

## James Longenbach and the Whole Human Contraption

Few people are able to write lyrical poems that convincingly inhabit the border country between the familiar and the unknowable. Few people write *about* poetry with agility, wisdom, and unfailing generosity towards subject and reader. How many fewer do both? And bring to each effort a vast learning, worn as lightly as the task allows? Which is to say there are very few people today writing like **James Longenbach**. He published his first book—*Modernist Poetics of History*—when he was just 27, and to date he has written five influential works of scholarship and persuasion. His is one of the most lucid and distinctive voices in contemporary literary criticism. Longenbach's two collections of poetry (a third, *Draft of a Letter*, will be published in 2007) reveal his unerring command of sound and line. Yet the poems are as elusive as they are precise, as searching as they are complete; their willingness to explore and deepen contradiction is what gives them so much life. Longenbach is a professor of English at the University of Rochester in New York. -Jesse Lichtenstein

**Loggerhead Reading Series:** You conclude your book, *The Resistance to Poetry*, with a beautiful essay called "Composed Wonder." It's rich in reasoning, example, and epigrams one wants to scribble in a notebook and return to when confronted by poems too difficult, or too pleasurable, to know what to do with. The subject of the essay—the source of wonder in poetry—seems daunting: so large, intangible, and terribly out of fashion. How did you come to take this on?

**James Longenbach:** I think that essay is probably the most personal thing I've ever written; it was an effort to describe what gives me pleasure when I write or read a poem. I'm drawn to poems because of what the language does, rather than what it says, and the concept of wonder became a way for me to explore the effect of certain kinds of diction and syntax on a reader. More importantly, it gave me a way of describing the allure of the language of poets like **George Oppen** as well as **Andrew Marvell**. My own poems aren't much like either of theirs, but from both of them I have learned something about how to keep a poem utterly clear but completely mysterious. And that's a mighty fine line. Descartes once said that wonder has no opposite: if you don't feel it, you're not alive. In poetry, the threat of the disappearance of wonder is itself wonderful.

**LRS:** Or even essential—as you write in that essay, "To feel the eruption of wonder convincingly, we need to feel an equally convincing lack of wonder." Some poems, you seem to be saying, strive too hard for all wonder, all the time. Do you have a particular kind of poem in mind?

**Longenbach:** You could say that I have a particular tendency in mind. One of the great things that poems do is to give us permission to take pleasure in language we don't yet understand; another word for that kind of pleasure would be wonder. But it wouldn't be quite right, I think, to say that wonder is aroused by the sonic rather than the semantic properties of language—it's an interplay between the two. A poem without any semantic interest could ultimately be as flat as a poem without any sonic play. What matters is the temporal process by which that interest happens to us—the movement of the language of the poem.

**LRS:** So if wonder is the pleasure we're able to take in language we don't yet understand, is there an implied expectation that this language will yield to understanding in time—in the course of the poem, or in the course of repeated readings? I notice you said *semantic interest*, not *semantic clarity*.

**Longenbach:** Hmm, that "yet" does seem crucial—but how? Let's think of an example.

Bronze by gold heard the hoofirons, steelyringing.  
Imperthnthn thnthnthn.  
Chips, picking chips off rocky thumbnail, chips.  
Horrid! And gold flushed more.  
A husky fifenote blew.  
Blew. Blue bloom is on the.  
Goldpinnacled hair.  
A jumping rose on satiny breast of satin, rose of Castile.  
Trilling, trilling: Idolores.

These are the opening lines of the "Sirens" episode of Joyce's *Ulysses*. The episode goes on for another fifty-five lines in this manner—it's gorgeous stuff, but mostly inexplicable. Or so it seems. In the plot of this episode, Leopold Bloom is wasting time in a bar at the precise moment when he suspects that his wife is meeting her lover, Blazes Boylan: Bloom sees Boylan leave the bar, but instead of following him, he stays and listens to various drunken men sing various songs.

The song that affects Bloom most is "Tutto è sciolto," or "All is lost," from **Bellini's** *Sonnambula*: a lover sings it when he believes that his beloved is leaving her bed to sleep with another man. But the lover is wrong: his beloved is merely sleepwalking, not engaging in a tryst. Bloom ignores this context, however, hearing the song as a reflection of what he supposes is his own loss.

And Joyce makes us experience a similar lack of semantic context: the lines I quoted form a kind of overture to the episode, and if we read them in isolation, they sound provocative but make no sense. But if we pay attention to the whole episode, we discover that Joyce is quoting bits of language from the episode at large: with that context in place, the lines make complete sense.

Anyway, Joyce's point is that readers of the episode need to do what Bloom neglects to do: look beyond the visceral seduction of the sound of language to the context provided by plot and character. And my point is that readers need to feel—want to feel—a tension in any utterance between the potential chaos of sound and the potential order of the meaning. Chaos and order in themselves aren't so interesting: great poems make sense because they threaten to make no sense. And they can't help but to do this because this is what language always inevitably does: "The Pope Calls for an End to Long Division," said a recent newspaper headline.

**LRS:** To the relief of fourth-graders everywhere! Let's return to the poets you mentioned earlier: Andrew Marvell and George Oppen. An odd couple? How are these poets—one a seventeenth-century British M.P. and author of a famous ode to Cromwell, the other a twentieth-century American who famously stopped writing poetry for decades to commit himself to grassroots leftwing political action—linked in your mind? What about their use of language draws you to them?

**Longenbach:** I admire the way Oppen lived out his political commitments to the point of idolatry. "There are situations which cannot honorably be met by art," he once said, and his refusal to imagine that he fulfilled any political responsibilities by writing poetry is part of what makes his sensibility so attractive to me. So when I read the poems—and I feel that I read them in the spirit of Oppen's sensibility—I don't really care what they're about; his politics are not what attracts me to the poems qua poems. Now, poems can't help but to be meaningful (this is Joyce's point), but what attracts me to both Marvell and Oppen is their diction. Both of them were influenced by or

connected to poets of the plain style (think of **Ben Jonson** or **Thom Gunn**), but both of them write just to the side of plain style; that is, while the diction is often breathtakingly simple, you feel that the restrained diction is employed in order to suggest something other—something spooky or mythic—than what the language of the poem also clearly denotes. It's as if the restraint establishes a verbal decorum in which the clear sense of *what* is being said raises the mysterious specter of *why* it is being said.

**LRS:** Let's stick with politics for a moment. In one of your essays on John Ashbery you quote him as writing, "All poetry is against war and in favor of life, or else it isn't poetry." Do you think that is the case?

**Longenbach:** I don't think Ashbery's remark is literally true, but you have to remember the context in which he was forced to make it. After Frank O'Hara was killed in the mid sixties, Ashbery eulogized him as a poet who refused to align his poetry with any social or political "program"; **Louis Simpson** subsequently attacked Ashbery for "sneering" at the conscience of poets who thought of their poems as part of the work of protest against the Vietnam War. Responding to Simpson in turn, Ashbery needed to make the remark about all poetry being against war, but he also said something much more challenging: "Poetry is poetry. Protest is protest." The implication here is that a poem has no inevitable relationship to any ideological position. Even to say that all poetry is against war is to give poets the benefit of the doubt—to assure us that the time we spend fiddling with words really is useful after all. Nobody deserves that assurance.

**LRS:** In the dispute between Simpson and Ashbery, presumably, they were talking largely about the subject matter of poems—poems overtly against the Vietnam War, or those that made no mention of it. How did the terms of this disagreement over the political function of poetry shift in the '70s and '80s?

**Longenbach:** I'm not sure if the terms have shifted in any fully coherent way, but I do think that the ways in which American poems have been identified as political have always been manifold and often contradictory. For some people, a poem is political if it makes a political statement; it's political in the same way that an email might be political. For other people, a poem is political if it disrupts poetic decorum in aggressive or counter-intuitive ways. Now, a particular poem might indeed have a political function in either of these ways—but only at a particular time and in a particular place. It's impossible to predict a poem's effect reliably, and it's impossible to

assert categorically that a poem written in any particular style will automatically perform cultural work. Too often, political claims for poetry are borne of a kind of narcissism—a poet's way of cheering himself up.

**LRS:** Let's return to the idea of mystery through clarity. When you described Marvell's and Oppen's diction as spooky or mythic earlier, I thought of the role of the oracle in mythology—of oracular speech. Not so much for its quality of pronouncement or portent, but for the idea that great mystery, disquiet, and contradiction proliferate in simple phrases. But how do they? Clarity, simplicity, and restraint aren't enough—a million emails a day exemplify all of these, too, without managing to suggest much else. Could you give an example of how a poet you have learned from navigates the fine line you spoke of earlier, between clarity and mystery?

**Longenbach:** I would put it a different way: I don't think there's a line between clarity and mystery; I think clarity *is* mystery, as opposed to confusion. Think of the most well known phrase from Marvell: "a green thought in a green shade." There is nothing difficult here, nothing knotty; my nine-year old daughter could read the line easily (and probably she'd have a better answer for this question, too). But the resonance of that clarity is immense, and all the critical ink that's been spilled over it has yet to exhaust the line's capacity for provoking wonder. The immensity of the unsaid is invoked because the line is so very clear about what it *does* say. I don't think this is a special quality, really; to my way of thinking, all great poetry—or all the poetry that grips me, anyway—partakes of this quality. How is it that we know that what might seem like two of the dumbest lines ever put down on paper—

The trees are in their autumn beauty,  
The woodland paths are dry

—are the beginning of one of the great poems in the English language?

**LRS:** Well, you've just pointed to a poet—W.B. Yeats—who rates Mystery very highly. You've written a book, *Stone Cottage*, about Yeats and his relationship with Ezra Pound, and you've spent a long time with Yeats's poetry. Are you conscious of what you've absorbed—as a poet—from his work? Or of what you've learned more through rejection than absorption?

**Longenbach:** Where to begin? I've gotten different things out of Yeats at different points in my life. At one time, it was the way Yeats organized volumes of short poems, making an inevitably yet continually surprising coherence out of a collection of lyrics. At another time, it was his way of making stanzas. I don't know of another poet who drives syntax through stanzas with such quiet, tense energy (I'm thinking of moments like the end of "Dialogue of Self and Soul," where the combination of tetrameters and pentameters seem to lift off the page, they're so vigorously a part of the larger design).

I wrote a lot of **pentameters** once, and Yeats was, along with **Stevens**, crucial for me—not so much because of the pentameter as such but because of this way of orchestrating syntax into larger shapes. Then, later on, when I turned more and more to what we call free verse, I found in retrospect that while I thought I was getting Yeats out of my ears, I was really getting him into my ears in a different way. That is, I've thrilled most recently to Yeats's diction—the luminous simplicity of all those Anglo-Saxon words in "The Wild Swans at Coole" ("The trees are in their autumn beauty"), and then the devastating way in which that simplicity is punctured with the line: "Mysterious, beautiful"—a trimeter made out of two Latinate words. It's almost like a foreign language stabs the poem.

I think this incredible control of diction, this drama of diction, is bound up with the quality that perhaps distinguishes Yeats's poems most: the sense that they are simultaneously mythic and earthbound. Though I'm not in the best position to say, I suspect that this quality is what I've absorbed most from Yeats. Or found in myself by gazing in the mirror of Yeats. Looking especially in my most recent work, I discover that I've written poems that strike me as terribly intimate, even mundanely so, and at the same time weirdly mythic, archetypal, as if they were taking place simultaneously around the corner and across the bar.

**LRS:** I find this, too, in the poems of your new collection, *Draft of a Letter*—this intricate mingling of the mundane and the mythic. In "Death and Reason," there's a moment where a bird, an unseen presence, is beckoning in the trees—but the trees are behind a shopping center. In "Abacus," the speaker invokes spirits of the natural world, but in the midst of the invocation, he runs a stoplight, and then sits, "fingers / On the keyboard self-delighting." Yet, if Yeats is a shadow presence we can feel in the movement between the two worlds of your poems, Petrarch's role is overt. How has the work of a fourteenth-century Italian come to figure in your own?

**Longenbach:** Yes, Petrarch is the presiding figure of this book. I came to love Petrarch much later than I came to love Yeats, and only recently I've been living in Petrarch's world—often quite literally, visiting the various places where he lived, especially the extraordinary (if now sadly overbuilt) town of **Fontaine de Vaucluse** in the south of France. This is where the river Sorgue suddenly erupts up out of the ground—millions of gallons of water just pouring from the earth, creating a wide river out of nothing. The place was crucial to Petrarch, both physically and metaphorically, and it became the location of my book.

As did Petrarch's writing—all of it—not just the poems but the letters, the dialogues, the essays. The sense of a complete human being that I get from this body of work—someone ravaged, kind, haunted, flawed, generous, selfish, seeking—is immense. I don't know of many other writers who managed to get the whole human contraption down on the page so unpretentiously. Also, like Yeats, Petrarch is a poet who works and thinks through contraries, and, in ways large and small, my book is designed around a series of oppositions between self and soul, joy and reason, and so on. I didn't plan this; it just happened. Reading Petrarch, I feel like a small part of something larger even than Petrarch—a way of being in the world that makes a love of language feel like a love of rivers and hills. I'm almost embarrassed to say that the poem "A Different Route," which is set in Petrarch's landscape, came to me as a dream, but it did. I woke up and wrote it down.

**LRS:** Petrarch, and the mention of Pound earlier, leads me to a question about ambition and renown in poetry. Petrarch, when he is 37, is made poet laureate at a special ceremony in Rome. Here is a deeply ambitious poet—in fact an international star—concerned with earthly glory and skilled in self-promotion, but whose work is, as you suggest, the richer for its many flawed and human strains. And I think of Pound, this towering figure of modernism who built his tower out of such unwelcoming materials that young poets today often excuse themselves from trying very hard to enter it. It's Pound the advocate, Pound the influence, Pound the guide and tastemaker who may come to mind instead. As a critic, you've had the task of assessing and reassessing not just poems but reputations. As a poet, you know the taste of ambition. There are American critics who've had the role of kingmaker in the past quarter century, but I wonder, in a fragmented poetry community, if that time has passed. What do you see as the role of ambition in poetry today, and what are its fruits? Can there be another Petrarch, or another Pound?

**Longenbach:** Petrarch was, especially as a young man, immensely ambitious. But the fact that he was successful has, for me, nothing to do with his real greatness, which rather depends on the humility—the acute sense of his smallness—that I feel in the writing. In a way, the whole of the *Canzoniere* is about his journey from a poet of the will to a poet of submission, and, while I'm not particularly religious myself, I find the final poems of the sequence almost unbearably beautiful.

In other words, I'm very interested in Petrarch's or Pound's place in the history of literature, but I'm not very interested in their place in the history of taste. No literary critic has ever had much to do with a poet's place in the history of literature—that can't be determined by reviews and other forms of gossip. (I say this as somebody who's written a lot of reviews.) So while a critic might for a moment help to determine a writer's place in history of taste, the moment really doesn't matter. Now it's snap crackle prose poems, twenty years ago it was mordant quatrains—it's only another moment before the pendulum swings back, alas.

What matters is the unproscribable exception, and if you really care about the next great poem, you don't really care who writes it. All we can do is try to be part of a climate that might make great writing possible. And in that climate, reviews matter if you learn from them how to listen to poetry—not because the reviewer has power.

So yes, I think the next Petrarch is probably in our midst. If the little history of taste collides with the big history of literature (as it did in Petrarch's case), then we'll recognize her. If not, you and I won't live long enough to know whether or not her greatness will be recognized.

**LRS:** What about Pound? How do you see his place in the history of literature stacking up against his place in the history of taste? It's hard to argue for Pound's greatness on the grounds of his humility...

**Longenbach:** Yes and no. There are a number of Pounds, and, while you can't do without any of them, I think the most genuine Pound is the one who writes with immense rhythmic delicacy in the lyrical lines of the *Pisan Cantos* or the delicate quatrains of "**Hugh Selwyn Mauberley**." Pound associated that delicacy with his alter-ego Mauberley partly in order to get rid of it—to devote himself to the big boy epic of the West. But the delicacy never goes away, and part of the great drama of the *Cantos* is the work we must do in order to discover it over and over again. The poem is a wreck, a calamity, a



provocation, but I don't see how any poet can avoid coming to terms with it. That would be like standing at the foot of the Rocky Mountains and trying to will their disappearance.

Which is to say that Pound is hard to like; he is an affront to anyone's taste; he exists to confound. But his place in literature seems to me crucial. From the start, I've loved other poets more than I've loved Pound, but probably I've spent more time reading him than any other modern poet. Even when I was very young, I felt instinctively that I had to do this in order to read any of his contemporaries. I even had a hand in editing the twelve-volume edition of his uncollected prose and poems. Quite a slog. But I learned so much from the effort—not just about Pound but about the entire swoop of literature, especially the history of prosody. I've always felt that the deeper I go into Pound, the farther away from Pound I must rove—I've never felt attached to a Poundian tradition or enclave. He's somewhere in every line I've written. Maybe I shouldn't say that. Should I say that?

**LRS:** I won't tell. What poet's criticism do you find most worth reading? (Or what critic's poetry, for that matter?)

**Longenbach:** **Elizabeth Bishop** once said that because no poet can write poetry all the time, poets can choose between spending their time writing literary criticism or drinking—it really doesn't matter which. There's something to that, and very little of the criticism written by poets finally stands up as lasting prose, unbolstered by the contiguous body of poetry. And then there are the unproscribable exceptions. Probably I'd say that **Marianne Moore** writes the most exciting literary criticism of any poet in the last century or more. Of course Pound and Eliot and Frost wrote brilliant essays, but the complete body of Moore's prose is an astonishing thing to work through—smart, lively, surprising at every turn yet also inevitable. And completely her own. I feel, reading Moore's prose, as if I'm reading Ruskin's prose or **Hazlitt's**—it's the work of a truly gifted prose writer who happened also to write brilliant poems.

Maybe it's also worth saying, since I know lots of people don't agree, that I don't like Randall Jarrell's prose very much (though I do admire his poetry immensely). It's showy, narcissistic, and it hurt people; **Muriel Rukeyser** was rendered incapable of writing for several years after Jarrell's cutesy-nasty review. Art doesn't need that, and it's a shame, these days, that this sort of reviewing is encouraged by literary venues designed somehow to increase the attention paid to the poor, beleaguered world of poetry. It's all taste, once again, not

literature. Moore's prose serves literature because it is literature. So does William Empson's: there's a great example of a critic, or a writer known primarily as a critic, who also wrote blistering good poems.

**LRS:** You are a poet, scholar, and critic, a dedicated teacher, and, of course, a father and husband (of the terrific novelist Joanna Scott)—how are you dividing your time these days? How do you choose between your interests and all of the potential projects you might undertake? I guess this is the 'what-are-you-working-on' question, but I'm curious to know, more generally, how you allocate your energies.

**Longenbach:** I see that there's a note pad on my desk: the pages say "I'm so busy I could scream." I do like to be busy. But I would say that I can't really "choose" between my interests; the interests choose me in different ways at different times. Last spring, I finished the new book of poems we spoke about, *Draft of a Letter*, and since then, poems have not been the center of my immediate attention. They could be—I've had a few sparks—but writing poems right now would be a will-driven activity, and I need to wait until the poems demand to be written; otherwise I'd end up repeating myself rather than discovering something new, something I can't yet do well. It's weird how ephemeral the feeling of true accomplishment is—it's as if you discover a new rhythm, a new structure, only to know in a short time that you can't use it again.

So I've spent the last few weeks working on a little book called *The Art of the Poetic Line* that I'm supposed to write for **Greywolf**. In a kind of childish, petulant way, I wasn't looking forward to beginning it, but I've actually found myself possessed by this project. I'm beginning with a passage from *King Lear* that is prose in the **quarto text** but poetry in the **folio text**—nobody knows what it's supposed to be. It's wonderfully elucidating of the work that line does; in fact, when I thought of this passage, then the whole book seemed like a revelation to me. The last chapter is about prose poetry, the relinquishment of line being powerful in the way that the relinquishment of rhyme or meter can of course be.

Some things cannot be done without, however, and so long as you've mentioned Joanna, I should say that her input into everything I write is crucial; for twenty-five years we've shared every draft of everything we've ever written—ever since we were undergraduates banging away on two typewriters in the same room. I show work to other people, but her eye is a part of me that I couldn't imagine being without. And even

this arrangement feels like something I was chosen by, a gift; how could one really choose the shape of one's life?

Tonight I've been chosen by a production of **Cole Porter's** *Anything Goes*: for weeks our daughters, who are both in it, have been walking around the house singing "You're a Bendel bonnet, a Shakespeare sonnet, you're Mickey Mouse." The dance move for "then get up and shake your halo" is sidesplitting. I wish I could demonstrate. I love the feeling of being in the midst of the act of writing a poem, but when I can't do that, hanging out with the kids is better even than literary criticism. I also planted a lot of pachysandra yesterday—very satisfying, all those neat little rows. ❖