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Introduction

By JODY ALLEN RANDOLPH and DOUGLAS ARCHIBALD

IN “WHY I WRITE” (1946) George Orwell recalls a flat little poem he wrote in 1935 saying that had he not been “born, alas, in an evil time,” he might have been a vicar watching his walnuts grow; but he immediately comes to his senses and recognizes that “every line of serious work ... I have written since 1936” has a political occasion and purpose. The vicar and walnuts bit is what Blake would have called a memorable fancy, but it works—or almost works—for Michael Longley. In “A Personal Statement,” he combines George Herbert’s form with Belfast irony:

Of the litany
Of movement I the vicar in command,
The prophet in my country,
The priest at hand.....

Had he lived in different times he would have been a learned poet, a love poet, a botanizing poet, or, as Eavan Boland says, Ireland’s nature poet. Who knows, were it the eighteenth century he might even have been a vicar, his version of Dr. Primrose, or of the schoolmaster in “The Deserted Village,” that Irish protest poem.

But he was born in 1939, came of age in the ‘Fifties, into politics with the Civil Rights movement in Ulster in the ‘Sixties, and has survived the subsequent dangerous and difficult decades. Not only survived, but helped to shape, interpret, and inform. He is still a learned poet, a love poet, and a nature poet—that cumbersome triad seems preferable to the throw-away “Movement poet”—but he has discovered in those roles and in those poems what Heaney discovered in Yeats: befitting emblems of adversity. Like his friend and his predecessor he has made poems adequate to the predicaments of place, self, and history. In Longley’s case, by placing his foot on a piece of ground and remaining responsible to the ghosts and people who suffered there.

Longley is the poet Wesley McNair and others admire for staying home to work for a humane, critical, and thinking democracy. He was Director of the Arts Council of Ulster for twenty-one years and a founding member of the Cultural Traditions Group. He worked for freedom, inclusiveness, peace, understanding. Had it been Czechoslovakia, he would have stood with Havel for liberation and irony. Had it been South Africa, with Tutu for truth and reconciliation. In Ulster, he stood with a few like-minded citizens and tried to

make civic life better, or at least more bearable. No one who has been engaged in similar activities, even a little, will escape without a sympathetic shudder at the references to office politics in the interview that follows these essays. All this is to say that Longley reflects and embodies the liberal virtues: tolerance, magnanimity, fairness, a belief in the possibility of social and political progress and amelioration of the human condition. "Liberal," especially with an edge, as in "Good Liberal," carries so much baggage now that it has almost lost descriptive utility. But the values are there in Longley's career as public citizen and as poet. Love, nature, and the classics are enriched by their close proximity to life on the ground in Belfast. Ulster life is complicated and muted by being enmeshed with Eros and botany or Homer and Ovid.

Longley's insistence that the Great War is a family and local event and his conflation of Flanders and the Somme with Bloody Sunday represents deep autobiographical truth validated by filial love and mourning and communal responsibility. It also challenges, Richard Russell and others point out, both Republican and Unionist pieties. The human and imaginative acts of placing love, poetry and meticulous descriptions of the natural world against loss, suffering and death counter sectarian narrowness and hatred. "Describing the world in a meticulous way," Longley comments in the interview, "is a consecration and a stay against damaging dogmatism." This hard-won celebratory and affirming aspect of Longley also appears in the trickster poems like "Alibis" or "According to Pythagoras." He is—see "Master of Ceremonies"—his grandfather's grandson. Serious joking, like Chaplin's walk or the carnival music in Fellini, is also a stay against darkness.

Longley's eclectic and quirky learnedness—something he shares with Louis MacNeice, a mentor and forerunner in this as in the celebration of love, flux, and multiplicity—is a check against Ulster or Irish provincialism. As Fran Brearton argues, the poet who stayed home—Belfast and Mayo—conducts a European, post-Colonial, and post-modern literary project. In poems like "The Campfires," "The Helmet," and "Ceasefire" Longley brings together Troy, Flanders, Ulster, Cambodia and obliges us to see other landscapes—Kandahar, Bagdad—as well.

It is more than a matter of relevance, of making the classics matter, though God knows that is accomplishment enough. Rui Homem explores some of the complexities and richness of Longley's varieties of translation. Ideas and images from Homer and Horace, as Eliot said they would, measure the time and redeem the time. And the classics are again thrilling and challenging.

Yet Longley's accomplishment extends beyond his roles as Irish liberal, nature poet, love poet, and the kind of classical poet who breathes new fire into old stories. As a political poet, he has been one of the most interested and interesting poets in beginning to find a way forward. Or as Fran Brearton describes it elsewhere "a way of remembering that works forwards as well as backwards." His political poems map a way back through that below-the-surface territory of grief, uncertainty, broken truths, and toxic words that exist in

the aftermath of political violence. But at the same time, they point forward toward a place where a lost and broken world gets reformed again through forgiveness and redemption. The delicate, sure-footed movement forward we see in poems like “Wounds” and “Ceasefire” is accomplished, in part, through precise acts of empathy that include victimizer as well as victim. This empathetic authority, quite possibly influenced by poems like Larkin’s “The Less Deceived,” is the force that drives his best political poems. To Longley’s great credit, the empathetic and slightly surreal focus his poems have put on the troubles over the years has proven a reliable lens—he has written some of the best political poems of his time.

Since *Gorse Fires*, Longley’s world in poetry has been consistently strong, vivid, and utterly unlike anyone else’s. As a younger poet, Longley was no small part of the constellation of talent from which his generation of poets arose. However, in an unusual career trajectory, he has come into his full powers as a poet in his fifties and sixties, bringing out three, now four, strong collections in succession. His most recent collection, *Snow Water* (forthcoming 2004) demonstrates Longley’s mastery of the long poem as well as shorter, luminous signature poems like “Norwegian Wedding,” poems with an edgy, deep authority and originality. We are grateful to Michael Longley for his permission to include thirteen poems from *Snow Water* in this issue.

The last few years have brought a rising tide of critical work on Longley’s poetry. *The Poetry of Michael Longley*, edited by Alan Peacock and Kathleen Devine, was published by Colin Smythe (2000); a special feature on Longley appeared in the *Honest Ulsterman* (summer 2001); and books on Longley are underway from both Michael Allen and Fran Brearton. This special issue, in the interest and diversity of views it presents, contributes to the growing body of Longley scholarship, and shares in the excitement of his ongoing renewal of Irish poetry. Fran Brearton’s essay on Longley’s early work and critique of its reception will no doubt become a classic reference point in the critically neglected area of Longley’s early poetry. John Redmond’s essay on the subtle influence of Hughes in Longley’s early work likewise contributes to the under-explored area of Longley’s early work and influences. Richard Russell’s correlation of the poet’s aesthetic development with his ethical development contributes to the ongoing debate about art’s role in a time of violence. (Russell’s use of the Longley archive at Emory University is one of the original forays into that resource.) Rui Homem’s distinguished overview of the rich commerce between the verbal and visual in Longley’s recent work, in particular, his imaginative relocations or “translations,” sets a new standard for innovative analysis of Longley’s methods and strategies.

Of particular historical importance are three essays by poets—Irish poets, Eavan Boland and Medbh McGuckian, and American poet Wesley McNair. McNair’s meditation on Longley’s attention to ravaging irreconcilables and his alternative-imagining response offers a fresh, clear eye on Longley’s strategy of “writing small poems with large implications.” Medbh McGuckian’s essay tracing Longley’s “diffident but determined quest after a faith out of

agnosticism” addresses another overlooked dimension of Longley’s work—the way his poetry is infused with and backlit by a spiritual, as well as natural, universe. Framing this special issue are an essay and interview that appear to be in poignant conversation with each other. Eavan Boland’s memoir of her early friendship with Longley, and her depiction of the early, uneasy camaraderie of their border-crossing generation of poets, converses with Longley’s recollections of the same period. Looking back to his early years as a poet, coming of age in a rare constellation of talent that included Boland, Heaney, and Mahon, Longley provides an account of the people, poets, events, and artistic developments that influenced his life as a poet. Moving forward to the creative resurgence that fueled his last three volumes, Longley talks about poetic strategies and techniques that have powered his best work.

This special issue has tried to present the richness and variety of critical response Michael Longley’s work has generated across Ireland, America, and Europe. More than half of the essays are written by poets, a testament to both the quality and intensity of interest that is accompanying Longley’s most mature and exciting work. All of the essays attend to these wonderful poems about love, nature, the classics and politics and to this life of civic engagement, moral witness, and poetic imagination.