While the very notion of medieval American literature might seem oxymoronic, the purpose of this essay is to consider ways in which such a formulation could not only make a paradoxical kind of sense but might also be seen as integral to the construction of the subject more generally. In fact, the idea of medieval American literature is hardly more peculiar in itself than F.O. Matthiessen’s once apparently oddball but now thoroughly naturalized conception of an “American Renaissance.” Matthiessen, working at Harvard at a time when the Ivy League establishment looked down condescendingly upon the vulgarities of U.S. culture, sought to justify his subject by aligning nineteenth-century American writers – Emerson, Hawthorne, Thoreau, Melville, and Whitman – with seventeenth-century English forerunners: Shakespeare, Jonson, Donne, Milton, Thomas Browne. Matthiessen’s polemical point was that, in terms of both thematic complexity and stylistic innovation, these American authors could be competitively evaluated “in accordance with the enduring requirements for great art,” with the tragic dimensions of Hawthorne and Melville embodying “certain indispensable attributes that are common also to the practice of both Shakespeare and Milton.”1 Matthiessen’s parallelism was also indebted to the conception, widespread among the subject’s first generation of scholars, of the Elizabethan roots of American language and literature, a theory propounded by Harry Morgan Ayres in the first Cambridge History of American Literature, published in 1919, and subsequently popularized by H.L. Mencken and others. This kind of historical analogy has re-surfaced in more recent critical variations, such as Robin Grey’s consideration of the apocalyptic tenor of Emerson’s writing alongside the iconoclastic, regicidal impetus of Milton’s turbulent prose style.2

In this sense, to talk about medieval American literature might be seen as nothing new, since it merely takes the old conceit of a metaphorical continuity between European and American literature and approaches it from a dif-

different chronological perspective. The way in which this Elizabethan world of intellectual discovery and religious reformation was widely mythologized as a cradle of American liberties has, however, subsequently produced a peculiarly slanted version of the American literary domain. Part of the value of the Renaissance in the eyes of nineteenth-century American historians such as George Bancroft, William Prescott and Francis Parkman was the way in which it introduced a split between the progressive narrative of rational freedom on the one hand and the reactionary power of feudal aristocracy on the other. In this model, the humanism that began to emerge in the sixteenth century was positioned antithetically to, and indeed partially defined by, a backward-looking medievalism. Conversely, there was a great deal of interest and concern in the United States during the earlier part of the nineteenth century in how the new country might relate to the *longue durée* of the historical past. Lawrence Buell estimates that between 1790 and 1830 “historical works, including historical fiction, accounted for a quarter or more of America’s best-sellers,” climbing to an astonishing figure of more than 85% in the 1820s, and much of this popular interest can be explained in terms of a reaction against the dislocating, destabilizing conditions of the post-Revolutionary era. Representative of the new United States frequently tried to compensate for the catastrophic disorientation of suddenly finding themselves without a history by reintegrating the English past as their own, such as we see in Washington Irving’s tributes to Chaucer and Shakespeare in *The Sketch Book* (1819), or later in Thomas Bulfinch’s widely-read *The Age of Chivalry* (1858), which argued pointedly that Americans “are entitled to our full share of the glories and recollections of the land of our forefathers, down to the time of colonization thence.” Fifty years later, in 1908, Brander Matthews, a professor at Columbia, was still describing Chaucer and his contemporaries as part of Americans’ common inheritance.

All literary (and historical) traditions are retrospective fictions, of course, and the point I wish to emphasize here is a metacritical one, illustrating the complicated relationship between past and present in American literary history and the ways in which the institutionalization of the subject over recent times has tended to distort and occlude these complex anterior dimensions. For example, the myth of Puritan origins proposed by Sacvan Bercovitch led him to describe John Winthrop as significantly lacking a medieval utopia and of his sermon “A Model of Christian Charity” as substituting the figure

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of Christ for the more prosaic, worldly figure of the sheriff. However, as Francis Bremer’s biography of Winthrop points out, this is largely to ignore the first forty-two years of Winthrop’s very active life, spent largely in East Anglia, where he would have encountered sheriffs (and other English officials) aplenty. Bremer argues that the pragmatic Winthrop sought subsequently to base the civil institutions of Massachusetts “on those of England rather than ancient Israel,” on existing worldly models rather than Biblical prototypes, having in his legalistic mind analogies between the colony of Massachusetts Bay and medieval states such as Normandy or Gascony, which paid homage to the King of France without, as a “point of government,” being administratively dependent on that country. Bremer suggests that Winthrop saw New England as a parallel but not subordinate form of Old England, and one larger inference to be drawn from this is that consideration of a medieval legacy in American culture might help to tease out a different version of national identity, one neither so beholden to the idea of the nation state as an independent, autonomous entity, nor so concerned with the imponderable question of its “origins.”

If the category of medieval American literature is an oxymoron, then so, of course, is that of medieval English literature. English historian F.W. Maitland in 1908 ascribed the very idea of the feudal system to the ingenuity of the seventeenth-century antiquary Henry Spelman, sardonically locating the “moment of its most perfect development” in the middle of the nineteenth century. (Maitland remarked that a good answer to the examination question “When did the feudal system begin?” would be “1850.”) More recently, Krishan Kumar has shown how the conception of Old and Middle English as a point of origin for an indigenous tradition of English literature was formalized only when Oxford and Cambridge set up their undergraduate syllabuses in English language and literature, in 1893 and 1917 respectively. Going back further, Christopher Cannon has also argued it was not until the end of the fourteenth century that a framework of romance became the dominant force for shaping a version of English literature, a definition that subsequently became a hegemonic instrument for marginalizing the more localized, experimental variants of English which had been widespread

in earlier centuries. These ironies of continual back formation – what Raymond Williams called the “escalator” of history – are not, in themselves, surprising; but, despite all of the important work it has done over the past two decades, perhaps one of the drawbacks of New Historicist approaches to American literature is that they have tended to suppress the reflexive element that was crucial to Stephen Greenblatt’s approach to Shakespearean culture, the acknowledged incongruity of his attempt “to speak with the dead.” Instead, in their focus on engagements between literary texts and U.S. domestic politics of various kinds, Americanists have often presented those relations as though they existed in transparent, self-evident forms. A projection of medieval American culture, by contrast, might be understood as a disjunctive defamiliarization of that conventional social state and as a precursor of transnationalism in the way it problematizes the conventional spatial and temporal circumference of U.S. cultural norms.

As Lee Patterson has observed, there was in the nineteenth century “a Middle Ages of the right and of the left” on both sides of the Atlantic. A medieval dream of order, based around a Tory sense of feudal hierarchy, inspired various forms of anti-industrial feeling in the works of writers from Walter Scott and Benjamin Disraeli through to John Ruskin, while other more radical medieval partisans – William Morris and the Pre-Raphaelites, for example – were more nostalgic for what they took to be the anarchic charms of the medieval era, its valorization of the individual craftsman and its happy ignorance of science and the machine age. T.J. Jackson Lears has described how a similar version of medievalism as what he calls a “therapeutic world view” was also prevalent in late-nineteenth-century America, where biographies of the medieval saints proliferated as never before and where Charles Eliot Norton at Harvard was at the centre of a Dante cult emphasizing not the theology of the Middle Ages but its aesthetic curiosities and its supposedly natural morality, something which culminated in the writings of Henry Adams at the


turn of the twentieth century. Others, though, took a harsher line towards what they took to be anachronistic American attachments to medievalism, with Mark Twain in 1883 famously castigating Scott’s “jejune” mystification of “an absurd past that is dead” and claiming the American South had become so enamoured of “the Walter Scott Middle-Age sham civilization” that its social and economic progress had been retarded “fully a generation.”

The other obvious resonance of medievalism within nineteenth-century American culture involved its treatment of Gothic scenarios. Whereas English Victorian Gothic could (and did) hark back to a specific historical era, American Gothic had no such visible legacy of medieval culture to draw upon, and it is a commonplace in discussions of American Gothic to suggest how its modes of representation consequently got deflected into more figurative forms. Donald Ringe traced its affinities with the dark underside of Enlightenment rationalism, Leslie Fiedler with the inchoate nature of psychosexual terror, Teresa Goddu and others with the long shadows cast by slavery. The stories of Edgar Allan Poe, to take one example, draw frequently on medieval iconography, as with the images of a *danse macabre*, castellated abbeys and courtiers in “The Masque of the Red Death” (1842). Alfred Kazin saw this “esthetic medievalism” as exemplifying Poe’s rejection of progressive social politics, his implicit attachment to reactionary values and his stance as “an apologist for slavery, order, and hierarchy”; but Poe’s incorporation of a zone of necrophilia carries a more disruptive and disturbing charge, embodying a form of materialistic reaction that highlights what he took to be the incorrigibly abstract nature of American liberal democracy. The emphasis on corporeal limitation exemplified by the *danse macabre* in “The Masque of the Red Death” operates as a counternarrative to the transcendental rhetoric that Poe despised, with the author here appropriating the culture of medievalism to throw a sinister reflection over U.S. national narratives of sentimental uplift.

Besides being rebuked by Kazin for his conservatism, Poe was notoriously excluded from Matthiessen’s *American Renaissance* because of his supposed pessimism and his being “bitterly hostile to democracy.” Instead, Matthiessen placed Ralph Waldo Emerson at the centre of his magic circle of representative American writers: “To apply to him his own words about

Goethe,” said Matthiessen of Emerson, “he was the cow from which the rest drew their milk.”15 Matthiessen’s positioning of Emerson helped to establish the latter as a figurehead for canonical narratives of liberal individualism that epitomized patriotic values: John Updike, commending Emerson, wrote of how it was the “spiritual essence” of the American “self” not to be “dissolved in Oriental group-think, or subordinated within medieval hierarchy.”16 But Emerson’s attitude towards “medieval hierarchy” was more complicated than this popular, patriotic view of him would imply, and his lectures on English literature, given in 1835, offer a very different picture from that more familiar to us from “Nature,” “Experience,” and the other heavily-anthologized essays. Whereas “Nature” in 1836 famously advocates an “original relation to the universe,” Emerson’s lecture on Chaucer, given on 26 November 1835, antithetically proclaims: “There never was an original writer. Each is a link in an endless chain ... The greatest genius will never be worth much if he pretends to draw exclusively from his own resources.” What Emerson particularly admires about Chaucer is the fact that he is, as Emerson puts it, “never anxious to hide his obligations; he finally acknowledges in every page or whenever he wants a rhyme that his author or the old book says so.” Emerson thus sees the medieval English poet as emblematic of the fact that, as he puts it, “all works of literature are Janus faced and look to the future and to the past.” In this re-reading of the English literary canon, it is intertextuality and tradition that provide the basis for literary creativity, so that “the question of authorship,” says Emerson, “becomes unimportant.”17 In his 1835 lecture on medieval romance, “The Age of Fable,” Emerson refers proprietorially to “our native English tongue,” positioning himself in a line of continuity with the tradition of English language and literature. He also portrays the “liberal and republican” Chaucer, in his deliberate break with the formality of Latin and turn to the vernacular, as an implied forebear of American writers working some 500 years later.18 In this same 1835 sequence of lectures, Emerson recounts Michelangelo’s institutional tangles with the sixteenth-century papacy, referring to the artist with typical folksiness as “Michael,” and comparing his acceptance of the papal commission to paint the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel “to the spirit of George Washington’s

15 Matthiessen, American Renaissance, p. xii.
18 R.W. Emerson, “The Age of Fable,” in Early Lectures, 253, and “Chaucer,” 278.
acceptance of the command of the American armies”; and yet what Emerson admires most about the Italian artist is precisely that he was “not a citizen of any country,” that there is “so little eccentricity” in his representations of, in Emerson’s concluding phrase, “the beauty that beams in universal nature.”

This is, of course, a very different Emerson from the one commonly celebrated for his hostility to the “courtly muses of Europe.” The emphasis here on “universal nature” also runs counter to Emerson’s more famous essay “Experience” (1844), which validates particulars, which defines the “true art of life” as “to skate well” on “surfaces,” and which is more obviously in line both with the tradition of American pragmatism that runs through William James and with the anti-essentialist emphasis that has become de rigueur in poststructuralism. My point is that by foregrounding a highly selective version of Emerson’s writings – “Experience,” “The American Scholar,” “The Divinity School Address” and so on – American critics in the wake of Matthiessen have tended to hypostatize a partial version of Emerson as patriot that is not justified by a wider reading of his works. In his 1850 essay on Montaigne, Emerson writes: “The lesson of life is practically to generalize; to believe what the years and the centuries say against the hours; to resist the usurpation of particulars; to penetrate to their catholic sense.” The idiosyncrasy of Emerson’s version of the “catholic sense” of things is that it always exists in a dialectical tension with terrestrial time, incorporating worldly history in order to disavow it. Just as Michelangelo, in Emerson’s interpretation, needed the worldly circumstances of Pope Paul III’s papal court to struggle against so that his statue could come away from the marble, so Emerson’s writing returns compulsively to a failed representation of history, deliberately turning away from a narrative of history as dates and events, causes and effects, and evoking instead an allegory of history as example.

Because of the overt antipathy toward fables of the past in some of his writings – in “History” (1841), Emerson expresses disgust with the “shallow village tale that our so-called History is” – Emerson is sometimes thought of as antagonistic toward history per se rather than more specifically to the flat, empirical version of history that he associated with institutional annals. The target in Emerson’s sights in “History” is antiquarianism – “antiquary” is the last word of the essay – and he repeats here an obser-

vation he had made in his 1835 essay “The Age of Fable,” about how its depiction of “magic, and all that is ascribed to it, is a deep presentiment of the powers of science.”22 Emerson, in other words, reads history in Neoplatonic terms, seeking to obliterate categorical distinctions between then and now by reconceiving historical progression as a recurrence of eternal types. It is, however, clearly not the case that for Emerson the idea of medieval history is bunk; instead, he engages systematically with early English culture, exhuming it for his own purposes and reorganizing it in terms of a dialectic between past and present. Just as Emerson attributes the genius of Chaucer’s work to its qualities of intertextual traversal, so Emerson’s own originality consists precisely in spinning things around the other way, in turning tradition on its head, in intertextual argument and displacement rather than in positive statement. There is also a marked resemblance here to Montaigne, one of the subjects of Emerson’s Representative Men (1850), who similarly resisted the appropriation of history for one-dimensional political or religious purposes. Much to the displeasure of the papacy, which placed his work on the Index in 1676, Montaigne broke explicitly with the Christian tradition of historia, substituting instead the fragmentary form of the personal essay, a form that allowed him scope to suggest absences, omissions and alternative points of view which the authorities prefer officially to ignore or repress.23 By reconfiguring the dogmatic allegory of historia as an allegory of example, Montaigne and Emerson both effectively disarticulate the more coercive directions of established cultural and political narratives and instead reimagine history as a more fluid, evasive field.

One particularly interesting aspect of many antebellum writers is the way in which, during this embryonic period of American literature, they tend to reject the flat-footed narrative which would position the past simply as the chronological precursor of the present. Instead, they consciously foreground within their texts the shifting, permeable boundaries of time and space, suggesting how fiction and cartography, the writing of history and the writing of geography, are commensurate with each other. For these authors, only two generations away from the exhilarating but traumatic rupture of political independence, the question of how to go about delineating the map of the past was a complicated one, something to be negotiated only provisionally and with due recognition of the incongruities inevitably involved in that operation. To move backward through time, conjoining the


era of national independence with a colonial, pre-colonial or pre-Columbian history, was equivalent to encompassing the country spatially by superimposing a rational grid on native landscapes that had been the province of many different tribal cultures and were not naturally susceptible to such linear designs. The idiosyncratic nature of Emerson’s medievalism involves an acknowledgement of such structural duplicities, thereby fulfilling his own criterion of poetic creativeness, which was that it involved neither staying at home nor travelling but, rather, a transition from one state to the other. Emerson himself used the term “trans-national” in 1845, in relation to the Bhagavad Gītā, which he called a “trans-national book,” and the general point here is that a genealogy linking American literature to medieval culture opens up a different kind of trajectory for the subject, one less obviously bound by the chronological constraints of the national period.24

It is important to remember, though, that to Emerson’s contemporaries Matthiessen’s nomination of such a marginal figure at the centre of an American literary “renaissance” would have seemed wilfully eccentric. In their eyes, the much more obvious candidate for such a position would have been Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, by far the most widely-read author in nineteenth-century America, and one who, as professor of modern languages at Harvard until 1854, enjoyed academic and critical as well as popular acclaim: Hawthorne, for instance, placed him “at the head of our list of native poets.”25 Longfellow’s Song of Hiawatha appeared in 1855, the same year as Whitman’s Leaves of Grass, but the difference in the early reception of these two books could hardly have been greater, with Hiawatha selling 30,000 copies during its first six months in print. Emerson damned Hiawatha with faint praise when it appeared as a “safe” poem, “sweet and wholesome as maize,” while Longfellow reciprocated by writing to a friend that while he had been “much delighted” by Emerson’s oratorical style, he could remember “nothing” about his lectures afterward.26 Although critical efforts have been made recently to re-evaluate the work of sentimental fiction writers of the nineteenth century – Harriet Beecher Stowe, Susan Warner, and others – there has not been an equivalent effort to reassess Longfellow’s central importance to the American literary canon. In part, no

doubt, this is because he seems like such an irredeemably reactionary figure. Poe was in a distinct minority when he jibed in his reviews of the 1840s at “Professor Longfellow,” casting him as disbelievingly genteel and excessively long-winded, but by the Modernist era this view had become commonplace. Matthiessen, finding Longfellow’s work “swamped” by “European influences,” dismissed his style as “gracefully decorous,” a mode in which “[a]ny indigenous strength was lessened by the reader’s always being conscious of the metrical dexterity as an ornamental exercise.” The fact that Longfellow was given honorary degrees by both Oxford and Cambridge tended to reinforce this popular understanding of him as an Anglophile renegade, as has the bust of him placed in Poets’ Corner at Westminster Abbey in March 1884, within two years of his death. Yet the terms of Longfellow’s art were much more innovative than this stuffy reputation would imply, and to reconsider his significance within nineteenth-century American literature is to understand how, like Emerson, he conceived the temporal and spatial dimensions of the field not simply in relation to domestic politics or national agendas, but within a more expansive transnational framework.

The Song of Hiawatha is, as its title suggests, a musical performance whose lilting, trochaic tetrameters make it easy to remember (and, indeed, to parody). In terms of American folk poetry, it has some of the qualities of Michael Wigglesworth’s The Day of Doom (1662), another poem in a memorable metre – “rocking fourteeners,” as Roy Harvey Pearce called them – which fully one-tenth of the population of New England in the 1660s knew off by heart. Whereas Wigglesworth’s theme is the imminence of apocalyptic doom, Longfellow’s epic of pre-Columbian Indian life sets itself to possess the American continent, to reconcile and uphold the nation by binding it together through time and space. In the first part of the poem, “The Peace-Pipe,” the “Master of Life,” Gitche Manito, declares himself impatient of the “wrangling” among the various tribes:

\begin{quote}
I am weary of your quarrels
Weary of your wars and bloodshed,
Weary of your prayers for vengeance,
Of your wranglings and dissensions;
All your strength is in your union,
All your danger is in discord;
Therefore be at peace henceforward,
And as brothers live together.\end{quote}

27 Matthiessen, American Renaissance, 174, 34.
29 Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, Poetical Works (London: Oxford University Press, 1904), 205. Subsequent page references to this edition are cited in parentheses in the text.
The allegory of political union outlined here has an obvious relevance for the United States six years before the outbreak of civil war. Just as Whitman’s *Song of Myself*, published the same year, deliberately tries to encompass many different regions of the country within its broad syntactic sweep—“At home on the hills of Vermont or in the woods of Maine, or on the Texas ranch”—so Longfellow extends a conception of sentimental brotherhood backward through time, envisaging the fractious Indian tribes within a magic realm of cross-sectional concord.30

To read *Hiawatha* alongside, say, Tennyson’s *Idylls of the King*, a cycle of poems published in 1885 representing legends of King Arthur, is to be made aware of how the absence of a conventional historical narrative in Longfellow’s poem opens up space for more reflexive elements. Tennyson’s poem proceeds through a “stately” quality—there are many references to Guinevere as “the stately Queen,” her “tender grace and stateliness,” and so on—with the regular march of Tennyson’s iambic pentameters (a metrical form that William Carlos Williams called the “medieval masterbeat”) providing a framework within which feudal hierarchies appear as naturalized entities.31 Tennyson, in other words, draws upon echoes of the English poetic tradition to lend his fictitious version of the royal realm an air of righteousness and verisimilitude. Longfellow, by contrast, constantly shifts between different levels, mixing anthropomorphism of the animal kingdom—the rabbit “Peering, peeping from his burrow” (234)—with the mythic narratives of Indian legend, as in part XVII, “The Hunting of Pau-Puk-Keewis,” in which Hiawatha’s enemy is changed into a beaver and descends to the beavers’ “wigwam” below the pond’s surface (256). Much of the recent criticism of the poem has focussed on section XIV, “Picture-Writing,” which foregrounds the art of deciphering symbols and emphasizes how, in Angus Fletcher’s phrase, “Longfellow thinks translatively,” turning foreign languages into a style of idiomatic American while continuing implicitly to acknowledge their distant provenance; but the overall effect of this in *Hiawatha*, which Alan Trachtenberg astutely called “a pretended translation,” is to create something like a mirage, where the “dreamy waters” (254) of Gitche Gumee conjur up a world wavering tantalizingly between absence and illusion, past and present.32

Longfellow was an early admirer of Irving’s *Sketch Book* – the “first book,” he subsequently said, to fascinate his imagination – and the self-parodic mode of romantic irony that Longfellow practises here owes much to Irving’s example.\(^{33}\)

Longfellow was not only the most popular poet in nineteenth-century America but also the best linguist, with fluency in an enormous range of languages and the capacity imaginatively to relate his immediate American culture to a much wider range of circumstances. He was also a great enthusiast for opera – in January 1855 alone, while writing *Hiawatha*, he attended performances of Bellini’s *I Puritani*, Donizetti’s *Lucrezia Borgia* and Mozart’s *Don Giovanni* – and indeed, as Dana Gioia has observed, perhaps “the nineteenth-century poem that Hiawatha most resembles … is Richard Wagner’s libretto for *Der Ring des Nibelungen*.\(^{34}\) Longfellow shared with Wagner an interest in the refurbishment of medieval myth, while the musical dimensions of *Hiawatha*, particularly its stylistic emphasis on structural repetition, are exemplified in the way the poem has been accommodated within a much wider range of later musical adaptations, from sketches in Dvorak’s Symphony No. 9, *From the New World* (1893), to the song “Hiawatha,” the final track on Laurie Anderson’s *Strange Angels* (1989). Longfellow was also himself personally acquainted with Franz Liszt, with whom he spent an evening in Rome in 1868. The multi-media as well as the multilingual aspects of Longfellow’s work tended to perplex the New Critics, with Newton Arvin roundly declaring *Judas Maccabaeus* (1872) to be an “unsuitable” subject for poetry. Trained as they were to appreciate the complexity and internal tensions of lyric poetry, critics such as Arvin found Longfellow’s long poems too somnolent, “quite without dramatic energy or spirit,” something more like “an oratorio reduced to a few brief and rather thin recitatives.”\(^{35}\) But the effect of an oratorio is precisely what Longfellow was striving for in *Judas Maccabaeus*: the poem chronicles the rebellion in 166 BC against the attempt of King Antiochus IV to impose his Greek religion on the Jews, and Longfellow wrote to Charlotte Saunders Cushman in January 1872 of how he would be “delighted” if his “tragedy … could be given with Handel’s music.”\(^{36}\) Handel’s oratorio *Judas Maccabaeus* was first


performed in London in 1746, and Longfellow, as a frequenter of concerts
given by the Handel and Haydn Society in Boston, would have been fully
conversant with this musical genre.

Handel’s oratorios were also for years dismissed as insufferably statu-
esque and tedious before a number of revivals in the latter part of the twen-
tieth century drew out their more humane, humorous aspects, and the same
qualities lie dormant in Longfellow’s longer narrative poems. One of the
most idiosyncratic features of these poems is their discursive inclination, the
way they consciously set their dramatic heroes within a worldly, contingent
setting. For instance, in *Michael Angelo* (1883), there is a deliberate turning
away from Transcendentalism in the way Longfellow shows the Italian artist
trying to get his work done, refusing invitations to dinner, dealing with the
tiresome business of papal politics, and so on. There are some similarities here with the tone of Emerson’s essay on Michelangelo, written nearly
fifty years earlier, which also portrayed the Italian artist’s struggle between
sublime aspiration and corporeal limitation, and in this sense the garrulous,
anti-heroic tone of Longfellow’s poem has its own poignancy:

Time rides with the old
At a great pace. As travellers on swift steeds
See the near landscape fly and flow behind them,
While the remoter fields and dim horizons
Go with them, and seem wheeling round to meet them,
So in old age things near us slip away,
And distant things go with us pleasantly. (811)

Longfellow’s idiom here is one of deliberate anti-climax, and in this sense he has been particularly ill-served by critics such as Arvin, who complained of how the “full Titanism of Michelangelo, his demiurgic or demonic charac-
ter, hardly emerges in any towering way” from the poem.37 Whereas
Whitman sought to transliterate history into myth through the apotheosis of a “divine average,” Longfellow was much more worldly in his concerns,
not simply because of his own social circumstances but because an abiding
concern of his works is how temporality intersects with the contours of the
human imagination.38

Longfellow also deliberately took issue with the cultural nationalists of his own day in the Young America movement who campaigned vociferous-
ly for confining the idea of American literature to a domestic provenance.
Although his 1824 essay “The Literary Spirit of Our Country” expresses “a
feeling of pride in my national ancestry,” his persona in the tale *Kavanagh*
(1849), a work much admired by Emerson, takes issue with Young America

by describing American literature as “not an imitation, but … a continuation” of English literature:

a national literature is not the growth of a day. Centuries must contribute their dew and sunshine to it. Our own is growing slowly but surely, striking its roots downward, and its branches upward, as is natural; and I do not wish, for the sake of what some people call originality, to invert it, and try to make it grow with its roots in the air.39

This understanding of literature as a “continuation” is commensurate with Longfellow’s interest in translation, which involves modification of existing texts rather than their invention ab nihilo. It fits as well with his interest in intertextuality, as in his Tales of a Wayside Inn (1863), whose form is deliberately modelled on that of Chaucer’s Canterbury Tales. Longfellow switches the milieu from spring in fourteenth-century South London to fall in the nineteenth-century town of Sudbury, Connecticut – indeed, he considered calling the work “The Sudbury Tales” – and the work makes plentiful references back to the squires, scrolls and chivalry of Chaucer’s time, while spinning everything round to an American patriotic context.40

For example, “The Landlord’s Tale: The Rhyme of Sir Christopher” looks back to Puritan times to recount the tale of Sir Christopher Gardiner, a

Knight of the Holy Sepulchre,
From Merry England over the sea,
Who stepped upon this continent
As if his august presence lent
A glory for the colony. (455)

Sir Christopher, who passes the time with the “roystering Morton of Merry Mount,” is said to have two wives in England and another “little lady” in Boston. What is striking here is how the author simultaneously evokes a Chaucerian framework and yet staunchly endorses New World values: Sir Christopher is dismissed as “only a Papist in disguise,” and, after being trapped by Indians, he is sent back to England by the Puritan governor (455). This tale, the culminating episode in Tales of a Wayside Inn, is one of two related by the landlord; his first tale, which comes immediately after the prelude, chronicles the story of Paul Revere’s ride during the revolutionary


40 Calhoun, Longfellow, 232.
wars, and the fact that Longfellow chose two overtly patriotic stories as the bookends to his collection emphasizes where the sympathies of his poetic sequence lie.

Associated with this stylistic intertextuality is a skill in the aesthetics of parody or doubling. Many critics have complained that no native author appears among the sources for *Hiawatha*, but the basis of the poem involves not authenticity but a kind of ludic quality that deliberately conjures up what is impossible historically to represent, a picture of Indian culture in pre-Columbian times. The curious fact that the *New York Times* reviewed a parody of *Hiawatha* four days before reviewing *Hiawatha* itself suggests how integral this element of comic reflexivity is to the poem’s composition. Longfellow would have been acquainted theoretically with the art of doubling through his interest in German Romanticism, especially the writings of Jean-Paul Richter (on whom he lectured in 1840), whose grotesquely humorous works illuminate ironic disjunctions between everyday facts and ideal laws. Longfellow was also, of course, well acquainted with the literary history of the Middle Ages, on which he began lecturing as early as 1832, when he was 25 years old; and indeed all of his work, both creative and critical, involves a concerted attempt to expand the contours of American literary culture, to set it in a different relation to time and space from that imagined by Young America and subsequently taken up by Matthiessen and his followers. In 1874, towards the end of his career, Longfellow began publishing the 31 volumes of his *Poems of Places*, wide-ranging anthologies in translation of lyrics drawn not only from European literature but from Asia and the Arab world as well.

It is this very multi-faceted quality of Longfellow’s work that has often disconcerted readers, particularly those more accustomed to literature as a form of subjective expression, a song of myself: “[t]here are,” wrote Christopher Irmscher, “so many voices that meet and merge in Longfellow’s works that, even to the author himself, it sometimes seemed they hadn’t been written by anyone in particular.” But the positive aesthetic qualities associated with this style of impersonality emerge most clearly in *Christus*, Longfellow’s epic poem about “various aspects of Christendom in the Apostolic, Middle, and Modern Ages,” finally published in 1873. Part One, *The Divine Tragedy*, reworks Dante’s *Divine Comedy* into an idiom of belatedness, and its focus again is on scenes of the ordinary, on dramatically playing off Christ’s gnomic utterances against the bewilderment of

onlookers. The peculiar genius of Longfellow is an eye for the comedy of the ordinary, for a Richteresque appreciation of the disjunctions between the quotidian and the marvellous. Pontius Pilate, who describes himself as operating the kind of “prudent and sagacious policy” typical of “Roman Governors in the Provinces,” is a typical Longfellow hero, someone full of hesitancy and worldly procrastination:

I will go in, and while these Jews are wrangling,  
Read my Ovidius on the Art of Love. (673)

Judas Iscariot, who complains of how he has never known “The love of woman or the love of children” (676), also comes across sympathetically here. Part of the point of Longfellow’s garrulous style is precisely how it fails to accord with both the conventional Puritan rhetoric of apocalypse and the strained discourses of Transcendentalism. Longfellow’s Christ, in fact, talks rather like Emerson in one of his lectures, mixing echoes of the Bible with aphoristic intensity:

The wind bloweth where it listeth, and we hear  
The sound thereof, but know not whence it cometh,  
Nor whither it goeth. So is every one  
Born of the spirit!

In Longfellow’s poetic world, however, Christ is always surrounded by skeptics. Nicodemus responds here to Christ in an “aside”:

How can these things be?  
He seems to speak of some vague realm of shadows,  
Some unsubstantial kingdom of the air! (651)

Christus is thus organized structurally around a pattern of bathos, where aspirations towards transcendence necessarily enter into dialogue with the limitations of the material world. This gives Longfellow’s poem a less euphoric feeling than those of Emerson or Whitman, but it introduces a ruminative, multilayered dimension that the writing of the Transcendentalists frequently lacks.

The intertwining of theology with human comedy surfaces again in the second part of Longfellow’s trilogy, The Golden Legend, a dramatic poem set in the thirteenth century that was originally published in 1851. A scene of black comedy is played out when Lucifer, who has cannily disguised himself as a priest, hears the confession of Prince Henry of Vautsberg: “I come to crave, O Father holy/Thy benediction on my head” (476). But there is a theological as well as a melodramatic point to this interlude, since Lucifer’s intercalation within his own figure of the properties of good and evil serves to reject the Calvinist principle that would hold these two categories distinctly apart. As a lifelong Unitarian, Longfellow would have endorsed the view
of Lucifer that “evil is only good perverted” (478), and the pertinence of this argument to *The Golden Legend* is underscored in its epilogue spoken by the Angel of Good Deeds, which declares that even Lucifer is “God's Minister,/And labours for some good/By us not understood!” (527). All this allows licence for a gregarious, latitudinarian account of the intersection of secular and religious history, epitomized here particularly by the representation of a miracle-play on the nativity in the third section of the poem. King Herod emerges in this masquerade as a hale and hearty fellow (“What ho! I fain would drink a can/Of the strong wine of Canaan!”), and he chirpily chronicles the Massacre of the Innocents in rhyming couplets:

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Now at the window will I stand,
While in the street the armed band
The little children slay:
The babe just born in Bethlehem
Will surely slaughtered be with them,
Nor live another day! (489)
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The play-within-a-play here throws back light on the representation of Herod in the first part of *Christus*, and it emphasizes the ingeniously reflexive or academic elements in Longfellow’s poetic narratives, the way these chronicles of Biblical and medieval times, no less than *Hiawatha*, turn upon a poetic dynamic of pastiche and translation. (One might be put in mind of John Barth, another intensely reflexive writer from 100 years later who also enjoyed a career as a university professor and whose theoretical work also came out of an academic base.) This metafictional element is underlined by Prince Henry’s puzzled articulation of invisible worlds as anthropomorphic fictions:

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A dim mirage, with shapes of men
Long dead, and passed beyond our ken.
Awe-struck we gaze, and hold our breath
Till the fair pageant vanisheth,
Leaving us in perplexity,
And doubtful whether it has been
A vision of the world unseen,
Or a bright image of our own
Against the sky in vapours thrown. (515)
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The cumulative effect of these reflexive stylistics is not only generally to interrogate the relationship of present to past but also to resituate adjacent American history within a much wider and less straightforwardly linear framework. The final part of Christus, *The New England Tragedies*, evokes in its prologue the projection of history as an act of self-conscious recovery, a retrospective reinterpretation:
To-night we strive to read, as we may best,
This city, like an ancient palimpsest ...
Rise, then, O buried city that hast been;
Rise up, rebuilded in the painted scene ... (564)

This is the art of translation aggrandized into a philosophical argument, where all understanding necessarily involves a double principle, involving a paradoxical transposition between original and copy:

For as the double stars, though sundered far,
Seem to the naked eye a single star,
So facts of history, at a distance seen,
Into one common point of light convene. (565)

In “John Endicott,” the first of the *New England Tragedies*, this admission of parallax necessarily works against the more apocalyptic proclivities of Endicott, governor of the colony, whose claims to prophetic truth are mocked by the Quaker, Edward Wilson. Although Endicott conceives of himself as a sublime figure, violently laying down Christ’s law and supporting the proposition of his minister that “There is no room in Christ’s triumphant army/For tolerationists” (593), Longfellow’s more worldly poem is sympathetic to the circumstances that ultimately frustrate Endicott’s separatist design. The unlikely deus ex machina in this poem turns out to be King Charles II of England, who incurs Endicott’s wrath by issuing a Mandamus order forbidding the colony to persecute Quakers and instead requiring them to be returned to England, leaving Endicott to bemoan the power of the King and to look forward eagerly to a more serious “struggle” for political independence (592). The second part of this sequence, “Giles Corey of the Salem Farms,” continues this theme of intolerance by portraying the “tornado of fanaticism” (627) at the time of the Salem witchcraft trials, with Cotton Mather’s celestial typologies about the community “journeying Heavenward,/As Israel did in journeying Canaan-ward” (603–04) being lambasted by Giles Corey’s wife Martha, who longs for “A gale of good sound common-sense, to blow/The fog of these delusions from his brain!” (608). One of the crucial points about *Christus* is the way it critiques New England exceptionalism by realigning the history of the province with that of former times and places, thus indicating how, as St. John remarks in the poem’s finale, “The world itself is old” and how “A thousand years in their flight / Are as a single day” (629). New England, in Longfellow’s imagination, is a continuation not only of Old England but of medieval Europe more generally, and the dogma that would insist on it as a site of purification and regeneration is, by Longfellow’s translative method, rendered null and void.

Longfellow’s reinscription of the past as a *longue durée* highlights the way in which, as Russ Castronovo has observed, ambivalence toward
national genealogy became one of the defining features of antebellum U.S. culture. In the first seventy years of the new republic the question of how to represent the past became a burning political issue, with evangelical understandings of the American Revolution as an apocalyptic new beginning balanced off against the views of those who, like Longfellow, sought to understand the new United States within a more amorphous historical framework. Medievalism is, of course, a distinctively European concept, and simply to apply the term directly to the very different circumstances of American culture would be incongruous, as writers such as Emerson and Longfellow well understood. Yet this kind of incongruity was no less apparent, if not quite so self-evident, in the ways in which Victorian moralists such as Augustus Pugin and John Ruskin were attempting around the same time to validate Gothic architecture as the ancestor of European civilization. Both cases involve the “deliberate anachronism” of an imposition of present concerns upon the past, since, as Jorge Luis Borges indicates in his celebrated fable of Pierre Menard rewriting *Don Quixote*, Victorian Gothic could never be the same as twelfth-century Gothic, even if they were identical in form. Ruskin himself, in fact, acknowledged this potential for systematic irregularity in his *Lectures on Architecture and Painting* (1854): “Do not be afraid of incongruities,” he said, “do not think of unities of effect. Introduce your Gothic line by line and stone by stone; never mind mixing it with your present architecture; your existing houses will be none the worse for having little bits of better work fitted to them.” The realm of English Victorian Gothic thus involved at some level an acknowledgement of the structural incompatibilities involved in any recuperation of the past, and, by extension, a recognition of how the idea of medieval England was necessarily a perspectival phenomenon. This metahistorical dimension was, however, considerably more pronounced in American literature and culture of the mid-nineteenth century, since, lacking a “natural” past, antebellum writers were forced to make up their history as they went along. It is medieval American literature, in other words, that highlights ways in which the very notion of medieval literature is always a retrospective cultural fiction.

The situation of American literature changed considerably in the heightened patriotic atmosphere after the conclusion of the Civil War. By the 1870s, the study of American writers was beginning to enter the classroom.

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with Moses Coit Tyler publishing the first *History of American Literature* in 1878. Whereas Longfellow in the 1840s was interested in synthesizing older literary traditions with New World perspectives, Tyler was more taken with the idea of an unsatisfactory colonial history leading toward the emergence of a genuine American “spirit” around the time of the revolution, and it was, unsurprisingly, this version of the past that became more pedagogically popular.46 This mirrored what was happening institutionally in Britain at the end of the nineteenth century, when Anglo-Saxon and medieval writing were being installed at the head of the English literary canon. All of this helped to cement the division of the two literary traditions, with the idea of a medieval American culture becoming something that could be invoked only in extemporaneous fashion, as in Henry Adams’s disquisition on the virgin and the dynamo in 1907. In Adams, the analogy between medieval mariolatry and the machine age works primarily on a formal level, suggesting an equivalence in terms of the structures of social iconography but representing the United States not as a medieval but as the quintessentially modern civilization. In the mid-nineteenth century, though, the idea of medieval culture was for American writers conceptually much closer to home. Widely read as they were in pre-1500 English and other European literatures, none of them instinctively believed that such writing should be construed as simply foreign or alien to U.S. interests; this latter assumption only hardened into dogma later, in the Americanist critical narratives from Tyler through to Matthiessen and beyond. Discussing the prose literature of exploration and empire between 1820 and 1865, Eric Sundquist observed: “Space, the promise of a boundless future, was translated into time … set in a moral framework in which self-discovery and national character were synonymous.”47 This is not altogether untrue, of course, but it is only half the story. What American medievalism of the antebellum period highlights is not an idea of inherent possession of the landscape but, rather, a much more extensive, unstable relationship between national identity and transnational cultures. In this sense, Emerson and Longfellow do not so much ground their work upon native soil as situate it on a highly charged and fraught boundary between past and present, circumference and displacement, and the challenge each writer faces is in mapping out a discrete location for himself, in finding a space from which to speak.

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