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Inscribing Cultural Corridors: 
Michael Longley’s Contribution to 
Reconciliation in Northern Ireland

BY RICHARD RANKIN RUSSELL

On 10 December 1974, Michael Longley wrote a letter to the editor of Hibernia protesting Padraic Fiacc’s article “Violence and the Ulster Poet,” which advertised for his anthology The Wearing of the Black, a collection of poems from seventy-three poets concerning violence in the province. In his letter, Longley condemns the idea of poetry as a mere response to sectarian conflict and the shocking attempt by Fiacc to collect poems on this subject:

Dear Sir,

I write to protest against Padraic Fiacc’s sloppily written and presumptuous article “Violence and the Ulster Poet” (Hibernia, 6.12.74).

Fiacc claims that I fought him about including a poem of mine on the assassination of my "grocer and friend." This is a personal matter which Fiacc has no right to report. The grocer was not my friend: I rather liked him, that’s all. The poem seemed to me to be bad, or at least inadequate, and I asked that it should not be included in Fiacc’s Encyclopedia of Tormented Ulster Poets. Imagine my surprise when, as our hero admits, he re-arranged it for me. Since Fiacc can scarcely write a coherent sentence, his re-arrangement did not amount to an improvement. Fiacc then presumures to read my thoughts on the subject [...] Fiacc ends in grand style by referring to “the Ulster poet’s tragic anguish.” Selfregarding nonsense like this makes me feel ashamed of the journalistic tag “Ulster poet.” (I am normally just embarrassed or irritated).

I wish to dissociate myself and my poetry from Fiacc’s pathetic meanderings. He buzzes around the Ulster tragedy like a dazed bluebottle around an open wound.

(“Letter to the Editor.” Hibernia 10 December 1974)

Longley’s revulsion toward Fiacc’s collection coheres perfectly with the philosophy he had recently articulated, in his introduction to a collection of essays he edited on Northern Irish arts entitled Causeway: The Arts in Ulster (1971), about the artist’s responsibility in dealing with civil discord:

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 realize 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 unfaltering spontaneity on events immediately after they have happened.

(8)
Patrick Kavanagh’s brief, foundational essay, “The Parish and the Universe,” was particularly instructive for both Longley and Heaney in developing their notions of proper poetic subjects. Kavanagh confirmed to them that their own province was worth studying in some detail. The elder poet argued that the very specificity of the local conditions of the parochial writer lends him artistic validity and integrity, as opposed to the impulse to mimic the metropolis in the provincial writer, which always weakens his work:

Parochialism and provincialism are opposites. The provincial has no mind of his own; he does not trust what his eyes see until he has heard what the metropolis—toward which his eyes are turned—has to say on any subject [...]. The parochial mentality on the other hand is never in any doubt about the social and artistic validity of his parish. All great civilizations are based on parochialism—Greek, Israelite, English. In Ireland we are inclined to be provincial, not parochial, for it requires a great of courage to be parochial [...]. There is always that element of bravado which takes pleasure in the notion that the potato-patch is the ultimate. To be parochial a man needs the right kind of sensitive courage and the right kind of sensitive humility. Parochialism is universal; it deals with the fundamentals.”

Along with this attention to detail as part of developing the aesthetic criteria for his poetry, Longley explored commitment to the integrity of the artistic endeavor in times of civil unrest. In 1969 he argued in a seminal essay, “Strife and the Ulster Poet,” that the primary duty of the artist at such a time is to his imagination, adumbrating the concerns about the artist’s role in a conflicted society he would articulate more fully in his introduction to Causeway. This duty does not preclude political or cultural engagement with the problems brought on by the unrest; rather, attention given the imagination can also positively affect the political situation. Longley concludes this essay by noting that he no longer has a “life which is my own entirely. However, as a poet I insist that the imagination has a life of its own, a life that has to be saved: if it isn’t, everything else will be lost” (765). His urgent declaration about the autonomy of the imagination remains perhaps the most striking statement to be issued about the relevance of art to conflict. If art will have any significant role to play in responding to the violence, Longley suggests, it must stay stay faithful to the imagination, not to the headlines of the newspaper on any given day.

Longley’s development of an aesthetic that was highly formal but also ethical in its concern over cultural and political conditions in his native province certainly has its roots in his participation in Philip Hobsbaum’s famous writing group at Queen’s University Belfast in the early to mid-1960s. Echoing Kavanagh’s advice to later generations of Irish poets, Hobsbaum urged his students to write out of what they knew and many of them took his advice. Hobsbaum was a Leavisite and displayed a penchant for formality in his own poetry and criticism, but, just as important, he also managed to bridge the sectarian divide in the city by bringing together artists from a variety of classes and religious persuasions. While Longley rejected Hobsbaum’s particular aesthetic—a preference for direct and unrhymed poetry—Hobsbaum’s precision in articulating his own formalistic views may have influenced Longley’s
development of a highly formalized style, often featuring rhyme, that persisted until the poems of *Gorse Fires*. In the Group, Longley interacted socially and artistically with Catholics, a group that while familiar to him through his attending a school composed of mostly Catholics, he had abstracted before entering university. The Group, then, modeled the twin emphasis on aesthetics and ethics and influenced him to adopt this emphasis of his poetry.

The indignation in Longley’s letter about Fiacc’s collection—which cheapened both the murders and the poetry—suggests the difficulty that many artists from the province have had in trying to write literature dealing with the conflict. Every Northern Irish poet writing in the last three decades has had to come to terms with conflict in the province. Seamus Heaney’s achievement in this regard has long been recognized. Longley’s work toward reconciliation, especially in his poetry, has been relatively overlooked. The present essay seeks to redress this imbalance and to delineate Longley’s unique contribution to political and cultural reconciliation in the province through his articulation of an aesthetic and spiritual theory of reconciliation, grounded in his semantically precise poetry, which is constantly attuned to the interaction between the material and spiritual worlds.

Despite clear evidence to the contrary, some criticism of Longley’s work accords him no engagement with the province’s violence in his poetry before *Gorse Fires* (1991). Jonathan Hufstader, for example, in his recent book on Northern Irish poetry and social violence claims that Longley’s early poetry dealing with the Troubles is bewildered and too distanced from the violence. Hufstader strangely attempts to separate Longley the Northern Irish Arts Council worker from Longley the poet, arguing that until the publication of *Gorse Fires* in 1991, “Longley the poet” refused to get involved in or even comment upon the conflict in Northern Ireland. Hufstader’s misapprehension of Longley’s consistent poetic engagement with the violence in the province, and his bifurcation of Longley into concerned public official and diffident private poet, continues a strain of Longley criticism that includes earlier readers such as Stan Smith.

My own analysis of some of Longley’s poems from the 1970s demonstrates the critical misapprehension of both Smith’s and Hufstader’s appraisals of Longley’s early poetry. These poems register the shock from the violence endemic in the North in the late 1960s and 1970s and draw connections with violence in other times and places, achieving a powerful multi-temporality. For example, the famous poem “Wounds” from *An Exploded View* (1972), recognizes the contribution of Ulster Protestants to the Battle of the Somme in World War I, but also acknowledges the victims of political violence in the province in the late 1960s and 1970s and the victims of random domestic violence as well. The poem opens with “two pictures from my father’s head”: “First, the Ulster Division at the Somme // Going over the top with ‘Fuck the Pope!’ / ‘No Surrender!’: a boy about to die, / Screaming ‘Give ‘em one for the Shankill!’ / ‘Wilder than Gurkhas’ were my father’s
words / Of admiration and bewilderment” (lines 3-8). The second picture is of “the London-Scottish padre / Resettling kilts with his swagger-stick, / With a stylish backhand and a prayer.” The first section concludes with an image of Longley’s father dying: “At last, a belated casualty, / He said—lead traces flaring until they hurt—‘I am dying for King and Country, slowly.’ / I touched his hand, his thin head I touched” (An Exploded View 40).

In the second section of the poem, Longley mentally buries “Three teenage soldiers, bellies full of / Bullets and Irish beer” beside his father, an indication of his recognition of their joint service to an abstract idea of nation and the utter senselessness of war. His father has held onto the idea of “dying for King and Country” ever since he served in the war, while the contemporary teenage soldiers here have been co-opted into serving a diminished British Empire. These teenage soldiers are Catholic Irish lads who have joined the British Army, since they are associated with “the Sacred Heart of Jesus” Longley mentions after the “packet of Woodbines” and “lucifer” he throws into the grave. Longley’s recognition (though not approval) of their “service” indicates his view of the universal nature of war and its participants. Another obvious connection between these soldiers and those from World War I is their youth; Longley decries their common lost youth, symbolized here by the image of the “heavy guns [which] put out / The night-light in a nursery for ever.” Longley goes on to associate (not equate) the “service” rendered by his father and the British soldiers with that of the bus-conductor, since he throws the “bus-conductor’s uniform” into the grave as well. This bus-conductor is a victim of seemingly random violence. We are told that “he collapsed beside his carpet-slippers / Without a murmur, shot through the head / By a shivering boy who wandered in / Before they could turn the television down / Or tidy away the supper dishes. / To the children, to a bewildered wife, / I think ‘Sorry Missus’ was what he said” (An Exploded View 40-41). While Hufstader conflates what he perceives as Longley’s bewilderment with that of the poet’s father and bus-conductor’s wife in the poem, Longley’s elegy actually perceives a continuation among the ostensibly legitimized violence in the theater of World War I, the violence in the province in the late 1960s and early 1970s, and random violence in a domestic context. The brilliance of this poem lies in the way in which Longley outlines three different kinds of service—his father’s World War I service; the current service of the British soldiers; the service of the bus-conductor to the community—then shows how the dehumanizing nature of violence pervades both the moments of service and the moments when that service is over.

The Irish poet Brendan Kennelly clearly appreciated Longley’s evenhandedness in this poem. In a letter of 23 November 1973, he wrote Longley that the poem stood out from others about the conflict in its ecumenism: “Wounds […] is a stunningly good piece of work, the best poem I know written about the troubles in Belfast. The problem with most of the poetry written about your city is that, to put it bluntly, the poems are sectarian and therefore crippled. Wounds knows no frontiers and its pity is unconfined” (“Letter to
Michael Longley”). In “Wounds” Longley seems to agree with World War I poet Wilfred Owen that “the poetry is in the pity,” suggesting his universal condemnation of violence in any context—martial or domestic—and implying his sympathy for the victims. Owen’s role in developing the duty of the artist in relation to violence has been instructive for Longley in other ways as well. In his introduction to Causeway: The Arts in Ulster, Longley argues that the Northern Irish artist shares with artists in the midst of conflict everywhere a duty to warn the community about the implications of the violence: “as Wilfred Owen stated over fifty years ago, it is the artist’s duty to warn, to be tuned in before anyone else to the implications of a situation” (8). “Wounds” can thus be read as an early warning about the Troubles, suggesting that citizens of Northern Ireland recognize that their situation is not unique and that the violence there is part of a universal continuum of violence that has been ongoing for many years. At the same time, the poem intensely individualizes the violence through Longley’s articulation of a real scenario about his father’s war experience and the imagined burial of his father, the IRA soldiers, and the bus-conductor’s uniform.

Since poems dealing directly with “The Troubles” are relatively rare in Longley’s work, the ones that do should be seen as particularly important in understanding Longley’s views on the vexed question of how to artistically critique the conflict. One of these is the sparely beautiful poetic sequence “Wreaths,” which is comprised of three poems examining the sectarian murders of ordinary people in the North: “The Civil Servant,” “The Greengrocer,” and “The Linen Workers.” “Wreaths” appeared in The Echo Gate (1979), the last volume of poetry Longley published until Gorse Fires in 1991. A sharp focus on material remnants of the deceased unifies these three poems. The emphasis in “The Civil Servant” is on the man’s private life: “The books he had read, the music he could play.” After he is killed, “his widow took a hammer and chisel / And removed the black keys from his piano,” to both demonstrate her brokenness and to remove the harsh tones his death has injected into her life (The Echo Gate 12).

“The Greengrocer” is characterized by the greenery that abounded in the man’s shop: “holly wreaths for Christmas, / Fir trees on the pavement outside” (The Echo Gate 12). In the second stanza, Longley manages to insert the greengrocer into the traditional Christmas story, giving it a contemporary Northern Irish emphasis:

Astrologers or three wise men
Who may shortly be setting out
For a small house up the Shankill
Or the Falls, should pause on their way
To buy gifts at Jim Gibson’s shop,
Dates and chestnuts and tangerines.

(The Echo Gate 12)
Instead of gold, frankincense and myrrh, we have “dates and chestnuts and tangerines.” Peter McDonald has pointed out the soothing quality of this concluding grocery list of items: “The focus on the particular at the end of this poem is the very opposite of frivolous; it ensures the maintenance of Longley’s characteristic gravitas, which is essentially the seriousness of a complete imaginative fidelity to the immediate. The nouns are meant to soothe, though they cannot (and do not) pretend to console” (Mistaken Identities 136). In addition to the concluding “naming” in this poem, the victim is also named, whereas he remained anonymous in the previous one. Perhaps most important, Longley’s recognition of a possible solution to the conflict emerges in this updated vision of the journey of the magi who visit the two sectarian ghettos of the city. He sees the celebration of the birth of the only One who can truly bring peace as still worth noting in the midst of this tragedy.

“The Linen Workers” continues the trajectory of this sequence toward the more personal, since it combines a famous massacre from the Troubles with memories of Longley’s father. The poem opens, however, with Longley’s image of another material remnant, Christ’s teeth:

Christ’s teeth ascended with him into heaven:  
Through a cavity in one of his molars  
The wind whistles: he is fastened for ever  
By his exposed canines to a wintry sky.  
(The Echo Gate 13)

The two main functions of the first stanza, seemingly from a child’s point of view, are to suggest a motif of body parts that Longley associates with other deceased people, and to set the poem in a Christian context. In stanza two, however, a mature Longley quickly conflates Christ’s teeth with his father’s false teeth:

I am blinded by the blaze of that smile  
And by the memory of my father’s false teeth  
Brimming in their tumbler: they wore bubbles  
And, outside of his body, a deadly grin.  
(13)

We have already seen Longley write his father’s World War II experience into “Wounds,” a poem that also explores victims of the Troubles and universal political violence. As it turns out, this poem does something similar, for his father’s dentures are quickly succeeded by another set of false teeth in stanza three:

When they massacred the 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.  
(13)
This massacre took place in January 1976 when a van of linen workers was stopped by the Provisional IRA in the North. The masked men killed all of the workers except for the lone Catholic in the group. Longley subtly evokes the outrageous nature of their deaths by the material objects they leave behind: money, false teeth, blood, and food particles. Somehow, in the aftermath of this tragedy, Longley is able to see the symbols of the Eucharist—the bread and the wine. Their sacrifice becomes part of a continuum that includes Christ’s sacrifice on the cross. In thus evoking a sacrifice valued by Protestants and Catholics alike, this stanza suggests the Christian grounds of a potential reconciliation between opposing cultures in Northern Ireland.

The poem ends with Longley preparing his father’s body for burial by employing the objects left from the linen workers’ massacre:

Before I can bury my father once again
I must polish the spectacles, balance them
Upon his nose, fill his pockets with money
And into his dead mouth slip the set of teeth.

This bizarre concluding image somehow perfectly ends the poem. By using the belongings of the dead workers to prepare his father for the journey of death, Longley memorializes the workers by bodying bits of them forth in his father. This process effects a strange, secular sort of transubstantiation that follows from the food particles and blood in the previous stanza. There, Longley suggests a theological, eternal memorialization of the linen workers for the community of believers; here, he renders significant parts of them in a secular present preparation of his father’s body for reburial. The effect is both settling and unsettling, peaceful and gruesome.

After a hiatus of twelve years in which he published no volumes of poetry, Longley came out with Gorse Fires in 1991, the publication of which coincided to the day he retired from the Arts Council of Northern Ireland. One of the longest poems in that volume is “The Butchers,” which is ostensibly about Odysseus’s return home and its violent aftermath but is also an indictment of the gruesome murders of Catholics by the Shankill Butchers in Belfast during the mid-1970s, and of sectarian violence generally. Most of the poem follows the storyline of this episode from the Odyssey; its conclusion, however, is from the beginning of Book 24, where Hermes leads the ghosts of the suitors into the underworld. This is a gory episode and Longley’s poem pulls no punches; if anything, his version is bloodier than Homer’s:

When he had made sure there were no survivors in his house
And that all the suitors were dead, heaped in blood and dust
Like fish that fishermen with fine-meshed nets have hauled
Up gasping for salt water, evaporating in the sunshine,
Odysseus, spattered with muck and like a lion dripping blood
From his chest and cheeks after devouring a farmer’s bullock,
Ordered the disloyal housemaids to sponge down the armchairs
And tables, while Telemachos, the oxherd and the swineherd
Scraped the floor with shovels, and then between the portico
And the roundhouse stretched a hawser and hanged the women
So none touched the ground with her toes, like long-winged thrushes
Or doves trapped in a mist-net across the thicket where they roost,
Their heads bobbing in a row, their feet twitching but not for long,
And when they had dragged Melanthios's corpse into the haggard
And cut off his nose and ears and cock and balls, a dog's dinner,
Odysseus, seeing the need for whitewash and disinfectant,
Fumigated the house and the outhouses, so that Hermes
Like a clergyman might wave the supernatural baton
With which he resurrects or hypnotises those he chooses,
And waken and round up the suitors' souls, and the housemaids',
Like bats gibbering in the nooks of their mysterious cave
When out of the clusters that dangle from the rocky ceiling
One of them drops and squeaks, so their souls were bat-squeaks
As they flittered after Hermes, their deliverer, who led them
Along the clammy sheughs, then past the oceanic streams
And the white rock, the sun's gatepost in that dreamy region,
Until they came to a bog-meadow full of bog-asphodels
Where the residents are ghosts or images of the dead.

(Selected Poems 101)

Part of the poem's continuous power derives from Longley's seamless connection of the events toward the end of Book 22 and those from the beginning of Book 24 in the Odyssey, as Peter McDonald notes: "In an extraordinary feat of syntactical suppleness, Longley joins his two source passages together without a moment's sign of the surgery: the twenty-eight long lines of the poem as a whole constitute one complete sentence, and the slaughter is made literally of a piece with its supernatural sequel" ("Lapsed Classics: Homer, Ovid, and Michael Longley's Poetry" 43). In that sweeping sentence, Longley also achieves something of the quality of epic style that C. S. Lewis argues marks Milton's epic style in Paradise Lost.

Although McDonald, one of Longley's most discerning critics, argues that Longley's title "courts (but does not exactly lay claim to) parallels with the shorthand of Northern Irish atrocities" ("Lapsed Classics" 42), the changes Longley makes to this crucial section of the epic themselves suggest otherwise. For example, where Homer portrays Odysseus and his men only pulling Melanthios's genitals off and then cutting off his nose and ears, Longley significantly has "his nose and ears and cock and balls" all cut off (line 15). And where Homer has Odysseus fumigate the house with smoke in order to purify the house from both the past presence of the suitors and their amorous desires for Penelope and to cleanse the present gore from their bodies on the walls and floors, Longley has Odysseus fumigate the house because he sees "the need for whitewash and disinfectant" (line 16). Finally, in the most important change of all, Longley's poem argues that only when this fumigation is performed can "Hermes / Like a clergyman [...] wave the supernatural baton / With which he resurrects or hypnotises those he chooses" (16-18). Why are Melanthios's body parts only cut off; why are they not both torn off and cut? Why does Longley use the modern word "whitewash," with its simultaneously soothing and negative connotations? And why is Hermes compared to a
clergyman using a baton? Finally, why end the poem with images of an hibernicized meadow and hibernicized flowers if it is only about events from the *Odyssey*? The poem’s title and the accretive power of these images suggest a very specific parallel with a particularly disturbing period in the province’s recent history. Read in the context of Longley’s ongoing concern with ethical responses to violence generally, his specific aesthetic choices in translating these two sections of the poem can be properly understood.

This array of images he inserted into the poem would have had special resonance for residents of Northern Ireland in the early 1990s. The gruesome and lingering image of the dismembering of Melanthios’s body accomplished *solely through cutting*, not cutting and tearing, coupled with the poem’s title, specifically suggest Longley’s comparison of this action with the violent killings committed by the Shankill Butchers in the mid-1970s. These killers were members of the Protestant paramilitary group, the Ulster Volunteer Force, and were led by Lenny Murphy. Peter Taylor has written that starting in late 1975, eleven members of the Shankill Butchers killed nineteen people, mostly Catholics, by stabbing them with butcher knives; they then dismembered them and abandoned the bodies. Even after Murphy was arrested in March 1976 and sent to the Maze prison, which housed paramilitary prisoners in the province until recently, he continued to direct his gang from inside until the remaining “Butchers” were arrested the next year. The leadership of the UVF at the time of the Shankill Road killings in the 1970s disturbingly allowed the killings to continue although they probably could have stopped them (*Loyalists* 153-55). These crimes outraged the citizens of Northern Ireland and signified an all-time low point in the Troubles.

Longley acknowledged in a recent interview the strong connection he had in his mind when writing the poem between the Shankill murders and the awful murders and dismemberings committed toward the end of the *Odyssey*:

> we were in Mayo, in this very remote cottage which we go to in Co. Mayo, which is sandy and remote. And the little smallholdings, and outhouses [...] it seemed to me that Odysseus would feel perfectly at home there—if slightly cold and damp—in that sort of an Irish scene—the smallholdings, the outhouses and the whitewashed walls [...] And that was my feeling—and at that time one of the things people were talking about was the Shankill Road murders. There’d been some dreadful killings and torturings in outhouses, very remote places like that.

(“Interview with Michael Longley by Sarah Broom” 18)

The rural setting of some of the murders seems to have struck a nerve with Longley, who thought he had escaped the often urban violence in the province in acquiring a cottage in rural County Mayo where he has periodically lived for many years. A close reading of his particular translation of these lines demonstrates again his penchant for critiquing violence in multi-temporal contexts.

The most interesting way in which he carries out this critique is through obliquely linking the Shankill Butchers, the Royal Ulster Constabulary, and the Reverend Ian Paisley in lines seventeen through nineteen, when he writes that “Hermes / Like a clergyman might wave the supernatural baton / With
which he resurrects or hypnotises those he chooses.” If Odysseus and his men are taken to be analogs for the Shankill Butchers, then Hermes, who is significantly described as “Like a clergyman” could easily be the outrageous Paisley, who has urged violence against Catholics from his pulpit but never himself been linked to any crimes. Paisley’s exhortations have been taken literally by a number of Protestant paramilitary members in the province, and thus, the suggestion that Hermes is directing the subsequent action, much as a conductor does a musical score by using his baton, is certainly plausible. The beginning of the clause that follows the fumigation of the house and out-houses—“so that Hermes” might lead the suitors away—suggests that the whitewashing undertaken is a sanitization process by which Hermes keeps his own hands clean, much as Paisley has managed to keep his own hands clean during the decades of the conflict, despite his murderous rhetoric against Catholics. Strengthening the connotation that Hermes signifies Paisley, the god is portrayed as using his baton “With which he resurrects or hypnotises those he chooses.” Paisley’s political power carries similar implications: he can make anyone’s political career and also mesmerizes his followers with his fiery religious oratory. Hermes’s “baton” also evokes images of the Royal Ulster Constabulary, now the Northern Irish Police Service, whose officers still carry batons. If Longley had wanted to suggest a more traditional image of Hermes, he probably would have chosen “wand,” with its more enchanting or comforting connotations. Finally, Longley evokes western Ireland with its majority Catholic population in the concluding image of the “bog-meadow full of bog-asphodels.” Since this area is where the suitors are led, this image heightens the analog with the Catholics murdered by the Shankill Butchers, some of whose bodies were left in remote rural areas. Thus, his clear revulsion is evident toward the murders in both the Odyssey and in 1970s Northern Ireland, despite the poem’s seemingly peaceful pastoral setting in its conclusion. Both the ghosts of the suitors, in the concluding lines of the poem, and the memories of those Catholics killed by the Shankill Butchers, in the minds of their friends and relatives, linger on, troubling reminders of the worst kind of atrocities.

While his distancing of himself from fellow Protestants who murdered purely for sectarian reasons reflects his humanitarian side and his continued sympathy for members of the nationalist community, Longley is implicitly arguing as well that murder for vengeance is always wrong. This point too has multi-temporal implications. Just as Odysseus’s righteous anger in the pursuit of Penelope by the suitors became immoral when he and his men slaughtered the suitors, so, Longley suggests, did the righteous anger of Northern Protestants when members of their own community began killing Catholics on and around the Shankill Road in Belfast in the 1970s as a response to an upsurge of IRA violence in the province. Both the Protestants who did not speak out against the murders and the murderers themselves are condemned since both are ultimately culpable. But, despite all the links with the Shankill Butchers the poem explores, Longley’s point about vengeance.
has applications to outraged members of the Catholic nationalist community as well. It is possible, then, to extrapolate from this poem and read it as a condemnation of the sort of nationalist violence represented by the IRA, whose members originally reinvigorated the dormant movement in the late 1960s and early 1970s in response to attacks on fellow Catholic civil rights demonstrators, particularly in Derry. Thus the poem’s condemnation of not just murder, but specifically murder for the purpose of vengeance, has multiple applications both in its original setting and in its contemporary setting in Northern Ireland.

In 1995 Longley published *The Ghost Orchid*, a volume of poetry with perhaps his most famous poem about the Troubles, “Ceasefire.” This poem, originally published in the *Irish Times*, borrows its narrative frame from the mourning together of the Greek warrior Achilles and the Trojan king Priam in the midst of the Trojan War, but its title and date of composition (shortly before the 1994 IRA ceasefire) suggest the path to reconciliation for those on both sides of the conflict in Northern Ireland. I quote it in full here:

I

Put in mind of his own father and moved to tears
Achilles took him by the hand and pushed the old king
Gently away, but Priam curled up at his feet and
Wept with him until their sadness filled the building.

II

Taking Hector’s corpse into his own hands Achilles
Made sure it was washed and, for the old king’s sake,
Laid out in uniform, ready for Priam to carry
Wrapped like a present home to Troy at daybreak.

III

When they had eaten together, it pleased them both
To stare at each other’s beauty as lovers might,
Achilles built like a god, Priam good-looking still
And full of conversation, who earlier had sighed:

IV

‘I get down on my knees and do what must be done
And kiss Achilles’ hand, the killer of my son.’

(Selected Poems 118)

This is a companion poem of sorts to “The Butchers”: both poems are set against the backdrop of an ancient conflict but comment incisively on two significant moments in the Troubles through their titles and their artful recapturing of violence and peace, respectively. If “The Butchers” represents one of the most horrific moments of the Troubles, then “Ceasefire” represents one of the most difficult, yet ultimately unifying moments—the declaration of a cessation of military activity by the IRA in 1994. In a recent interview, Longley discussed how he hoped the poem would make a contribution, however slight, to the IRA ceasefire that was rumored at the time of the poem’s composition:
when I was writing it, it was at the time when there were rumours of an IRA ceasefire, and I wrote it partly because I do have some sense of the magic of poetry in the world—hoping that it would make some tiny, tiny, miniscule, unimportant contribution to the drift towards a ceasefire. And I sent it to The Irish Times and hoped that they would print it, in the hope that if they did print it somebody might read it and it might change the mind of one ditherer on the IRA Council. And by coincidence the IRA did declare a ceasefire—I think it was a Thursday, and then on the Saturday the poem appeared, which was a coincidence. The coincidence struck people, and the poem [...], had some kind of public life in as much as priests and politicians picked it up. I found that a refreshment. I was asked to read it when I went here and there, and what I should have said when I read the poem—but I didn’t, you see, because I didn’t want to put a jinx on the peace process—I should have said, of course, this is only a twelve-day ceasefire and the Trojan war resumes. And Achilles himself gets killed.

("Interview with Michael Longley by Sarah Broom" 21)

By its publication two days after the IRA ceasefire, the poem seems to violate Longley’s own rule that the poet shouldn’t be “a super-journalist commenting with unfaltering spontaneity on events immediately after they have happened” (“Introduction” to Causeway: The Arts in Ulster 8). As he points out, however, he wrote the poem as an attempt to actually influence the ceasefire, an attempt that conforms more to his theory that the poet should, in Wilfred Owen’s words, warn about the implications of an event. Longley’s political prescience here lies not so much in anticipating the ceasefire, which was in the air anyway, but in realizing that “ceasefire,” with its implications of a possible resumption of violence, was more appropriate to the situation than a poem about the final end of an armed struggle. After all, the IRA had declared lengthy ceasefires before and often had declared short ones around Christmas. Longley did not want to get his or his readers’ hopes up. At the same time, the poem suggests that this is a moment rich with potential for a future permanent end to the violence between the Greeks and the Trojans and among the IRA, the Protestant paramilitaries, and the British Army.

For instance, the opening phrase of the first line of the poem suggests that generations of violence can be stopped by the wrenching process of forgiveness. Achilles is significantly “Put in mind of his own father” upon seeing Priam’s utter despair at his son Hector’s death. The two men, one a displaced father, the other the battle-hardened son of another father, end up weeping together at the end of this stanza, lamenting Hector and presumably all the men who have died in the Trojan War. Their joint weeping seems to lead them to an honesty that was not present between them previously, for Achilles’s presentation of Hector’s cleansed body, “wrapped like a gift” and dressed in his uniform, to Priam in the next stanza suggests a straightforwardness in their new relationship to each other. This new rapport between the two leaders of their respective countries signifies just how much has changed in their formerly suspicious attitudes toward the other; this gift engenders trust, whereas the Greeks’ earlier deceptive gift of the Trojan horse created mutual distrust. In stanza three, the two men break bread together and admire each other’s rugged good looks. Despite the sonic neatness of the concluding couplet that comprises stanza four, Priam’s words urge forgiveness of a most unqualified sort: “I get down on my knees and do what must be done / And

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'kiss Achilles' hand, the killer of my son.' That "must" has three possible meanings. First, Priam may be expressing the martial and societal obligation of the term, in that he is expected as a representative of the defeated Trojan army to kiss Achilles's hand. At the same time, it could be argued that the old king feels he must go through this process for himself—to avoid being destroyed with anger and hatred toward Achilles. Finally, Priam could be humbling himself out of societal and martial duty, and in the process, his heart changes and he really can forgive Achilles. Whatever the particular intended meaning of the gesture, the point seems to be that private verbal declarations of forgiveness must be accompanied by something like a public and honest announcement of the change of heart, while fully acknowledging the extent of the sin committed against the forgiver. The public life that the poem acquired suggests that its specific image of forgiveness resonated for a number of individuals in the province.

This poem and Longley's other poems about the conflict in Northern Ireland continually suggest the very real potential of imaginative literature in the North for opening the "cultural corridor" between nationalists and unionists about which the critic Edna Longley has written so perceptively. As she has argued, literature can provide a space in which ecumenism on the individual and societal levels can flourish:

The literature produced by Ulster people suggests that, instead of brooding on Celtic and Orange dawns, its inhabitants might accept this province-in-two-contexts as a cultural corridor. Unionists want to block the corridor at one end, republicans at the other. Culture, like common sense, insists it can't be done. Ulster Irishness and Ulster Britishness are bound to each other and to Britain and Ireland.

(“Opening Up: A New Pluralism” 24-25)

Edna Longley's contention speculates how Northern Irish literature might transcend traditional political boundaries—while simultaneously recognizing them—and create a corridor of communication between the most intransigent factions of the province. This process would be a crucial step toward reconciliation.

Michael Longley has had a continuing interest in such cultural reconciliation, through his poetry and through his work with the Arts Council of Northern Ireland. Though not an orthodox Christian, Longley nevertheless has drawn on contemporary theological theories about reconciliation that have their origin in work done by the late Hannah Arendt. In her book, The Human Condition: A Study of the Central Questions Facing Modern Man (1959), Arendt argues that there is a political importance to two religious traits—the capacity to forgive and the capacity to make promises. For Arendt, forgiveness and promise-making have a special resonance for the modern world:

The possible redemption from the predicament of irreversibility—of being unable to undo what one has done though one did not, and could not, have known what he was doing—is the faculty of forgiving. The remedy for unpredictability, for the chaotic uncertainty of the future, is contained in the faculty to make and keep promises. The two faculties belong together in so far as one of them, forgiving, serves to undo the deeds of the past, whose "sins" hang like Damocles' sword over every new generation; and the other, binding oneself through promises, serves to set
up in the ocean of uncertainty, which the future is by definition, islands of security without which not even continuity, let alone durability of any kind, would be possible in relationships.

(qtd. in Wells, People Behind the Peace: Community and Reconciliation in Northern Ireland 40)

Arendt’s theory, applied to the ongoing conversation on forgiveness in Northern Ireland, suggests that forgiveness can release both the sinner and the sinned against from the pernicious binding power of past crimes and their effect, while promise-making might effect a new island controlled not by security forces but by a secure sense of relationships based on trust. Arendt’s articulation of the “islands of security” that would result from this process is uncannily similar to Longley’s image of stepping stones which he argued in 1971 is the artist’s duty to establish in troubled societies (“Introduction” Causeway 9). At the same time, her sense that forgiveness can actually “undo the deeds of the past” is ill-founded and does victims of political violence anywhere a disservice.

Donald Shriver’s theory of reconciliation has specifically influenced Longley’s thinking on this topic. Shriver has extended Arendt’s theory of reconciliation and imbued it with Christian theology. As Shriver argues in his book, An Ethic for Enemies, political forgiveness begins with a collective memory “suffused with moral judgment.” He cannot subscribe to the maxim, “Forgive and forget,” arguing instead that true forgiveness is only possible if we remember the crime committed. Since forgiveness on any level necessitates a forgiveness of a specific injury, it is important to recall the injury to effect the full, efficacious power of this process. Shriver also believes that forgiveness can still involve punishment for the perpetrators, but that Christians must forgo vengeance if they seek legal justice. Additionally, he argues that Christians must develop an empathy for the enemy’s humanity as a step toward creating a future, workable, ecumenical community (qtd. in Wells 41-42). It is important to point out the distinction between forgiveness and reconciliation: “forgiveness begins the process of which reconciliation is the end; reconciliation must combine repentance and justice with forgiveness” (Wells 45).

Longley’s poems dealing with the Troubles are consistent with the outlook he developed while working in the Arts Council of Northern Ireland and later in the Cultural Traditions Group. They are crucial to understanding how literature has been an effective, nondidactic tool for cultural communication in Northern Ireland. As Longley notes in the conclusion to his memoir:

In Ulster, cultural apartheid is sustained to their mutual impoverishment by both communities. W. R. Rodgers referred to the “creative wave of self-consciousness” which can result from a confluence of cultures. In Ulster this confluence pools historical contributions from the Irish, the Scots, the English and the Anglo-Irish. Reconciliation does not mean all the colors of the spectrum running so wetly together that they blur into muddy uniformity. Nor does it mean denying political differences. [...] The Cultural Traditions approach involves a mixture of affirmation, self-interrogation and mutual curiosity. To bring to light all that has been repressed can be a painful process; but, to quote the American theologian Don Shriver: “The cure and the remembrance are co-terminous.”

(Tupenny Stung: 75-76)
Longley’s image of a spectrum here suggests the efforts of this group to prismatically include the different traditions in the province, affirm each individually, and stress affinities and differences among them. His recognition and incorporation of Shriver’s thinking into his approach toward cultural education suggests the real and potential success for reconciliation—not token, empty tolerance—effected through the coalescence of imaginative literature and Christian forgiveness.

Longley has more fully articulated his convictions about forgiveness in an essay, “Memory and Acknowledgement,” given as a talk to a symposium entitled “Reconciliation and Community: The Future of Peace in Northern Ireland,” at the University of Ulster, Belfast in June 1995. Longley concludes this lecture by describing a service he attended in 1995 in Tullamore, a small town in the Irish Midlands, for victims of the Troubles. He recalls seeing a procession of locals carrying a number of placards down the aisle of the church where the event was being held. A woman from Dungannon had written out on these placards the names of every victim in the Troubles. Greatly moved by this procession, Longley extrapolates an argument about forgiveness that coheres perfectly with his reading of Shriver’s theory:

The long list of names should become a litany—a litany of the dead. The word itself—"litany"—suggests three things: enumeration, repetition, penitence. Concepts such as "a clean slate" or "drawing a line" are offensive. If we are not ever to know who bombed Enniskillen and Birmingham, Dublin and Monaghan, we can at least go on asking “Where are all the missing bodies of the last twenty-five years? Where have they been buried? In the ghastly paramilitary argot these are the “bog jobs.” Amnesty does not mean amnesia.

We Irish are good at claiming a monopoly on human suffering. We are good at resurrecting and distorting the past in order to evade the present. In Ireland we must break the mythic cycles and resist unexamined, ritualistic forms of commemoration. If we don’t, it will all happen again.

These references have particular resonance for the families of the victims in Northern Ireland, given the IRA’s refusal to tell where it buried many of its victims and given the amnesty granted to almost all paramilitary prisoners according to the terms of the Good Friday Agreement three years after this talk. It is particularly ecumenical of Longley to articulate his theory of forgiveness through discussing the concept of “litany,” a term usually associated with the rituals of Catholicism, such as reciting the rosary. Longley’s litany, however, resists the static, perfunctory quality that any litany can easily obtain; instead his theory of litany moves progressively forward through an enumeration of sins committed, a repetition or dwelling on these to realize their full significance, then penitence for the sins. This kind of detailed litany, taken as both a symbol of the process of forgiveness in the province and as an actual device enabling forgiveness, rejects “amnesia” and invites “amnesty” to be given. Longley’s advice to his audience to resist unexamined ritualized forms of commemoration is especially important in effecting the long process of true reconciliation and in rejecting static rituals such as paramilitary funerals as unhealthy repetitions, incapable of breaking out of preconceived notions of identity.
A striking example of Longley’s penchant for the particularized litany occurs in his poem “The Ice-Cream Man,” which appeared in *Gorse Fires*. Here, Longley names the flowers of the karst limestone region of western Ireland called the Burren as a fragile, temporary solace for, and replacement of, the flavors the murdered ice cream man in Belfast used to recite to customers:

Rum and raisin, vanilla, butter-scotch, walnut, peach:
You would rhyme off the flavours. That was before
They murdered the ice-cream man on the Lisburn Road
And you bought carnations to lay outside his shop.
I named for you all the wild flowers of the Burren
I had seen in one day: thyme, valerian, loosestrife,
Meadowsweet, tway blade, crowfoot, ling, angelica,
Herb robert, marjoram, cow parsley, sundew, vetch,
Mountain avens, wood sage, ragged robin, stitchwort,
Yarrow, lady’s bedstraw, bindweed, bog pimpernel.

(*Gorse Fires* 49)

The “I” of the poem is undoubtedly Longley himself; the “you” of the poem refers to Longley’s daughter Sarah; and “they” refers to the unidentified killers of the shop owner. This inclusion paradoxically personalizes the poem—the “you” could easily be transferred to the reader—and universalizes it across a range of voices. The poem is framed by lists of ice cream flavors and flowers from the Burren and turns on another flower image: the carnations his daughter laid “outside his shop.” This domesticated flower of respect obviously triggered a connection between the flavors of the ice cream and the flowers of the Burren Longley had seen so many times in his visits to County Clare. His abundance of flowers listed here more than compensates for the relatively spare list of ice cream flavors and seems in danger of tipping the poem too far toward the other, rural landscape. But the point is precisely that the sheer variety and profusion of the wild flowers both offers a glimpse of a natural catalog that the urban ice cream man vaguely mimicked in his celebratory recitation of flavors (whether he knew it or not) and acts as a beautifully intricate metaphorical wreath of flowers with which Longley adorns the man’s memory. In this latter sense, “The Ice Cream Man” returns to the concerns Longley adumbrated in the earlier sequence “Wreaths.”

While Longley is not an orthodox Christian, his search for patterns and paradigms for forgiveness and renewal in pursuing his ethical vision does sometimes embrace essentially Christian images. For example, toward the end of his interview with Sarah Broom, in response to the question, “Do you believe in God or any kind of spirituality?” Longley told a lengthy story about his response to the recent death of a dear friend. He spoke of a trip with his wife Edna to World War I battlefields and how that made him feel reverent, then of a visit to Sweden on that same trip. At the Lutheran church in Lund, a communion service was going on when the Longleys arrived. While Edna refused to take part, he did:
I went up and took the sacraments, for the first time in about 35 years. And that was because of the first world war, and it was because a dear friend of mine had just died—she died of terrible bowel cancer. And another friend of mine who's a Methodist minister had stayed up with her for hours on end. She was a non-believer, but he was telling her how marvelous she was, how good a schoolteacher she was, how much she was appreciated, and he was reciting this over and over again. I heard from her husband that my friend was on his knees, for hours and hours on end. And that seemed to me Christ-like, and made me think that Christ was just the most perfect man—most perfect human—who's ever lived [...]. And he suggested that we should do this, you know, the bread and the wine. And since it was his suggestion it's worth doing.

Longley's recognition of the power of the Lord's Supper is perfectly in keeping both with his theory of political and personal forgiveness and with his continued emphasis on the quotidian and concrete in his poetry. Bread and wine run throughout his poetry, from "The Linen Workers" in The Echo Gate to his free translation from Ovid, "Baucis and Philemon," in The Ghost Orchid. These concrete elements comfort our bodies and prepare our hearts and souls for something like a transcendent vision of peace and forgiveness.

At the same time, Longley's recognition of the healing, unifying force of the Eucharist suggests his own perception of the way in which the spiritual and material worlds are interconnected and helps us to understand the commingling of quotidian and spiritual elements in his own poetry. Gregory Post and Charles Turner point out the philosophical application and the theological significance of the eucharistic elements in their study of the Eucharist in literature and Scripture, The Feast: Reflections on the Bread of Life. Post and Turner note that Eastern Orthodoxy helps bridge the seemingly opposed views of the Eucharist taken by Catholics and Protestants. Orthodoxy "sees the miracle of the Eucharist not so much as a change per se but as the actualization in bread and wine of that which is indeed true" (115-16). They go on to cite Orthodox spokesman Alexander Schmemann's definition of the Eucharist as: "an entrance into a fourth dimension which allows us to see the ultimate reality of life. It is not an escape from the world, rather it is the arrival at a vantage point from which we can see more deeply into the reality of the world" (116). Longley certainly seems to have broken through into this fourth dimension in poems such as "Linen Workers." Dwelling on the significance of the Eucharist, whether or not he is a practicing believer, has enlarged his imagination to encompass truth as the commingling of the material and the spiritual. His powerful poetic imagination thus has remained attuned to the material conditions of life in Northern Ireland and the Republic and how the spiritual world infuses this material world with moments of transcendence.

While continuing to espouse cultural pluralism and reconciliation, Longley increasingly seems to inhabit a widening imaginative world. The broadened scope of his imagination has enabled him to paradoxically focus on the particular even more as his recent fascination with miniature objects from Asian culture demonstrates. At the same time, Longley's fascination with the specific—with individualized objects and flowers—marks him as a parochial writer, in the best sense of this term. It is in this way that his penchant for
Longley’s interest in this kind of parochialism is thus closely tied to his desire for Ulster Protestants across the province to register a regional identity and reinstate themselves in its cultural life rather than looking to London for their identity.

Since Longley is a parochial poet in this sense, it is not sufficient to term him merely an Ulster or a Northern Irish poet. Longley’s fear in trying to develop a Northern Irish literature was that poets writing in Northern Ireland would be understood only in an Ulster context, not in the context of the entire world as demanded by their universal verse. This is the same sort of prejudice writers in the American South have fought against for years and the reason some still reject the label of being a “southern author.” Longley’s own staggering range of classical and contemporary allusions does suggest a universal voice. Influences on his work range from Herbert, Yeats, Kavanagh, MacNeice, Hewitt, and Larkin to Sibelius, jazz music, Greek literature and mythology, and Asian culture. In another poet, these influences might be dizzying or jarring, but Longley’s kaleidoscopic interests are rendered in a poetic style that is structured, lyrical, and achingly beautiful.

Longley’s poetic achievement has been to create a space in which he can draw on the two major cultures in Northern Ireland and also transcend these imaginatively. More recently, his fascination with Asian cultures further demonstrates his transcendence of dualities. This interest is manifested in poems in *The Ghost Orchid* such as “Massive Lovers,” “A Grain of Rice,” “Chinese Objects,” and “Chinese Occasions,” and throughout *The Weather in Japan* (2000). Though a movement toward Asian culture and art may seem incongruous with the themes discussed already in this essay, the Asian insistence on brevity—particularly the art of karumi or concision in form—and specific words, coheres perfectly with Longley’s view of the contribution of poetry to reconciliation.

In a recent interview, Longley affirms that the primary responsibility of the poet is to the imagination but also argues that he must use the imagination in such a way as to respond to tragedy in his community:
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 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.

("Observing the Sons of Ulster" 13)

Longley’s fidelity to his imagination has enabled him to remain above sectarianism and stay committed to his art, while also enabling him to effectively critique sectarianism in a unique body of work still not fully recognized either for its astonishing linguistic and stylistic variety or for its contribution to enhanced cultural understanding in the North. The miniature gems that comprise the majority of the poems in The Weather in Japan both exemplify Longley’s continuing fascination with form that began early in his career and also are part of his singular and semantically specific contribution to imagining ways out of the deterministic mind-sets that still dominate thinking about identity in Northern Ireland.

Works Cited


