

Poetry

CRITICISM

VOLUME

118

Poetry Criticism

*Excerpts from Criticism of the Works
of the Most Significant and Widely
Studied Poets of World Literature*

Volume 118

Michelle Lee
Project Editor



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Poetry Criticism

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Preface

Poetry Criticism (*PC*) presents significant criticism of the world's greatest poets and provides supplementary biographical and bibliographical material to guide the interested reader to a greater understanding of the genre and its creators. Although major poets and literary movements are covered in such Gale Literary Criticism series as *Contemporary Literary Criticism (CLC)*, *Twentieth-Century Literary Criticism (TCLC)*, *Nineteenth-Century Literature Criticism (NCLC)*, *Literature Criticism from 1400 to 1800 (LC)*, and *Classical and Medieval Literature Criticism (CMLC)*, *PC* offers more focused attention on poetry than is possible in the broader, survey-oriented entries on writers in these Gale series. Students, teachers, librarians, and researchers will find that the generous excerpts and supplementary material provided by *PC* supply them with the vital information needed to write a term paper on poetic technique, to examine a poet's most prominent themes, or to lead a poetry discussion group.

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- The **Introduction** contains background information that introduces the reader to the author and the critical debates surrounding his or her work.
- The list of **Principal Works** is ordered chronologically by date of first publication and lists the most important works by the author. The first section comprises poetry collections and book-length poems. The second section gives information on other major works by the author. For foreign authors, the editors have provided original foreign-language publication information and have selected what are considered the best and most complete English-language editions of their works.
- Reprinted **Criticism** is arranged chronologically in each entry to provide a useful perspective on changes in critical evaluation over time. All individual titles of poems and poetry collections by the author featured in the entry are printed in boldface type. The critic's name and the date of composition or publication of the critical work are given at the beginning of each piece of criticism. Unsigned criticism is preceded by the title of the source in which it appeared. Footnotes are reprinted at the end of each essay or excerpt. In the case of excerpted criticism, only those footnotes that pertain to the excerpted texts are included.
- Critical essays are prefaced by brief **Annotations** explicating each piece.

- A complete **Bibliographical Citation** of the original essay or book precedes each piece of criticism.
- An annotated bibliography of **Further Reading** appears at the end of each entry and suggests resources for additional study. In some cases, significant essays for which the editors could not obtain reprint rights are included here. Boxed material following the further reading list provides references to other biographical and critical sources on the author in series published by Gale.

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Glen, Heather. "Blake's Criticism of Moral Thinking in *Songs of Innocence and of Experience*." In *Interpreting Blake*, edited by Michael Phillips. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978. 32-69. Rpt. in *Poetry Criticism*. Edited by Michelle Lee. Vol. 63. Detroit: Gale, 2005. 34-51. Print.

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Michael Longley

1939-

Irish poet, critic, and editor.

INTRODUCTION

A member of the group known as the “Ulster Poets,” Longley, along with Seamus Heaney and Derek Mahon, is known for helping to revitalize Northern Irish poetry in the 1960s. The clarity and vivid imagery of his poetry have been praised by critics, who have noted the development of his work from rather conventional treatments of love and nature, to more politically engaged themes dealing with violence and chaos. The focus in his later poetry has been on the role of the artist in relationship to the events surrounding him, such as the political turmoil of Northern Ireland.

BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION

Longley was born in Belfast to English parents on July 27, 1939, and, along with his twin brother, received his early education at the Malone Primary School in a working-class district of southern Belfast. Longley then enrolled in the Royal Belfast Academical Institution, and in 1958 began studying the classics at Dublin’s Trinity College. He earned a B.A. in 1963, and while at Trinity, met his future wife. Longley worked as a teacher in Dublin, London, and Belfast for the next six years and then took a position as associate director of the Arts Council of Northern Ireland. From 2007 to 2010, he served as Professor of Poetry for Ireland. Longley is married to Edna Broderick Longley, a critic specializing in modern Irish and British poetry. They have three children and make their home in Belfast.

Longley’s awards include the Whitbread Poetry Prize, the T. S. Eliot Prize, the Hawthornden Prize, and the Queen’s Gold Medal for Poetry. He has been awarded honorary doctorates from Trinity College, Dublin, and Queen’s University, Belfast. He was knighted in 2010.

MAJOR WORKS

Longley began producing poetry in the late 1960s, publishing *Ten Poems* (1966), *Three Regional Voices* (1967), and *Room to Rhyme* (1968), a collaboration with Seamus Heaney and David Hammond. His first

major volume was *No Continuing City* (1969), a collection of his poems, primarily dealing with urban themes, from 1963 to 1968. *An Exploded View*, published in 1973, consists of shorter poems that are more personal than his previous work. Some critics consider the 1979 volume *Echo Gate* Longley’s most important work, as he began seriously articulating themes of love and war, using the natural world as a backdrop. War poetry had occasionally appeared even in the earlier *No Continuing City*, with “In Memoriam,” a powerful elegy for his father. After a period of literary inactivity, Longley published, in 1987, *Poems, 1963-1983*, a collection of his earlier work along with fifteen previously unpublished pieces, one being an elegy for his “Jewish granny” within the context of twentieth-century anti-Semitism. Longley’s real return to poetry, however, was not until 1991 when he produced *Gorse Fires* followed by the 1995 volume, *The Ghost Orchid*, which “signaled a new energy in Longley’s writing,” according to Fran Brearton. The critic maintains that “the two volumes negotiate both with each other, and with Longley’s previous collections.” In 2000, Longley published a number of new elegies in the volume *The Weather in Japan*, which earned the Hawthornden prize, Britain’s oldest literary award. His latest collections are *Snow Water*, published in 2004, and *A Hundred Doors*, published in 2011.

CRITICAL RECEPTION

Although Longley has been considered one of the three most important Irish poets of the late twentieth century—along with his contemporaries Seamus Heaney and Derek Mahon—his reputation has been overshadowed by the fame of the other two. In part, this can be attributed to the fact that he has been a less prolific writer, and in part to his devotion to a more “conservative formalism,” according to Brian John. John Redmond contends that “there is no doubt that Longley is a poetic conservative—his writing has been characterized by a constant reworking, rendering the same material over and over again with steadily increasing assurance.” Longley has gone through periods when he produced no poetry at all, most notably a four-year “silence” in the 1980s. When he resumed writing, claims John, “he broke away from the more extreme formalism of his earlier years and adopted a more relaxed, sometimes longer, line.” The poet seemed to find his own voice in the volumes he published in the early 1990s—*Gorse Fires* and *The Ghost Orchid*.

As a student of the classics, Longley has produced poetry that demonstrates the influence of classical poetry, particularly Ovid. Sarah Broom notes that Longley's references to the classics appeared in the early collection *No Continuing City* as well as in the three volumes that followed. *Gorse Fires* and *The Ghost Orchid* especially "demonstrated an extended engagement with such classical texts as the *Iliad*, the *Odyssey*, and the *Metamorphoses*." Broom reports that even in the 2000 volume *The Weather in Japan*, there are number of poems influenced by classical texts. She suggests that "Ovidian and other forms of metamorphosis and mutability are primarily seen as troubling and disturbing in Longley's poetry." She cites as an example the happy resolution of Ovid's story of transformation involving Pygmalion, which appears in Longley's "Ivory and Water." But in Longley's version there is no happy ending; the results of metamorphosis is "dissolution and loss." John Lyon, too, finds that although Longley has been classified as an "Ulster Ovid," his relationship with Ovid's *Metamorphosis* is one of resistance rather than agreement or accord. Examining Longley's poem "Metamorphoses," Lyon contends that "if this is Ovid, it is Ovid tempered."

Another major influence on Longley's poetry has been the work of Louis MacNeice, whose work he edited and introduced in a 1990 *Selected Poems* volume. Michael Allen has traced this influence, reporting that both Longley and MacNeice "displayed an immense range and variety of tone and voice from very early in their careers" and "both were slow to develop a single self-integrative and uniquely recognizable stylistic mode." Brearton notes that Longley's poetry "disrupts both the stereotypes of an 'Irish poet' and a 'Poet from Northern Ireland,'" as did the work of MacNeice. As a consequence both poets occupy a "place within critical debates [that] is often either non-existent or anomalous."

Longley's position in relationship to the political turmoil of Northern Ireland has been studied by a number of critics, including Lyon, who reports that the poet rejected the notion that violence and strife should provide inspirational material for a writer, or that any poem could provide solace to the victims of that violence. According to Lyon, Longley's is "an art which does not presume to do too much, an art which is cautious and reticent, refusing any very active role in the events it records and unwilling to make grand rhetorical claims about any ability to explain, justify, console or redeem." Despite such reticence, he wrote a number of poems about World War I and its parallels to the Irish "troubles" as they were called. James P. Haughey discusses Longley's war poetry and reports that he refuses to romanticize the death of soldiers as he "reminds us of our moral obligation to recognize the truth about violence." Brearton has also studied Longley's World War I poetry, noting that his work associ-

ates the involvement of Irish soldiers in the Great War with the violence and chaos in Northern Ireland in his own time.

PRINCIPAL WORKS

Poetry

Ten Poems 1966
Three Regional Voices 1967
Room to Rhyme [with Seamus Heaney and David Hammond] 1968
Secret Marriages: Nine Short Poems 1968
No Continuing City: Poems 1963-1968 1969
Lares 1972
An Exploded View: Poems 1968-1972 1973
Fishing in the Sky 1975
Man Lying on a Wall: Poems 1972-1975 1976
The Echo Gate: Poems 1975-1979 1979
Selected Poems: 1963-1980 1980
Patchwork [with drawings by Jim Allen] 1981
Poems, 1963-1983 1987
Gorse Fires 1991
The Ghost Orchid 1995
The Ship of the Wind: Eight Poems 1997
Broken Dishes 1998
Out of the Cold: Drawings & Poems for Christmas [with Sarah Longley] 1999
The Weather in Japan 2000
Snow Water 2004
Collected Poems 2006
A Hundred Doors 2011

Other Major Works

Under the Moon, Over the Stars: Young People's Writing from Ulster [editor] 1971
Selected Poems of Louis MacNeice [editor and author of introduction] 1990
Poems by W. R. Rodgers [editor and author of introduction] 1993
Tuppenny Stung: Autobiographical Chapters (autobiography) 1994

CRITICISM

Michael Longley and Dillon Johnston (interview date spring 1986)

SOURCE: Longley, Michael, and Dillon Johnston. "Michael Longley," in *Writing Irish: Selected Interviews*

with *Irish Writers from the Irish Literary Supplement*, edited by James P. Myers, Jr., pp. 51-63. Syracuse, N.Y.: Syracuse University Press, 1999.

[In the following interview, originally published in 1986, Longley and Johnston discuss the poet's background, his influences, and his thoughts on poetic form.]

I like to believe that in this very dangerous trade—and poetry is very dangerous—silence is part of the impulse, and one must wait for the muse. I do believe in the old-fashioned notion of inspiration. I don't think I've ever written anything without impulsive excitement, a sense of exploration, and the chill of psychological risk.

—Michael Longley

For poets, said Louis MacNeice, the middle stretch was the most difficult. Michael Longley recalls this advice in his 1986 interview. Undergoing his own personal transitions, Michael Longley came to Boston in May to give a major poetry reading at the national conference of the American Committee for Irish Studies (ACIS).¹ In 1985 he observed the publication of his collected poems,² and he anticipates in 1987 a popular edition of the same work by Penguin and Wake Forest University Press. While major anthologies—*The Penguin Book of Contemporary British Poetry* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1982) and *The Faber Contemporary Irish Poetry* (London: Faber and Faber, 1986)—honored him with copious selections and assertions that he was one of the major Ulster poets in whose shadow English poetry etiolated, he suffered a four-year period of poetic barrenness. Having begun a year-long sabbatical in January, he has already conceived a new series of poems based on a sojourn in a cottage in Mayo. Consequently, the May visit to Boston offered a special focus on an important literary career at midpoint.

Born in Belfast to transplanted English parents in 1939, Michael Longley and his twin brother, now a merchant mariner, attended school with working-class students in southern Belfast. He enrolled in the Royal Belfast Academical Institute before reading classics at Trinity College where he met his wife-to-be, Edna, and the poet Derek Mahon. After graduation, he taught in London and Dublin before taking up residence in Belfast where he exchanged early poems with Seamus Heaney, Mahon, and, occasionally, members of Philip Hobsbaum's weekly circle of readers.³ While Edna Longley lectured at Queen's University and developed a series of probing essays,⁴ Michael was serving as associate director of the Arts Council of Northern Ireland and writing five volumes of poetry: *No Continuing City* (London: Gill and Macmillan; Chester Springs, Pa.: Dufour Editions, 1969), *An Exploded View* (London: Gollancz, 1973), *Man Lying on a Wall* (London: Gollancz, 1976), *The Echo Gate* (London: Secker and Warburg, 1979), and *Selected Poems, 1963-1980* (Winston-Salem, N.C.: Wake Forest University Press, 1981).⁵

After the ACIS conference, Longley came to Winston-Salem, North Carolina, to help celebrate the tenth anniversary of Wake Forest University Press. On a temperate Saturday afternoon, above the sound of lawn mowers and arias, he engaged in the following conversation. [Dillon Johnston]

[Johnston]: May I ask you about your poem "*Wounds*" and the ending to "*Wounds*," particularly, because I think it has to do with audience?—the lines that read "shot through the head / By a shivering boy . . . / . . . / to the children, to a bewildered wife, / I think 'Sorry, Missus,' was what he said."

[Longley]: Well, I think it means "it is rumored," and also "I hope," and it's looking for some glimpse of humanity amid the brutality of that particular circumstance. But, of course, "I think" is more neutral than either of those and is intended to be.

But it's a kind of scrupulousness, a kind of attempt to be honest.

Yes, it's saying that if there is anything to be optimistic about out of this mess, I'm not going to overstress it.

The poem has sympathy for a number of people, including the "shivering boy."

Yes, it has. That was before the IRA campaign became even more brutalized. We are inclined to forget that a lot of people involved who are under twenty-five and even teenagers haven't known any other political circumstances except civil unrest. So it seems important to me to try and think oneself into their shoes, as it were, and to imagine how one can be so brainwashed or so angry or, in a sense, perhaps even so innocent that one can drive in a car and go into somebody's house and shoot that person stone dead. It seems important to imagine that.

Let's get to another subject of sympathy in the poem. The Ulster Division at the Somme,⁶ the trenches, the life that you imagine for your father's stories, the tales of the First World War?—what about that war? You've written about it a number of times.

Well, it was important to me to realize as a young man that my father was a representative of a generation, the remnants of a generation, that survived that nightmare. I suppose Europe is still recovering from the First World War. When you think of it, it was just the tatters of a generation that ruled Britain, France, Germany for many years—the Attlees, the Macmillans.⁷ Looked at from the next century, we will be thinking in terms of the fifty or sixty years war that began in 1914: there was a respite; it picked up again in 1939; then there was Korea and

Vietnam. It's been a long struggle, and the Edwardian dream ended in 1914; mechanized slaughter became the norm, and the world has never been the same since.

When you imagine yourself into your father's situation, to what extent do you have a sympathy for the English side of yourself, your English background?

That's unavoidable. From an early age, I think I was quite schizoid. In order to survive in the street I had to develop a Belfast accent, a rather severe one. When I went home, this would be modified for my parents, who retained their English accents and didn't find the Belfast accent very attractive. So, from quite an early age, I was recreating myself twice a day or more. I mean, I'm Irish, inasmuch as Ireland has provided me with most of the data out of which I make sense of experience, and I feel most at home in Ireland. But, of course, I was brought up by English parents. Part of the way I see things is bound to be of an English tinge. And, as I've said elsewhere, the result of being brought up by English parents in Ireland is that I feel slightly ill at ease on both islands. I'm neither English nor Irish completely, and I like to think that is a healthy condition. It's out of such splits, out of such tensions, that I write, perhaps.

There are other people who feel that same sort of division, Catholic and republican and people in the South who exercise another version of that.

No, I don't see how they would. I didn't enjoy the familial hinterland of a Seamus Heaney or a Derek Mahon. There were no aunts or uncles living around the corner. The family ended at the front door and was contained within that home.

Were there grandparents in England?

Yes, but I never met my father's parents; my Grandpa George was the only relative who crossed the Irish Sea to visit us in Belfast. He was a marvelously Dickensian cockney who taught ballroom dancing and was quite an exciting mix of vulgarity and refinement. He introduced me to things like pheasant and hare and tripe, and at the same time he had the coarse confidences of the master of ceremonies in a ballroom. But he was so different from any of my friends' grandparents. I was continually reminded, I suppose, that I was not quite the same as my playmates. I remember one of my friends who came from a strict Presbyterian household: when he came to play with me, he noticed the crate of empty Guinness bottles outside the back door and said, "Ach, the English."

Let me ask you about living in Belfast itself. Some of your best friends are poets or are connected with the arts generally. The community there cuts across any

*kind of line or forms a kind of model for a mixed society living more or less peacefully, aside from the row now and then at the Eglantine Inn.**

Yes, I think the artists of Belfast have imagined an ideal Belfast. Art does cross all the barriers and the frontiers, and it doesn't admit of borders. This has made life very rich for me in Belfast. Do you want to pursue that?

I think it was de Valera⁹ who said somewhat mischievously that Belfast is the most Irish of cities. In a way, that's not true inasmuch as Belfast is a creation of the Industrial Revolution and has more in common with Glasgow and Liverpool than with Dublin. But because of its tribal mix, it's the place where the antique European religious struggle is guttering out, we hope; it's the fag end of that religious war. And if that is so, and I believe that is the case, I would ask, who knows Ireland who does not Belfast know?

The community around Wellington Park Bar¹⁰ earlier and the Eglantine Inn, as I witnessed it anyway, includes a number of very good friends interested in poetry and art. What about the absence from that group of Paul Muldoon, who left in February for Dingley?"

Of course, his leaving leaves a big gap in my life. My two closest friends in Belfast are the critic Michael Allen and Paul Muldoon. It's not exactly a café culture in Belfast; there's no real literary pub like, say, McDaid's used to be in Dublin. I think that's because being reticent "Northerners" we all prefer the tête-à-tête to the group showoff around the table. Even with my two closest friends, we would meet in twos rather than a threesome. When I've seen Paul recently in Dingle, it reminded me of how much I was missing him in Belfast and how I used to enjoy very much the gradual conversational exploration with the help of alcohol down through the layers of the psyche until round about midnight you had reached the basement. [Laughter.]

It's called "soundings."

Soundings, indeed.

Would either Paul or Michael be readers of poems in draft?—not speaking of draft beer this time.

Yes, but the first critic of a poem that I write would be my wife, Edna, and she's quite hard to please; so I feel more confident about showing it to Michael Allen and Paul Muldoon. If those two like it and Edna likes it, I don't really care what anyone else says. Heaney and Derek Mahon used to be in that immediate circle of readers. I would send them poems through the post, but by that time the poems would have had the Good Housekeeping seal of approval from Edna, Michael,

and Paul, and there would be less urgency. I mean, I'm talking about those circumstances where you order the pints, and you sit down, and you nervously take a folded bit of paper out of your pocket.

At what point does your secret scratching in the den or wherever become something you share with Edna? When do you know that a poem is fairly finished?

In the early days I'd show it to her when I thought it might be finished rather than when I knew it was finished. She would say, "Well, yes, I like that, but that line's not right" or "that word's not right." And, of course, I would see that she was right; she has what I would call a very good ear.

It's agreed between Edna and me that she won't write about my work. Somehow or other, I think that would be improper. To quote Oscar Wilde, it would be like washing your clean linen in public although, naturally, I hope that my poetry has influenced her critical stance a little.

Is that reciprocal? Can we assume that you don't write your love poetry about her?

That's an interesting question. I suppose that my love poetry is addressed to what I grandiosely call the female principle, to the Gravesian notion of the muse.¹² It's written out of my experience of womankind, and, of course, Edna makes a big contribution to that experience. But when I read my love poems in public, I don't feel that I'm "undressing" Edna for others to look at. It would be bad love poetry if that were the case. If the artifact has any validity at all, it acquires an impersonal authority of its own. If I were a painter and I couldn't afford a model, I should feel free to paint my wife in the nude without people who came to look at the picture, rubbing their hands and thinking they were having a glimpse of my wife in the nude. They would simply be looking at a painting, and I hope the same thing applies to my poems.

Are there poems of yours that couldn't have been written by a woman?

I don't know the answer to that question, but I think that I am a very feminine man. I think that I see the world through the woman part of me. I feel the world through the woman part of me more than most men. If that is true, I suppose there must be some poems which one wouldn't be surprised to have discovered written by a woman.

Are there any poems of yours that couldn't be understood by women?

No; if that were the case, I think that they would be bad poems, and I would throw them out.

You're the combined arts director of the Arts Council of Northern Ireland. To what extent did those heavy responsibilities contribute to the period of silence from which you've just emerged?

I think it did contribute. There were other factors, of course, but to do that kind of job—and it's a very privileged job, really—to do that kind of job well, you do it creatively. But I also think of my vision of how I wanted the arts to develop in Northern Ireland: In my innocence, I thought I could rush that vision through. So there was a certain amount of tension in the job as I came up against—well, "vested interests" is putting it too strongly. Let's say that power gravitates toward the center, and in the arts world that tends to mean middle brow, middle class, middle age, middle of the road. I've been interested in a more profound involvement with the community than the Arts Council can manage at the moment. Therefore, my frustration took up too much energy.

Having said that, though, my job in the Arts Council is exciting, and I meet lots of interesting people. The silence was brought about by much more than just that. It might have been the male menopause. As Louis MacNeice said, the middle stretch is bad for poets. It might have been that I had nothing to say, and I think I do also move in manic-depressive cycles which last for long periods. I was in a depressive trough, but I've had silences before. I had a very long silence about 1968-70. I do feel, Dillon, that most poets write and publish too much, and surviving the silence—I should say the silences—separates the men from the boys. After twenty-five years of practice, one has acquired quite a lot of technique, and it would be very easy to produce forgeries that would fool other people and perhaps even fool one's self. I like to believe that in this very dangerous trade—and poetry is very dangerous—silence is part of the impulse, and one must wait for the muse. I do believe in the old-fashioned notion of inspiration. I don't think I've ever written anything without impulsive excitement, a sense of exploration, and the chill of psychological risk.

There must have been points when this kind of wisdom left you and at some discomfort from not writing.

Yes, it's a commonplace to say that every poet thinks of the most recent poem as possibly the last. That's only partially true because you know in the back of your mind when you've struck a vein. There's this enormous sense of confidence and, indeed, insouciance, which is an essential part of the enterprise. But it's when the block is prolonged that there's a loss of confidence which is very damaging, not just to the writer but in all other aspects of life as well. It's like having an itch and not being able to scratch.

Or a period of impotence.

Yes, it's exactly like impotence.

Not that we would know about that. [Laughter].

Having the equipment and not being able to do anything with it—yeah. Part of me had to say, sooner or later, fuck off to form. I got my sabbatical and then went to this cottage in Mayo for four or five weeks and lived entirely on my own. For the first ten days, I was trying too hard. Then I said, well, I'm just here to enjoy myself. Once I said that, the lines started to come, and in a sense what I'm saying through those more relaxed long lines is, "I'm just here to enjoy myself" within the shape of the poem.

There are clear signs that you have emerged from the period of silence, Michael. How long was it? Is that dangerous?

It was three or four years. I wrote one or two poems. I didn't have the appetite for it, and, as I said, I didn't have the confidence. The usual formal preoccupations were knocking me off balance, whereas in fact they are normally a part of balance and poise.

Can you describe what those formal preoccupations are?

Producing an organic form, a shape, which makes emotional, spiritual, and linguistic sense. Finding within the confinements of a shape the pulse of life, valid rhythms. I think that rhythm is what poetry is all about. When rhythm fails, the poem fails.

We're listening to a National Public Radio broadcast of Madame Butterfly. Among your new poems is a lovely tribute to her. When you recited the poem earlier, in anticipation of a Puccini afternoon, it sounded as if it was much longer than a six-line poem. I suppose that with pauses in the lines there are ways in which it is both six lines and something more extensive.

How can I say this without sounding presumptuous? Yes, I think that's one of the bigger poems I've written. I hate the confusion of miniature with minor, and I hope I have said extensive things within a small compass. I'm complimented to think that you're surprised that it's only six lines long.

You speak about these poems as if they're unbuttoned, and there is something a bit wild about the imagery and lovely turns. Is that related to the formal qualities of the poem, or the less trammled formal quality?

I once said that if prose is a river and poetry's a fountain, then the shape of the poem and the form of the poem are like the nozzle that forces under pressure the water into a shape that is recognizable as a shape

but is free-flowing and alive. The trouble in the past for me has been that the shape has become increasingly defined, perfected, so that at certain points in my formal explorations there's been nowhere to go. I've often thought sympathetically of the American painter Rothko,¹³ who as you know painted icons of color, three bands of color, and explored that. Even with the nearly infinite potential of that idea, the paintings got darker and darker until he reached the blank wall of a nearly black canvas. And he shot himself. But that's part of the risk of poetry. I do think that poetry is more complicated, more dangerous, than high-wire walking. Most people who call themselves poets would be dead if they were high-wire walkers; they'd have fallen off the wire. So technical facility seems to me of importance, but one can get to a certain stage where one becomes almost too capable, and I think that when you become too capable the darker parts of your psyche resist the facility and the result is silence. One has to go back to the beginning at certain stages in what one hopes is a long career and, as it were, learn all over again.

*Where all the ladders start?*¹⁴

Where all the ladders start, yes.

Thomas Kinsella and John Montague¹⁵ have both described a feeling of being boxed in and have found some relief in American models. Kinsella mentions William Carlos Williams as someone who blew some fog away for him. Do you read American poetry? and have you found poets here that you're particularly attracted to?

Yes, I read quite a lot of American poetry, and most of it I find is chopped prose.

Sounds like a delicatessen choice.

"Chopped prose." Yes, I like some of Williams, but I find it thin on my ear, not rich enough. I don't see how somebody living in a small island where the landscape changes at every turn in the road and where the fields are small and where the sky is low could write the same way as someone who lives on the prairies where the vista is unchanged for hundreds of miles. I'm against any notion of an international style. In the 1960s, the abstract expressionists' international style depressed me inasmuch as it was impossible to tell whether the painter was Italian or American or British. So I think that what I can learn from American models is limited. But I would very much hope that one day I'll be able to write some distinguished free verse like the great psalms of Theodore Roethke in the North American Sequence.

What about English poetry? Are there models and would you consider yourself equally separated from, or distinguished from, the English poet in this avoidance of international style?