

# «Spain through Henry Wadsworth Longfellow: Reality or romance?»

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Henry Wadsworth Longfellow is often described as a «transplanter of Old World culture»<sup>1</sup>, More specifically, as the one who «introduced to America the literature of Spain»<sup>2</sup>.

Longfellow's only direct contact with Spain took place in 1827 when the 20 year old future poet spent nine months in that country to prepare himself for the appointment to the newly established chair of modern languages of Bowdoin College in Maine.

European interlude, rather than a formal course of study, better describes the poet's first European visit. His reaction on first sighting the Old World reveals his glorious anticipations and his equally predestined emotional reactions:

«For to my youthful imagination the Old World was a kind of Holy Land, lying afar off beyond the blue horizon of the ocean; and when its shores first rose upon my sight, looming through the hazy atmosphere of the sea, my heart swelled with the deep emotion of the pilgrim, when he sees afar the spire which rises above the shrine of his devotion»<sup>3</sup>,

It would be difficult for any country to live up to these expectations so, it is not surprising, that the eight months he spent in France proved to be a disappointment.

Longfellow then journeyed overland by diligence to Madrid where he arrived on March 6, 1827. Contrary to this stay in France, Spain «was a period of great delight»<sup>4</sup>. So much so in fact, that when the time of departure drew near he wrote his mother: «I feel very little desire to leave Madrid, as you may imagine»<sup>5</sup>. Nevertheless, Longfellow sailed from Malaga after spending nine months in Spain.

Although in later years Longfellow returned to Europe three times, he never again visited Spain. His brother explains that Spain «appealed with the most romantic charms

1. ROBERT E. SPILLER, *Literary History of the United States*, New York: Macmillan, 1975, pág. 588.

2. STANLEY T. WILLIAMS, *The Spanish Background of American Literature*, New Haven: Yale University Press, vol. II, pág. 152.

3. LAWRENCE THOMPSON, *Young Longfellow*, New York: Octagon Books, 1969m o, 88.

4. SAMUEL LONGFELLOW, *The life of Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, with Extracts from his Journals and Correspondence*, Michigan: Scholarly Press, 1968, vol. I, pág. 134.

5. *Ibid.*, pág. 124.

to him in his most romantic years. He always referred to it with a warm glow of interest... and was unwilling to break the spell of that early time»<sup>6</sup>.

There can be no doubt that his Spanish sojourn, though of short duration, produced profound and lasting effects upon the poet. Spanish material inspired his work throughout his lifetime, both original compositions and translations from the Spanish, from the early essay «Spanish Devotional and Moral Poetry» (1833) right up to the poems «Castles in Spain» and «The Three Silences of Molinos» (1877).

Nevertheless, the poet, shortly after his return from Europe, admitted in a letter to the author of a recently published book on Spain:

«I feel rather sad, that I should have effected so little, where you have effected so much; for instead of a treasure of useful and valuable information, such as you have brought away from Spain, I have only dreamy sensations, and vague recollections of a sunny land»<sup>7</sup>.

The Longfellow thus far described, a pilgrim in Holy Land, caught in the spell of a sunny land, corresponds to popular legend, to the romantic dreamer, to «the White Mr. Longfellow», so beloved by the reading public of his generation. There is, however, another Longfellow who should not be forgotten: the poet who possessed a «facile talent for verse and a shrewd perception of the themes most acceptable to his vast audience»<sup>8</sup>. This was the author who wrote while still in Europe that »Whoever first makes a Sketch Book of Spain will necessarily make a very interesting book»<sup>9</sup>. Longfellow combined the rare ability of knowing exactly what the reading public wanted and the gift to be able to give it to them in the desired form.

I would like to consider briefly two of Longfellow's most important works based on Spanish material. The first is an original prose work and the second is a translation of a Spanish poem. To what extent are they a true representation of Spanish culture and Spanish literature? Did he, in fact, «introduce to America the literature of Spain» or are they merely an extension of the romantic Longfellow or even of the shrewd Longfellow set against the background of «a sunny land»?

#### OUTRE-MER: A PILGRIMAGE BEYOND THE SEA (1835)<sup>10</sup>

*Outre Mer* is a collection of prose essays on the poet's travels in Europe, written in the style that had been popularized by Washington Irving in his Sketch Book. In defence of the title, Longfellow wrote that «The Pays d'Outre-Mer, or the Land beyond the Sea, is a name by which the pilgrims and crusaders of old usually designated the Holy Land. I, too, in a certain sense, have been a pilgrim of Outre-Mer»<sup>11</sup>.

6. *Ibid.*, pág. 134.

7. Letter to Alexander Slidell, Oct. 15, 1829 in THOMPSON, *op. cit.*, pág. 151.

8. WILLIAMS, *op. cit.*, vol. II, pág. 153.

9. THOMPSON, *op. cit.*, págs. 131-32.

10. *Outre-Mer* in *The Works of Henry Wadsworth Longfellow*, Cambridge, mass., The Riverside Press, 1886, vol. VII.

11. THOMPSON, *op. cit.*, pág. 186.

The section devoted to Spain is divided into seven chapters: two are essays on Spanish Literature which had been published earlier and the other five chapters treat different aspects of Spain and Spanish culture based, to a great extent, upon the carefully preserved journal-letters written from abroad to his family. At times he quotes from them exactly; at other times he evidently felt it necessary to make revisions or additions for the published version. A study of these essays together with their journal-letter counterpart will help us to judge the extent of Longfellow's «Spanish realism» and distinguish between his personal experience and what he felt the American reading public should or would accept.

Chapter one is a description of the country side and towns as seen from the window of the diligence on Longfellow's journey southward from France to Madrid. It opens with an idealized though commonplace description of the weather —glorious mornning, cloudless heaven— which contrasts with an equally general but dismal picture of the villages as seen in passing —«a group of idlers at every corner, wrapped in tattered brown cloaks, ruined cottages, rude little chapel»<sup>12</sup>.

This information is similar to what he had written in his letters, but for the published version the descriptions of nature have been enlarged and will be the stock opening for four of the five chapters. Longfellow's use of nature has been called «pretty embroidery»<sup>13</sup> but in *Outre-Mer* nature is the very cloth. The derogatory description of «dark, fiendish countenances»<sup>14</sup> in his letters alluding to the Spanish peasants has been omitted for the reading public and an occasional tinkle of a mule-bell or song of a muleteer added to render a more pastoral picture.

No attempt is made to individualize the different scenes; the city of Vitoria, where the diligence stopped the first night, is dismissed because «descriptions of churches and public squares are dull and tedious matters»<sup>15</sup>.

The only attempt to involve the reader in a Spanish experience takes place at a roadside inn. The incident is fictitious but the description of the inn, based upon one he later stopped at in Segovia, is convincing<sup>16</sup>. His conversation with a fellow traveler at the inn enables him to insert two phrases in Spanish, two literary references, one on Don Quijote and the other on Gil Blas de Santillana and more important, to embellish upon the different regional dress of Sapin. Apparently, Longfellow saw no inconsistency in this colorful picture following so closely upon his comment about «tattered brown cloaks». Descriptions of colorful regional dress are a favorite theme to be found in every chapter.

Chapter two opens upon «a beautiful morning in June» which brings to mind memories of Spain. Longfellow muses on the country's past glories and the heroes that made them possible and contrasts these with the present condition of the country when the «brave and generous people» are «much abused»<sup>17</sup>. Actually, the poet has little to

12. *Outre-Mer op. cit.*, págs. 132-33.

13. VERNON PARRINGTON, *Main Currents in American Thought*, New York, Harcourt, Brace & World, n. d., vol III, pág. 334.

14. SAMUEL LONGFELLOW, *op. cit.*, pág. 107.

15. *Outre-Mer, op. cit.*, pág. 133.

16. See letter of May 13, 1827 in SAMUEL LONGFELLOW, *op. cit.*, pág. 111.

17. *Outre-Mer, op. cit.*, pág. 140.

say of the present condition, either here or in later chapters, whereas past glories are another much repeated theme.

Longfellow describes the national character as a mixture of «pride of birth, superstitious devotion to dogmas of the Church and innate dignity»<sup>18</sup>. This reference to «superstitious devotion» introduces another topic which is recurrent throughout *Outre-Mer*: religion or, to be more exact, religion as it was practised in Spain. Chapter one contained only the passing reference to a «rude little chapel» which corresponded to the general description of the village. His journal contains the caustic remark. «the people have nothing left them but rags and religion. Of these, such as they are, they have enough»<sup>19</sup>. This entry was written a few days after his arrival but the sentiment did not change as we see in a letter to his father:

«The Spaniards, in their faith... will believe anything a priest tells them to, without asking why or wherefore. But at the same time, as you may readily infer from this, they have as little pure religion as can be found upon the face of the earth. In fact, their religion may justly be compared to one of those little grocery stores in the purlieu of Green Street, which has its whole stock of sugar hats and gingerbread images stuck up at the windows»<sup>20</sup>.

In chapter five Catholic dogma and in chapter seven pious customs are ridiculed at length<sup>21</sup>. Chapter five also contains an ironic inuendo concerning the moral conduct of a village priest<sup>22</sup>. Since these incidents are not recorded in his journal, they are apparently additions, arbitrarily introduced for the reader.

The belief that Longfellow «seemed to have, more than other American poets, a comprehension of Catholic Spain» that «he showed a surprising sympathy with Catholic moods»<sup>23</sup> does not appear to be warranted. The fact that when visiting the Escorial he «could not help lingering among its gloomy arches, indulging in that pleasant kind of melancholy which such scenes are apt to inspire»<sup>24</sup> is simply Longfellow's accustomed reaction to certain aesthetic stimuli and has nothing to do with the particular religion involved. However, perhaps to be on the safe side, these remarks have been excluded from *Outre-Mer*.

Longfellow also finds a «tinge of sadness in the Spanish character. Even a Spanish holiday wears a look of sadness»<sup>25</sup> and offers as proof the «serious, sombre character (of the) national sport, the bull-fight»<sup>26</sup>. But he evades a description of it because «it has been so often and so well described by other pens»<sup>27</sup>. Longfellow's reticence to describe

18. *Ibid.*, pág. 140.

19. SAMUEL LONGFELLOW, *op. cit.*, vol. I, pág. 106.

20. *Ibid.*, vol. I, pág. 119.

21. *Outre-Mer*, *op. cit.*, págs. 177-79 e 213-14.

22. *Ibid.*, pág. 180.

23. WILLIAMS, *op. cit.*, vol. II, pág. 164.

24. SAMUEL LONGFELLOW, *op. cit.*, vol. I, pág. 115.

25. *Outre-Mer*, *op. cit.*, pág. 141.

26. *Ibid.*, pág. 142.

27. *Ibid.*

a bullfight should not be interpreted as a lack of personal experience or of sympathy with the sport. A journal entry leaves no doubt:

«May 21. The Bull-fight. The best of the season. A great number of horses killed. A great many hair-breadth escapes of picadores: -a banderillero tossed in the air. -one of the aficionados: -a good lesson for him»<sup>28</sup>.

Nor were bullfights easily forgotten. «I quarrel with myself every day», he wrote after his return, «for not having seen more Bull fights»<sup>29</sup>.

If this is an instance of deletion to cater to the taste of the reading public, he was undoubtedly right in his judgment. His brother, Samuel Longfellow, makes no mention of bullfights in his biography. Even recent critics have been hard put to gloss over this entry. «The obvious explanation of this insensibility», according to one, «was not that Longfellow had turned Spanish but that he was protected by a chronic limitation which kept him from recognizing reality when he was confronted with it»<sup>30</sup>. Another explanation which pinpoints an important facet of Longfellow's character is that he was «self-indulgently romantic, he uses imagination rather for escape from reality than for penetration of it»<sup>31</sup>.

However, these explanations do not ring true in this particular case: the author of the journal notation was for once wide awake and aware of his surroundings.

It seems more likely that Longfellow wanted to evade a description which would be offensive to many of his readers, so he compromised and ended the chapter by quoting from «one of the old Spanish ballads upon the subject: Lochhart's translation of «The Bullfight of Ganzul». Through the distancing in time and the use of a literary medium the sport could be considered a romantic tradition which in turn would account for the poet's present interest. What was old was romantic and the romantic was his reality.

The next chapter is a kaleidoscopic view of a supposedly typical day in the life of Madrid as seen from Longfellow's third floor balcony, overlooking the busy Puerta del Sol. At this height he can ignore «the poor and slovenly dress of the inhabitants»<sup>32</sup>. A colorful and noisy pageant is acted out below us: farmers in regional dress hawking their wares, a beautiful girl, a gay gallant and for contrast a barefooted Carmelite who permits the author to speculate on a life of «penitence and prayer»<sup>33</sup>. Longfellow is not aware of irony when he claims that the monk «standest aloof from man»<sup>34</sup>. The square is suddenly silent and deserted and Longfellow turns from the balcony to indulge «in the exquisite luxury of a siesta»<sup>35</sup>.

In the evening, when «the city awakens from its slumber... the living tide now sets towards the Prado, and the beautiful gardens of the Retiro»<sup>36</sup>. But what the poet really

28. THOMPSON, *op. cit.*, pág. 113.

29. *Ibid.*, pág. 151.

30. IRIS WHITMAN quoted in THOMPSON, *op. cit.*, pág. 367.

31. ODELL SHEPARD quoted in *Ibid.*

32. *Ibid.*, pág. 141.

33. *Ibid.*, pág. 149.

34. *Ibid.*, pág. 150.

35. *Ibid.*, pág. 151.

36. *Ibid.*, pág. 152.

loves is «to linger on the Prado till the crowd is gone and the night far advanced»<sup>37</sup> There, «musing and alone», the poet inhabits «almost a fairyland... beneath the skies of Spain»<sup>38</sup>.

A visit to El Pardillo, a village near Madrid, is the subject of Chapter five. He had seen the villages of the north of Spain on his journey to Madrid and found «that for the most part they have few charms to entice one from the city; but (he) was curious to see the peasantry of the land in their native homes, to see how far the shepherds of Castile resemble those who sigh and sing in the pastoral romances of Montemayor and Gaspar Gil Polo»<sup>39</sup>.

El Pardillo es «only a cluster of weather-stained and dilapidated houses, huddled together without beauty or regularity; but the scenery around it is picturesque»<sup>40</sup>. However, in the evening, it is transformed into «the beautiful landscape that spread before me»<sup>41</sup>.

The site of the village church also attracted him in the evening «when in pensive or melancholy mood»<sup>42</sup>. One evening, upon hearing children's voices, he entered the church while the priest was giving religious instruction. «The questions and answers were so curious» that Longfellow devotes two pages to them and advises any reader skeptical of the truth of his statement to consult the Spanish catechism<sup>43</sup>. This incident does not appear in his journal, so we assume it to be an addition.

The opinion that «Nature with him (Longfellow), whether human or external, is always seen through the windows of literature»<sup>44</sup> is proven by this chapter. The Spanish writers Montemayor and Gil Polo are mentioned, the peasant Lucas is reminiscent of Rip Van Winkle, while echoes of Goldsmith and Gray are heard in the simple virtues of this «happy place, though all unknown to fame»<sup>45</sup>.

A village pilgrimage, like «that of old... that toward Canterbury wolden ride»<sup>46</sup> closes the chapter. After visiting an old Moorish alcazar, each traveler entertains the group with a story. Longfellow repeats one, then ends the chapter with his usual evasive: the other tales are too frivolous to repeat.

The final chapter takes us to the south of Spain where Longfellow is to embark for Italy. The structure of the chapter closely follows that used in chapter one to recount his Journey by diligence from France to Madrid.

The town of Aranjuez, enveloped in the moonlight, is only vaguely perceived; while La Mancha comes alive only in its relation to Don Quijote. The poet confesses «There are seasons when I am willing to be the dupe of my imagination; and if this

37. *Ibid.*

38. *Ibid.*

39. *Ibid.*, págs. 172-73.

40. *Ibid.*, pág. 175.

41. *Ibid.*

42. *Ibid.*, pág. 176.

43. *Ibid.*, págs. 177-79.

44. MARGARET FULLER in JAY B. HUBBELL, *Who are the Major American Writers*, North Carolina, Duke University Press, 1972, pág. 36.

45. *Outre-Mer*, *op. cit.*, pág. 181.

46. *Ibid.*, pág. 183.

harmless folly but lends its wings to a dull-paced hour, I am even ready to believe a fairy tale»<sup>47</sup>.

Once again, Longfellow uses a stop at an inn to involve the reader in Spanish «reality». This time he introduces a poor student who in return for his food, tells the story of his life, «beginning with his birth and parentage like the people in *Gil Blas*»<sup>48</sup>. In spite of many trials, the student manages to survive by his wits in true picaresque fashion.

Longfellow cites *El Buscón* by Francisco de Quevedo as a faithful picture of life in a Spanish University, bridging the two intervening centuries with the reassurance that «What was true in his day is true in ours»<sup>49</sup>. In outline the student's tale is similar to Quevedo's. Even the opening, which Longfellow associated with *Gil Blas*, mirrors more faithfully Quevedo, complete to the profession of his father «de oficio barbero»<sup>50</sup>. The expression «raising the dead» which Longfellow explains in detail is also found in *El Buscón*. However, the «midnight frolics» and «madcap revelries» are more Longfellow than Quevedo.

Longfellow's use of Quevedo's grotesque caricature as an example of nineteenth century Spanish University life is another instance of his dependence upon literature whenever he attempts to describe a Spanish experience.

Continuing his journey southward, Longfellow remarks on the magnificent mountain scenery but in general finds little to comment on in Andalucia until he reaches Granada.

The countryside around Córdoba is enchanting, evidence of the «luxuriance of this sunny clime»<sup>51</sup> but the city itself is a disappointment. All that remains of the history of Moorish dominion is a «crumbling wall» and a «Saracen mosque, now changed to a Christian cathedral»<sup>52</sup>. For a lover of the past this is not «the imperial city of Alhakam the Just, and Abdoulrahman the Magnificent»<sup>53</sup>.

Of Sevilla he can only repeat Byron's phrase- «pleasant city, famous for oranges and women»<sup>54</sup>. As Byron had predicted, he found Cadiz more beautiful, «the cities of our dreams are not more enchanting»<sup>55</sup>. The beauty of the Gaditana turns the poet's thoughts to the swift and fleeting passage of time.

It was Granada that allowed Longfellow to relive the past «within the walls of that earthly paradise of the Moorish Kings»<sup>56</sup>. The reader will learn little about the city or even the Alhambra but none can doubt the poet's emotional attraction to the «enchanted palace, whose exquisite beauty baffles the power of language to describe»<sup>57</sup>.

47. *Ibid.*, pág. 207.

48. *Ibid.*, pág. 209.

49. *Ibid.*, pág. 210.

50. FRANCISCO DE QUEVEDO, *El Buscón*, ed. Domingo Ynduráin, Madrid, cátedra, 1980, pág. 79.

51. *Outre-Mer*, *op. cit.*, pág. 215.

52. *Ibid.*, pág. 216.

53. *Ibid.*

54. *Ibid.*, pág. 217.

55. *Ibid.*, pág. 218.

56. *Ibid.*, pág. 223.

57. *Ibid.*, pág. 226.

«Is this reality and not a dream»<sup>58</sup> wondered Longfellow in Granada. Almost an echo of our original question: Is the poet's Spain Reality or Romance?

In *Outre Mer* his descriptions and interpretations of Spanish life were definitely not reality but the result of a youthful imagination, dreams of his own fabrication.

We believe there were two different reasons for this. First, the fact that his knowledge of Spanish was very limited, even after his nine months in the country.

The second reason is more complex. Something in the poet's nature required him to view the outside world from afar. In *Outre Mer* he achieves this by different methods. One was his belief that nineteenth century Spain could be interpreted through classic Spanish literature and histories that he had read in America. A further distancing occurs when he attempts to explain Spain through English literature, as in Lockhart's description of a bullfight or Byron's thoughts on Sevilla and Cadiz.

When Longfellow must speak in his own voice, reality comes to us filtered through a window pane as in his journey in diligence through Spain or it is seen from a height as when he describes the bustle of Madrid from a third floor balcony, through blinding sunlight or best of all at twilight when reality is enveloped in a romantic haze.

The second work I would like to discuss is «Coplas de Manrique»<sup>59</sup>, a translation from the Spanish of the fifteenth century poem entitled «Coplas a la Muerte del Maestre Don Rodrigo» by Jorge Manrique.

In August of 1832 Longfellow wrote to borrow a volume containing the «Coplas» from the Harvard College Library. His translation was originally published in the *New England Magazine* (Dec. 1832) and the following year Allen and Ticknow edited *Coplas de Manrique* (1833) in book form.

The slim volume included the original Spanish text alongside the translation, plus a preface to introduce the Spanish poet to the American public and to set forth Longfellow's views on translation. The volumen was further filled out by a few additional translations of shorter Spanish poems.

The poet wrote that his wish was «to make rather an elegant book than a large one» but the practical businessman added that «as the number of pages in rather small it will be a matter of some importance to have the paper thick»<sup>60</sup>.

Although the volume was not successful, Longfellow's faith in his translation and his continued delight in the theme of Jorge Manrique never wavered. He later inserted it in his sketch book *Outre-Mer* and finally included it in the immensely popular volume of poems *Voices of the Night* (1839). As late as 1852, Longfellow quited six lines from the seventeenth copla in his diary to comment on the brevity of worldly pleasures. It is interesting to note that at this later date the poet transcribed the original Spanish lines rather than his translation<sup>61</sup>.

In the introduction to the «Coplas», Longfellow states that «the object of this little work is to place in the hands of the lovers of Spanish literature the most beautiful moral poem of

58. *Ibid.*, pág. 223.

59. *The Complete Poetical Works of Henry Wadsworth Longfellow*, Cambridge, Mass., The Riverside Edition, 1893.

60. THOMPSON, *op. cit.*, pág. 387.

61. SAMUEL LONGFELLOW, *op. cit.*, vol. II, pág. 231.



that language»<sup>62</sup>. «The great art of translating well», he continues, «lies in the power of rendering literally the words of a foreign author while at the same time we preserve the spirit of the original»<sup>63</sup>. This was the principle that Longfellow believed he had followed:

«I have rendered literally the words of the original, when it could be done without injuring their spirit; and when this could not be done, I have occasionally used the embellishment of an additional epithet, or a more forcible turn of expression»<sup>64</sup>.

What we would like to question here is if the English reading public was, in fact, given a true version of Jorge Manrique, one that reproduced not only the words but also the tone, or in the words of Longfellow, the «spirit of the original». Is Longfellow, as Menendez Pelayo asserted, «el más excelente de los traductores de esta elegía que conocemos en lengua alguna»<sup>65</sup> Or would it be more exact to consider the American «Coplas» an original poem which had been inspired by the Spanish poet?

The 480 verses of the Spanish «Coplas» are divided into forty stanzas of twelve octasyllable verses except the 3rd, 6th, 9th, and 12th which are half lines and vary slightly. The rhyme is ABCABCDEFDEF.

Longfellow used a different meter and rhyme for his translation although he believed it to be an «equivalent stanza»<sup>66</sup>. The verses are divided into six-line stanzas of iambic tetrameter, with the 3rd and 6th verse iambic dimeter, rhyming AABCCB.

Longfellow's version has an additional 24 verses, four stanzas, inserted between stanzas 24 and 25 of the original, which do not belong to his particular poem. Spanish scholarship considers them to be inferior to the «Coplas» and of doubtful authorship. The inclusion of these four stanzas necessarily breaks the internal structure of the original «Coplas».

Important as these considerations are when judging the fidelity of the translation, more important, we believe, is the question of tone or style, what Longfellow called «the spirit of the original». Here the two works are radically different as we can judge from the following verses:

62. HENRY WADSWORTH LONGFELLOW, *op. cit.*, pág. 586.

63. *Ibid.*

64. *Ibid.*

65. MARCELINO MENÉNDEZ Y PELAYO, *Antología de Poetas Líricos Castellanos*, Biblioteca Clásica, Madrid, 1896, Tomo VI, pág. CXXXVII.

66. HENRY WADSWORTH LONGFELLOW, *op. cit.*, pág. 586.

COPLAS A LA MUERTE DE DON  
RODRIGO MANRIQUE, MAESTRE  
DE SANTIAGO

## I

Recuerde el alma dormida,  
avive el seso y despierte,  
contemplando  
cómo se pasa la vida,  
cómo se viene la muerte  
tan callando;  
cuán presto se va el plazer,  
cómo, después de acordado,  
da dolor;  
cómo a nuestro parescer,  
cualquiera tiempo pasado  
fue mejor.

## 6

Este mundo bueno fue  
si bien usasemos del  
como debemos,  
porque, según nuestra fe,  
es para ganar aquél  
que atendemos.  
Aun aquel fijo de Dios  
para sobirnos al cielo  
descendió  
a nacer acá entre nos,  
y a vivir en este suelo  
do murió<sup>67</sup>.

FROM THE SPANISH COPLAS DE  
MANRIQUE

## I

Oh let the soul her slumbers break,  
Let thought be quickened, and awake;  
Awake to see  
How soon this life is past and gone,  
And death comes softly stealing on,  
How silently!

## 2

Swiftly our pleasures glide away,  
Our hearts recall the distant day  
With many sights;  
The moments that are peeding fast  
We heed not, but the past, -the past,  
More highly prize.

## 11

Did we but use it as we ought,  
This world would school each wandering thought  
To its high state.  
Faith wings the soul beyond the sky,  
Up to that better world on high,  
For which we wait.

## 12

Yes, the glad messenger of love,  
To guide us to our home above,  
The Saviour came;  
Born amid mortal cares and fears,  
He suffered in this vale of tears  
A death of shame<sup>68</sup>.

The urgency and authority of the opening imperative of Manrique's verse has been softened by Longfellow to a plaintive «Oh let». His verse is further slowed by the repeated use of the conjunction «and», whereas the Spanish uses short phrases, separated by commas which sustain the mood of dynamic energy generated by the opening command.

Manrique reinforces the «virile emotion»<sup>69</sup> by the repetition of the harsh sound /k/ which opens seven verses of the first stanza (ls. 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9) and is internal in four

67. *Obra Completa de Jorge Manrique*, Estudio Crítico de Miguel de Santiago, Libros Rio Nuevo, Serie Ucieza, Ediciones 29, Madrid, 1978, págs. 193-208.

68. HENRY WADSWORTH LONGFELLOW, *op. cit.*, págs. 587-92.

69. ANGEL VALBUENA PRAT, *Historia de la Literatura Española*, Barcelona, Editorial Gustavo Geli, 1960, tomo I, pág. 314 «Una emoción varonil va llenando todo el poema...».

(ls. 1, 6, 8, 11) which Longfellow will carefully weaken. Longfellow prolongs the plaintive note by use of long vowels and diphthongs which further slow the rhythm.

The impression of strength and stark reality of the original «Coplas», achieved by a concise, direct syntax, free of modification or qualification, is entirely lost in the translation. For example, in the first stanza of Longfellow's version the word *slumbers* (l. 1) replaces the more direct *dormida* (l. 1) of the original which could correspond to the simple verb «sleep». «Death» in the Spanish version *se viene... tan callando* (ls. 5-6), literally «comes... how silently» has been further muted and embellished by Longfellow to read *comes softly stealing on/How silently* (ls. 5-6). In the same way, «pleasure» that *cuan presto se va* (l. 7), which can be expressed by the English «how quicnkly... goes», has been etherealized by Longfellow to *Swiftly... glide away* (l. 7).

To cite from another stanza (6th in the Spanish, 11th in Longfellow), the direct *si bien usásemos* (l. 2), which is to say «if we used well» has been paraphrased out of all recognition to read *would school each wandering thought* (l. 2). With the Spanish phrase *para ganar aquél* (l. 5), literally «to gain that», Longfellow has allowed his imagination to take flight and translates it *wings the soul beyond the sky/Up to that better world on high* (ls. 56).

In the sixth stanza of Manrique, twelfth of Longfellow, the direct *fijo de Dios* (l. 7), in English «son of God», is translated as *the glad messenger of love* (l. 1). In the same way, *para sobirnos al cielo* (l. 8), that is «to lift us to heaven» has been domesticated to *To guide us to our home above* (l. 2). The Spanish *a nacer acá entre nos* (l. 10), which literally means something like «to be born here among us», has been sentimentalized to *Born amid mortal care and fears* (l. 4). In the same stanza we find the overworked *vale of tears* (l. 5) as the translation of the unadorned Spanish *este suelo* (l. 11), or «this earth».

In the Spanish «Coplas», «The overcharged affectivity intensified by the briefness of expression, is accentuated by the syndetic function of each third verse...»<sup>70</sup> while Longfellow's prolixity spins gossamer to hide the rough edge of reality and permit the reader to advance placidly without ever experiencing the «slight chill that overcomes us», with the Spanish, «and forces us to think»<sup>71</sup>.

Francisco Caravaca has made a parallel study of eight Coplas and the corresponding Longfellowian version. Some of his partial conclusions are similar to ours but we cannot agree that «The language used by Longfellow is characterized by its simplicity»<sup>72</sup> His final verdict of the translation is also much more favorable. Caravaca defines the translation as a «great literary truth and of a singular, interpretive fineness»<sup>73</sup>.

70. *Poesía de Jorge Manrique*, ed. Jesús Manuel Alda Tesán, Ediciones Cátedra, S.A., Madrid, 1978, pág. 53. «La sobrecarga afectiva intensificada en la brevedad de la expresión, se acentúa con el proceso sindético de la frase ternaria enumerativa...».

71. «Azorín», *Al margen de los clásicos*, editorial Losada, Buenos Aires, 1958, pág. 18. «...escalofrío ligero que nos sobrecoge un momento y nos hace pensar».

72. FRANCISCO CARAVACA, «Estudio de ocho coplas de Jorge Manrique, en relación con la traducción de Longfellow», *Boletín de la Biblioteca de Menéndez Pelayo*, año L enero-diciembre, 1975, nn. 1, 2, 3, 4., pág. 28. «La lengua empleada por Longfellow se caracteriza por su sencillez».

73. 90. «de gran probidad literaria y de singular finura...»

All criticism however, has not been as favorable as this. As early as 1891 one critic comments that Longfellow's «version of the *Coplas* of Jorge Manrique still sounds pleasantly in some Spanish ears, though not all are able to appreciate it»<sup>74</sup>.

An early opinion has, we believe, inadvertently, defined the translation exactly: «Among the Translations I was especially taken with the Ode of Don Jorge Manrique. It is an exquisite Poem; and reads so like an original, I cannot help thinking, that... it owes not a little to some subtle infusion from the Translator's own mind»<sup>75</sup>.

To return to our original question: Did Longfellow present a true representation of Spanish culture and literature? We believe that he did not. What Longfellow longed for in Spain was to relive the romances he had read in his boyhood. In this he was successful. The present simply did not exist for him. Although at times he was conscious of the deception, «One almost thinks he has got back into old pastoral times; and the peculiar dress of the Spanish peasantry add much to this romantic self-deception»<sup>76</sup>, he invariably encouraged it. In a sense it was a double deception - one he never admitted. He preferred to believe «I like to see things in reality-not in painting-to study men-not books»<sup>77</sup>.

Much the same can be said for his translations. As a critic he was able to recognize the particular characteristics of the original. He notes the «energetic and beautiful simplicity» of the Spanish verse where all is »described in the fewest possible words; there is no ornament, no artifice»<sup>78</sup>. But when he attempted to render them in English, it was his own creative personality that dominated.

Although in the preface to the translations Longfellow claimed to «have rendered literally the words of the original, when it could be done without injuring their spirit; and when this could not be done, (to) have occasionally used the embellishment of an additional epithet, or a more forcible turn of expression»<sup>79</sup>, the result is quite different. He never used a literal translation if he could possibly use a paraphrase; nor did he ever use «a more forceful turn of expression».

Longfellow appears to have been psychologically incapable of reproducing the vital energy and naked statement of the «Coplas». He must remain the «skillful purveyor of gentle, lovable ideals»<sup>80</sup>.

74. Cultura española, May, 1907 in John de Lancey Ferguson, *American Literature in Spain*, New York, AMS Press, 1966, pág. 146.

75. SAMUEL LONGFELLOW, *op. cit.*, vol. I, págs. 351-52.

76. Letter dated July 16, 1827 in Samuel Longfellow, *op. cit.*, pág. 122.

77. THOMPSON, *op. cit.*, pág. 114.

78. *Outre-Mer*, *op. cit.*, pág. 156.

79. HENRY WADSWORTH LONGFELLOW, *op. cit.*, vol. VII, pág. 586.

80. VERNON LOUIS PARRINGTON, *Main Currents in American Thought*, New York, Barcourt, Brace & World, n. d., vol. II, pág. 431