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Review of *Longfellow Redux* by Christoph Irmscher

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Book Reviews

Longfellow Redux. By Christoph Irmscher. (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2006. Pp. xx, 352. \$40.00.)

Christoph Irmscher's *Longfellow Redux* begins with a provocative question, "Is poetry dead?" Rather than answer that (perhaps unanswerable) question directly, he turns instead to one of the dearest of the Dead White Men, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow. Irmscher believes that Longfellow deserves serious consideration—not just because he was popular but also because he consciously reimagined the social function of American poetry. In four lucid chapters, Irmscher examines how Longfellow negotiated then dominant (and still prevalent) romantic notions of authorship, patriarchal authority, originality, and literary nationalism. Ultimately, Irmscher argues that Longfellow was an innovative writer precisely because he rejected the romantic ideal of the poet as a solitary rebel.

Chapter 1, "Strangers as Friends," addresses the intimate relationship that Longfellow cultivated with his readers. Unlike other celebrity authors (Sigourney, Whittier), Longfellow spent hours replying to requests for autographs, valentines, advice, and even personal interviews, cultivating an accessible persona that blurred the lines between public and private, professional and amateur, author and reader. Steady streams of fans knocked on his door at Craigie House, and—remarkably, if a bit wearily—he admitted them. Irmscher finds Longfellow's accessibility telling: "In the course of his long career, he began to see himself less and less as an 'original' creator than as a competent redistributor of common cultural goods, whose relationship with his audience was based on a system of exchange, both monetary and emotional, governed by civility and respect" (p. 67). Longfellow, Irmscher concludes, saw poetry writing as a "trade," a site of necessary interaction between the writer and his readers.

Chapter 2, "How Marbles Are Made," connects the idea of authorship to the concept of patriarchal authority, arguing that Longfellow evaded Oedipal "anxieties of influence" by redefining the relationship between fathers and children, using his domestic life as a model for

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his literary practice. Here again, Irmischer draws on images of trade and exchange: “Longfellow saw fatherhood not as a tool for domination but as a process, an exchange of sympathies and identities that involved self-understanding as well as understanding the needs of others” (p. 93). The chapter offers close readings of several key Longfellow poems, including “The Children’s Hour,” “The Song of Hiawatha,” and “Keramos.” These readings—which will delight the casual reader with their wit and precision—are likely to become definitive among Longfellow scholars. For instance, Irmischer’s gloss of “The Children’s Hour”—with its careful attention to the figure of the Bishop of Bingen—shows how the poem breaks down barriers between work and play, positing poetry as a space where even parents and children (or authors and readers) can spar as equals. Irmischer’s readings are never needlessly complex, and yet they add surprising depth to even a (superficially) simple poem such as “The Children’s Hour.”

The final two chapters connect Longfellow’s self-effacing persona to his lifelong cosmopolitanism: as both a borrower of European source materials and as a translator, he sought commonalities across cultures rather than trumpeting American exceptionalism. Unlike his inward-looking transcendentalist contemporaries, Longfellow celebrated travel as an escape from individualism—a way to imagine “interesting places with eyes other than our own” (p. 215). In volumes such as *Tales of a Wayside Inn*, which draw on European traditions, the isolated ego of the author is replaced by a more intimately *social* connection between storytellers and audiences, a connection that erases “arbitrary distinctions of time, place and class” (p. 197). For Longfellow, translation was a natural extension of his work as a poet, offering yet another chance to work the poetic “trade,” providing readers with access to the strangeness—and the comforting familiarity—of a text such as Dante’s *Inferno*. Longfellow’s knowledge of European languages was vast, but as a translator he wore his learning lightly, balancing his scholarship with a commitment to clarity.

The same could be said of *Longfellow Redux*: it is authoritative but never pedantic, and it should significantly strengthen the resurgence of critical interest in Longfellow that has been begun by Mary Louise Kete, Matthew Gartner, Colleen Boggs, and others. Irmischer’s enthusiasm for his subject is infectious as he rummages through the dense material world of nineteenth-century bourgeois culture with its Delft porcelain, walking sticks, and glass marbles. Readers are likely to be both charmed and edified. As this book makes clear,

Longfellow has much to teach us about how poetry can matter to people outside of the academy. He was no romantic isolato, but he was exceptional precisely because he challenged—and broadened and democratized—the very idea of American authorship.

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