

Ancient Salves and Modern Grievs: Michael Longley's Elegies

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Abstract

Michael Longley, born in Belfast in 1939, is of the same generation as Derek Mahon and Seamus Heaney and his poetry ranks equally with theirs in its integrity, range and excellence. All three reached artistic maturity about the time of the resurgence of Northern Ireland's Troubles in the late sixties, and the violence has left an indelible imprint on their work. For Longley, as for Heaney, elegy offered an appropriate means of responding to the Troubles and of mourning its victims, yet the genre also brought with it a number of challenging problems, among them the risk of falsifying the reality of sectarian murder by committing it to poetry and the unpalatability to modern taste of elegy's traditional propensities towards idealization and transcendental consolation. Heaney's success in remaking elegy by strenuously engaging with such artistic problems has received its due weight of critical attention, but there has been no comparable study of Longley's evolution as an elegist nor of his equally important contribution to the rehabilitation of the genre. This essay will attempt to supply these deficiencies by way of a detailed examination of his work in elegy.

The dead are unrestricted tenants in Michael Longley's work: they have had the run of the house from his first collection *No Continuing City* (1969) through to his recent *The Ghost Orchid* (1995) and the elegiac as an underlying impulse in his poetry has continued to elicit his best work. His oeuvre encompasses a wide range of elegiac sub-genres from poems mourning the dead of world war, through elegies for victims of Northern Ireland's Troubles, tributes to dead friends and fellow artists, to his elegies for his parents and other members of his family, and an equally broad range of approaches to the convention from parody of its facile urge to provide consolation to unembarrassed improvisation on its traditional structures and tropes. However, Longley's reclaiming of elegy for his own violent times has not been an easy task. The outbreak of the Troubles in the late sixties gave renewed urgency to questions of identity that had first surfaced in the poet's childhood (Longley was born to English parents who made Belfast their home in the 1920s), and also challenged his art with the imperative of responding to the tragic events taking place in his community without compromis-

ing his prime duty to his imagination or reaping artistic profit from others' losses. Not surprisingly, poems approaching the violence directly were slow in coming (up to the appearance of *The Echo Gate* volume in 1979, only two elegies had addressed victims of the Troubles) and fraught with a deep sense of their inadequacy when they came.

Longley had already worked to advantage some of the familiar conventions of the genre in an early elegy on his father's death where he summoned the 'experimental lovers' who had confirmed his father's post-war potency (he had been wounded in the scrotum on the Somme) to give a risqué new twist to the consolatory coda:

I summon girls who packed at last and went
Underground with you. Their souls again on hire,
Now those lost wives as recreated brides
Take shape before me, materialise.
On the verge of light and happy legend
They lift their skirts like blinds across your eyes.

('In Memoriam')¹⁾

Yet however much he might transform the generic norms, the merest hint of transcendence or gesture of comfort risked becoming a dangerous impertinence when his focus switched to the victims of sectarian violence. There was the danger too of taking advantage of atrocity and making artistic gain from others' suffering, and thus unwittingly colluding with the death-dealers.

Longley has stated as a conviction in interview that 'other people's feelings are more important than poems'²⁾, and his unusual sensitivity in this regard is confirmed by his practice of seeking approval from the families of the victims named in his poems before considering publication. This concern to elegize the dead without desecrating their memory permeates his poetry, accounting for the oblique angles of presentation, unexpected shifts of tone and sudden bewildering swerves from the real to the surreal which have become Longley trademarks, and informing his unpretentious assays at giving comfort. Viewed from a quite different angle, these strategies supply evidence of an ongoing struggle to come to terms with elegy's conventions and by a process of strenuous trial and experiment to remake them for his own time.

In a short essay published in 1988, Neil Corcoran showed how 'Wounds' (the first of Longley's elegies to confront the Troubles directly) earned effects of great pathos by unsettled and unsettling variations of register and by the licensing of public lament with the privacy of personal grief. 'Grief is a private emotion, not truly felt at all if felt at a distance'³⁾, Corcoran explains, and by tapping a deep reservoir of private sorrow for his own father's death, the poet found a means of internalizing the suffering of the bereaved families and of bringing his grief to the public utterance without violating his chosen artistic distance from the events themselves. Distrustful of any instant response to the mindless violence fomented by the Troubles, Longley has from the first favoured an 'oblique rather than head-on approach'⁴⁾ in his attempts to address that violence, and the coupling in this poem of his father's world war anecdotes with instances of sectarian atrocity shows an early recognition of the value of analogizing different realms of experience as a means of placing an artistic space between himself and subject. However, the analogizing in such poems works both obliquely and reciprocally. 'Wounds' thus 'approaches Northern Ireland killings by way of an evocation of his father's death'⁵⁾, as Corcoran claims, yet with equal force and conviction it confronts the pathos and absurdity of his father's 'dying for King and Country, slowly'⁶⁾ by way of a mordantly ironic update on Ulster patriotism.

Viewed from the vantage-point of his most recent volume, *The Ghost Orchid* (1995), 'Wounds' takes its place in a perspective of father-centred poems that spans Longley's career (his wife, Edna Longley, refers to three of these poems in her survey of father-fixation in recent Irish literature, 'When Did You Last See Your Father?'⁷⁾). Many of these poems draw on harrowing experiences in two world wars which his father had kept secret until just before he died and then passed on as a special legacy to his son. However, these anecdotes haunt his poems not because there is anything obsessional in Longley's relations with his dead father, nor for the light they throw on recent events in Ulster, but because they focus important questions of identity and belonging which are of common concern to father and son. These questions preoccupy the elder Longley's mental reenactments of the Somme, as they do the son in his periodic forays across No Man's Land in search of the dead relatives who 'people [his] head like a ghost town'⁸⁾ and, ultimately, of himself.

The earliest father-centred poems, 'In Memoriam' and 'Wounds' (dating, respectively, from before and after the outbreak of the Troubles), are prefaced by an acknowledgement of their provenance in anecdotes passed on to him by his father and by a concern for fidelity as

Longley projects them onto the screen of poetry:

My father, let no similes eclipse
 Where crosses like some forest simplified
 Sink roots into my mind; the slow sands
 Of your history delay till through your eyes
 I read you like a book.

(‘In Memoriam’)⁹

Such scruples are not misplaced in a poet consciously bridging a divide between oral and written narratives nor in a son confiding grave-mouth secrets, yet the desire to occupy his father’s memory, to see exclusively through his eyes, appears to go beyond both tasks and to approximate to one of those peculiar mergers of self with other that occur with such frequency in Longley’s non-elegiac work. Identity and belonging in both poems are curiously plastic and exchangeable:

You, looking death and nightmare in the face
 With your kilt, harmonica and gun,
 Grow older in a flash, but none the wiser
 (Who following the wrong queue at The Palace,
 Have joined the London Scottish by mistake).

(‘In Memoriam’)

First, the Ulster Division at the Somme
 Going over the top with ‘Fuck the Pope!’
 ‘No surrender!': a boy about to die,
 Screaming ‘Give ‘em one for the Shankill!’
 Next comes the London-Scottish padre
 Resettling kilts with his swagger stick
 With a stylish backhand and a prayer.
 Over a landscape of dead buttocks.

(‘Wounds’)¹⁰

In both too, the inseparable horror and absurdity of his father’s experience are condensed into images which cut at the very root (almost literally in the recollection of his scrotal wounding) of settled notions of individual, sexual and national identity, and which trigger a reciprocal sense of crisis in the son:

That instant I, your most unlikely son,
In No Man's Land was surely left for dead.

(*'In Memoriam'*)

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

(*'Wounds'*)

No Man's Land as the nightmare backdrop to the obliteration of identity and reburial as a compulsive ritual to allay unresolved feelings about the dead reemerge as master tropes in later poems about Longley's father and other members of his family. No Man's Land makes its next appearance in *'Master of Ceremonies'*, a poem ostensibly about his mother's father, Grandfather George, but in fact an elegy for her brother Lionel, whose disappearance without trace in the trenches of the First World War, and afterwards from family conversation, haunted Longley's childhood:

My grandfather...
Had thrown out his only son, my sad retarded uncle
Who, good for nothing except sleepwalking to the Great War,
Was not once entrusted with a rifle, bayonet but instead
Went over the top slowly behind the stretcher parties
And, as park attendant where all hell had broken loose,
Collected littered limbs until his sack was heavy.¹¹⁾

Longley's memorial for his disowned and almost forgotten relative is a poem about memory, one that recalls with painful candour the cordon of shame and censorship his grandfather posted around his son and war's complicity in erasing him from memory, and which affirms his own countervailing task of piecing together the fragments of his uncle's history and restoring him to memory. To achieve this task, there can be no distortions of fact or of emotion, whether amelioration of his uncle's disabilities or the expression of an unmet sorrow (as in *'Wounds'*, the pathos is held at arm's length by a grimly jocular tone and grotesque effects). Meanwhile, the same rigorous honesty and willingness to disrupt elegiac decorum can be seen in the withering exposure of his grandfather's glib and callous deceits:

In old age my grandfather demoted his flesh and blood
 And over the cribbage board ('Fifteen two, fifteen four,
 One for his nob') would call me Lionel. 'Sorry, my mistake.
 That was my nephew. His head got blown off in No Man's Land.

His grandfather's 'confusion' premises a typical Longleian fusion of identity between the poet and his uncle, one which answers to a similar sense of disinheritance from a vital section of his own past and a like compulsion towards order as a means of coping with the splits and divisions ('head...blown off in No Man's Land') he senses within himself.

Splits and divisions are much in evidence in Longley's autobiographical sketch, *Tuppenny Stung*, which relates confusions in his own childhood identity both to special factors in his family background (his English parentage, surrogate upbringing, etc) and to the rigid class and sectarian divisions of his native Belfast. He has also revealed in interview how the inability to ratify his identity by access to a broader familial hinterland led to the emergence of family as a major theme in his poetry:

My parents came to Belfast from Clapham Common in London in 1927. They didn't keep in touch with their families. I missed out on the usual familial hinterland of aunts and uncles and cousins. Perhaps I am now trying to compensate. Outside of the immediate family circle, my relatives are a crowd of ghosts. I'm interested in ghosts. Genetically each one of us is a ghost story.¹²⁾

This comment offers a valuable gloss on another of Longley's poems about family, 'Second Sight', which pictures him on a disorientating visit to London in search of his family roots:

I have brought the *Pocket Guide to London*,
 My *Map of the Underground*, an address —
 A lover looking for somewhere to live,
 A ghost among ghosts of aunts and uncles
 Who crowd around me to give directions.

Where is my father's house, where my father?¹³⁾

Deep-seated insecurities about nation and home issue here in the desperate cry of longing for his dead father, who, as the bridge between opposing self-definitions (Longley has described

himself in another interview as 'neither English nor Irish completely'¹⁴), seems to hold the vital key to his own identity. The dream of a unified self also pervades the anecdote about his grandmother's gift of second sight. Her ability to cross the bars of space and time once brought No Man's Land to her own backyard and she could as easily leap 'the miles of cloud and sea to Ireland':

My father's mother had the second sight.
 Flanders began at the kitchen window —
 The mangle rusting in No Man's Land, gas
 Turning the antimacassars yellow
 When it blew the wrong way from the salient.

In bandages, on crutches, reaching home
 Before his letters, my father used to find
 The front door on the latch, his bed airing.
 'I watched my son going over the top.
 He was carrying flowers out of the smoke.'

Longley reveals a curious affinity to his grandmother's gift in the frequency with which war zone overlaps with domestic space in his family poems. Typical is 'No Man's Land', which imagines him searching the dismal terrain of its title for traces of yet another missing relative. Echoing with the sound of splintering glass and littered with human debris, Longley's elegy exposes the hopelessness of the task of piecing together the fragments of his family history as a means of finding himself:

Who will give skin and bones to my Jewish granny?
 She has come down to me in the copperplate writing
 Of three certificates, a dog-eared daguerreotype
 And the one story my grandfather told about her.¹⁵

The 'granny' referred to is his mother's mother, Jessica Brahams, whose death left his mother in the care of an 'insanely jealous' stepmother who subjected her to cruelty and 'daily humiliations'.¹⁶ However, unlike 'Master of Ceremonies', the poem is not concerned with airing family skeletons: only with tracing this long dead relative's 'misaid whereabouts', which together with his grandmother's premature death and Jewish origins, provides a thematic bridge to the elegy for Isaac Rosenberg that comprises the poem's second unit. The result is an unex-

pected meeting of genealogies, of genetic and literary ancestries, and a convergence of pain from private and historical griefs. Meanwhile, the change from a domestic to a war setting transfers the poet's sense of loss and disorientation to No Man's Land, the nightmare ground that compulsively haunts his imagination, where identity shatters and leaves no trace. The elegy accordingly ends where it began in fruitless search and disrupted lines of communication:

Because your body was not recovered either
I try to read the constellations of brass buttons,
Identity discs that catch the light a little.
A shell-shocked carrier pigeon flaps behind the lines.

Reburial, the second of these master tropes, appears to be closely connected with anecdotes passed down by Longley's father describing the experience of burial alive and other close brushes with death. 'In Memoriam' vividly recalls one of these premature death experiences, one that ironically prepares (via the image of the smashed funeral urn with its unsettling ties to soup canteens and severed testicles) for a later appointment with Death:

Between the corpses and the soup canteens
You swooned away, watching your future spill.
But, as it was, your proper funeral urn
Had mercifully smashed to smithereens,
To shrapnel shards that sliced your testicle.
.
In my twentieth year your old wounds woke
As cancer. Lodging under the same roof
Death was a visitor who hung about,
Strewing the house with pills and bandages,
Till he chose to put your spirit out.¹⁷⁾

'Wounds' relays the same irony through his father's death-bed wit while exposing his own helplessness in the chiasmic doubling-back of his gesture of comfort:

At last, a belated casualty,
He said — lead traces flaring till they hurt —
'I am dying for King and Country, slowly.'
I touched his hand, his thin head I touched.¹⁸⁾

The burial ceremony which opens the poem's second unit appears to belong to the same period of time (his father died in 1960), but the interment beside him of the most recent victims of the Troubles ('Three teenage soldiers, bellies full of/Bullets and Irish beer') along with the uniform of a murdered bus conductor reveals the ceremony to be a deeply irrational ritual taking place in the poet's own mind. Moreover, the poem's analogizing of his father's wounds with the historical wounds still festering in the life of the province opens the door for a new set of analogies. Thus his father's 'bewilderment' at the displacement of sectarian hatred to the trenches of the First World War is complemented by the shock of the bus conductor's 'bewildered wife' before a more recent example of the same fervour, while the pairing of himself with the 'shivering boy' who apologizes banally for murdering her husband exposes the feelings of inadequacy and guilt that attend the poem's futile attempt to heal those wounds.

This compulsive and irrational side to his mourning surfaces again in the bleak demoralizing ironies of 'Last Requests', where his failure to honour his father's dying request is distorted by guilt into an act approximate to sacrilege:

I thought you blew a kiss before you died,
 But the bony fingers that waved to and fro
 Were asking for a Woodbine, the last request
 Of many soldiers in your company,
 The brand you chose to smoke for forty years
 Thoughtfully, each one like a sacrament.
 I who brought peppermints and grapes only
 Couldn't reach you through the oxygen tent.¹⁹⁾

The poem has the typical two stanza structure (seen in 'Wounds' and 'No Man's Land') that Longley employs to analogize different realms of his experience, and this scene in its second unit is prepared for in the first by an anecdote recalling his father's experience of premature burial during the 1914–1918 war and the treachery of his batman who, thinking him buried alive

Left you for dead and stole your pocket watch
 And cigarette case, all he could salvage
 From the grave you so nearly had to share
 With an unexploded shell.

Though these two scenes appear initially only marginally related, the mirror-like play of images between them reveals how the guilt and anguish Longley experienced at his father's death-bed have since then evolved into something close to a full-scale obsession. Thus, his father's resurfacing from his would-be tomb 'to take a long remembered drag' in the first unit is complemented by his kiss-like appeal for a Woodbine from the entombing oxygen tent in the second, where his treacherous son, unable to reach him through the flimsy walls of his grave, replays the batman's role.

'Last Requests' comes after 'The Linen Workers' in Longley's *The Echo Gate* volume and, given his tendency to group related poems, their contiguity may not just be an arbitrary affair. The poems' clearest resemblance is in their mutual agonized reliving of the father's death and burial. However, in the reading which follows, I hope to show that Longley's use of the reburial motif in 'The Linen Workers' again signals the eruption of a more darkly based and intractable grief than earlier critics have allowed. However, this poem is part of the elegiac sequence 'Wreaths', and it is this context that it needs first to be considered.

Longley's first work to confront the Troubles directly since 'Wounds' and 'Kindertotenlieder', 'Wreaths'²⁰ registers a new stage in his elegiac work in serving as a testing ground for doubts and anxieties about his right to address the suffering of others in a context of political violence. Writing in 1979 about what he was attempting to do in the volume, Longley affirmed that 'though the poet's first duty must be to his imagination, he has other obligations — and not just as a citizen. He would be inhuman if he did not respond to tragic events in his own community, and a poor artist if he did not seek to endorse that response imaginatively.'²¹ However, this left the artist in a double bind, for by responding to tragic events in his community he risked committing the equal inhumanity of intruding on the grief of the bereaved families or, even more monstrous, of reaping artistic profit from their loss. What stance then should he adopt towards these other victims of atrocity, when to regard 'their agony as raw material for your art or your art as a solace for them in their suffering' fell little short of colluding with the death-dealers in 'atrocities of the mind'?

The sequence's opening poem, 'The Civil Servant' (all three titles tactfully conceal the identity of their victims), parodies its own intrusion into the victim's home and his widow's grief by foregrounding the obtuse routines of the police enquiry:

He lay in his dressing gown and pyjamas

While they dusted the dresser for fingerprints
 And then shuffled backwards across the garden
 With notebooks, cameras and measuring tapes.

They rolled him up like a red carpet and left
 Only a bullet hole in the cutlery drawer.

Their impassive collecting of data and evident self-satisfaction at setting everything to rights before leaving is a reminder of the dangers of sanitizing such atrocities by aestheticizing them in poetry. The poem's matter-of-fact tone similarly conspires to keep suffering at arm's length. Yet, its coolness gives a sardonic edge to such details as their rolling up of the corpse 'like a red carpet', while the poignancy of the widow's grief is only deepened by the understated reporting of how she

took a hammer and chisel
 And removed the black keys from his piano.

Such suffering gives the lie to elegiac consolation, and the poet here tactfully withdraws leaving her to the desolation of her grief.

The second wreath, 'The Greengrocer', is offered for a local tradesman murdered by the Ulster Volunteer Force. He is the sole victim of the three poems known personally by the poet and the only one he names. Longley has related in interview how he nervously sent the poem to the widow and did not even consider publication until he received her gracious approval.²²⁾ As a result, poetic intrusion is not an issue here, though acquaintance with the greengrocer's family now brought to the fore a different artistic problem: how to reconcile grief with outrage, comfort with condemnation, elegy with Troubles poem. Longley's solution was to return, as he had done in his earliest elegies, to the stock consolatory machinery of the genre — naming the dead man; paying tribute to his virtues; recalling and mourning his death; recalling the visit of mourners to the place of his loss; providing intimations of a transcendent life beyond death — while sowing his elegiac ground with ironies directed at the perpetrators of his death.

The opening stanza recalls and discreetly honours the dead greengrocer, premising his personal goodness in the industry and well-stocked efficiency which made his 'a good shop'. His busy preparations for Christmas doubly condemn his murderers who, masquerading as cus-

tomers,

found him busy as usual
 Behind the counter, organised
 With holly wreaths for Christmas,
 Fir trees on the pavement outside.

The ironies speak for themselves, pointing the absurd bigotry of a sectarian conflict that crudely distinguishes friend from foe by the version of Christianity they profess.

Longley models his second stanza on the traditional elegiac coda, which typically attempts to console by redefining the loss as gain in heavenly or other transcendental terms, but he wisely departs from convention by avoiding making such claims for the dead man himself. Instead, he mythologizes his shop into the traditional framework of the Christmas story, displaced here to the streets of Belfast so that the 'Astrologers or three wise men' of the gospels (standing in here for the genre's ceremonial mourners) may 'pause on their way' to 'a small house' situated, with a bitterly mocking even-handedness, 'up the Shankill/ Or the Falls,'

To buy gifts at Jim Gibson's shop,
 Dates and chestnuts and tangerines.

The exquisite balance achieved in this poem between realism and fantasy, satire and comforting balm is displaced by something less obviously controlled and more blackly surreal in the closing elegy of the sequence, 'The Linen Workers'. The poem follows a bizarre associative logic from its disquieting opening vision of Christ's teeth fastening his resurrected body to a wintry sky to a recollection of his father's false teeth brimming in their tumbler; from there to a set of dentures lying in the road after the gunning down of ten linen workers, and closes with yet another reburial:

Before I can bury my father once again
 I must polish the spectacles, balance them
 Upon his nose, fill his pockets with money
 And into his dead mouth slip the set of teeth.

It is Longley's strangest and most disturbing poem, and one that has lent itself to diverse interpretations.

Neil Corcoran sees its closing ceremony as self-therapeutic ('making the bodies of those you love decent enough to be buried inside your own head'), and explains its unexpected focus on the poet's own father as a means of generating 'genuine, not forced, feeling by establishing the authenticating relationship between public and private: the linen workers are felt for because his father is felt for, and because the linen workers are, or have, fathers themselves.'²³ This consolatory agenda gains support from the way the spectacles, money and false teeth with which Longley makes his last cosmetic adjustments to his father's corpse double for those of the murdered linen workers. On the other hand, the reading is called into question both by the scant space the poem affords its ostensible subject and by our sense of an irrational driving force at work in the poem, one with little in common with altruistic aims.

The cruel vision which opens the poem (paradoxically, one of Christ smiling) evokes for Corcoran 'the cruel absurdity of the religion which resurrects itself in these sectarian murders; its unrelentingness, as it fastens people to it for ever.' However, since this nightmare Christ looks down with similar ambivalence on the victims of this atrocity ('the bread, the wine' spattered on the road reveal that they had just taken communion), his smile seems to render equally absurd the (for Corcoran, 'consolatory') evidence of their martyrdom. If this gives an impression of the subversive forces operating in the poem, something similarly surreal and unsettling colours Longley's recollections of his own dead father. Unlike 'Wounds', for Corcoran the prototype of its analogizing of grief, 'The Linen Workers' gives no direct key to the son's feeling for his father. Moreover, memory gives access not to the living man but to a lurid recollection of his

false teeth

Brimming in their tumbler: they wore bubbles

And, outside of his body, a deadly grin.

The poem's bleak dispassionate tone and lingering over macabre details carry us back to 'The Civil Servant', though the tightly reined-in feelings and bizarre ritual performed to relieve them are now transferred to the poet himself. The singular power and strangeness of the poem may thus derive from the poet's willingness to give grief in all its inconsolable anarchy the licence to enact itself. This would account for the way the subject is all but consumed by its analogue; it would also explain why there is no direct attempt to give comfort beyond the simple offer of this wreath. If the poem thus resolves itself in unresolved personal grief, it is

an earnest of the humility and seriousness the poet brings to the task of reconciling the genre's traditional role of mourning the dead with the tragic absurdity of Northern Ireland's Troubles. By the same token, it is the persistence of unresolved private griefs in the poet's own experience that makes his poetry such a sensitive medium for others' suffering and this remarkable sequence of poems the deeply honest work it is.

To repeat what I said earlier, 'Wreaths' marks a new stage in Longley's elegiac work in its preoccupation with the problems of elegizing the victims of sectarian violence and of comforting its unsung victims: the parents, wives and children left behind. This compassionate concern suffuses *The Echo Gate* and the later volumes, expressing itself in a return to the consolatory tropes of the genre ('The Greengrocer' is his first announcement of this return) and in the appearance of a new theme of healing which carried him back to the origins of his craft in primitive charms and healing rituals. The emergence of this theme is closely connected with Longley's relationship as a poet and amateur naturalist with the landscape of the West of Ireland, and as it is of immense significance to his development as an elegist, I shall backtrack briefly here to examine a handful of poems written from the Longleys' summer home in Carrigskeewaun, Co. Mayo.

A poem addressed 'To Seamus Heaney' (in 'Letters') registers an awareness of both the attractions and the dangers of a retreat to

That small subconscious cottage where
The Irish poet slams his door
On slow-worm, toad and adder,²⁴⁾

and it is to his credit that, far from offering a safe haven from the pressures of home, Longley's version of the West has from the first provided a stark elemental testing ground for the important issues of his work. As Peter McDonald has shown²⁵⁾, his stance in the Mayo poems involves a careful and often delicate balancing of the emotional preoccupations he carries from home with the desire to create an autonomous mental space in the stern solitude of the new landscape. The result is another of those curious feats of legerdemain at which Longley is a practised hand of 'being in two places at the one time.'²⁶⁾ And, since his earliest visits to this 'home from home' were roughly contemporaneous with the outbreak of the Troubles, it is

not surprising that he should have found there a complementary theatre of violence. Thus, in one of the earliest poems, pointedly titled 'Casualty', the disinterested curiosity of the amateur naturalist affords an oblique glance at the depredations of his home province:

Its decline was gradual,
 A sequence of explorations
 By other animals, each
 Looking for the easiest way in —

A surgical removal of the eyes,
 A probing of the orifices,
 Bitings down through the skin,
 Through tracts where the grasses melt,

And the bad air released
 In a ceremonious wounding
 So slow that more and more
 I wanted to get closer to it...²⁷⁾

A similar air of quasi-scientific enquiry pervades the poems of his third collection, *Man Lying on a Wall* (1975), where complementing this darker version of Nature, red in tooth and claw, she now manifests in the beneficent roles of healer and renewer. 'The Goose' reworks the surgical tropes of the earlier poem in a culinary context (it is about the gutting and cleaning of a goose for the oven), but the clinical tone and procedure are now modulated by a sensitive concern for an addressee ('I thought of you through the operation/ And covered the unmolested head'), and the feelings of loss discreetly mitigated by gain:

Surviving there, lodged in its tract,
 Nudging the bruise of the orifice
 Was the last egg. I delivered it
 Like a clean bone, a seamless cranium...

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.²⁸⁾

The tensions generated by this unidentified presence (presumably a member of Longley's own family) not only afford the poem its special insights — the beauty and dignity of animals; the guilt that attends our proprietorship over their lives — but tentatively draw it within the ambit of elegy. (Resemblances to the elegiac sub-genre of animal poems can be seen in the speaker's respectful memorializing of the bird and the strategies he devises to ward off pain.) Indeed, 'The Goose' seems to have taught Longley the artistic benefits of foregrounding a member of his own family as a receptor of loss and focus of comfort, and the poem can be seen as the prototype of later elegies like 'The Ice-cream Man.'

The creative and destructive elements in Nature are held in a more precarious balance in 'Fury', where the chatter of martins in the rafters, the 'hiss of scythes' cutting hay, and the cries of crows 'hustling to pin down the new evictions' complement the wholly silent *agon* of a breech-born foal's 'dithering acceptance' of life. However, it is typical of Longley that he should leave this contest in unresolved deadlock with a final view of the foal still hesitant at the very threshold of affirmation:

I can just make out
His starry forehead
Hesitant among
Eyebright and speedwell.²⁹⁾

The reticence of this ending lies not only in its avoidance of an undue hopefulness but also in its settling in the final line for a simple act of naming in place of a more explicitly pointed and thus more presumptuous forecast of the foal's survival. John Lyon has shown the importance in Longley's poetry of accumulative structures like catalogues, inventories and lists of names³⁰⁾, and though the line 'Eyebright and speedwell' falls somewhat short of a list, its closing of the poem on an oblique note of affirmation³¹⁾ identifies 'Fury' as the forerunner of important later elegies like 'The Greengrocer', 'The Ice-cream Man' and 'X-ray'.

Healing, as a collaboration between human skill and natural beneficence, is a major theme in *The Echo Gate* (1979), where it finds a counterpart in various manifestations of human suffering. The closest Longley comes to a manifesto is in 'Lore'³²⁾, a sequence of short poems which roots the theme in Irish agricultural lore and folk medicine. The first five of these poems are folk prescriptions related to the harvest: half-pagan rituals to ensure continuing pleni-

tude and a harmonious accord between man and nature. Recurring images of cutting and bleeding keep in mind the negative aspect of man's dealings with nature and authorize a final emphasis on faith and healing:

Sprinkle the dust from a mushroom or chew
 The white end of a rush, apply the juice
 From fern roots, stems of burdock, dandelions,

 The cover the wound with cuckoo-sorrel
 Or sphagnum moss, bringing together verse
 And herb, plant and prayer to stop the bleeding.

('Finding a Remedy')

The supple cadences and delicate internal rhymes produce an effect here similar to incantation (the rhythmic utterance of a charm or spell), whose central role in that peculiar blend of science and superstition, Irish folk medicine, is acknowledged obliquely by the word 'verse' in line five. However, 'verse' is also a synonym for poetry and, by relating these different skills with their shared roots in magic and ritual, Longley tentatively invests the poet with the mantle of healer.

Stopping the bleeding has of course a special relevance for Northern Ireland, a province depleted since the late sixties by a seemingly endless cycle of bloodshed, and likewise for its poets, who have been under extraordinary pressure both from without and within to respond to that carnage. Up to the publication of *The Echo Gate*, Longley's response had taken the indirect route of analogizing from conflicts at a temporal and spatial remove from the Troubles such as his father's nightmarish experiences on the Somme or the natural depredations of the Mayo townlands. Now, as attested by the troubled sequence of elegies ('Wounds') which stands near the head of the volume, he was ready to confront that violence directly along with the grief and suffering it brought in its tow. Meanwhile, the healer figures of poems like 'Self-heal' and 'Florence Nightingale' provided the poet with a new set of personae to give voice to the fears and aspirations that went with the task.

'Self-heal', the third of the 'Mayo Monologues', a sequence of poems projecting isolated or disabled figures onto the stern backdrop of the Mayo landscape, is the most pessimistic of his poems figuring compassion: it is a grim cautionary parable on the text 'Physician heal thyself'. Its surrogate poet and would-be healer is a young woman who takes pity on a men-

tally retarded boy and attempts

to teach him the names of flowers,
Self-heal and centaury; on the long acre
Where cattle never graze, bog asphodel.³³⁾

Though words and herbs are both partners in the cure, the healing efficacy of the plants is here wholly symbolic, and releasing him from the prison house of his condition depends on a simple act of naming. However, the magic fails to work: the boy is unable to memorize the names and each is left hovering 'above its flower/ Like a butterfly unable to alight.' She then pulls a cuckoo-pint apart to free the giddy insects trapped inside, but again, short of securing his release, it results in what she interprets as a sexual assault. Though the boy's disability, the gentleness of the act and the fact that she is not frightened all serve to obscure its moral status, she runs in tears to report the incident and this issues in a prolonged and brutal punishment for the boy which leaves both characters traumatized.

The monologue is her attempt to heal her inner wounds by reconstructing the incident and coming to terms with the doubts and accusations that continue to trouble her mind. However, no such therapy is available for the boy who, the victim of the full weight of the community's prejudices, is tethered like an animal in a field and systematically brutalized. His sense of betrayal and feelings of self-hatred can only find expression later in a retaliatory cycle of violence.

It is temptingly easy to find a parallel here with a violent impasse in a more northerly province of Ireland though, as Seamus Heaney has cautioned, Longley may have had 'no deliberate notion of writing a poem relevant to the Troubles.'³⁴⁾ (For Heaney, 'Self-heal' is paradigmatic of Northern Irish poetry in its *involuntary* displacement of Northern energies to a neutral setting.) However, he does see in the young woman a possible analogue for the action of the poetic imagination as it comprehends and imposes order on unresolved tensions in the mind of the poet, a process not dissimilar to self-healing.

Imitations and tributes addressed to the elegists of the two world wars make up a small but significant sub-genre in Longley's elegiac work, access to their experience enabling him to set the Northern Irish conflict within a broader perspective of futility and waste. Edward

Thomas's influence pervades Longley's 'nature' poetry, and in one of the earliest of these tributes, he draws on Thomas's war diary to affirm Nature's miraculous powers of self-renewal:

Green feathers of yarrow
 Were just fledging the sods
 Of your dugout when you
 Skirted the danger zone
 To draw panoramas,

 To receive larks singing
 Like a letter from home
 Posted in No Man's Land
 Where one frantic bat seemed
 A piece of burnt paper.

(‘Edward Thomas’s War Diary’)³⁵⁾

Though, with typical restraint, Longley avoids any mention of the herb's association with the staunching of wounds, the tentative peeping forth of Thomas's 'green feathers of yarrow' anticipates the special importance that Irish herbal lore will assume in the next volume, *The Echo Gate*. There, in an elegy for Keith Douglas, poet and victim of the Second World War, Longley takes his first cautious step in employing this lore as a source of visionary affirmation.

'Bog Cotton', the elegy referred to, is closely modelled on Douglas's 'Desert Flowers', but acquires a broader intertextual weave from the fact that its model is an elegiac tribute to Isaac Rosenberg and itself partially modelled on his poem 'Break of Day in the Trenches'. Douglas's deliberate echoing of Rosenberg's lines is his way of acknowledging that the poets of the later war had nothing new to say ('hell cannot be let loose twice...Almost all that a modern poet on active service is inspired to write, would be tautological'³⁶⁾). Writing at a further remove but sharing his predecessor's frustration, Longley can do no more than reecho Douglas's echoes, while defining the crisis out of which he wrote as something more hopeless and final:

Keith Douglas, I nearly repeat what you were saying
 When you apostrophised the poppies of Flanders
 And the death of poetry there: that was in Egypt
 Among the sandy soldiers of another war.³⁷⁾

Douglas's way out of this impasse was his resolution in the poem to go beyond the bounds of ordinary perception, beyond even life itself (one of several such prescient moments in his poetry) in search of a vision no earlier poet had sung. For Longley, on the other hand, the portal to vision lies concealed in nature and, by 'mak[ing] room for bog cotton' in a parenthetical insertion that recalls and complements the botanical observations of both Douglas and Rosenberg, he opens an extraordinary vista on Ireland's long history of folk medicine and faith healing:

(It hangs on by a thread, denser than thistledown,
 Reluctant to fly, a weather vane that traces
 The flow of cloud shadow over monotonous bog —
 And useless too, though it might well bring to mind
 The plumpness of pillows, the staunching of wounds,
 Rags torn from a petticoat and soaked in water
 And tied to the bushes around some holy well
 As though to make a hospital of the landscape —
 Cures and medicine as far as the horizon
 Which nobody harvests except with the eye.)

Lacking any practical use or beauty and native to Ireland's bog-land perimeters, bog cotton is justifiably defined here as her desert flower. However, viewed amid the temporal flux of cloud and shadow, the flower reveals to a receptive eye the immanence of a powerful healing force at work in nature. This fleetingly caught vision redefines 'the still unfocused' visionary insights of Longley's two predecessors, while complementing the destructive aspect of Nature that holds sway in their poems (both Douglas's desert flowers and Rosenberg's bloodstained poppies have their roots in dead men's veins). The poem need not spell out the connection between this curative vista and Northern Ireland's ills, but it may need to remind us that the natural world, once sacramental and instinct with signs of a reality beyond the visible realities, still holds a potent source of healing and consolation for those ills.

This insight, won from Longley's patient observation of the flora and fauna of the Mayo landscape and his studies in folklore and traditional folk medicine, suffuses his later work in elegy, affording a greater responsiveness to the dead and a new openness towards elegy's ancient tropes of consolation. The liberty this allowed, though moderated by Longley's characteristic distrust of extravagant claims and grand gestures, reveals itself both in the range and

confidence of his recent work in elegy, particularly in his *Gorse Fires* volume, where poems addressing the violence in Northern Ireland are complemented by elegies mourning the victims of Nazi persecution, tributes to dead friends and fellow artists, and a collection of elegies for his own parents.

Foremost among the later elegies related to the Troubles is 'The Ice-cream Man', a response to a pointless sectarian slaying on Longley's home turf, the Lisburn Road area of Belfast. It is a deeply felt and intensely private poem, one marked by the oblique angle of its approach and an unusual degree of reticence:

Rum and raisin, vanilla, butter-scotch, walnut, peach:
 You would rhyme off the flavours. That was before
 They murdered the ice-cream man on the Lisburn Road
 And you bought carnations to lay outside his shop.
 I named for you all the wild flowers of the Burren
 I had seen in one day: thyme, valerian, loosestrife,
 Meadowsweet, tway blade, crowfoot, ling, angelica,
 Herb robert, marjoram, cow parsley, sundew, vetch,
 Mountain avens, wood sage, ragged robin, stitchwort,
 Yarrow, lady's bedstraw, bindweed, bog pimpernel.³⁸⁾

The poem differs from the elegies in 'Wreaths' in being directed neither to the dead man nor his family but an unidentified addressee (later identified by Longley as his daughter, Sarah³⁹⁾). The minimal narrative the poem provides tells us little about the victim; instead, it recalls its addressee's delight in 'rhym[ing] off the flavours' of the ice-cream and her response to his death. Her grief is accordingly the poem's main focus and the business of comforting her the agenda of the long botanical catalogue which takes up the greater part of the poem. Recalling the cadences of her list of flavours and the bouquet of flowers she laid outside the shop, Longley's marvellously evocative feat of naming transports the wild flowers of the Burren to the streets of Belfast, and brings together 'verse and herb, plant and prayer' (Longley refers to the list as 'a wreath of words, a prayer of sorts') as a balm for her mind. Several of the plants listed have sedative or healing applications in Irish folk medicine but, as reading them aloud will confirm, the names have a soothing magic all their own and

the poem need make no grander claim.⁴⁰⁾

'Ghetto'⁴¹⁾, a sequence of short poems recalling the suffering in the central European ghettos (the focus, as in several other elegies in the volume, is on the suffering of children), reveals a similar concern with the healing or restorative power of words. The list or inventory is its characteristic structure, reflecting the reduced circumstances of the victims' lives and their need to take stock in the face of annihilation. Poem I sets the mood for the sequence with its bleak existential riddling, its intimations of the treachery of things and the words that denote them:

Because you will suffer soon and die, your choices
 Are neither right nor wrong: a spoon will feed you,
 A flannel keep you clean, a toothbrush bring you back
 To your bathroom's view of chimney-pots and gardens.
 With so little time for inventory or leavetaking,
 You are packing now for the rest of your life
 Photographs, medicines, a change of underwear, a book,
 A candlestick, a loaf, sardines, needle and thread,
 These are your heirlooms, perishables, worldly goods.
 What you bring is the same as what you leave behind,
 Your last belonging a list of your belongings.

Words are deceptive in a different sense in poem V, where lexical and syntactical ambiguities collude in the redeeming of time and the deliverance of the dead:

For street singers in the marketplace, weavers, warp-makers,
 Those who suffer in sewing-machine repair shops, excrement-
 Removal workers, there are not enough root vegetables,
 Beetroots, turnips, swedes, nor for the leather-stitchers
 Who are boiling leather so that their children may eat;
 Who are turning like a thick slice of potato-bread
 This page, which is everything I know about potatoes,
 My delivery of Irish Peace, Beauty of Hebron, Home
 Guard, Arran Banners, Kerr's Pinks, resistant to eelworm,
 Resignation, common scab, terror, frost, potato-blight.

Poetry's claim to nourish and sustain receives a preposterously literal twist in this dream-like fantasy of intervention. Words perform their magic before our eyes as the page we are read-

ing is conveyed into the hands of the ghetto's starving children, where as a poem about potatoes, a substitute for them (like the boiled leather of line 5) or, more absurdly, as 'a thick slice of potato bread', it is turned with hungry relish. What we see alters with each shift in the syntax of this tightly-packed, highly ambiguous single-sentence poem. Thus, the word 'turning' in line 6 is exposed to alternative interpretations both by the poem's delay in defining its object and its syntactical echo of 'boiling' in line 5. The loose grammatical relationship of lines 7 and 8 similarly energizes 'delivery', and though *logically* a simple list of names can neither relieve the children's hunger nor 'deliver' them from the grave, the sheer absurdity of the proposal is held in check by the earnest sobriety of the poem's tone. As we saw in 'The Ice-cream Man', the rhythmic ordering of particulars in catalogue form is an important means of encoding feeling in Longley's poetry, and his cataloguing here of 'everything' he knows 'about potatoes', his compassion deepened and authenticated by the analogizing of home-grown suffering (the Irish experience of potato famine) and his oblique endorsement of nature's curative potency, 'delivers', if nothing more substantial, a moving requiescat for the ghetto's victims.

Written while Longley was still struggling to come to terms with the initial impact of the violence in Ulster and its implications for his poetry, 'In Memory of Gerald Dillon', an elegiac tribute to the Belfast-born painter, was singled out by Neil Corcoran to illustrate the way Longley could rework to great advantage some of the traditional plangencies and consolations of the genre.⁴²⁾ The lifting of the painter out of death into life is achieved by a discreet blend of natural description and resonant metaphor, the afterlife envisioned retaining all the familiarity of a known landscape:

You walked, all of a sudden, through
 The rickety gate which opens
 To a scatter of curlews,
 An acre of watery light.⁴³⁾

Nevertheless, its feat of translating grief into consolation with no cost to its honesty distinguishes the work sharply from the earliest Troubles related poems in the same volume with their agonized turning away from song and solace.

Longley's most recent work confirms that he is still more at ease accommodating the tradi-

tional psychology, structure and tropes of formal elegy in tributes to friends and fellow artists than he is in other branches of the genre, and recent poems in this category — ‘In Memory of Charles Donnelly’, ‘Between Hovers’, ‘Sitting for Eddie’ and ‘The Pleiades’ — show significant resemblances in their approach to this early personal tribute. The first mentioned, and unfortunately the only poem there is space to examine here, mourns the death of Charles Donnelly, the Co. Tyrone poet who fought and died (aged 22) in the Spanish Civil War. It is paired in the same volume with ‘The Ice-cream Man’, thus providing a familiar Longleian nexus between different theatres of war and violence and the different effects of that violence on poetry.

The poem’s first stanza revisits the battlefield, compacting the vision won in Donnelly’s last few moments into his best-known line of poetry:

... time to pick
 From the dust a bunch of olives, time to squeeze them,
 To understand the groans and screams and big abstractions
 By saying quietly ‘Even the olives are bleeding’.⁴⁴⁾

Donnelly’s vision of a compassionate bond linking man and nature touches a receptive chord in his elegist, and he is rewarded with a special form of apotheosis in the second stanza:

Buried among the roots of that olive tree, you are
 Wood and fruit and the skylight its branches make
 Through which to read as they accumulate for ever
 The poems you go on not writing in the tree’s shadow
 As it circles the fallen olives and the olive stones.

Combining the ancient consolatory tropes of vegetal rebirth and installation as a tutelary deity, Longley resurrects Donnelly by transforming him into the tree’s wood, fruit and branches, where he becomes the *genius loci* of the scene.⁴⁵⁾ This modest form of transcendence (since based on the natural recycling of the body) is also extended to the promise cut short by Donnelly’s untimely death, for the poems he will ‘go on not writing’ will continue to ‘accumulate for ever’ within the compass of the same tree. That the creative gift can survive mortal detachment from the poet is a more challenging hypothesis, but one accommodated by Longley’s dexterous balancing of a natural explanation (that the eternally fruiting olive tree has

subsumed his talent) with a supernatural one (the spectre of Donnelly reading these self-created poems in the tree's shadow).

Dominating the family poems in Longley's recent volumes are two groups of elegies for his mother: 'The Third Light' and 'The White Butterfly' (in the supplement of 'New Poems' in *Poems 1963–1983*), and 'The Balloon', 'Anticleia', 'Icon' and 'X-Ray' (in *Gorse Fires*). Several of these poems draw on vivid recollections of his mother during her final illness or on happy experiences in her company during Longley's childhood. The response is loving and compassionate throughout and, with the single exception of 'Anticleia', they are significant for their untroubled reworking of standard elegiac tropes of consolation. It is thus the more surprising to learn from the painfully candid pages of Longley's autobiographical sketch that his relations with his mother from earliest childhood till close to the end were 'tense and complicated', and that the tender feelings enshrined in these poems are rooted in a history of estrangement. However, the memoir also shows how death became the means of clarifying their relationship and of erasing their shared burden of pain and guilt:

My mother died in April 1979. For about a year beforehand we both knew that she was going to die. I wanted to feel free to embrace her as I had embraced Lena [the surrogate mother who had nursed Longley in early childhood], and agreed to call with her every day for five minutes or five hours — for as long as both of us could stand it. Over several tumultuous months we lived out her childhood and mine. She gave me X-ray pictures in which the shadowy shapes of Peter and me curl up and tangle about five months after conception. ('Tu'penny stung for a penny bung,' my father had said.) She confessed that in the early days of the pregnancy she had attempted to abort us — or 'it' as we then were. I registered neither shock nor pain. Somehow this knowledge made it easier to hug her dying lopsided body. It was like a courtship, and I accompanied her on my arm to death's door.⁴⁶⁾

The first of these elegies, 'The Third Light', written in the months following his mother's death, finds Longley before an open family grave, officiating over his parents' reunion in a 'last bedroom' lined 'with mossy cushions and couch grass'.⁴⁷⁾ Apart from some mildly affectionate recollections of her domestic quirks and oddities, Longley stops short of expressing his feelings for his mother directly. Instead, by way of a shared reliving of another of his father's

war anecdotes, she is displaced by his father as the focus of grief:

You spent his medals like a currency,
 Always refusing the third light, afraid
 Of the snipers who would extinguish it.
 Waiting to scramble hand in hand with him
 Out of the shell hole, did you imagine
 A Woodbine passing to and fro, a face
 That stabilises like a smoke ring?

The poem thus creates an unexpected bridge to the elegies for his father yet differs from these earlier returns to No Man's Land in the part now played by connubial tenderness in defusing the nightmare, in ending the interminable replays with a ceremony of love. And, far from being an obliteration of identity, death is now celebrated as an affirmation of identity in wedlock ('I kneel to marry you again' echoes and resolves the terrifying compulsion to 'bury my father once again') and the grave honoured as a domestic space where his mother will be able to continue for all eternity her absurd last-minute 'spring-cleaning/ Of one corner of a shelf in his cupboard.'

The natural history of the butterfly had furnished Longley with a series of intimations of rebirth in his poem 'Entomology'.⁴⁸⁾ Now in 'The White Butterfly', based on a legend from the Blasket Islands ('how the cabbage-white/ May become the soul of one/ Who lies sleeping in the fields'⁴⁹⁾), it provides consolatory 'evidence' of his mother's survival beyond the grave. The recasting of this legend into dream weakens the fourth stanza, where the journey to an 'incandescent palace' seems to promise something grander than a resurrection in nature. However, Longley brings the poem to an effective close with the recollection of a moment of prelapsarian communion with his mother — elegy's conventional period of idyllic accord between the mourner and deceased⁵⁰⁾ — which serves both as a mirror for his loss and a prelude to her transcendental release:

When I asked you as a child
 How high should fences be
 To keep in the butterflies,
 Blood was already passing
 Down median and margin
 To the apex of a wing.

Flight, as an incidental component of its many bird poems and as a standard elegiac image of transcendence, figures prominently in the *Gorse Fires* volume, and in its dedicatory poem, 'In Memory of my Parents', anticipates the volume's central concern with survival beyond the grave:

Between now and one week ago when the snow fell, a bird landed
Where they lie, and made cosier and whiter the white patchwork:
And where I imagine her ashes settling on to his collarbone:
The tracks vanish between wing-tips symmetrically printed.

In the first of its mother elegies, 'The Balloon', dream affords a highly qualified vision of transcendence with flight reflecting the euphoric state of the dreamer. As in 'The White Butterfly', Longley apostrophizes his mother but, by a transposition of roles made credible by the oneiric framework, he now takes the parental part while she, described twice as 'a child in the dream and not my mother', looks up at him.

.... smiling and waving and running without a limp
Across the shallow streams and fields of shiny grass
As though there were neither malformation nor pain.
This is the first time ever I have seen you running.
You are a child in the dream and not my mother
Which may be why I call out from the balloon to you:
'Jump over the hedges, Connie, jump over the trees.'⁵¹⁾

In the dream's background lie memories of the crippled and abused childhood that his mother relived in the months before her death: memories now transmuted into this vision of wholeness and joyous release. Longley's quasi-parental role in the dream makes him a surrogate for his maternal grandmother, who died soon after his mother's birth (the reading gives an extra dimension of meaning to his shadowless floating above her head), allowing him to purge his actual relationship with his mother of ambiguities and guilt and substitute this idyll of unqualified love. But apart from healing breaches between the living and the dead, the dream also serves its stock elegiac function of opening a window on the afterlife: a radiant child-scaled world where his mother can run and vault the trees and hedges 'as though there were neither malformation nor pain.' However, that qualifying 'as though' is crucial to the poem's effect for, rather than affirming that death is not death but a liberation, Longley handles its

consolatory aspects with his customary tact and reticence and, by highlighting his reservations before the absurd logic of the dream, reminds us that the dream is just a dream.

'The Balloon' forms a pair with a very different version of the afterlife in 'Anticleia', the bleakest of the mother elegies. One of seven poems in the volume combining close translation with free rendering of specific episodes in the *Odyssey*, it recalls Odysseus's visit to Hades and meeting with his mother in Book XI of the epic. Longley's avoidance of proper names and discreet use of anachronism allow him to refashion the Homeric narrative into an otherworldly reunion with his own mother, but one that holds very little in the way of consolation either for her or himself:

And if, having given her blood to drink and talked about home,
 You lunge forward three times to hug her and three times
 Like a shadow or idea she vanishes through your arms
 And you ask her why she keeps avoiding your touch and weep
 Because here is your mother and even here in Hades
 You could comfort each other in a shuddering embrace,
 Will she explain that the sinews no longer bind her flesh
 And bones, that the irresistible fire has demolished these,
 That the soul takes flight like a dream and flutters in the sky,
 That this is what happens to human beings when they die?⁵²⁾

Unlike the early elegies for his father, those for his mother are sparing in biographical data and scrupulous in their avoidance of any hint of darker elements in his relations with her. However, here, under cover of the Homeric narrative, the tensions between closeness and estrangement in that relationship appear to find a correlative in Anticleia's avoidance of Odysseus's touch and his longing to exchange comfort with her in the unHomeric intensity of a 'shuddering embrace'. The love that was difficult in life becomes impossible in death and, augmenting the irony, dream and avian flight, the transcendental images of the earlier poems, now define the unbridgeable gulf between them.

'Icon', the third poem in the series, recalls how on the day Longley's mother died, the poem's unidentified addressee crouched over him protecting him with her shoulders and hair while her tears fell on to his face. The sexual intimacy of the scene (the woman is naked; God is a peeping Tom) gives an unexpected Oedipal twist to the son's grief, as it does to the oddly self-conscious acting out of the maternal and orphan's roles by the two lovers. The

poem's strange blend of the erotic and the elegiac is further intensified by Longley's recognition of his lover's mortality and by the lover-mother identification implicit in:

I could not believe that when you came to die
Your breasts would die too and go underground.⁵³⁾

The consolation derived from his lover's embrace, her hair and shoulders enclosing him like a womb, thus fulfils the unresolved longing of the previous poem, while preparing us for the uterine *mise en scene* of 'X-ray', the last in this series of elegies.

This final elegy is also the one most closely related to his autobiographical account of his mother's final months of illness. However, the poem differs significantly from the prose sketch and the differences illuminate the characteristic tendencies of this phase of Longley's elegiac work. In *Tuppenny Stung*, the viewing together of the X-ray photographs led to the startling confession from his mother of her bungled attempt to abort her twin sons in the early months of pregnancy⁵⁴⁾, a revelation which made it easier for him 'to hug her dying lop-sided body' and accompany her like a lover to death's door. Conversely, in 'X-ray' the context of the viewing is left unspecified: there is neither hint of his mother's presence nor allusion to her death, and the poem's reticence in this respect is reminiscent of the strategy of 'The Ice-cream Man', a work it closely resembles both in structure (4 lines of condensed narrative followed by 6 of listing) and in its private, coded approach to its subject matter.

The opening lines review with a clinically restrained wonder the monochrome details of the X-ray photograph: the play of light and shade, the distribution and normalcy (the poignancy here left unpointed) of the foetal bones, and the visual confirmation of a primal oneness:

I gaze at myself before I was born. A shadow
Against her liver and spine I share her body
With my brother's body.⁵⁵⁾

This gives way to a sudden release of tenderness, one concomitant with an abrupt shift of viewpoint to the darkness of the womb and a displacement of roles whereby the poet's unborn self plays folk physician to his pregnant mother:

I want her to eat the world, giblets, marrow,
Trips and offal, fish, birds, fields of grain.

But because it is April nineteen thirty-nine
 I should look up to the breasts that will weep for me
 And prescribe in the dark a salad of landcress,
 Fennel like hair, the sky-blue of borage flowers.

Longley's compassion here takes a similar course to that in 'Ghetto V', where again he undoes time to intervene directly in the sorrows of the past with prescriptions of nourishing words. However, the brooding imminence of the future in both poems (there, the known outcome of the Holocaust; here, the ominous date and the sorrows encrypted in 'the breasts that will weep for me') renders absurd the ameliorative project with its reminder that words can neither redeem time nor renegotiate our relations with the dead. Yet, as the elegiac genre has always known (and the poet acknowledges in 'Self-heal'), words *do* have a therapeutic potency for healing: setting forth a painful experience in language can help to ease the sufferer, and the pain that underlies this group of elegies is clearly related to his history of troubled relations with his mother. It is thus fitting that he should make a return in this last poem to his own starting point in the womb and affirm his relationship and love for his mother with an elegiac offering of herbs and flowers.

Longley makes excursions back to similar moments of loving relationship in the past in two poems for his father in the same volume. 'Northern Lights' recalls how his father once woke him from his sleep to reveal, Muse-like, the mysterious beauty of the northern lights:

Curtains of silk, luminous smoke, ghost fires,
 A convergence of rays above the Black Mountain.⁵⁶⁾

However, it is not the lights themselves but the preciousness of this moment of communion that endows the scene with its lyrical intensity and moving power. The empathy between father and son is elevated to a cosmic scale as it draws to itself the immense energies of the solar wind, while the beautiful imagery in the sky defines their magnetic field:

The northern lights became our own magnetic field —
 Your hand on my shoulder, your tobacco-y breath
 And the solar wind that ruffled your thinning hair.

Both the subject matter and the deliberate artifice of this short piece make it an appropriate prelude for 'Laertes'⁵⁷⁾, which, in a similar epiphanic moment, reveals the poet's artistic debt to his father. Based on Homer's account (in *Odyssey*, Book XXIV), of Odysseus's meeting with his father, Laertes, the poem combines free rendering with close translation of its source while, as in 'Anticleia', condensing the epic's more expansive narrative into a single lyrical moment. Free rendering again allows Longley to weave into that narrative details drawn from his own experience, among them, memories of his father working in his Belfast garden (Laertes' goatskin 'duncher', local dialect for a flat cap, gives one clue), and though the reunion described is a wholly fictional one, it clearly derives part of its imaginative authenticity from the testimony of his mother to the beginnings of his own artistic preoccupation with the act of naming:

Before she died my mother told me that when I was a toddler I used to go obsessively in the garden and ask what the names of the plants were. Since the age of about five or six I've been obsessively interested in birds, watching them and naming them.⁵⁸⁾

Both in the epic and in Longley's account, naming holds the key to Odysseus's identity. Yet it is in his treatment of the son's identification of himself to his father that Longley makes his most striking departure from his source. In the Homeric account, the moment of revelation arrives when Odysseus addresses Laertes and, to confirm his identity, itemizes and names the fruit trees and vines which he had claimed as a child. On the other hand, in the poem, sobbing in the shade of a pear-tree, the son longs to 'kiss and hug [his father] and blurt out the whole story', but held back by the realization that his story is 'one catalogue and then another' (John Lyon has observed in a different context that Longley seems to conceive of his life as an inventory rather than a story)⁵⁹⁾, he chooses to wait instead for images to come back from that 'formal garden' of

a childhood spent traipsing after his father
And asking for everything he saw, the thirteen pear-trees,
Ten apple trees, forty fig-trees, the fifty rows of vines
Ripening at different times for a continuous supply.

Upon which he is recognized by his father and the poem comes to a close with the tableau of their embrace.

Longley's reshaping of this incident may possibly have been prompted by the desire to bring the Homeric narrative closer to the actuality of his relationship with his dead father, to whom access was now only possible through deliberate acts of memory. However, it also allowed him to foreground the past as a source of epiphanic knowledge about himself. The elegy thus acknowledges Longley's debt to his father by revealing how these early visits to his garden set the seal both on his identity as a man and on the artistic preoccupations of a lifetime.

This study of Longley's work in elegy accordingly ends where it began in a poem to his father, one which measures the artistic distance he has travelled since his first ventures into the genre and which, like the legendary reunion the poem recalls, marks the completion of his own long-delayed homecoming. That journey has taken him from the self-conscious experimentation of his earliest elegies, which set up challenges to decorum while working *within* the generic conventions, to the insistent note of doubt and self-interrogation in his post-Troubles work. From there to the stern landscapes of the West of Ireland, where his witness to the presence of an immanent healing force in nature supplied a tentative source of affirmation for the poems to come. His return finally to the consolatory devices of formal elegy in his recent work has allowed him not only to extend the reach of his compassion but to restore to its proper place in the genre elegy's traditional role of comforting those in grief.

The course of Longley's voyaging along the coastlines of the genre seems also to have been guided by significant shifts in his orientation towards home and family, among them, the imaginative space provided by his home-from-home in the west and the emotional release afforded by the death of his mother. Moreover, it is tempting to find in the homecoming motif that permeates the *Gorse Fires* volume the resolution of that quest tirelessly pursued in his earlier family elegies for a stable base of identity. If so, it is one that culminates in the series of face-to-face meetings with his parents that provides the volume's emotional centre and in his loving recognition of the part they played in shaping him as an artist and a man.

Notes and References:

Unless otherwise stated, all quotations from Michael Longley's poetry are taken from his *Poems 1963–1983* (Edinburgh: Salamander Press; Dublin: Gallery Press; Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1986), abbreviated hereafter to *Poems*. The name of the volume in which the poem first appeared follows in brackets.

- 1) *Poems*, p. 49. (*No Continuing City (1963–1968)*.)
- 2) Dermot Healy, 'An Interview with Michael Longley', *The Southern Review*, vol. 31, no. 3, (1995), p. 560.
- 3) Neil Corcoran, 'Last Words: Michael Longley's Elegies', *Poetry Wales*, vol. 24, no. 2, (1988), p. 17.
- 4) Michael Longley, *Tuppenny Stung: Autobiographical Chapters*, (Belfast: Lagan Press, 1994), p. 40.
- 5) Neil Corcoran, *op. cit.*, p. 17.
- 6) *Poems*, p. 86. (*An Exploded View (1968–1972)*.)
- 7) Edna Longley, 'When Did You Last See Your Father?', in *The Living Stream: Literature and Revisionism in Northern Ireland*, (Newcastle upon Tyne: Bloodaxe Books, 1994), pp. 150–172.
- 8) From 'Letters', *Poems*, p. 77. (*An Exploded View (1968–1972)*.)
- 9) *Poems*, p. 48. (*No Continuing City (1963–1968)*.)
- 10) *Poems*, p. 86. (*An Exploded View (1968–1972)*.)
- 11) *Poems*, p. 133. (*Man Lying on a Wall (1972–1975)*.)
- 12) Dermot Healy, 'An Interview with Michael Longley', *op. cit.*, p. 561.
- 13) *Poems*, p.151. (*The Echo Gate (1975–1979)*.)
- 14) 'I'm neither English nor Irish completely and I like to think that is a healthy situation. It's out of such splits, out of such tensions that I write perhaps.' Interview with Dillon Johnston, *Irish Literary Supplement*, (Autumn 1986), pp. 20–22.
- 15) *Poems*, p. 199, (*New Poems*.)
- 16) Michael Longley, *Tuppenny Stung*, *op. cit.*, p. 7.
- 17) *Poems*, p. 48. (*No Continuing City (1963–1968)*.)
- 18) *Poems*, p. 86. (*An Exploded View (1968–1972)*.)
- 19) *Poems*, p. 150. (*The Echo Gate (1975–1979)*.)
- 20) *Poems*, p. 148–149. (*The Echo Gate (1975–1979)*.)
- 21) Michael Longley, 'A Tongue at Play' in *How Poets Work*, ed. Tony Curtis (Bridgend: Seren, 1996), p. 120.
- 22) Dermot Healy, 'An Interview with Michael Longley', *op. cit.*, p. 560.
- 23) Neil Corcoran, *op. cit.*, p. 18.
- 24) *Poems*, p. 84. (*An Exploded View (1968–1972)*.)
- 25) Peter McDonald, 'Michael Longley's Homes' in *The Chosen Ground: Essays on the Contemporary Poetry of Northern Ireland*, ed. Neil Corcoran, (Bridgend: Seren, 1992).
- 26) From 'Alibis', *Poems*, p. 105. (*An Exploded View (1968–1972)*.)
- 27) *Poems*, p. 74. (*An Exploded View (1968–1972)*.)
- 28) *Poems*, p. 133. (*Man Lying on a Wall (1972–1975)*.)
- 29) *Poems*, p. 127. (*Man Lying on a Wall (1972–1975)*.)
- 30) John Lyon, 'Michael Longley's Lists' in *English*, vol. 45, no. 183, (Autumn 1996), pp. 228–246.
- 31) The potent healing properties of these herbs in Irish folk medicine are left unstated.

- 32) *Poems*, p. 158–159. (*The Echo Gate (1975–1979)*.)
- 33) *Poems*, p. 163. (*The Echo Gate (1975–1979)*.)
- 34) Seamus Heaney, 'Place and Displacement: Reflections on Some Recent Poetry from Northern Ireland' in *Contemporary Irish Poetry*, ed. Elmer Andrews, (Basingstoke: The Macmillan Press, 1993), p. 143.
- 35) *Poems*, p. 134. (*Man Lying on a Wall (1972–1975)*.)
- 36) Keith Douglas, 'Poets in this war', *Times Literary Supplement* (23 April, 1971).
- 37) *Poems*, p. 167. (*The Echo Gate (1975–1979)*.)
- 38) *Gorse Fires* (London: Secker and Warburg, 1991), p. 49.
- 39) See Michael Longley, 'A Tongue at Play', *op. cit.*, p. 114.
- 40) For a full and stimulating account of the poem with different emphases, see John Lyon, *op. cit.*, pp. 241–243.
- 41) *Gorse Fires*, p. 40–43.
- 42) Neil Corcoran, *op. cit.*, pp. 16–17.
- 43) *Poems*, p. 95. (*An Exploded View (1968–1972)*.)
- 44) *Gorse Fires*, p. 48.
- 45) It anticipates in this respect the seven poems in *The Ghost Orchid* which are freely based on Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, among them, Longley's version of the story of Baucis and Philemon. The origin of elegy is thought to lie in vegetation rites, which frequently enacted the death of gods in tree form to ensure their resurrection.
- 46) Michael Longley, *Tuppenny Stung*, *op. cit.*, p. 11.
- 47) *Poems*, p. 200. (*New Poems*.)
- 48) *Poems*, p. 165. (*The Echo Gate (1975–1979)*.)
- 49) *Poems*, p. 201. (*New Poems*.)
- 50) I am indebted for this point to Jahan Ramazani's discussion of Heaney's 'Clearances' in *Poetry of Mourning: The Modern Elegy from Hardy to Heaney* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), p. 355.
- 51) *Gorse Fires*, p. 34.
- 52) *Gorse Fires*, p. 35.
- 53) *Gorse Fires*, p. 36.
- 54) Longley had already skirted this ground in 'Self-portrait' (*Poems*, p. 183), where his twin brother threatens him in the womb 'like an abortionist/ Recommending suicide jumps and gin with cloves'.
- 55) *Gorse Fires*, p. 37.
- 56) *Gorse Fires*, p. 32.
- 57) *Gorse Fires*, p. 33.
- 58) 'The Longley Tapes' (interview with Robert Johnstone) in *The Honest Ulsterman*, no. 78, (Summer 1985), p. 14.
- 59) John Lyon, *op. cit.*, p. 237.