

INTERVIEW WITH MICHAEL LONGLEY



by Sarah Broom

SB: *There was a gap of several years between Poems 1963-83 and Gorse Fires. What was going on for you poetically during those years?*

ML: I did try to write poems but they weren't any good. And—well, I'd stopped enjoying life. It was partly because of my job, in which I was increasingly unhappy. The middle stretch, as MacNeice calls it—the middle stretch is bad for poets. Poems tend to be written by young and old people. At least on the male side—it's more complicated again on the female side. A lot of women start to write when they've brought up their children. And I was in all sorts of internal turmoil—and perhaps I had nothing to say.

SB: *What brought you out of it?*

ML: I really don't know the answer to that. Well, the prospect of getting out of my job...

SB: *The job with the Arts Council?*

ML: Yes.

SB: *Why was that job difficult? Was it fulfilling in any way?*

ML: I did it for twenty years... I felt very privileged to work with artists and I enjoyed that part of it very much, but it was the bureaucracy, the office politics that got me down. And I'm quite sure that whatever the malaise was, I contributed to it myself. But at the time I was getting increasingly paranoid and depressive. My wife noticed that I wasn't listening to music anymore, which is a major part of my life. And it was—well, I hate to sound like a women's magazine, but it was a mid-life crisis, and I thought I was finished. But then there was some kind of relaxation. No matter how hard you concentrate on a poem, or how serious the subject matter, if you are not insouciant, involved but relaxed, you're not going to succeed. I mean, if you think what would happen if you thought about riding a bicycle—if you think too much about what you are doing—

SB: *You can't do it...*

ML: No, you'd probably fall off. It was an enormous release and happiness when towards the end of my forties and beginning of my fifties I started to write again. But what exactly brought about the cure, I don't know. I wish I knew, just in case it happens again.

SB: *Did the translation work—the process of adapting Homer—in Gorse Fires have anything to do with it? Can translation sometimes kick-start poetry again?*

ML: I think I had just about kick-started myself. But the translations were an enormous inspiration. The first was the Eurycleia one, the one about the old nurse (which doesn't quite work, I don't think). And then I was in Italy in about 1989 and I had a view from the bathroom window of this little villa of our friends, where we were staying, and I looked down to the bottom of the village and there was this octogenarian tending his flowers. I had a volume of Homer with me, and I wrote the Laertes poem which is also a lament for my father. And that was extraordinary. I really felt as if I had gone back into Homeric times, and I was part of a timeless Mediterranean scene. There was something very confirming in that, because the translation's quite free. Bits of it are me, and bits of it are Homer.

Then, I forget whether it was later that summer or in the following summer—must have been the following summer—we were in Mayo, in this very remote cottage which we go to in Co. Mayo, and the insight I had was that Ithaca must have looked very like this little secret part of Mayo, which is sandy and remote. And the little smallholdings, and outhouses... it seemed to me that Odysseus would feel perfectly at home there—if slightly cold and damp—in that sort of an Irish scene—the smallholdings, the outhouses and the whitewashed walls. But I've often thought that that part of Ireland—especially when it's in the middle of a heatwave, which happens about once every twenty years—looks like Greece. Or Greece looks like a dust-bowl version of Ireland. And that was my feeling—and at that time one of the things people were talking about was the Shankill Road murders. There'd been some dreadful killings and torturings in outhouses, very remote places like that. My physical circumstances brought to the surface, or brought to my attention, perhaps, that passage in the *Odyssey*—I think it's Book XXII—where Odysseus, with the help of Telemachus and the swineherd and somebody else, wipes out the suitors. And I had in the back of my mind the Shankill Butchers—I had in the back of my mind the sort of outhouses and smallholdings that would have been on Ithaca and which were reflected in the landscape of Ireland. And I sat up until about 7 o'clock working—I worked for almost 12 hours non-stop. I decided I

would just build it around a summary, I didn't want the whole thing, there were bits I didn't want. I wanted this headlong violent expression of something. Then I didn't quite know how to end it, and what to do. So what I did then was—I mean, it was a very bold stroke—I took the beginning of Book xxiv and Hermes leading the ghosts of the suitors down into the underworld. And again, I made it bog-meadows, and bog-asphodel, not asphodel. I hibernicized it. And when I'd finished, I was very frightened. I felt as though I had released something. And also, one of the things that bothered me about the poem was my hatred for various people on the Arts Council—this was how I would have liked to have behaved, to clean out the Augean stables. So there was a personal emotion in it. I think I would have been less driven to express myself through those passages in that way if I hadn't been angry and confused and disappointed, which was why I felt rather frightened. And I went into our bedroom and woke up Edna and said can I read you this, and she grunted, you know—but when I read it through she sat up shocked and excited.

And so, you know, the recovery of my balance or whatever you want to call it in that book, *Gorse Fires*, is intimately tied up with the Homeric thing. I had been a very lazy scholar at Trinity. Well, I did a lot of other things then. I taught myself to write poetry there, we had a mutual apprenticeship, Derek Mahon and myself. But I didn't open my books—hardly at all—so it wasn't until I was about 45 that I started to read Homer properly, and that was a revelation. And one of the things that had been irritating me was the praise lavished on quite a few versions of Homer, which didn't seem to me very good. Like Robert Fitzgerald's, which was praised to the skies by Brodsky and Walcott. Seems to me like polystyrene. Who else? Oh, I didn't care for the Walcott *Omeros*. I just thought it was a yawn, pretty boring. There's a new one out, which I think is really very good but whether it's poetry or not I don't yet know—Robert Fagles, which has just been published. He did the *Iliad* and he's just published the *Odyssey*. But I'm trying to do something other than what they're doing. I freeze-frame moments, like a painter. And I try to make the versions my own. I don't put "after Homer", because they're my own. And there are a lot of wonderful moments, which are a joy. Somehow or other seeing ancient Greece in terms of Ireland and seeing the Greek landscape in terms of the Irish landscape was important. A couple of years ago Edna and I were in a tiny little place in Co. Cork called Ballycotton, and we were having sandwiches and a pint—it wasn't a very good pub, but you looked down the hill to the little harbour. A tiny harbour, little fishing smacks, you know. It was a lovely, sunny day. And I looked down and said, look, that's the harbour at Ithaca. And I had had in my mind—since I'm lazy and love bed—the

moment when Odysseus makes himself a bed in the leaves, after nearly drowning. And I had the books with me. I had put them in a cardboard box in the boot of the car. I sat there and fiddled with the poem, which is about the contentment of bed when you're exhausted. That was important. Homer, in Ulster and Irish terms.

SB: *Could you describe your response to the heroic, romantic, epic character of the Iliad and the Odyssey?*

ML: Well, the *Odyssey* is (this is not an original insight) more like a novel in a way. A picaresque novel. Although it has great, resonant, profound moments. But it's a sequence of extraordinary adventures and each one says profound things about the "human condition". The *Iliad* is—in some ways I love the *Odyssey* more, but the *Iliad* is altogether darker and deeper—a huge lamentation, really, a painful exploration of war, a gigantic poem about death. And it is a challenge to separate out of what is essentially a Bronze Age sensibility, out of Bronze Age thinking and feeling, contemporary moments, moments which make sense to somebody living now. You know, the battle scenes, the descriptions of spears going through windpipes and men's bowels spilling into the sand—that doesn't really interest me very much. It's the little moments which seem to me very modern—well, I don't know about modern, but they glint across thousands of years. They could have been conceived yesterday. Hector's son being frightened of his helmet, the farewell. I'm very fond of that little poem...

SB: *The two-line one?*

ML: Yes. There are extraordinary things happening in that episode where Achilles goes to Priam to beg for the body of Hector. And again it strikes me as modern, as though a modern novelist was writing. Because underneath the text, the subtext is this shift of power between the great general, this macho man who's about one thousand percent testosterone, and the weak old king. And eventually it's the weak old king who's somehow or other, not exactly in charge, but the scales have tilted in his direction. And that's what appeals to me, rather than the heroic clang and clatter of swords and shields. And I'm not really interested in the gods, either. So it's those moments where I can feel myself as a modern little Martin Bell type war correspondent, all of a sudden walking around those battlefields and tents and houses, and feeling at one with the personalities.

SB: *One thing I find a bit difficult about "Ceasefire" is this whole sense of fate—the sense that "to do what must be done", as you say, applies in the Iliad and the*

poem to the fighting as well as to the reconciliation and forgiveness. Especially given that we know that the fighting does in fact continue. Can you say anything about what you feel about that sense of fate?

ML: Well, I mean, it's partly the way I chose to write that poem, and what got me going was that statement of Priam's, you know, "I get down on my knees..." It's not a literal translation or anything like that. But he says that at the beginning of the episode, and what made me think I might be able to do something with this extraordinary moment was the idea that—well, actually I could put that at the end of the poem and refer it back, which does make it all seem fated and so forth. And then I thought, well, if I can take three moments, three milestones, in this really quite long scene and make a quatrain out of each one I'll have a sonnet. Those were partly the problems. But that's a kind of fated thing too. The formal aspect of a poem is really just taking tendencies in the story or the raw material and tendencies in the language, and letting them interact in a way which seems to—I mean, if it's any good at all—to be preordained. You know, you really should have that feeling when you're looking at a picture, that it always existed; when you read a poem, you know, that it was always there, that it was just waiting for someone to remove the veils, and there it is. And then the whole thing had something fated about it, inasmuch as when I was writing it, it was at the time when there were rumours of an IRA ceasefire, and I wrote it partly because I do have some sense of the magic of poetry in the world—hoping that it would make some tiny, tiny, minuscule, unimportant contribution to the drift towards a ceasefire. And I sent it to *The Irish Times* and hoped that they would print it, in the hope that if they did print it somebody might read it and it might change the mind of one ditherer on the IRA council. And by coincidence the IRA did declare a ceasefire—I think it was a Thursday, and then on the Saturday the poem appeared, which was a coincidence. The coincidence struck people, and the poem... I mean, if you write the kind of lyrics that I write, which make their occasion in private—most of what I write makes its occasion in private, but this was a poem that had some kind of public life in as much as priests and politicians picked it up. I found that a refreshment. I was asked to read it when I went here and there, and what I should have said when I read the poem—but I didn't, you see, because I didn't want to put a jinx on the peace process—I should have said, of course, this is only a twelve-day ceasefire and the Trojan war resumes. And Achilles himself gets killed.

SB: *When you were writing the poem, how did you feel about the fact that it was just a temporary ceasefire?*

ML: I hoped that the ceasefire would—I mean, I just hoped against hope. You can't be fatalistic; it's important not to despair. But I did meet on the Lisburn Road a man who came up to me and said—it was about a year after I wrote the poem—and he said, "it was a good poem", he said, "but I wasn't ready for it. My son was a victim of a punishment beating, and he now has epileptic fits". He said, "I wasn't ready for your Achilles poem"—as he called it. So I've since written another poem, which is lopsided, about eleven lines long, and eschews the symmetries of the ceasefire poem. Just to take the argument further.

SB: *Going on to the Ovid adaptations, which are quite different in tone — humorous and ironic... How did you approach Ovid? And were you first inspired to use him by being asked to contribute to After Ovid?*

ML: Well, that's right, I was invited to do the "Baucis and Philemon" story by Michael Hofmann and James Lasdun, two bright young men. And I groaned, you know, and then I read the story, and it's just one of the loveliest stories in the world—it's so beautiful. And I'm interested in companionship between the sexes, very interested in the relationship between the sexes, and very interested in women. And I count myself very lucky, you know, being married to an extraordinary, intelligent, interesting woman. And we've been married for 32 years; it seems quite extraordinary that she hasn't seen through me—well, perhaps she has seen through me—that she hasn't got bored out of her mind by now. And that was going on in this. And then, I suppose, another thing was... well, the main strand of the story, the spectacular, miraculous metamorphoses are what people remember, but right the way through it Ovid has all these other little metamorphoses, the daily metamorphoses of ashes being blown into a fire, of raw meat being made into a meal—raw meat and vegetables. The old couple put down a grotty old cloth on a rickety bench and that becomes a throne for the gods. And that, you see, is what I think the art I love the most does—it transforms the everyday and shows the divine, something divine in everyday ordinary objects. I love Chardin—do you know his painting? He painted mainly still lives. Vermeer, you know. Or what Vincent van Gogh does with an old pair of shoes. And that transformation, that transfiguration of the everyday, that's running parallel to the more obvious, spectacular movements of the story. And I thought, well, I'll test it. And I've forgotten how many lines are in it but I translated it backwards. That was because the first thing that came into my head were my own lines about the nightwatchmen, which aren't there in the original. And I thought, well, I'll end it with that, and I'll see what the stanza length is by translating backwards to the first natural pause. And I thought, well, okay, it's five

lines, five-line stanzas. And then I translated it backwards, five lines... and the test would be, if when I got to the end I had a five-line stanza. If it had been three or four I'd have had to rethink the whole thing. But it worked. It was such a happy—it was one of the happiest things I've done, though it took quite a long time. And it's such a moving story.

And then I thought, well, I'm not stopping now, this is great. I read through the *Metamorphoses*, and thought, my God, there's another story! And I started to send them a version every three or four weeks. I ended up intoxicated with Ovid. And then I got very bold, and there's one where I combine the story of—you know, it's called "Ivory and Water"—it combines two of the metamorphoses. The woman who is changed to ivory, and then the woman who is changed to a fountain. I just jammed them together. The spiderwoman interested me because I have been interested in spiders for a long time, and especially—I forget which—there are a number of breeds where the male, in order to court the female, plucks the web, and he has to be very careful that he's sending out a message that says I'm your lover and not your dinner! And that's so spooky, as Dame Edna Everage would say. So that was part me, my reading over the years on spiders, which I just added to the Ovid.

And then there was... yes, the Phoenix one, I loved that, the way it works. What interested me very much about the *Metamorphoses* was that it begins—the story at the beginning is just as good, just as reverent and awe-struck as Genesis in the Bible. Then you have all these strange stories, and it ends—where you might expect something like the Book of Revelation—it ends in quite a Monty Python fashion, a humorous account of the teachings of Pythagoras. I think I must have left some out but I put most of that in. And then I have—I didn't acknowledge it, but I'm a great fan of Douglas Adams and *The Hitchhiker's Guide*, and one of his phrases is "the fundamental interconnectedness of all things". I slipped that in. That's a kind of a joke, saying that I think this is hilarious. When I read it, people sit and look serious, you know. And the joke is, it's terribly funny, it's meant to be very funny.

So there was an enormous release—it's one of the great books of the world. I really think anyone doing an arts course should be told to read in the summer (and just think of them as three novels) the *Iliad*, the *Odyssey*, and the *Metamorphoses*. A few things like that, you know. The Bible—selected bits out of the Bible. You see, when I was an undergraduate, and indeed a schoolboy, Ovid wasn't quite respectable, we didn't take him seriously; he wasn't to be taken as seriously as Horace or Virgil. So I don't think we read any of the *Metamorphoses* at Trinity. So this was a godsend—thanks very much Michael Hofmann and James Lasdun.

SB: *You said you weren't interested in the gods in Homer. Do you believe in God or any kind of spirituality?*

ML: Yes, I believe in some kind of spirituality...

SB: *You don't have to elaborate if it is too complicated.*

ML: Well, I don't want to be too private about this, you know. About three weeks ago I was with Edna and a dear friend, and we went round the battlefields of World War I—not all of them, I mean, we were in the Somme valley, and on Vimy Ridge, and at Loos. Charles Sorley was killed at the age of 21, at Loos. We visited the graves of Edward Thomas and Wilfred Owen. So I was feeling reverent, I suppose, in a strange sort of way. And in Sweden we were at Lund, about a week ago. In Lund there's a beautiful Romanesque cathedral—it's the Lutheran church—and there was a woman—she was taking, giving Holy Communion. And there were about ten people in this huge church, and a whole pack of kids at the back looking at one of those mechanical clocks. And Edna wouldn't go, Edna didn't, but I went up and took the sacraments, for the first time in about 35 years. And that was because of the first world war, and it was because a dear friend of mine had just died—she died of terrible bowel cancer. And another friend of mine who's a Methodist minister had stayed up with her for hours on end. She was a non-believer, but he was telling her how marvellous she was, how good a schoolteacher she was, how much she was appreciated, and he was reciting this over and over again. I heard from her husband that my friend was on his knees, for hours and hours on end. And that seemed to me Christ-like, and made me think that Christ was just the most perfect man—perfect human—who's ever lived. Or if not the most perfect, one of the most perfect. And that all the things one says in the catechism are beside the point—I mean, the virgin birth is a fairy story, and you don't have to believe in the resurrection of the body. But here was this most extraordinary genius—political agitator, revolutionary, poet, shaman, whatever. And he suggested that we should do this, you know, the bread and the wine. And since it was his suggestion it's worth doing. I have a sense of the sacred and divine in nature and in music and in poetry. I love the Lord's Prayer. There's not a mystical thing in it, is there? It's very practical. And the implication is, you know, that if you live honestly and straightforwardly and with courage you will attain some divine state, and I think that's what I believe. I don't believe in a personal God. But at moments of heightened perception, you know, in listening to music, in one's relationships, in times of sorrow, when you have two or three skins less—you do get intimations.

SB: *Was it a trip to Japan which let you come in contact with some Chinese or Japanese poetry which influenced The Ghost Orchid?*

ML: Well, no, I went to Japan in—I think it was 1991. But I had been interested in things Japanese before that, Japanese poetry, and especially Japanese wood-engraving and porcelain. And it was—part of it was a bit like going home. Here I get my leg pulled, and they think it's a bit effete to write about birds and petals and feathers. There I was reading my poems to people whose culture circulates around things like that. They have moon-viewing parties—you go and you just sit and look at the moon. And then when the petals are falling, you have petal-falling parties. So it was a marriage made in heaven, really. Then I met a few people that mean a great deal to me—they're people I keep in touch with.

SB: *You've only rarely chosen to draw on Irish mythology. Is that because of a lack of a long familiarity with it, or is it something else?*

ML: Well, it is to do with a lack of a long familiarity with it. I have written the odd one. There's a poem "Smoke in the Branches"—I like that sequence because it's gnomic, and I think I've forgotten what's going on in some of the images and stories. Which makes them resonate for me—when they mean something in ways that I can't quite explain. And then "On Slieve Gullion" is the Conor Mor story, a beautiful story about the severed head and all the rivers running dry, which was about our society becoming increasingly pitiless, it seemed to me. I find Irish myth a bit promiscuous in its stories and in its great swerves of plot and procedures. Of the two bodies of mythology, I much prefer the Greco-Roman one. But I'm quite sure I will return to Irish myth. I don't go to myths looking for poems. A poem has to be there. I believe that the poet's mind is like a woman's ovaries. There are only so many poems and that they're waiting to be fertilized, as it were. And it's the collision of a story you read with the residue of something that's happened to you, or an insight. And the two come together, not exactly by chance. Each one of the Ovid poems and each one of the Homer poems were discoveries in the same way as any other poem of mine is a discovery and a surprise. I love doing translation, and moving into that area, to see where it will take me; it's an exploration.

The Irish stories seem to me a bit over the top and chaotic. I am interested in all mythology. I'm reading some Finnish myths at the moment; that's partly because I am interested in Sibelius's music. I don't altogether warm to *Sweeney Astray*, but there are great stories there. When the BBC Schools Department here was really very good, I used to dramatize two Irish myths a year. And I used to make odd conditions. I'd say, I definitely

don't want Irish music. I said, I don't want us doing another BBC programme with an Irish myth theme that has Irish pipes and fiddles and harps, and all that clichéd crap. And I wrote one with a jazz trio in mind, that kind of mischievous thing. They were lovely stories, some of which got into the little poems which I compressed down. I just took the images and let them look after themselves, with nothing controlling them, really, except for the rhyme scheme—and that's how I wrote "Smoke in the Branches".

SB: *Do you speak or read Irish?*

ML: No.

SB: *Because you did some translations of Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill's poetry...*

ML: Well, that was done with her writing them out and providing the literal translations, and then slightly more polished translations, and she sent the poems to me, a few phone calls... and "Aubade" is considered by Irish speakers to be one of the best translations of her work. So it was jiggery-pokery! No, I've always wanted to learn Irish but you don't learn languages at my age! I've too many other things I want to do. You think I could? While I was in Sweden I thought, this is a beautiful language—I'd love to learn Swedish. So it's just wishful thinking really.