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Early Conversations

by EAVAN BOLAND

I MET MICHAEL LONGLEY when I was nineteen. It was September. I took the train to Belfast—the old, creaking Enterprise—with Derek Mahon. Somewhere, if I looked hard for it, I might find the letter Derek wrote me when I was a student at Trinity and he was in London for the summer. It was the letter of a Glengormley Proust, describing "the good, the generous train," which left three times a day from Westland Row.

In it, he wrote lovingly about the stations along the way—the last sight of Malahide, the first of the Boyne Valley, the angles of Dundalk, the arrival in Belfast. It was a letter about the new and strange—to me at least—written by someone to whom it was all familiar. It was also a letter about distances and estrangements. I had never been to Belfast. He had only just got used to Dublin. The distance between them—this was the middle sixties—was to prove far greater than any of us could have imagined.

And so it was with Irish poetry as well. When I finally took the train and went to Belfast on a crisp autumn afternoon, I was crossing into more than a new city and an unfamiliar politic. One of the promises Derek's letter had made was about the Crown Bar, just across Victoria Street. In his letter he described its wild carving, its ornate wooden drinking booths, and the way John Betjeman had praised it. We stopped there briefly, ate bowls of Irish stew for less than a shilling—proper Irish stew with lamb shanks and broken potatoes –and went on to meet Michael.

This is not a piece about friendship, nor does it need to be. We became friends then, and have been friends ever since. Instead, it is intended as an argument—and, in this, a particular tribute to Michael—about the way poets influence each other through the painful challenges and cross-grained exchanges of their youths. And then carry that with them into their growth and finish as poets—still arguing, still muttering under their breath, still imagining an evening in Belfast or Dublin, that became a midnight, that became a dawn, that lasted a week and then softened finally into a question, held forever like a talisman or a much-loved letter.

And so it was with me. When I went to Belfast that autumn I was just beginning my third year at Trinity. More important, in my mind, was the fact that I was still an unconstructed Yeatsian. Perhaps I wouldn't have used the adjective. But as a schoolgirl, reading him for the first time, and as a student, with his book still on my night table, Yeats had seemed to me beyond chal-

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lenge. His lyric decisions seemed flawless. His seizure of Irish history and landscape seemed justified. His eminence was allowed by me and, I was sure, by everyone.

But recently my assurance had begun to show some cracks. Derek Mahon, for instance, was brisk and cheerfully vandalistic in his comments on Yeats. The very things I valued—Yeats's self-shaped place in the Irish canon—were a source of impatience to Derek. Poem by poem, yes, he conceded, there were enormous strengths. But the background, the foreground, the outworks, the backdrop—he may not have used the word corrupt, but it was certainly in the air. Michael was almost equally resistant. That stance of inclusion and power Yeats offered, that inventive sense of entitlement, meant little to them. To limited degree, he was their poet—in a certain sense he had to be everyone's in that century. But he was not their national poet.

Of course not. We did not share a nation; we did not share a history. We could not exchange the values we had in common, for the very good reason that we had none. Instead of canonical sophistication, I offered a crude separatism—a sort of post-Revival resistance to English poetry: I read Yeats and elevated F. R. Higgins and quoted Kavanagh. They, on the other hand, were openly admiring of Hughes and Larkin, of MacNeice and W. R. Rodgers. The circumstances that made the Irish poetry of the previous fifty years a remarkable and romantic enterprise to me—in particular the struggle for an Irish identity—made it a subject of skepticism to them. Later I would value this. I would think of those exchanges as a starting point for my own questions. But at the time I felt unsettled, put out, provincial.

Now I look back, in fact, our conversations and disagreements seem inevitable. But not then. It must have seemed to me at that time, if I thought about it at all, that those arguments were just struggles of will and opinion. But they were more. As young Irish poets, we were, whether we knew it or not, a captive audience for what was happening all around us. Into our two cities, and our single troubled history, flowed a rich, powerful stream of artistic and intellectual influence—a mix of tributaries in which languages, traditions, genres, styles, and voices moved toward our fledgling poetic world like a flash flood. We were powerless to resist it. In fact, in a very real sense, it was to be our element for the next twenty years. This was Ireland, and just a decade after the mid-century. One set of tribal wars behind us. One set about to begin again. One language lost. One seized and made our own. But nothing settled and everything ahead of us. It was, in its way, an instruction set for more than political conflict. It was also, paradoxically, a moment in which a poet could pick and choose, could strike out against the mainstream, could truly become independent.

And so it was with Michael. In that first year, and for some time after it as well, we would take the moment where we found it and start to talk and argue—Michael, often as not, waving a cigarette like an orchestral conductor in time to his conversation, in any one of the smoky pubs or front rooms of those years. In a way it was his conversation I found hardest to understand.

Some of that was for the simplest reasons. He hardly ever talked about the subjects that interested and located me: Yeats, the south of Ireland, Irish history, or the Irish Revival. Even his feelings for Trinity were local and familial; a fondness for a household and its gods, mixed with a very real coolness toward its hinterland.

And when he described his own world, I was attentive but often lost. Here was a poet who spoke about birds the way other people spoke about places. I, on the other hand, was the product of a nomadic, urban childhood. The idea that the earth itself could be a series of signs, a road pointing toward home, was unfamiliar to me. What's more, the poets he gathered in, quoted, cherished, were hardly known by me at all. Edwin Muir, for instance, that obstinate son of the Orkneys, with his hard-headed autobiography, his poems, his bleak inward compass, was a lost cause to me. Keith Douglas, the same. Elements of John Clare mixed with low notes from Billie Holiday. Horace, who I had read and relished in boarding school, was a very different figure to Michael: a maker of grace rather than the quick-witted mercenary I had struggled to translate.

Over and over. Back and forth. We were like two visitors to each other's houses, gesturing our welcome, our intent of hospitality, and yet our expressions betraying us at the sight of yet another unwanted gift. I had no lexicon, no vocabulary for this. I had just a blunt, crude measure of relevant and irrelevant, major and minor. Michael's conversation was a subtle, nuanced register of difference. I couldn't follow. I could only disagree.

Sometime after that meeting in the autumn of that year—maybe eight months or so later—Michael wrote a poem called "The Hebrides" and dedicated it to me. It appeared in his first book, "No Continuing City," published in 1969. There were a cluster of first books, including my own, in those few years. Michael's was one of the last to appear. When it did it was a fine, measured book—less immature, less self-conscious than some of the others. I read it with respect and affection. I read "The Hebrides" with an increased measure of both. In fact it was that poem which first warned and promised—at least for me—of the poet Michael would become. Even at this distance it is a remarkable piece.

The poem opens in that bleak Scottish landscape and quickly references the title of the collection:

In whom the city is continuing,
I stop to look,
To find my feet among the ling
And bracken—over me
The bright continuum of gulls, a rook
Occasionally.

The chopped-off music of these Traherne-like stanzas was Michael's idiom at the time. He liked the management, the tight corners, the quick turns—and it showed. But there was a turbulence behind the decorum; something of true importance keeps coming through here. The son of a soldier in

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the Ulster Division. The maker of Irish poems. The possessor of a British passport and an Irish birthplace—all the contradictions of a young man on the edge of an historic abyss—and all the reach of the future writer of *Wounds* and *Ceasefire*—finds bold, preliminary expression against the background of barren rock:

For these are my sailors, these my drowned—
In their heart of hearts,
In their city I ran aground.
Along my arteries
Sluice those homewaters petroleum hurts.
Dry dock, gantries,

Dykes of apparatus educate my bones
To track the buoys
Up sea lanes love emblazons
To streets where shall conclude
My journey back from flux to poise, from poise
To attitude.

The poem ends with lines that recall Muir and Clare, his old heroes, as well as a gesture toward his own doubt and indecision.

Granting the trawlers far below their stance,
Their anchorage,
I fight all the way for balance –
In the mountain's shadow
Losing foothold, covet the privilege
Of vertigo.

Looking back now, I understand it all better. If I could revisit those excited and lost meetings of our youth, they would look different too. In some ways those conversations—because of their insistence on difference, and because of Michael's profound and original resistance to the received Irish poetic tradition—are among the true gifts I took away from my poetic apprenticeship—although I don't care for the term.

And now, at this distance, I also understand that Michael carried a particular intellectual and artistic burden. His love for the pastoral, his care for decorum, his longing for a symmetry that would explain the world without suppressing it had little place, and received little enough hospitality, on our rough island. The intimate murders, the lurid backlight of a country in a time of civil violence would claim his attention, as it claimed everyone's, in the years to come. The world of "The Hebrides"—of a poet seeking a rare, revealed poise between the outer and inner world—seemed uniquely at risk.

Sometimes during those years, when my mind wandered away from the local and immediate, sometimes reading English poetry, sometimes American, I would occasionally think that Ireland did not have its nature poet yet. The intense focus of a James Wright or a Robert Frost seemed not to have materialized. There were good nature poems. But that was a different thing. And Patrick Kavanagh didn't quite fit the bill. He was an anti-pastoral

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lyric witness: beautiful, essential, and in many ways heroic. But not exactly a nature poet.

But then, what qualities would an Irish nature poet need to have? Someone I thought, who would love this island, but not mistake its beauty for its truth—someone, in other words, who would shelter in their poems the abandonments of its history, the dark twist of its pastoral, the extraordinary, interwoven stresses between the claims of its public life and the private power of feeling.

I never resolved that train of thought. And I won't attempt to here, for fear of simplifying what is complex. Nevertheless, I am quite sure that the first, bold seeking of "The Hebrides" never really finished. As Michael Longley published more, as his poems began to meld the vertigo of a natural landscape with the upheaval of a political one, that search became more urgent. His poems still registered the early voices that had so bewildered me. They still honored Muir and Clare and Edward Thomas—the outsiders and dispossessed consciences of their time. But they had their own unique voice. And they were uniquely of their time.