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Michael Longley As a Metaphysical

By MEDBH MCGUCKIAN

ALTHOUGH I WILL be focusing narrowly on only one strain in a complex output, from the outset, in the early sixties, of his published work, Michael Longley has interpreted the world of his twentieth-century experience against the traditional Christian heritage, more consistently than most modern poets, at least in English. In his Festival 1965 pamphlet he questions the validity of the artist in himself using Gospel notation:

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?

Despite the sly humor in the junction of “water” with “Walter,” the tone is serious, oracular, imposingly judgmental. A nephew’s infant cry becomes an “eleison,” he as godfather is “Creation’s sponsor,” the birds of heaven come on farfetched winds even with a small “h.” Dust and moth from parables are their weather. Emily Dickinson “lives and prays” by christening the world, her poems increasing like dust and rust: his bridal night is haunted by moths with “their fatal appetite.”

The title of his first collection in 1969, *No Continuing City*, seems as darkly negative as Heaney’s collections then, referring biblically to the general human condition and the political insecurity in the North. Yet in the poem of that name he positives his marital commitment in an amusing epic simile as a “continuing city,” from which old loves recede, adding a mildly blasphemous injunction to his last girl to “eat and drink” him as a Eucharist.

He answers Heaney’s “Personal Helicon” in a Pauline address to his Mind as distinct from his Body, retaining even the Donne-like capitals:

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

To Eavan Boland he compares the city that is continuing in him to the actual port of Belfast, with its docks and gantries, dissociated from the “generation” of leaping salmon. He recalls a classics school lesson, “doing battle/With the Greek New Testament again—Acts Of the Apostles,” his grounding in the language obviously as thorough as in the religion. A hawk is likened to a “dark cross overhead,” the image of “swallows/Lifting blood on their breasts/Up to the homely gables” is reminiscent of the angel of Death marking the Israelite doors. The island of Inishmore is “awash in wave and anthem.” He depicts presumably Catholic nuns in an exquisite natural setting, punning on “Convent” and “convening”:

On their morning walk just beyond
The icons and the cabbages,
Convening out of sight and sound
To turn slowly their missal pages.

This thread is tightened rather than dropped in the poems of the seventies. The opening lines in the second volume imply that poetry has its own “catechism.” The following verses name the patron saints of Ireland, Bridget and Patrick, refer to parts of Christ’s body, his ankle, spine, and face, reflected in the Irish landscape. Here is the first verse, FARLS:

Cut with a cross, they are propped
Before the fire: it will take
Mug after mug of stewed tea,
Inches of butter to ease
Christ’s sojourn in a broken
Oatmeal farl down your throat.

Using again a Eucharistic under narrative, he symbolizes the difficult compromises he is making, and will have to make, as an urban Ulsterman, of English and Jewish extraction, in order to assimilate imaginatively the national psyche of a place, temperamentally his chosen ground, Mayo, whose spirituality is as stubbornly Irish as it is Catholic. The comi-tragedy of the outsider’s initiation seems a crudely forced form of oral circumcision; yet the beauty and humility of the stanza is Herbert-like in its homeliness, where Christ’s sufferings are at once being devoured and overcome. What is really being eased is his sense of not belonging, or the tension of feeling critical about a way of life one can only marginally accept, yet instinctively, or with one part of one’s self, find nourishing.

The third sequence, “A Nativity,” is devoted to the central Christian mystery of the Incarnation. The narrator continues to be present in an indirect, agnostic curiosity, mingled with the baptism of desire. The surrounding unconsciousness of the animals is what the artist-interpreter of the medieval or renaissance painting explores. He draws the Blessed Virgin, the main Irish Catholic icon, very simply as Mary, emphasizing her physical reality, the umbilical cord, the afterbirth, the brute facts of the detaching, but culminating in a psychological symbol of the bullfinch as an idea in Mary’s head prefiguring the Crucifixion.

The sacramental often intersects for him with the natural world of begetting, as in the perfect heraldry of “Swans Mating,” which is “both a marriage and a baptism.” Writing ostensibly about a wren, he uses the words “mote” and “adulteries” to signify a pondering of a more human sexuality, perhaps including his own, under the guise of various birds, so questions of blame, guilt, or sin can be subsumed by a context in which shame is impossible.

The christening of a child is a recurrent subject with him; in a mock-ceremony he imagines drinking with poet-friends to the birth of his son, Daniel, “improvising” as “priest of the muses” the “holy water and the font” (his daughters also have Old Testament names, Rebecca and Sarah).

In a poem about reading “The Water Babies” to his twin brother he calls the little chimney sweep “our grubby redeemer.” He also remembers a Lent, a Good Friday, and an Easter spent in the company of Derek Mahon, eavesdropping “on conversations / with a Jesus who spoke Irish,” taking part in the parish liturgy as strangers, bending their knees with wood splinters from the boat nailed into their hands. Wittily he advises Jimmy Simmons to distract him from the imminent fall of Stormont by his Noah-esque music: “Pipe us aboard the sinking ship/Two by two.” To Seamus Heaney he bewails “The midden of cracked hurley sticks/Tied to recall the crucifix.”

In one of his most celebrated poems, “Wounds,” Longley balances “A Lucifer, the Sacred Heart of Jesus” against the Ulster Division cursing the Pope at the Somme. Sacraments are again alluded to in a fine elegy for the painter Gerard Dillon, “Christening robes, communion dresses,” part of the inspiration of life on the Lower Falls. In “Alibis,” he summons up a poetic alter ego of an ancient Irish poet-monk, “drafting entertainment for popes and kings,” “the saviour of damaged birds,” composing “daily after matins,” by way of claiming his own inheritance rights on the Book of Kells, the scribal tradition freely exploited by Heaney and Carson, pre-Reformation and pure.

The third collection, *Man Lying on a Wall*, opens with a brilliant summary of the sociopolitical climate in “The Lodger,” a satiric image of the Catholic/Nationalist tenant harbored and indeed nurtured by tolerant hosts, who feature as characters in the potentially parasitic novels he is churning out—“At the end of each four fingered /Suffering line the angelus rings.” The mood flavors the close-following “The Goose,” in which the poet-executioner operates on the defunct Northern Ireland constitution, with its implied complacency and rich, over-indulgent corruption:

I would boil the egg for your breakfast,
Conserve for weeks the delicate fats
As in the old days. In the meantime,
We dismantled it, limb by limb.

Like many of his apparently domestic settings, the dark environment extends the meaning.

In this book, Longley’s increasing obsession with physical dissolution is influenced by Biblical warnings. A “Love Poem” dwells on the less erotic

flesh zones, finger and toenails, “dust accumulating under your hair.” His mother in terminal illness is “Christ’s example,” like the pelican that feeds its young with its blood. He is fond of the word “scapulae” for the shoulder bone, which also means a protective religious amulet. His vocabulary can be archaic for a late twentieth-century practitioner: “the unhallowed soul” could be from the Restoration; he can be as poetically concerned about the “weight” of the soul as any orthodox Thomist. In “Points of the Compass” for John Hewitt, he beautifully traces connections from real thorns to the Crucifixion, “a station that staggers still,” a skeptic’s probe more convincing than a heavy-handed sermon. The use of the single word “crib” in a description of a foal’s birth positions Christ more centrally in the natural rural world than Muldoon’s early poems. In a poem for Paul, “Stilts,” the carpenter who comes from another town to manufacture “playthings for the soul” has a kinship with St. Joseph. In the last poem in this book he watches himself, his own worst enemy, through a Judas-hatch.

Andrew Motion, in the latest biography of Keats, counts ninety references to the Bible in his oeuvre. Longley in the seventies persists in his exploration, imagining after death looking at his body, “a saint whose pits and pieces separate/Into a dozen ceremonies,” while part of him waits for “superstitious rivers” to take him to a final ocean. His complex sequence on Oliver Plunkett further investigates the reliquary of martyrdom, viewing the idea of sainthood through a scientist’s prism, albeit a morbidly curious one. The murder of a shopkeeper at Christmas is additionally condemned by its context: “Astrologers or three wise men . . . should pause on their way.” Christ’s teeth, bread and wine mingled with blood and food, grotesquely dominate his passionate protest for “The Linen Workers.” His father smoking cigarettes is done “thoughtfully, each one like a sacrament.” In the title poem, “The Echo Gate,” he hears the words of his poetry “Echoing back from the monastery wall;” the pillars he stands between symbolize the broken historical antitheses of Ireland. The yearning for unbroken tradition is “echoed” in “On Hearing Irish Spoken.”

A delicately lovely lyric, “Martinmas,” revives the meaning of the calendar’s rural pieties by waiting for the beloved as a “harvest” until the Feast of St. Martin. She is compared to “a stained glass window in a burning church.” Noting that his Jewish grandmother, Jessica, has been forgotten by a “terrible century, a circle of Christian names,” he sees his task as a love poet is to “mummify /angel feathers.”

Several poems in the later volumes indicate persistent religious preoccupation, even if still in the onlooker’s role.

Tomorrow when we pass the Pentecostal church
The wayside pulpit will read “Thanks, Lord, for the rain.”

“An Amish Rug” is itself an ornate patchwork of history, faith, nature, love, and poetry, the colors forming “a cathedral window.” A love poet is now a carpenter, a series of three central poems, “Cathedral,” “Il Volto Santo,” and

“Font” deal directly with his situation as “A pagan and one of those awkward Protestants” who nevertheless feels

As though a pigeon had flapped in from the piazza
And perched on the chalice and sipped the sacrament.

There is a Blakean inclusiveness in the loving detail of animal, bird, and sea life, herb, flower, and plant, the realization that “all waters are holy waters.” Ostensibly classical poems still sound biblical in their “cubit’s and sacrifices.” A reflected nakedness makes “of God our icon,” and a cathedral full of confiscated pillow feathers becomes a “suffocating” image for the gas chambers.

There is a gradual turning from the study of Irish flora and fauna in Mayo to the indigenously Catholic landscape of Italy and “the sore belly-button” of Rome. Unlike Heaney’s Sheela-na-Gig in *Station Island*, Longley’s is behaving thus “above the church door.” “Rosemary” incorporates or coalesces two incidents from the gospel, Veronica wiping the face of Jesus at Calvary, and the woman healed of hemorrhage by touching the hem of his garment. Also the miracles in which spittle is the agent of cure. The first miracle at Cana of the wedding wine and the “no room at the inn” motif from Bethlehem find their way into the classical context of “Baucis and Philemon,” as well as Lot’s wife and Noah’s flood. “Chenac” associates “the spider out of the Book of Proverbs” with an “altar-wide hearth” in France. Longley refuses to remain outcast, “the buzzard with nowhere to perch,” asserting his territory as “the exceeding wise” lizard who does not build his house on sand, in a fusion of fabliaux and the fable, parable, Aesop and Renan. Longley relishes the resonances of biblically exotic substances, suggestive of spiritual richness, myrrh, frankincense, spikes of nard. “The Fishing Party” ties knots between Christ’s apostles as “fishers of men,” the miraculous walking on the water, and local shootings. A sonnet called “Scales,” were it not for the irony of the over-exaggeration, could be placed beside Donne’s “Hymn to God the Father” without the centuries weighing very much. Other less eschatological texts are the ritual washing of a youth’s burns, a scholar-friend Adam naming things in Eden /Trinity, death as a waft from a “Winnowing fan or oar.”

It seems no accident that a proposed title for a new collection is *The Latecomers*. And from what I have seen of these new poems, the allusions persist. The “Evening Star” epitaph, although Sappho is present, plays with the last judgment prediction of the division of the goats from the sheep:

In all
The air from the high church down to the piazza
Is there no room for the swallow other swallows
Frighten away?

The outsider in Mayo has merely traveled to be the outsider in Rome. San Rocco’s chapel “fits like a kennel the saint and the faithful dog,” the saint in the present continuous keeps lifting the hem of his tunic even if his power is under threat. He gently satirizes the undersized custodian of the Romanesque San Georgio’s church: “Shouldn’t we be sheltering beneath the altar-

cloth's/Pattern of grapes and vine-leaves?"

A poem, he affirms with tongue in cheek, is "little more than a wing and a prayer." Love can transform a barn into a Shaker's cathedral with a wooden rose window. A death is a communion of blankets of sheets. "The Flock" celebrates lovemaking as "moving among seals without frightening them,"

A shepherd among his sheep
Going over them all and counting his flock by fives
And rescuing one lamb from the sea-weedy tangle.

The epic "War Graves" begins beside "an exhausted cathedral," snoozing wounded angels. "The Mustard Tin" most subtly represents his indirect method, recalling unpreachily the parable of the mustard seed to which the kingdom of heaven may or may not be likened. There are overgrown vineyards even if the setting is not necessarily Italy; a landscape with wild figs blends with a Swedish one to symbolize the biblical vineyard of "The Latecomers" itself, "the pulpit and candles the sun doesn't put out." A small poem called simply "A Carol" sums up Longley's agnosticism:

So did the known universe
Come in out of the cold to find her milk warm.

The fairly anti-Romanist Goethe wrote in 1811:

Every genuine artist must be looked upon as one who is guarding something that is acknowledged to be sacred, which it is his wish to propagate with earnestness and care. But every century, in its own way, tends towards what is secular, striving to make what is sacred, common, what is difficult, easy, what is serious, amusing; and nothing could be said against this, were it not for the fact that earnestness and humour are thereby utterly destroyed.