

Longfellow's Labor

“Be Up and Doing”: Henry Wadsworth Longfellow and Poetic Labor” by Jill Anderson, in *Journal of American Studies* (Apr. 2003), School of International Studies, Brunel Univ., Uxbridge, UB8 3PH, England.

Let us, then, be up and doing,
With a heart for any fate;
Still achieving, still pursuing,
Learn to labor and to wait.
—“Psalm of Life” (1838)

A poet “on his sound anvil forges the broad shield of Truth and weapons of her warfare,” Henry Wadsworth Longfellow (1807–82) declared in an 1838 lecture. Yet invoking, in “Psalm of Life” and other popular poems, a life of strenuous effort, Longfellow offered no specific truths or purposes to be pursued, only the moral necessity of pursuit itself. Beneath all the resolutely uplifting sentiments, it seems, was an attempt to maintain republican virtue in a new era of selfish individualism and rising capitalism.

“As the market economy and the developing [political] party system provided more opportunities for the pursuit of individual gain and influence [in the first half of the 19th century], Americans resisted the abandonment of republican values,” writes Anderson, an editor and historian at the International Center for Jefferson Studies, at Monticello in Charlottesville, Virginia. To sustain the idea of “virtuous self-interest”

consonant with those values, Longfellow and many other authors of the period stressed effort and service for their own sakes, obscuring in a cloud of rhetoric “the more material aspects of self-interest” now coming to the fore.

In his poem “The Village Blacksmith” (1840), says Anderson, Longfellow’s message is clear: “Learn from the blacksmith to fashion each ‘burning thought and deed’ into a solid, honest, hard-working life.” That life, she writes, was more important “than the actual objects forged by the blacksmith, which go unmentioned.”

In Longfellow’s poems and in an emerging body of literature directed at young men, Anderson observes, “the successful achievement of middle-class manhood, represented by the figure of the ‘self-made man,’ rested on the careful manipulation and presentation of one’s own inner life. The authors linked right thought and feeling to social and economic success, a connection perhaps more wishful than realistic.” After all his exhortations to action in “Psalm of Life,” Anderson points out, Longfellow concluded on a darker note: His closing injunction to wait implied that “labor might not necessarily bring desired results.”

Upstairs, Downstairs

“The World as India” by Susan Sontag, in *Times Literary Supplement* (June 13, 2003), Admiral House, 66–68 E. Smithfield, London E1W 9BX, England.

In an idealized world of literature—a vision now brought closer to reality, thanks to the Internet, than at any other time in history—all works in all languages would be available to all people. What stands in the way, says Sontag, the noted writer and critic, are the limitations of translation. Technology hasn’t vitiated the lament of St. Jerome, who translated from Greek to Latin the *Chronicle* of Eusebius in A.D. 381, that “it is an arduous task to preserve felicity and grace unimpaired in a translation.”

For Sontag, translation is a necessary and almost sacred function, the “circulatory system of the world’s literatures,” and perhaps of humanity itself. In what she calls the “evangelical incentive,” translation can “enlarge the readership of a book deemed to be important.” Although this can promote a kind of scorecard approach—the number of languages in which a book gets published represents its worth—translation often occurs in only one direction, with “many more books written in English being translated into for-