Longfellow's Hiawatha.

A perfect judge will read each work of wit,
With the same spirit that it's author writ,
Survey the whole, nor seek slight faults to find,
Where nature moves, and rapture fills the
But in such lines, as neither ebb nor flow,
Correctly cold and regularly low,
That, thundering faults one quiet tenor keep,
We cannot blame, indeed — but we may sleep
Tiel run on poets in a raging vein
Even to the dregs & dropping of their sense
And "write" with all the race of impotence.

Pope.

To throw around the wild traditions of the Red Man, the charm and grace of poesy," is a task well worthy of the brightest genius; even without this master-spell they possess a wild and thrilling interest.

It is almost an untrodden field,

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a few indeed have entered, and, wandering along the boundaries of this mystic region, where the midday glare of History has dispelled the shadows of the Past, [illegible] plucked a few of those sweet little forest flowers, which love not the sunshine, but lingering, blown beneath the lone oak's friendly shade; and [illegible] them [illegible] a chaplet to adorn thier, beauteous and unfading as the classic laurel; but they dare not trust slender thread of tradition, rendered brittle by the mildew of ages, to guide them among the dark labyrinths of the past.

To perform this task in a manner worthy of its importance requires a thorough knowledge of Indian history and tradition, all of which is one continuous web of romance, interwoven, it is true, with much which the poet should reject as unworthy of his pen, yet offering to him who loves Nature, with a true devotion,

a noble field for the exercise of poetic genius. A perfect knowledge of Indian character, is also requisite to execute this task.

The Indian character taken as a whole, (though some of its components may be base) is of a noble, dignified cast. It is the old Roman dignity, simplicity, blended with Spartan cunning and treachery, and the imperturbable gravity of the stoic; And whoever depicts it as lacking any one of these, or others of minor importance, degrades the Indian character, and exposes himself to critical censure. The poet must also be familiar with the Indian Mythology; this is as striking and peculiar as might be expected from a mind so idiomatic, surrounded by such peculiar influences. Roving in unrestrained freedom amid the unbroken solitude of the forest, standing beside

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the roaring cataract, or listening to the wild music of the waves as the storm-King hurts them to the shore, beholding Nature roughest moods and most majestic forms, the Indian mind became impregnated with grandeur, and when he mused upon the cause, the mighty works surrounding him pointed to an almighty cause this cause he termed the Great Spirit, than which a Deity more exalted, dignified and God-like can be found nowhere outside the limits of Christian theology, He was omnipotent omniscient, the origin ruler and preserver of the universe, infinite and immutable rewarding the just and punishing the unjust. The ancient Jove is not to be compared in dignity or power, with The Great Spirit. Thier heroes were deified after death; and each phenomenon had its genius

If thus prepared there is no lack of material, no dearth of incident, every foot of our land is or should be classic ground

"Long, long ago the Red Man made, His dwelling in our forests shade," in every vale "the dark rich soil has carnage drunk," from every hill "our roving eyes behold the scenery of some legend old."

Every jutting promontory that divides the bright waters of our noble lakes, every creek and river in whose banks "the shelving clay, When worn by the wash of waves away Rude implements of other days And skeletons arrest the gaze," has its appropriate name "bearing on its forehead its significance that he who runs may read.

A few years since Longfellow, who was by many considered our best American poet announced, that he was engaged

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on a poem, which was to embody the most beautiful and romantic Indian traditions this naturally excited considerable speculation in the literary world and some of the poets admirers, even predicted as the result another great epic. It came; sanguine friends read and slept, foes ridiculed and burles lessened, critics considered the prey too insignificant for thier pens, and all agreed that it should be left to die in peace. The fact that Agha Vatag been announced the author is about to publish another volume of poems must be our apology (if one be necessary) for mentioning Hiawatha. Let us first glance at the prologue, introduction, or whatever it may be, for our author does not name it and we cannot; in this he informs us that he recieved these legends and traditions, "from the lips of Hiawatha

"The musician the sweet singer"

We see by this that the poem is not only intended to embody in narrative verse the mythologic and historic traditions of the Indians, but is to be considered as the production of an Indian minstrel (if we may so term it) and related by him to those having implicit faith in the traditions which he narrates; it should therefore not only be a perfect + complete index of Indian character, but it should be related in a manner to accord with its supposed origin, and design, in rude, earnest, graphic, language, abunding in bold, original, yet natural and pointed, metaphor; a measure, strong, flexible and sonorous, one fitted to describe deeds of prowess and heroism, scenes of mystery and horror, the furious charge, the sudden yell, the successful ambush

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the fierce and desperate struggle, and the wild, defiant death-song. Let us see if our author's work embodies these essential requisites. He proceeds to inform us that Nawadaha found these legends

"In the bird's nests of the forest
In the lodges of the beaver
In the hoof prints of the bison
In the eyrie of the eagle," a very pretty sentiment, but it seems to us rather doubtful authority for national traditions or a mythology recieving popular credence. After informing us who this Nawadaha was, he addresses himself directly to his readers, thus "Ye who love the haunts of Nature"

"Love the wind among the branches"
"And the rushing of great rivers"
"And the thunder in the mountains"
"Whose innumerable echoes"

"Flap like eagles in thier eyries." Listen to this Indian legend

To us the flapping of eagles hardly seems a fit metaphor to represent the reverberations of thunder; We fear our author in seeking to be original has ceased to be consistent. Here too we find a clue to the manner in which the author treats his subject.

"Ye who love a nations legends"
"Love the ballads of a people"
"That like voices from a far off"
"Call to us to pause and listen"
"Speak in tones so plain and child like"
"Scarcely can the ear distinguish"
"Whether they are sung or spoken"
"Listen to this Indian legend."

It is plain from this that he considers simplicity the leading element of Indian character; thus we shall find, he aims at simplicity throughout his poem

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This address half-apology, half-appeal to the indulgence of the reader, ~~one~~ contains some of the finest passages in the poem, one especially, which while it serves still ~~farther~~ farther to illustrate the author's idea of simplicity we consider among the very best and with this we leave it. Ye whose hearts are fresh and simple

"Who believe that in all ages"
"Every human heart is human"
"That the feeble hands & helpless"
"Groping blindly in the darkness"
"Touch God's right hand in that dark
And are lifted up and strengthened"
"Listen to this simple story."

We now come to the legend itself; the first chap. narrates the prophecy in fulfillment of which the wonderous Hawatha came to earth. We are here informed that "in the days long since forgotten" the Great Spirit, descending

to earth, stood on the great Red Pipestone quarry, a sparkling river flowed from either foot and detaching a huge fragment of rock, he fashioned it into a pipe bowl, an mighty reed furnished a stem, and filling the bowl with bark he quietly began to smoke; all of which so far as we may judge is very appropos and Indian-like. The ascending smoke is a signal to the nations, who straightway assemble round the mountain's base; when the Great spirit proceeds to give enumerate his gifts and favors reprove them for ingratitude, give them some good advice, command them to be at peace henceforward, promises to send them a prophet "who shall teach and guide" them, directs them to bathe in the stream before them, "wash the war-paint from thier faces" bury thier war clubs (this being I suppose previous to the invention of tomahawks,) "Smoke the

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calumet together." And as brothers live henceforward"
Each warrior in compliance with these requests
having prepared himself for a quiet smoke—
and "departed each one homeward." Great
Manito smiles benignantly upon them
and vanishes— Jove and the Prophets, not
into thin air nor a cloud but— Apollo &
the Muses!! what a triumph of poetic trans-
formation!!! he vanishes into Smoke!!!
"'Tis a consummation devoutly to be wished."
How does this description of the Great Spirit, that
noble deity of Indian tradition, compare
with the Thunderer, a being really of far less
beautiful and majestic character. There is
not even the dignity of power, for his presence in-
spired no awe and his authority was scarce
sufficient to quell the raging animosities of
hostile tribes, and he must have appeared very
commonplace if not contemptible to those stern

warriors; and beside the idea of human beings
quietly
bathing & smoking in the immediate & visible
presence of Deity is superlatively ludicrous
We next behold the "mighty Mudjekeewis," the
the sire of Hiawatha, who being deified for
"deeds of valor done," becomes ruler of the winds,
himself retains the west wind and gives the
remaining three to his sons; Episodes are in-
troduced giving the adventures of each of these;
that of Wabun is one of the prettiest, spright-
liest things in the poem. This chap. probably
contains the best description of any, some of this
is very nearly beautiful; Beauty of the Lake style it has
to some extent. No Komis daughter of the Moon,
and her daughter Wenonah now appear upon
the stage, and "Then was born my Hiawatha;
his mother Wenonah having died, "this child of wonder" he was left to
the care of his grand mother old No Komis. There
seems to have been nothing in the infancy & childhood

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of our hero, like most great men, (our author among the number) his development was slow. This chapter closes with a magnificent description of the feast where the hero kills his first deer.

All the village came and feasted
All the guests praised Hiawatha
Called him loon heart Mahnguy-o-ta
see. But the lack of miracles in our hero's childhood is soon abundantly supplied for we see him visiting the home of the west Wind to avenge his mother's wrongs, armed in the following remarkable manner.

He had mittens Minjekawun
Magic mittens made of deer skin
When upon his hands he wore them
He could smite the rocks asunder
He could grind them into powder.

This is curious armour for an Indian. Whoever heard of an Indian's wearing mittens?

What traveller, what journalist, what collector of curious information supplied this item? Why the Indian considers it disgraceful effeminate & derogatory to his manhood to wear mittens. But the most ridiculous thing about it is, that he was to use these as weapons; ~~no~~ doubtless an ancient Greek or Trojan would have used these wondrous gauntlets to advantage, Dares would have rejoiced to oppose them to the "geminos immani pondere caestus" of Entellus; but unfortunately for the consistency of our author, the Indian never practices "the glorious art of self defence" he would as soon use his head for a trip-hammer as his fist for a war club, or supply the lack of hammers of the geologists. But this is not all

He had mocassons enchanted
Magic mocassons of deer skin
When he bound them round his ankles

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At each stride a mile he measured."
Now we ask any intelligent person if this does not more resemble the narrative of Mother goose, than a national legend entitled to national credence.
Dire was his conflict with Mudjekeewis lasting three days and resulting in a drawn battle neither side gaining the victory. The magic mittens performed wonders smashing rocks which would terrify our modern hard fisted athletes, with perfect ease; by the conditions of the treaty Hiawatha after death becomes ruler of the North west wind. In his return he stops in the land of the Dacotaks and quietly falls in love with the daughter of an arrow maker Minnehaha. His next adventure was a revision of the old orthodox Jacobite miracle of wrestling with the angel with this variation; the angel was slain buried and sprang up corn.

Hiawatha's two friends are characters who appear to have been thrown in for no purpose at all. Chibiabos was a musician and Kewasind who was a second growth Samson whom just to save from positive idleness, Hiawatha employs to clear the channels for his canoe, makes him a regular "River and harbor improvement Bill," who should have kept at work snagging the Mississippi till this time. Our hero having built a canoe invents a novel motive power, which if it should be applied at the present day would form an era in scientific navigation.

"Paddles none had Hiawatha
Paddles none he had or needed
For his thoughts served him for paddles
And his wishes served to guide him."
Strong minded man that.

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(At length he goes fishing), and far out
in the Big Sea water after many dis-
appointments succeeds in hooking a
mammoth sturgeon "mighty Nahma
(King of Fishes)," who instead of sub-
mitting quietly to being towed ashore by
this improved propeller, "Opened his great
jaws and swallowed, "Both canoe and Hiawatha"
the modern Jonah "groped about in helpless
wonder" till he felt a great heart beating
Throbbing in that utter darkness,
And he smote it in his anger
With his fist, the heart of Nahma
Felt the mighty king of Fishes
Shudder through each nerve + fiber
Heard the water gurgle round him
As he leaped and staggered through it,
Sick at heart and faint and weary.
And well he might be sick at heart, for Hiawatha's
magic mittens and his pugilistic abilities

would doubtless made an impression on a
less susceptible heart than his.
Crosswise then did Hiawatha
Drag his birch canoe for safety. This inter-
esting operation must have raised some
commotion beneath the monsters scales; it
probably seriously deranged his digestive ap-
aratus, and to this doubtless Hiawatha owed
his safety, for nothing else could have preser-
ved him "nisi deus intersit." In effecting
these improvements he was assisted by the
squirrel whom in return he christens "tail
in air," "Stranded at length by stress of weather
I suppose the huge leviathan lies dead upon
the margin of the Big Sea water, immediately
the Sea Gulls open huge rifts in his sides, from
which Tail-in-air, and Hiawatha issue - "lacti-
que cavo promunt," as a reward for this ser-
vice he names the Sea gulls "Noble Scratchers"!!

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The hero next undertakes an expedition against the "Pearl feather" the great magician who had slain his grandmother's father in days "long syne" and now dwelt beyond the black pitch water, he is armed with a most pugnacious war club, his rock crushing mittens & "his jasper headed arrows" he first applies science to navigation by smearing the sides of his canoe with the oil of the defunct sturgeon that it may glide swiftly through the pitchy waves, re-acts Apollo and the pythoness, shooting any quantity of serpents; in describing his voyage the author has one passage & beautifully & pathetic it is this "And the Bullfrog the Dahinda"
"Thrust his head into the moolight"
"Fixed his yellow eyes upon him"
"Sobbed and sank beneath the surface"
Doubtless the bullfrog of that ancient day

~~the~~ expressed "the sadness that was in him" by sobbing but of late when oppressed by grief he bellows it right out. The conflict with the magician is terrific & our hero is woefully tired ~~his~~ badly wounded and his mittens sadly torn. Hiawatha now reflects that "as unto the bow ~~unto~~ the cord is, So to man is woman" so putting on his mile stride ~~boots~~ mocassons he journeys to the land of the Dacotahs and without rivalry or opposition marries the lovely Mumehaha. Having now arrived at the consummation we must pass rapidly on over the remaining chapters of "The blessing of the cornfields we shall say nothing, nor of "picture writing, nor Hiawatha's lamentation", save that from either one might cull inconsistencies enough to fill a quire. The adventures transmigrations and transfigurations of Pau Puk Keewis remind us of

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the Frenchman's ado injunction to the police officer in the old comedy "Catch him hard hold him strong, break his neck several times but don't kill him too much." Hiawatha is now beset with ghosts and famine and these two chapters are in our humble estimation the best and most Indian like in the poem, the introduction of the ghosts is almost dramatic. But the end approaches Kwasind is killed, Minnehaha dies; the white man comes and Hiawatha departs, but his grand mother still remains, this is a little strange when we consider how her fall from the Moon must have shocked her nerves. Perhaps the careful old lady still lives, if so there's hope for Barnum yet. Our author has why we cannot conceive chosen for this poem the unrhymed trochaic tetrameter than which according to our best critics no measure is more illy adapted to heroic poetry.

We conclude then that our author has failed in accomplishing the object of his poem. First by representing the bold, fearless, indehaughty, dignified, laconic, taciturn cruel, cunning and revengeful Indian, as a being of childish simplicity & credulity, merry, loquacious, peaceful, forbearing and forgiving by attributing to his hero habits of life which the Indian has ever considered disgraceful, and by entirely neglecting to mention that love of tribe that pride of clanship so prominently seen in every Indian tradition.

2nd By falsifying and degrading the character of the Great Spirit, and Indian Mythology in toto.

And finally we conclude that our author has written 155 00 lines without expressing one great original thought.

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or clothing an old common place in words of striking or peculiar beauty; In fact ~~5000 lines~~ a poem of 5000 lines which ~~have~~ for utter lack of merit has not a rival in American literature).

And so we too will say "farewell O, Hiawatha.

A. W. Tourgee

Sept 1857

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