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Fighting for Balance: The Influence of Ted Hughes on Michael Longley

by JOHN REDMOND

TED HUGHES'S influence on Michael Longley is less remarked than his influence on Longley's better-known contemporary, Seamus Heaney. In this essay I want to set out the reasons why Longley was drawn to Hughes's work and the consequences for his poetic evolution. Focusing on Longley's collections up to and including *The Echo Gate*, I will look at a number of areas of shared concern, both formal and thematic. These will include poems about animals, corpses, and war, poems that pursue balance as a formal principle, and poems that make extensive use of metonymy.

Longley's exposure to Hughes's influence, like many developments in Northern Irish poetry during the 1960s, owes much to the mediation of Philip Hobsbaum. To say this is to enter a controversial area—one I do not propose to enter very far. In sharp contrast to Heaney, Longley has been reluctant to praise Hobsbaum's mentoring role. Of course, Hobsbaum's influence on Heaney has long been accepted and attested. In the earliest book-length study of Heaney, Blake Morrison wrote:

Ted Hughes's influence indeed permeates many of the early poems about farming and country matters, and spills over into Heaney's use of assonance, metaphor, and titles as opening words of the poem We also know that when he was studying and teaching in Belfast in the early 1960s Heaney received the tuition of Philip Hobsbaum, a contemporary of Ted Hughes at Cambridge, and a fervent believer in his work; Hobsbaum encouraged Heaney to strive for Hughes's masculinity and energy.¹

In respect of Hughes's influence on Longley, Hobsbaum is a common link since Longley also attended the poetry group inaugurated by Hobsbaum in late 1963.² The *extent* of Hobsbaum's influence, however, is certainly a matter for debate. Whereas John Wilson Foster, in his study of Heaney, credits Hobsbaum with "almost single-handedly" transforming Northern Irish poetry, Longley himself has been keen to emphasize that Hobsbaum disliked the "elegance" of his own poetry.³ Nevertheless Hobsbaum is such an obvious

1. Blake Morrison, *Seamus Heaney* (London: Methuen, 1982), 18

2. Michael Parker, *Seamus Heaney: The Making of a Poet* (London: Macmillan, 1993), 51.

3. John Wilson Foster, *The Achievement of Seamus Heaney* (Dublin: Lilliput, 1995) 19. Parker. *Seamus Heaney*, 52.

link between Hughes and Longley that we can afford to bypass the rival histories of the “Belfast Group.” As this essay will show, there are many parallels between Hughes’s influence on Heaney and his influence on Longley that suggest the centrality of this nexus.

We might nevertheless feel inclined—on quite other grounds—to discredit any substantial link between Longley and Hughes. Their poetic temperaments are, on the face of it, opposed. Against Longley’s sober, diplomatic moderation, Hughes offers us a poetics of extremist individualism. As Tom Paulin suggests, Hughes’s “imagination rejects the middle way with its undogmatic sense of balance, its compromises or sophistries.”⁴ Certainly, this is true of Hughes’s poetry taken as a whole, but his work is very various and has passed through many contrasting phases. Rather than propose that the totality of Hughes’s stylistic evolution has been an influence on Longley, I want to make the case for the importance of Hughes’s second book, *Lupercal*, as providing a pivotal model for the Northern Irishman. Although chaotic and troubling areas of experience are rendered in *Lupercal*, Hughes does not allow, as he allows later in his career, the subject matter to radicalize his treatment of it. This early book, which features many of Hughes’s most anthologized poems (“Second Glance at a Jaguar,” “Hawk Roosting,” “An Otter”), shows Hughes attempting, like the intensely described animals of his poems, to maintain a graceful, adaptable style under pressured circumstances.

One needs to acknowledge, of course, that Longley’s early poetry is open to influences other than those of Hughes, especially the witty formalism of W. H. Auden and Louis MacNeice. Terence Brown describes it aptly:

... the work of a self-conscious, urban sophisticate for whom Ireland as a possible poetic subject scarcely exists. Indeed his first volume, *No Continuing City* (1969), contained only one poem on an explicitly Irish subject. In that collection we enter a world of private associations, of wit, intelligence and formal relations.⁵

Brown emphasizes the technical character of Longley’s first book because the characters in so many of the poems, like “Emily Dickinson” and “Words for Jazz Perhaps,” are notable technicians (musical or literary) and because some the rather two-dimensional characters in poems like “Odyssey” and “Circe” exist only as foils for the poet’s technique.

Throughout *No Continuing City*, Longley’s personality is deliberately withheld from the reader and this is perhaps why so many of the poems feature beasts and birds—one can write animal poems without revealing much about oneself. Hughes’s second book, *Lupercal*, was published at a time when the major alternative to the limiting practices of Movement poets like Philip Larkin and Kingsley Amis was the fraught confessionalism of such American poets as Robert Lowell and John Berryman. *Lupercal* helpfully maintains its distance from both of these models—the book might be described as intensely

4. Tom Paulin, “Laureate of the Free Market? Ted Hughes,” *Minotaur: Poetry and the Nation State* (London and Boston: Faber, 1992) 252-75: 265.

5. Terence Brown, *Northern Voices: Poets from Ulster* (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1975), 201.

impersonal. The reader encounters Hughes's temperament in all its radicalism but not the circumstances of his day-to-day life. Longley himself has identified the significance of *Lupercal* to his thinking about poetry:

Books of the undeniable stature of Larkin's *The Whitsun Weddings*, Hughes's *Lupercal* or Hill's *Mercian Hymns* are what really matter; they encourage a fruitful schizophrenia in someone trying to write poetry in Ireland.⁶

In a separate interview, Longley again talks about the centrality of Hughes's work to him in the context of a list of single volumes (the list of books slightly changes):

Larkin's *The Less Deceived* and *The Whitsun Weddings*, Hughes's *Lupercal* and Hill's *For The Unfallen* are the post-war collections I keep returning to.⁷

One of the reasons that Longley does not have the same kind of emotional intensity as Hughes is that his early style advances equilibrium as a universally desirable existential quality. Although rendered in increasingly personal terms, Longley maintains this disposition throughout his entire career. Often, it is made manifest by his fascination with states of "between-ness." Take, for example, this statement that appears on the back cover of his third collection, *Man Lying on a Wall*:

This is my most personal book to date. Certainly its privacies were not conceived in reaction to the political and more public utterances of its predecessor, *An Exploded View*: both books grew out of similar preoccupations and pressures. The man lying on the wall might be resting between sleep and waking, dream and reality, life and death.⁸

Especially in *No Continuing City*, Longley pursues the quality of balance largely on the formal level. The poem "A Questionnaire for Walter Mitty," for instance, is a startling illustration of this. Longley wonders whether or not Mitty, through his daydreaming, can undergo true self-transformation. The question, however, is left unanswered. Instead it is asked in an aggressive variety of ways, leaving the poem's subject suspended between competing possibilities:

At which side of the glass does Mitty stand
In his epiphany - in front? behind?
Or both - the hero with the also-ran?

And, Walter Mitty, how would you define
The water-walker who made the water wine -
Was it Christ the god? Was it Christ the Man?⁹

The poem ends as it began in a series of contrasts: contrasting positions, "front" and "behind"; contrasting types, "hero" and "also-ran"; contrasting

6. Michael Longley in "The State of Poetry—A Symposium," *The Review* 29-30 (Spring-Summer 1972): 3-75, 47.

7. Michael Longley, "An Inner Adventure," *Phoenix* 5 (Summer 1968): 54-55.

8. Michael Longley, quote on back cover of *Man Lying on a Wall*, 1975.

9. Michael Longley, "A Questionnaire for Walter Mitty," *No Continuing City* (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1969), 12.

elements, “water” and “wine;” contrasting spirits, “God” and “Man.” Indeed the accumulation of contrasts is so great that it is hard to experience the poem as more than a rhetorical exercise.

Animals give Longley more opportunity to use contrast aggressively because their characteristics can be played off against the characteristics of the human world. Some of Longley’s poems that rely on this procedure are particularly reminiscent of phrases and passages in Hughes’s *Lupercal*. Consider the way in which Hughes ends a poem like “Mayday on Holderness”:

Curded to beastings, broached my palate,
The expressionless gaze of the leopard,
The coils of the sleeping anaconda,
The nightlong frenzy of shrews.¹⁰

It is revealing to place this ending beside the conclusion of Longley’s “Christopher at Birth”:

Although there is such a story to unfold
- Whether as forecast or reminder -
Of cattle steaming in their byres, and sheep
Beneath a hedge, arranged against the cold,
Our cat at home blinking by the fender,
The wolf treading its circuit towards sleep.¹¹

Several characteristics are shared between the two poems: the lack of enjambment toward the end of each stanza; the way in which each animal is given a line wherein they are rapidly sketched, then abandoned; the way in which the last two lines of each poem contrast an image of animal calm with an image of animal ferocity. In Hughes’s “Crow Hill,” these patterns reappear and the behavior of human society is deliberately balanced with the behavior of natural creatures:

What humbles these hills has raised
The arrogance of blood and bone,
And thrown the hawk upon the wind,
And lit the fox in the dripping ground.¹²

Many of the poems in *Lupercal* allow the animals to suggest ways in which human beings might live (and die): to be extremely cruel (“Hawk Roosting”); to be immensely adaptable (“An Otter”); to be as nothing in death (“View of a Pig”). They represent ways of being in the world obviously not confined to animals. They are invitations to read certain qualities—humility, arrogance—as shared between human and animals.

In *No Continuing City*, Longley’s tendency to generalize at the same time as he uses animals to create arresting contrasts is most evident in the poem “Camouflage.” Having made a general point, in the first stanza, about the dif-

10. Ted Hughes, “Mayday on Holderness,” *Lupercal* (London: Faber, 1960) 12.

11. Longley, “Christopher at Birth,” *No Continuing City*, 43.

12. Hughes, “Crow Hill,” *Lupercal*, p. 14.

ferences between animals and human beings, namely, our ability to weep, Longley, in the second stanza, begins a familiar balancing act. He uses the animals to provide contrast with humanity, while they also provide, in camouflage, contrast between themselves:

The leopards' coat accepting light through leaves,
Giraffes whose necks presume that certain trees
Are tall, whose elongated stance relieves
Those boughs of height's responsibilities -
Such attributes a balanced world conceives,
Itself reflected, its streams reflecting these.

We'd say they choose a mood to linger at:
Like white for weddings, black for funerals

Longley points up his admiration for a balanced world by the obvious contrast of wedding-white and funeral-black. The poem ends with a muted allegory when the animals wake:

(Amid the sanctuary of camouflage)
To a change of colour, a risk taken.¹³

Longley is well aware of what is at issue when using animals in this manner, making it clear, for example, in "To Three Irish Poets," a poem that echoes Hughes's "An Otter":

The approximate untold barks
Of the otters we call water-dogs,
A dim reflection of ourselves,
A muddy forepaw that dissolves.¹⁴

This pattern is repeated in a more integrated poem from the volume called "The Hebrides," in which human and avian elements are carefully played off each other:

Between wind and wave this holiday
The cormorant,
The oyster-catcher and osprey
Proceed and keep in line
While I, hands in my pockets, hesitant,
Am in two minds.¹⁵

Just as the holiday is balanced between wind and wave, just as the poet's human response is balanced by the presence of the natural creatures his mind is balanced between two choices. When the nature of his choice is finally revealed to us, it is typically generalized and impersonal:

13. Longley, "Camouflage," *No Continuing City*, 18.

14. Longley, "To Three Irish Poets," *An Exploded View* (London: Victor Gollancz, 1973), 32.

15. Longley, "The Hebrides," *No Continuing City*, 27.

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.¹⁶

Critical to the use of animals in his early work is the question of the animal poem itself: how should we read animals in poetry and how should we approach the genre of the animal poem? While Hughes is more naturally sympathetic to the poetic stance of D. H. Lawrence, and to the use of the Lawrentian bestiary, for example, in *Birds, Beasts and Flowers*, nevertheless for both Hughes and Longley, as for Lawrence, there is an inescapable link between the perceived liveliness of animals and their closeness to death. An animal is always seen—positively—as a corpse in the making. The liveliness of animals is also a question of their deathliness and Longley's early habit of deliberate contrast often exploits this paradox. In "The Ornithological Section," for example, the stuffed birds of the title are, on a physical level, balanced between stillness and flux, while, on a metaphysical level, their representations are balanced between contrasting outlooks, one coldly analytical, the other warmly empathetic. While Longley recognizes the inescapable fact of the birds' death, he can still see them as moving things:

while winging it through fable,
 Fuse all we hope with what we know -
 Their fate incontrovertible,
 Their vanished bodies flying still.¹⁷

The same deliberate balance is famously maintained in Heaney's "The Grauballe Man," between seeing a bog body as a "corpse" or as a "vivid cast."¹⁸ If we look ahead to a poem from Longley's third collection, *Man Lying on a Wall*, we can see these issues playing out with greater intensity. The poem, "The Goose," for instance, lingers over the dismemberment of a bird:

I thought of you through the operation
 And covered the unmolested head,
 The pink eyes that had persisted in
 An expression of disappointment.

 It was right to hesitate before
 I punctured the skin, made incisions
 And broached with my reluctant fingers
 The chill of its intestines¹⁹

Although this is a portrait of a domestic scene, the preparation of a goose for cooking, it is shot through with a sense of violence on a grander scale. Brian

16. Longley, "The Hebrides," *No Continuing City*, 29.

17. Longley, "The Ornithological Section," *No Continuing City*, 16.

18. Seamus Heaney, "The Grauballe Man," *Opened Ground: Poems 1966-1996* (London: Faber, 1998), 116.

19. Longley, "The Goose," *Man Lying on a Wall*, 11.

McIlroy uses it as an example of how Longley, in a troubling manner, fetishizes parts, so the poem can be read as a distant displacement of political violence.²⁰ The poem from Hughes's canon that it sharply brings to mind is "View of a Pig" from *Lupercal*:

The pig lay on a barrow dead.
 It weighed, they said, as much as three men.
 Its eyes closed, pink white eyelashes.
 Its trotters stuck straight out.
 ...
 Too deadly factual. Its weight
 Oppressed me—how could it be moved?
 And the trouble of cutting it up!
 The gash in its throat was shocking, but not pathetic.²¹

Between "The Goose" and "View of a Pig," there are clear similarities: the use of an overtly pretty color, pink, in an ugly context; the cold emphasis on body parts; the mildly reluctant and ruminant tone of the speaker. Hughes's detached stare could, one feels, issue from anyone who destroys life, from a trench soldier to a death-camp doctor. It would be hard to underestimate the significance of "View of a Pig" on Northern Irish poetry, for there is a clear line between it and Heaney's bog poems as well as many poems central to Longley's canon. Longley (and Heaney) found in Hughes's ambiguous approach to corpses a method for contemplating violence in Northern Irish society and beyond.

Heaney has not been slow to acknowledge how much this poem has meant to him:

I remember the day I opened Ted Hughes's *Lupercal* in the Belfast Public Library. [There was] a poem called "View of a Pig" and in my childhood we'd killed pigs on the farm, and I'd seen pigs shaved, hung up, and so on Suddenly, the matter of contemporary poetry was the material of my own life.²²

One major area of interest shared by Hughes and Longley—one that has a partly biographical cause—is their identification with war poets and war poetry. Stephen Spender has remarked of the 1930s poetic generation that it owed its fascination with the such poets as Wilfred Owen to the fact that its parent's generation lived (and died) during the Great War.²³ As Longley and Hughes both had fathers who fought in that war, their interest in twentieth-century war poets, particularly Wilfred Owen, Edward Thomas, and Keith Douglas is no surprise. Paul Fussell, in *The Great War and Modern Memory*,

20. Brian McIlroy, "Poetry Imagery as Political Fetishism: The Example of Michael Longley" *The Canadian Journal of Irish Studies* 16(1)(July 1990): 59-64, 62.

21. Hughes, "View of a Pig," *Lupercal*, 40.

22. Heaney, "An Interview with Seamus Heaney" (by James Randall) *Ploughshares* 5.3 (1979): 14.

23. Stephen Spender. *Love-Hate Relations: A Study of Anglo-American Sensibilities* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1974) 144.

noticed similarities of approach to the issue of the Great War in the poetry of both Longley and Hughes and deals with them side by side. In a point that bears on the impersonality of both poets, he observes that Longley, like Hughes, "... derives his images not from experience but from mythic narrative."²⁴ Longley has often spoken about the terrible effects that the Great War had on his community's history:

The tragedy of the Somme affects all of Ulster My father's own experiences, which he recounted vividly on only a couple of occasions, have allowed me to participate in the community's glum pride. My mother's mentally retarded brother disappeared in the Trenches—and from family conversation. His vanishing act haunted my childhood much more than the vaster catastrophe ever did.²⁵

For both poets, criticism of the Great War, becomes a form of contemporary social criticism. In his first collection, *The Hawk in the Rain*, for example, Hughes used this particular kind of secondhand experience to attack the atrophied social ethos of mid-1950s Britain in the mid-1950s. A nightmarish poem, called "Bayonet Charge" ends:

He plunged past with his bayonet toward the green hedge.
King, honour, human dignity, etcetera
Dropped like luxuries in a yelling alarm
To get out of that blue cracking air
His terror's touchy dynamite.²⁶

In *No Continuing City*, two significantly different poems are organized around the theme of war: "The Centaurs" and "In Memoriam." "The Centaurs" is a surreal fable, not far removed from the hazy allegories of "The Hebrides" and "Camouflage." Politically, it is a good example of Longley's consistent moderation. Seamus Deane has described Longley's style, when compared with the other Northern Irish poets, as the "most civil."²⁷ The very civil moral of this poem is that, in a divided society, distrust of the other side only makes matters worse. Longley puts this point in the communal (and impersonal) first person plural:

Into the water our youth is spilled.
We make on the causeways our last stands.
Because of the bridges we did not build
Our whole army fights for balance.²⁸

"Fighting for balance," a phrase also used in "The Hebrides," takes on a deeper meaning in this poem, for Longley relates it to the divisions in Northern Irish society. The word "causeway" is significant for Longley as he

24. Paul Fussell, *The Great War And Modern Memory* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1975) 324.

25. Healy, "An Interview with Michael Longley," 130.

26. Hughes, "Bayonet Charge," *The Hawk in the Rain* (London: Faber, 1957) 51.

27. Deane, *A Short History of Irish Literature* (London: Hutchinson, 1986) 243.

28. Longley, "The Centaurs," *No Continuing City*, 36.

chose it for the title of a book of essays that he edited on the arts in Ulster. In his introduction to this book he wrote:

In one of the dictionaries I consulted "causeway" is defined as a path of stepping stones. This is, I think, a fair description of the role played by the arts in any society: it defines what should reasonably be expected of them in all civilised countries, but especially in a troubled community like our own.²⁹

Longley's second volume, *An Exploded View* (1973), is generally seen as a more personal work than *No Continuing City*, and was written at a time of intensifying political violence. The poems are shorter and more oblique. There are fewer full-blown allegories, and there is greater use of metonymy. In a poem that deals more directly with the historical pressure on him, "Kindertotenlieder," Longley abandons the conspicuously self-confident tone of his first volume and attempts something more understated:

There can be no songs for dead children
Near the crazy circle of explosions,
The splintering tangent of the ricochet,

No songs for the children who have become
My unrestricted tenants, fingerprints
Everywhere, teethmarks on this and that.³⁰

The frequent, almost obsessive use of marks of every kind is one of the hallmarks of Longley's poetry and this use is especially obvious in *An Exploded View*: "fingerprints," "toothmarks," "footprints," "cattle tracks," "a sanderling's tiny trail," "toe-/ And fingernail parings of the sea." These fragments of creatures and things, like the relatively short poems of his second volume, underline the slightly altered nature of Longley's poetic ambitions. Because the most significant difference between *No Continuing City* and *An Exploded View* is the shift from the allegorical to the metonymical.

That Longley's poetry operates to a considerable extent on the basis of metonymy, has been suggested by Brian McIlroy:

... in Michael Longley's poetry there is a discernible fascination with parts because no one whole is available. It is as if we are given parts to assemble into some pattern, into some unified subject, which perforce must remain anonymous, nameless, or simply pluralist.³¹

McIlroy goes on to identify the political ramifications of Longley's attachment to parts and to the rendering of parts, connecting it with the Ulster Protestant's habitual sensitivity to external pressures, the so-called "siege mentality."³² On another level, Longley's poetry represents the problems of a part, like Northern Ireland, which is, or has been, subject to various attempts to reorient it in relation to larger wholes, like the Republic of Ireland, the

29. Longley, Introduction to *Causeway* (Belfast: Arts Council of Northern Ireland, 1971), 9.

30. Longley, "Kindertotenlieder," *An Exploded View*, 42.

31. McIlroy, "Poetry Imagery as Political Fetishism," 61.

32. McIlroy, "Poetry Imagery as Political Fetishism," 60.

U.K., and Europe. Like Northern Ireland, it is not always clear what his parts are part of. They might be as much a part of one thing as another and seem balanced *between* the various options. Alan Peacock notes the way in which Longley, like MacNeice, has little trouble writing from within a British cultural framework while at the same time being happy to describe himself as “Irish.”³³ Tellingly, Longley in discussing MacNeice’s cultural identity, describes Ulster as “a limbo between two (three?) cultures”—and here the question mark is surely indicative of a markedly unresolved identity.³⁴

In the sense that animals are meant to be seen as part of a greater whole, Hughes’s use of them, throughout his poetry, might also be seen as metonymical. This is especially true of *Lupercal* in which the lengthy descriptions indicate that the animals have significance far in excess of their physical dimensions. We are encouraged to think what they are *part of*, rather than to think what they are. Hughes has also used metonymy in a more straightforward way, showing like Longley a fascination with animal tracks. “The Thought-Fox,” in his first collection, *The Hawk in the Rain* (1957), uses the marks made by an animal to suggest, rather than to embody, its reality:

Cold, delicately as the dark snow,
A fox’s nose touches twig, leaf;
Two eyes serve a movement, that now
And again now, and now, and now

Sets neat prints into the snow³⁵

Longley’s metonymical poetic objects, which are widely distributed throughout *An Exploded View*, are on the whole suggestive rather than descriptive. Combining this quality with an engaging modesty of tone, Longley found a formula that would serve him well throughout his poetic career. Such delicacy can be seen, for instance in “Love Poem”:

I

You define with your perfume
Infinitely shifting zones
And print in falls of talcum
The shadow of your foot.

2

Gossamers spun from your teeth,
So many light constructions
Describing as with wet wings
The gully under my tongue.

33. Alan Peacock, “Michael Longley: Poet Between Worlds,” *Poetry in Contemporary Irish Literature*, ed. Michael Kenneally, 263-79, 263.

34. Longley, “The Neolithic Light: A Note on the Irishness of Louis MacNeice” *Two Decades of Irish Writing*, ed. Dunn, 98-104, 99.

35. Hughes, “The Thought-Fox,” *The Hawk in the Rain*, 14.

These wide migrations begin
 In our seamier districts -
 A slumdweller's pigeons
 Released from creaking baskets.³⁶

There is no trace here of the heavy abstractions that dominated *No Continuing City*. Everything is pitched at a quiet level with suggestive parallelisms. The lover is imagined not as a whole, but in the context of various parts: "teeth," "feet," "wings," "tongue." This miniaturization is also reflected in the polysyllabic words: "infinitely," "constructions," "migrations," where the crammed light syllables evoke small spaces rather than large abstractions. The poem ends with the sudden brightness (the release of pigeons in the air), which is so often associated with lyrical release in the poets while the daring transition of the last stanza undermines the overabsorbed world of the lovers.

Longley's "Wounds," in this volume, is in a direct line of development from the earlier "In Memoriam" and shows how Longley is able to use metonymical techniques to deal with material at once dark and personal. Again it deals in a realistic way with the experiences of his father, at one point imagining his burial:

with military honours of a kind
 With his badges, his medals like rainbows,
 His spinning compass, I bury beside him
 Three teenage soldiers, bellies full of
 Bullets and Irish beer, their flies undone.³⁷

The emphasis here on minor details like "badges" and "flies" is indicative of the evolving delicacy and appropriate restraint of his style.

Longley's tendency in *No Continuing City* to extend metaphors is thus severely curtailed in *An Exploded View*. His use of extended metaphors (allegory, fable) gave an impression of trying to control his material in a too complete way. After all, if one tries to substitute a fable for a social situation, as he had tried to do in "The Centaurs," one must have—or appear to have—a deep understanding of the social situation.

The pressure seems even stronger in Longley's fourth and, possibly, best collection, *The Echo Gate* (1979). The emphasis on objectified body parts is extended until it becomes reminiscent of Heaney's procedures in *North*. In a poem like "Oliver Plunkett," for instance, the poet dwells on minute parts of the body; the emphasis on weight and fingernails is most reminiscent not only of Hughes's "View of a Pig," but of Longley's own poem "The Goose" and Heaney's "The Tollund Man":

His thigh bones and shoulder blades are scales

36. Longley, "Love Poem," *An Exploded View*, 15.

37. Longley, "Wounds," *An Exploded View*, 40.

That a speck of dust would tilt, making him
Walk with a limp or become a hunchback.

He has been buried under the fingernails
Of his executioners, until they too fade
Like the lightning flash of their instruments.³⁸

Here the terror, which was only present by implication in “The Goose,” is made explicit by the word “executioners.” The contrast, running through so many of Longley’s poems from “The Ornithological Section” onward, between scientific objectification and imaginative empathy, continues here. The phrase, “the lightning flash of their instruments,” marks a strange lyric intensification, where the sinister mechanisms are poised ambiguously with the vital freedom of the lightning flash. Does the flash cancel the instruments or do the instruments simply cancel the flash? The reader is balanced between the options.

Throughout *The Echo Gate* the image of war and the idea of war poetry play an important role. Just as Longley in “Wounds” placed the poems in the historical context provided by the First World War, in *The Echo Gate*, he juxtaposes poems about the conflict in Northern Ireland, like the sequence “Wreaths,” with poems that deal with the violence in Flanders like “Last Requests” and “Second Sight.” This is done to such an extent that when Longley writes a poem called “The War Poets,” the word “war” has an intentionally global resonance;

It was rushes of air that took the breath away
As though curtains were drawn suddenly aside
And darkness streamed into the dormitory
Where everybody talked about the war ending
And always it would be the last week of the war.³⁹

The essence of Hughes’s influence on Longley is a desire for poise between opposing forces, and as we have seen this desire takes many forms: their interest in war poetry; their fascination with corpses; their use of animals to contrast with the human world; their use of metonymy to create suggestive poetic effects. In the early 1960s Northern Irish poetry clearly required models for itself that went beyond the self-limiting style of the Movement poets, and Hughes’s ambitious tackling of universal subjects provided Longley with one model to tackle the unique problems of his especially divided society.

38. Longley, “Oliver Plunkett,” *The Echo Gate* (London: Secker & Warburg, 1979), 11.

39. Longley, “The War Poets,” *The Echo Gate*, 34.