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Michael Longley and Birds

ABSTRACT

The following essay attempts to shed some light on Michael Longley's poems about birds, which form a fairly complicated network of mutual enhancements and cross-references. Some of them are purely descriptive lyrics. Such poems are likely to have the name of a given species or a specific individual representative of that species in the title. Others make references to birds or use them for their own agenda, which often transcends the parameters of pure description. Sometimes birds perform an evocative function ("Snow Geese"), prompt the poet to explore the murky mysteries of iniquity ("The Goose"), judge human affairs from the avian vantage ("Aftermath"), or raise ecological problems ("Kestrel"). Most of the time, however, Longley is careful not to intrude upon their baffling otherness. Many of his bird poems are suffused with an aura of subtle yet suggestive eroticism, a conflation of the avian and the amorous.

Keywords: Longley, Ireland, poetry, birds.

Michael Longley once remarked in an interview that he hoped that by the time he died, his work would “look like four really long poems. A very long love poem; a very long meditation on war and death; a very long nature poem and a playful poem on the art of poetry” (Longley, “As English”). This essay will discuss one subcluster of his nature poems, namely poems about birds. That the Irish poet entertains a particular fondness for them is fully borne out by his own words. Once he went so far as to confess to being “especially obsessed by birds” (*Five Points*). He even seems to believe that birds are bearers of a certain variety of transcendence in a disenchanted world: “And then, when I hear a bird sing, it goes through me like an electric shock. And these are the things that matter to me. And I would call that transcendental” (“Vitality”). It is no accident that his *Selected Poems, 1963–1980* feature a bird in flight on the cover.

Generally speaking, all of Longley’s poems on both animals and plants flow from a philosophy deeply rooted in respect for their irreducible otherness. According to Donna Potts, “Longley’s poetry consistently registers an awareness of the nonhuman otherness of nature, as well as a realistic acceptance of human position in the world” (77). This is also true of his poems on birds. There is a tough-minded tenderness and an open-eyed reverence for the natural world in Longley’s work, which remains alert to the pitfalls of postromantic sensibility. A Longley poem creates a space where animals need to have no fear of usurpations from the human world. What I have in mind here is not only the obvious question of ecological depredations but also the less tangible dangers of intellectual appropriation, which is but a misguided attempt to drag the otherness of animals down into the bathos of human affairs.

On the other hand, the poet knows very well that the symbolic value of birds has historically carried great weight, and he occasionally has birds appear on battlefields, where they seem to sit in a horrified judgment over the baffling follies of humanity. “Aftermath,” a remarkably concise one-sentence poem from Longley’s first collection *No Continuing City* (1969), is a case in point:

Imagine among these meadows
Where the soldiers sink to dust
An aftermath with swallows
Lifting blood on their breasts
Up to the homely gables, and like
A dark cross overhead the hawk. (*Collected Poems* 31)

The imperative which opens the poem is also the crucial word here since it implies that the hard work of forgiving must have its wellspring in

imagination. At the same time, it may also suggest that it will never leave the realm of imagination as this touching vision can only be lyrically expressed but never enacted in reality. To further complicate matters, one should not be too easily swayed by the deceptively lucid symbolism of the swallows “Lifting blood on their breasts / Up to the homely gables” as suggesting nature’s compassion or possibility of restoration. It is not at all clear whether the swallows should be construed as symbolic of forgiveness. Longley is no self-deluding romantic and the picture of nature in his work is fraught with manifold ambiguities which must not be ignored.¹ In this brief elegy, the swallows’ blood-stained plumage and skyward soaring may evoke a desire for reconciliation and ultimate restitution on a higher plane. They could even be read as salvific, almost Christ-like, emblems of vicarious suffering, but the sinister presence of the hawk circling above undercuts any tempting affinities between the operations of nature and the process of human healing.²

The poet’s own commentary on this early poem is rather mystifying. In his introduction to *Secret Marriages*, a collection of just nine poems published in 1968, Longley says the following: “I imagine the possibility of swallows breeding near a battlefield and using blood as well as mud to build their nests. On second thought this doesn’t seem quite so likely” (3). The first sentence comes across as grimly realistic, while the second seems strangely diffident and somehow subversive of the poem’s message. This comment may also soberly suggest that for the swallows the soldiers’ blood is little more than building material lying ready to hand (wing?). What is remarkable about this brief poem is that it activates a variety of interpretations without committing itself to any one in particular. What it clearly does do, however, is outline a space of loss with swallows acting as insignia of lost innocence.³

¹ This is the main thrust of Robert Welch’s essay “Michael Longley and the West.” According to Welch, Longley is often tempted by “the free-fall exhilaration of romantic vertigo” (57) but he never lets go of sober Protestant reasonableness.

² According to Tom Adair, the hawk ushers in “the sudden sense of skewed reality” (18), while Medbh McGuckian sees the predator “as reminiscent of the Angel of Death marking the Israelite doors” (216).

³ Needless to say, Longley has also come to be recognized as one the most important chroniclers of the political unrest which ravaged Ireland for so many years, as well as a compassionate advocate for reconciliation. About the former he writes most movingly in “The Ice-Cream Man,” where the onomastic gesture of naming flowers is meant to counterbalance the tragic death of the eponymous victim, while the latter theme gave us the exquisite subtlety of his famous poem “Ceasefire.” The bird poems discussed in this essay, however, have little relevance to these issues. Some of them address the problem of man-perpetrated violence but not in the context of the Troubles.

“Aftermath” reverberates against “The Choughs,” a poem from the 2000 collection *The Weather in Japan*:

As they ride the air currents at Six Noggins,
Rolling and soaring above the cliff face
And spreading their wing tips out like fingers,
The choughs’ red claws recall my father

Telling me how the raw recruits would clutch
Their “courting tackle” under heavy fire:
Choughs at play are the souls of young soldiers
Lifting their testicles into the sky. (CP 258)

With its daring admixture of the horrific, the aerial, and the erotic, this is a more complicated text. It is trying to address several issues at once, one of them being tacit commemoration of the poet’s father, who was wounded in the Great War. The startling association which gives the poem its strength stems from the visual resemblance of the birds in flight to the recruits clutching their “courting tackle” for fear of emasculation. Despite the horror of its historical occasion, the conceit is lighthearted enough; consequently, the airily incorporeal is provocatively matched with the crudely physical—it is not often that one sees “souls” and “testicles” occupying the space of a single sentence. While less sanguinary than in the previous poem, the final image is even more shocking. One hermeneutic possibility is to read these lines as registering a tragically belated apotheosis, whereby the soldiers are posthumously wafted up into the empyrean regions in all of their individual integrity, which comprises both the spiritual and the physical. Despite the self-confident aura of the assertion in the final lines (self-consciously flirting with the declarative banality of the alleged synonymy between the humans and birds), the choughs “are” the souls of young recruits only in the poet’s desire to see them as such; once again the healing is effected primarily in the realm of the imagination. The eye of the poet may discern certain similitude in the carefree pirouetting of the choughs in the sky and the tragic fate of the soldiers, but—on the strictly literal plane—the process of restoration ends there. It occurs only poetically, which somehow both negates and enhances the poignancy of loss. At the same time, the poem’s playful eroticism and associative audacity almost succeed in redeeming the manifold horrors of the trenches.⁴

In spite of Longley’s confession that he generally prefers to write about ordinary birds, “the blackbird, the meadow pipit, the skylark . . .” (*Five*

⁴ Barry Sloan remarks that “This elegy is not for his father but for the many young men who died in World War I” (105).

Points), there is no shortage of poems about imposing predators in his work. “The Osprey” is a perfect example of his (occasionally unsettling) fascination with unmitigated savagery:

To whom certain water talents–
Webbed feet, oils–do not occur,
Regulates his liquid acre
From the sky, his proper element.

There, already, his eye removes
The trout each fathom magnifies.
He lives, without compromise,
His unamphibious two lives–

An inextinguishable bird whom
No lake’s waters waterlog.
He shakes his feathers like a dog.
It’s all of air that ferries him. (*CP* 13)

It begins with a tongue-in-cheek formality, also mischievously wrongfooting the reader, as “certain water talents” mentioned in the opening line are precisely what the bird lacks. Moreover, to describe talents as “occurring” to an individual is to flout standard usage in the hope of raising poetic utterance to a higher degree of intensity. “The Osprey” is not a philosophically challenging or theologically charged poem. Nor does the poet yield to the temptation of turning the bird into symbol. Quite the contrary, he is careful to keep the mystifying otherness of the bird intact, unencumbered by questionable allegories.

As in many other avian lyrics, Longley is out to capture the unique inscape of the bird. The poem depicts the osprey (identified only in the title of the poem) as an inhabitant of two distinct dominions, feeling at home in both, even though it is the sky that is “his proper element.” At the same time, the amused bafflement signaled in the opening stanza does not blind the poet to the fact that the osprey is a bird of prey, and it is rather good at being murderously efficient. The truth is that the osprey is a perfect killing machine; its wings are adapted for maximum lift off the water so it can easily get airborne, clutching its prey. Bearing in mind the numinous majesty of the predator, it is hardly surprising to detect a hint of quasi-religious awe in the polysyllabic adjective “inextinguishable,” which is normally accorded to creatures of myth, such as the phoenix.

This being an early text, it flaunts its poetic credentials in a more emphatic manner than Longley’s later work, where his artistry tends to be less self-conscious. Here, the parachesis of the final lines works through

a meticulously woven web of consonants chiming off each other, while the verb “ferries” in the last line is enriched by the ghost of “carries” which would be normally used in the context (in the same way as “talents” in the first quatrain echoes off the ghost of “talons,” its curved claws being the sea eagle’s most dangerous weapon). Longley’s word pacts a more powerful punch as it suggests the lethal single-mindedness of the predator swooping down on its prey (the ocularly “removed” trout, the hapless victim wriggling for freedom, writhing in agony). It also heightens the musicality of the text, carried along by suggestive consonances and assonances, with the surprising “f” of the verb “ferries” ringing off the “f” of feathers in the previous line.

Perhaps this early text, which exhibits Longley’s preoccupation with avian cruelty, points forward to “Kestrel,” a puzzling one-sentence poem from *The Ghost Orchid* (1995):

Because an electric pylon was the kestrel’s perching
I wanted her to scan the motorway’s long acre
And the tarmac and grassy patches at the airport
And undress her prey in the sky and beat the air
Above grasshopper and skylark as the wind-fucker. (CP 210)

The poem is set in an environment in which man has left his ugly imprints all over the place. Most probably Longley is looking over his intertextual shoulder at the famous “Windhover” of Hopkins with a view to bringing out in sharper relief the difference between the Jesuit’s world and ours. Where for the Victorian poet the soaring kestrel becomes symbolic of mystical rapture leading up to God, Longley’s predator is a deracinated creature, whose native territory has been usurped by man. This is indeed a world where everything “wears man’s smudge and shares man’s smell” as Hopkins memorably writes in “God’s Grandeur” (Hopkins 66); it is a world where kestrels are forced to perch on pylons.⁵ A note of strangely menacing eroticism which enters the poem with the speaker’s desire that the kestrel “undress her prey” (the poet’s choice of the bird as female is already telling) later broadens out into the crudity of the kenning-like “wind-fucker.” This violent term is likely to give offence, but its use is totally legitimate, as it preserves the old meaning of the verb: “to beat, strike.”⁶

⁵ Stephen Spender’s famous poem about pylons is probably another intertextual echo.

⁶ On-line research reveals that “*Windfucker* is synonym for a kestrel, which was used as early as 1599, and giving rise to a variation, *windhover*, in the late 1600’s” (“Windfucker”). It should be noted, however, that Longley has separated the two

Normally, Longley is careful to write a poetry which is happy to accommodate all forms of alterity, but here the poet's munificence is sullied by a desire for some sort of commination. The fairly unpoetic initial word "Because" already indicates that this one-sentence poem will follow a logic of cause and effect, but its movement appears tortuous and baffling. It seems that the poet postulates that the falcon become a vengeful deity as if a measure of salvific brutality could somehow cleanse the man-wrecked world, the only "solution" being recourse to symbolic violence. What is significant is that its victim is not the actual human trespasser, but other non-human creatures, which are made to suffer vicariously instead of the real culprit. On the other hand, for all its murderous glory, the kestrel remains every bit as vulnerable as she is threatening. This is pointed up by the prevalence of industrial lexicon (electric pylon, scan, motorway, tarmac, airport), which is only tenuously counterbalanced by the natural imagery of the final lines.

Even when Longley writes about less glamorous fowl, as in the poem "The Goose," from his 1986 collection *Man Lying on a Wall*, he continues to be perturbed by the mystery of violence. In fact, as many commentators have noted, his entire work wrestles with the question of the ubiquity of violence in the universe. Where "Aftermath" shows what man can do (and has frequently done) to man, "The Osprey" confronts the problem of natural violence, "The Goose" shocks with a painfully exhaustive account of the suffering which man inflicts on lesser creatures. This disturbing poem describes in uncomfortably close detail the process of slow dismemberment of the bird.

In the poem, the male speaker is accompanied by a silent female who seems more squeamish than himself, but remains involved in the act of cruelty, furtively enjoying its fruits. The poem has an air of studied callousness to it; the consecutive stages of mutilation are performed in a deliberately protracted and chillingly detached fashion:

Remember the white goose in my arms,
A present still. I plucked the long
Flight-feathers, down from the breast,
Finest fuzz from underneath the wings. (CP 86)

The goose may be the "proverbial creature of dumb innocence" (Kennedy-Andrews 77) but the dumbness (both meanings of the word are relevant here) could not save it from pain, which the poem euphemistically

nouns with a hyphen, perhaps implying in this way that the natural communion between the bird and the wind is no longer possible. See also: <https://www.spectator.co.uk/2015/09/the-remarkable-discovery-of-roger-fuckebythenavele/>.

describes as a lingering “expression of disappointment” in the goose’s eye. On the other hand, the speaker appears less of a monolith than initially suggested as his hands freeze in a moment of guilty hesitation, his fingers reluctant to proceed:

It was right to hesitate before
I punctured the skin, made incisions
And broached with my reluctant fingers
The chill of its intestines . . .

Is this a sudden pang of conscience, a startled realization of the enormity of violence inherent in this otherwise “socially acceptable desecration” (Kennedy-Andrews 77) or is it more of a self-delighted deferment? Whichever it is, the grim session continues until the total destruction of the goose. At some level, the disembowelment is a ghastly mockery of birth-giving, especially when the speaker finds an egg hidden in the goose’s entrails: “Surviving there, lodged in the tract, / Nudging the bruise of the orifice / Was the last egg.” He goes on to “deliver it”—a word rich in suggestive semantic echoes, thus actuating various hermeneutic possibilities. But the male speaker is not going to shoulder the feeling of guilt alone, and the final line accentuates the complicity of his female partner: “We dismantled it, limb by limb.”

It might of course be argued that this variety of violence hardly qualifies as the disinterested malice of pure evil. After all, killing domestic fowl is a utilitarian action, resulting from our deplorable yet inescapable reliance on other creatures which must be slaughtered for food. At the same time, Elmer Kennedy-Andrews is certainly right to point up “an almost erotic thrill” (77) the male speaker derives from the power he wields; there is something deeply disturbing in the tone of self-conscious *jouissance* which pervades the text.⁷

The goose returns in a far more glorious context in “Snow Geese,” a poem from *Snow Water* (2004). Longley has often been praised for the careful arrangement of texts in his collections. The poem in question is paired on the same page with “The Pattern,” which precedes it. It is spurred into life by a chance finding; the poet is greatly moved on discovering a thirty-six-year-old “six-shilling *Vogue* pattern” (CP 294) of his wife’s wedding dress. It all happens on a day when snow has fallen, and the speaker is holding up the pattern against the opalescent “snow light.” In this way the poem is subtly gesturing towards its companion on the facing page. They share many similarities: both move between the past and the present, both

⁷ In an article reflecting on the influence of Ted Hughes on Michael Longley, John Redmond compares this poem to “View of a Pig” by Hughes.

contrast individuality against multiplicity, both are achingly nostalgic, both are intimately addressed, and both flirt with sentimentality without sinking into mawkishness. The second poem begins with a perception of distant snow geese, which are “So far away as to be almost absent / And yet so many of them we can hear / The line of snow geese along the horizon” (CP 294). This is followed by a surprising imperative addressed to an otherwise unidentified companion: “Tell me about cranberry fields, the harvest / Floating on flood water, acres of crimson.” Somehow the sight of snow geese conjures up a vision of floating cranberries. It would be tempting to go into learned disquisitions about one being the tenet and the other the vehicle of the metaphor, but they are never forced to merge: the whiteness of the snow geese and the redness of the cranberries remain distinct entities.⁸ Both are beautiful and haunting, but no elements are forcibly yoked together. One may surmise that the sight of the distant flock acts as a sort of Proustian alembic for the speaker, but the poem leaves us in the dark as to the details of the evocative alchemy that occurred in the poet’s mind.⁹

Where “The Goose” is likely to linger long in memory on account of the horrors it portrays, “Swans Mating” from *An Exploded View* (1973) shows Longley at his most lyrical. The best preface to the poem is Longley’s own commentary: “Swans Mating’ goes back to being a student at Trinity and walking along the canal at Dublin and sitting down and much to my amazement and delight, two swans came and did this amazing ballet which led to copulation. Now, the male swan, who’s the cob, he mounts the female who’s the pen so that she’s submerged. The moment of ignition takes place under water” (Longley, “Creative Minds”):

Even now I wish that you had been there
Sitting beside me on the riverbank:
The cob and his pen sailing in rhythm
Until their small heads met and the final
Heraldic moment dissolved in ripples.

This was a marriage and a baptism,
A holding of breath, nearly a drowning,
Wings spread wide for balance where he trod,
Her feathers full of water and her neck
Under the water like a bar of light. (CP 47)

⁸ In his perceptive analysis of “In Mayo,” Robert Welch has pointed out that “[t]here is no blurring of clear distinctions to evoke a rhapsodic blur” (62).

⁹ Perhaps another interpretative possibility would be to see this poem as tacitly addressing the problem of migration, especially painful for Ireland’s historical consciousness.

Simone Weil famously remarked that “[d]istance is the soul of the beautiful” (Weil 148), and this profound observation sets the philosophical context for the poem. The speaker is, at least in purely chronometric terms, removed from the scene of passionate love-making he is describing. The wistful invocation of another (probably female) person, who is otherwise only a vaguely intimated presence, serves to underline the passage of time separating the poet from the experience. It also shows that the sight of the rapturous congress continues to linger in his mind. Apart from that, the poem is graciously free from the weight of human affairs. This absence of human vantage allows for a language of delightfully lucent eroticism, as the intense moment of avian passion is recreated before our very eyes. It is most fortunate that Longley manages to keep in check any potentially intrusive commentary about the kind of effect that instance of evanescent eroticism had on himself. The description of the sexual act itself is accomplished with a compelling lyricism as language is moving towards a moment of near absolute unity with the thing described, and the poem is effortlessly carried along by its own lyrical momentum. Although religious idiom briefly intrudes at the beginning of stanza two, the poem remains a semi-pagan celebration of avian sexuality. The reference to sacraments may even suggest that the spontaneous love-making is a ritual which is its own justification. As Medbh McGuckian has pointed out: “The sacramental often intersects for [Michael Longley] with the natural world of begetting” (217).¹⁰

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There are also poems where hazy eroticism and elusive predatoriness interanimate each other. “Peregrine” from *Gorse Fires* (1991) is a case in point:

I had been waiting for the peregrine falcon
As a way of coming to terms with the silence,
As a way of getting closer to you – an idea
Above the duach, downy whirlwinds, the wind’s
Mother-of-pearl for instance, an eddy of bones.

Did the peregrine falcon when I was cycling
To meet you, swoop from the corner of my eye
And in and out of the culvert and out of sight
As though to avoid colliding with me–wings
Under the road, a blur of spokes and feathers? (CP 169)

The opening lines of the poem are reminiscent of Ronald Stuart Thomas’s religious verse; the Welsh priest-poet often describes waiting

¹⁰ Interestingly, in the poem “In Mayo,” written just three year later, swans are described as “married for life” (CP 89).

for the sighting of a rare bird as figuratively representing waiting for an inscrutable deity to reveal itself.¹¹ But Longley's poem strikes off in a different direction. Admittedly, at first the "you" of the first stanza could easily lend itself to a theological reading, and supporting evidence this could be marshalled with ease: the waiting itself, the peregrine falcon as suggestive of spiritual wanderings, the bird flashing into presence only for a second, glimpsed out of the corner of the eye, etc. They might all steer the interpretation towards the familiar paradigms of religious verse, but the disarmingly unpretentious action of "cycling / To meet you" clearly shows that the "you" of the poem is no deity. One may wait for God (or a god) to appear, but (most likely) one can never cycle to meet Him. For all its intangibility and symbolism, the peregrine falcon the speaker has been waiting for is a real creature of bones and feathers. Moreover, one should allow the reading to be vectored by the poem's barely tangible yet strangely suggestive eroticism. As Seamus Heaney once noted, Longley's is a poetry "of direct amorous address, its dramatic voice the voice of indolent and occasionally deliquescent reverie, its subject the whole matter of sexual daydream" (140). Rather than evoking the awesome divinity of R. S. Thomas's verse, the "you" refers to the speaker's (probably female) companion, while the peregrine falcon might act as an airborne envoi between the two. The possible role of the bird as a go-between begins as pure potentiality, "an idea / Above the duach," but assumes more specificity when the speaker thinks he might have seen the falcon swooping down and flying out of sight. Its momentary emergence fails to bring the speaker closer to this lover, as he cannot be sure whether he really saw the bird at

¹¹ "Sea-watching" is probably the most sublime example of this mini-genre of religious verse (Thomas 306). Both poets share a fascination with the avian, but there is an important difference. For the Welsh priest-poet, birds are often seen as the least imperfect symbol of the operations of the divine in the world, and numerous poems approach the mystery of divinity by dint of the ornithic. The religious vantage of this kind is almost completely absent from Longley's poems on birds. It is true that in her theologically-oriented reading of "Owl Cases," Gail McConnell argues that in the poem, "Longley makes more explicit his birds' divine symbolism and the Christological context for this iconoclastic sensibility" (160), only to conclude that "[a]s a symbol of the divine, *Bubo bubo* remains as distant and silent as Luther's God." I must confess that I find this interpretation less than compelling. "Owl Cases" is not really a poem about the divine. The difference between R. S. Thomas and Michael Longley lies in the fact that the Welshman's poetry often offers theological ponderings under the form of ornithological metaphors, while Longley's poem reverses such dynamics, striving to capture the unique inscape of the bird through various metaphors, one of which happens to draw on a theological trope.

all; in fact the whole of the second stanza is couched in interrogative terms. The sighting remains uncertain and fleeting—a mere blur of spokes and feathers.

“Goldcrest” from *Gorse Fires* (1991) once again rings a note of tender eroticism combined with discreet mourning for the minute creature (goldcrest being the smallest of European birds):

When you weighed against
 A dried-out cork
 The goldcrest, then buried
 The twelfth of an ounce
 Which was its eye, feathers
 And inner workings,
 Did you release, love,
 Among the tree tops
 The ghost of a bouquet? (*CP* 172)

Longley is careful to get the ornithological details right: the goldcrest is an astonishingly colourful creature of very small size. That he bids it farewell with the lightest of threnodies is only too appropriate given the diminutive dimensions of the dead bird. When alive, the goldcrest may indeed be mistaken for a highly motile bouquet, since its colorful plumage looks like a miniature armful of flowers leaping gaily about in the treetops. The rhetorical question which ends the little elegy offers a suitably restrained mini-coda. In Kennedy-Andrews’s words, “The rhetorical questions suggest the speaker’s appreciation of the delicacy and wonder of the natural world, and the tentativeness and incompleteness of his efforts to find a form to express these intuitions” (95). This produces a poem full of lyrical grace, while resolutely staving off the dangers of misguided lachrymosity. Finally, one should not overlook the subtly erotic subcontext conjured up by the simple appellation “love,” addressed to the speaker’s beloved, who is also the careful performer of the funeral rite.¹²

Longley is well aware that the blackbird is highly significant in Irish writing (particularly associated with a famous medieval lyric about Belfast Lough). It comes as no surprise then that the blackbird is a recurrent presence in Longley’s verse. To wit, the seventh section of the terrifying poem “Ghetto” (*CP* 188) consists of just one distich: “Fingers leave shadows on a violin, harmonics / A blackbird fluttering between electrified fences.” At first this reads like a koanesque stanza lifted out of Wallace

¹² It is perhaps of relevance that death is in many religious traditions described as release from the pain of living, but it would be far-fetched to pursue this line of eschatological speculation in the context of the poem.

Stevens's famously cryptic poem about thirteen ways of looking at the blackbird, but here the bird's aliveness is made to contrast sharply with the deadly machinery of concentration camps. Another example of a highly contracted, haiku-like poem, which features the blackbird, is "Thaw" from *The Echo Gate* (1979), where the thaw is metaphorically likened to "a bird with one white feather" (CP 126), perhaps alluding back to Edward Thomas's poem on the same theme.

Yet another example is a poem entitled simply "Blackbird" from *The Ghost Orchid* (1995):

On our side of the glass
 you laid out the Blackbird's
 sleepy eyes, its twiggy
 toes, crisp tail-feathers
 and its wings wider than
 the light from two windows. (CP 218)

This tender lyric invites a more symbolist reading (one ought to remain wary though, for symbolist readings are always fraught with the dangers of eisegesis). Once again, Longley's affectionate attention to detail, which shows his kindness to other life forms, is very much in evidence. The opening line is suggestive of some sort of limbus between two very different kinds of reality, even though its exact nature is difficult to determine. That the span of the blackbird's wings blocks out the light from two windows comes across as vaguely minatory, once more, however, its exact import can hardly be established. Perhaps the real afflatus behind the poem was a simple desire to record what happened, and one is doing the poem a disservice by suggesting a symbolist potential lurking somewhere in those relatively straightforward lines.

One of Longley's latest poems with an ornithic component is "Heron" from the 2004 volume *Snow Water*. The title is slightly misleading, as the lyric offers little in the way of ornithological exploration. The eponymous heron is not really a bird, but the figure of Longley's late friend, Kenneth Koch. Longley himself has thus explained the inspiration behind the poem:

My daughter, Sarah, has done a drawing of a heron for the new book, and I have a poem in it which is dedicated to the memory of Kenneth Koch, the New York poet. There's such a timing, I realized he died late last year, on the afternoon we were driving down to Carrigskeewaun, and because he was very tall and thin like a heron, I think of him as a guardian spirit. "The Heron" brings together Carrigskeewaun and Central Park, and that was all I could offer him, really. (*Five Points*)

This semi-elegy is addressed directly to the American poet. Longley invokes numerous birds (curlews, lapwings, sparrows, starlings) but it is the heron that he singles out as a kind of avian guardian to watch over the spirit of his dead friend: “You are so tall and skinny I shall conscript a heron / to watch over you on hang-glider wings, old soldier, / An ashy heron, *ardea cinerea* . . .” (CP 323). In the closing lines the Irish poet urges his deceased companion in a voice of movingly restrained pathos: “Tuck your head in like a heron and trail behind you / Your long legs, take to the air above a townland / That encloses Carrigskeewaun and Central Park.”

This essay has only scratched the surface of Longleyan ornithology, and it would be unwise of it to make any claims to conclusiveness. Birds appear in Longley’s work so often that only a full-length book study could hope to do justice to their significance.¹³ One of the most conspicuous features of Longley’s avian poems is their diversity, with birds appearing in a variety of different contexts. The poems which limit themselves to verbal portrayal of their object often embark on a quest for the Holy Grail of all descriptive poetry—finding the word(s) to evoke the thing itself in a language of such semantic transparency that it would positively efface itself in the process. On the other hand, even in purely descriptive poems, birds can easily be (and Longley is on occasion “guilty” of this) forcibly recruited into the ranks of handy symbols, which the poet may then use to ponder the manifold pathologies of humanity. But Longley’s poems are always salvaged by a sense of tentative unease, of deferential wonder, as if the poet knew that by discussing the human by dint of the

¹³ Here is a fairly comprehensive list of Longley’s bird poems (the page numbers refer to his *Collected Poems*): “The Ornithological Section” (8; for an insightful, though slightly theologically biased, reading of this poem, see McConnell 158-59), the mini-cycle “The Corner of the Eye” (49) consists of four short poems on birds (49), “Whistle” (97), “True Stories” (99), “Home Ground” (121), “Architecture” (122), “Spring Tide” (124), “Among Waterbirds” (155), “Humming Bird” (174), “Quails’ Eggs” (175), “Swallow” (176), “Aubade” (178), “Autumn Lady’s Tresses” (197), “Perdix” (201), “According to Pythagoras” (202), “Oasis” (210), “Phoenix” (220), “Behind a Cloud” (223), “Birdsong” (233), “Chinese Occasions” (235), “Sandpiper” (239), “The Lapwing” (243), “Pale Butterwort” (244), “Scrap Metal” (274), “Leopardi’s Song Thrush” (277), “The Musical Box” (277), “Pascoli’s Portrait” (279), “Birds and Flowers” (282), “Flight Feathers” (288), “Marsh Marigolds” (289), “An October Sun” (292), “Stonechat” (296), “Dipper” (296), “Robin” (297), “Snipe” (297), “Wheatear” (298), “Two Pheasants” (298), “House Sparrows” (298), “Owl Cases” (303), “Edward Thomas’s Poem” (307), “Montale’s Dove” (313), “Up There” (314), “Woodsmoke” (317), “The Wren” (328).

avian, he is in danger of degrading the delightfully irreducible otherness of birds to something drab and familiar. His lyrics on birds' courting and mating rituals form another cluster of poems; they are usually energized by a sense of baffled joy at the innocence of avian erotics. Being the exquisite lyrical poet that he is, Longley is always at pains to recreate the dazzling choreographics of birds' lovemaking. Another distinct group are poems which address themselves to the mystery of violence. These are invariably accusatory towards humans and forgiving towards animals, even when the text darkens with the presence of birds of prey. While Longley always abhors human brutality, he may write about avian predatoriness with untroubled delight.

At the end of the day, for all their kinetic eloquence and chromatic charm, birds remain largely elusive of definition or description, even given the generous pliancy of poetic language. Longley is well aware of this; rather than insist on unlikely affinities between the two realms, he cherishes the distance by not striving for a sense of familiarity between birds and bipeds. If some poems recount an anecdote of a chance meeting, the encounter rarely leads to engagement or intimacy. If one side happens to be enriched by the experience, it is most certainly not the human. But their robust alterity is exactly what the poet finds so alluring about birds. If they were more like us, the poet would not find them so fascinating.

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