

Musarum Sacerdos:

An Interview With Michael Longley

Michael Longley's *Collected Poems* appeared this autumn. To mark the publication of this gravely beautiful book – the record of four decades of a practice which has helped keep lyric poetry in English both necessary and alive – *Poetry Review* asked the poet to put it in context.

The sheer substantiality of this Collected Poems, set alongside the characteristic lucidity and concentration of your poems, seems almost paradoxical. So, despite the rehearsal of 1998's Selected Poems, it's all too easy to believe that the act of collection must have altered your relationship to individual poems. Is this, in fact, the case?

I trust that in their new format the poems are more lucid and more concentrated. As I put the collection together I became aware of each poem as it related to others, and tried to treat the book as one long poem. I wanted an arrangement that felt organic. But that kind of editorial self-awareness could wreck future poems, and is now fading away. For me, orderliness and creativity don't go together. My *Collected Poems* is hardly massive (about the size of a novel), and that's a relief. I find doorstep collections disheartening.

What was the editorial process?

I photocopied all the poems and then did a scissors-and-paste job, keeping more or less to the order of each volume, and compromising between the beauty of a poem per page and the ugly practicality of running on. I tried to save space and create it. Ideally every poem should have its own page. (The test of a two-line poem is whether or not it fills the page.) In the new arrangement I wanted to give all the poems, especially the short ones, breathing space. I then photocopied the resulting sticky pages, and commissioned Gerry Hellawell of the Seamus Heaney Centre for Poetry to word-process the whole lot according to my page design. With me at her elbow we further explored patterns and adjusted the arrangement. Finally, *Collected Poems* was beamed through the ether as camera-ready copy.

Do you have strong views in general about the after-life of poems?

In my preliminary note I say that “by and large I prefer not to tinker with

past efforts: this resembles denting cold metal that was red-hot in another life.” I have cut out nine poems, excised stanzas from four, and altered a very few titles. I can think of hardly any poets whose revisions are improvements. The Muse is offended by face-lifts.

At a recent reading, it was pointed out to you that many of your audience were in tears. The Welsh call a particular kind of longing, perhaps for an archaic sense of home, hiraeth. To what extent are you aware of – or intending to elicit – this kind of desire for an authentic return: in your readers or yourself? Is poetry, in other words, at all liturgical?

The main problem is how to be private in public. I try to lose myself by giving voice to the poems as straightforwardly as possible. (My favourite poet-reader is Wallace Stevens.) Self-awareness or, worse, self-importance would be fatal for any reading and for my long-term artistic health. Tears and laughter are natural responses to art. So I was pleased to learn that my listeners had been moved. I must forget about that possibility before my next performance, and let the poems speak for themselves. Yes, the poet is *musarum sacerdos*, priest of the muses, or he is nothing. With its deepest roots in ceremony, poetry is sacerdotal: it commemorates and celebrates.

Is your relationship to landscape changing, as a collective consciousness of climate change takes root? Does the countryside seem, for example, more fragile; is it increasingly important to memorialise it?

Even my earliest landscape poems sound anxious. Now my so-called nature poems are prompted by despair as much as by delight. We are making such a mess of everything. In Ireland we are methodically turning beauty spots into eyesores. I memorialise lovely places as they disappear. Poetry gives things a second chance, perhaps now their only second chance. John Clare says, “Poets love nature and themselves are love.”

Though you’re famously a poet of Carrigskeewaun, the townland in the West of Ireland which has been your second home for several decades, you’re also a poet of many other places: of Belfast, or of the death camps, for example. In Bartok’s Mikrokosmos, the miniatures encompass the composer’s musical world but are also progressively more difficult to play. Do you have any analogous sense of lyric concentration as a training, a discipline?

I have been going with my wife and children (and now grandchildren) to Carrigskeewaun for more than thirty years. It opens my eyes and keeps me

alert, I hope, to the nuances of locality. I view all other places through the Mayo lens. I couldn't have written about Tuscany without years of trying to read the landscape around Carrigskeewaun. In one of my Mayo poems I say: "Home is a hollow between the waves, / A clump of nettles, feathery winds [...]" The Famine-haunted fields remind me how provisional habitation is. And they help me to respond sensitively, I hope, to the desolation and abandonment of Terezin and Buchenwald.

One could imagine that "my Jewish granny" represents the sense of a joined-up world. Indeed, your Carrigskeewaun poems are frequently written to or from there (one thinks of the 'Letters' of An Exploded View; the distance from and closeness to the late poet's New York in your elegy for Kenneth Koch). Visitors and family come and go – in two beautiful new poems which end the Collected it's your grandsons who visit – as if meaning-making, even in lyric verse, were collective.

The central experiences in my life have been marriage and fatherhood and a few lasting friendships: naturally, these help to shape the plot of *Collected Poems*. But distant heroes and "everyday folk" also preoccupy me.

It pleases me that people come and go in my work. Poetry is communal as well as individual. Christopher Caudwell put it most profoundly when he wrote that "the instinctive ego of art is the common man into which we retire to establish contact with our fellows." And I love Donald Hall's definition of poetic tradition as "conversations with the dead great ones and with the living young." Poetry, even the most intensely lyrical, is unlikely to be a solo flight.

There's a particular sense that children make you vulnerable to the world in both the poems clustered round Gorse Fires's 'Ghetto' and – in another guise – in the earlier, almost-death-wishing and certainly Mahlerian, 'Kindertotenlieder'.

I worried about everything much more as each of our three children was born. Surely everyone's the same? And now that we have four grandsons, well... I have written a poem for each of them – prayer, spell, lullaby, modes evolved by our ancestors.

Strikingly, given the orthodoxies which currently surround writing from material place, you also situate poems within the Classical tradition. From the 'Altera Cithera' of An Exploded View to 'The Group', one of your latest poems, you signpost not so much classical myth as Greek and Roman writers

themselves. *Has writing 'after' such a tradition anything to do with diction, metre, prosody? Could you tell us a little about your relationship to a tradition (and wit – as in 'Damiana' –) which so unusually informs your lyric?*

When it comes to time, we are so parochial. Under the gaze of eternity Homer flourished only a blink ago. Ovid and Catullus are our near neighbours. Our civilisation is 70% Graeco-Roman (or more?). As an undergraduate I was obsessed with trying to write poetry and neglected my classical studies. In middle age I rediscovered Homer and, a little later, Ovid. Passages in the *Odyssey* enabled me to write belated lamentations for my parents and to broach nightmarish aspects of the Troubles. *The Iliad* is the greatest poem about war and death. Deep emotion and intellectual excitement draw me to certain passages which I feel compelled to respond to in an English version that “feels” like Homer (or Ovid). Diction, metre and prosody are far from being my main concerns. It is all much more uncertain and improvisatory and risky than those terms suggest. If this all sounds a bit long-faced, let me point out that ‘The Group’, for instance, and some of my other versions, are meant to be funny.

Could you say something about your musical influences, too?

I listen to music every day. It is central to my life. I have adored Sibelius since I was sixteen. But once I am concentrating, I have to turn such elemental surges down or off. The same applies to Mahler, Janacek, Berlioz, Ives and other favourites. Symphonic music burns up the oxygen in a small room. Sometimes I work with quieter sounds in the background - Angela Hewitt playing Couperin, Glenn Gould playing Bach's *The Well-Tempered Clavier*. The ghost of a third melody between left hand and right in Chopin and Schubert – I would love my lines to reverberate like that. Jazz (mostly from the twenties and thirties) can get me going – Bessie Smith's majesty, Fats Waller's combination of sunniness and subversion. I have wanted for years to write a poem about the white clarinetist Pee Wee Russell, but he keeps giving me the slip. I venerate the way he just about gets there after teetering on the edge of disaster. He makes me think again about what we mean by technique. Pee Wee lurks behind my line (from 'Praxilla'): "I subsist on fragments and improvisations." Although I know nothing about it technically, music means nearly as much to me as poetry. Listening to music and writing poetry connect for me at a deep level.

