

Longfellow's Echoes

JOHN HAY

Thus may you ever live,—translating life into music, and
hearing its echoes take the sound of fame!

—George S. Hillard to Henry W. Longfellow,
30 December 1849

PAUL FLEMMING, the protagonist of Henry Wadsworth Longfellow's novel *Hyperion* (1839), is a young man shattered by grief after the death of his lover. In his sorrow, he travels to Europe and wanders through the Rhine valley. Rowing out upon Lake Wolfgang one day with a newfound friend, he stares up a steep cliff face made locally famous by a medieval holy man's hermitage. The two chums find the spot "now haunted only by an echo, so distinct and loud, that one might imagine the ghost of the departed saint to be sitting there, and repeating the voices from below—not word by word, but sentence by sentence, as if he were passing them up to the recording angel." Flemming is deeply impressed by this natural phenomenon, feeling "in his inmost soul" the voice that repeats their words "with awful distinctness in the blue depths overhead."

Though Longfellow authored two novels, he was immortalized as a poet—a poet best known as a disembodied voice, an impersonal purveyor of emotions. As Horace Scudder, one of his contemporaries, explained, Longfellow "found in poetry a form of expression which permitted great freedom of speech without necessary reference to the personality of the author." While Emily Dickinson and Walt Whitman emerged as the two great first-person poets of nineteenth-century America—the one *Nobody* and the other *Everybody*—Longfellow was something else. He was *Somebody*—a celebrity, the most famous poet of his day, but an intensely private figure who refused to give public readings and loathed writing about himself. Like his college classmate Nathaniel Hawthorne, Longfellow strove to "keep the inmost

Me behind its veil." He strenuously avoided the first-person singular, lamenting any necessary use of what he called "that objectionable pronoun," even when reviewers criticized him for its omission in his poetry. He wanted his words to sound not from his embodied self but from "the blue depths overhead."

Longfellow's current fans (a small but robust crowd) are familiar with the story of the great poet's fall from canonical to cornball, a casualty of successive movements and trends from modernism to multiculturalism. He was, writes Nicholas Basbanes, his most recent biographer, "widely revered in one century, methodically excommunicated from the ranks of the worthy in the next." Over the past few decades, many admiring critics have sought to rebuild Longfellow's reputation, generally by adopting a historicist approach that values the poet's considerable celebrity, what Eric Haralson calls "the cultural logic of his popularity." A poet so widely cherished must have been doing something right—and must tell us something about the culture that exalted him.

Yet an appreciation of Longfellow's ability to write dearly beloved verses tends to reinforce the superficial characterization of him as a fusty "fireside poet," reducing him to an avuncular supplier of greeting-card adages and genteel life lessons. Perhaps this is why his lines today can be found most prominently on boxes of Celestial Seasonings tea and bottles of Dr. Bronner's soap—both of which reprint his 1838 poem "A Psalm of Life" in full. In a 1907 biography, Longfellow's younger friend Charles Eliot Norton highlighted "the strength and simplicity of his moral sentiment," merely one example of the praise he routinely received at the turn of the century for the simple sincerity and gentle didacticism of such poems. This somewhat prudish appreciation of Longfellow as a singsong poet suitable for schoolbooks and tombstones—the kind of person Herman Melville referred to as "an eminently safe man"—has colored much of the scholarship of the past hundred years. It is an attitude neatly summed up by Paul Lewis's claim that Longfellow "strove to strike the right note with his poetry, affirm accepted or progressive principles, and offer sound advice." (Ralph Waldo Emerson once told him, "I have always one foremost

satisfaction in reading your books that I am safe—I am in variously skilful hands but first of all they are safe hands.”) From the dominant view, if Longfellow is to be appreciated for his ability to appeal to an enormous audience, then he is also to be dismissed as a conservative figure who did little to shape the course of literary history.

But his popularity should strike us as unusual, and not just because he was a poet. A Harvard professor of languages who loved both foreign translation and metrical experimentation, Longfellow would seem, in retrospect, like a longshot for literary celebrity. He became famous by creating a powerful impression of stability and tradition, but he did so by keeping up to date with advances in the arts and sciences of his time. He has often been received as an old-fashioned aficionado of bygone traditions; just as his fan Robert Frost was frequently associated with Norman Rockwell as a source of cultural nostalgia, Longfellow can seem the literary equivalent of a nineteenth-century Currier and Ives print. Yet his work is perhaps closer to that of his friend Charles Eliot’s younger relative, T. S. Eliot (or his own grandnephew Ezra Pound). Longfellow was a champion of history and tradition whose poems perform the “escape from personality” that Eliot advocated in his famous 1919 essay “Tradition and the Individual Talent.”

Longfellow developed his own poetic notion of impersonal identity as a form of echo—just like the heavenly echo his alter ego Paul Flemming found in Bavaria. Working primarily in prose through the 1830s, he paid particular attention to aural phenomena and to the scientific study of their effects. In this sense he was not simply characterizing authorship as influenced by or responding to the literature of the past but rather conceiving selfhood as a sonic vibration transformed by distance and time. When he finally established himself as a leading poet in the 1840s, he had developed a theory of echoic authorial identity that modernized his verses and distinguished him from his peers.

This essay examines Longfellow’s engagement with the echo as his way of understanding modern subjectivity, first by attending to the author’s often overlooked early prose writings. It then turns to “My Lost Youth” (1855), one of Longfellow’s most popular and least

well-understood poems, to reveal the implications of his echoic identity.



Poets have always been known for oral and aural engagement, and a fascination with bards, minstrels, and troubadours was common among romantic poets of the early nineteenth century, but Longfellow was obsessed with sound and sound effects to a degree unusual even for his milieu. His entire corpus is fixated on listening—from the fifteenth-century epigraph to *Outre-Mer* (1835): “Lystenyth, ye godely gentylnen, and all that ben hereyn!”; to the opening of his reputation-making epic *Evangeline* (1847): “List to the mournful tradition still sung by the pines of the forest; / List to a Tale of Love in Acadie, home of the happy”; to his monumental *Song of Hiawatha* (1855): “Listen to this Indian Legend, / To this Song of Hiawatha!”; to the memorable intro of one of his most popular poems, “Paul Revere’s Ride” (1861): “Listen, my children, and you shall hear.” As Longfellow once wrote to John Sullivan Dwight, America’s first prominent music critic, “What a writer asks of a reader is not so much to *like* as to *listen*.”

His ear was much more developed than his eye; in fact, he was plagued by chronic eye pain. While he could certainly depict a beautiful vision, his most passionate passages describe music. He was an amateur musician himself, playing both the flute and the piano, and also an opera aficionado at a time and place when performances could be hard to come by. Longfellow’s otherwise mundane journal entries become notably enthusiastic when they record opportunities to hear works by Mozart. After listening to the Swedish soprano Jenny Lind sing from *The Marriage of Figaro* in Boston in 1851, he told his friend Charles Sumner, then serving as a US Senator, “If you ever see it advertised, and she to sing it, do not fail to go, though the Union be in danger.”

His favorite opera was *Don Giovanni*, and in *Hyperion* (a novel closely based on his own experiences in Europe in 1835 and 1836) he explains that work’s power in a string of exclamations: “What

rapturous flights of sound! what thrilling, pathetic chimes! what wild, joyous revelry of passion! what a delirium of sense! what an expression of agony and woe!—all the feelings of suffering and rejoicing humanity sympathized with and finding a voice in those tones.” The protagonist, Paul Flemming, then describes the effect that Mozart’s music has on him personally:

How the chorus swells and dies, like the wind of summer! How those passages of mysterious import seem to wave to and fro, like the swaying branches of trees; from which anon some solitary sweet voice darts off like a bird, and floats away and revels in the bright, warm sunshine! And then mark! how, amid the chorus of a hundred voices and a hundred instruments,—of flutes, and drums, and trumpets,—this universal shout and whirlwind of the vexed air, you can so clearly distinguish the melancholy vibration of a single string, touched by the finger,—a mournful, sobbing sound! Ah, this is indeed human life! where, in the rushing, noisy crowd, and amid sounds of gladness, and a thousand mingling emotions, distinctly audible to the ear of thought, are the pulsations of some melancholy string of the heart, touched by an invisible hand.

Flemming has discovered the essence of “human life” through what he calls the “ear of thought.” This was a significant concept for Longfellow, who had used that very phrase in one of his earliest published verses, “A Spirit of Poetry,” which first appeared in *The Souvenir* giftbook for 1828 and was then reprinted in his bestselling collection *Voices of the Night*, published just a few months after *Hyperion*. Here the poet, enjoying the “wayward days of youth,” observes that a “quiet spirit” in the woods “fills the nice and delicate ear of thought.” The spirit of poetry, in other words, is sonic. It is vibrational, oscillatory, and the poet is the artistic amplifier attuned to the proper frequencies at which this poetic spirit resonates and reverberates. Thinking—feeling—human life—starts with the inner ear.

As a result, Longfellow’s texts are awash in sound. The “sounding anvil” of his famous village blacksmith clearly stimulated the ear

of thought, and the chiming of bells and the roar of the ocean persist as a kind of background noise throughout his oeuvre. His biographer Newton Arvin observes that “the sound of bells, of chimes, even of gongs is audible in much of [Longfellow’s] work, and when it is associated with the seaside it has a peculiarly personal quality.” Bells “held a special place in his imagination,” notes Christoph Irmscher. They obviously appear in poems such as “The Bells of San Blas” and “The Belfry of Bruges,” but they also toll in poems such as “The Children’s Crusade,” “The Beleaguered City,” “The Wreck of the Hesperus,” “Afternoon in February,” “Pegasus in Pound,” and “Sunrise on the Hills”—in which “The music of the village bell / Came sweetly to the echo-giving hills.” When in 1855 the future *Atlantic Monthly* editor Thomas Bailey Aldrich published his own first collection of poetry, *The Bells: A Collection of Chimes*, he expressed his obvious indebtedness to Longfellow (noted by reviewers) by including a poem titled “H. W. L,” in which he explained that Longfellow’s “Voices of the Night” have filled him “with an inner tone. / Their echoes linger on my ear.”

The sonority of bells suggests a particular relationship to time. Opposed to the puncturing exactitude of modern time (“five o’clock sharp”), bell time is diffused by a watery, echoic quality. Longfellow describes 2:00 a.m. in London as a symphonic phenomenon, comparable to an advancing choir of angels:

Far distant, from some belfry in the suburbs, comes the first sound, so indistinct as hardly to be distinguished from the crowing of a cock. Then, close at hand, the great bell of St. Paul’s, with a heavy, solemn sound,—one, two. It is answered from Southwark; then at a distance like an echo; and then all around you, with various and intermingling clang, like a chime of bells, the clocks from a hundred belfries strike the hour.

Instead of a clear, decisive signal, here is an echoing ocean of sound, a cacophonous march of time. This wonderful passage—from an otherwise unremarkable 1837 book review—captures the young Longfellow’s great talent for listening. What set him apart from other

writers, long before he became a popular poet, was his intense fascination with his sonic environment. His journals are peppered with such beautiful, casual, auditory observations—as when, walking across the bridge over the Charles River on a late-winter evening in 1838, he stopped “to hear the soft sound of the dissolving ice-cakes in the brine,—a low and musical sound, a gentle simmering like the foaming of champagne.”

Longfellow’s interest in sound and acoustics is evident as far back as his *Outre-Mer: A Pilgrimage beyond the Sea* (1835), a travel narrative that recounts his first trip to Europe in the late 1820s. Longfellow published very little original poetry until he was in his thirties; as a young professor of modern languages at Bowdoin College, he was primarily known for his prose. *Outre-Mer*, which first brought him national attention as a writer, is intensely fixated on the sound and music of France and Spain, a record of the “listening ear of youth.” For Longfellow, this first European tour had been a formative experience. It not only provided him with the practical linguistic education he needed to serve as an academic philologist; it also destabilized his sense of self. He allowed his own identity to adapt to the sounds of his city of residence. In letters home, he became “Henri” in Paris, “Enrique” in Madrid, and “Enrico” in Rome. He could be Zelig-like in his authorial willingness to blend in with his lingual and sonic surroundings.

Outre-Mer reflects this release to the aural environment. Several passages consist of the narrator sitting at an upstairs window and describing the sounds drifting up from the streets below. For example, in the French village of Auteuil, Longfellow—who later claims to be a “good listener”—observes a noisy wedding procession (featuring an “asthmatic clarionet”) passing by in the morning and returns to his spot in the evening for the following:

I was sitting by the window, enjoying the freshness of the air and the beauty and stillness of the hour, when I heard the distant and solemn hymn of the Catholic burial-service, at first so faint and indistinct that it seemed an illusion. It rose mournfully on

the hush of evening—died gradually away—then ceased. Then it rose again, nearer and more distinct, and soon after a funeral procession appeared, and passed directly beneath my window.

He goes on at length about the mournful lamentation of the funeral dirge and the dismal wailing of an accompanying horn. While other American travelers to Roman Catholic countries typically attended to the church's architecture and iconography, Longfellow listened carefully to the rolling Latin cadences.

We can also find sympathy here with developing theories of acoustics in the early nineteenth century. In his very popular 1832 book on sonic phenomena, *The Music of Nature*, the English composer William Gardiner claims that from the ringing of bells derives "the most delightful" expression in music: "that increasing and dying away of the sounds, as they are wafted to or from us by the breeze. It is only in an upland country that we can enjoy these sublime effects—where their tones wind round the hill, or down the woodland vale." Gardiner concludes that "these effects are poetic, and will touch the feelings as long as sounds remain." In accord with these sentiments, Longfellow describes walking in the Père Lachaise Cemetery in Paris: "The distant murmur of the city rose upon my ear; and the toll of the evening bell came up, mingled with the rattle of the paved street and the confused sounds of labor. What an hour for meditation!" The "ear of thought" thus finds a remarkable stimulus in the streams of sound coursing through the air.

As the study of acoustics matured, notable works appeared from writers such as John Herschel, Joseph Togno, David Brewster, Johannes Müller, and John Stallo. According to sound historian Jonathan Sterne, "Visualizing sound as a species of vibration was a central task of the new science of acoustics." Longfellow acknowledges such a vibratory essence when he remarks in *Outre-Mer*,

As there is no sound where there is no ear to receive the impulses and vibrations of the air, so is there no moral impression—no voice of instruction from all the works of nature and all the

imitations of art—unless there be within the soul itself a capacity for hearing the voice and receiving the moral impulse.

“Voice” is here a correspondence between sounding object and listening subject. And, in a romantic characterization common at that time, Longfellow suggests that the natural world continuously emits moral instructions (at least to those prepared to receive them), implying that a person has a moral obligation to harmonize one’s identity with the natural environment.

Longfellow’s brief remark may strike us as insignificant, but a Harvard sophomore named Henry Thoreau diligently copied it down into his notebook in 1835, when *Outre-Mer* was first published. Thoreau was excited about Longfellow’s appointment to Harvard two years later, and he attended his lectures on Goethe before graduating. Thoreau’s biographer Robert Richardson has suggested that the young transcendentalist was especially influenced by *Outre-Mer* and that his own *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers* (1849) is “close in spirit” to it—“an American answer” to the European pilgrimage of Longfellow’s book.

According to William Gardiner, “The sublimest operations in nature, which strike us with awe and wonder, are to be referred to the sound of distant echoes.” Following Longfellow, Thoreau became especially interested in echoes, later remarking in *Walden* (1854) that “the echo is, to some extent, an original sound, and therein is the magic and charm of it.” In fact, soon after he moved to the woods in 1845, Thoreau said, “I would only hear myself as I would hear my echo.” Thoreau understood his very being as both sonic and echoic, a harmonic oscillation in sync with nature; indeed, Branka Arsić has provocatively suggested that such echoic listening was central to Thoreau’s radical ideas of nature and the self. Longfellow developed a very similar sonic ontology, declaring in his 1839 *Hyperion* that “the soul of man is audible, not visible.”

In retrospect, Longfellow’s sonorous self might be understood as a hybrid of romantic and protomodernist dispositions. Influenced by his English and European reading, Longfellow certainly borrowed

a note from his poetic forebears. He especially admired the phrase “a soul-like sound,” which he had picked up from Coleridge’s 1802 “Hymn before Sunrise.” And when in 1850 he finally got around to reading Wordsworth’s 1835 “Stanzas on the Power of Sound” (which gives voice to a world, according to one modern scholar, where “even the solid rocks participate in an aural concert”), he was surprised at how much it resonated with his own, independently developed poetic thoughts.

But Longfellow’s own attention to the echo also strikes a more modern chord. In an era before phonographic technology, the echo was a brief form of sound recording—perhaps a single playback of an otherwise ephemeral utterance. As Mark Smith notes, an echo is “a faded facsimile of an original sound, a reflection of time passed.” While we might nowadays associate recording with permanence, echoing presents recorded sound as the most transient of reflections, to be appreciated with special attention. “The ear, once accustomed to detect them, is always on the watch for an echo,” wrote Margaret Fuller in 1842. In other words, to link subjectivity with sound waves, and especially with the echo, is radically to destabilize it—to connect it to the past, but only weakly, with limitation and distortion.

Longfellow, like Thoreau, Fuller, and others of his milieu, clearly held echoes and echoic phenomena in high esteem—as more than mere mirrors or metaphors for representation. Along with church bells and ocean waves, echoes play an outsize sonic role in his poetry. From the resonant ticktocking of “The Old Clock on the Stairs” (“Forever—never! / Never—forever!”), to the “multitudinous echoes” of *Evangeline*, to the “wild reverberations” of *The Song of Hiawatha*, Longfellow’s lines are constantly sounding and resounding. The enormously popular *Evangeline* begins and ends with echoes, as the roar of the “deep-voiced” ocean is answered in “accents disconsolate” by the forest primeval. The echo is not simply a theme; it is an element of his authorial identity that he would attempt to articulate in his most personal poetry.



A student encountering Longfellow today would likely be assigned his 1855 poem “My Lost Youth,” a mainstay of the *Norton Anthology of American Literature*, appearing in every edition of that popular textbook since it was first published in 1979. It is frequently misunderstood. Mid-twentieth-century critics read it as a straightforward romantic recollection of childhood innocence; George Arms noted that the poem concludes with “an emotion of joy,” and Newton Arvin claimed that it “sounded the note of nostalgia” for the “charm of a boy’s eager sensuous awareness of natural beauty.” Scholars today, when they examine the poem at all, have tended to agree; Christoph Irsmscher, for example, concurs with Arms that the poem “ends on a cheerful note.” But “My Lost Youth” is more than a simple expression of nostalgia for childhood glory days. One of Longfellow’s most brilliant compositions, it is a dark exploration of modern subjectivity.

“My Lost Youth” first appeared in the August 1855 issue of *Putnam’s Monthly Magazine*, three months before the publication of Longfellow’s enormously successful *Song of Hiawatha*. It contains ten stanzas, the first of which is as follows:

Often I think of the beautiful town
 That is seated by the sea;
 Often in thought go up and down
 The pleasant streets of that dear old town,
 And my youth comes back to me.
 And a verse of a Lapland song
 Is haunting my memory still:
 “A boy’s will is the wind’s will,
 And the thoughts of youth are long, long thoughts.”

The form may at first glance seem simple and straightforward, but a more careful consideration reveals a complicated rhythm. The meter is irregular (some lines have three feet, some have four, some five), and the fifth and ninth lines of each stanza remain unrhymed (a scheme that might be represented as *abaabcdde*). In his 1962 biography, Arvin claimed that the resulting style is such a bizarre novelty

as to be comparable to Walt Whitman's free verse or Gerard Manley Hopkins's sprung rhythm.

The final two lines are repeated in every stanza, and this refrain became one of Longfellow's most well-known snippets, a Yankee proverb referenced in the title of Robert Frost's first book of poems, *A Boy's Will* (1913). The refrain is itself a lyrical quotation, a rendering of a musical memory that might also carry with it a remembered tune. Longfellow had been reading Johann Gottfried von Herder's German version of a traditional Lapland song: "Knabenwille ist Windeswille, / Jünglings Gedanken lange Gedanken." A literal translation of the second line might read "A youth's thoughts are long thoughts" (the earliest English translation of this song, from 1674, read, "A youth's desire is the desire of wind, / All his Essaies, / Are long delays"), but Longfellow ingeniously added an extra "long"—a move that makes the line literally longer and forces the reader to slow down as if pensive or wistful. In his original manuscript draft of the poem, Longfellow had rendered "Knabenwille" as "a child's will." But he quickly amended this to "a boy's will" for publication, perhaps connecting the *o* sound in "boy's" to the open vowels in "long thoughts."

(In his now-classic 1849 essay "The Philosophy of Composition," Edgar Allan Poe claimed that in designing his poem "The Raven" he felt he needed a refrain that was "sonorous and susceptible of protracted emphasis," a need that led him to "the long *o* as the most sonorous vowel." Like Poe's "nevermore," Longfellow's "long, long thoughts" meets this requirement. Poe himself may have been influenced by the final lines of *Hyperion*: "No more! O, how majestically mournful are those words! They sound like the roar of the wind through a forest of pines!" Poe penned a dismissive review of *Hyperion* in 1839, more than five years before writing "The Raven," though he insisted at the time that Longfellow's novel left no "definite impression" on him.)

Longfellow's refrain is a strange aphorism. How might we describe the wind's will? Turbulent? Unpredictable? Whimsical? Capricious? Unconscious? And what, exactly, is a long thought? One that stays in the mind for a long time? Or one that is slow to develop? Or one filled

with *longing*, with unreachable desires—what Longfellow refers to as “longings wild and vain”? Or is it merely a thought of “long ago”—a deep memory? And finally, what are the “thoughts of youth”? Are these the thoughts passing through a boy’s mind, or are they an adult’s thoughts about having once been a youth? (Perhaps they are “the indefinite longings incident to childhood” that Longfellow recalled in an undated autobiographical fragment.) Longfellow would probably not have known of this specific Lapland song when he was a boy, so how long has his memory been “haunted” by this translated verse? The simple refrain is richly ambiguous.

Longfellow, of course, was no youth when he composed the poem. He was forty-eight years old, and he had just resigned his professorship at Harvard, having attained financial independence (mostly through his marriage to Fanny Appleton but also from his profitable poetry). He was happy to retire from his teaching post, though quitting was bittersweet. He wrote in his journal, “I am now free! But there is a good deal of sadness in the feeling. This separating one’s self from one’s former life! This breaking away from one’s Past!—from one’s old associates and associations.” Similar feelings were likely attached to his beloved Portland, Maine, the “beautiful town that is seated by the sea” where Longfellow was born and raised. His physical ties to the place had recently been severed by the deaths of his father (1849), his older brother, Stephen (1850), and his mother (1851). There were fewer familiar faces: “Strange to me now are the forms I meet / When I visit the dear old town.”

These biographical considerations are especially relevant because “My Lost Youth” is an unusually intimate poem for Longfellow, an avid translator who preferred to trade in folktales and legends and who rarely published poems about his personal life. His penchant for echoing and recycling the words of past poets occasionally led to charges of plagiarism yet also vaulted him into fame as a dependable curator of the classics and a reliable artisan of the commonplace and familiar. It is this trait that Claudia Stokes has recently celebrated by dubbing him “the nineteenth century’s foremost unoriginal writer.” Remarkably few of Longfellow’s poems emphasize the subjectivity of the speaker or suggest the identity of Longfellow himself—though

these few, including also “The Children’s Hour,” “Mezzo Cammin,” and “The Cross of Snow,” were among his most admired after his death. Longfellow’s celebrity makes it easy to believe that he was, and still is, well known, but this is an illusion; his poetic first person was as rarely seen as the poet himself, who gave no public readings between 1854 and 1875. Perhaps this simply reflects a preference for privacy, but it also leaves open the possibility that this subject was evanescent, only as permanent as the multitudinous echoes that constituted it.

Despite this inaccessibility of the individual author, “My Lost Youth” is no better understood as a cultural artifact of the summer of 1855 that might be illuminated by a consideration of its specific contemporary social context (for instance, the bloody conflicts in Kansas). As the first word of the poem indicates, the line describes a memory that has resurfaced “often” for the poet; like Wordsworth’s famous off-flashing daffodils, the iterative or habitual nature of the recall is the whole point. The act of memory is not a singular event that belongs to one fixed moment in historical time but rather a recurring mood, an echoing of former impressions. This poem, in other words, has a long foreground.

While Wordsworth had privileged his “inner eye,” Longfellow turns to his inner ear. He visited Portland nearly every summer when his parents were alive, and its soundscapes inspired him. In 1846, for example, while sitting amid a favorite childhood haunt, he “listened to the lashing, lulling sound of the sea” and “meditated a poem.” The following year he paid close attention to “the gurgling of the tide” and the echo of an evening gun: “the islands seized the sound and tossed it farther and farther off, with multiplied reverberations, till it died away in a murmur.” Longfellow’s journal entries are generally quite prosaic, but the sonic phenomena of his hometown seem to have aroused him here. These noises resound in “My Lost Youth” as both the “sunrise gun, with its hollow roar,” and “the sea-fight far away” that “thundered o’er the tide”—allusions to a naval battle off the coast of Maine in the War of 1812.

The actual composition of the poem occurred years later, in 1855 in Cambridge, Massachusetts, a few weeks after he attended a riveting performance of his favorite opera, *Don Giovanni*, featuring

the Italian soprano Giulia Grisi (whose singing had captivated his wife twenty years earlier in Paris). Longfellow had fallen sick with the flu, and he recorded the poem's inception in his journal for 29 March:

A day of pain; and cowering over the fire. [. . .] At night, as I lie in bed, and cannot sleep, a poem comes into my mind—a memory of Portland, my native town—the City by the Sea,

Siede la terra dove nato fui
Sulla marina.

Those Italian lines are from canto 5 of Dante's *Inferno*, the subject of his final Harvard lecture the previous spring. In his later published translation, Longfellow rendered them as "Sitteth the city, wherein I was born, / Upon the sea-shore." The speaker here is Francesca da Rimini, a native of Ravenna, who is condemned to the second circle of hell—"a place mute of all light, / Which bellows as the sea does in a tempest"—where the lustful are blown about by an eternal whirlwind. When asked to relate her tale, Francesca tells Dante the Pilgrim, "*Nessun maggior dolore / Che ricordarsi del tempo felice / Nella miseria*" (There is no greater sorrow / Than to be mindful of the happy time / In misery"), and he is so filled with pity by her ensuing story that he faints.

Longfellow's translation of *The Divine Comedy* wasn't published until 1867, but he had long been a Dante devotee, and this passage was especially dear to him. On 17 December 1828, a lonely Longfellow wrote from Venice to George Washington Greene and quoted the above lines in Italian, prefacing them with an assurance to his friend that "you will call to mind those expressive words of Dante in the melancholy little story of Francesca da Rimini." Longfellow had met Greene in Venice just a year earlier, and he reflects that "the lapse of time seems a dream," offering a description of his present situation: "As I write, too, the sound of the Austrian drum, and the distant ringing of bells reaches my ear. Nothing is wanting to complete the illusion, and to make the shadow go back one year on the dial-plate of time, but to see you enter the door." Dante's lines here (*Nessun maggior dolore. . .*) were an important touchstone for Longfellow. Later in

life, following the death of his second wife, Fanny Appleton, he would habitually pen them into his journal every May 10th, the anniversary of the day in 1843 when she accepted his declaration of love.

These considerations trouble the mid-twentieth-century consensus that “My Lost Youth” is a charming, cheerful poem. If one wonders why Longfellow would render Francesca’s “terra” (“Siede la terra”) as “city” (“Sitteth the city”) in 1867, it may be because in 1855 he was thinking of Portland, his own city by the sea, rather than Francesca’s Ravenna (which was more properly a “territory”). Following this connection, one might also associate the “wind’s will” of “My Lost Youth” with the punishing hurricane of the second circle of the *Inferno*. As with Francesca, the thoughts of youth occasion a painful, plaintive nostalgia, the greatest sorrow rather than the greatest joy. In 1837, Longfellow had explained to a friend that Portland (“my native place”) was “a perfect hornet’s-nest of early recollections, insects with stings.” “When I reach Portland a most unmanly sadness comes upon me,” he wrote to another. For the poet of “My Lost Youth,” racked with the flu, the recollection of his childhood Portland fills him with despair.

Yet Longfellow, of course, was hearing more than Dante’s Italian. When one considers the care with which he listened to the sounds of his native Portland, the passage of time is certainly significant. As the scholar Richard Cullen Rath observes, “Sound mattered to early Americans in ways that it no longer does.” The mechanization and electrification of the nineteenth century, and especially Edison’s 1877 invention of sound-recording technology, irrevocably altered the epistemology of sonic phenomena. The very meanings derived from bangs, clangs, rumbles, murmurs, peals, shrieks, hums, clatters, clomps, and warbles were different in Longfellow’s youth than they were when he died in 1882.

One of Longfellow’s contemporaries, the Maine historian Edward Elwell, noted in 1882 that Portland had been—perhaps counter-intuitively—a much noisier place in the 1810s and 1820s. Prior to the advent of industrialization, the city’s harbor relied on a cacophonous operation that included singing stevedores, stamping horses, and

shouting teamsters: “Everything was then done with great noise and bustle and by main strength. The discharging of a cargo of molasses set the town in an uproar.” Portland, he continues, drove “a brisk little trade with more tumult and hurrah than now accompanies the transaction of ten times the amount of business then done. . . . Men now living, going back in memory to those bustling days, will tell you those were the times when trade was lively, and think it but a dull town now, though with five times the population and many times the amount of business.” Longfellow’s poetic memory of “the black wharves and the slips” and “the beauty and mystery of the ships” in “My Lost Youth” would have been intimately tied to these lost noises.

These sonic memories, mediated by many years, lie at the heart of the poem. Longfellow’s poetic recall offers a pulsing resonance of the Lapland song, alternately described as murmuring, throbbing, sighing, and haunting. It should come as no surprise that “My Lost Youth” ends with an echo:

And Deering’s Woods are fresh and fair,
 And with joy that is almost pain
 My heart goes back to wander there,
 And among the dreams of the days that were,
 I find my lost youth again.
 And the strange and beautiful song,
 The groves are repeating it still:
 “A boy’s will is the wind’s will,
 And the thoughts of youth are long, long thoughts.”

The groves repeat the strange and beautiful song; they echo it. And the poem’s refrain repeats it as well, stanza after stanza. But the final phrase is also itself a kind of echo, as the additional “long” (“long, long”) extends the line. This final echo is, of course, a pun on his own name: Long-fellow.

Longfellow is not often considered a funny poet, but—as a man with a name like that—he certainly had a sense of humor. “He was fond of making harmless puns and small witticisms,” reflected his son Ernest, something “those who knew him only through his writings

might not suspect." As a younger man, Longfellow had jokingly lamented the "crime of my forefathers in perpetuating such a name as mine," the frequent butt of "unpleasant puns." His friend Julia Ward Howe playfully addressed him by the nickname "Longo" in their correspondence, and he occasionally attended punning parties at James Russell Lowell's house. The pun in "My Lost Youth," in other words, is essential to both poem and poet. Longfellow's own name is quite literally the echo that he hears repeated back to him in Deering's Woods in Portland. Through a fellow feeling, he has found himself again.

Like the claim that "the thoughts of youth are long, long thoughts," Longfellow's statement that in Deering's Woods "I find my lost youth again" is artfully ambiguous. When you call out for someone in the woods and hear only an echo in return, your search is a failure. Echoes are signifiers of empty space; the repeating groves of the final stanza ironize not only the wisdom of the refrain but also the conviction that youth has been recovered. What the poet finds (in the present tense) is not his youth but his *lost* youth. He recovers it as it nevertheless remains lost. As a professor of languages, Longfellow would have known that in Greek, the word *echo* (*ēchō*, ἠχώ) is nearly identical to the verb meaning "I have" or "I hold" (*echō*, ἔχω). Wordplay on this association could be found among ancient Greek poets such as Callimachus, whose work Longfellow translated. It suggests that to hear the echo is to hold it. Longfellow recovers his "Long-" youth when he hears it echoing through the woods. But what does it mean to hear—or to hold—an echo?

For Longfellow (as for Thoreau), echoes are ontological; they model the twinned nature of the literary artist's identity, the relationship between the textual author who persists in print, frozen on the page, and the embodied writer who continues to grow and to develop. He was certainly familiar with the myth of Echo and Narcissus from Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. Ovid's Echo is a wood nymph punished by Juno; her body wastes away until she is left as a disembodied voice—"sonus est"—and she can only repeat the words of others. (Percy Shelley described Echo as "a shadow of all sounds.") Echo's story is linked to the myth of the sixteen-year-old boy Narcissus, who

dies gazing at himself in a pool of water. His last words are "*heu frustra dilecte puer*" (alas, the boy beloved in vain!), which Echo repeats through the woods. Just as Narcissus loses his life while grasping vainly at his own image (he is literally a victim of self-reflection), Echo is by Greek nomenclature an ironic twist on the desire to hold what is by nature ephemeral. This death of the boy Narcissus and the echo of his vanity reinforce the irony underlying Longfellow's joyous claim to have "found" his lost youth in Deering's Woods.

Longfellow believed that the human soul is audible and that it speaks to the "ear of thought." His own long thoughts, borne back to him by the winds of Dante's second circle of hell, vibrate with the sonic memories of a familiar Portland that no longer exists. "My Lost Youth" is a meditation on memory that listens intently for the empty echoes of what is lost. Just as Paul Flemming heard his own voice in Germany echoed back clearly to him, disembodied, as if being recorded and rejected by an angel of God, Longfellow listens into the void to hear his former voice distorted and depersonalized.

Longfellow was not simply using the literary marketplace to peddle commodified nostalgia, as he has all too often been accused of doing. He radically reconceived authorial identity as echoic. He took the relatively common notion of the poet as the inheritor and steward of a tradition and pushed it further, rejecting the romantic atomism of the self in favor of a figure of constant dissolution, a hollow man housing a wave function that crests and collapses upon the page, shoring fragments against the ruins of a long-gone voice.