

## *Treating Your Self*

Michael Longley, *Snow Water*. Jonathan Cape, £8 (pbk)  
Leontia Flynn, *These Days*. Jonathan Cape, £8 (pbk)

A couple of years back Michael Longley gave a reading at the Cúirt Festival in Galway. In the middle of the reading a member of the audience thought it an opportune time to question the politics of Longley's poetics in what amounted to a public heckle: "Why are you so bitter!" the heckler shouted. Longley replied simply and directly: "I'm not bitter. If you think I'm bitter, listen to this next poem". I don't remember what Longley read next, but, and here's the point, it could've been *any* poem in Longley's *œuvre* since Longley has never written a bitter poem. Among other things, bitterness requires an inflated sense of self and this is something Longley, for all of his use of the personal, avoids. Even at his most political—and I'm thinking of wonderful poems like "Wreaths", "Wounds", or "The Butchers"—Longley's poetry has been defined by a concern for the other which he expresses in a rather reserved voice, objective (but not detached) in observation, softly treading what can be contentious war-torn streets (be they in Northern Ireland, France or Troy).

Perhaps I've offered too much space to the knucklehead that inspired the anecdote; but it serves me since Longley's latest collection, *Snow Water*, continues to avoid bitter currents even as it focuses on what many of us might take to be life's undesired inevitabilities, ageing and death. In step with much of Longley's work—including his previous collection, *The Weather in Japan*, which won the T.S. Eliot Prize in 2000—this collection is a lesson, in fact, in what it means to appreciate, to be patient, to listen, to contemplate, to respond to what we've come to know as Longley's naturalist pleasures. Poems set in the countryside, mud flats, and spring tides of his adopted homeland, the west of Ireland, often make him seem a contemporary Romantic, recol-

lecting nature's bounty in the tranquility of short lyrics. If the title poem ventures into a more surreal Eastern sense of place (and mind), it also attests to the collection's preoccupations while revealing the tell-tale sounds of Longley's signature voice:

A fastidious brewer of tea, a tea  
Connoisseur as well as a poet,  
I modestly request on my sixtieth  
Birthday a gift of snow water.

Tea steam and ink stains. Single-  
Mindedly I scald my teapot and  
Measure out some Silver Needles Tea,  
Enough for a second steeping.

Other favourites include Clear  
Distance and Eyebrows of Longevity  
Or, from precarious mountain peaks,  
Cloud Mist Tea (quite delectable)

Which competent monkeys harvest  
Filling their baskets with choice leaves  
And bringing them down to where I wait  
With my crock of snow water.

The term "snow water" pops up a few times in this collection and there's usually something mystical about it: "Where is the holy water, the snow water for Job?" Longley asks in another poem. Longley's "request" here, however, makes it clear that it's not spiritual inspiration he's after but worldly inspiration. The "self" is the pre-ordained subject of the lyric and, if ever there were a case where one might abandon the idea that the "I" is a device, it would seem to be here. Significantly, his treatment of self is paradoxically one that makes him both the subject of his poems and yet not the subject of the poems. Just as Longley precisely "measures" and steeps his tea, he knows how long to keep himself at the forefront of a poem. Note how quickly he turns the reader's attention away from himself to sing the praises of various Chinese teas: "Silver Needles... Clear/ Distance... Eyebrows of Longevity... Cloud Mist". If it's not clear already, such riffs make it clear that Longley's interest isn't just in expressing his love of tea, but in lan-

guage (my Google search didn't turn up a tea, but various Chinese literary sources for the hairiest-sounding of the above). As is typical, craft is drawn attention to, but this is done without losing that most artful grace of appearing effortless amidst the "ink stains" of creation: the leisurely lush catalogue perfectly balancing the stingy reusing of the word "tea" in the first line. When Longley returns to the scene at the end of the poem he offers a postured presentation of self, someone resembling an ascetic monk whose modesty doesn't prevent him from satisfying his whim of both "choice leaves" and choice language. Sincerity (despite what the postmodernists say) still exists, and this is it, with just a touch of coyness to give the poem that right tone of transcendental reverence. In the last stanza, the real world is confirmed as one of surreal proportions and the life lived is one of "wait[ing]": for that perfect cuppa and that perfect poem.

In the context of this collection, I can't help but wonder if there's another perfect something that Longley is waiting for, namely death. This is a seriously morbid thought, and no doubt I'm imposing it on the poem, but since death gets such regular treatment it's easy to want to read these poems as all contributing to similar themes. However, I don't in the least mean to imply (or apply) a graveness to this collection. For Longley, death is of this world just as much as life, so contemplating it or conversing about it is as natural as talks about robins, otters and marigolds. Here's the beginning and the end of "Petalwort", for Michael Viney, a poem that's very much about the perfect burial:

You want your ashes to swirl along the strand  
 At Thallabaun—amongst clockwork, approachable,  
 Circumambulatory sanderlings, crab shells,  
 Bladderwrack, phosphorescence at spring tide...

.....  
 Let us choose for the wreath a flower so small  
 Even you haven't spotted on the dune-slack  
 Between Claggan and Lackakeely its rosette—  
 Petalwort: snail snack, angel's nosegay.

No poet makes better use of the catalogue than Longley, who rolls around in polyphonic words and place names with almost animalistic delight (Carrigskeewaun, Cloonagh-manah, and Dooaghty are other places that get regular mention). In the mid-

dle of this poem, he tells us “There’s no such place as heaven, so let it be/ The Carricknashinnagh shoal”. This is more of Longley’s desire to keep the spiritual close at hand, measured in concrete syllables and observations, as opposed to in some abstract netherworld where the afterlife reigns in abstraction. If one is tempted to think that death gets obsessive treatment to the point of acceptance in this collection (and, as one, I admit that half way through this collection I was tempted), the one poem that does venture into the netherworld tells us that this is not the case. As Achilles responds to the flattering Odysseus:

“Not even you can make me love death, Odysseus:  
I’d far rather clean out ditches on starvation  
Wages for some nonentity of a smallholder  
Than lord it over the debilitated dead.”

Ten collections over four decades means Longley has lived the life of the poet, and so it’s no surprise that so much of this collection explores the parallel relation between the life lived and the life written. If there are places where the images don’t really tell (or show) us anything new—“Can you spot my skull under the nearby roof,/ Its bald patch, the poem-cloud hanging there?”—in the context of talk about aging and death, one of the things that stands out is a light-heartedness which gets more space here than in other collections. Here’s a poem of one swift couplet for the relatively forgotten ancient Greek poet Corinna: “Have you fallen asleep for ever, Corinna?/ In the past you were never the one to lie in”. There are a number of elegies in memory of poet-friends, and, for the most part, Longley discusses getting old (and even dying) with grace—instructing Kenneth Koch to “Tuck your head in like a heron and trail behind you/ your long legs”—while maintaining that Michael Hartnett’s “poems endure the downpour like the skylark’s/ Chilly hallelujah, the robin’s autumn song”. It’s important to note that Longley’s accepted sense of life and death means that he’s no raving Dylan Thomas; instead, Longley makes the image not the rhetoric do the burning as in the collection’s closing poem, “Leaves”, when he personalizes the subject by thinking about his own “final phase”:

Is this my final phase? Some of the poems depend  
Peaceably like the brown leaves on a sheltered branch.

Others are hanging on through the equinoctial gales  
To catch the westering sun's red declension.  
I'm thinking of the huge beech tree in our garden.  
I can imagine foliage on fire like that.

To contemplate the final phase of one's poetry, never mind one's life risks self-absorption, but it's Longley's sense of himself as observer as well as his note-perfect display of craft that makes this so palpable: the trace of "descend" in "depend", the dropped simile beginning "Peaceably", the last metaphorical lines where Longley doesn't force the personal connection between the autumn season, life, and poetry, but "leaves" (every pun intended I think) the reader in the transcendental space connecting nature and the imagination.

Along with his sense of craft, it's Longley's ability to move beyond himself, as mentioned earlier, that I like in this collection (and Longley's work in general). In a book composed of so many personal poems about personal times with family and friends, Longley isn't so much interested in recording his life but in offering the reader a way to experience situation and scene. This opens up the poetry to explore the nuances of language, to capture the voice and tone of not only the word-maker but the words themselves. I can think of no contemporary poet who deserves to be read aloud so much as Longley: the formal sense of line turning with accentuation, the alliteration of sibilants in the exemplary poem "Snow Geese" getting caught up in the mouth: "I remember a solitary snow goose/ Among smudgy cormorants on the Saltees". In this way, lyric expression, in both song and meditation, ventures into the territory of anecdotal narrative, allowing the reader creative space as in this last poem I want to cite, "Primary Colours":

When Sarah went out painting in the wind,  
A gust blew the palette from her hand  
And splattered with primary colours  
The footprints of wild animals.

She carried home, "Low Cloud on Mweelrea"  
And "Storm over Lackakeely", leaving  
Burnt Umber behind for the mountain hare  
And for the otter Ultramarine.

What I like about this poem is the soft treading (over land and language): the casualness of formal diction, the inversion of syntax in the last lines drawing our attention to Ultramarine (and Burnt Umber for that matter) as not only colour but habitat. Longley's lasting donation to contemporary poetry may well be this: his ability to write an *unselfish* poetry of the self, inviting readers to experience miniature dramas.

Leontia Flynn's first collection, *These Days*, has been one of the big noise-makers of 2004. A recently selected Next Generation poet by the Poetry Book Society, Flynn's admirers include some of these islands heaviest hitters: back-cover blurbs are courtesy of Ciaran Carson, John Burnside, Tom Paulin, Lavinia Greenlaw, and, most glowingly, Michael Longley himself. In receiving this book paired with Longley's for review, there were lots of places where I might have found a comparative base, not least of which is the fact that both poets were born in Belfast. This, however, seemed rather too easy and also rather ill-conceived, primarily since neither collection really spends much time there (despite Flynn's inside cover's encomium telling us that she "writes about Belfast and the north of Ireland with a precision and tenderness that is completely fresh"). A more fruitful place to start then seems the similar territory of the short lyric.

Flynn's are domestic poems about growing up. They aim to express a sense of "walking somehow in shadow", into the unknown, to give expression to awe while simultaneously attesting to what amounts to inexperience: be it a child's discovery of a word, a daughter's appreciation of her parents, the dangers of the world (embodied in "that legendary man in the back [of the car] with the hatchet"), a young lover's disappointment at a break-up. The post-modern ethos has been described as one where we've learned to tolerate the anxiety of not knowing. It's the tension, of course, between tolerance and anxiety that makes self-reflexiveness interesting to those who aren't telling the tale. Too often, however, I can't help but feel that this collection lets itself down with a slackness of motivation and intellect: "But I don't know anything about anything/ and it feels almost like a festival time". Declaring that one doesn't know is *de rigueur*, of course, but if the reader isn't involved in the search to know, or likewise doesn't feel the tension involved in what it means to not know, then poems begin to defeat themselves. The awe that wants to be expressed simply gets negated when the writer tells



clauses that clog up the poem. Segregating dashes might have extended the rhythm and formatting of Dickinson or even Jorie Graham, but here it's done to the point of obscuring meaning. This in itself almost seems purposeful, since when one finally untangles the disruption, one finds the sentiment expressed rather derivative. Poets, of course, should ask questions they don't know the answers to, but all too often the questions posed have such obvious answers—what is the point? love is the point!—that I feel the writer is being disingenuous. The last lines only reinforce this:

Suddenly it's beyond me:  
how I'm turning my thoughts to the bird or two in the bush  
and to all the fish in the intervening sea.

I don't believe that this maudlin idea is "beyond" the speaker. The use of clichés, of course, can be telling in poetry when the language is being explored (or perhaps subverted), but conflating and convoluting the two here as a way of turning away from lost love, just seems easy.

Contemporary poetry is beginning to really value humour and there's a tongue-in-cheekness to this collection that tries to use humour to address ideas about the awkward experience of growing up. This has the potential to be fun, even charming, as if the writer is smiling at her own inadequacies. One of the more successful examples of this is a poem where a sixteen-year old speaker admits to a need to be noticed while simultaneously admitting to not knowing a figure whom her friend recognises, Seamus Heaney. Her wish to get due credit for reading a book Heaney compliments is evoked with a comical sense of ego but without self-satisfaction. When the punchline comes, it both surprises and yet seems a natural evolution of situation:

When I was sixteen I met Seamus Heaney  
outside a gallery in Dublin. I was with a friend  
who knew her way around better than I did.  
She was carrying Flann O'Brien's *The Poor Mouth*.

As I have it Heaney winked when he signed her copy  
of *The Poor Mouth*. He said: That's a great book.  
I ground my teeth: she hadn't even *read* it.  
It was summer: UV-haze, bitumen fumes, etc.

I had read *The Poor Mouth*—but who was Seamus Heaney?  
I believe he signed my bus ticket, which I later lost.

There's a fine line between a good joke and a bad one and if this poem's humour works, too often the attempts backfire. This can occur when the writing becomes glib, the puns hackneyed, as in the last line of a poem about a machine dependant alcoholic, "We move beyond the *pint* of no return" (my italics, though I don't believe I need them). It can also occur when the pun is extended to such a point that the overt attention to the clever use of language reduces the sentiment being expressed. One poem that begins promisingly exploring the issue of a man's place in a household of women—"Washboards and mangles... on my father's mind"—ends with "lunatic women/ putting one thing after another through the wringer". As a reader, this makes me feel as if I'm being constantly winked at, just to make sure that I understand what the writer is doing. Such affectation isn't just reserved for humour, but ordinary detail as well. Is it really important that the speaker refer to "my *Marc Chagall* calendar" in the title poem (my italics)? What does this tell us? That the speaker appreciates art? Or that, again, the speaker wants us to notice her cleverness:

These days I haven't time for people on television or aeroplanes  
who say "momentarily" meaning "in just one moment".

.....

These are the days  
of correcting the grammar on library-desk graffiti,  
the cheap, unmistakeable thrill of breaking a copyright law.

Yes, people today can abuse both public property and language,  
but the speaker's attention to her own literacy is tough to take.  
The poem ends:

These days I'm bowled over  
hearing myself say *ten years ago this... ten years ago such-and-such*  
like the man left standing, his house falling wall by wall,  
in that black-and-white flick blurring headlong into colour.

The writer of this book was born in 1974, making her thirty or just about thirty. To be "bowled over" by the fact that she's ten years

past twenty seems overwrought. Exacerbating this is the fact that the concern for “hearing myself say” something sounds (even if inadvertently) of self-satisfaction. One could make the case that if “these days” were remarkable they might justify the inflated concern, but in fact, we’re told the days are “unremarkable”. Even “unremarkable” days, however, deserve more than the reductive “this” or “such-and-such”. The vague use of language extends to the “man... in that black-and-white flick”. If the writer’s life was once black-and-white, it seems important to at least know why or how. The simile itself, of course, is dated (just as the expression “bowled over” is dated), and perhaps that’s the point. The poem begins, “These days, it seems, I am winding my clock an hour forward/ with every second weekend”. Expressions of time moving too quickly are hardly tolerated by pensioners; what to think of such an expression by a young writer? Poets need to be self-aware, even, to some extent self-conscious, but as this collection confirms, too much of one’s self and the poetry suffers.