Influence of Finnish Kalevala in the Composition of Longfellow's Song of Hiawatha

DOUGLAS HARDY

In the summer of 1835 a young American poet arrived in northern Europe intent on seeking out the mysteries of Scandinavia, and in high spirits in anticipation of the romance of the North. But Henry Wadsworth Longfellow soon became disillusioned. His failure to achieve his original objectives can be attributed largely to his own personality characteristics which proved to be far from favorable in the European culture. He did not mix well with Europeans; "on the contrary, he was never quite happy unless he was consorting with Americans." And apparently this priggish attitude accompanied him on subsequent visits.

Despite his personality difficulties and general disillusionment, however, he nurtured a fond and romantic sentiment for the countries of the North which lasted for years. The basis for this paper is found in an entry by Longfellow in his journal, the date being June 5, 1854:

I am reading with great delight the Finnish epic Kalevala.
It is charming.

And under the date of June 22, 1854, we find:

I have at length hit upon a plan for a poem upon the American Indians, which seems to me the right one, and the only one. It is to weave together their beautiful traditions into a whole. I have hit upon a measure, too, which I think the right and only one for such a theme.

The growth of this seed of enthusiasm and inspiration led to the creation of Hiawatha, an Indian epic so successful...
that only twenty-six days after its publication Longfellow victoriously made the following entry in his journal, under the date of December 6, 1855:

The publishers are just going to put to press the ninth and tenth thousand of Hiawatha. Critics may assail as they please, oppur simuove.4

From the date of publication much unfavorable, and sometimes rabid, criticism was heaped upon both Longfellow and Hiawatha. A writer in a Washington newspaper, for example, charged that Longfellow had stolen "the entire form, spirit, and many of the striking incidents" from the Finnish Kalevala.5 Others claimed that it was derived from Spanish form,6 while still others debated whether or not it "owed a debt to the Swedish Kalevala translation of Castrén or the German translation of Schiefner."7 In the heat of the battle, a German friend of Longfellow, Mr. Ferdinand Freiligrath, came to the defense of the American poet. Although Freiligrath did not know about the American background of Hiawatha, and in addition was "without definite information about Lonnrot's Kalevala and the poetic devices governing Finnish runes,"8 he felt justified in saying that Mr. Longfellow had only occasionally used the parallelisms and alliterations of the Finnish epic, his poem being "not really in the old national metre of Finland, but in a modified form of that metre."9 Whatever the disagreement among the critics at the time, Longfellow was at least able to "console" himself with the fact that "Hiawatha parodies come in from all quarters,—even from California."10 This was at least an indication of the exploding coverage of the poem!

And so our thesis is pointed out: Just what was the influence of Kalevala in the composition of Hiawatha? As has been shown above, there are only three possibilities: Longfellow was a plagiarist and stole outright from Kalevala; Hiawatha was composed completely independently of Kale-

4Ibid., p. 297.
6Ibid.
7Ibid.
8Ibid.
9Waino Nyland, "Kalevala as the Reputed Source of Longfellow's 'Song of Hiawatha,'" American Literature, XXII (March, 1950), p. 3.
10Schramm, p. 338.
11Longfellow, p. 305.
certain characteristics of the Finnish epic were modified for use in *Hiawatha*. The second consideration is already out. Let us first consider the third alternative.

In the first place, Longfellow stated that Freiligrath, in his defense of Longfellow, no matter how ill-prepared he was to give it, "puts the matter right at once." He further added in defense of his use of parallelism and repetition in *Hiawatha* that such construction was justified, it being "as much the characteristic of Indian as of Finnish song."11

It is now quite apparent that the legends and settings of the poem *Hiawatha* were not copied from the *Kalevala*, but "have been traced to the pages of Schoolcraft, Catlin, Heckewelder, Mrs. Eastman, and others."12 Mr. Schramm notes:

The scholars, like the readers, have forgotten that upwards of a dozen Indian verse romances were published in the United States before *Hiawatha*, and that there was a well-grounded tradition of which Longfellow must have been conscious when in 1894, he began to write . . . .13

In addition, the rhythm of these verses was almost identical to that used in *Hiawatha*:

Mrs. Morton’s *Quabi* of 1790 was largely tetrameter, much of it trochaic. *Yamoyden* is almost entirely tetrameter. *The Land of Powhatan* employs four and five stress couplets and quatrains . . . *Tecumseh* is almost entirely tetrameter. *Alhalla* is trochaic tetrameter.14

It becomes almost certain, then, that rather than adopt the complete style of the *Kalevala* in the composition of *Hiawatha*, Longfellow found his source of great inspiration in American tradition and in the abundance of precedent poems then available; but everything that he found in the rhyme and meter of the American models turned him to the Finish classic as the best of them all.15

To refer back to the first consideration: *Did* Longfellow steal outright the thoughts and patterns of the *Kalevala*? In addition to its already having been shown that only a modified version of the metre of *Kalevala* was used in *Hiawatha*, it is

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11Ibid., p. 303.
12Schramm, p. 321.
13Ibid.
14Ibid., pp. 339-40.
15Ibid.
quite easy to display why it would be impossible for it to have been otherwise!

While in Stockholm, Longfellow had studied Finnish for only thirteen days, "interrupted by various activities." To further complicate matters, Longfellow was never in touch with "Finnish patriots, linguists, or literary men." The *Kalevala* was written in the Karelian dialect, a vocabulary of which was not available until 1862. In other words, Longfellow could not have studied the original before he composed *Hiawatha*. The closest he could have gotten to the original was through translations, it being believed that he had "a copy of Castrén's Swedish translation (1841), Schiefner's German translation (1852), and a French translation," although Mr. Kirby, in his preface to the English translation, firmly states that *Kalevala* was based on "the first German translation." But in translation there is retained hardly any of the richness of the original, which fact I shall presently demonstrate. It follows, then, that Longfellow could not have plagiarized considerable material from the *Kalevala* had he wanted to!

I have chosen to insert below the two initial stanzas from the original *Kalevala* for comparison with the English translation and a section from *Hiawatha*.

*Mieleni minun tekevi,*
*Aivoni ajattelevi*
*Lähteäni laulamahan,*
*Saa’ani sanenelemahan,*
*Sukuvirttä suoltamahan,*
*Lajivirttä laulamahan;*
*Sanat suussani sulavat,*
*Puhe’et putoelevat,*
*Kielelleni kerkiävät,*
*Hampahilleni bajoovat.*

*Veli kulta, veikkoseni,*
*Kaunis kasvinkumppalini!*
*Lähe nyt kanssa laulamahan,*
*Saa kera sanenelemahan*
*Yhtehen yhtytyämme,*
*Kahta’alta kätytyämme;*
*Harvoin yhtehen yhymme,*

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16 Nyland, p. 6.
17*ibid.*
18*ibid.*, p. 5.
19*ibid.*, p. 6.
Let us begin with initial alliteration. I have placed initial consonants in italics so that they will be all the more easily distinguished. From our sample verses it is readily seen that in every line there is initial alliteration within the line, in many instances every word beginning with the same consonant. This is strictly characteristic of the entire work.

Next we come to free rhyme of the final syllable. At once we note the abundance of this throughout the complete work. Interestingly enough, there is a general change of pattern from initial alliteration. Whereas initial alliteration is generally confined to the words in one line, the final alliteration elements pair off with succeeding lines, so that, in addition to initial alliteration within the single lines, each line of a give couplet group contains individual and contrasting final elements that in turn alliterate with corresponding "twin" elements in the sister line. Though complicated in explanation, this phenomenon cannot be overlooked by even the superficial glance of one who may be completely unfamiliar with the language! And notice how magnificently this maintains the unity and spirit of the recurring couplet series, the latter line saying in essence what the former has just stated.

The abundance of this free rhyme may be contributed to the grammatical structure of the Finnish language, and which is uniquely Finnish. For example, in the first stanza the "mahan" endings are nothing more or less than a regularly conjugated poetical verb ending, a form of the regular "maan" ending. The "ni" elements in the first stanza and the "mme" endings in the second stanza are simply the first person singular possessive noun forms and the first person plural possessive noun forms, respectively. And so we see that these constructions, which are native to the prose and poetry of Finland, are not strained poetical devices, and partly owing to this reason cannot degenerate into a "sing-song" rhythm that occurs to a degree when these structure factors are imposed upon the English language. It is appropriate, also, to indicate that the metre of Kalevala is dimeter, not tetrameter, the accent in Finnish always falling on the first syllable.

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But this is not all. The Finnish language, and consequently the Kalevala, is pregnant with assonance within words, the reason for this being that front vowels can only unite with front vowels, and back vowels can only unite with back vowels, the vowels "i" and "e" fitting into either pattern. For example:

Yhtehen yhytyämmme,
Kahta'alta kätyämmme;

Can you find just one letter that does not have a rhyming counterpart? And all this beauty of sound and rhythm is native to the language! During Longfellow's very brief introduction to the Finnish language he doubtless became aware of the existence of some of the language characteristics we have mentioned, but as has already been shown it was quite impossible for him to adopt these features with understanding into his composition of Hiawatha.

Mr. Waino Nyland has pointed up another factor that further separates the Kalevala from Hiawatha. He reminds us that the Kalevala is evolved folk-song poetry, originally made to be "played on the Kantele, a five-stringed (G, A, B, C, D) instrument, to which each line is fitted."²² He continued, with example:

This tune consists of four measures in 5/4 time. Each measure begins with six eighth-notes and ends with two quarters to make the count of five.

This is haunting music, indeed, as the writer can testify.

Now that a few of the characteristics of the original are established, let us see how it compares with the English translation of Mr. Kirby and an excerpt from Hiawatha.

²²Ibid.
I am driven by my longing,  
And my understanding urges  
That I should commence my singing,  
And begin my recitation.  
I will sing the people's legends,  
And the ballads of the nation.  
To my mouth the words are flowing,  
And the words are gently falling,  
Quickly as my tongue can shape them,  
And between my teeth emerging.  

Where is the rich alliteration that was found in the Finnish?  
Mr. Nyland has included a quotation in his work that in  
answer to the question, "Of the beauties and interweaving in-  
tricacies of Finnish as in the Kalevala, what do the translations  
give us?" says: "Nothing but four trochaic feet, dry and  
stripped of all pleasure!"25 I wholeheartedly agree!  
Now what does Hiawatha look like?  

By the shores of Gitche Gumee,  
By the shining Big-Sea-Water,  
Stood the wigwam of Nokomis,  
Dark behind it rose the forest,  
Rose the black and gloomy pine-trees,  
Rose the firs with cones upon them;  
Bright before it beat the water,  
Beat the clear and sunny water,  
Beat the shining Big-Sea-Water.26  

Parallelisms similar to those of Kalevala are attempted here,  
and with some success; but let us remember that Longfellow  
considered the parallelisms and repetitions characteristic of  
Indian culture as well as of Finnish.27 Initial alliterations are  
also found here and there, but for the most part are achieved  
only by repetition of the same words, whereas this is not true  
in Kalevala.  
Aside from the strictly prosodic considerations up to this  
point, it is interesting to note that the very mood of Hiawatha  
is different from that of the Kalevala. The Kalevala  
... illustrates the harsh, disappointing human relations  
surrounding daily life. The hero is beset with a succession  

26Elson, William H., and Christine Beck, Elson Grammar School Reader  
(Chicago, 1911), p. 296.  
27James J. Hatfield, "The Longfellow-Freiligrath Correspondence," Publications of The Modern Language Association of America, XLVIII (December,  
1933), p. 1281.
of embarrassing moments. Virtue is not a shield against evil. Sin is unpunished. Evil often prevails. In these and many other aspects, Kalevala is an antithesis of Hiawatha. Hiawatha was born to win. He progresses through life spiritually unscathed, a sure victor in all struggles against evil.28

Mr. Longfellow, himself, realized the gap between Kalevala and Hiawatha, and this is undoubtedly the reason for his not correlating the two. How much did the Kalevala influence the composition of Song of Hiawatha? In conclusion we should believe the words of Mr. Longfellow when, in answer to some charges of imitation, he said:

—it is absurd. I can give chapter and verse for these legends. Their chief value is that they are Indian legends. I know the Kalevala very well; and that some of its legends resemble the Indian stories preserved by Schoolcraft is very true. But the idea of making me responsible for that (imitation) is too ludicrous.29

In fact, we must accept his authority as a conclusion, because the evidence offers no other alternative.

28Nyland, p. 11.
29Longfellow, p. 297.

REFERENCES CITED

Hatfield, James T. “The Longfellow-Freiligrath Correspondence,” Publications of the Modern Language Association of America, XLVIII (December, 1933), 1281.