

Colby



Colby Quarterly

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Volume 39  
Issue 3 *September*

Article 10

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September 2003

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### Recommended Citation

Colby Quarterly, Volume 39, no.3, September 2003, p.270-275

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## Michael Longley's Journey to the Real World in *The Weather in Japan*

by WESLEY MCNAIR

IN A RECENT INTERVIEW by Eileen Battersby for *The Irish Times*, Michael Longley defined the obligations of the poet:

Though the poet's first duty must be to his imagination, he has other obligations—and not just as a citizen. He would be inhuman if he did not respond to the tragic events in his own community, and a poor artist if he did not seek to endorse that response imaginatively... In the context of political violence the deployment of words at their most precise and suggestive remains one of the few antidotes to death-dealing dishonesty .

(“The Future Is Behind Us” 5)

Clearly, the community Longley has in mind is his own in Northern Ireland. It has become a truism that Longley is the Ulster poet who, unlike others, stayed behind; it is impossible to discuss his stance as a poet without understanding the responsibility he feels toward his society, torn by sectarian strife. His concern about the cultural differences that divide his country is shown not only in his poetry but in his professional life. As an arts administrator for the Arts Council of Northern Ireland, and later on as a founding member of the Cultural Traditions Group, he promoted the acceptance of cultural diversity. Add to that his boyhood experience of mediating between the middle-class reality of his English parents and the working-class world of his Belfast schoolmates, and dealing with the differences of his parents themselves (“my father's personality was sedimentary; my mother's was volcanic,” he writes in *Tupenny Stung*) (19), and one discovers that his attention to irreconcilables has a long history.

The more Longley has ruminated about Ulster's conflict in his poetry over the years, the more connections he has found between the “tragic events” of Northern Ireland and those of the world at large. In *The Weather in Japan*, he alludes to pre-Civil War tensions in the United States, the battlefields of World War I, and the concentration camps of World War II. “The Vision of Theoclymenus” returns to *The Odyssey*, as Longley has so often done in his work, to link the warfare of recent memory with the violence of the human past:

What class of nightmare are you living through,  
 Poor bastards, your faces, knees shrouded in darkness,  
 The atmosphere electric with keening—for it all  
 Ends in tears—the walls bloody, and the crossbeams  
 Like branches after a cloudburst dripping blood,  
 The porch full of zombies, likewise the haggard  
 Where they jostle to go underground, and no  
 Sun while deadly marsh-gas envelops the globe?

Menacing as the vision Longley describes is, his alter-ego Theoclymenus is in no way overwhelmed by it. “Though it feels to me like midnight here,” Theoclymenus says, “... I shall make it through these doors/ To the real world,” using “my eyes and ears and two feet, with unimpaired/ Intelligence” (13). His assertion suggests the underlying pattern of *The Weather in Japan*, in which by a process of imagination—an effort of the eyes, ears, and intelligence—Longley makes his own way toward an alternative to the “death-dealing” that troubles him, demonstrating to his readers the course of peace.

The poems of the book, characteristic of Longley’s poetry in general, may not at first seem up to the task he has set for himself. Mostly short lyrics that contain personal reflections, they are not suited for public argument, or argument of any sort. Several are only one sentence long, and their syntax offers a key to Longley’s overall approach. The one-sentence poems tend to begin with a clause that introduces the situation or incident they are based on; then they quickly subordinate the incident to their main concern: an image, moment, or thought drawn from the incident. Their sense of a still center of meaning set apart from action belongs to all of Longley’s poems in *The Weather in Japan* (and elsewhere), making them Zen-like, and the title of this collection, among other things, a statement of his aesthetic.

The poem “Heartsease” illustrates the method of the Longley lyric:

When Helen, destroyer of cities, destroyer of men,  
 Slipped the lads a Mickey Finn of wine and heartsease,  
 Unhappiness’s cure, a painkiller strong enough  
 To keep you dry-eyed for a day even if mummy  
 Or daddy pegs out, or your brother or son’s bumped off  
 On the doorstep in front of you (an Egyptian drug?),  
 She hadn’t a clue that where I hail from—beyond  
 The north wind, Hyperborean, or nearly—heartsease  
 Is kiss-me-quick, kiss-me-behind-the-garden-gate,  
 That in Donegal this pansy gets mixed up with selfheal.  
 (13)

In the title of this one-sentence poem is the image Longley focuses on, showing as he does so how effective his lyric can be in examining the issues of war and peace. The poem opens with an incident taken from *The Odyssey* in which Helen puts heartsease into the wine of Menaleus’s guests to make them forget their grief for companions killed in war; it concludes by pondering the altered definition of heartsease hundreds of years later in his own war-torn province. There, the word is used for the stolen kisses of lovers, and just outside Ulster, in Donegal, for a flower whose true name refers to healing. By

pointing out this shift of usage and meaning, Longley slyly implies that to ease the heart of war's sorrows, Northern Ireland might consider the ways of love, or the curative message of wild flowers, associated in his poetry with nature's affirmation of life. The irony is that few in Ulster speak of such antidotes, though the language for them is already on the Irish tongue.

The healing and life-affirming capacity of the flower is implied in other poems of *The Weather in Japan*. The motif they develop together is an example of how Michael Longley conducts his discussion in the volume. For what he may lack in the plot of an argument, he makes up for in the cumulative power of related images. In "The Poppy" the flower in question is a dead one, likened to the drooping head of a dead soldier in World War I. However, the poem ends with the spectacular regeneration of the poppy after the flower-heads fall, and the promise of spiritual renewal for the soldier:

And the poppy that sheds its flower-heads in a day  
Grows in one summer four hundred more, which means  
Two thousand petals overlapping as though to make  
A cape for the corn goddess or a soldier's soul.

(20)

Flanders Fields, whose array of poppies was the subject of a popular poem about the dead of World War I, is surely on Longley's mind in this elegy. The Great War is often on Longley's mind. As he told Pat Boran in an interview published in *Books Ireland*, he has been interested from the start in the impact of "that catastrophe on subsequent Irish and European history," and its own catastrophes ("The Future Is Behind Us" 187). The longest poem of *The Weather In Japan* conveys an extensive and disheartening catalogue of the battlefields and cemeteries of the First World War. Yet in this poem, as in "The Poppy," the harsh facts of death are relieved by the insistence on life brought by the wild flowers that bloom amidst the devastation. So "tiny whitish flowers no one remembers the names of in time" sprout around the shell holes, and violets thrive in mine craters "as though strewn by each cataclysm/ To sweeten the atmosphere and conceal death's smell." In a nettle bed near the grave of Wilfred Owen, celandine grows, "the flower" Longley says, "that outwits winter" (22-23). By completing his poem with this image, he suggests not only nature's validation of life in spite of the death war has brought, but the living power of Owen's poetry, and its own refutation of war.

Clearly, the life force of nature and the harmony of its cycles are essential to the "real world" Longley takes us toward in *The Weather in Japan*. His word for the natural world is "eros," (187) and no poem better reveals nature's eros than "The Flock," where the speaker watches a flock of seals with his mate, the two of them wondering whether the animals are "mating" or "suckling their pups" or "just playing." The sight of the seals' intimacy draws him closer to his human companion and finally leads to a dream vision of swimming among them in their community under the sea.

Touching your shoulder for a second longer takes me  
 Below the surface, and there I move among the seals  
 Without frightening them, a shepherd among his sheep  
 Going over them all and counting his flock by fives  
 And rescuing one lamb from the seaweedy tangle.

(6)

The narrator of this poem is in marked contrast to Theoclymenus, the one speaker identifying so strongly with the natural world that he envisions communing with seals, the other entirely alienated from the midnight world in which he finds himself—Longley's nightmare of Thanatos.

The seals of "The Flock" link with other creatures in *The Weather in Japan* to create a motif that includes sea otters, dolphins, and birds of all sorts. Two of the birds—the swan and the thrush—have traditional connections with poetry and the poet. Others make a music that hints at nature's sorrow for human misdeeds; thus, the "apprehensive cry" of blackbirds and the keening call of woodpigeons in "The War Graves" (23). In their appearances, songs, or flight, all of the birds suggest sympathy and hope, qualities sorely needed in a period of human history so ravaged by destruction.

But the motif that is most important to Michael Longley's, and our, journey to the real world in *The Weather in Japan* concerns the patchwork quilt—both the created object and the process by which it is made. Longley's poetry about the quilt starts with the moving elegy "The Sewing Machine" and features George Fleming, who creates "out of sailors' collars/ A quilt that will cover the sea bed and the graves/ Of submariners in their submarines." The poet invites us to listen as Fleming's "sewing machine cruises among the flot-sam," picking up "hundreds of waterlogged cap tallies"; then he names the submarines and details where they went down, and by what deadly methods: "torpedoes, depth charges/ Mines" (30). In another poem about quilts called "The Design," Longley wonders how to make a quilt for funerals. "How," he asks, "do you sew the night?" (45). As he shows in "The Sewing Machine," one way to sew the night—that is, to repair the tragedy war has caused—is to keep in our memory the numbers of human lives war took away, and where, and how.

George Fleming is only one of the quilt-makers in "The Sewing Machine." The other is Michael Longley, the craftsman who creates from isolated and forgotten events a common memorial. Connections between quilt-making and the craft of art are everywhere in *The Weather in Japan*, even in poems that are not ostensibly about quilts. The materials used by the sculptor Helen Denerly in "Scrap Metal" may not be the disparate articles of clothing from which patchwork quilts are made, but they are disparate nonetheless:

Helen Denerly made the raven out of old iron,  
 Belly and back the brake shoes from a lorry, nuts  
 And bolts for legs and feet, the wings ploughshares  
 ('Ridgers', she elaborates, 'for tatties and neeps'),  
 The eyeballs cogs from a Morris Minor gearbox.

(51)

“The Branch” features another artificer by patchwork, Longley’s father:

The artist in my father transformed the diagonal  
Crack across the mirror on our bathroom cabinet  
Into a branch: that was his way of mending things,  
A streak of brown paint, dabs of green, an accident  
That sprouted leaves ...

(50)

In “Remembering the Poets,” Longley discusses the patchwork of early influences that helped to shape his poetry. To the variety of classical poets he lists, one might add several others, both poets and artists, who have affected the approaches and subject matter of this book, including Irish lyricists, the English war poets Edward Thomas and Wilfred Owen, the painters Courbet and Bjorn Olinder, and poets and painters of the Far East.

For a writer who believes as Longley does in the value of multiculturalism in Irish society, the artist who creates by bringing together different resources is an important model, demonstrating in his work that by embracing diversity, new orders can be found. Thus, quilt-making and the quilt itself are more than metaphors of the creative experience. They suggest the way to create a new social compact in Northern Ireland, one that will carry her citizens beyond the conflicts of warring parties to a transformed nationhood—beyond, that is to say, the midnight of Theoclymenus, to the real world.

“Found Poem” extends the relationship between quilt-making and social action. In the poem Longley’s central figure, Harriet Tubman, the black conductor of the Underground Railroad, appraises the beauty of a quilt she has finished. The poem opens with a carefully constructed sentence that associates her quilt with the Underground Railroad:

As it developed, Harriet Tubman,  
Conductor on the Underground Railroad  
Which was really the long road to the North  
And emancipation for runaway slaves,  
Thought her quilt pattern as beautiful  
As the wild flowers that grew in the woods ...

By withholding the reference for the pronoun “it” in his sentence, Longley encourages us to consider how the Underground Railroad is like a quilt, taking its shape from the collaboration of a community of like-minded people—abolitionists, church members, and freed slaves—all putting aside their differences to serve a greater good. That the Tubman of Longley’s poem likens the quilt pattern she has made to wild flowers growing in the wood and at the sides of roads reminds us in one more way of the Underground Railroad, itself off main roads and hidden. The names of wild flowers mentioned in the poem are also suggestive: “Jerusalem flower” alludes to the spiritual promise blacks associated with a life in the North, free of slave holders; “motherwort” (literally, mother plant) touches on the motherly influence of Harriet Tubman, watching over and protecting the lives of those she has released from bondage. Stitching together the familiar motifs of wild flowers

and quilt-making with a scrap of prose found in Ann Petry's biography of Harriet Tubman, Longley has created his own patchwork quilt in "Found Poem." In its content and its form, the poem illustrates what can be achieved when diversity is honored.

The theme of the quilt in *The Weather in Japan* culminates in "All of These People," which brings the issue of multiculturalism home to Northern Ireland. The people of the poem's title are members of Longley's neighborhood, and he speaks proudly of the community they have created. Like the patches of a quilt, they have their dissimilarities, yet each makes a contribution that helps to create the larger social order. Though there is diversity, there is an acceptance of difference. "Our cobbler," Longley tells us, "mends shoes for everybody." The butcher, he adds, blends "into his best sausages leeks, garlic, honey," the sausages by themselves illustrating the benefit that can come from diversity in combination. And when the "Catholic greengrocer" is murdered by a terrorist in this community, he dies "in the arms of the Methodist minister," each of the two having settled beforehand the very sectarian strife that causes the greengrocer's death. The important question Longley asks about peace in this poem—"Who can bring peace to people who are not civilized?"—does not refer to the citizens of his civilized community, then, but to the people who have visited upon it, and upon Ulster generally, the barbarity of war.

Longley's question in "All of These People" resonates well beyond *The Weather in Japan*. For though his poems and the motifs that integrate them lead us through the doors of Theoclymenus's nightmare toward his real world, hostilities persist in Northern Ireland, and war continues throughout the globe. The task of bringing the ways of peace to a world ravaged by conflict is a daunting and perhaps a futile one. Yet by writing small poems with large implications in *The Weather in Japan*, Michael Longley takes on the task.

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