long since out of print;
And pasted in against the faded ink
Of an old log-book... (*Idyl* 36)

In this description, the hybrid text not only traces the variety of reading material the girls had access to, but it also captures something of the impermanence of that reading material. While the girls may be said to bring renewed life to the texts, the deterioration of pages, glue, and ink cannot be reversed. This image functions to metaphorically bring the past into the present, the traditions of old into modern times, but it nevertheless sees those traditions as fading. Through the process of lyricization, poetry would become an increasingly abstracted genre, detached and immaterial; yet here, Larcom preserves the poems in concrete and historically contingent contexts. In the case of the log-book, the material determines the form: it is a “relic of the sea, / And mostly filled with legends of the shore / That Esther loved, her home-shore of Cape Ann” (36).

Elsewhere, after enumerating the “democratic neighborhood” of Eleanor’s bookshelves (discussed in Chapter One), Larcom turns her attention to the condition of three Bibles on a nearby table: “—one almost new, / The others showing usage” (*Idyl* 43). The “unworn one” belongs to Isabel, who readily embraces her role as the disobedient girl among the group. Isabel may ignore the sacred text, but the Bible is hers

alone, in contrast to the literary texts that are shared among the girls. Larcom's attention to the material traces of reading indicates how an author can "do things" with books: the unread Bible provides insight into the circulation of texts that doubles as character insight. Isabel's Bible also represents a rare moment of nonreading in a text that seems to be read all over, and yet Larcom knows that the materiality of an unread book might also have a story to tell.⁴⁶

The notion that supposedly unread texts—and poetry, in particular—might have a great deal to say recalls what Cohen suggests is "the open secret" of the study of nineteenth-century literature (*Social Lives* 12). Although seemingly invisible now, poetry was ubiquitous in the nineteenth century, and Larcom's text affirms this is not just a figurative statement about the dominance of poetry as a cultural form; instead, in material terms, the nineteenth century amassed a bulk of poetry, thanks to cheaper paper, faster printing, better distribution networks, and increased literacy. Her attentiveness to both the genres and the printed forms that abounded are a useful entry point for reconsidering how we might read this abundant verse culture. If, as I noted in the first chapter, Larcom offers a theory of generic diversity from which a poet might draw, then she also provides insight into the material conditions in which those genres circulated. Formats new and old—including the giftbook, souvenir, literary annual, or the anthology—appealed to middle-class tastes and consumer habits, responding to an increased appetite for and ensuring the broader reach of poetry. This audience did not only read verse, but actively composed original poetry or adapted the poetry of others to their own needs. Larcom

⁴⁶ Price gives the name of "nonreading" to the consideration of books whose "value... lies orthogonal to its legibility" (8).

documents this activity throughout, in a sense anticipating the twentieth-century efforts to recuperate many marginalized, overlooked, or forgotten authors that have greatly expanded the wealth of nineteenth-century literature deemed worthy of study. Yet even with such projects, as Cohen points out, there is still a great deal more that cannot be salvaged—from the point of view of literary analysis—because it seems so conventional and generic. Larcom offers us access to and even performs reading strategies for this historically contingent, generic verse. First, she documents the strategies the girls used to gain access to and circulate poetry up and down the ladder of taste. More importantly, however, Larcom recreates—at the remove constituted by literary publication—the context in which many such “doggerel” poems would have been encountered (*Idyl* 36). Her method differs significantly from what a trip to the archives might yield. Rather than encountering a poem in its original context (that of a magazine or a scrapbook, say), the long narrative poem form—with its formal heterogeneity as well as its interest in the compositional practice of the figure of the poet—allows Larcom to narrate the experience from both sides of the equation: as author and as reader.

Anticipating the Audience in Longfellow

If Longfellow frequently imagines the poet in relationship to his audience, he is not necessarily confident that the audience will read him right. In fact, “misreading” on the part of the audience is as much a feature as a proper reading in his long narrative poems. Much like we saw with Larcom, the long narrative genre allows Longfellow to represent the continuum of author and reader by the affording him the space in which enact the many different forms an encounter with poetry might take. In “The Birds of

Killingworth,” Longfellow portrays two audiences for the Preceptor’s speech. The Preceptor’s speech later circulates in print, given renewed life with “another audience out of reach, / Who had no voice nor vote in making laws” (*Tales* 200). This audience—the women of Killingworth—“in the papers read his little speech” (*Tales* 200). The stark shift in the medium of communication, from public speech to private speech, plays to a conventional divide between the spheres of men and women. But it also gesture towards the many networks through which poetry would pass at this time. He draws upon traditions rooted in oral performance, although print is the primary medium in which Longfellow’s poetry circulates.⁴⁷ But first, the Preceptor addresses the crowd in front of town hall that consists of the educated and uneducated alike. The Preceptor mobilizes poetry—in his versified speech and in his method for “reading” the birds—to make his plea, which the crowd ignores in hopes of avoiding more avian destruction. At the start of his address, the Preceptor anticipates his critics by citing Plato, who, “anticipating the Reviewers, / Banished from his Republic without pity / The Poets” (*Tales* 195). The move cannily doubles back on itself, defending the Preceptor/Poet against attack while also acknowledging receptivity as constitutive of authorship. The Preceptor, of course, is didactic: He is the town pedagogue, and he also presumes a place knowledge within (and perhaps above) the community. Although his opening gambit does not “teach” those in

⁴⁷ Critics have used such ambivalence to critique an author’s cooptation of popular forms. Cohen cites Susan Stewart’s critique of “ballad discourse” and its “method[s] for making oral genres extinct.” Meredith McGill offers another perspective on the matter. McGill’s reading of Longfellow’s “National Ballad” “The Wreck of the Hesperus” offers an example of how “the relationship between print history and the history of genres” should be understood as “dynamic rather taxonomic” (“What is a Ballad?” 157). McGill’s vision is less rooted in a naturalized sense of genres, their poetics, and their modes of communication. Cohen, like McGill, instead considers ballads as “contested property,” the history of their circulation bound up closely with print despite being presumed to be oral artifacts. *Social Lives of Poems in Nineteenth-Century America* 136-163.

the town square to read, only to listen. It is only later, when the women of town “read his little speech” that his point is understood.

A similar gesture appears in *The Song of Hiawatha*, where, in a stronger sense, the poet figure does not simply teach how to read but introduces the concept where it did not exist prior. In the “Picture-Writing” chapter of *The Song of Hiawatha*, Hiawatha brings “sign and symbol” as a way to connect to the “speechless days” of prior generations (*Hiawatha* 189). This scene gestures to the poem’s introduction, where the narrator describes his poem as a “rude inscription.” As Virginia Jackson notes, this poet-narrator of “little song-craft” “puts his readers in the position of being able to decipher several languages in which they did not know they were so fluent” (*Hiawatha* 8-9; “Longfellow’s Tradition” 477). Jackson says Longfellow’s *Hiawatha* makes “classical... and vernacular literacy available at a discount” which Longfellow represents in Hiawatha’s introduction of writing, through which he delivers verse and interpretation in one go (“Longfellow’s Tradition” 476.)

In *The Courtship of Miles Standish*, John Alden acts as a mediator between Priscilla and Miles Standish; however, when “the dexterous writer of letters” delivers Standish’s message in “schoolboy” language, he draws out from Priscilla a subtle analysis of the corrupted proposal as well as the relations within the Standish-Alden-Priscilla triad (*Courtship* 44). Priscilla, however, is not so much interpreting the “sudden and abrupt avowal” of Standish’s interest as she is anticipating Longfellow’s reviewers. Written in dactylic hexameter (like *Evangeline* a decade earlier), *The Courtship of Miles Standish* imports into English the heroic meter that, as Christopher Phillips points out, “was seen as either woefully imitative or bewilderingly avant-garde” by critics at that

time (223). Priscilla's interpretation implies the anticipated critique, but in reverse: Where, for her, such a topic as love and marriage proposal should not be couched in schoolboy language, the critics might hold that the meter of the rarefied genre of epic should not be used to couch such a prosaic story set in non-heroic times.⁴⁸

In *Tales of a Wayside Inn*, Longfellow draws these moments of intratextual interpretation more explicitly, interlacing the medley-book with interpretive interludes that knit poetic utterance and analysis closely together, such that poet and reader (or listener) are closely bound together. The worlds of poem and reception, poet and audience, individual and community, consistently cross each other, as Longfellow includes inter/intra-textual moves. The "wayside inn" that encapsulates the narrative *Tales* but also provides a place "[w]here toil shall cease and rest begin" for the lyric persona that closes "Weariness," the final poem of the *Birds of Passage* collection that was published along with *Tales*. Elsewhere, the village clock that keeps time in successive verses in "Paul Revere's Ride" also sounds at the close of the long poem in the "Finale" after each traveler has said his piece.

To close this chapter, I turn to the scenes of reading in "Paul Revere's Ride." The poem would appear to be an odd choice to end my discussion of this "invisible" genre of the long narrative poem, since "Revere" is easily one of the few Longfellow poems that is still very well-known and does not lack for a history of reading. But "Revere" is worth reconsidering because it is rarely read in the context of the *Tales* as a whole which

⁴⁸ Longfellow appears to double down on this playfulness when he makes the Puritan hero Standish declaim "I am a maker of war, and not a maker of phrases," a turn of phrase he will return to lines later (with slight variation), saying, "I was never a maker of phrases" (*Standish* 24, 26). He slips into the language of epic and makes his phrases according to the heroic meter.

suppresses the intertextual possibilities the poem relies upon. The poem imagines overlapping situations of reception that push back against the perception of the text as simply a middlebrow and homogenizing recitation poem. In order to appreciate the work of the poem, it is important to attend to how it is built on both intertextuality and recitation. These are two seemingly incompatible “readings” of the text, but Longfellow makes both available to his readers with the poem.

Like the war it presages, the content of the poem itself has become so familiar as to hardly need repeating. The poem tells the story, in famously galloping lines, of how Revere spread the news of the arrival of the British and the onset of the Revolutionary War. Revere assigns his friend to light a lamp once he has uncovered the nature of the British charge—which he does as he “[w]anders and watches with eager ears” out the army barracks—which sends Revere riding to “[e]very Middlesex village and farm” to deliver the “midnight message” (*Tales* 18-19). Written in 1860, Revere’s “midnight message” bears on the crisis of the Civil War, fresh to the poem’s original readers and producing an echo of Longfellow’s earlier *Poems on Slavery*.⁴⁹ This context would soon become secondary to the poem’s pedagogical value, which would be used to both introduce colonial themes to children while also becoming a perennial favorite for memorization and recitation in school settings. As Angela Sorby notes, this pedagogical function is not merely imposed on the poem by subsequent readers and educators; in fact, it is announced in the poem’s very first line: “Listen, my children, and you shall hear” (*Tales* 18).⁵⁰ Even as the poem fades from its place of centrality in America—first

⁴⁹ See Lepore 30.

⁵⁰ See Sorby 17.

culturally, then pedagogically—elements of it live on. Its first lines are among the most quotable in American literature, and lines within the poem—“one if by land, two if by sea,” “It was twelve by the village clock”—are known even to those who cannot say whether they have ever read the poem or not (*Tales* 18, 23).

In Sorby’s reading, Revere is a figure of “liminality,” “a dark, half-dissolved body,” his “persona is ambivalent” and he lacks a “fixed class position” (22). As such, Sorby suggests, by centering the poem on a “mediocre” character such as Revere, Longfellow creates a “neutral ground” that is able to register the collision of larger social forces at work that constitute the revolutionary moment.⁵¹ According to Sorby, Revere is “mediocre” because he is a “medium” for information within the story, and her analysis relegates “medium” to be mediocre, neutral, and (despite the action described within the poem) passive. In this reading, the poet-figure is a bystander to “extreme social forces,” and the work of poetry is rendered secondary to primary social conditions (220). We can point to Revere’s ride as evidence that Longfellow does not consider the form of medium as neutral, passive, or inert. But beyond Revere’s furious galloping, the poem also sees itself as a kind of binding agent that links to both prior texts and functions to generate communal ties. The poet-figure’s status as a medium is not passively inflected; instead, the poetic message performs an essential action in shaping this historical moment rather than being epiphenomenal to it, as Levine would say.

As is evident throughout *Tales*, the stand-ins for the poet conjoin social forces rather than necessarily emerge from them, and Longfellow’s famous character is no

⁵¹ Sorby is drawing on George Lukacs’s analysis of Walter Scott and the historical novel, 22.

different. Longfellow reinforces this active, shaping, participatory poet-figure with his galloping rhythm and with “Revere”’s narrator’s gesture towards a listening audience. Stephen Burt describes “Paul Revere’s Ride” as “oral, communal, and ceremonial,” which is captured in the content of the poem but also in its form (159). The meter of “Revere” comprises lines of varied iambs and anapests and is straightforward to the point of being hypnotic, helping the narrative to unfold in a regular manner (reinforced by the insistent clock marking regular intervals of time). This offers the aural equivalent of the horse which carries the rider carrying the news. Medium is central to the content of the poem, a fact reinforced by Longfellow’s metrical choice. In the poem’s bouncing rhythm, it is not only the hoofbeat beneath Revere that we are hearing and but also our heartbeat. Or we would, if the reading of poetry still included the act of memorization. As Catherine Robson has noted, “when we do not learn poems by heart, the heart does not feel the rhythms of poetry as echoes or variations of its own insistent beat” (“Burning Deck” 150). Decrying the poem’s metrical simplicity gives short shrift to what the meter can hope to accomplish for its readers and those who might render the poem aloud. If this is a poem that is engaged with the poetics of pedagogy, then surely it seems important to consider the ways in which the gives shape to those poetics. Internalizing a poem is a matter of the individual body as much as it is a product of the social force—such as schooling—behind that internalization.

As Robson and others note, the collective view of memorization and recitation is one of lament and condescension: recitation represents both a bygone era of poetry’s cultural centrality but also an approach that stands in contrast to the reading of poetry as a “self-realizing” activity (*Heart Beats* 61). To the latter point, the works that constituted

the “recitation canon” differ from more complex poems that lend themselves better to literary analysis (Robson *Heart Beats* 61). That which is memorable and recitable is hobbled by consistent rhythm, simple rhyme, and elementary language, none of which can adequately produce the effects valued by modernist reading: the ambiguity that Northrop Frye would describe as “elusive, meditative, resonant, centripetal word-magic” (34). Longfellow’s poem of Paul Revere “works” because it contains minimal surprises, is pushed forward by a steady momentum of both rhythm and narrative, and contains symbols that are more or less transparent in their signification. The village clock strikes with regularity as Revere warns one town after another the story unfolds toward its revolutionary moment. That moment, however, exists outside the time of the poem as the endpoint that determines the meaning of what the stanzas describe. So, while the poem would seem to be—and has been taken to be—working towards a homogenizing wholeness, Longfellow’s approach is far more composite and permeable.

“Paul Revere’s Ride” is the first of the *Tales of a Wayside*, and it is, fittingly, a story of origins. Yet, despite the poem’s crisp rhythm and clear language, its stance towards origins is somewhat murky. Longfellow consistently directs the reader’s attention elsewhere, deflecting the poem’s status as an origin story in order to think about the melding of traditions. This is partly lost when removed from the context of *Tales* and also when the narrative frame with “Revere” is ignored. The most famous line—“One, if by land, and two, if by sea”—is announced in Revere’s voice in a short speech addressed “to his friend” which rehearses the plot of the poem in miniature. As he often does, Longfellow nests performances that resemble but do not fully mirror the larger narrative frame.

Because of the embedded status of the poem (within *Tales*), it is difficult to say where exactly the poem begins and where it ends. As one of the most famous and ubiquitous poems in the American canon, its reputation can be said to precede it, a situation not so different from the position the poem occupies within the narrative frame of *Tales*. Even before the Landlord begins the poem, his audience “clamor[s] for the Landlord’s tale,— / The story promised them of old, / They said, but always left untold” (*Tales* 17). There is a hint of irony in this set up, as the poem was already in circulation at this point. Like other interpolated poems within *Tales of a Wayside Inn*, “Paul Revere’s Ride” first appears as a standalone publication prior to being included in Longfellow’s longer work, first in *The Boston Transcript* in 1860 and again in *The Atlantic Monthly* in 1861. This most American of poems treats poetry as porous and accumulative, borrowing from other traditions and also supporting its claims through a series of (unnamed) outside sources. Noting, for example, that Longfellow likely learned the metrical effects he employed from Browning, Burt suggests that “there is nothing particularly American” about the poem’s meter (159). And although often considered out of the context of *Tales* throughout its history, “Paul Revere’s Ride” draws much of its meaning from the intertexts that would inform its readers and the literary context in which it is forged, shared, and read. The revolutionary moment the poem is working towards does not get narrated; instead, the story of the war and subsequent nation-building can be found “in the books you have read,” with which this poem is conversant (*Tales* 24). Instead of being a statement about the formation of American identity, the poem consistently refers or defers to other texts and traditions.

The poem is said to be a prelude to a story Longfellow's audience is said to already know (the narrator interjects to tell his listeners, "You know the rest") while the "midnight message" at the heart of the tale is meant to be kept secret. Whether he knew it or not, Longfellow anticipated the status of his poem with this structure. The intertexts are ignored precisely because we pay less attention to forms that Longfellow brings into contact in his poem, because we think we know the poem in advance. Why bother "reading" it if we know the ending and if we know it was only meant to be read aloud? At the very least, rereading "Revere" might offer a lesson about messengers, media, and circulation. The story of "Paul Revere's Ride"—both the one the poem tells and the history of the poem itself—are useful reminders that poetry was, and can be, read in context, addressed to a particular audience, and delivered in multiple ways. Those contexts, audiences, and modes of delivery may not be chiefly how we read today, but returning poets like Larcom and Longfellow might prompt greater attentiveness to the forms nineteenth-century poetry took and how that poetry was received.

CONCLUSION

In addition to raising a complaint against the long poem, Poe objects to the “heresy of *The Didactic*” in “The Poetic Principle” (72). In Poe’s scheme, Longfellow exemplifies the sort of poet who refuses to “subserve” concepts like “Passion,” “Duty,” and “Truth” to the more proper domain of poetry: “*The Rhythmical Creation of Beauty*” (“Poetic Principle” 78). He then goes on to quote in full Longfellow’s proem to the anthology *The Waif*, finding the problem with the introductory poem to be its “delicacy of expression” as well as its “‘ease,’ or naturalness” (“Poetic Principle” 78). Such a “delicacy of expression,” Poe believes, suits the “character of the sentiments” in the poem, such that the moral determines the formal choices and therefore governs the poem at the expense of beauty (“Poetic Principle” 80). This is didacticism at its worst, and we can see the legacy of such an opinion reappear in a twentieth-century work like Cleanth Brooks and Robert Penn Warren’s *Understanding Poetry*, which begins with Longfellow’s “Psalm of Life” in order to warn against reading as “message-hunting” (10).⁵² These are not surprising judgments for Poe to levy against his longtime foe—after all, Poe’s review of *The Waif* played a part in the “Little Longfellow War” in which Poe accused his fellow poet of plagiarism.⁵³ But, like we saw in the previous chapter, Longfellow’s brief poem already anticipates and attempts to ward the criticism that Poe performs. Poe begins with praise, although the compliment is highly suspect. The lines

⁵² Brooks and Warren suggest that this is *the wrong way* to read Longfellow’s poem, although their choice of Longfellow implies a dismissive attitude towards the type of readers attracted to his work: “Here is a poem by Longfellow that has been greatly admired by many people who read poetry in this fashion” (10).

⁵³ Speaking of other poets that might “interfere with the claims of Mr. Longfellow,” Poe concludes: “These men Mr. Longfellow can continuously *imitate* (*is that the word?*) and yet never incidentally commend” (“Longfellow’s *Waif*” 702).

that Poe grants as “very effective” are, in fact, truncated, and their meaning is purposefully revised. “Nothing can be better,” Poe suggests, than:

- - - - the bards sublime,
Whose distant footsteps echo
Down the corridors of Time.

As Poe very well knows, those dashes render invisible Longfellow’s desire *not* to draw on “bards sublime” or “the grand old masters,” but to instead seek out “some humbler poet[s]” for his collection (“Poetic Principle” 79). Longfellow wishes to justify his choice of a volume of “waifs” against a transcendental or transhistorical conception of poetry, and his proem serves no higher purpose than to introduce a volume in verse. Poe uses “Pröem” to take issue with the kinds of compositions that “must perpetually vary... with occasion,” an argument he wants to prove by invoking and critiquing a very occasional poem (“Poetic Principle” 81). It is a straw man, purposefully misreading the passage which is intended to anticipate just such a response as Poe’s. But Poe cannily uses Longfellow’s authority to bolster his own argument, even when Longfellow’s poem is seeking to evade such authority.

Longfellow would go on to reprint this poem under the title of “The Day is Done,” and it would continue to appear in anthologies in subsequent decades; but, surely, Poe’s “Poetic Principle” accounts for how the proem circulates today. The proem’s original context is completely from Poe’s introduction and analysis of it – although Poe does cheekily use the poem to “introduce” his own miniature anthology of poems that he proposes to analyze. While recovering the original placement of the proem does nothing to elevate it to the “corridors of Time,” Poe’s use of the proem seems to have made the occasional text outlive its intended purpose. Whether we agree with Poe or not, his

argument has force, and for various reasons (many of which are bound up in the professionalization of literary reading) his perspective aligns with the commonplace readings of Longfellow's oeuvre. This is not to say that subsequent criticism of Longfellow (or subsequent "lyricized" readings) intentionally mislead; however, Poe's example does raise questions about what, why, and how we read. We do not need to *meet a poem at its level* or agree to the author's terms when providing a reading;⁵⁴ at the same time, it would seem disingenuous to completely ignore the situation of reception of a poem, especially one (like Longfellow's proem) which is fit for a specific occasion. The example goes to show just how powerful such a misreading can be, particularly because Longfellow's proem seems like a very weak example to hang one's theoretical hat on. Poe's protocol of reading deprecates the situated, occasional purpose of the proem, applying principles of poetry that seem out of proportion with Longfellow's waif-like text; and yet, it is Poe's judgment that lives on and looks familiar to us today.

It takes a sophisticated approach (of which I only scratch the surface) to not only return Longfellow's proem to its proper context but to trace its circulation and reception beyond its presence in Poe's famous essay. This is the approach I have sought out in my previous chapters, and which I believe the long narrative poem supports. When we look at the bulk of nineteenth-century American poetry, what comes through is that most authors and readers pursued poetry that sought a more immediate bond, one that could be specific to different contexts, private or public, domestic or political. This embodied and

⁵⁴ Again, as Phillips notes, any invocation of "authorial intention" should come "with the usual caveats of indeterminacy and the reader's role in making meaning" (14).

situated form of reading is addressed directly by Longfellow in his proem, as he exhorts his audience:

Then read from the treasured volume
The poem of thy choice
And lend to the rhyme of the poet
The beauty of thy voice.

Here, beauty is the product of the poem being taken up by a reader and read aloud, to herself or others, not exclusively the sum of effects produced by the poet's craft. What this occasional poem reveals is twofold. First, it helps us see how, from Poe onwards, a genealogy of close reading indicates that good poetry was presumed to not be historically contingent and socially situated; instead, good poetry should aspire to bardic sublimity in the "corridors of time." And second, that an alternative to that genealogy was written into the poetry that "lyricization" has left behind, and close attention to these overlooked works will reveal the plurality of verse cultures that were ignored in the process.

The diverse poetry of nineteenth-century America provides fertile ground for the critic interested in recuperating neglected voices, forgotten forms, and overlooked readers. The long narrative poem, I have argued, is a genre that incorporates each of these traditionally ignored aspects of literary history, by both documenting and offering a reading of the verse cultures of the nineteenth century at work. In their long narrative poems, both Larcom and Longfellow imagine poetic composition as less an act of original inspiration than the coordinating of traditions. As Larcom's *An Idyl of Work* shows, the long narrative poem is a site in which to encounter both a variety of verse forms as well as the various reading strategies that a wide range of readers would employ when "using" the poems around them. In Longfellow's *Tales of a Wayside*, poetry is

central to and pervasive in the communities in which the assorted tales are set, a tool for understanding and for shaping social relations. Reading, in these long poems, is not reduced to an academic exercise, and poems are not collapsed into the abstraction of the lyric which many critics suggest all poetry is understood to be today. The neglected voices of the long narrative poem pertain to both authors and audiences whose historically contingent verse and situations of reception have been written off as conventional and middlebrow when held up against the rubric of a modernist aesthetic. But, by orienting our approach away from strictly close reading these poems, by considering the social and political functions they could fulfill and not simply reading them on transcendent or aesthetic terms, we might reveal their value to the culture in which they circulated. Additionally, these poems might also reveal the assumptions that determine what gets in and what is left out of literary history.

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