



Trinity College Dublin

The University of Dublin

MICHAEL LONGLEY

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Michael Longley was born in Belfast in Northern Ireland on 27 July 1939 to an English family (on his mother's side his grandmother was Jewish), which had moved to the province from Clapham Common in London in 1927. Longley's father, who had served with distinction as an enlisted soldier in the Great War, supported his family by working as a commercial traveler for a firm of furniture manufacturers. He enlisted once more when the Second World War broke out in September, 1939, shortly after his son's birth. Michael was the earlier arrival of twin boys. Longley père subsequently worked as a charity fund raiser enabling the family to live in a fairly comfortable middle-class area of south Belfast. Longley began his formal education at a nearby primary Public Elementary School where he encountered for the first time the realities of class division and sectarianism, which then so marred the social fabric of the city and the province. Longley underwent secondary education at the well-known grammar school for boys in the city centre, the Royal Belfast Academical Institution (RBAI, popularly known as Inst.). The school had a distinct literary association for one of its founders had been the United Irishman and poet, William Drennan. In Longley's day, however, the school was more renowned for prowess on the rugby pitch than for artistic or literary achievement. Michael Longley kept his place for a while as a forward on the 1st XV.

Among the teaching staff at Inst. was an enthusiastic Classics master who enjoyed some renown in the province for his school productions (with all male casts) of Greek drama. I remember a production of *Oedipus Rex* in which he himself took the title part. It may be that it was this teacher who stimulated Longley to choose Classics as a subject when he left school for Trinity College, Dublin where he entered as a Junior Freshman in 1958. In college Longley was far from being an industrious student. Indeed in a recollection in a memoir he dubs himself a 'lapsed Classicist' (Longley 1994, 40) and it this self-depreciatory term he likes to use when he introduces public readings from his poetry. In fact it might be said that poetry was Longley's Trinity subject, for talking about, thinking about, and reading and writing poetry were the things that most engaged him during his Trinity years. The focus in those years for students interested in writing poetry was *Icarus*, the small literary periodical which had been founded with the help of the Oxford-educated Alec Reid. Reid was still a presence in the college with his love for the poetry of Louis MacNeice, about whom Longley would later write an important essay, and his enthusiasm for the drama of Samuel Beckett. The *Icarus* circle included such figures as Rudi Holzapfel and Brendan Kennelly who had already published four slim volumes of verse together and were recognised as the 'college poets'. In 1960 Longley was followed to Trinity from Inst. by Derek Mahon who quickly made his presence felt as a highly talented 'new kid on the block'. Longley and Mahon soon struck up what would prove to be a long-lasting friendship that at the beginning was not without its competitive edge. In *Tuppenny Stung* Longley recalls the heady excitement their shared zest for poetry involved:

We inhaled with our untipped Sweet Afton cigarettes MacNeice, Crane, Dylan Thomas, Yeats, Larkin, Lawrence, Graves, Ted Hughes, Stevens. Cummings, Richard Wilbur, Robrt Lowell, as well as Rimbaud, Baudelaire, Brecht, Rilke – higgledepiggedly, in any order. We scanned the journals and newspapers for poems written yesterday. (Longley 1994, 36-7)

The critic Fran Brearton has written of Longley's Trinity experience that it served as his 'apprenticeship myth both in terms of his formal development, and in terms of his emerging sense of self' (Brearton 2006, 17). Trinity was also where Longley met Edna Broderick, daughter of the university's Professor of Pure Mathematics. She was beginning what would develop to become a distinguished career as a critic by contributing critical articles to *Icarus*. Upon their marriage the couple settled in Belfast while Michael took a post as an English teacher at his old school, Inst. while Edna was appointed as a lecturer in English at the Queen's University in the city. The return to Belfast meant a further stage in Longley's apprenticeship as a poet. One of the lecturers in English in Q.U.B., Philip Hobsbaum, had been holding regular meetings at which young local poets could read and discuss each others' work. One of the members of what had become known as 'the Group' was Seamus Heaney, who published his first collection *Death of a Naturalist* in 1966 (Michael Longley reviewed it for *The Irish Times*). Heaney and Longley soon became fast friends in a literary friendship that continued until Heaney's death in 2013. Hobsbaum's impact on the local poetry scene at this time, in a city that had little sense of a literary tradition of its own, was to give young writers a belief in their capacities. Longley has put it succinctly: 'Hobsbaum generated an atmosphere of controversy and excitement' (Longley 1994, 42). Although Derek Mahon was not a member of 'the Group' (as Longley recalls it, he attended only a few times) the publication of his first collection *Night Crossing* (1968) was a contribution to the excitement poetry was beginning to generate in Belfast. So was the publication in 1969 of Michael Longley's first collection *No Continuing City*. For here were poets from the province being published by major British houses (by Faber and Faber in Heaney's case, by Oxford University Press in Mahon's, and by Macmillan in Longley's). *No Continuing City* was an impressive debut, formally and linguistically assured, offering substantial well-made poems of unapologetically imagistic bravura.

What is fascinating for admirers of Longley's oeuvre is how various poems in *No Continuing City* seem to anticipate his future preoccupations and successes as a poet. In the volume the poet who would later make classical texts a resource for modern lyric verse exhibited his skill in the writing of poems of classical provenance. Poems such as 'Circe', 'Nausicaa', 'Persephone', and 'Narcissus' are a somewhat bookish (it must be admitted) nod to the poet's education. They suggest however, how classical texts have helped to form his imagination by laying down a kind of bed-rock to serve as a foundation upon which he could erect future poems. In two poems, 'Epithalamium' and the title poem itself, collected in the volume, Longley in intricately constructed stanzas broached the theme of marital love, an early indication that his more mature work would earn him a reputation as an exceptional love poet. Poems that describe with the naturalist's precise eye the flora and fauna of the Irish countryside reflect also an interest that would make Longley a fine nature poet.

No Continuing City was published in the year in which the Northern Irish troubles broke out. One poem, 'In Memoriam', which recalls the terrible suffering of the Great War in which the poet's soldier father had been grievously wounded, hints that a poetic response to violent events could be the difficult responsibility of the poet in years to come. In all these modes of poetry exhibited in the collection, the reader could only be impressed by Longley's confident control of complex syntax, of the sweep of a sentence across a stanza or verse paragraph. It was such an assured control of tone and register implicit in the twists and turns of syntax, which was to characterise the artistry of his mature poetry making him one of the finest poets writing in English in the second part of the twentieth century.

Longley chose to remain in Belfast as an officer of the Arts Council of Northern Ireland, with his wife and growing family, though the difficult years of the Troubles. Through the generosity of a naturalist friend the family was able to spend summer vacations in a cottage in the townland of Carrigskeewaun in County Mayo, during this challenging period. This locale became a vital source of imaginative

stimulus for the poet and was part of what made him the remarkable nature poet he is. Nature in Longley's poetry is not treated with any romantic expectation that it can afford experiences of the numinous. There is no sense of something 'far more deeply interfused', nothing Wordsworthian about his vision of things. Rather birds, wild flowers, animals, and topographies are described in what one might term a Lucretian spirit: these things constituting as they do the palpable givenness of the material universe. The natural order as he represents it in his poetry, without anthropomorphism, is a fragile eco-system, whose very fragility is a rebuke to the dealers of death and disorder in the human world. An almost scientific rigour of observation gives to Longley's nature poetry a tone of delighted respect, even reverence, without piety, for the exact way things are. His is a poetry of a naturalist's clear-eyed wonderment.

In the 1980s, after so auspicious a beginning, and following the publication of a further three collections, Longley seemed to enter a fallow period with no new collection being published, though *Poems 1963-1983* (1985) did include some new poems. A new, widely praised, collection entitled *Gorse Fires* appeared in 1991. Fran Breaton points out that most of the poems therein had in fact been composed in the late 1980s during Longley's apparent period of poetic silence. In this volume the patient study of the natural world remains, in such poems as 'Peregrine' and 'Swallow', as a central preoccupation, but this is joined by an appreciation of what might be thought of as a taxonomy of inner, domestic spaces, with their tender intimacies and affections. Most compellingly *Gorse Fires* marked a full-throated return by the poet to the inspiration classical texts had offered at the outset of his career. Homer's *Odyssey* is the ur-text of a number of the book's most impressive works. Longley's achievement in these, as it would be in poems in subsequent collections, was to invest moments chosen from an epic narrative with a lyric intensity. 'Homecoming', and 'Anticleia', are prime examples of this. Arguably this capacity was shown at its most striking in the poem entitled 'Ceasefire' which the

Irish Times published in 1994 after the IRA's cessation of violence. This poem tellingly drew on *The Iliad* as it pondered the human cost involved in making peace.

Gorse Fires concluded not with the lyric grace and gentleness of many of the book's poems, but with a free translation of the passage in *The Odyssey*, which recounts how Ulysses slaughtered the suitors on his return to Ithaca. It is a passage whose primitive energy reflects the values of a society which countenanced the brutal carnage of warfare. Readers could not but have sensed that in this poem Longley was directing their attention towards his own society, in which atrocities of like savagery had been committed during the troubles. Readers could have been reminded too how since the publication of 'In Memoriam' in *No Continuing City* Longley had sought to respond to the violence of war and to that which was afflicting his native city and province. *An Exploded View: Poems 1968-1972* (1973) had included 'Kindertotenlieder' and 'Wounds' which once again recalled his father's Great War experience making it bear on current violence. Poems in further collections had accepted the obligation to be the elegist of lost lives. 'Wreathes', collected in *The Echo Gate: Poems 1975-79* (1979) was one of the most impressive of his elegies, combining arrestingly original imagery with a grave formality of tone.

Following the publication of *Gorse Fires*, Michael Longley has published six more volumes of poetry, including *Selected Poems* (1998) and *Collected Poems* (2006), in the latter of which most of the poems referred to in this essay can be found. This body of work reveals that the lyric impulse, present from the start of his career has continued to beat strongly in poems written in the poet's seventh and eighth decades. His later collections contain many exquisite nature poems and the great Homeric texts still supply analogues to contemporary life. The theme of arms and the man is suggested in poems that treat of the Great War. The poets of that cataclysm, Wilfred Owen, Isaac Rosenberg, and Edward Thomas (Edna Longley published a fine collected edition of the latter's work in 2008) along with his own soldier father and other young soldiers, haunt his imagination like revenants from a permanent front-line. In all these volumes the poet's vision of the natural world

with its delicate inter-dependencies has its parallel in the human world of family relationships (celebrated with tact and formal respect) and in erotic inter-connectedness. One of Longley's finest love poems, 'The Linen Industry' (collected in *The Echo Gate*) had rendered the transformative powers of married love in terms of the processes by which flax can become linen. Michael Longley's most recent collection, *The Stairwell* (2014) is a book of exits and entrances, the second part dedicated to and memorializing 'Peter, My Twin.' Still, the erotic principle remains vital, in 'Padlocks' for example, in which even the insect world is a participant in love-making on an April Day.

Michael Longley has received many awards and prizes for his poetry. Including the Whitbread Poetry Prize, the *Irish Times* literature prize for Poetry, the T.S. Eliot Prize, and the Griffen Poetry Prize. In 2001 he was awarded the Queen's Gold Medal for poetry by Elizabeth II. He is the holder of honorary doctorates from QUB and from Trinity College Dublin. In 1993 he was Arts Council of Ireland Writer Fellow in TCD. He was holder of the Ireland Chair of Poetry (2007-2010). He is a member of Aosdána, the association of Irish artists, and of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences. In 2015 he was made a Freeman of Belfast by the City Council.

Works Cited

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