

THE EDGE OF UTTERANCE

Louise Glück, Faithful and Virtuous Night, Carcanet, £9.95

ISBN 9781847774798

Michael Longley, The Stairwell, Cape, £10

ISBN 9780224101684

reviewed by Tiffany Atkinson

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Michael Longley once remarked that “most good poetry is written by young people or old people”. As readers embrace the 2014 ‘Next Generation’ poets for the freshness and promise of new voices, it is salutary to hear, from an older generation, a contrasting set of chords, whose force comes less from novelty than from the confidence and polish of decades of acclaimed practice. Glück and Longley are surely household names for poetry readers on both sides of the Atlantic: Glück, based in Cambridge, Massachusetts, lists among her many accolades the Pulitzer Prize and the twelfth U.S. Laureateship, while Longley, longtime resident of Belfast, has, among multiple honours, been awarded the T.S. Eliot Prize and the Queen’s Gold Medal for Poetry. These are respectively their thirteenth and tenth collections, and they share an elegiac tone, through which is folded a sense of wonder at both the observed and felt worlds, and the silences at the edge of utterance.

Faithful and Virtuous Night follows the 2012 publication of Glück’s *Poems 1962-2012*. The new collection marks an energetic shift in mode from what has become a distinctive and celebrated mytho-poetic lyricism towards a looser, more freely associative narrative form that takes the measure of an artist’s life through a series of dreamlike nocturnal fragments. The monologues are mostly spoken by an ageing painter, a pilgrim figure “entering the kingdom of death”, giving rise to nothing so literal as a life-story but, as the opening poem suggests, a parable, or parabolic shape: “behold how we have aged, traveling / from day to night only, neither forward nor sideward, and this seemed / in a strange way miraculous”.

The gnomic diction of the opening poem sets the tone for the collection’s often long-breathed and meditative lines, which in themselves create a sense of dreamy incompleteness – a formal enacting of what Glück has described as the “feeling around in darkness” aspect of the creative process, mirrored in the artist’s efforts to glean meaningful shape from a life’s vicissitudes. The book’s

name, for example, comes from the speaker's suggestive mishearing of the Arthurian title his brother is reading on the very night their parents – “sitting on the white clouds in their white travel outfits” – are killed in a car accident. The artist's own quest is thence bound not just homophonically, but thematically, with night, and each poem examines associated dialectics between dark and light, silence and utterance, chaos and form. Inadvertent crystallisations of significance are part of an artistic destiny, of course, but creative maturity, this work suggests, involves shaking off passive fatalism as “the adolescence of the mind, perhaps” and owning that, over a lifetime, creative process is about choices – not always very conscious ones, but choices nonetheless, “as when, for example, the murderer pulls the trigger”. The artist, and maybe even Glück herself, is pulled increasingly towards the suggestiveness of negative form: silences, stillness, blankness. We are unsurprised to learn that he crowns his life's work with a series of “immense and entirely white” canvases – a clichéd analogy perhaps, but one that probes the ambivalence of absence as a signifier, which may be anything between sterile perfectionism and the “stepchild of the sublime”, between inarticulacy and the expressivity of “sharply worded silences”. This dimension of the collection is avowedly ruminative, and may be frustrating to the reader who prefers milder demonstrations of negative capability, or a less abstracted examination of self. But the collection is punctuated with lapidary and incisive prose poems – a new form for Glück, and one that she handles with playful dexterity – as in this example, ‘Theory of Memory’, which lays speculation over memory with perfect poise:

Long, long ago, before I was a tormented artist, afflicted with longing yet incapable of forming durable attachments, long before this, I was a glorious ruler uniting all of a divided country – so I was told by the fortune-teller who examined my palm. Great things, she said, are ahead of you, or perhaps behind you; it is difficult to be sure. And yet, she added, what is the difference? Right now you are a child holding hands with a fortune-teller. All the rest is hypothesis and dream.

Michael Longley has long been known as a master of the compact, meditative lyric, and his work has been called elegiac since *Gorse Fires* in 1991, not least because of the ways in which his work engages directly with classical and especially Homeric tradition. But *The Stairwell* is overtly and literally so, opening a first half that commemorates friends, family and environment with the line, “I have been thinking about the music for my funeral”, and the second half being a series of elegies for his twin brother, Peter. As Glück's prose poem folds temporality into a Möbian, mirroring structure, so Longley's tightly constructed poems fold together past and present, birth and death in an elemental and

symbolically integrated landscape. A death bed, love bed, birth bed appear as aspects of the same resting place; a plover's egg "crack[s] in my trouser pocket / like a chilly ejaculation"; a girl grows up in the space between two stanzas, as in this beautiful example, 'Salamander':

Do you remember me turning over a stone
That stayed wet beside the skinny waterfall,
And showing you, when you were a girl,
A sleepy, stone-coloured salamander?

Can you startle it, now you are a woman,
And make of it a shipwrecked golden creature,
Its three rubies quenched by sea dark, its empty
Six holes filling up with sand and sea water?

Longley is fond of recalling a description, apparently Tennyson's, of the lyric as an S-shaped structure, and this poem exemplifies such a balance of swerve and symmetry. An S, being a sort of porous figure-of-eight, is also a form that avoids solipsism by open-endedness, reminiscent of Glück's interest in the expressive potential of blank space or silence, but via a different tradition. Longley seems well aware that an epigrammatic poem can fill a page as richly, as mysteriously as, and often more tactfully than one more bloated and discursive; indeed it is a pity that some of the shortest poems in the collection's first half ('Haiku' for example: "During the power-cut / Maisie wondered: 'Where is me? / I have disappeared'") are not given their full quota of page-space for this resonance to occur. When, however, in part two, each short poem is given its full space, this only underscores the aching silence of the twin who is addressed:

You were the naughtier twin, were you not?
It was I who wept when you were chastised.
Where am I pushing you, dear brother, where?

Elegies like fired arrows (an image invoked directly later on, "steel- / Tipped, feathery, lethal at the zenith") disturb the empty page-space with their reverberations, and more poignantly, with their absolute un-answerability. If there is anything consolatory about these elegies, it comes perhaps from Longley's own deeply internalised Homeric models, which confer a formal sense that individual grief is both ancient and universal. The measure of how simply and stunningly Homeric echoes surface in Longley's poetry is best given by this complete poem, 'The Bay':

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VOLUME 104:4 WINTER 2014

You'd have loved the funeral games, Peter
– Sports-crazy, our Patroclus, a true Greek –
The chariot race, squabbles about the spoils,
One horse in particular, out in front,
A bay, reddish brown all over except for
The blaze on his forehead, round as the moon.

If there is facility here it is hard-won. Longley and Glück certainly hold up their end of the 'most good poetry' wager. We will not dwell on what this means for those of us stuck in the middle.

Tiffany Atkinson's So Many Moving Parts is published by Bloodaxe. She teaches at the University of East Anglia.