

THE TRANSFORMATION OF A MINOR EVENT INTO A MAJOR POEM: LONGFELLOW'S "PAUL REVERE'S RIDE"

UDC 811.111:316.7

Stefan Pajović

Faculty of Philosophy Novi Sad, University of Novi Sad, Serbia

E-mail: stefan@capsred.com

Abstract. *The essay delves into the process of creating an American icon of Paul Revere by examining how was Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, nation's beloved poet, able to use historic facts while writing his much lauded poem "Paul Revere's Ride". The starting point is the examination of sheer facts: Revere's biography and the ride itself. Next we turn to the poem, its setting, and Longfellow's intention in writing it, as well as the events that followed its publication. This includes separating facts from fiction, i.e. drawing a clear line between literary invention and reality, in order to gain a unique insight into the process of mythmaking. Having scrutinized this dichotomy, the focus shifts toward the poet's intentions and reasons for such an alternation of the truth, and to what effect. Finally, the essay explores the poem's longevity in present-day America.*

Key words: *Paul Revere, poetry, myth, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, American Revolution*

PAUL REVERE AND THE ACTUAL EVENT

In the eve of the Civil War, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow (1807 – 1882) published his famous poem "Paul Revere's Ride", in which he described the events of the night before the Battles of Lexington and Concord, "initiating the towns' fateful combat" (Butler 2001: 231) which became the first confrontations in America's fight to become an independent nation. The aim of this essay is to scrutinize the process by which the poet converted a minor event into a nationwide, and arguably worldwide, famous poem. As an integral part of such an undertaking, first we must separate fact from fiction,¹ i.e. turn to history to provide us with the data which would help us understand how the poem and its eponymous rider became so enormously popular. Having this in mind, it does not come as a surprise that the poem's protagonist, Paul Revere, is an actual historical figure. Until

Submitted April 2013, accepted for publication in May 2013.

¹ The historical information about the ride is collected from various history books; please refer to the Reference list at the end of the paper.

the publication of the poem, he was renowned for different things, but his destiny, both as a person and a literary character, would change overnight, literally.

Paul Revere, "the single finest silversmith of the colonial era" (Butler 2001: 158), was born in 1734 in Boston, and died in 1818, aged 83, and thirty-five years after the Treaty of Paris which ended the American Revolutionary War he had fought in. His father, a French Huguenot, came to American colonies at the age of 13, and learned the craft from John Coney, one the most prominent silversmiths in colonies of his day. Paul was an apprentice to his father, a common practice in the colonies (Butler 2001: 157), and soon became an expert craftsman himself. As a matter of fact, during his lifetime he produced not only much sought after quality silverware, but cannons, coins, church and ship bells as well. However, things soon started to look bleak for the young entrepreneur, as the British stamp Act of 1765 further worsened Massachusetts economy, already weakened by the Seven Years' War. And as it is the case with all societies that fall on hard times in terms of economy, sooner or later they turn to militarism to solve their financial issues. But in the States-to-be, this armed combat took the shape of a war for independence, and Revere's sentiments towards the revolution were no different from those of the majority of his fellow countrymen who had been reading Paine's "Common Sense", published in January in Boston. This was reflected, among others,² in the fact that he took an active role in the Boston Tea Party, in 1773. All this erupted on that fateful night of 18th of April 1775, when Revere was enlisted by a prominent Boston doctor who was a member of the Sons of Liberty (an organization of American patriots), Joseph Warren, along with William Dawes, who was in the Boston militia, a tanner by profession. They had the task of warning the militia and their leaders in the nearby towns of Lexington and Concord of the coming British troops who had secret orders to seize their weapons and arrest rebel leaders John Hancock and Samuel Adams³ who were hiding in a house in Lexington. Revere set off at around 10 p.m. and rowed across the Charles River to Charlestown where he took a horse and continued further on. As far as the signals from the church tower go, Revere indeed instructed the sexton of the North Church in Boston to put up one lantern in the belfry if the British troops took the land route or two if they went by sea, via the Boston Neck. They took the path across the Charles River, crossing it south from the point Revere did. It should be noted that Revere's instructions and the signal were primarily meant to alarm the colonists in Charlestown, who did actually see them, and sent a few riders of their own to the north. Dawes on the other hand had taken the southern route, across the Boston Neck. Revere rode through present-day Somerville, Medford, and Arlington, and warned the patriots along the way, many of whom mounted messengers of their own, so there were as many as 40 riders that night carrying the message. Although Revere's mission depended upon secrecy, for the countryside was crawling with British patrols and there were many Americans who were still loyal to the Crown, he nevertheless shouted his message: "The Regulars are coming"⁴ (Lanning 2008; 342). Dawes arrived some half an hour after Revere at the house, and after speaking with the two rebel leaders, they pressed on to Concord, now accompanied by Dr. Samuel Prescott.

² For Revere's entire engagement in the American Revolution refer to Joel J. Miller's *The Revolutionary Paul Revere*, given in the Reference list at the end of the paper.

³ Samuel Adams was second cousin to President John Adams.

⁴ Popular culture has it that he shouted: "The British are coming". Revere in a letter, which he wrote some 23 years after the ride, states merely that he "alarmed almost every House, till [he] got to Lexington", not recounting the exact words (MHS: 3).

They soon ran into a British patrol in Lincoln, just off Lexington, and Revere was captured, but the other two escaped. Later on, Dawes fell off his horse and failed to deliver the message, while Prescott reached Concord and continued on, thus achieving the mission's goal. After being held captive at gunpoint, Revere was released without his horse and made his way back to Lexington on foot, just in time to witness the battle of Lexington Green, in the dawn of April 19th 1775.

LONGFELLOW'S POEM AND ITS LEGACY

If we are to deliberate upon the poetic value of the poem in question, first we need to remind ourselves of who its author was. Henry Wadsworth Longfellow was one of the most popular 19th century American poets. His first poem was published when he was only 13 on the front page of a local newspaper, and depicted a heroic battle between colonists and the Indians (Longfellow 2001: 805). The poem, entitled "The Battle of Lovell's Pond", was only the beginning of a prolific literary career that would reach its peak during the 1850s, in the States and Britain as well, with the publication of his major works in which the poet brought into perfection the ideas and concepts that developed during his Portland childhood and early reading of Shakespeare, Pope, Ossian etc. (*Ibid*). He had created many distinctively American myths and epics, thus shaping the history of a young nation, becoming an iconic figure himself. In his long narrative poem, "The Song of Hiawatha", he draws from the Native American legacy:

"...Should you ask me,
Whence these stories?
Whence these legends and traditions,..."
"... I should answer, I should tell you,
"From the forests and the prairies,
From the great lakes of the Northland,
From the land of the Ojibways,
From the land of the Dacotahs,
From the mountains, moors, and fen-lands..."
"... Should you ask where Nawadaha
Found these songs so wild and wayward,
Found these legends and traditions,
I should answer, I should tell you,
In the bird's-nests of the forest,
In the lodges of the beaver,
In the hoof-prints of the bison,
In the eyry of the eagle!..."

(Longfellow 2001: 141)

A cyclic pattern can be observed here, in which the poet uses Indians as the carriers of "old universal truths"⁵ as Faulkner had put it, in the form of folk tales which are now his to set down, thus giving birth to a new and unique literature of the New World. In refer-

⁵ From his speech delivered at the Nobel Banquet at the City Hall in Stockholm on December 10, 1950. The whole speech is available at: www.nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/literature/laureates/1949/faulkner-speech.html (Accessed 22 February 2013).

ence to this, we can freely say that Longfellow reaches into the past of a country with a fairly poor history and creates new figures and stories, distorting their truth in the process, but creating works of art that for the first time on this new continent have features of a palimpsest. This twisting of true events will happen again, some half a decade after the "Song of Hiawatha", as Longfellow strives to revive a fairly obscure historical figure at the time and his role in the event that would, in long terms, shape the history of world democracy. Such a literary intervention is not uncommon; the great Shakespeare used it himself as he breathed new life into historical characters such as Richard III, Cleopatra, Henry V etc.

The story of the writing of the poem in question, "Paul Revere's Ride", first appeared in the December 18, 1860 edition of the "Boston Transcript", and then in January 1861 in Atlantic Monthly (Maine Historical Society, Internet). Two years after this, it was republished as a part of Longfellow's collection of poems "Tales of Wayside Inn" (Longfellow 2000: 813). The poem was entitled "The Landlord's tale", and was the first of 22 poems which constructed a storytelling narrative written in the style of Geoffrey Chaucer's "Canterbury Tales".

So as to provide a time frame, the poem was written nearly a century after the famous ride took place and just one year before America became "engaged in a great civil war" (Lincoln 1989: 536). It was a time in which the memory of the Revolutionary War was fading from people's minds as the States became steeped in the slavery debate that was threatening to split the country in half. Longfellow, a conscientious poet as he was, felt the need to remind his fellow countrymen that it was their unity that had claimed this piece of the New World for them. But some truths were obviously not self-evident, and it was this racial and economic cleft that obviated the need for the unity he was alerting to, in favor of war. However, this does not diminish the role of the poem, and despite its initial didactic failure, which was after all inevitable and beyond the influence of poetry, it is still very much alive today, being reminiscent of the Revolutionary War, just as it was in the 19th century, when it was published.

In order to understand how Longfellow transformed this, until then, minor event in the Revolutionary War, we must set aside his motives in writing the poem, at least for now. It would be of great help if we dealt in detail with what the event actually changed in his poem, and in which manner it detracts from the actual event described at the beginning of the essay. Firstly, although plainly obvious, it must be stated that the event that inspired the poem had actually transpired. This is important because this great American myth was forged from verisimilitude, not some folk tales, carried through the centuries orally by an unknown author, but based on testimonies of real people, participants in the event, including Revere himself (The Paul Revere House, Internet). But the first poetic distortion of truth occurs as early as in the title: "Paul Revere's ride": singular form, one protagonist. Throughout the entire poem there is no mention of any other rider or riders, thus effectively giving Revere sole credit for the equestrian mission. Longfellow perhaps omits to mention the other two riders and the subsequent ones dispatched from Lexington (Fischer 1994: 143) because it is more convenient to have one hero instead of a multitude. The use of only one name and last name makes it easier for the reader to remember and it sounds much better than the possible alternative: "Revere, Dawes, and Prescott" which would be more suited for a plaque of a corporate law firm. One or three, the ride did occur, and the final destination along with the goal corresponded with the actual one: Concord, and warning of the Sons of Liberty members of the en route British troops.

When it comes to the time frame, however, Longfellow plays with truth once more: the planning of the famous "One, if by land, and two, if by sea" (Longfellow 2000: 362) happened two days before the ride, on April 16th. The signal is once more problematic, as the roles get reversed. In the poem, it is the signal that initiates the action, i.e. mounted Revere starts his ride when he sees the lights in the church tower. It is quite clear that the signal was for his eyes only, a kind of a code to conceal the real meaning from the British. This it certainly was, but it was not *for* Revere, but *from* Revere-. Longfellow plays with the propositions once more, singling out this rider and making the scenery interact with him. As a part of this, he even prolongs the route Revere took that April night, sending him all the way to Concord, whereas in reality, he reached only Lexington, where a British patrol stopped him not far from it. It should be noted that in this case, Concord was the final destination, i.e. the goal of the mission of both the real Revere and his fictional counterpart, so the reaching of that terminus of the latter, can be seen as a fulfillment of a goal, and gives much more importance to the entire undertaking than it merits if it were solely based on the truth of that night's events. To Longfellow's credit, the goal *was* accomplished, not by his selected rider though, but by another rider, joining the "race" midway. Perhaps the most ironic inaccuracy is the fact that the poem romanticized the ride, with such lines as:

"...He saw the gilded weathercock
Swim in the moonlight as he passed..."
"...He heard the bleating of the flock,
And the twitter of birds among the trees,
And felt the breath of the morning breeze
Blowing over the meadow brown..."

(Longfellow 2000: 365)

The sober reality was that Revere was captured and interrogated by the British. It was not likely that he was listening to the twitter of birds among the trees as a gun was held to his head and a British officer threatened to "blow his brains out". (MHS: 4).

THE MECHANISM OF THE TRANSFORMATION

It is not hard to imagine, by looking at the opening lines, that the poem was meant for children and had a didactic function, to teach the youngest Americans of their not so far away past. But the time of the publication, and especially the medium, a "Magazine of Literature, Arts, and Politics" (CUL: i), imply that there is more to the poem than the eye can see. The actual event it depicts holds the key to understanding its enormous popularity that spans centuries. The now immortalized ride transpired at the onset of the American Revolution, preceding a series of events that would, in terms, create a new nation. But as it is often the case, the ride became obscure, overshadowed by the imposing figures of the Founding fathers, the famous Constitution and the battles that took place during the war itself. Compared to this, a couple of horsemen yelling in the Massachusetts night seem banal, at the very least. Without the intention to detract from the importance of the ride, it can be said that it did not stack up too well in the importance chart of the young nation's history. A historical dead end, some would say, but to a learned poet such as Longfellow, Paul Revere and the riders were a literary well of inspiration.

Before the poem, Revere was mostly lauded for his excellent craftsmanship, "his surviving silver pieces number several thousand" (Butler 2001: 158), but soon became the nation's favorite messenger and is still regarded as such to this day. The Portlander used the name of Paul Revere, a man who "was virtually unknown outside of Boston" (Lanning 2008: 343), and turned it into a national anthem of sorts.⁶ Historical accuracy was never Longfellow's main concern, he had set out on a task to create a legend, which usually takes centuries to form, from an event that took place less than a century before. This is a relatively short time span, as most mythical tales come from the time of yore, and take millennia to form. This is why the historical facts that we have delineated on in the introductory chapter have little impact in the formation of the literary character of Paul Revere and his ride. It should be noted that the Revolution, just as any historical event, comprised of numerous small episodes, the night ride being only one of them. The question imposes: why did the poet choose precisely this one? So as to answer this, it would be of great use if we went back to the didactic part, and took a focal point of a child because most Americans, who are familiar with the lines, had learned them while in elementary school. Imagine what impact a prancing horseman looking at two lights gleaming from the darkness while the enemy army marches nearby, has on a child. The mental image resembles the fantasy genre to such an extent that it could easily be mistaken for a scene from the motion picture "The Lord of the Rings". The rhythm is also very intense, adding to the emotion of excitement it evokes. As we have pointed out, Longfellow, although being a Fireside poet (this meant his verses were entertainment for the whole family, i.e. fairly comprehensible), obviously writes these lines for a more serious, adult audience, as a caution to an ever distant nation, which is about to be engulfed in the flames of a civil war. And what better way to alert an ardent supporter of slavery/antislavery than through a poem which a child could understand and which tells of a nation becoming one. Only this time the opponent was not so conspicuous, he or she did not parade in a redcoat, but was rather hidden within the very citizens whose ancestors have bled together in a fight in which the hoofs of Revere's horse resonated the battle cry of the Revolution. In January, Americans held the poem in their hands. In April, it was supplanted by rifles. The Civil War had begun.

This tendency to unify the nation in the time of peril can also account for the fact that there is only one protagonist who rides that night. The actual story is, mildly put, intricate. In the context of this essay, contracting Revere's account of the incident, as well as the history books explanation to a two page summary was no easy task. So much had transpired on that April night and the following morning that Longfellow had to be a literary tailor of sorts and cut out the unimportant events and facts. That is why Revere rides alone⁷, one man against an advancing army, a patriot, with the future of the nation in his reins. This mythical image creates, like all myths do, a pattern of behavior which would become distinctively American in the centuries to come. In the twentieth century

⁶ There are striking similarities between Longfellow's poem and the US national anthem "The Star-spangled Banner", written by Francis Scott Key. Both depict an altercation with the British forces, a night full of suspension and a morning which rekindles the hope in victory. In this sense, the latter can also be perceived as a myth.

⁷ Lanning, a retired lieutenant colonel and the author of numerous books on military history, also allows the possibility, and he does not hold this stance alone, that "Revere" was chosen because he offered better rhyming opportunities (Lanning 2008: 343). The same author does not, however, undermine Longfellow's role in promoting Revere's undertaking.

the American movie industry would proliferate upon this motif, detracting from its value in the process and making it a cliché. However, the power of words comprising Longfellow's poem is far more potent than that of a motion picture trying to ape it. For millions of Americans today, Revere, whom they have come to know through Longfellow's verse, is the model patriot that they fervently, but latently, strive to be. For this, they have their national poet to thank, for the blatant disregard of the facts which in terms mounted a new hero to the pedestal of American mythos.

REFERENCES

1. Burg, David F., (2007), *The American Revolution, Updated Edition*, [pdf] New York, Facts on File, Inc.
2. Butler, Jon, (2001), *Becoming America: The Revolution before 1776*, Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press.
3. CUL - Making of America, *The Atlantic Monthly Volume 7 Issue 39 (January 1861)*, Internet, Available at: <http://digital.library.cornell.edu/cgi/t/text/text-idx?c=atla;cc=atla;view=toc;subview=short;idno=atla0007-1> (Accessed 25 February 2013).
4. Fischer, D. H., (1994), *Paul Revere's Ride*. [e-book] New York, Oxford University Press. Available at: Google Books (Accessed 25 February 2013).
5. Fletcher, Angus (2004), *A New Theory for American Poetry: democracy, the environment, and the future of imagination*, Cambridge, Harvard University Press.
6. Hollander, J. ed., (1993), *American Poetry: The Nineteenth Century, Vol. 1: Philip Freneau to Walt Whitman*, New York, Library of America.
7. Lanning, Michael Lee, (2008), *American Revolution 100: the battles, people, and events of the American war for independence, ranked by their significance*, [pdf] Naperville, Sourcebooks, Inc.
8. Lincoln, Abraham, (1989), *Lincoln: Speeches and Writings: 1859-1865*, New York, Library of America.
9. Longfellow, Henry Wadsworth, (2000), *Henry Wadsworth Longfellow: Poems and Other Writings*, New York, Library of America.
10. Maine Historical Society, "Paul Revere's Ride", Internet, Available at: http://www.hwlongfellow.org/works_paul_reveres_ride.shtml (Accessed 24 February 2013).
11. MHS Collections Online, "Letter from Paul Revere to Jeremy Belknap, circa 1798", Internet, available at: http://www.masshist.org/database/viewer.php?item_id=99&img_step=1&mode=transcript#page1 (Accessed on 24 February 2013).
12. Miller, Joel, (2010), *The Revolutionary Paul Revere*, [e-book] Nashville, Thomas Nelson. Available at: Google Books (Accessed on 26 February 2013).
13. Murray, Stuart, (2002), *American Revolution*, [pdf] New York, DK Publishing, Inc.
14. The Paul Revere House, "The Midnight Ride in Revere's Own Words", Internet, Available at: <http://www.paulreverehouse.org/ride/words.html> (Accessed 25 February 2013).

PRETVARANJE NEVAŽNOG ISTORIJSKOG DOGAĐAJA U POZNATU PESMU: LONGFELOUOVO "JAHANJE POLA RIVIRA"

Stefan Pajović

Rad se bavi tokom nastankom kulta američkog heroja Pola Rivira ispitujući kako je Henri Vodsvort Longfelou, omiljeni narodni pesnik, uspeo da iskoriti istorijske činjenice dok je pisao svoju poznatu pesmu „Jahanje Pola Rivira.“ Počinje se od golih činjenica: Rivirove biografije i samog jahanja. Nakon toga, rad se bavi samom pesmom, periodom kada je napisana i događajima koji su usledili. Ovo uključuje povlačenje jasne linije razgraničenja između realnosti i fikcije kako bi se bolje odgonetnuo tok nastanka mita, uključujući pesnikove razloge i namere koji stoje iza prekrivanja istorije i posledica istog. Na posletku, rad se bavi današnjom popularnošću pesme u Sjedinjenim Američkim Državama.

Ključne reči: *Pol Rivir, poezija, mit, Henri Vodsvort Longfelou, Američka revolucija*