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*'Wrapped like a present': artifice in  
Michael Longley's 'Troubles' elegies*

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## **'Wrapped like a present': artifice in Michael Longley's 'Troubles' elegies**

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“Technique is the test of sincerity. If a thing isn't worth getting the technique to say, it is of inferior value.”

- Ezra Pound

Elegy is the poetry of mourning, a genre traditionally approached as a means of processing grief and achieving consolation. It might be described as the literary site of collision between life and death, where the author comes to terms with the 'heavy change' that enters a mourner's experience when faced with bereavement.<sup>[1]</sup> It deals with themes of intense psychological importance: death, memorial and a fitting consolation. In the light of these definitions, the connection between artifice and elegy might not seem immediately apparent. Indeed, to suggest that the grief expressed (particularly in one of Michael Longley's so-called 'Troubles' elegies) is in some way 'artificial', might seem an affront to the grief and loss suffered by those directly affected by the death mourned. A reader of elegy might suppose that this genre, above all others, demands of its poet a high degree of sincerity and authenticity. This essay will argue that the artifice in Longley's elegies for the 'Troubles' in Northern Ireland does not devalue its subject matter, but rather heightens the reader's awareness of the role that the elegist, and indeed poetry, can play in processing tragic events.<sup>[2]</sup> Douglas Dunn similarly suggests that for a number of contemporary writers, 'a conspicuous engagement with the artistry of poetry [...] is not a grafted on, willed, enforced virtuosity in how they say what they say; it is a crucial part of what they are saying'; 'the actual performance of writing [...] is part of a moral project'.<sup>[3]</sup>

Peter MacDonald warns against reductive readings of Northern Irish poetry, ones which focus on 'cultural identity' and 'politics' rather than on the poems themselves, writing that:

In literary studies as in political analysis, it is always easier not to think than to think, and it is quite possible not to think in academically profitable ways: whole schools of not-thinking about literature have established solid institutional presences by finding new ways to ignore the difficulties and perplexities of literary analysis and evaluation.<sup>[4]</sup>

This challenge to 'think' about the poetry seems particularly fitting in the case of Longley, for whom form and techniques of composition are so important.<sup>[5]</sup> For this essay, five pieces have been chosen from Longley's 2006 Collected Poems, representing both his 'first' period of writing in the 1970s and his work from the 1990s. Each engages with the sectarian violence in Northern Ireland, and is seen to be a highly self-conscious creation, concerned with its own making. And in each, the attention drawn to the poem's artificial nature seems to enhance its elegiac purpose. The poems chosen are 'Wounds', 'Wreaths', 'The Ice-cream Man', 'Ceasefire' and 'The Fishing Party'.<sup>[6]</sup>

'Wounds', written in 1972, is the 'first poem directly concerned with sectarian killing', and is one of Longley's most anthologised poems.<sup>[7]</sup> The poem is a 'double' elegy, whose two stanzas are inter-related on a number of levels.<sup>[8]</sup> Throughout, the poet contrasts two scenes of conflict: the first stanza's 'Ulster Division at the Somme' (3), fighting for Britain in the First World War; and the second stanza's 'Troubles', civil conflict that has claimed the lives of the 'Three teenage soldiers' (21) and the 'bus-conductor' (27). The poet's father, mourned throughout both stanzas, provides a sense of continuity, as Longley ensures that his poem 'mediates public utterance through private grief, and mediates between past and present'.<sup>[9]</sup> The father is a 'belated casualty' (14) of the 'Great War', and dies 'for King and Country, slowly' (16) beside a new generation of 'teenage soldiers, bellies full of / Bullets and Irish beer' (21-22). Indeed, Longley has

spoken of the continuing effects of this war: 'Looked at from the next century, we will be thinking in terms of the fifty or sixty years war that began in 1914'.<sup>[10]</sup> Longley's allusions to the 'Great War' and the poetry associated with it is a key aspect of artifice in his elegies. Fran Brearton finds his relationship with the 'war poets' to be influential upon Longley's own struggle to 'engage' with the violence in Northern Ireland: 'his reflections on poetry are virtually interchangeable with those of other earlier twentieth-century war poets'. In drawing attention to this relationship between his poetry and that of earlier conflicts, Longley highlights the 'dilemmas', both moral and stylistic, that he faces as a writer of the 'Troubles', and in uncovering the artistic process, cultivates a sense of candidness towards his audience.<sup>[11]</sup>

While the first stanza of 'Wounds' is removed spatially and temporally from the 'Troubles' of the mid-twentieth century, it is coloured by contemporary conflict. Indeed, the screams of sectarian loyalty heard in the poem, 'Give 'em one for the Shankill!' (6), are uttered by soldiers fighting a foreign enemy in an international war. Similarly, the second stanza links current conflict back to the battlefield, as the poet buries 'three teenage soldiers' (21) alongside his war-veteran father, throwing in 'military honours of a kind' (18), substituting 'A packet of Woodbines', 'a lucifer, the Sacred Heart of Jesus' (23-24) for his father's 'badges, his medals like rainbows' (19). Terence Brown observes that 'the killing fields of that war [the Great War]... have constituted for this poet a kind of metaphor for all conflict'.<sup>[12]</sup> Elmer Kennedy-Andrews sees that: 'Death has not demoralised but provoked respectful remembrance, spirited imagining, the demonstration of an urbane and stylish control'. <sup>[13]</sup> This would suggest that in presenting himself as a war-poet, Longley utilises the artifice of literary allusion to authenticate his own response to death.

Each stanza of 'Wounds' has a priest: in the first this is obviously the 'London-Scottish padre' (9), and in the second, the poet fulfils the role.<sup>[14]</sup> Both padre and poet are unable to prevent the violence, but attempt to restore order after the chaos caused by death. The padre moves 'Over a landscape of dead buttocks',

'Resettling kilts with his swagger-stick, / With a stylish backhand and a prayer' (12, 10-11), while the poet buries 'teenage soldiers... their flies undone' (21-22). The two figures are contrasted, however: while the padre's 'stylish backhand' might seem almost careless, and a merely momentary recognition of the dignity earned by the battle-dead, the poet's figurative 'burial' of the dead within his elegy is understood to be a painstaking work of memorial, which might go further in restoring dignity and order. The images of burial and the mourning rituals ensure that the poem lies within the elegiac tradition. Further engagements with conventions of elegy can be identified. The dead figures remain nameless, and are identified instead by lists of emblems or images, for example the father's 'badges, his medals [...] / His spinning compass' (19-20); the soldiers' 'packet of Woodbines [...] / A lucifer, the Sacred Heart of Jesus' (22-23); the 'bus-conductor's uniform' and 'his carpet slippers' (27-28). This use of synecdoche effectively reduces each of the dead figures to a non-specific victim of armed conflict, identified only by their job, which perhaps results in the elegy's mourned figure being society itself, as it suffers the consequences of violence. The practice of listing is consistently used by Longley: in 'Wounds', it serves to reduce each of the mourned subjects to a collection of 'insignificant material objects', which, Michael Parker argues, presents the process of death as one where 'human bodies and minds [...are] violated and dispersed'.<sup>[15]</sup> The process of elegy is one of artificial re-construction, an act of creation to counteract the fragmentation caused by death. In this light, 'artifice' becomes the poet's strongest weapon against grief.

Dealing with such a sombre subject, it is perhaps unsurprising that the elegy provides little traditional consolation.<sup>[16]</sup> Indeed, the Christian images of resurrection and a heavenly afterlife found in elegies like 'Lycidas' seem to be rejected, as Longley observes the religious antagonism that has led to the conflict. The poem is not entirely bleak in its conclusions, however. The last sentence is vital in conveying a sense of hope: 'To the children, to a bewildered wife, / I think "Sorry Missus" was what he said' (33-34). The suggestion of remorse on the part of the killer points to the potential for reconciliation. It also conveys the poet's

desire to be active in reconciliation, by carrying out the work of elegy. The words "Sorry Missus" are not reported as a direct quote, but as a suggestion of what *might* have been said, which is emphasised by the intrusion of the poet's 'I think'. The poet self-consciously uses poetry to create, or re-create, a version of the events in a way that might bring hope and comfort. This is the work of elegy, as poetic artifice is constructed in order to process the experience of loss. The use of elegiac techniques as a way of responding to the 'Troubles' occurs in a number of Longley's poems, as he is forced to return on multiple occasions to themes of violence, conflict and loss.

'Wreaths', published at the end of the 1970s, deals with the increasing fragmentation of Northern Irish society, as private lives continue to be impacted by the effects of sectarian violence. Like 'Wounds', it treats multiple subjects, and this is reflected in the structure of the sequence. The three parts of the elegy are often read separately, and their subtitles encourage this approach. The main title, 'Wreaths', also reminds the reader that the three works of memorial can be read as a single, sustained response to the conflict. The first section is entitled 'The Civil Servant'. Like the other sections, 'The Greengrocer' and 'The Linen Workers', and as in 'Wounds', it identifies the dead by their role in society.<sup>[17]</sup> However, the mourned subject in 'The Civil Servant' is more individualised than the 'bus-conductor' in the earlier poem: his death is described as a loss of experience specific to him - 'The books he had read, the music he could play' (4). This might be a condensed and understated version of the praise found in traditional elegies like 'Lycidas' and 'Adonais', where the mourned subject's (specifically musical and literary) talents are remembered, as the elegist recognises the artistic potential left unfulfilled.<sup>[18]</sup> Death enters in the second line, and the reader is not offered poetic tact or euphemism, but instead is given factual and brutal detail:

He was preparing an Ulster Fry for breakfast  
When someone walked into the kitchen and shot him:  
A bullet entered his mouth and pierced his skull,  
The books he had read, the music he could play.

(1-4)

As in 'Wounds', this death sees violence invading and 'violating' the domestic.<sup>[19]</sup> Indeed the 'shock' of the death 'violates the lyric poem too, which is rhythmically disruptive and musically discordant, as well as uncompromising in the plainness of its description'.<sup>[20]</sup> The 'bullet' in the third line is perhaps unnecessary detail, as it has already been implied by the word 'shot'. However, it demonstrates the intrusion of death into the scene. The seemingly gratuitous description, as the 'bullet entered his mouth and pierced his skull', displays an initial step in the mourning process: a repetition of the fact that the mourner has been bereaved, in order that he may accept the loss and begin a journey towards consolation.<sup>[21]</sup>

The loss of dignity in violent death, made explicit by the 'dead buttocks' and 'flies undone' of the soldiers in 'Wounds', is implicit in the bus-conductor's 'carpet slippers' and the civil servant's 'breakfast': private details of life that are not normally part of one's 'public' persona. This sense of violation is found not only in the death of the civil servant, but also in the aftermath, as in the second stanza:

He lay in his dressing gown and pyjamas  
While they dusted the dresser for fingerprints  
And then shuffled backwards across the garden  
With notebooks, cameras and measuring tapes.

(5-8)

Here, it is not the killer who invades the private space of the home, but 'they', fellow 'servants' of the state. Longley responds to the funeral procession traditionally found in elegy where, for example, in 'Adonais', the dead subject's fellow poets make their lament. This mourning role is neglected by the figures who 'shuffle' through the stanza, however: they attend the death only in an official capacity, and their efforts to reinstate order and civil justice, depicted by their paraphernalia of 'notebooks, cameras and measuring tapes', obliterate the individuality and humanity of the dead man, reducing him to a set of statistics. After ignoring him in their search for evidence, 'He lay in his dressing gown...' ,

they remove his body from the scene, depersonalising it further as they 'rolled him up like a red carpet' (9).[\[22\]](#)

The final lines focus on the response of 'his widow'. Her private grief is demonstrated as she 'took a hammer and chisel / And removed the black keys from his piano' (11-12). This image, offered in an understated manner with no particular sense of emotional climax, is nevertheless rich in symbolic possibilities: black being the colour of mourning, a reminder of death, and also, in musical terms, connoting a minor, mournful key. The destruction of the black keys suggests a desire to banish death, but the violence carried out upon the object which is the image of the dead man's 'art' also represents his violent death. The reminder of this wasted artistic potential takes the reader back to the elegiac tone at the start of the poem. However, the destruction is perhaps anti-elegiac: commonly elegy contains images of construction, and re-construction, as a poetic 'wreath', is woven to memorialise the subject.[\[23\]](#) Brearton notes that the widow's action 'lies outside the normal codes of grieving because grief itself is not reducible to a formula. It has a ritualistic aura to it; but it is a "ritual" which has no meaning beyond its futility'.[\[24\]](#) Here, there can be heard echoes of another of Longley's laments for the 'Troubles', which begins, 'There can be no songs for dead children'.[\[25\]](#)

'The Greengrocer' eulogises another man identified by his occupation. As opposed to the civil servant and the bus-conductor of 'Wounds', he was killed at his place of work. This is stated in the opening lines: 'He ran a good shop, and he died / Serving even the death-dealers...' (1-2). Unlike the previous subjects, this man is named: 'Jim Gibson', and the poem does not state whether he is Protestant or Catholic – he is not associated with 'Ulster' in the way the civil servant has been, and he is recommended to customers who 'may shortly be setting out / For a small house up the Shankill / or the Falls' (8-10). The mention of these neighbouring roads, the first regarded as strongly Unionist, the second as staunchly Nationalist, identifies the conflict behind the killing, but does not apportion blame. Indeed, the visitors who might be travelling to either location are pictured as 'Astrologers



or three wise men' (7), suggesting the dignity of both sides of the divided community. Again, the victim or subject of the elegy seems to be Belfast itself.

The 'wise men' follow on from the Christmas imagery in the first stanza:

He ran a good shop, and he died  
Serving even the death-dealers  
Who found him busy as usual  
Behind the counter, organised  
With holly wreaths for Christmas,  
Fir trees on the pavement outside.  
(1-6)

The Christmas setting gives a secondary meaning to the 'Wreaths' of the poem's title, as the 'holly wreaths', decorations normally used to celebrate a joyful occasion, are now a memento of tragic loss. The 'holly wreaths' also present an example of 'artifice' that is nevertheless endowed with a sense of significance, and representative of a shared cultural experience. The Christmas imagery allows for the greengrocer to be seen as a Christ-like martyr in his death, as he 'died / Serving even the death-dealers'. The parallel between this small-business man and the 'death-dealers', however, might imply that even the killers are merely doing their job, making the killing seem more like a transaction than an emotionally charged event. This might suggest desensitisation, as the poet notes the regularity with which such violence occurs. While the 'Dates and chestnuts and tangerines' (12) might be bought by either Catholics or Protestants as part of the religious festival that both groups celebrate, therefore implying a hope for peace and unity, they also highlight the absurdity of conflict that exists between two groups who share so much in common.[\[26\]](#)

'The Linen Workers' is the most complex of the three sections. It embodies some of the characteristics of Longley's poetry highlighted by Neil Corcoran:

Longley sometimes bewilderingly swerves between realism and fantasy,  
personal lyric and mythopoeia, narrative and parable, genuinely

topographical and imaginary location. The metamorphoses of tone and mode tend to foreground the poetic act itself, the making of the poem...<sup>[27]</sup>

While the title suggests it is a group elegy, it becomes, like the earlier 'Wounds', a piece whose focus is the poet's father. This section of 'Wreaths' is the most public and also the most private part of the poet's mourning. There is a sense in which the 'speaker's feeling for his father teaches him how to feel for the anonymous linen workers'.<sup>[28]</sup> Simultaneously, the sense of public grief seems to cause the poet to return to the site of his personal grief, as he 'once again' (13) prepares his father's body for burial. The image of 'teeth' is repeated in each stanza, first imagined as 'Christ's' as he ascends into heaven (1), then as 'my father's false teeth / Brimming in their tumbler' (6-7), then as the 'set of dentures' (11) which lay at the roadside following the killings of the 'ten linen workers' (9), and finally returned into the 'dead mouth' of the poet's father, as he is 'once again' (13) laid to rest. The progression of this image highlights the process of reconstruction carried out as the elegist performs his work of mourning, and this can be looked at in more detail.

The first three stanzas of 'The Linen Workers' seem to prepare for the final one, in which the poet's father is ritually mourned in an imagined 'embalming' scene:

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.  
 (13-16)

In this final stanza of the section, and indeed, the entire sequence, the elegist seems to have found comfort in performing rituals of burial, and in reconstructing the dignity and individual identity of the mourned subject.<sup>[29]</sup> There are a number of issues to be worked through before arriving at this point, however, which are tackled in the preceding lines. In the first stanza, Christ is presented irreverently, as, 'Through a cavity in one of his molars / The wind whistles' (2-3), which strips

the ascension image of its majesty.<sup>[30]</sup> More ridiculously, 'he is fastened for ever / By his exposed canines to a wintry sky' (3-4). This renders Christ impotent and helpless. However, it also links him to the dead subjects previously mourned, in their lost dignity: the civil servant 'rolled [...] up like a red carpet', and the nakedness of the dead in 'Wounds'. Therefore, there is also a tone of pity, and a sense of victimhood. The surrealism of the imagery is another of Longley's uses of artifice, allowing him to express potentially subversive sentiments without having to align himself with a definitive view-point or party-line. Instead, he might be seen de-familiarise or unsettle established responses to religion, questioning and refiguring traditional Christian conventions, just as he is interrogating the elegiac tradition, in order to provoke his readers into engaging with the situation at hand, and to explore the ways in which it might be thought about. This is a crucial aspect of the work of a poet dealing with the sensitive issues thrown up by the 'Troubles'.

The opening of the second stanza, 'I am blinded by the blaze of that smile' (5) suggests the poet's humility in the face of the suffering experienced by the victims of conflict. The image of teeth appears again, now as the poet's father's, pictured 'outside of his body, a deadly grin' (8). In both stanzas, the teeth take on a sinister agency: Christ's render him helpless, fastening him to the sky, and the father's 'wore bubbles' and 'a deadly grin' (7-8), which suggests that they, too, might take on their own existence. This is an extension of synecdoche: the teeth stand for the person that they belong to, seeming, indeed, to overpower them. This happens again in the third stanza, where the nameless 'linen workers' are represented by a list of debris:

When they massacred the ten linen workers  
There fell on the road beside them spectacles,  
Wallets, small change, and a set of dentures:  
Blood, food particles, the bread, the wine.  
(9-12)

Here the dead are signified by the objects they carried, making them, again, a symbol of the wider community. Indeed, Kennedy-Andrews is reminded by these 'commonplace' objects of 'the concentration camps: ultimately, Longley's poem is an elegy to all victims of violence'.<sup>[31]</sup> The emblems that make up the Northern Irish community are not just 'personal effects': as well as the 'spectacles' and 'small change', there are the 'Blood, food particles, the bread, the wine'. This links the violence back to the sectarian conflict by using symbols of the Eucharist, celebrated by both Catholics and Protestants.

Immediately following this image, the fourth stanza seems to look for consolation in the re-burial scene. The restoration of the father's 'spectacles', 'money' and 'false teeth' to their proper places on his body suggests a ritual of preparation for an unknown after-life existence. These actions, linked so closely to the images of the previous stanza, also suggest the poet's desire to respond to public events, which he does by translating them onto his personal situation. There is a sense in which the poet's need to mourn for his society is met, to some extent, as he mourns for his private loss.<sup>[32]</sup> The poet is clear that this is a re-burial: 'Before I can bury my father once again' (13), emphasising the fact that the act is a figurative, performed one, drawing attention to the poem itself, which has become the vehicle for mourning. Indeed, 'Wreaths' shows the poet's awareness of the consolation that might be found in elegy, as a created work that can offer memorial and reconstruction after the dispersal caused by death.<sup>[33]</sup> Each section has a different structure: 'The Civil Servant' written in three four-line stanzas of unrhymed, loose hexameter; 'The Greengrocer' with two six-line stanzas of tetrameter, with sporadic internal and end rhymes; 'The Linen Workers' with its four four-line stanzas and sense of para-rhyme, but no clearly organised rhyme scheme. These varying forms give a sense of the plural nature of the losses mourned and the fragmentation caused by them. However, they still work together as one poem. In these respects, the form is reminiscent of W. H. Auden's 'In Memory of W. B. Yeats', where the sections of various metre and disparate settings work together as a picture of mourning.<sup>[34]</sup>

'The Ice-cream Man', published in *Gorse Fires* (1992), continues Longley's elegiac treatment of the 'Troubles'. Again, the subject is identified by his role in the community, and, like the greengrocer, is killed at his shop in central Belfast. Indeed, there are a number of similarities between this poem and the second section of 'Wreaths'. Both ice-cream man and greengrocer serve the families of Belfast, providing luxury goods. Their roles are seen as a-political and non-sectarian.<sup>[35]</sup> The list of Christmas goods is perhaps echoed in the opening line of 'The Ice-cream Man': 'Rum and raisin, vanilla, butter-scotch, walnut, peach' (1). This list also serves the elegiac function of recollecting an idealised past.<sup>[36]</sup> Unlike the previous elegies, however, 'The Ice-cream Man' is addressed to a fellow-mourner. The poem is brief enough to quote in full:

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.  
 (1-10)

The elegy seems to be written for the 'you' of lines 2, 4 and 5, who might be a lover or a child.<sup>[37]</sup> The mourned subject is set at a distance, having existed only peripherally to this relationship between speaker and addressee. Although the ice-cream flavours feature in the speaker's memories, the remembered relationship is the (presumably continuing) one between the 'I' and 'you'.<sup>[38]</sup> The remembered pleasure is distanced from present reality of grief by the caesura in the second line, after which death intrudes upon the scene: 'They murdered the ice-cream man'. However, the impact of the death is partially absorbed by the fact that it appears in

the middle of a long sentence which stretches over three lines. This keeps the momentum moving towards the image of the 'carnations', forcing the reader to arrive at the work of memorial without dwelling on the actual death. It also returns focus to the addressee, and away from the dead man.

The second half of the poem, containing a long list of 'wild flowers', performs a number of elegiac functions. Where a pastoral elegy like 'Lycidas' looks to nature for consolation, before turning to religion or philosophy, Longley introduces the image of 'the Burren' in juxtaposition to the urban scene of the first half of the poem.<sup>[39]</sup> As in 'Lycidas', the list of flowers mimics the action of shrouding the body, and of creating a memorial wreath for the mourned subject.<sup>[40]</sup> There is a sense in which the violence of the death is hidden, if not soothed, by the beauty of the flowers. The 'Burren', in the west of Ireland, is contrasted with the Belfast setting of 'the Lisburn Road', and although the poet does not explicitly state the fact, it might be inferred that this peaceful setting is where the poet was at the time of the death. If this is the case, then there might be an expression of guilt here: the speaker could not prevent the death, having been elsewhere, in safety.<sup>[41]</sup> If this takes the reading too far, it is at least possible to say that the change of scene from Northern Ireland to the Republic introduces a sense of escapism. This might be consolatory, or, conversely, a distraction from the fact that there is no suitable consolation. The poet 'named for you all the wild flowers...' which shows his awareness of his duty to comfort his addressee. John Lyon finds that 'Longley is as much concerned, in this elegy, to recover, for the griever, an adequate means to express grief as he is to alleviate that grief'.<sup>[42]</sup>

The way in which the elegy ends without a clear offer of consolation, but rather a list of flowers that are added to the addressee's 'carnations', suggests that the poet is aware of the inadequacy of his work of mourning. Language breaks down as the sentence becomes merely a string of nouns. However, there can be heard a tentative hope in the power of poetry. While the addressee laid real 'carnations' at the scene of the murder, the poet's bouquet of 'wild flowers' exists only in language, as he 'named' each plant. The preservation of memory within language

is acknowledged to be an artificial act, which in re-constructing, must destroy the original: 'The flowers are recited, or inscribed, in order to remember, but with each name becoming present, the reader discards the presence of the previously present one'.<sup>[43]</sup> Despite their purely literary existence, however, the 'wild flowers' supersede the 'carnations' by taking over the poem, until the stanza itself becomes a floral tribute, or 'wreath of words'.<sup>[44]</sup> In this sense, the poet seems to imply the superiority of poetry as a form of memorial: the dead 'carnations' can be only a temporary gesture, whereas the living flowers of the 'Burren' are immortalised by the permanence of poetry. This realisation of the potential for lasting memorial found in elegy is perhaps the consolation offered.

The elegy entitled 'Ceasefire' was finished less than a week before the IRA ceasefire declared on 31<sup>st</sup> August 1994, and was published in the Irish Times just a few days after the announcement.<sup>[45]</sup> It differs from the poems already discussed in its adoption of Homeric legend as its ostensible subject matter. The poem is a sonnet, with its quatrains and couplet separated into numbered stanzas. It is written in an iambic hexameter which becomes increasingly ordered as it approaches the perfectly iambic final couplet. The even-numbered lines are rhymed in couplets, with the alternate lines left unrhymed. Each feature of the poem's form, therefore, simultaneously acknowledges traditional expectations while retaining a sense of departure by the adoption of formal irregularities. It allows the poem to be located in both the traditional and the contemporary poetic, and draws the reader's attention to the artistic accomplishment of the poet.

It is possible to read the poem and the scene described, Achilles' return of Hector's corpse to his mourning father, Priam, as a mere re-rendering of the familiar portion of Homer's *Iliad*. An awareness of the poem's contemporary context, however, encourages the reader to consider the poem as one of Longley's 'Troubles' elegies.<sup>[46]</sup> Therefore, in subject matter, as well as form, 'Ceasefire' inhabits both the literary past and the political present. The use of mythic figures to represent a mourned subject is one of the most long-standing conventions of the English elegy: Milton casts Edward King as 'Lycidas'; Shelley re-imagines (or

even consumes the identity of) Keats, portraying him as 'Adonais'; Matthew Arnold transforms the poet Arthur Hugh Clough into 'Thyrsis'.<sup>[47]</sup> The difference in Longley's poem, and what it has in common with his other 'Troubles' poems, is that there is no specific contemporary victim for whom the elegy mourns. Rather, the experience of loss, as one that is shared by an entire community, is reflected by the story of Priam and Achilles. The poem deals with the universal experience of grief as a result of conflict.

Longley's organisation of the events in his poem results in an emphasis on the mutual grief of the two men: 'Syntactically, the poem displaces the individual ego to the margins'.<sup>[48]</sup> The opening quatrain focuses on Achilles' empathy:

## 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.  
 (1-4)

This shared 'sadness' gives the poem a sense of a single community, divided by a conflict in which everyone is a victim. As Edna Longley comments, 'the poem explores the moment and meaning of ceasefire in a way which speculates about the mutual conditions for an end to war'.<sup>[49]</sup> The sense of community is continued as Achilles prepares the body for funeral rites:

## 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.  
 (5-8)

and in the third stanza, the two men are depicted as equals, even 'as lovers':



## 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...

(9-12)

Longley's re-ordering of events means that the final couplet takes the reader back to the start of the encounter, as documented by Homer, where Priam

...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.'

(12-14)

Here, in the last line of the poem, is the first time the killing of Hector is openly acknowledged: the previous stanzas focus on the rituals of mourning, rather than the actual death. This chronological shift brings the reader back to the beginning of the episode, suggesting the circularity of violent conflict.<sup>[50]</sup> It might seem to cancel the work of mourning in the previous stanzas, and might, furthermore, suggest a sense of pessimism about the contemporary ceasefire. Indeed, an awareness of the myth reveals that Achilles' ceasefire was a temporary one, necessitated by the need for both sides to mourn their dead; effectively a chance to clear the battlefield ready for a return to war. In his choice of this particular ceasefire as source material for his 'Troubles' poem, Longley seems aware of the fragile nature of the newly declared peace in Northern Ireland.<sup>[51]</sup>

There is, nevertheless, some sense of consolation in 'Ceasefire', which comes from Longley's use of elegiac technique; specifically, his focus on the performance of mourning rituals. Achilles' washing of the body is a ritual found in both

traditional and contemporaneous elegies, for example, Seamus Heaney's 'The Strand at Lough Beg'.<sup>[52]</sup> Having the body 'laid out in uniform' performs a similar ritual to the one at the end of 'Wreaths', where the mourner seems to reconstruct the subject after the fragmentation of death. In Hector's case, it is the man responsible for the mutilation and violation of his corpse who begins the process of re-assembling and memorialising him. There is a reminder of this in line 5, 'Taking Hector's corpse into his own hands', echoing the cliché, 'taking Hector's life into his own hands', which is, indeed, what has happened. This is repeated in the final image, as Priam must 'kiss Achilles' hand, the killer of my son'. This instance of synecdoche is commented on by Edna Longley: 'the ambivalent poise of "Ceasefire" pivots on "hand": used for caring and killing'.<sup>[53]</sup> Priam is given the body 'Wrapped like a present', and this mimics the shrouding that takes place in many elegies. The ugliness of death is shielded from view, often by something beautiful, like flowers. Here, the body becomes a 'present', which makes the granting of the opportunity to mourn an act of grace, a gift. It also has the effect, as in 'The Civil Servant' and also Robert Lowell's elegy 'Sailing Home from Rapallo', of objectifying the body, thereby creating a sense of artistic detachment.<sup>[54]</sup> Steven Matthews notes the poem's emphasis upon 'beauty':

What is striking here is that aesthetic appreciation plays a crucial part in that move towards reconciliation and conversation between the two sides. [...] The poem claims, then, a deciding role for the aesthetic within the larger continuum of understanding between the warring sides.<sup>[55]</sup>

This suggests a hope in the possibility of reconciliation, and an opportunity for grief to be shared through the performance of, specifically poetic, mourning rituals.

'The Fishing Party' is found in The Ghost Orchid (1995), in which 'Ceasefire' is also collected. While both poems can be identified as 'Troubles' elegies, they contrast starkly at the levels of form and diction. 'The Fishing Party' may be quoted in full:

Because he loves off-duty policemen and their murderers  
Christ is still seen walking on the water of Lough Neagh,  
Whose fingers created bluebottles, meadow-browns, red  
Admirals, painted ladies, fire-flies, and are tying now  
Woodcock hackles around hooks, lamb's wool, badger fur  
Until about his head swarm artificial flies and their names,  
Dark Mackerel, Gravel Bed, Greenwell's Glory, Soldier  
Palmer, Coachman, Water Cricket, Orange Grouse, Barm,  
Without snagging in his hair or ceasing to circle above  
Policemen turned by gunmen into fishermen forever.

(1-10)

Where 'Ceasefire' is given a mythical setting, 'The Fishing Party' is firmly placed in Northern Ireland, both geographically, in the mention of 'Lough Neagh', and politically, in the characters with which the poem is peopled, 'off-duty policemen and their murderers'.<sup>[56]</sup> Unusually for an elegy, the grammatical subject of the poem is not the mourned dead, but 'Christ'. Indeed, the complex grammatical structure of the poem draws attention to the accomplishment of the poet, with the entire piece existing as a single ten-line sentence.<sup>[57]</sup> The themes of the first stanza, 'policemen and their murderers' and Christ's creative work in nature, are repeated in reverse order in the second, albeit with a more surreal, self-consciously poetic tone, as the poet describes Christ creating 'artificial flies' for fishing, and 'Policemen turned by gunmen into fishermen forever'. In the second stanza's revision of these themes there can be seen an elegiac shift in focus from the natural to the artificial. This follows the pattern set by poems like Shelley's 'Adonais', where the poet, finding no comfort in the natural world, looks to philosophy and metaphor as he attempts to process his grief. The emphasis on creation, both in the natural and in 'artificial' contexts, draws attention to the poem's own 'created-ness', the piece of artifice that has been constructed as a response to the deaths mourned. This, again, is an elegiac commonplace, as the

act of creating poetry is held up for inspection, and explored as a method of performing the work of mourning.

Although there is no fixed metrical or rhyming pattern, the lines are given a measured pace by their roughly iambic rhythm, and there are generally six or seven feet per line, giving 'The Fishing Party' a classical, conventionally mournful register.<sup>[58]</sup> Internal rhymes and repeated sounds give the poem a sense of order, and attention is drawn to the construction of the images: for example, in the Hopkins-esque sound-play of 'Woodcock hackles around hooks, lamb's wool...'. This intricate language works with the theme of creation to draw attention to the fabric of the poem itself. The conventional image of 'water' is found in the second line, and is integral to the poem. Water is bound up with the figure of Christ, and with the Northern Irish setting, and is linked to the act of making fishing 'flies'. Water provides the opportunity for the positive act of creation, while at the same time existing as a hunting ground for the fishing party, who will use their 'artificial flies' to catch the fish that live in it. Longley uses elegiac tradition, but adapts and complicates it to fit his purpose.

The use of lists is one of the most noticeable features of the poem, as the list of natural creations - 'bluebottles, meadow-browns, red / Admirals...' - appears to be superseded by the names of 'artificial flies': 'Dark Mackerel, Gravel Bed, Greenwell's Glory...'. Just as the 'real' carnations in 'The Ice-cream Man' are replaced by the 'named' wild flowers, here the 'names' of the artificial flies 'swarm' on the page. Like the 'teeth' in the final section of 'Wreaths' that pin the ascending Christ to the sky, here the 'artificial flies and their names' are made to 'swarm' about Christ's head 'without snagging in his hair'. This seems to render Christ once again helpless, and even corpse-like. Indeed, the fingers that once 'created bluebottles' and a natural order that the book of Genesis calls 'good', are now dismantling that creation to make 'artificial flies' that will harm and kill the fish that they also, presumably, created. Therefore, when Christ's biblical promise to make his disciples 'fishers of men' is echoed in the final line, it might sound more like a cliché than a consolation.<sup>[59]</sup> The presence of 'gunmen' in the final

line means that any comfort in the 'for ever', in its tentative suggestion of an after-life, is severely muted by the reminder of violent death.

There are, however, suggestions of hope found in 'The Fishing Party'. The poem describes Christ in the present tense: he 'is still seen walking on the water of Lough Neagh'. This miraculous image makes Longley's treatment of Christ complex, with the attitude of faith that it brings to the poem, despite the apparent rejection of a Christian consolation. It also implies that the speaker is still able to visit the Lough, and indeed, that he is a member of a real 'Fishing Party' taking place there. This might suggest that despite the horror of the conflict in which 'off-duty policemen' lose their lives, there is opportunity for life to carry on. Fly-fishing in a time of conflict might in itself be a political statement, a refusal to allow violence to hold sway. The idea of life continuing after a death is central to elegy, and, indeed, to the mourning process. It also provides the elegist with a sense of purpose: to use the time he has to create a lasting work of memorial for those he has lost, and, in time, for himself.

While these 'Troubles' elegies wrestle with the idea of finding hope or meaning within the conflict they describe, they are not without a sense of quiet faith, even if in nothing else, at least in poetry's potential to produce something positive out of otherwise devastating loss. Longley himself has mentioned his faith in the potential power of a 'well-made poem': 'I like Ezra Pound's equating of an artist's technique with his sincerity'. [\[60\]](#) What has been taken from these readings is a sense in which the artifice involved in elegy is an integral part of the offer of consolation that the genre hopes to provide, as it can allow the poet the right amount of distance from what might seem an impossible subject, releasing him into a positive act of creation.

### **Endnotes**

[\[1\]](#) Fran Brearton, *Reading Michael Longley* (Tarsset: Bloodaxe, 2006) 145. For 'heavy change', see Milton's "Lycidas," *The Complete Shorter Poems*, ed. John

Carey, 2nd ed., *Longman Annotated English Poets* (Harlow: Longman, 1997) 237-56.

[2] Neil Corcoran writes that: 'The necessity of establishing credentials before presuming to speak for the Northern dead is a moral compunction articulated in Longley's elegies as a disruption of elegiac decorums or an oddly unsettling variation of register', *English Poetry since 1940* (Harlow: Longman, 1993) 185.

[3] Douglas Dunn, "Longley's Metric", *The Poetry of Michael Longley*, ed. Alan J. Peacock and Kathleen Devine, *Ulster Editions and Monographs Series: 10* (Gerrards Cross: Colin Smythe Ltd, 2000) 13-33 (14).

[4] Peter MacDonald, *Mistaken Identities: Poetry and Northern Ireland* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1997) 4-5.

[5] Longley has said, for example, 'I had long been preoccupied with form – pushing a shape as far as it would go, exploring its capacities to control and its tendencies to disintegrate', and 'Poems should be as well-made as chairs'; 'A true poet is set free by form', "A Tongue at Play," in *How Poets Work*, ed. Tony Curtis (Bridgend: seren-Poetry Wales P: 1996) 111-21 (112); "Michael Longley" in John Brown, *In the Chair: Interviews with Poets from the North of Ireland* (Cliffs of Moher: Salmon, 2002) 87-96 (88, 91).

[6] Michael Longley, *Collected Poems* (London: Cape-Random House, 2006) 'Wounds', 62, 'Wreaths', 118-9, 'The Ice-cream Man', 192, 'Ceasefire', 225, 'The Fishing Party', 228.

[7] Brearton, *Reading Michael Longley*, 68. For examples of anthologies, see Padraic Fiacc's *The wearing of the black: An anthology of contemporary Ulster poetry* (Belfast: Blackstaff, 1974), and Frank Ormsby's *A Rage for Order: Poetry of the Northern Ireland Troubles* (Belfast: Blackstaff, 1992). Longley has raised strong objections to Fiacc's 'voyeuristic and opportunistic parasitism', while recommending Ormsby's 'extraordinary anthology' as the 'best commentary on the

“Troubles”): see Brearton, 'Reading Michael Longley', 61, and Brown, In the Chair, 93.

[8] Jonathan Hufstader, Tongue of Water, Teeth of Stones: Northern Irish Poetry and Social Violence (Lexington: The U P of Kentucky, 1999) 94.

[9] Brearton, Reading Michael Longley, 98.

[10] Michael Longley, 'Michael Longley, Interviewed by Dillon Johnston', in Writing Irish: Selected Interviews with Irish Writers from the Irish Literary Supplement, ed. James P. Myers Jr. (New York: Syracuse U P, 1999) 51-63 (53).

[11] Brearton, The Great War in Irish Poetry: W. B. Yeats to Michael Longley (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2000) 262-3.

[12] Terence Brown, “Mahon and Longley: place and placelessness”, The Cambridge Companion to Contemporary Irish Poetry, ed. Matthew Campbell (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2003) 133-48 (143-4).

[13] Elmer Kennedy-Andrews, “Conflict, Violence and 'The Fundamental Interrelatedness of all Things'”, The Poetry of Michael Longley, ed. Alan J. Peacock and Kathleen Devine, Ulster Editions and Monographs Series: 10 (Gerrards Cross: Colin Smythe Ltd, 2000) 73-99 (85).

[14] Kennedy-Andrews, 85.

[15] Michael Parker, Northern Irish Literature, 1956-1975, vol. 1 (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007) 209.

[16] Brearton writes that: 'The “bewilderment” of the bus-conductor's wife and of the poet's father, which unites the actions in both stanzas if only in their incomprehensibility, is there too in the poet's refusal to make sense of the events through conventional forms of consolation', Reading Michael Longley, 100-1.

[17] Corcoran suggests that: 'The implication of the titles is presumably that in Northern Ireland nobody is truly invisible behind a function, since your job can place you in front of a bullet', 186.

[18] For 'Lycidas' see n. 1; Percy Bysshe Shelley, "Adonais," The Major Works, ed. Zachary Leader and Michael O'Neill (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2003) 529-45.

[19] See MacDonald: 'When the Troubles enter Longley's poetry, the dominant perspectives are domestic ones', Mistaken Identities, 133; and Brearton: "'Home" is a violated space', Reading Michael Longley, 99.

[20] Brearton, Reading Michael Longley, 145.

[21] Peter Sacks gives a number of explanations to account for the use of repetition as an elegiac convention: 'Repetition creates a sense of continuity, of an unbroken pattern such as one may oppose to the extreme discontinuity of death'; 'repetition [...has] the effect of controlling the expression of grief while also keeping that expression in motion'; it is part of the 'highly important phase in mourning in which the griever must be convinced of the actual fact of loss', The English Elegy: Studies in the Genre from Spenser to Yeats (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1985) 23-4.

[22] Brearton notes that 'it is the treatment of the victim as object that is so profoundly disturbing in the aftermath of the killing', Reading Michael Longley, 145.

[23] Sacks, 19. See also Jahan Ramazani's description of 'melancholic' mourning in modern elegy: 'the modern elegy resembles not so much a suture as "an open wound," in Freud's disturbing trope for melancholia', Poetry of Mourning: The Modern Elegy from Hardy to Heaney (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1994) 4.

[24] Brearton, Reading Michael Longely, 146.

[25] Michael Longley, Collected Poems (London: Cape-Random House, 2006) 'Kindertotenlieder', 61.



[26] Conversely, Kennedy-Andrews suggests that 'the simple act of naming things the greengrocer sells in his shop – 'Dates and chestnuts and tangerines' – has a soothing and reassuring effect. As in "Wounds", Longley emphasises the way violence breaks in upon the peaceful routines of domestic life, but through his devotion to the small details of ordinary people's everyday lives, he affirms the *lares*, spirits of hearth and home, reasserting the binding force of community and the unquenchable life-force itself', 86.

[27] Corcoran, 185.

[28] Kennedy-Andrews, 86.

[29] Kennedy-Andrews, 87.

[30] For Hufstader, 'Longley here is grotesquely reflecting on orthodox Christian belief – the ascension of Christ's whole body into heaven – in such a way as to satirize those beliefs and their power to wreak violence', 96.

[31] Kennedy-Andrews, 87.

[32] Brearton sees a connection between cycles of private and public mourning, seeing that 'each burial of his father is also a bringing of the memory of him back to life, one which rather than healing the wound, reopens it each time, keeping it green', which parallels the situation as 'the violence in Northern Ireland perpetuates itself', Reading Michael Longley, 147. Corcoran writes: 'The linen workers are felt for because the father is felt for; and the poem knows that a public elegy can only be written from such private sources when the public horror is sent to invade the private grief', 187.

[33] Brearton suggests that there is in Longley 'a belief in imaginative compensation – poetry displacing conventional religious consolations', "Poetry of the 1960s: the 'Northern Ireland Renaissance'", The Cambridge Companion to Contemporary Irish Poetry, ed. Matthew Campbell (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2003) 94-112 (106).

[34] W. H. Auden, "In Memory of W. B. Yeats," Collected Shorter Poems 1927 – 1957 (London: Faber & Faber, 1966) 141-3.

[35] Brearton gives background to the poem, detailing the killing of 'an off-duty RUC officer shot by the IRA whilst looking after his brother's ice-cream shop...' but points out that the 'politics behind the killing are invisible in the poem itself', Reading Michael Longley, 182. While this information links the poem with 'The Fishing Party', in dealing with the murder of an 'off-duty policeman', sectarian allegiances do not seem to play such an important role in 'The Ice-cream Man'.

[36] Sacks, 99.

[37] In actual fact, the poem is addressed to Longley's youngest daughter. Hufstader misreads this poem when he understands that with the 'you' in the second line, the poet 'addresses himself', which leads to a confusion about line 5, 'I named for you all the wild flowers...', which he believes is addressed to the dead man. Hufstader's mistake leads to an unconvincing reading, and destabilises his argument that 'Longley's difficulty here lies in locating the lyric voice, the speaking self', 97-8.

[38] John Lyon notes that the poem 'is written *not* for the dead man, but for the person who lays carnations outside his shop – for Longley's daughter [...] Thus the poem's attempt to assuage is oblique, at a remove from the death itself', "Michael Longley's Lists", English 45 (Autumn 1996): 228-46 (242).

[39] Edna Longley links this poem with Seamus Heaney's 'The Strand at Lough Beg', writing that: 'Both elegies turn to the natural world for help with mourning and protest', Poetry and Posterity (Tarsset: Bloodaxe, 2000) 133.

[40] Sacks, 19.

[41] Sacks, 22.

[42] Lyon, 243.

[43] Brearton, Reading Michael Longley, 183.

[44] Longley, 'A Tongue at Play', 114.

[45] Brearton, Reading Michael Longley, 210.

[46] Indeed, Longley has said: 'The moments in Homer that I've tried to render into English feel quite contemporary to me. They release in me strong immediate emotions and allow me to say things about the here-and-now that I wouldn't otherwise be able to manage – personal/political statements', In The Chair, 90.

[47] See n. 1 for a reference to 'Lycidas'; n. 18 for 'Adonais'; for 'Thyrsis' see Matthew Arnold, The Scholar-Gypsy and Thyrsis (London: Macmillan, 1906) 28-51.

[48] Brearton, Reading Michael Longley, 211.

[49] Edna Longley, 303.

[50] See Brearton's comment in n. 32 about cycles of violence in Northern Ireland.

[51] See Brearton: 'The possibility of transformation carries with it the possibility of failure; a story told can always be retold', Reading Michael Longley, 213.

[52] See Northrop Frye, Fables of Identity: Studies in Poetic Mythology (New York & London: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1963) 119-20. Seamus Heaney, "The Strand at Lough Beg," Opened Ground: Poems 1966-1996 (London: Faber & Faber, 1998) 152-3.

[53] Edna Longley, 303.

[54] Lowell's elegy for his mother ends with the image: 'The corpse / was wrapped like *panetone* in Italian tinfoil', Robert Lowell, "Sailing Home from Rapallo", The Penguin Book of American Verse, ed. Geoffrey Moore (London: Penguin, 1977 rpt. 1989) 408.

[55] Steven Matthews. Irish Poetry: Politics, History, Negotiation: The Evolving Debate, 1969 to the Present, (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1997) 1-3.

[56] See n. 35 for the link between the mourned subject in both 'The Fishing Party' and 'The Ice-cream Man'.

[57] John Lyon remains unconvinced regarding the accomplishment of this poem: 'while "The Fishing Party" attempts more than "The Ice-cream Man", it achieves less', 245. However, the poem may not be as 'vulnerable' or 'precarious' an attempt at elegy as Lyon believes.

[58] Various critics comment on Longley's preferred line-lengths and rhythms, and their relationship to classical metre; one such example is Dunn: 'Longley's "metric" is based on a classical if also uniquely personal interpretation of the history of poetry in the English language, and on his own intimate acquaintanceship with the poetry of Rome and Greece', 33.

[59] See Matt. 4:19; Mark 1:17.

[60] Longley, "A Tongue at Play", 120.

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### **First Response**

An intelligently and sensitively argued essay on Longley's use of elegy that concentrates on five poems to explore Longley's power, tact and subtle obliquity; stress is laid rightly on the writing's refusal of easy consolation, but also on its heartening rather than hubristic 'trust in the power of poetry', a trust that is often 'tentative'. The author is fully aware of the considerable amount of criticism on

Longley in recent years (important work by Fran Brearton, for example), but s/he is able to find an independent path through the critical thickets.