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## "The privilege / Of vertigo": Reading Michael Longley in the 1960s

by FRAN BREARTON

IN RECENT YEARS claims that Michael Longley suffers critical neglect have begun to sound increasingly hollow: the publication of the first collection of essays on Longley in 2000 and the proliferation of articles and high profile reviews of his work over the last decade would suggest the opposite. Nevertheless, a brief overview of the critical reception of Longley's work might suggest that "critical neglect" is a matter not simply redressed by quantity; instead, it is—and remains—a problem more deeply implicated in the state of Irish poetry criticism. The catalyst for a "new wave" of Longley criticism was undoubtedly the publication of *Gorse Fires* in 1991, his first full collection since the 1979 *The Echo Gate*. While the period of "writer's block" that Longley experienced in the 1980s only lasted for about five years, from 1980 to 1985, the twelve-year publication gap between these collections may be one reason why the critical tendency, apparent through the 1970s, to omit any detailed consideration of Longley's work to the critical debates taking place in the period continued into the 1980s. In the 1980s the prominent debates might be seen to center on two opposing texts in particular, Seamus Deane's *Celtic Revivals* (1985) and Edna Longley's *Poetry in the Wars* (1986). For Deane, the trajectory of *Celtic Revivals*, with its broadly Catholic and nationalist sympathies, finds no place for Longley: he is able to accommodate another contemporary Northern Protestant poet, Derek Mahon, in the Beckett line, but Longley proves less amenable to inclusion in Deane's understanding of an Irish tradition. The studies of twentieth-century Irish poetry published in the 1980s by Robert F. Garratt and Dillon Johnston—*Modern Irish Poetry: Tradition and Continuity from Yeats to Heaney* (1986) and *Irish Poetry After Joyce* (1985) respectively—also follow Deane, broadly speaking, by advocating particular versions of tradition and influence in which Longley finds, at best, only a marginal place. In contrast, Edna Longley's *Poetry in the Wars* implicitly suggests terms in which Michael Longley's poetry may be read, but direct discussion of his work is, as a rule, omitted from her criticism—and for obvious reasons.<sup>1</sup> While Longley's 1979 collec-

1. The effect of the agreement between the Longleys that Edna Longley will not write about Longley's work is, I have argued elsewhere, impossible to quantify. It is, however, worth noting that since the example of Longley's poetry is excluded from the content, although not the terms, of her criticism, it is not always addressed by critics who respond directly to her work. See Brearton, *The Great War in Irish Poetry* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2000) 283-84.

tion, *The Echo Gate*, did prompt critical attention, this came, predominantly, not from the broader critical community, but from those who had been advocates of the importance of Longley's work for many years. (Such critics include Michael Allen, Douglas Dunn, Terence Brown, and Gerald Dawe. Peter McDonald has also been, over the last fifteen years, one of the most acute and insightful critics of Longley's work.)

The sparse attention paid to the poet through the 1980s—a period in which “Irish Studies” was itself consolidated—meant that the arrival of *Gorse Fires* on the scene in 1991, and the acclaim it received, simultaneously exposed the absence in much Irish criticism of terms by which Longley could be adequately read; hence, for example, the extraordinarily inappropriate ways in which the poet is contextualized in the critical apparatus of the 1991 *Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing*—a logical consequence of the (non-)treatment of the poet's work by critics writing broadly in the Deane critical tradition.<sup>2</sup> But *Gorse Fires* both consolidated and marked an increase in Longley's poetic reputation to an extent that has since prompted a critical reevaluation. (It is *Gorse Fires*, for example, which inspired Alan Peacock's Coleraine symposium, led eventually to the publication of *The Poetry of Michael Longley*.<sup>3</sup>) That reevaluation has had two noticeable consequences in Irish poetry criticism through the 1990s. First, where once upon a time, Longley might not even be mentioned in studies of Irish poetry, there is now a tendency, at the very least, to acknowledge his presence, and, in some instances, to give his work parity of treatment. Second, where his work is treated in a more sustained way, interest has centered, for the most part, on Longley's elegiac mode, and on the way in which his poetry responds to violent conflict—war, the “Troubles,” the holocaust.<sup>4</sup>

There may be much to dispute in the narrative proposed above. But even if it appears positive—neglect gradually redressed through the 1990s—it remains the case that criticism of Longley's pre-1980 poetry is still thin on the ground, and that many aspects of his work beyond the elegiac remain unexplored. (There are, of course, exceptions to the rule.) While the critical flowering as regards his last three collections has prompted some criticism of the earlier poetry, this has been, comparatively, quite limited. In addition, the reverse trajectory that begins consideration of Longley from the 1990s, fueled by an enthusiasm for *Gorse Fires*, *The Ghost Orchid*, and *The Weather in Japan*, and then gestures backwards, also carries some difficulties in its tendency to elide the reasons for the earlier period of neglect.

2. See for example the notes by Declan Kiberd to Longley's poems which associate Longley with Larkin, with postwar England, British ‘suburbia’, Northern English landscapes etc. “Contemporary Irish Poetry,” ed. Seamus Deane, *The Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing* (Derry: Field Day, 1991) iii, 1364.

3. See Alan Peacock's introduction to *The Poetry of Michael Longley*, ed. Alan Peacock and Kathleen Devine (Gerards Cross: Colin Smythe, 2000) in which he argues that *Gorse Fires* “marked a momentous return to inspiration after a character-testing lean period.” The 1996 symposium at the University of Ulster on which the book is based was “projected in 1994 in the wake of the success of *Gorse Fires*” (ix).

4. Recent journal articles on Longley have been primarily concerned with elegy in the 1990s; other chapters on the poet, by, for example, Patrick Grant, Jim Haughey, and this author, have focused on war and violence.

In a way, the problems of "reading Michael Longley" began at the start, began with the ways in which he was read in the context of the 1960s. To revisit Longley's 1960s poetry, and the reception of that poetry, may then be a means of reevaluating both Longley's work and the broader critical assumptions that developed out of, or in reaction against, the 1960s—assumptions that continue to reverberate through and beyond the 1990s. Longley's first collection, *No Continuing City*, published in 1969, has a long gestation. Despite its historically evocative publication date, it is a pre-Troubles collection, written, for the most part, between 1963 and 1966. His first "mature" poem, "Epithalamion," appeared in *Icarus* in 1963; his first pamphlet, *Ten Poems*, was published in 1965; the core poems of *No Continuing City*—including "A Personal Statement," "The Hebrides," "No Continuing City," "En Route," and "In Memoriam" were all written in 1964-65. By the time *Ten Poems* appeared in 1965, one of a series of pamphlets published by the Belfast Festival at Queens, several of the poems included had been brought to the Belfast Group sessions the year before; most had already appeared in, variously, *Icarus*, the *Irish Times*, the *Listener*, and the *New Statesman*.

Unlike Derek Mahon, already in the early to mid-1960s an inveterate reviser (and this despite some protests from both Michael Longley and Edna Longley), Michael Longley has rarely tinkered with his early poems. "Epithalamion," for example, remains unchanged from its first publication in 1963 to its recent position as the opening poem of Longley's 1998 *Selected Poems*. Only a handful of poems from the individual collections are omitted from *Poems 1963-1983*. Such revisions as there are tend to consist of the merging of individual couplets into short stanzas. In contrast, the opening poem of *Ten Poems*, "Emily Dickinson," has undergone more drastic changes. In *Ten Poems* it appears with the following four stanzas:

Emily Dickinson, I think of you  
 Wakening early each morning to write,  
 Dressing with care for the act of poetry.  
 Yours is always a perfect progress through  
 such cluttered rooms to eloquence, delight,  
 To words—your window on the mystery.

The candelabra there resemble trees  
 Too well: the clock beneath its dome of glass  
 Ticks without the weather, for no one's sake,  
 Untruthfully. Beyond the likes of these,  
 In wiser landscapes, through wider vistas,  
 You have your voyages, your points to make.

By christening the world you live and pray—  
 Within those lovely titles is contained  
 The large philosophy you tend towards:  
 Within your lexicon the birds that play  
 Beside your life, the wind that holds your hand,  
 Are recognised. Your poems are full of words.

In your house in Amherst Massachusetts,  
 Though like love letters you lock them away,  
 Your poems are ubiquitous as dust.  
 You sit there writing while the light permits—  
 While you grow older they increase each day,  
 Gradual as flowers, gradual as rust.<sup>5</sup>

By the time of *No Continuing City*, it has three stanzas (the second is omitted); in *Poems 1963-83*, two stanzas (the first and fourth of the original version are retained). And only then, one might say, is it deemed “fit for human society.”<sup>6</sup>

This may not be unusual in terms of Longley’s habitual method of composition, in which the principle to make every word work for its keep tends toward a ruthless cutting of extraneous material. It is only unusual in that it is played out in print. For Longley to publish a poem in three different versions, indicates an unease, even with its final form, that suggests the poem touches on some central aesthetic nerves. (That unease is perhaps comparable to Mahon’s own unease with his “Courtyards in Delft” Maenads, who are variously absent, present, and absent again in different versions of the poem.<sup>7</sup>) Longley admits, too, that “Emily Dickinson” is not a poem of which he is particularly fond, and although it stands at the front of his first published pamphlet, it is not included in his 1998 *Selected Poems*. But, as with Mahon’s “Courtyards in Delft,” the transparent glitches in the process of bringing the poem to a final version have their own points of interest. In a way, the publication history of “Emily Dickinson” uncannily mirrors its subject: the poem is gradually pared away to become as elusive and secretive as the thing it describes, moving from overexplanatory “cluttered rooms,” or stanzas, to a more precisely evocative use of language. The “perfect progress” is both an aspiration of style, and, more generally in Longley’s first collection, its accomplishment, since his early poems demonstrate an extraordinary formal skill. This poem’s own gradual progress has been both growth and, more literally, decline; regeneration (flowers) and decay (rust). As with the earlier “Epithalamion,” where the poem both celebrates the night and anticipates the day, acknowledges the moment as finite even as it seeks infinity, begins a centrifugal collapse as it reaches its centripetal climax, in “Emily Dickinson” each accumulation is also an unravelling, the moment of achievement deconstructs itself. The poem has not been allowed to gather dust; but at the same time, it has, over time, gathered around it an oeuvre whose preoccupations the poem itself, by looking back to Dickinson’s lifework, preempts.

“Emily Dickinson” is thus paradigmatic in more ways than one. It demonstrates, in miniature, the process of poetry for Longley as one in which the

5. Michael Longley, *Ten Poems* (Festival Publications, Queen’s University of Belfast, 1965).

6. See Derek Mahon’s poem “Matthew V. 29-30,” in which the phrase may be read as an ironic comment on his own habitual processes of revision. Derek Mahon, *Poems 1962-1978* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1979) 71.

7. See the different versions of “Courtyards in Delft” in Mahon’s *Courtyards in Delft* (Dublin: Gallery Press, 1981), *The Hunt by Night* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1982), and *Selected Poems* (London: Viking; Oldcastle: Gallery Press, 1991).

urge to explain that process (the act of naming, for instance, is here explained as "Within those lovely titles is contained / The large philosophy you tend towards"), eventually gives way to the thing itself (a tactic that in this instance reaches its apotheosis, to a chorus of acclaim and bemusement, in the later poem "The Ice-cream Man," from *Gorse Fires*: "thyme, valerian, loosestrife I Meadowsweet, tway blade, crowfoot, ling, angelica..."). In looking back, it also looks forward, implicitly, to Longley's own ambitions and development, not least in its preoccupations with the relationship between public and private, local and universal. Emily Dickinson dresses "with care for the act of poetry." That phrase in itself drops some hints about the almost ritualistic preparation of Longley's first collection, *No Continuing City*: poetry is both a public "putting on" of styles, voices, an assemblage of the poet's own dramatis personae, as it is also (and in the case of Dickinson exaggeratedly so) a private act, a ritual performed behind closed doors. *No Continuing City* leaves little doubt that the poet is both performer, ventriloquist, and actor, and simultaneously the "love letter" writer of intimate sincerity. At once ubiquitous and invisible, poetry in "Emily Dickinson" is also a matter of perspective: it looks from its enclosed rooms to the community outside, and draws its light from the outside in, even as it is unknown to that community. This is not Philip Larkin's "high window"; rather, it recognizes the issues of perspective and belonging that reverberate throughout Longley's work—the knowledge that one writes, even if one does not live, in isolation; that voices may go unheard, but that the point still lies as much in the sounding of them; and that the problematic relation to the community may range from strategic withdrawal to forced exclusion to empathetic belonging. And not least, Emily Dickinson's work is itself a reminder to Longley of what becomes for him an important dictum: that miniature is not the same as minor.

"Emily Dickinson" thus takes its place as one of a group of poems in Longley's first collection that are, in a sense, tribute poems, dedicated to, or at other times, ventriloquizing for, figures of inspiration: poets, artists, musicians, and scientists from Dr. Johnson to Bix Beiderbecke. Its concern is with poetry creating a moment of recognition, with life finding itself anew in language; its quasi-religious sensibility both holds up Dickinson's work as aspiration and reveals something of the sense (shared by Mahon and Heaney) of poetry as an alternate spirituality. But it also takes its place in the group of poems written in the same year—"The Hebrides," "A Personal Statement," "En Route," and "No Continuing City"—in which the lyric is a voyage of (self) discovery, a journey of aesthetic development. The voyage is not the central conceit in "Emily Dickinson"; but it is (in the early version explicitly, and in the later one obliquely) woven into the fabric of the poem. Hers, and by implication Longley's, is a poetic journey: there may be "points to make"; but the poem is also about the search for points from which to make them, a search for different perspectives. The "cluttered rooms" relate symbolically to stanzaic style; the phrase is also evocative of the Metaphysical poets in more

ways than one, carrying its own metaphysical wit in playing on multiple (now archaic) meanings; the room, as a stanza, is also a stopping place on a journey.

In that sense, poetry serves both as a moment of rest, a space cleared and held poised against the flow of time, and also as a marker of movement, of progress through time. With this subtext to “Emily Dickinson” in mind, it is not surprising that Longley places the poem at the front of *Ten Poems*. While it may not be entirely successful in its original form, its concern is, at least in part, with issues revisited in the more accomplished and sustained achievement of other poems in the first collection. Of these, “The Hebrides,” written in the winter of 1964, is in some ways the most complex, in terms of both its form and its content—the culmination of aesthetic ideas worked out through the early 1960s. Its complexity partly accounts for criticism’s tendency to fight shy of the poem. Nevertheless, it is central not merely to Longley’s first collection but to his oeuvre as a whole, and its neglect perhaps takes us to the core of the problem of reception in relation to Longley’s work. As with “Emily Dickinson,” the poem carries some debts to the work of the American poet Richard Wilbur, whose formal precision, metaphysical conceits, and shifting perspectives—the sense of, as Wilbur phrases it, keeping a “difficult balance”—haunt Longley’s early poems. But “The Hebrides” also consciously draws together seemingly irreconcilable influences to define something of the paradoxical poetic sensibility at the core of *No Continuing City*.

To understand that sensibility and its implications for reading Longley’s poetry, it is worth considering some of the difficulties *No Continuing City* encountered in terms of its critical reception. Longley’s early poems are not “obscure,” in the sense that they do not possess the willful opacity sometimes attributed to Muldoon. Nor are they characterized by a neo-modernist experimentalism with form that purports to leave its readership without the security of an existing frame of reference. But they do not have the accessibility that has been seen to characterize Heaney’s first volumes, which have been excavated by critics to the point where one is tempted to hope that that wet center is not bottomless after all. In contrast, *No Continuing City* tends—with a few notable exceptions—to be glossed over as possessing “formal tautness,” after which criticism moves hastily onward to a point where the “troubles” offer a more seductive way of reading the poetry.

The problem caused by reading through the lens of the “troubles” is not, of course, unique to Longley. Heaney and Mahon have also, in different ways, both suffered from, and, in terms of media profile, benefited from the perspective that begins its narrative post-1969. But in the case of Michael Longley, rather different interpretive issues had already surfaced in the mid-1960s. In November 1964 Longley brought a selection of poems to the Belfast Group which included “The Hebrides,” “No Continuing City,” and three short (uncollected) love poems. While the poems met with admiration from Heaney, they also met with some hostility and incomprehension, notably from the Group’s dominating spirit, Philip Hobsbaum. There are two questions to address here. The first of these is why poems of this stature were



ambiguously received by the critical environment of the Belfast Group; the second, and related question, is why, in the decades that have followed, critics of Irish poetry have, comparatively speaking, failed to give *No Continuing City* the attention any first collection by a leading Irish poet deserves.

Longley's first collection, it seems, poses a broader interpretive problem that has not yet been resolved. It eludes categories; it offers a challenge to its readership that has not yet been met. In a more specific instance, one difficulty of the early poems is that they elude the "difficult" category. That is to say, even the obvious difficulty posed by some of Muldoon's work, for example, is rendered to some extent benign if one follows one of the critical trails he lays down. In other words, Heaney implicitly encourages a new critical approach to his own poetry, Muldoon implicitly encourages deconstructive free fall; but the practice of (self-consciously) trailblazing for one's readership is common to both. Longley, who rarely adopts the role of poet-critic, has always been, in that respect, in a very different position from Heaney, whose prose-writings have opened up, and helped to educate, a critical audience attuned to his aesthetic beliefs. In addition, Longley's early poems don't put up any obvious signposts for the reader. But the complexity of his early poetry does not exist simply at the level of formal control—complicated rhyme schemes; subtle rhythmic patterning. Rather, its interpretation depends on a recognition of paradox in terms that carry implications for theoretical approaches to Longley's work.

On one level, that recognition can lead to nothing more than delineation of paradox in *No Continuing City*: as one reviewer writes, "these poems are sophisticated but innocent, easy-minded but clever, loving but detached, literary but firmly related to real experience and the everyday voice."<sup>8</sup> Such comments, though true enough, identify thematic and tonal consequences, not aesthetic principles or causes, and risk a nothing-saying seesaw of indecisive praise. But on another level, paradox may be seen as a fundamental principle of the book. As Eavan Boland writes:

...in a sense the distinction and grace of *No Continuing City* will be at odds with some of the critical norms of the moment, which demand that emotional anguish be testified to by technical anarchy, and confusion be expressed by obscurity. But...[f]or the most part the technical composure is moving because it ritualises a need for its opposite, a search for liberation, an insight into risk. And it is these two tensions in Michael Longley's work, of on the one hand symmetry and on the other actual suffering, which force his best poems into shape.<sup>9</sup>

Boland is in many ways insightful here, in the acknowledgment that technical accomplishment can lead to the unfair judgment that accomplishment is all that there is—a criticism that has, in fact, haunted some of Longley's earlier work. In addition, she recognizes that the achievement of *No Continuing City* involves more than the ability to say two different things at once, or to achieve different tonal registers. Rather, the idea of tension, and of risk taken,

8. Sean Lucy, "Also Often Beautiful," revision of *No Continuing City*, *The Tablet*, 7 February 1970.

9. Eavan Boland, "A Vision of Risk," revision of *No Continuing City*, *Irish Times*, 1969, reprinted as blurb to Michael Longley, *An Exploded View* (London: Gollancz, 1973).

is crucial to understanding the poetry. Boland implicitly attributes that tension, and consequent risk, to a distinction between the imagined and the actual. Symmetry is equated here with form, and with poetry; actual suffering with real life. By implication, suffering is permitted to intrude upon symmetry and thereby risk its composure. The “vision of risk,” Boland goes on to observe, “cannot be separated from the form which it has forced.”

But the argument—and the paradox—may be taken a stage further than this. It is not merely that the formal control of these poems is deliberately put at risk; rather, one might also say that the formal control, far from being a refuge, is precisely the risk that is taken. Symmetry and suffering (pre-emptive of Heaney’s later uneasy polarisation of suffering and song<sup>10</sup>) might, in other words, be usefully replaced with the paradoxical relationship between what Muldoon calls structure and serendipity. “One of the great mysteries for me,” Muldoon writes, “is that one can actually combine structure and serendipity to great effect, simultaneously knowing and not knowing what one is doing.”<sup>11</sup> At least one way of interpreting this is to suggest that the “knowing” lies in the adoption of a particular poetic form, or rhyme scheme, with fixed parameters; the “not knowing” in the inevitable consequence that what is to be said within those parameters is unpredictable—and is unpredictable precisely because the parameters are in place. Longley too suggests that form is its own form of accident and anarchy. He has more than once quoted Yeats’s remark that he found his ideas “looking for the next rhyme” as illustrative of his own practice. Similarly, he celebrates the moment when “language itself takes over the enterprise.”<sup>12</sup>

In one sense, then, Longley’s early poems are, in their formal accomplishment, as amenable as Heaney’s to the mode of criticism—Anglo-American new criticism—by which Heaney’s poetry has been well-served. But the extent to which the poems delight in play cuts the interpretive ground from underneath the reader. His own recent (and comparatively rare) reflection on the process of composition—in the 1996 essay “A Tongue at Play”—acknowledges that delight, in terms both erotic and, albeit unconsciously, deconstructionist. The phrase itself is at several removes from Heaney’s “The Government of the Tongue,” which, despite its ambiguity (by the tongue? of the tongue?) still suggests control as opposed to “play.” And “experimentalism,” in terms of poetic form, as Longley recognizes it, has less to do with the abandonment of traditional structures than with their reinvention—a mode of writing potentially far more subversive than one which pretends that the parameters against which it defines itself simply aren’t there. “The rules,” he writes, “are there to be broken.”<sup>13</sup>

10. See Seamus Heaney, *The Government of the Tongue* (London: Faber, 1988) xii.

11. Sebastian Barker, “A Drink with Paul Muldoon,” *Long Poem Group Newsletter*, 7 (1998) 1-4.

12. See Michael Longley, “A Tongue at Play,” ed. Tony Curtis, *How Poet’s Work* (Bridgend: Seren Books, 1996) 113, 118.

13. Michael Longley, “The Longley Tapes” interview by Robert Johnstone, *Honest Ulsterman*, 78 (Summer 1985) 16.

Such reinvention is the conscious starting point of "The Hebrides." The poem deliberately attempts to bring together irreconcilable influences: George Herbert and Hart Crane. It borrows its stanzaic shape (the metrical pattern of 10, 4, 8, 6, 10, and 4 syllable lines) and its ababc rhyme scheme from Herbert's "Peace"—the technical challenge posed by this is, in Longley's phrase, one of the ways he "discovered how to write."<sup>14</sup> It also borrows, and destabilizes, Herbert's understanding of "repose." Herbert attains this repose at the close of "Peace" through an ever-present sacramental life:

Take of this grain, which in my garden grows,  
     And grows for you;  
 Make bread of it; and that repose  
     And peace, which ev'ry where  
 With so much earnestness you do pursue  
     Is onely there<sup>15</sup>

"In my end is my beginning" is, in effect, his aesthetic as well as religious premise. "The Hebrides" also loses its way in order to find it but does not make the same kind of return "home," wherever that might be. Instead, Longley counters Herbert's repose with a "schizophrenia" that draws on Hart Crane's more destabilizing "Voyages," his suicidal vertigo. The sea, Crane's most powerful image, is both order and chaos, flux and tranquility. If Herbert signifies harmony, Crane signifies paradox and uncertainty.

In terms of his own cultural inheritance, Longley describes himself as "schizophrenic," leading "a double life," recreating himself "twice daily"; drifting from one side of the Lisburn Road—itself a "schizophrenic" street, working class and middle class—to the other.<sup>16</sup> The "schizophrenia" seen in the poem in terms of influence is only part of that more complex "double life," and a problematical—or rather paradoxical—relationship with "home," which is lost in order to be found, and vice versa. The opening of the poem, with its Presbyterian granite, lack of trees and orphaned stone, is irresistibly evocative of the bleak north Antrim coast as much as of the Hebrides:

The winds' enclosure, Atlantic's premises,  
     Last balconies  
 Above the waves, The Hebrides—  
     Too long did I postpone  
 Presbyterian granite and the lack of trees,  
     This orphaned stone  
  
 Day in, day out colliding with the sea.  
     Weather forecast,  
 Compass nor ordnance survey  
     Arranges my welcome  
 For, on my own, I have lost my way at last,  
     So far from home<sup>17</sup>

14. *Ibid.* 28.

15. *The Poems of George Herbert* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1913) 127.

16. Michael Longley, *Tuppenny Stung: Autobiographical Chapters* (Belfast: Lagan Press, 1994) 25.

17. Michael Longley, "The Hebrides," *No Continuing City* (London: Macmillan, 1969) 26

Some of this imagery haunts Derek Mahon's poetry to the extent that it later becomes his trademark. There are other echoes and overlaps between the two poets that are illustrative of their closeness in the writing process at this time, and of their shared influences—notably Louis MacNeice and Robert Lowell (particularly the Lowell of "The Quaker Graveyard in Nantucket"). For both Longley and Mahon, the rather bleak imagery is linked to the North's repressive puritan traditions in the 1950s and 1960s, about which they have both been openly condemnatory. But the opening of "The Hebrides" has a more particular resonance in terms of Longley's personal mythology. The poem is a search for origins, one that finds a perspective on Antrim from the vantage point of elsewhere. In effect, therefore, the postponement of the opening lines is as much the postponed confrontation with the poet's own past as it is the belated arrival in the present moment. In the beginning of a complicated conceit that runs through the poem whereby the speaker merges into the land, and the land itself becomes as fluid and shifting as the sea, the "orphaned stone" reverberates in terms of Longley's complex, and in another way unstable sense of origins—as the Irish child with English parents; as the Northern Protestant alienated from the trappings of Irish Catholic culture, but alienated also from the Presbyterian ethos of the Northern "state." Since Longley's first elegy for his father, "In Memoriam," also appears in *No Continuing City*, "orphaned" registers on a more intimate level. Lacking map, compasses, markers of who and where he is, defined through heredity but with the father no longer there, the speaker embraces a solitude and an instability in which, paradoxically, to lose one's way is also to find it.

"The Hebrides" posits choices—between stability and instability, continuity and rupture, flux and poise. It begins with uncertainty and indecisiveness, moves toward certainty and poise, but ends by desiring the very state of mind it had apparently transcended. At the close of section two of the poem, the speaker describes himself as "in two minds." He confronts two irreconcilable conditions; the first—which is the one decided upon—is "shipwreck," jettisoning "My each nostalgic scheme" and casting himself ashore as the sole survivor; the second, which is involuntary, is the recognition that memory disallows complete severance. If the poet is the "amputee" who decides upon shipwreck, the ghosts of the past are perpetually absorbed into his present (Old neighbours... People my brain...I feel them / Put on their raincoats for ever / And walk out in the sea"). The recognition, in section three, is thus that a journey forward is also a journey backwards:

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 where love emblazons  
    To streets where shall conclude  
My journey back from flux to poise, from poise  
    To attitude.  
  
Here, at the edge of my experience,  
    Another tide  
    Along the broken shore extends  
    A lifetime's wrack and ruin –  
No flotsam I can beachcomb now can hide  
    That water line.

The movement away from the shoreline through the remainder of the poem is a movement that allows the past to emerge like a palimpsest; the varying water levels and tide marks become ("I discern / My sea levels") the map and compass of his own history that were absent at the start of the poem. (There are echoes here of the inexorable impetus behind "Epithalamion," with the "trees... again in their huge histories / Displayed.") In a way, then, the poem encompasses both of its two minds: it jettisons and accumulates. What it leaves behind it also takes with it. What it takes with it, it ultimately loses.

In doing so, the poem resists harmonious "closure." It tantalizes its reader with the possibility of resolution and reconciliation, but its resistance to "repose," to drawing its imagery into a satisfactory unity is, in the end, unequivocal:

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.

This privilege is vertigo in its figurative as well as literal sense as indicative of a disordered, or divided, state of mind. "The Hebrides" is an ambitious poem, not least because it provides a marker at the outset of what Longley is trying to do, an acknowledgment that his aesthetic will always be one of a deliberate uncertainty, and that definitions—of home, tradition, lineage—will always prove resistant to single interpretations. "The Hebrides," in other words, operates on a principle of drawing parallel lines; the objective is always out of reach; the lines never meet. Again, that principle carries autobiographical resonance: Longley writes of his relationship with his twin as one in which, as a child, he felt completely fulfilled—"fraternal, paternal, maternal. Being a lover, a husband, a father has since enabled me to draw parallel lines only."<sup>18</sup> Longley's inheritance is a dual inheritance; many of the early poems are concerned with division of self from self, mythologized in familial terms as the perpetual adult search—doomed to failure—for the mirror

18. *Tuppenny Stung*, 24.

image, or alter ego that will make the poet whole once again. "The Hebrides" moves beyond what one would expect to be its own beginnings and endings—the "bridal pools" and "rivers where they meet the sea" of its fourth section—and concludes by coveting as a fundamental principle risk, a kind of schizophrenia, being in two minds and two places, balanced and unbalanced. And not least, the application of Herbert's tight stanzaic pattern to the more expansive and destabilizing voyage undertaken in "The Hebrides" means that that pattern is sustained, against the odds, almost to breaking point. Once again, the risk is in the form itself: the edifice meticulously built up over five sections needs to exist for that privilege of vertigo to take on its proper meaning. It is, in other words, as if the poet has built his own poetic structure for the purpose of destabilizing that achievement by falling from it from the greatest possible height. The poem thus becomes an exercise in control that by definition is finite, that exists on the edge of collapse, that is itself, like the landscape around it, a "suicidal. / . tilt." It is in this sense that Longley has understood Yeats perfectly, particularly the Yeats of "The Tower" sequence, whose architectural forms embody memory even as the process of writing—and reading—unravels those structures. And it is this recognition about Dickinson's work—that her poems are "gradual as flowers, gradual as rust," simultaneously writing and unwriting themselves, accumulating and jettisoning—that is subtly weaved into "The Hebrides." Longley's "Emily Dickinson," in other words, reads his precursor according to his own gradually forming aesthetic; once again, it describes a process that gives way, in Longley's own work, to the thing itself.

"The Hebrides" will not allow itself to be read to an easier conclusion than this; parts of it remain elusive, slightly beyond control. It willfully embraces contradiction. This also goes some way to explaining the problematical reception accorded the poem in the Belfast Group in 1964. The introduction of Longley to the Group served to expose the critical gap between critics Philip Hobsbaum and Michael Allen, a gap which led, ultimately, to Allen's being "cast out from the magic circle."<sup>19</sup> But Longley's, as compared to Heaney's Group poems, might be seen to open up that kind of critical gap in a broader sense. For Hobsbaum, Heaney was the undoubted star of the Group, whose densely textured, empirical mode of writing validated Hobsbaum's own critical principles. Those principles—learned in part from his former tutor F. R. Leavis—were enshrined in Hobsbaum's *A Theory of Communication*, written between 1959 and 1968, and published in 1970. Beyond Leavis, the book is heavily indebted to I. A. Richards's *Principles of Literary Criticism* (1925) to the extent that much of Hobsbaum's material (even down to his title) is drawn from Richards, who is thus in a way retranslated forty years later in relation to contemporary poetry. In that study, Hobsbaum asserts that an unsuccessful poem will not allow itself to be read

19. *Tuppenny Stung*, 42.

to coherent and shared conclusion; a truly great poem is one that transcends such disagreements because it manifests itself "so tangibly and forcefully." In the end, this translates into a dislike of poems that lead to two irreconcilable interpretations; poems that do so are poems that contain "fundamentally incompatible" ideas. Thus, Emily Dickinson, whose poetry, in Hobsbaum's view, is too ambiguous for an interpretative consensus to exist, is dismissed as "a minor poet" with a "vastly inflated" reputation.<sup>20</sup> (This explains why, for Hobsbaum, Heaney is a "great" poet, because for Hobsbaum, there is only one way in which Heaney can be read.)

Hobsbaum's *Theory of Communication* is a text that pushes the approach current in the academy since I. A. Richards to its extreme; and it is, of course, a text that by 1970 had missed its moment. The critical climate altered so radically in the late 1960s that some of its principles were rendered anachronistic even before it appeared. That is not necessarily to claim that all Hobsbaum's assumptions—or indeed all formalist assumptions—are simply invalidated by the explosion of literary theory in the academies in the 1960s and 1970s. But some of his conclusions about textual stability and coherence are—rightly—now seen as bound up with an essentially conservative worldview that reverberates beyond the realm of the text. Hobsbaum's *Theory of Communication* presumes, as did Richards's *Principles of Literary Criticism*, a consensus among readers, but the belief in such a consensus, and in the ways in which it comes into being—through culture, class, education—cannot now be seen as apolitical in their implications.

*A Theory of Communication* reveals the extent to which Hobsbaum's method of reading poetry struggles to accommodate the kind of disruptive aesthetic evident in Longley's early work. The critical gap may be illuminated by comparing Longley's "The Hebrides" with Heaney's "The Peninsula," poems that share some of their imagery, and which were both written during the period of Heaney's and Longley's involvement with the Group. "The Peninsula," written after "The Hebrides" had been discussed in the Belfast Group, has its origins, in part, in the friendship between the Heaneys and Longleys, which began in the mid-1960s in their joint explorations of County Down and elsewhere, and in their shared love of the natural world. But it also shows the two poets working in different directions. In Heaney's "The Peninsula," the poet also undertakes a coastal journey in which one aims not to arrive "But pass through." The poem, however, also comes full circle, "round the peninsula," to this conclusion:

And drive back home, still with nothing to say  
 Except that now you will uncode all landscapes  
 By this: things founded clean on their own shapes,  
 Water and ground in their extremity.<sup>21</sup>

20. Philip Hobsbaum, *A Theory of Communication* (London: Macmillan, 1970) 6, 14, 58-59.

21. Seamus Heaney, *Door into the Dark* (London: Faber, 1969).

It is, both emotionally and in terms of its imagery, a perfect loop, that finds its starting point “back home” with a fresh clarity of vision, a distinctness in its elements, that was lacking at the outset, notably in its recovery of a perfect rhyme. The poem too is a thing “founded clean” on its own shape, its apparent simplicity rendering it possible to “uncode” it as a poem of integrity, in that it leaves nothing wanting, nothing broken or incomplete. More recently, of course, criticism has called that seductive simplicity into question: reading Heaney has gradually become a more difficult, and more rewarding enterprise too. But it is easy to see why this poem, for example, would appeal so directly to a reading practice invested in precisely that sense of completion and closure, since the poem’s own self-reflexivity offers that mode of interpretation as indicative of the nature of poetry itself.

One might speculate that if the fourth section of “The Hebrides” had chosen to hold “shore and sky / In harmony,” with all the trappings of formalist unity, its reception may have been very different in the context of the Belfast Group. But “The Hebrides” is both formally and thematically resistant to the interpretation Hobsbaum’s criticism avowedly prefers. Accommodation of difference is not the same as reconciliation of difference: the former is closer to Longley’s (and to Crane’s) method; the latter to Heaney’s (and to Herbert’s). Nevertheless, that “The Hebrides” encountered a critical approach that struggled to accommodate it should not be read as an indictment of the poem; it points rather to the limitations of that approach. As Jacques Derrida writes:

in marking out difference, everything is a matter of strategy and risk. It is a question of strategy because no transcendent truth present outside the sphere of writing can theologically command the totality of this field. It is hazardous because this strategy is not simply one in the sense that we say that strategy orients the tactics according to a final aim, a telos or the theme of a domination, a mastery or an ultimate reappropriation of movement and field. In the end, it is a strategy without finality.[... ] The concept of play... designates the unity of chance and necessity in an endless calculus.<sup>22</sup>

This returns us to Muldoon’s earlier delight in the paradoxical relation between structure (necessity) and serendipity (chance). To covet vertigo is in one sense to opt for an endless calculus. The impetus of “The Hebrides” may be distinguished from that of “The Peninsula” in this: for Heaney, as for Longley, the journey through space is also a journey through time, a memory trip; but “The Peninsula” seeks—and purports to find—a transcendent truth, one that affirms Heaney’s early description of poetry as “divination... revelation of the self to the self.” “The Hebrides,” too, might seek such revelation, but for Longley it is the journey and not the destination that matters—the poem, in other words, may be read as “a strategy without finality,” as a poem that detours, that “suspends the accomplishment or fulfilment of ‘desire’ or ‘will’.”<sup>23</sup> Memory, in “The Hebrides,” is both an accretion *and* a gradual

22. Jacques Derrida, “Différance,” 1968, reprinted in Julie Rivkin and Michael Ryan, eds., *Literary Theory: An Anthology* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998) 388-89.

23. *Ibid.* 389.



process of forgetting that "unwrites" the poem even as its structure is established. The poem is about poetic development; it understands that the poetic journey is unpredictable, and that it is never concluded. Longley thus takes risks in searching for a truth that the poet also knows is not there to be found and in undertaking a journey that cannot return him to something he does not possess: a stable sense of "self," "home," or "belonging."

The paradoxes that follow on from such profound uncertainty lie at the heart of *No Continuing City*. Longley's avowedly religious sensibility finds no sure theological resting place; "home" itself may be better translated as "homes"; the rhyming is not to see oneself, as Heaney formulates it in a poem dedicated to Longley, "Personal Helicon," but to see multiple dramatized versions of self. The early poems are about both the search for "presence" and about the irreparable loss of presence. Even the collection's title, *No Continuing City*, taken as it is from St. Paul to the Hebrews—"For here we have no continuing city, but we seek one to come"—defers its object, suspends the accomplishment of desire, and posits the quest as a permanent condition. In that sense, it is possible to see how Longley's 1990s elegies, in their fascination with absence and presence, sound and silence, their acknowledgment of "failure," their willingness to destabilize the poem at the moment of its accomplishment, draw on aesthetic principles established, if not always critically acknowledged, right at the start.

This is not necessarily to suggest that principles of deconstruction allow a way in to Longley's work that cannot otherwise be found: quite the opposite. (The reading of "The Hebrides" offered above is, of course, a "conventional" close reading not a deconstruction.) Rather, one may be tempted to draw the following paradoxical conclusion: these early poems resist formalist closure, defying the too easy assumption that "form" can be equated with "formalist"; as a result, they have proved rather too challenging not merely for formalist critics, but, more importantly, for subsequent critics who have, ironically enough, themselves resisted the Richards-Leavis methodology. Consequently, those who wish to challenge the "conservatism" of Irish criticism—or indeed, of Irish poetry itself—have tended to look to Longley's successors for ammunition rather than question assumptions about Longley's poetry that emerge from a mode of reading in the 1960s they themselves would not condone. Heaney's own argument—that "formalist" is a "reductive verdict" to pass upon Longley's poetry<sup>24</sup>—has tended to be forgotten.

The extent to which, even thirty-five years later, the misconceptions surrounding Longley in the early years still reverberate in recent criticism becomes apparent in two recent studies of Irish poetry that set out to question what they see as the dominant, Heaney-centered approach to criticism, Alex Davis's *A Broken Line: Denis Devlin and Irish Poetic Modernism* and John Goodby's *Irish Poetry Since 1950: From Stillness into History*, both pub-

24. Seamus Heaney, rev. of Michael Longley, *Poems 1963-1983*, *Sunday Tribune*.

lished in 2000. Alex Davis writes that “The critical feeding-frenzy that surrounded the Northern renaissance in Irish poetry during the 1970s and 1980s helped to create a dominant image of the characteristic Irish poem: a Movement lyric fractured by the impact of political violence.” Against this, he argues for the importance of the “Irish neo-avant-garde,” which has found the “closed lyric” form “increasingly antiquated” in a global culture.<sup>25</sup> The image of the “well-made” poem, the fractured “Movement” lyric is, as Davis implicitly notes, a critical construct, but at the same time he also accepts that construct as an adequate summary of the 1970s/1980s Northern generation’s aesthetic. Davis then posits a narrative in which Irish neo-modernism reacts against the conservatism, in both form and content, of the Northern poets—“Heaney, Derek Mahon and others.”<sup>26</sup> There are two obvious and related problems with this scenario. The first is that the “critical feeding-frenzy” he describes never took place in relation to Longley (the phrase is already stretching a point in relation to Mahon); the second is that it never took place precisely because Longley’s poetry questions rather than subscribes to the idea of the “well-made” poem. In effect, Davis’s failure to consider Longley’s poetry means that he has, by implication, rendered his work another example of the “dominant image” of Irish poetry, of the closed lyric form that Davis then goes on to challenge. But one cannot have it both ways: if Longley fits that dominant image, his work should be central to the dominant critical narrative that Davis questions; but since it is not central to 1980s criticism, one must surely conclude that it is, in fact, disruptive of the category in which it is misleadingly placed. (Longley’s absence from the book suggests that the “solution” to the difficulty is, for Davis, to deny that the difficulty exists.)

John Goodby, although he does briefly consider Longley’s earlier poetry, ultimately finds himself in a similar conundrum when he writes that “The issues of language, place, identity and myth broached by Heaney and Montague continued to dominate poetry in the late 1970s and early 1980s; but, as in the case of Carson and Muldoon, they were being increasingly queried by younger poets....”<sup>27</sup> This elides the fact that such issues were being played out rather differently in Longley’s work (as also in Mahon’s) in ways that could themselves be seen to query Heaney (influence here is read in Catholic as well as male terms); “myth,” for example, is central to *No Continuing City* but not to *Death of a Naturalist*, and it is partly Longley’s interest in myth that accounts for Hobsbaum’s negativity towards the work. In addition, although Goodby’s *Irish Poetry Since 1950* aims to challenge such critics as Garratt and Johnston, he also, paradoxically, accepts some of their critical judgments on the poetic scene as an accurate measure of the poetry:

25. Alex Davis, *A Broken Line: Denis Devlin and Irish Poetic Modernism* (Dublin: UCD Press, 2000) 160-61.

26. *Ibid.* 160. Longley is nowhere directly mentioned in the book, though implicitly accommodated in this phrase.

27. John Goodby, *Irish Poetry Since 1950: From Stillness into History* (Manchester: Manchester UP, 2000) 210.

Heaney becomes, for Goodby as for earlier critics, the too-convenient spokesman for a generation, a position that a more careful reading of Longley's poetry should throw into question. Issues that dominate criticism are not the same as those that dominate poetry; to suggest that they are is once again to attribute a collective identity to a group of poets, to accept the part for the whole. For Goodby, as also for Davis, it is the experimentalist poetry of recent years that has challenged "traditional notions of allegiance, identity and belonging," leaving Longley, Heaney, and Mahon largely unaffected. Thus, while Longley's more recent 1990s poetry does concern itself with "geographical (and to some extent historical) displacements," it does not break with the "core concerns—of responsibility, home, alienation, community—which marked [his] earlier work." In contrast, Goodby argues that "younger poets" have "an already existing scepticism towards such terms within the Irish context" which has "informed the aesthetic stances and formal strategies of their poetry in correspondingly more radical fashion."<sup>28</sup> But the implicit overview of Longley's career here—a conservative and stable aesthetic gradually becoming more displaced (though never completely)—misses wholly the extent to which Longley's aesthetic has been from the outset, one of destabilization and displacement; the extent to which his formal strategies were—and are—radical at a far more subtle level than those characteristic of neo-modernist "experimentalism"; and finally, the extent to which his attitudes towards home, responsibility, and community have always been marked by a self-questioning scepticism and a rigorous refusal of complacency.

The rather token inclusion of Longley's work, or the uneasy position it holds, in broader critical studies of Irish poetry, suggests, oddly enough, that although Philip Hobsbaum's perspective is hardly critically dominant nowadays, it is perhaps Longley's association with the Group, and more particularly, with Heaney and Hobsbaum, which has sometimes served to sideline him somewhere he never "belonged" in the first place. Although his poetry may be seen, in the 1960s, to challenge reductive methods of reading, the irony is, perhaps, that it did so rather sooner than criticism was ready for it. Longley's early poems offer their reader "the privilege / Of vertigo"; not many—thus far—have been willing to destabilize themselves, or their own critical assumptions, in response.

28. *Ibid.* 281-82.