

Tomislav Pavlović*
Faculty of Philology and Arts,
Kragujevac

MICHAEL LONGLEY – THE CAPTIVE OF VARIOUS TRADITIONS

Abstract

Michael Longley (1939), one of the most famous modernist poets of Northern Ireland and the outstanding protagonist of the so-called Ulster Renaissance, was known for his long-standing interest in different cultural traditions or ideological paradigms that gradually became the inspirational sources he drew upon for years. The horrors of First World War experienced by his father, the sectarian violence known as the Troubles that used to shake Ulster for decades, different aspects of the centuries-old protestant – catholic controversy, the Classical heritage of his student days, the tradition of European modernism do coalesce and diverge in Longley's lines. Our analysis will focus upon Longley's poetic techniques transforming the aforementioned motifs into the landmarks breaking open new vistas of Ulster's spiritual landscape. A special emphasis will be laid on the amazing syncretic power of Longley's poetic genius helping us to penetrate the existential *aporias* imposed by a specific *hermeticism* of Ulster, customarily resistant to numerous historical and philosophical explanations.

Key words: Michael Longley, Ulster Renaissance, existential aporias, hermeticism of Ulster

* E-mail: tomislavmp@gmail.com

The poetry of Belfast-born and now legendary Ulster poet Michael Longley (1939) seems to be growing in popularity among the critics even in the decades to come. Fran Brearton warns about the hollowness of the comments that Michael Longley currently suffers from critical neglect and claims that “the publication of the first collection of essays on Longley and the proliferation of articles and high profile reviews of his work over the last decade suggest the opposite.” (2003:199) Besides, his appeal of a sage among the contemporary poets originates from some his early statements in which he tries to explain his position as an artist on the politically turbulent Irish social scene. Being reproached on account of his neutral position during the Troubles he stated:

“I accept, as I must, the criticism of the slogan ‘*Malone Road fiddles while the Falls Road burns*’, the implication that the still and heartless centre of the hurricane is the civic inactivity of liberals like myself. Nevertheless, I have to insist that poetry is an act which in the broadest sense can be judged political, a normal human activity”. (Brearton 2000: 272)

Similar statements indicate that Longley’s primary interest, since his early years, lies in achieving some kind of balance between his poetic and social self. They also lead us to conclude that Longley wished to obscure some rather controversial features of his poetic sensibility or to repudiate the aspects of his own career that he, in the course of the years, grew to dislike. Michael Longley is known to have belonged, together with Derek Mahon, James Simmons, Seamus Heaney, to the famous Belfast group of poets perpetrating Ulster poetic renaissance under the guidance of professor Philip Hobsbaum who assembled them and organized their first poetic workshops. Hobsbaum taught at the Queens University Belfast and, reputedly, kept a rather close contact with his poetically-gifted students such as, apart from the mentioned, Paul Muldoon, Ciaran Carson, Frederick Ormsby and others. The idyllic picture of the initial stages of the Ulster poetic renaissance comprising the picture of the old master Hobsbaum, himself a talented poet presiding over the meetings of young poets, was shattered by the very members of the group.

Heather Cark points out that Michael Longley was one of the keenest in “dismantling the myth of the Belfast group” and quotes his denial uttered in *Honest Ulstermen* Group Symposium held in 1976 that “Derek Mahon, James Simmons, Seamus Heaney and [him]self were the discoveries of

Philip Hobsbaum.” (2006: 3) Besides, the poet had his share in dismantling the stereotype generally known as the Irish national feeling or Irishness and Irish poetic tradition. According to Shane Alcobia-Murphy, “Irishness is admittedly unstable category, often defining itself in opposition to the former colonial power ...” (2006: 218) In this very respect the identity of Michael Longley, born by English parents and brought up in Belfast, is case in point. Tara Christie quotes Longley’s words revealing that as a child he “walked out of an English household on to Irish streets” and felt that he was “schizophrenic on the levels of nationality, class and culture”. (2009: 554) Longley, undoubtedly, met certain challenges on account of his mixed Anglo – Irish identity but the most provoking ones originated from the critical pieces concerning his poetic orientation.

Tara Christie claims that: “In the Irish poetic tradition, Longley is marginalized for his Englishness, for what is often interpreted as his Protestant literary Unionism, his poetry’s cultural, political, aesthetic, and literary ties to mainland Britain.” (Ibid.) Fran Brearton, in an excellent piece of criticism, confirms that Longley is deeply rooted in Irish tradition but draws upon English tradition as well, constantly speculating about Englishness and Irishness urban and pastoral.” (Ibid.) Then, in an interview given in 1986, Longley tried to resolve the crucial dichotomy between English and Irish aspect of his poetic being by saying that: “Neither Irish nor English completely” is a “healthy condition”, and that it is “out of such splits that I write perhaps”. (Brearton 2000: 262)

Some poetic fragments, however, reveal that, in spite if this and several other attempts, Longley cannot easily piece together the two traditions and that, there is nothing less than a kind of abyss between them. In one of his earliest poems entitled “The Hebrides” (*No Continuing City*, 1964), Longley depicts a depressive, deserted area in the Hebrides:

“The winds’ enclosure, Atlantic’s premises,
Last balconies
Above the waves, The Hebrides -
Too long did I postpone
Presbyterian granite and the lack of trees,
This orphaned stone,
...
Day in, day out colliding with the sea ...” (2006: 202)

According to Fran Brearton, Longley's formal precision, shifting perspectives and metaphysical conceits are the elements characterizing the poem which, is in fact, done in the manner of Richard Wilbur a celebrated American poet. (2006: 40) Although still young, Longley shows the considerable skill in the building up of some rather complex poetic images. In the initial conceit of this partly autobiographical poem, the author admits that he "shall have left these rocks within the week" speculating simultaneously upon "how summer on the island / Is ill at ease." (2006: 202) The poet is, in the quoted strophe, allegorically presented as an "orphaned stone" embedded in the dismal monolith of "Presbyterian granite". It is clear that by mentioning the "Presbyterian granite" the poet alludes to Protestant background that he cannot possibly quit being compelled to remain, as a castaway, on the desert island having "no trees", to spend "day in, day out colliding with the sea". The water surrounding him may be seen as the Catholic majority of Ireland. The beginning of the poem, evidently, lacks some optimistic tone since poet is, even at that point, aware of his doom of eternal residing between the two hostile worlds.

Another tradition to which Michael Longley remained loyal throughout his life was the one embodied by the classic literature. It is known that Longley studied classic languages at the Queens University in Belfast but he was, in fact, introduced to the classic authors much earlier. According to Heather Clark, Longley during his early days at the Royal Belfast Academical Institution, had no opportunity to study carefully Irish language, history and music since the preparatory institution (popularly called Inst) however, "maintained the Unionist status quo in its curriculum." (2006: 17) As a result Longley turned to the Classic literature and translated a lot of Greek and Latin texts which he found quite valuable for developing his own poetic craft. He claimed that the reading of Latin poetry: "... alerted [him] to the possibilities of syntax, which is the muscle of poetry." (Ibid.). Referring to the forced minimalism of modernist poetry Longley stated that he: "... got bored by so much poetry which is written in short, jerky, sentences" and that he particularly liked the "stretching out over a stanza, a sentence, and playing the pauses of meaning against the line endings and trying to make the sentence, the grammatical unit, coincide with the stanzaic unit." (Ibid.)

The poems Michael Longley published in his first collection *No Continuing City* (1969), entitled "Odyssey", "Nausicaa", "Circe", "Narcissus" and "Persephone" indicate the depth of poet's youthful infatuation with the

works classic authors. The first poem in line is composed in traditional, classical sestinas and contains Odysseus's musings on his prolonged sea voyage:

“And, going out my way to take a rest,
From sea sickness and the sea recuperate,
The sad fleets of capsized skulls behind me
And the wide garden they decorate.
Grant me an anchorage as your paying guest –
Landladies I have been too long at sea.” (2006: 14)

If we take a closer look at the lines, we are reaching the conclusion that the strict poetic form of theirs is the only quality referring to classic tradition and what Fran Brearton recognizes as the Longley's mythological pretext. She claims that “Odysseus's ten-year wandering at sea are preordained, and they are interspersed with sojourns on islands (literal and metaphorical) of seductive women – Circe, Calypso, Nausicaa – as well as encounters with monstrous females who would literally devour him: Scylla and Charybdis.” (2006: 36) Later on, she mentions that the pattern of the old myth is in fact the pattern of “the poet's own past which he can now see objectively, as past.” (Ibid.) Having in mind that Longley's lyrical “I”, emerging in the first stanza, fuses with Ulysses, the aforementioned mythical heroines are identified as Longley's former girlfriends, “ ... amateur witches and professional virgins/Sirens and shepherdess all new areas / Of experience” (Longley 2006:14)

One cannot but notice that the old myth is, on this occasion, travestied even shattered for the purpose of the author's intention to express adequately his own experience. He does it in nothing less than truly Joycean tradition. In an interview with Clive Wilmer, Longley admitted that at the time he composed his early Homeric poems he “was inhaling Ulysses and got some early sense from him and from Bloom's wanderings.” (Impens 2018: 87) Longley's typically modernist reworking of myths can also be found in the poem entitled “Persephone” from the same collection.

The goddess of the underworld is not explicitly mentioned. The poet grieves for her departure since he sees it “through a skylight in [his] brain” whereas hibernating animals “turn above their broken home/And all [his] acres in delirium.” (Longley 2006: 21) The dismal wintry conditions caused by the goddess's absence mortify the senses as a kind of an unrelenting fate since “Straitjacketed by cold and numskulled/Now sleep

the welladjusted and the skilled.” (Ibid.) In order to intensify the deadly impact of Persephone’s abduction Longley keeps enumerating the victims of the fatal change and these are: “The weasel and ferret, the stoat and fox/ Move hand in glove across the equinox.” (Ibid.) However, the impression that Persephone’s descent is mourned on Greek shores is lacking since the deity that Longley hints at definitely performs her charms on the coasts of Ireland. The landscape that the poet describes is unmistakably Irish and his pronounced passion for depicting the Irish scenery resembles the one his fellow compatriot Seamus Heaney was possessed by to the extent of creating the tradition out of it.

Ancient topics, making the important part of Longley’s poetic tradition, are to be found in later collections as well but they coalesce with other equally significant traditions. “The Butchers” (*Gorse Fires*, 1991), got its title owing to Longley’s painful frustration with Ulster sectarian violence that broke out in 1960’s and ended temporarily when warring factions signed the Good Friday Agreement in 1998. The fusion of the two traditions, the second one referring to sectarian clashes, was explained by the poet himself. He claimed that its creation was inspired by the activities of Shankill Butchers, the group of radical Loyalists who made their mark in the bloody history of Ulster by slaying a group of Catholics with their butcher knives. (Brearton 2006: 176) Longley draws a strange parallel between Shankill Road and Odyssey’s fatherland by saying that “the sort of outhouses and smallholdings that would have been on Ithaca and which were reflected in the landscape of Ireland.” (Ibid.) The murderous event is, in the poem, juxtaposed with Odyssey’s massacre of suitors upon his return to Ithaca. Odyssey emerges, immediately after the bloodbath, “spattered with muck and like a lion dripping blood/From his chest and cheeks after devouring a farmer’s bullock.” (Longley 2006: 14) Longley does not spare the audience from the *post factum*, no less bloody details of the event starting from the hanging of the disloyal maidservants to the dragging of “... Melanthio’s corpse into the haggard/And cutting off his nose and ears and cock and balls, a dog’s dinner.” (Ibid.) The episode is according to Richard Rankin Russell even more bestial than Homer’s. (2003: 227)

Closely following the original, Longley informs the audience how Odysseys:

“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 ...” (2006: 14)

The scene of Hermes taking the souls of suitors and to the underworld concludes the poem. However, the final destination that the god and the souls reach is not the bank of Styx but:

“... 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.” (Ibid.)

The region that Longley refers to bears close resemblance to Northern Irish coast and famous *bogland*, Irish moor, which became one of Seamus Heaney’s central poetic symbols. In the eponymous poem Heaney introduces the moor as the repository of Irish history a kind of underworld, the burial place for the participants and waste material worn out in the tumultuous Irish historical pageant.

The very same technique of setting the motif of violence of the Troubles in classic context is performed in the sonnet entitled “Ceasefire” (*The Ghost Orchid*, 1995). Longley kept no secret about how he got the idea to compose the poem. In an interview given to Sarah Broom Longley reminds that in August 1994, IRA was “rumored to have been ready to declare a ceasefire” and adds that at the time “he was reading the XXIV Book of the Iliad about the meeting of Achilles and king Priam who came to Greek camp to beg for the body of his son Hector.” (Impens 2018: 104) Longley, therefore, compressed some two hundred lines of Homer’s text into a short lyric of a great poetic strength so as to “make [his] own minuscule to the peace process.” (Ibid.)

Longley’s adaptation presents us with a scene in which the two enemies Achilles and Priam, consumed with mutual hatred, convene on a rather solemn, sad occasion that compels them to forget their long-lasting adversity. Touched by the plea of the grieved father who “curled up at his feet” (Longley 2006: 225), Achilles took:

“Hector’s corpse in his own hands ...
Made sure it was washed and, for the old king’s sake
Laid it in uniform, ready for Priam to carry
Wrapped like a present home to Troy at daybreak.” (Ibid.)

In the final couplet Priam confides that after the funeral feast during which he sat and talked with Achilles as his best friend, he : “ ... got down on [his] knees and do what must be done/ And kissed the Achilles’ hand the killer of [his] son” (Ibid.)

Jonathan Hufstader in his excellent commentary upon the poem points out that in Homer’s version of the event, Priam comes to collect the body of his son upon the order of Hermes whereas Longley “squarely places the initiative with Priam” (1999: 107). The old king therefore appears at Greek camp urged by the highest moral obligation that is to revere the heroic death of his son at which no abasement seems too demanding to bear. Michael Longley, as a poet, shared the same moral obligation compelling him to contribute to the overall reconciliation in Ulster.

Centuries old loyalist – republican controversy that took so many lives in Ulster is, evidently, another mighty tradition that permeates Longley’s poetry. However, he cannot resist the impetus to couple it with some other equally strong traditions, apart from the classic one, and this is the tradition of the Great War. The man responsible for Longley’s taking too much to it is his father “a belated casualty” of the First World War who was “dying for King and Country slowly.” (Longley 2006: 62) The poem in which Longley reveals that his father, a soldier of the British Expeditionary Corps in France, received the wound that almost crippled him, bears the title “Wounds” (*An Exploded View*, 1973). His long and painful death affected Longley so deeply that he could not but start the poem with:

“Here are two pictures from my father’s head —
I have kept them like secrets until now:
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!’ (Ibid.)

The battle scream of the Ulster soldier who dies upon charging the German trenches contains the toponym – Shankill Road a very long street in Belfast

notorious for its bloody history of sectarian clashes that lasted throughout the nineteenth century. The dying soldier thus inadvertently links the two distant periods or traditions correlated by their murderous practices.

In the second strophe of the poem the author appears as a kind of a mourner who buries his father “with military honours ... with his badges, his medals like rainbows.” (Ibid.) Together with him he deposits the bodies of:

“Three teenage soldiers, bellies full of
Bullets and Irish beer, their flies undone.
A packet of Woodbines I throw in,
A lucifer, the Sacred Heart of Jesus
Paralyzed as heavy guns put out
The night-light in a nursery forever.” (Ibid.)

It is evident that the three soldiers engaged in the fictitious burial are the victims of sectarian clashes that frequently exploded in 1960s or 1970s, probably caught unaware and machine-gunned by some militant protestant combat group. The fact that they addressed their prayers to the Sacred Heart of Jesus, identifies them as Catholics serving in the regular army units. The juxtaposition of Longley’s father, as the belated protestant casualty of the First World War, with the three young Catholics who joined British army emphasizes the devastating effect of the clash of the two conflicting traditions both of which Longley seems to be deeply anchored in.

The last poem, and not only the last one, covered by our analysis casts a light on Longley’s ever present readiness to increase the register of different, often opposing, traditions he operates with. Besides, the poem asserts that the religious imagery became another passion of the poet. The religious background of Ulster conflict obviously used to be and still is quite an inspiration for Longley since he develops the complex poetic images universalizing both protestant and catholic perspective. In the quoted fragment of “Wounds”, the phrase “Sacred Heart of Jesus” is used to denote the soldiers’ nationality but the very fact that the prayer is “paralyzed” by the salvoes of canons shows that the religion is the first victim of war.

The religious symbolism of rather different sort is to be found in “Wreaths” (*The Echo Gate*, 1797), the elegiac tryptic dedicated to the victims of the Troubles. The second sequence of the elegy, entitled “The Greengrocer” reveals the horrible details of the death of an innocent

seller who is murdered by the men who arrived at the store as ordinary customers. To make the impression even more gruesome, the poet informs that the killers found him busy organizing “holly wreaths for Christmas/ Fir trees on the pavement outside.” (Longley 2006: 118) The poet then reflects upon some rather strange group of people passing by the crime scene referring to them as:

“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 Gibsons shop,
Dates and chestnuts and tangerines.” (Ibid.)

While the nouns in the last line may be taken as the symbols of impending Christmas time, the arrival of the “three wise men” is rather dubious and resembles the voyage of the three Magi who witnessed Christ’s birth. Fran Brearton, however, provides an explanation claiming that their appearance: “might suggest that a First Coming hasn’t happened yet, as much as it projects forward to a Second one.” (2006: 145)

The third sequence of “Wreaths” entitled “The linen Workers” introduces us to another hideous murder of innocent men. The IRA operatives detonated the time bomb and killed ten linen workers and then we get to know that: “There fell on the road beside them spectacles, /Wallets, small change, and a set of dentures:/Blood, food particles, the bread, the wine.” (Longley 2006: 119) The symbols of Eucharist in the last line obviously accentuate the tragedy but the very beginning of the profoundly symbolic sequence is rather dubious:

“Christ’s teeth ascended with him into heaven:
Through a cavity in one of his molars
The wind whistles: he is fastened forever
By his exposed canines to a wintry sky.” (Ibid.)

The fantastic and a bit blasphemous scene alluding that Christ himself may have fallen a victim of explosion indicates that those who kill innocent people figuratively kill the Saviour. The main paradox of the poem lies in the fact that both protestant and catholic extremists usually present

themselves as ardent believers. According to Jonathan Hufstader, Longley “is grotesquely reflecting on orthodox Christian belief – the ascension of Christ’s whole body into heaven – in such a way as to satirize beliefs and their power to wreak violence.” (1999: 96) If teeth go with Christ into heaven,” proceeds Hufstader “then Christ goes with the teeth of the slaughtered into the dust.” (Ibid.)

In both poems Longley proves himself capable of spanning the distance from the simple symbolism up to the rather profound, intricate symbolic images that are not easily decoded. One is, somehow, under the impression that the key words – religious symbols like the Sacred Heart of Jesus, Christ’s teeth, blood, the bread, the wine, the three wise men, occupy an independent position in the lines surrounded by semantically-poor words and expressions with which they do not establish a valid semantic connection.

The poetic quality in question is, according to Roland Barthes, one of the main characteristics of modern poetry. The words of classic or traditional poetry, states Barthes, “... are on the way to becoming an algebra, where rhetorical figures of speech, clichés, functions as virtual linking devices; they have lost their density and gained a more interrelated state of speech.” (1970: 46) In modern poetry, on the other hand, the word is: “encyclopaedic, it contains all the acceptations from which a relational discourse might have required it to choose. It therefore achieves a state ... where the noun can live without its article, and is reduced to a sort of zero degree, pregnant with all past and future specifications.” (48)

The poetic language employed by Longley is undoubtedly the modernist one as well as his handling of myths and the opposing traditions that he masterly transforms. But the modernism of Michael Longley is quite an extraordinary one. Longley always wished to promote the poetry of so-called War poets – Isaac Rosenberg, Edward Thomas and Wilfred Owen as modernist *par excellence*. (Christie 2009: 553) In his interview with John Brown in 2001 Longley stated that: “The war poems of Owen and Rosenberg ring out in my ears like modern versions of Sophocles or Aeschylus. Utterly modern. Huge. Who cares if they are ‘Modernist?’” (Ibid.)

On the other hand, he was quite displeased with the poetry of the leading authors of modernism Ezra Pound and T. S. Eliot. “How many people in the world can actually enjoy them?” wondered Longley. (Ibid.) The lines we analyzed show that the minimalism of speech, intertextuality, sequentiality, the techniques employed by Pound and Eliot simply do not

belong into Longley's poetic arsenal. He, therefore, resolutely rejects the modernist poetic tradition of Pound and Eliot in favour of another one whose protagonists were the fellow-combatants of his father.

This is not the last paradox of Longley's poetry and that is why it sometimes seems rather difficult to generalize upon his achievement. Both critics and the audience are accustomed to consider Michael Longley an outstanding modernist but the analysis proved that his modernism is of a rather different kind. He exploited the ancient myths but, for the purpose of materializing his own chimeras and in this respect he goes hand in hand with Joyce, Eliot and Pound. Not an atheist like Joyce and Pound, Longley is definitely a *homo religiosus* of a kind, a connoisseur of ancient literature and the one who never shared modernist indifference to politics. Unlike Joyce's and Pound's aloofness from politics, he was deeply committed to the political cause of achieving peace in Ulster and for this purpose he coupled the tradition of the Troubles with classic and Christian myth, and the collective memory of the First World War. In his painful journey from one tradition to another Longley seems never to have stepped out of the borders of Ulster. One may reproach Longley for having too much *couleur locale* in his poetic images, that he never elevated his poetic symbols to so universal a level as the one reached by Seamus Heaney or that he never experimented with postmodern techniques like Paul Muldoon. In spite of these limitations Longley's poetic *oeuvre* is one of the greatest not only in Ulster and we may hope that the poet, being still active, may feel inclined to the set off for a journey whenever he notices that there are some new traditions to capture.

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