# 'VESPERTINAL MIXTURE': MICHAEL LONGLEY'S *A HUNDRED DOORS*

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**Abstract:** Remembering, in some senses, is an act of reparation. What is it, then, to recount by name and number the creatures and the flora that populate the Hibernian landscape, in a time when the edges of the city are ever expanding? Almost as if in a gesture of redress, Michael Longley's most recent collection of poems, *A Hundred Doors*, reveals again his sustained and sustaining interest in landscapes not encroached upon by the urban. Why this pointed avoidance of the urban? In part, he is reinstating his relationship to the past, and to a kind of permanence, to the land that remains as people come and go. In my article I will examine Longley's relationship to the pastoral, to the landscapes that appear unbothered by human forms beyond his immediate family and friends. (Unlike Heaney's poetry, in Longley we find few if any accounts of laborers and farmers.) The pastoral supposedly represents a simplification of life (the *Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics* refers to it as "the complex" "reduced to the simple"). It is relief, but not simplicity or isolation, which Longley finds in the pastoral.

**Key words**: pastoral, eclogue, Irish poetry

"When I do count the clock that tells the time."
Shakespeare, Sonnet XII

Counting is something poets spend a lot of time doing. "Let me count the ways." Syllabic, stress, word, line and page – and these are just the mechanical and obvious elements. Lyric poetry is implicitly about time, the ticking of the clock, the soldier at the door. (It is also about time in its more mundane aspect: "I have measured out my life in coffee spoons"). Every word in a poem, then, should count. The *OED* offers several

definitions for "count," two of which I have already used: (from the Latin *computare*) "to calculate," and "to include in the reckoning."

My attention was drawn both to the word and to the act by Michael Longley's *A Hundred Doors*. As a word, it appears in only a few poems, including the first and the third to last, but as an act, it is insistently present. Other scholars, such as Peter McDonald and Gerald Dawe have drawn attention to Longley's propensity for list-making, a Homeric gesture. And *A Hundred Doors* is no exception: curlews, wrens, pipits, and merlins are all here in good number. But I observed that over half the poems in the volume – there are 66 – contain words that actually are numbers or numerical references (including references that indirectly suggest numbers on a clock: first, midnight, dawn). And these poems often contain more than one such reference.

Shakespeare's Sonnet XII is about aging, the physical changes the body undergoes. As is his wont, he compares the signs to a winter's landscape, the withered earth. Longley's volume performs a similar action, enlarging our awareness of time, its fleeting nature. When little time is left, we become acutely aware of the hours, the minutes even, the myriad sensations, experiences and visions the moments contain. There is a soldier at each of Michael Longley's *Hundred Doors*.

Feeling that breath on his neck, in this volume Longley ceremoniously hands over to the next generation a place and an era – not unlike Virgil in *Eclogue* IV, when he welcomes the newborn child into the bountiful and troubled world of the 1st century B.C.E.:

> Dear child, there will be new little gifts for you,
>
> Springtime valerian, and trailing ivy,
>
> Egyptian beans, and smiling acanthus, all

Poured out profusely from the untilled earth.

The goats will come back home all by themselves

Without being called, their udders full of milk;

The browsing herds will have no fear of lions;

Your cradle will be a cornucopia

Of smiling flowers blossoming all around you;

Nowhere will there be serpents anymore,

And nowhere plants in which a poison hides;

And everywhere the Assyrian spice will flourish. (29-31)

Virgil offers the boy what fertile bounty the earth contains: flowers, domesticated animals. Here is Longley's poem for his fifth grandchild, the first granddaughter, called "The Fold," written in lines that resemble in length the meter of enchantment, iambic tetrameter, but which do not offer any tight-locking end rhymes:

Why would the ewes and their lambs

Assemble as though hypnotized

Around the cottage? Do they sense

A storm on its way? Or a fox?

Darkness and quiet are folding

All the sheep of Carrigskeewaun,

Their fleeces lustrous, long wool

For a baby's comfort blanket,

For Catherine asleep in her crib

This midnight, our lambing-time. (14)

The poem's opening questions create a sense of mystery, heightened by the surprising consequence of the line break in "Darkness and quiet are folding / All the sheep […]." The gathering of the animals recalls another birth, at another time, but here we see the sheep (mothers and their children) surround the cottage like a "baby's comfort blanket," come to cocoon the newborn girl in their "lustrous fleece." As in traditional pastoral, threat, however, is not far away:

Do they sense

A storm on its way? Or a fox? (14)

There is a tension here between the unknown, what lies in wait, and the sweet innocence of the newborn baby girl. This dissonance is Virgilian. In "Et in Arcadia Ego: Poussin and the Elegiac Tradition," Erwin Panofsky writes, "In Virgil's ideal Arcady human suffering and superhumanly perfect surroundings create a dissonance. This dissonance, once felt, had to be resolved, and it was resolved in that vespertinal mixture of sadness and tranquility which is perhaps Virgil's most personal contribution to poetry" (300). Longley captures this sense of tranquility and wonder, which is also tinged with something else. The animals are on guard for some reason. (Virgil's lion has become a fox in Longley's account). Ultimately, the sense of wonder at the child's birth relieves the tension of his wondering what was going on at the beginning. This poem, like many of the others in the volume, represents a door as a threshold, a bittersweet passing down of this world – beautiful but troubled – from one generation to the next.

So how else does time feature in *A Hundred Doors*? Well, some of the poems literally take stock. Notice how prominent counting and numbers are in the book's first poem, made up of ten lines of rhyming couplets:

**Call**

Alone at Carrigskeewaun for the millennium
My friend sits at the hearth keeping the cottage warm.
Is it too late to phone him? Is it midnight yet?
That could be me, a meadow pipit calling out.
Otters are crossing from Dooaghtry to Corraguan.
There are mallards and widgeon and teal for him to count.
Three dolphins are passing the Carricknashinnagh shoal.
He has kept for this evening firewood that is very old.
Bog deal's five thousand years make the room too hot.
How snugly the meadow pipit fits the merlin's foot. (1)

The friend is "alone," and within the word "alone" is the word "one." The millennium is a count of years, the end of a sum. The speaker worries about the time, the count of the clock – is it too late to phone? A single meadow pipit calls out (and is the call of the pipit, or the speaker, or both, the "call" of the title?). "There are mallards and widgeon and teal for him to count." And "Three dolphins…" ("Three.." is the first line that begins with a strong stress). Even though the speaker isn't there, he is

counting, in memory, or in longing (imagination). The preserved pine wood ("bog deal") his friend burns in the fire is five thousand years old.

As I mentioned, the ten-line poem is written in (off) rhyming couplets. These rhyming pairs echo the rhyming pair of speaker and friend. Each line is eleven to thirteen syllables long – an average of twelve (a typical Longley hexameter). Every line contains a complete end-stopped sentence except for the first three; lines one and two are one sentence. Line three contains two questions, and then the pattern of one sentence per line emerges. The word "count" appears mid-poem and extends further out than any other word into the margin. One way of announcing an interest in – or urgency to – environmental situations is to keep a count of sightings of birds and animals that are threatened. By keeping record, the poem teaches but is not tediously didactic. Here the wildlife isn't overtly threatened by anything other than itself, the laws of nature: the merlin (small falcon) that will swoop down and capture the pipit in its talons.

The friend is someone who is keeping watch – of Carrigsweekaun and of the clock, as midnight nears, the turn of one millennium into the next, the crossing over of a threshold, just as the otters cross from Dooaghtry to Corraguan and the dolphins pass the shoal. The bog wood, preserved for five millennia, crosses over too – from wood to flame to ash. But the one thing that does not cross over is the speaker's voice on the telephone line. Instead it comes through in the poem, crosses over to the page, unspoken, so to speak. "That could be me, a meadow pipit calling out." Is he imagining the ring of the phone? Does this imagining lead him to envision what his friend can see and count? Even the speaker has aligned himself – he who usually sees and counts these things – with the friend, someone other to bear witness to this place sacred to the poet and his wife, at this ceremonious moment. If the speaker cannot be there in person to witness the turn, the change, he will imagine its happening. As Longley has

mentioned elsewhere, “When I can't sleep, I walk around it in my imagination.” (KELLAWAY)

The first dozen or so poems of the book include those written to each of his grandchildren (the first four were boys and then to everyone’s relief a girl, and then another, appeared). He counts them all. It is to them that he leaves Carrigskeewaun; it is to them that he shows and describes what he sees, releases his records. As readers of Longley know, Carrigskeewaun is a cottage in County Mayo where he and Edna have been holidaying for 40 years. He explains: “We can't take being there for granted. It can be cut off. We get there sometimes by stripping to our belly buttons and wading through the tide. We have it to ourselves which seems important, although I have introduced the grandchildren to it, so I must want to share it.” (Longley qtd. Kellway Web 2011)

It is worth nothing that “Marsh Cinquefoil,” the volume’s second poem, contains a number in its title – five-leafed – and refers explicitly to an event “twenty/ Years ago.” The fifth poem, “New Window” – which is one-sentence long, like 19 of the other poems in the volume – reads:

> Sitting up in bed with binoculars I scan
>
> My final resting place at Dooaghtry
>
> Through the new window, soul-space
>
> For my promontory, high and dry, Fairy
>
> Fort the children called it, rising above
>
> Otter-rumours and, now, the swans’ nest
>
> Among yellow flags, a blur of bog cotton,
>
> After feathers from a thousand preenings. (2)

To "scan" is to count syllables. (This poem contains lines of seven to twelve syllables.) The "preenings" number a thousand just as the doors of the title poem are a hundred. He lets go of a discernible rhyme pattern here. Longley has become more conscious of the dangers of overworking poems: "I am less formally obsessed now, more interested in what you might call shape." Looking at his "final resting place" we see him imagining the time when he crosses over, or at least the place he goes to – instead of an afterward or after life, we have "afterfeathers." (And now we understand how he could "see" the otters crossing and the dolphin passing in the first poem – he has binoculars!)

"At Dawn" imagines him disoriented from a bad dream. But the numbers he cites here – of swans – have a correspondence to the numbers of grandchildren:

> Wakened from a grandfatherly nightmare
>
> I sleepwalked around the cottage at dawn,
>
> Checking windows and wind-rattled gates.
>
> The westerly blew me wren-song, then
>
> Wing-music. Five swans creaking towards
>
> Corraguan Lake would have been enough.
>
> I have to imagine the sixth swan
>
> That was definitely there at the zenith. (6)

"Grandfatherly" suggests the nightmare was not too terrifying. Why does he use the phrase "I have to" in the second to last line? We learn in the following poem that

the sixth grandchild, the second girl, has arrived, and so he wants to pair the number of swans with grandchildren. The time of the poem is liminal, from the threshold of sleep to waking, from the imagined to the real. The zenith, the point of the sky directly overhead, is a measurement too. The word "zenith" appears in the next poem too; the stitching of a word from one poem into the next is a technique Longley often uses.

Committing oneself to the idea of the natural cycles of life is a way of coming to terms with one's death, making sense of it – to see oneself as part of a larger order, an order that has laws, regulations, an accounting system. Shakespeare does this – in sonnets 12 and 73, among others, and so does Longley. Meter is one thing that often provides a kind of sedative to the excitements of poetry by 'the co-presence of something regular.'" (Bateson 34-35). The shapes and lengths of Longley's poems are this "something regular" that gives the poems a predictable rhythm and provide balance for the distresses of loss, the pipit that fits snugly into the merlin's talons, the fox that startles the ewes and the lambs. Longley's poems have admirable order but are never dull – which reminds me of something Christopher Ricks has said about the difference between admiring a sunset and admiring a shooting star.

Shakespeare sees his legacy in the sonnets written for his friend; Longley in the figures of his grandchildren placed in the landscape of Carrigskeewaun. What is evoked, and evoked in the collection as a whole, is the preoccupation of Shakespeare's speaker in Sonnet 73:

> That time of year thou mayst in me behold
>
> When yellow leaves, or none, or few, do hang
>
> Upon those boughs which shake against the cold,
>
> Bare ruin'd choirs, where late the sweet birds sang.
>
> In me thou seest the twilight of such day

As after sunset fadeth in the west,

Which by and by black night doth take away,

Death's second self, that seals up all in rest.

In me thou see'st the glowing of such fire

That on the ashes of his youth doth lie,

As the death-bed whereon it must expire

Consumed with that which it was nourish'd by.

This thou perceivest, which makes thy love more strong,

To love that well which thou must leave ere long. (Web, 2013)

Pentameter and Latin decasyllabic lines have a correspondence. (In the book's first poem, "Call," the number of syllables in his ten-line poem approach (or add up to) the number of syllables in a sonnet). Shakespeare's poem is one of account, both taking account and recounting. He acknowledges his age, compares himself to a dying landscape. Longley's poems in *A Hundred Doors* make a similar acknowledgment. Death awaits this shepherd and he shows he is ready for it (in one poem he imagines the "ideal death," nodding off at a pub). Longley conjures up the guardian spirits of pastoral here: Virgil's *Eclogue* IV announcing the birth of a newborn. There is also a whisper of *The Aeneid*'s Bk VI, when Aeneas goes to meet his father, Anchises, in the Elysian fields, home of the 'good' people (poets, priests, patriots) where spirits tend to horses, chariots and wrestle and sing. *A Hundred Doors* offers this as a postscript:

meadowsweet

loosestrife

swaying along

the ditch

waiting to

cross over

at the end

of my days. (70)

Meadow, end of days and end of day – these things recall the pastoral. Virgil's *Eclogue* VI closes:

Vesper, advancing, bade the shepherds tell

Their tale of sheep, and pen them in the fold.

Sensing evening's – night's – arrival, Longley tells his tales, pens his poems in the folds of these pages.

These are, after all, landscape poems. Early pastoral espouses a love of place. Because of the localness of their lives, the shepherds, or those who sang through them, saw no need to name the place, to tether it with particulars. But contemporary poets resist generalization, being hauled into the great machine of category. Individuation is a virtue in modern poetry. Think about how Shakespeare's sonnet glances at no particular names: tree, bird, you. But the depth of feeling is great. (Or as Emerson says, he lives "from a great depth of being"). The beauty is the result of syntax (stately), meter (measure), image and rhythm. Longley cannot rest on these laurels won by another. His birds are wrens, pipits, merlins. His plants have names: fuchsia, heather, valerian, nettles, thyme. The unspecified yous (of Shakespeare, or the "boy" of Virgil) are the names in Longley of grandchildren and friends. With these marks of specificity he ties them to the earth, to the ground of the poems. But it is a bit like tying balloons

with long pieces of grass; inevitably they will flit and fly away. There is no staying even though it is what we all long for. Poetry is about this tension between the ideal (the sonnet, the decasyllabic ode) and the real: the people who live and die, flower and vanish, and bring us that vespertinal mixture that Virgil sings about, the good, the beautiful, or the sweet (*hedu*), as Theocritus has it, that must find an end. Its end is what defines and heightens its sweetness.

The pastoral supposedly represents a simplification of life (the *Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics* refers to it as "the complex" "reduced to the simple"). It is relief, but not simplicity or isolation, which Longley finds in the pastoral. For poets from Virgil to Spenser to Geoffrey Hill, the pastoral setting has offered some sort of redemption from life's ills. The pastoral elegy in particular provides a fertile setting in which serious questions about life and death can be raised, but no one solution is ever offered. Because the questions are posed in a landscape, where renewal takes place continually, regeneration is perforce implied. In Longley, fertility is in flora, fauna and in the appearance of grandchildren.

The Virgilian image of pastoral, according to Ellen Lambert, is that of "an enclosed and a besieged world. Death is admitted into the heart of the eclogue sequence (the fifth eclogue) but it is admitted so it may be vanquished" (LAMBERT, 1976, pg. 31). How does death enter Longley's pastoral realm? Does it find resistance? Here is a short poem called "Hawthorn:"

> Unsuperstitiously I snapped a hawthorn sprig
>
> And kept it alive in a mug of tap water,
>
> For it reminded me of one of his sentences,
>
> Bud clusters, the makings of snow in May,
>
> October sunshine, and a blaze of hardhearted

Haws on the original Aughawillan hedge. (64)

As in other poems in the volume, Longley makes a fascinating and emphatic choice here. The one elegized remains nameless but is kept "alive" through the vehicle of the poem and the image of the "hawthorn sprig;" what lingers, what is memorialized is the place name, Aughawillan, and the plant. It is worth paying attention to the end word in each of the six lines: *sprig, water, sentences, May, hardhearted* and *hedge*. Words that attend to the craft of writing ("sentences") and to the stuff of art, feeling ("hardhearted"), are embedded in a poem that enshrines the natural world.]

In his introduction to his translation of Horaces' *Odes*, David Ferry writes:

> The expectable has more than one function in art. It focuses our attention on performance; it provides recognizable configurations within which the unexpected can occur in interesting ways and in interesting kinds of tension with the familiar; it permits the artist to show how deep the familiar situation, theme, sentiment runs, how deeply it is founded on the truth, on what is commonplace because it is common to all of us. (*x*)

Ferry could be describing Longley. The expectedness of Carrigskeewaun, of poems that contain one sentence but extend over ten or twelve lines, the description of the flora and fauna of County Mayo, the grandfatherly speaker within this landscape; all of these "familiars" free us to focus on "the particular performance of the expected in any given poem, and to experience that performance in relation to others" (FERRY,

1997, pg. *x*). One of the great pleasures of reading Longley is to see *how he will do it this time*. It is nothing new for a poet to write a volume that bespeaks a keen awareness of time passing, taking account, taking measure of one's life as new lives come into focus. What is compelling is the manner of the telling. And telling or recounting is one of two final definitions of the verb "to count" provided by the *OED*; the other is to esteem or to regard (Robert Browning: "Must we count Life a curse and not a blessing?") – which does not seem out of place when discussing Longley. After all, praise counts for something.

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