



THE UNIVERSITY *of* EDINBURGH

## Edinburgh Research Explorer

### Elegies for Ireland

**Citation for published version:**

O'Rourke, D 2020, Elegies for Ireland: W.B. Yeats, Michael Longley and the Roman elegists. in I Torrance & D O'Rourke (eds), *Classics and Irish Politics, 1916-2016*. Classical Presences, Oxford University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780198864486.001.0001>

**Digital Object Identifier (DOI):**

[10.1093/oso/9780198864486.001.0001](https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780198864486.001.0001)

**Link:**

[Link to publication record in Edinburgh Research Explorer](#)

**Document Version:**

Peer reviewed version

**Published In:**

Classics and Irish Politics, 1916-2016

**Publisher Rights Statement:**

This is a pre-copyedited, author-produced version of a chapter accepted for publication in *Classics and Irish Politics, 1916-2016* following peer review. The version of record O'Rourke, D. (2020). *Elegies for Ireland: W.B. Yeats, Michael Longley and the Roman elegists*. In I. Torrance, & D. O'Rourke (Eds.), *Classics and Irish Politics, 1916-2016* (Classical Presences). Oxford University Press. is available online at: <https://global.oup.com/academic/product/classics-and-irish-politics-1916-2016-9780198864486?cc=gb&lang=en&#>.

**General rights**

Copyright for the publications made accessible via the Edinburgh Research Explorer is retained by the author(s) and / or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing these publications that users recognise and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

**Take down policy**

The University of Edinburgh has made every reasonable effort to ensure that Edinburgh Research Explorer content complies with UK legislation. If you believe that the public display of this file breaches copyright please contact [openaccess@ed.ac.uk](mailto:openaccess@ed.ac.uk) providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.



Elegies for Ireland:  
W.B. Yeats, Michael Longley and the Roman elegists

*Donncha O'Rourke*

The poetic genre of elegy, popularized in antiquity by the Latin love-poets Propertius (c. 56 – c. 16 BC), Tibullus (c. 55 – 19 BC) and Ovid (43 BC – AD 17) during Rome's troubled passage from the internecine wars of the late republic to the uncertain peace of the early empire, has had a long tradition that surfaces in the work of a number of Irish poets, particularly in the context of their own country's *impia bella* – or, in the words of one, 'the sticky intimate violence of our tawdry little civil war'.<sup>1</sup> The genre of tears as well as of love, 'elegy' was derived by some ancient etymologists from the Greek '*e-legein*' ('to cry *ah!*'), though in origin its interests ranged well beyond love and lament to embrace political and ethical themes that have remained embedded in its genetic make-up throughout its multifaceted history.<sup>2</sup> In antiquity the genre's identifying and unifying quality was first and foremost formal, but the elegiac couplet's alternation of hexameter and pentameter lines was also what mobilized its introspective pullback from purely hexametric monologism. The elegiac voice, then, defines itself in contradistinction to that of epic, which one Virgilian critic has characterised as "'objective', credible, univocal ... unshocking in tone and substance, indeed (and more particularly) patriotic and inspiring', even if it was also that critic's purpose to amplify epic's 'further voices'.<sup>3</sup> Elegy might thus be considered as a 'further voice' for private, sentimental and, very often, critical reflection.

If elegy can be heard as epic's 'further voice', it speaks in Ireland through the work of W.B. Yeats and Michael Longley in a way that pulls back from the violent narratives their times were telling. This is also true, ostensibly at any rate,<sup>4</sup> of the Roman elegists, and perhaps especially of

---

For discussion of this paper in various stages of its gestation I warmly thank Maureen Alden, Stephen Harrison, Aifric Mac Aodh, Fiachra Mac Góráin, Cillian Ó Hogan, Isabelle Torrance, Mark Usher and the anonymous reviewers appointed by the press.

<sup>1</sup> Longley (2009: 101).

<sup>2</sup> See Nagy (2010) in the first chapter of Weisman (2010).

<sup>3</sup> Lyne (1987: 2).

<sup>4</sup> For a discussion of elegy's identification with the violence of its time, see O'Rourke (2018).

Propertius, not least as championed by Ezra Pound, whose 1917 'Homage to Sextus Propertius', the modernist poet's first large-scale work, mediates subsequent reception of the elegist.<sup>5</sup> Defending his version of Propertius from the derision it attracted for its apparent misconstruals of the elegist's difficult Latin (itself nowadays regarded by some as proto-modernist),<sup>6</sup> Pound explained that his poem was not a translation but, precisely, an homage inspired by his affinity, in the context of the First World War, with Propertius' anti-imperialist posture:<sup>7</sup>

I may perhaps avoid charges of further mystification and wilful obscurity by saying that it presents certain emotions as vital to me in 1917, faced with the infinite and ineffable imbecility of the British Empire, as they were to Propertius some centuries earlier, when presented with the infinite and ineffable imbecility of the Roman Empire.<sup>8</sup>

This reading of Propertius also informs the work of another Belfast-born poet, Derek Mahon, whose own Propertian set includes a version of Propertius 3.4 and 3.5 ('Love Not War') in which Augustus' campaigns in India are made to foreshadow the imperial interests of the Raj:<sup>9</sup>

Augustus aims to raid the wealth of India,  
Our oars will strike her pearl-providing sea.  
Great victories there, rich pickings in the East!  
Indus will flow at the imperial whim.  
One of these mornings I expect to see  
our wagons groaning with the spoils of war  
and read the stickers – 'Patna', 'Kandahar' –  
while I recline upon my Cynthia's breast.

---

<sup>5</sup> On Pound's Propertius and its critical reception, see Sullivan (1965); Comber (1998); Hooley (1988: 28-54); Rudd (1994: 117-50); Davidson (1995); Usher (1996); Willett (2005); Liebrechts (2010).

<sup>6</sup> See, e.g., Benediktson (1989). Longley (2009: 105; 2015: 35) describes Propertius as 'neurotic and strangely à la mode'.

<sup>7</sup> Thomas (1977) 39-58 suggests that it was, rather, a mid-career poetic crisis that prompted Pound to identify with the middle and transitional books of Propertius.

<sup>8</sup> Ezra Pound, *Collected Letters* 246 (to the Editor of the *English Journal*, 1931) (= Paige [1971: 230-31]).

<sup>9</sup> Mahon (2009: np) = Mahon (2011: 18). From *Raw Material* (2011), by kind permission of the author and The Gallery Press (Loughcrew, Oldcastle, County Meath, Ireland).

Pound, for his part, seems to have considered the First World War as a consequence of capitalist overproduction, to which he saw an antidote in the economic-stimulus theory of Social Credit proposed by Major C.H. Douglas, whose model Pound actively promoted in his *Cantos* and later distorted in his anti-semitic broadcasts on the airwaves of his hero Benito Mussolini.<sup>10</sup> Pound's espousal of Italian fascism squares rather oddly with his liberal (in all senses) reading of Propertius, and attracted about as much criticism. Indeed, the two motives for vitriol were wont to be combined each in justification of the other: after Pound was convicted of treason and committed to a psychiatric facility in 1945, one critic took the opportunity to revisit the 'Homage' and concluded, with bitter irony, as follows:

But how profoundly mournful is the present spectacle of the sage of Rapallo, driven mad by his much learning and incarcerated in a madhouse instead of being shot for treason. Classical scholars, grateful for Pound's homage to Sextus Propertius, will unanimously lament this sorry miscarriage of justice.<sup>11</sup>

Propertius thus enters Irish poetry already heavily politicized, especially in relation to the British Empire. Of the surviving Roman elegists he is also the one with the most conspicuous Irish legacy, making at least one cameo appearance in Yeats and providing a recurrent source of inspiration for Longley, whether in direct or indirect connection with Ireland's troubled history. Yeats's learning in Greek and Latin was rather more desultory and idiosyncratic than that of Longley, who read Classics formally at Trinity College Dublin from 1958 to 1963.<sup>12</sup> Given the former's greater sympathy for the Hellenic imagination, there seems little reason to doubt Pound's insistence (in the letter quoted above) that it was Yeats, with whom he enjoyed close professional and personal ties at the time, who borrowed from the 'Homage' rather than the other way around.<sup>13</sup>

---

<sup>10</sup> On Pound's politics and economics, see Redman (2010); on the radio broadcasts, see van Ert (1994); Friedlander (2010).

<sup>11</sup> Forbes (1946: 179).

<sup>12</sup> On Yeats's classical learning, see Stanford (1976: 94-102) and Arkins (1990: 1-23). Recalling his university days Longley (1994: 51) writes 'my already half-hearted hold on Latin and Greek was further enfeebled by a now all-consuming desire to write poetry', and later (2009, 2015: 26-7) describes himself diffidently as a 'lapsed classicist'.

<sup>13</sup> On the association of Yeats and Pound, see Paul (2010).

Longley, for his part, describes Propertius as ‘my soul mate, love’s polysyllabic | Pyrotechnical laureate reciting reams by heart’ in his retrospective poem ‘Remembering the Poets’ (from *The Weather in Japan* [2000] = CP 280).<sup>14</sup> In this roll-call of Latin authors idolised by the teenage Longley, Propertius takes his place alongside Macer, Ponticus, Bassus, Horace, Virgil and Tibullus. Several of these poets Longley cannot, however, actually have read, since they are no longer extant. That oddity, and the curious omission of Ovid (elsewhere very evident on Longley’s reading-list), are explained by the fact that ‘Remembering the Poets’ is itself a version of Ovid’s autobiographical retrospective at *Tristia* 4.10.41-54. Notwithstanding this Ovidian source, it is true that Longley’s youthful enthusiasm for Propertius was ignited by the lively recitations of Prof. Donald Wormell at Trinity College Dublin, and his earliest published poems in the 1960s were versions of Propertian elegy.<sup>15</sup> Little could Longley have known at the time, however, that Latin love-elegy would later prove a suitable medium through which to approach the Northern Irish Troubles, as it had previously done for Yeats writing about Ireland after 1916.

Longley’s ‘Remembering the Poets’ is also a poem that indirectly and playfully describes the political clout of classical reception in Ireland. Both Ovidian and autobiographical, it has suggested to its readers, and to Longley himself as his own reader, a contemporary *sodalitium* of poets gathered behind the ancient celebrities: ‘The personalities of my own brilliant contemporaries kept crowding in from the back of my mind. The poem expresses brotherly love for them and for the poets I converse with across the millennia.’<sup>16</sup> In the first of the poem’s more conspicuous departures from its Ovidian source, one of these alter-egos, ‘Virgil, our homespun internationalist’, is to be sighted at ‘government receptions’. Irrespective of the identity of this latter-day Virgil (the posthumous publication of Heaney’s *Aeneid VI* all but confirms the identification suspected by most), Longley’s supplement to Ovid points to the powerful encounter of classical reception and Irish politics. Similarly pointed is Longley’s elaboration on his *amicitia* with Tibullus, which implicitly records ‘Peace’ (a version of Tibullus’ elegy 1.10) as the most extended political reception of a classical text in his own oeuvre: more than twenty years since that appearance in

---

<sup>14</sup> Citations of Longley’s poems are given from Michael Longley, *Collected Poems* (= CP), published by Jonathan Cape (reprinted by permission of The Random House Group Limited, © 2006) and Wake Forest University Press (reprinted by permission of WFU Press, © 2007).

<sup>15</sup> For a sensitive appreciation of Propertius by the young Longley, see his 1962 address to the Classical Society of Trinity College Dublin, now reprinted in Longley (2017: 121-31).

<sup>16</sup> Longley (2009: 112; cf. 2015: 40). For this reading, see also Nice (2005: 239); Harrison (forthcoming). For a Hellenic counterpart see Longley’s ‘The Group’ from his 2004 collection *Snow Water* (CP 321-2), discussed at Longley (2009: 111-12; cf. 2015: 38-9).

Longley's 1979 collection *The Echo Gate*, Tibullus is now 'An echo from the past' who gets pride of place at the end of this intensely personal translation of Ovid's elegiac catalogue. Such listing of canonical poets is a feature of elegy at least since Hermesianax (fr. 7 Powell; cf. Prop. 2.34; Ov., *Am.* 1.15);<sup>17</sup> assuming Ovid's voice, Longley confidently locates himself in this tradition as 'the last of the singing line' – a punning in-joke in view of Longley's description elsewhere of his contemporary (and later Propertian) Derek Mahon as 'our bravest and most stylish wielder of the singing line'.<sup>18</sup> It is a confidence that also locates Longley's work alongside that of Yeats in a pan-Irish and highly political tradition of classical reception.

## YEATS AND PROPERTIUS

Yeats's encounter with Propertius comes, first and foremost, in the form of a short poem entitled 'A Thought from Propertius', included in both the first (1917) and expanded (1919) editions of *The Wild Swans at Coole*:

She might, so noble from head  
To great shapely knees  
The long flowing line,  
Have walked to the altar  
Through the holy images  
At Pallas Athena's side,  
Or been fit spoil for a centaur  
Drunk with the unmixed wine.

The poem reworks Propertius 2.2.5-10, prose and verse translations of which Yeats most likely consulted in W.K. Kelly's collection of *Erotica* (London, 1854), the only edition in his library that contained the poem.<sup>19</sup> In *The Wild Swans at Coole*, the poem features within a sequence that centres

---

<sup>17</sup> See Farrell (2012).

<sup>18</sup> So Longley on the dustjacket of Mahon (1999); see also E. Longley (1986: 170-84): 'The Singing Line: Form in Derek Mahon's Poetry'. For the pun, see Nice (2005: 239), but the Ovidian comparand indicates that the phrase now applies to Longley himself.

<sup>19</sup> Kelly (1854: 30 and 167). The library of W.B. and George Yeats is catalogued at Chapman (2006). Yeats might of course have consulted the Latin, but he preferred Greek – and was in any case an unsuccessful student of both: see n. 12 above.

on Maud Gonne, whom critics identify also with the ‘She’ of this poem.<sup>20</sup> As Brian Arkins has shown, in both Propertius and Yeats the lover concludes that his girl is the fairest of them all, and Cynthia’s further comparison to Helen suggests that other poems by Yeats, such as ‘No Second Troy’, might owe something to Propertius, too.<sup>21</sup> Certainly it is apt, given the turbulent nature of their relationship, that Gonne should play Cynthia to Yeats’s Propertius, and in this configuration the elegiac conceit of *militia amoris* (the ‘warfare of love’) takes on a suggestively literal dimension in the *domina* who ‘hurled the little streets upon the great’.

That context may seem remote from Yeats’s ‘A Thought from Propertius’ and its surrounding collection, but for a number of reasons it would be more accurate to say that England’s difficulty and Ireland’s opportunity are thematically present under erasure. First, Yeats had originally mapped out the earlier (1917) edition of *The Wild Swans at Coole* to begin and end with the poems now entitled ‘Easter 1916’ and ‘On Being Asked for a War Poem’, thereby framing the collection with poems on the wars in Ireland and Europe.<sup>22</sup> In the event, ‘Easter 1916’ was withheld and replaced with the volume’s titular poem ‘The Wild Swans at Coole’, an elegiac meditation on how ‘All’s changed’; but ‘On Being Asked for a War Poem’ made the final cut, and in publically demurring the invitation to write a war poem – what Latin scholars would call a *recusatio* or poem of refusal – it registers how the poet’s antipathy to the British Empire’s involvement in Ireland had left him indifferent to its involvement in the First World War. Such thoughts were also much in the poet’s mind when organising the definitive 1919 edition of the collection, which includes elegies that lament the death of Lady Gregory’s son and decry the war in which the airman was killed.

A second context that politicizes ‘A Thought from Propertius’ is Yeats’s close collaboration at the time with Ezra Pound, whose ‘Homage to Sextus Propertius’ was completed in the same year (the title-page dates the poem to 1917). Through association with a text already enlisted against the ‘imbecility of the British Empire’, Yeats’s inclusion of Propertian love-lyric takes the stance adopted by other poems in the collection against Britain’s wars – this despite Pound’s earlier opinion piece on ‘The Non-existence of Ireland’, a bilious response apparently to the debacle over the Hugh Lane bequest, in which he writes: ‘There is no State, no recently promoted territory in the

---

<sup>20</sup> See Albright (1990: 574-9, esp. at 576). On Yeats and Gonne see, e.g., Cullingford (1993); Twoomy (1997a); Steele (2010).

<sup>21</sup> See Arkins (1990: 146). See also Arkins (1985) and Sullivan (1965: 178-80).

<sup>22</sup> See Chapman (2010: 78-96).

Union, which has not more claim to being a nation in itself than has this “John Bull’s Other Island,” this stronghold of ignorance and obstruction.’<sup>23</sup>

Thirdly and finally, its connection with Maud Gonne imbricates ‘A Thought from Propertius’ with the Irish political situation at the most intimate level. Yeats had proposed to Gonne for one last time in 1916 following the execution of her husband, the rebel fighter Major John MacBride,<sup>24</sup> a man whose violent ways were alleged by Gonne to have spilled into the domestic sphere.<sup>25</sup> He was, as Yeats puts it in the poem that almost stood at the head of this collection, ‘A drunken, vainglorious lout. | He had done most bitter wrong | To some who are near my heart’. Gonne declined Yeats’s hand (as subsequently did her daughter Iseult) but in 1917 Yeats married Georg(i)e Hyde-Lees with Ezra Pound as his best man. Read with this heady mixture of politics and gender in view, ‘A Thought from Propertius’ seems to look back at Gonne at a fateful crossroads: that ‘she might ... have walked to the altar’ beside the patron goddess of the arts makes a Yeatsian nuptial of the Propertian source (where Athena alone *spatiatur ad aras*); her alternative destiny (fulfilled, to Yeats’s chagrin, by MacBride) sees the marriage gatecrashed by ‘a centaur | Drunk with unmixed wine’. That Yeats’s Hippodamia is ‘fit spoil’ gives a rather darker focalisation of Propertius’ *grata rapina* than either of the translations he may have consulted in Kelly’s edition (‘delightful booty’ in Grantillon’s prose version, ‘her charms’ in Elton’s verse translation): depending on whether ‘fit’ is taken to represent the centaur’s perspective or the poet’s, Gonne is seen as a victim either of her nobility or, alternatively, of the violence her violent choice deserves.

Yeats’s ambivalent handling of Cynthia/Gonne in this poem speaks in interesting ways to his handling of the classical tradition. In her book *Gender and History in Yeats’s Love Poetry*, Elizabeth Butler Cullingford has argued that ‘[a]s a white, male, middle-class, Protestant citizen of the British Empire, with an acknowledged debt to canonical English writers, Yeats belonged to the dominant tradition’, but that ‘[a]s a colonized Irishman ... he was acutely conscious of repression and exclusion.’<sup>26</sup> Yeats’s classical learning might likewise have been centrifugal to the revival of Irish culture that he championed, but he deploys the classics in a way that seeks to resist empire, with the result that even in his love-poetry woman is not just a Muse or ‘The long flowing line’, but

---

<sup>23</sup> Pound (1915: 453).

<sup>24</sup> Foster (2003b: 54-5) argues that Yeats’s proposal was motivated by duty more than love.

<sup>25</sup> The point remains controversial: Jordan (2000) argues that MacBride was maligned.

<sup>26</sup> Cullingford (1993: i, cf. 6).



also, as M. Wyke has argued in the case of Propertius, a space in which discourses of power are thrashed out.<sup>27</sup>

## LONGLEY AND PROPERTIUS

In its incorporation of Propertius into the Irish lyric tradition, Yeats's 'A Thought from Propertius' invites comparison with Longley's similarly titled 'An Image from Propertius', the final poem of his second collection *An Exploded View*, published in 1973 in the wake of the outbreak of the Troubles (= CP 80):<sup>28</sup>

My head is melting,  
Its cinder burnt for this:

Ankle-bone, knuckle  
In the ship of death,

A load five fingers gather  
Pondered by the earth.

The brevity of this poem should not deceive. The Propertian 'image' in question takes its cue from Propertius 4.11, an elegy of some 102 lines in which the noble Cornelia speaks from beyond the grave in defence of her conformist life. This Cornelia was stepdaughter of the emperor Augustus, and the morality she is made to champion is entirely the opposite of that for which Propertius and his mistress Cynthia stand in the earlier books. Here Propertius finally seems to make good on the abandoned promises of his earlier *recusationes* and addresses contemporary political themes – much to the approval of his critics.<sup>29</sup> It was on this poem, the 'regina elegiarum' as Scaliger called it, that Longley had cut his teeth as a translator in the 1960s with a full version ('Cornelia') in

---

<sup>27</sup> See Wyke (2002: 11-114) on Propertius.

<sup>28</sup> The connection with Yeats (and Mahon: see below n. 32) is also noted by Harrison (forthcoming), with corroboration *per litteras* from the poet. For other remarks see Arkins (2009: 154-5).

<sup>29</sup> For a representative appraisal of Prop. 4.11, see Hightet (1957: 106-111).

eleven freely-rhymed stanzas of ten lines apiece.<sup>30</sup> Since then, however, Longley had not returned to the Latin poets; now, as the finale of *An Exploded View*, he revisits the poem and his earlier translation in just twenty-six words, fragmenting the grandeur of the originals into a few relics gathered apparently at random, like Cornelia's remains, but in fact carefully arranged at the end of the collection to mirror the position of its counterpart at the end of Propertius' oeuvre. As the comparative table below shows, the final couplet of 'An Image from Propertius' preserves the most intact of these fragments, each plucked from disparate points in the longer versions:

'An Image from Propertius'	'Cornelia'	Propertius 4.11
My head is melting	The funeral trumpets meant this when my head Was put above the blaze, and was melted (9-10)	sic maestae cecinere tubae, cum subdita nostrum detraheret lecto fax inimica caput. (9-10)
Its cinder burned for this: <sup>31</sup>	Our marriage, Paullus, my family name, All the assurances of motherhood— What help were they to me? (11-13)	quid mihi coniugium Paulli, quid currus auorum profuit aut famae pignora tanta meae? (11-12)
Ankle-bone, knuckle <sup>32</sup>	cf. 'Skara Brae' 11: 'Knuckles'	cf. 4.7.12: pollicibus fragiles increpuere manus
In the ship of death,	My bones conveyed there in the ship of death (110)	cuius honoratis ossa uehantur aquis (102)
A load five fingers gather	and reduced me to a load   Five fingers gather (14-15)	et sum, quod digitis quinque legatur, onus (14)
Pondered by the earth.	While my reward is pondered by the earth (108)	dum pretium uitae grata rependit humus (100)

This Propertian image of decay is profoundly effective at the close of a collection that bleeds with the violence of the Troubles from the moment of its title (*An Exploded View*), at least at first blush. Even if the phrase 'exploded view' turns out to be a technical term in the poem 'Skara Brae', the volume's epigraph suggests that this is a red herring we are supposed to catch:<sup>33</sup>

<sup>30</sup> The version, entitled 'Cornelia', was published in *Poetry Ireland* 5 (Spring 1965: 19-22), in which Seamus Heaney's 'End of a Naturalist' and 'Valediction' also first appeared. It is quoted here by kind permission of *Poetry Ireland*. Longley (2009: 106) comments that formally 'Cornelia' was a 'break-through' in his evolution: "'Cornelia' helped me to discover the sort of noise I was looking for in a line of verse'.

<sup>31</sup> Comparison with 'Cornelia' and Prop. 4.11 reveal the speaker's 'this' as more subtly plaintive assessment of the pathetic outcome of her life: see discussion below.

<sup>32</sup> This line finds no correspondence in 'Cornelia' or Prop. 4.11, but does resonate with neighbouring poems in both collections, as indicated; it also resonates with the phrase 'Our knuckle bones' in the later version of Derek Mahon's thematically and titularly similar 'An Image from Beckett' (Mahon 1999: 40-41), the earliest versions of which (published in *Ecclesiastes* [1970] and *Lives* [1972: 8-10]) themselves show a possible debt to Longley's original 'Cornelia' (e.g., 'And my one marriage | Was over as soon as it started'). For further discussion see Haughton (2007: 64-6).

<sup>33</sup> See the discussion in Brearton (2006).

We are trying to make ourselves heard  
Like the lover who mouths obscenities  
In his passion, like the condemned man  
Who makes a last-minute confession,  
Like the child who cries out in the dark.

As the last word in such a collection, then, ‘An Image from Propertius’ resonates with preceding glimpses of sectarian atrocity (e.g., ‘Kindertotenlieder’ [CP 61]: ‘fingerprints | Everywhere, teethmarks on this and that’) and foreshadows later poems in which Longley witnesses the horror of terrorism in unflinching autopsy (e.g., ‘Wreaths’ [CP 118-19]: ‘When they massacred the ten linen workers | There fell on the road beside them spectacles, | Wallets, small change, and a set of dentures: | Blood, food particles, the bread, the wine.’).

The vast differences between Longley’s 1965 and 1973 versions of Propertius 4.11 are instructive in respect of classical reception pre- and post- Troubles. In whittling down the great scale of Propertius 4.11 to a few fragments in this brief compass, ‘An Image from Propertius’ occludes the patriarchal certainties articulated by ‘Cornelia’ in a way that many Latin scholars would say is entirely in keeping with the resurgent feminine and elegiac agenda that deconstructs Propertius’ poem as a final indictment of Roman culture.<sup>34</sup> For example, despite her conformism, Longley’s earlier Cornelia wonders, ‘Our marriage, Paullus, my family name, | All the assurances of motherhood– | What help were they to me? (11-13, *quid mihi ... profuit* in Propertius). This sense of disquiet is preserved in the couplet that sets up ‘An Image from Propertius’: ‘*My head is melting, / Its cinder burnt for this:*’, where ‘this’ turns out to be her own remains – ‘a load five fingers gather’. Longley’s elegiac retuning of the poem leaves the confidence of orthodox society in smithereens, and explodes the ‘polysyllabic pyrotechnics’ of his own youthful *tour de force*. Comparing Longley’s 1965 and 1973 versions of Cornelia’s death-poem reveals a far more troubled Propertius.

‘An Image from Propertius’ is preceded in *An Exploded View* by Longley’s reworking of Propertius 2.10 (CP 76), a programmatic *recusatio* or ‘refusal’ poem in which the elegist announces – only to decline – a change of inspiration from love and elegy to war and epic, the ‘different lyre’ (10 *aliam citharam*) that Longley’s title, ‘Altera Cithera’, conspicuously misquotes. Longley’s

---

<sup>34</sup> For such readings of Propertius 4.11, see, e.g., Janan (2001: 146-63).

equally programmatic and rather quirky poem identifies itself in its second stanza (quite literally printed as an aside) as a self-consciously modern ('ballpoint') version of Propertius:<sup>35</sup>

A change of tune, then,  
On another zither,  
A new aesthetic, or  
The same old songs  
That are out of key,  
Unwashed by epic oceans  
And dipped by love  
In lyric waters only?

Given under our hand  
(With a ballpoint pen)  
After the Latin of Gaius  
Sextus Propertius,  
An old friend, the shadow  
Of his former self  
Who – and this I append  
Without his permission –

Loaded the dice before  
He put them in his sling  
And aimed at history,  
Bringing to the ground  
Like lovers Caesar,  
Soldiers, politicians  
And all the dreary  
Epics of the muscle-bound.

---

<sup>35</sup> For discussion see Arkins (2009: 153-4); Impens (2018: 89); Harrison (forthcoming).

When the comparatists have done Longley's bidding they will find that the first stanza synopsis all twenty-six lines of the Propertian original. In recasting the Latin *recusatio* in the form of this question, Longley's version formulates one of the central issues of Propertian scholarship: to what extent *does* Propertius engage with the politics of his day? This is a question of some pertinence also to Longley, whose readers (including, once again, the poet himself) have likewise grappled with the largely unspoken relation between, for example, Longley's botanical poems, or indeed his many versions of Greek and Roman authors, and the Northern Irish Troubles.<sup>36</sup> Identifying himself as Propertius' 'old friend', the poet of 'Altera Cithera' justifies the liberty taken in the third stanza (added, as we are told, without the Roman elegist's permission) to answer the question posed in the first. Unlike some of the Propertian scholarship which Longley might have read as a undergraduate classicist, this response refuses the false dichotomy of the *recusatio* by recognising the political power already inherent in Propertian love-elegy.<sup>37</sup> In a letter in the *Irish Times* of 8 June 1974, Longley wrote that the artist 'would be inhuman if he didn't respond to tragic events in his own community, and an irresponsible artist if he didn't seek to endorse that response imaginatively. This will probably involve a deflection or zigzag in his proper quest for imaginative autonomy ...' It may be a critical commonplace in today's scholarship that Propertius configured the civil war of his lifetime within the framework of erotic elegy,<sup>38</sup> but this view was not especially prominent when 'Altera Cithera' was published in 1973. In the context of the Troubles in Northern Ireland, Longley discovered a new dimension to his affinity with the poet he had studied during his undergraduate days in Dublin.

In meditating through Propertius on the relationship between poetry and politics, Longley invites comparison with Ezra Pound, who also included a version of Propertius 2.10 in the 'Homage

---

<sup>36</sup> Brearton (2006: 135-43); Arkins (2009, esp. 152); Cieniuch (2010: 114-15). See also Longley (1969: 11): 'Anything I may write in the future is bound to be influenced by the recent turmoil. Whether the influence will be obvious or even recognisable, I couldn't say'; Longley (1971b: 8): 'Too many critics seem to expect a harvest of paintings, poems, plays, and novels to drop from the twisted branches of civil discord. They fail to realise that the artist needs time in which to allow the raw material of experience to settle to an imaginative depth where he can transform it and possibly even suggest solutions to current and very urgent problems by reframing them according to the dictates of his particular discipline. He is not some sort of super-journalist commenting with unflinching spontaneity on events immediately after they have happened.'

<sup>37</sup> Contrast, for example, the readings of Hight (1957: 111) or Hubbard (1974: 100-3) with Keith (2008: 131-3) or Roman (2014: 169-201, esp. 172-4).

<sup>38</sup> For a reading along these lines see, e.g., O'Rourke (2016).

to Sextus Propertius'.<sup>39</sup> Longley's modernist and imagist poetics owes much to Pound, such that 'Altera Cithera' is something of an homage to the 'Homage':<sup>40</sup> the title's apparent misquotation of Propertius' Latin replicates the kind of schoolboy error of which Pound was accused, but without actually making an error of Latinity (the alteration of Propertius' *alius* to Longley's *alter* points not so much to a 'different' mode of expression as to an 'alternative' one); similarly, 'Gaius Sextus' gives Propertius two *praenomina*, of which 'Gaius' sounds like a dubious confusion with Gaius Catullus;<sup>41</sup> also in the indented verse (which reads and looks like the kind of paratextual gloss familiar in Pound), Longley's 'ballpoint pen' confidently trumps the pencil used by Pound's Propertius (and the pumice used by Propertius himself) in contrast to less discerning poetasters: 'Out-wearers of Apollo will, as we know, continue their | Martian generalities, | We have kept our erasers in order' (*Homage to Sextus Propertius* I.10-12, cf. Prop. 3.1.7-8 *ah valeat, Phoebum quicumque moratur in armis! | exactus tenui pumice versus eat*). Such wit aside, Longley seems to acknowledge that Pound before him had recognised Propertius as a poet of Callimachean refinement, 'unwashed by epic oceans', no lover of the 'dreary | Epics of the muscle-bound'.

As a modernist take on the Propertian *recusatio* of overtly political poetry, then, 'Altera Cithera' is instructive in respect of the way in which Longley does engage with Homeric epic.<sup>42</sup> As Longley has later written in essays on his classical allusions, 'in my Homeric poems I pushed against the narrative momentum and 'freeze-framed' passages to release their lyric potential'.<sup>43</sup> What 'Altera Cithara' adds to this analysis is the potential of this technique to make incisive comment on the political domain inhabited by epic, a poetry that aims at history 'Bringing to the ground | Like lovers Caesar | Soldiers, politicians'. Just as the stop-start runs of Propertian elegy fragment epic and reframe it from the perspective of the poet-lover, so too does a poem like 'Ceasefire' (to pick the most famous example) distil from *Iliad* 24 a lyrical vignette in which, rather elegiacally, Achilles is 'moved to tears' and Priam 'Wept with him until their sadness filled the building', and in which 'it pleased them both | To stare at each other's beauty as lovers might'.<sup>44</sup>

---

<sup>39</sup> 'Homage' Part V.1 gives Prop. 2.10.1-20, i.e. up to the lacuna indicated in Müller's Teubner edition from which Pound worked: see the collation at Willett (2005: 216-17).

<sup>40</sup> On 'Altera Cithera' and Pound, see Peacock (1988: 66-7).

<sup>41</sup> See Cairns (2006) 15 n. 77. *CIL* IV 1501 mentions a Gaius Propertius Postumus who may have been our Propertius' cousin: see Cairns (2006: 16-18); Keith (2008: 5).

<sup>42</sup> See also Volsik (2009: 676) on the negotiation between elegy and epic in Longley.

<sup>43</sup> Longley (2009: 99).

<sup>44</sup> On Longley's 'Ceasefire' see further Alden in this volume.

Elegy is, after all, the genre of tears as well as the genre of love par excellence. It is its elegiac ‘further voices’, then, that appear to draw Longley and Propertius to Homeric epic.

For all its affinities to Pound’s ‘Homage’, Longley’s version of Propertius 2.10 offers a programmatic reading of the politics of classical reception that is rather less partisan than either Pound’s fulmination against British imperial ‘imbecility’ or Yeats’s identification with the Republican Propertius. Longley’s Propertius is no less political, but his vision is more objective (which is not to say detached), refusing to enter into any war of words and instead bringing into the compass of his poetic oeuvre different systems of violence that resonate with one another in different times and places.

## LONGLEY AND TIBULLUS

A key example of Longley’s non-partisan and global perspective, and an early inkling of the reconciliatory potential of classical allusion that found its fullest expression in ‘Ceasefire’, comes in his poem ‘Peace’ (CP 134-6), a version of Tibullus 1.10 on the same scale as the earlier ‘Cornelia’ and regarded by some as the culmination of Longley’s engagement with Roman elegy.<sup>45</sup> Originally composed at the behest of Belfast’s Peace People, it later took its place in *The Echo Gate* (1979), where it resonates with the most urgent concerns of the collection.<sup>46</sup> Tibullus’ poem decries the warfare of the present and longs for the simple life of yore; in Longley’s version the linguistic register vacillates suggestively between ancient Rome and modern Ireland: ‘Who was responsible for the very first arms deal— | The man of iron who thought of marketing the sword?’ (1-2 *Quis fuit, horrendos primus qui protulit enses? | quam ferus et vere ferreus ille fuit!*); ‘I’ve been press-ganged into service, and for all I know | Someone’s polishing a spear with my number on it’ (13-14 *nunc ad bella trahor, et iam quis forsitan hostis | haesura in nostro tela gerit latere*); ‘And don’t be embarrassed by this handmade statue | Carved out of bog oak by my great-great-grandfather | Before the mass-production of religious art’ (17-20 *neu pudeat prisco vos esse e stipite factos: | sic veteris sedes incoluistis avi. | tum melius tenere fidem, cum paupere cultu | stabat in exigua ligneus aede deus*); ‘If the good Lord keeps me out of the firing line | I’ll pick a porker from the steamy sty and dress | In my Sunday best, a country cousin’s sacrifice’ (25-28 *at nobis aerata,*

---

<sup>45</sup> Reprinted at Longley (2006: 134-6). For discussion, see Peacock (1988); Kennedy-Andrews (2000: 88-9); McDonald (2000: 36-8); Potts (2011: 85-7); Impens (2018: 90-1); Harrison (forthcoming).

<sup>46</sup> The genesis of the poem is described at Longley (2009: 106-7; 2015: 35-6).

*Lares, depellite tela, | hostiaque e plena rustica porcus hara. | hanc pura cum veste sequar myrtoque canistra | vincta geram, myrto vinctus et ipse caput*); ‘You keeping track of the sheep, your son of the lambs, | While the woman of the house puts on the kettle’ (41-2 *ipse suas sectatur oves, at filius agnos, | et calidam fesso comparat uxor aquam*). As these samples show, Longley’s version slips in just enough contemporary idiom (e.g., ‘arms deal’, ‘bog oak’) to update Tibullus’ poem, orienting but not confining it to an Irish audience. In reply to Tibullus’ opening question about the origin of violence, he writes ‘Blame the affluent society: no killings when | The cup on the table was made of beechwood, | And no barricades or ghettos when the shepherd snoozed’, taking us from Tibullus’ *non arces, non vallus erat* (Tib. 1.10.9) to the Falls Road of the 1970s and to Warsaw of the 1940s. As A.J. Peacock has noted, ‘The avoidance of strict determinacy is part of a broad, non-parochial conspectus on conflict and violence offered by the poem’.<sup>47</sup>

Tibullus and Longley end by petitioning Peace herself to bestow a Golden Age in which warfare occurs only as *militia amoris*, joined when the *rusticus* (Longley’s ‘labourer’) comes home *male sobrius* (‘a trifle sozzled’). In both poems, however, the speaker’s naive idealism is difficult to share (cf. Tib. 1.10.53-66):

Then, if there are skirmishes, guerilla tactics,  
 It’s only lovers quarrelling, the bedroom door  
 Wrenched off its hinges, a woman in hysterics,  
 Hair torn out, cheeks swollen with bruises and tears—  
 Until the bully-boy starts snivelling as well  
 In a pang of conscience for his battered wife:  
 Then sexual neurosis works them up again  
 And the row escalates into a war of words.  
 He’s hard as nails, made of sticks and stones, the chap  
 Who beats his girlfriend up. A crime against nature.

Enough, surely, to rip from her skin the flimsiest  
 Of negligees, ruffle that elaborate hair-do,  
 Enough to be the involuntary cause of tears—  
 Though upsetting a sensitive girl when you sulk

---

<sup>47</sup> Peacock (1988: 60).





Longley's version does not, therefore, shy away from the darker implications of Tibullus' meditation on the fragility (if not impossibility) of 'peace born from war' in a way that anticipates the more disquieting implications of 'Ceasefire', especially when it appeared in *The Ghost Orchid* (1995) alongside other Iliadic poems ('The Campfires', 'The Helmet', 'The Parting') suggestive of continuity rather than decommissioning.<sup>49</sup> As Longley himself wrote in 1971, citing Wilfred Owen, 'it is the artist's first duty to warn, to be tuned in before anyone else to the implications of a situation'.<sup>50</sup> At the same time, however, the final lines of Longley's poem work towards resolving the impasse of Tibullus' 'cycle of violence'. Whereas the Latin speaker merely repeats his invocation of Peace (67-8 *at nobis, Pax alma, veni spicamque teneto, | perfluat et pomis candidus ante sinus*), Longley's Tibullus goes one further in making her his lover:

As for me, I want a woman  
To come and fondle my ears of wheat and let apples  
Overflow between her breasts. I shall call her Peace.

These last lines pull away from the Latin original in seeking more harmonious consummation in contrast to Tibullus, and Roman elegy generally, where woman is enmeshed in the very systems of war that the poetry ostensibly resists. Here in Longley the elegiac mistress continues to play a role as a space for political discourse, but figured as Irish Peace she pacifies earlier revolutionary muses such as Cathleen Ní Houlihan and Maud Gonne.<sup>51</sup>

A similar move is witnessed a little further on in the same collection, following two war poems ('The War Poets' and 'Bog Cotton'), in 'Sulpicia' (CP 137). This sonnet takes its title from the name of the only extant female Roman elegist, to whom are ascribed at least six poems preserved in the third book of the *Corpus Tibullianum* ([Tib.] 3.13-18), though several others (3.8-12) are about her if not also by her. Longley's 'Sulpicia' is in part a collage of lines from these poems (chiefly: lines 1-2, cf. 3.8.1; line 3, cf. 3.8.9-10; lines 9-14, cf. 3.9.5-18), but the speaker's rustic charm ('When I let my hair down I am a sheaf of wheat | And I bring in the harvest without cutting it') also seems to have an affinity with that of Tibullus'/Longley's personified Peace just across the page, or perhaps with the speaker of that poem ('As for me I want a woman | To come

---

<sup>49</sup> See Cieniuch (2010: 117-19).

<sup>50</sup> Longley (1971b: 8).

<sup>51</sup> So Kennedy-Andrews (2000: 88-9).

and fondle my ears of wheat...'). The blending of Sulpicia's voice with that of Longley is sensitive to the gender politics that have centred on the identity of this female elegist,<sup>52</sup> and also to the ambivalent subject position of a female who attempts to assert her subjectivity in the masculinist commerce of elegy:<sup>53</sup> in that predatory world Sulpicia runs the risk of the passions of war ('Round this particular date I have drawn a circle | For Mars, dressed myself up for him, dressed to kill', cf. 3.8.1 *Sulpicia est tibi culta tuis, Mars magne, kalendis*) and of objectifying identification with the land ('Were he to hover above me like a bird of prey | I would lay my body out, his little country'), but like Longley's Peace she also turns the chase on its head, achieving in the sestet a greater degree of autonomy than in the Latin source at [Tib.] 3.9.9-18:

I will stumble behind him through the undergrowth  
Tracking his white legs, drawing about us both  
The hunters' circle: among twisted nets and snares

I will seduce him, tangle his hairs with my hairs  
While the stag dashes off on one of its tangents  
And boars root safely along our circumference.

quidve iuvat furtim latebras intrare ferarum  
candidaque hamatis crura notare rubis? 10  
sed tamen, ut tecum liceat, Cerinthe, vagari,  
ipsa ego per montes retia torta feram,  
ipsa ego velocis quaeram vestigia cervi  
et demam celeri ferrea vincla cani.  
tunc mihi, tunc placeant silvae, si, lux mea, tecum 15  
arguar ante ipsas concubuisse plagas:  
tunc veniat licet ad casses, inlaesus abibit,  
ne Veneris cupidae gaudia turbet, aper.<sup>54</sup>

<sup>52</sup> See Skoie (2002).

<sup>53</sup> See, briefly but insightfully, Arkins (2009: 156). See also Impens (2018: 89) and Harrison (forthcoming).

<sup>54</sup> 'Or what pleasure is there in entering the hideouts of beasts and scratching your white legs on thorny briars? And yet to have the chance to wander with you, Cerinthus, I myself will carry the

These two poems from the Tibullan corpus furnish Longley with a rich supply of the erotic and rustic themes that are characteristic of his own poetry. Longley, however, re-orientates the optic away from the masculinist and martial ethos of the Roman source and reconfigures love as a source of tenderness and optimism, capable of offering, like the landscape of his beloved Co. Mayo, a sanctuary from a sometimes violent world,<sup>55</sup> even if necessarily one from which that world is also more painfully understood.

## CONCLUSIONS: THE ELEGIAC CONTINUUM IN IRELAND

In a concinnity that would have appealed to ancient biographers, the year of Yeats's death (1939) was also that in which Longley was born. Their respective oeuvres might be said thus to conjoin to form a continuum of classical reception in Ireland across the twentieth century and beyond. The differences between their responses, as well as the similarities, sharpen our sense of how both poets stand at different points in that continuum, and of how classical reception has changed, but also remained a constant presence, in a shifting political landscape. For both Yeats and Longley, writing more than half a century apart, Latin elegy has provided a suitable medium through which to approach the present, perhaps because the genre's brief flowering at Rome itself coincided with and reflects, in its collision of love and war, the trauma of civil conflict and the pain of reconciliation. As for Yeats, classical allusion locates Longley in canonical English-language poetic traditions.<sup>56</sup> Like Yeats, too, Longley brings together the First World War, in which his father fought, and the Irish Troubles, sometimes within the compass of a single poem, as for example in 'Wounds' from *An Exploded View* (1972) or 'Wreaths' from *The Echo Gate* (1979). Unlike Yeats, however, Longley's poetry declines to take sides. This is true not only of the poems most immediately

---

pleated nets over the mountains, I myself will track the swift stag's trail and remove the iron chains from the fast hound. Then, yes, then would the woods please me if, my light, I were alleged to have lain with you before those very nets: though a boar may then come to the toils, it will depart unharmed, lest it disturb the joys of passionate love.'

<sup>55</sup> So Brown (2003: 146-7). To the extent that *No Continuing City* (1969 [= CP 1-38]) seems to echo 'No Second Troy', the epithalamial quality of its poems reminds us that for Longley love is about harmony. On Longley's environmental elegies, see Potts (2011: 75-97).

<sup>56</sup> In an interview with Brearton (1997: 37), Longley remarks: 'The stepping stones for me would be Hughes and Larkin, to a lesser extent Hill, then back to the 'thirties – Auden and MacNiece – then back to the trenches – Owen, Rosenberg, Edward Thomas. And then the great resumption – Hardy, Tennyson, Keats, Clare, Herbert, Donne, back to Propertius, Catullus ...'.

relevant to this chapter. 'Wreaths', for instance, is a triptych on the tit-for-tat IRA/UVF murders of the 1970s ('The Civil Servant', 'The Greengrocer', 'The Linen Workers'), the third panel of which widens its compass to take in the deaths of Christ and of Longley's father. In the same way, as if to consider a remote aetiology (or perhaps just an analogue) for the sectarianism of the present, the preceding poem on 'Oliver Plunkett' gives a macabre ekphrasis of the relics of the Catholic archbishop martyred in 1681 on trumped up charges in the so-called Popish Plot. Later classicising poems such as 'Ceasefire', discussed in the next chapter by Maureen Alden, and 'The Butchers' are similarly unconcerned to press their allusions to the service of any ideology. Rather, in Longley classical allusion ecumenically exposes ideology itself, looks unflinchingly at its violent consequences, and offers a common ground for dialogue between opposing traditions.<sup>57</sup>

---

<sup>57</sup> See Rankin Russell (2003).