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Fran Brearton

'Wounds', Michael Longley

Until the publication of 'Ceasefire' in 1994, 'Wounds' was probably the best-known and most celebrated of Michael Longley's poems: it is frequently anthologized, an habitual critical touchstone in discussion of his work, and enshrined as a 'set text' on the Republic of Ireland's School Leaving Certificate. Although there are other factors at play, in the case of both 'Wounds' and 'Ceasefire', one reason for the unusual degree of attention given to the poems may be their overt engagement with a turbulent political history. Both poems, as with W. B. Yeats's controversial Easter 1916 elegies, reverberate beyond the particular context of their production, but are, nonetheless, deeply implicated in the historical memory of that context. 'Wounds' emerges from a point in Northern Ireland's history, and literary history, when the Troubles – and, correspondingly, media demands for its already high-profile poets to write a 'public' and 'responsible' Troubles poetry – were at their height. Written in May 1972, and collected in Longley's second book, *An Exploded View* (1973), it responds, more directly than any other of his poems, to atrocities in the early 1970s that were, in their different ways, definitive moments in the history of the Troubles. The first is the IRA shooting of three Scottish soldiers on 6 March 1971 – the teenage brothers John and Joseph McCaig, and twenty-three-year-old Dougald McCaughey. Lured from a bar in the centre of Belfast, they were killed on a mountain road outside the city. The second is the murder of Sydney Agnew on 18 January 1972, a bus conductor and father of three who was shot at his home the day before he was due to appear as a witness in a court-case. Behind these two explicit commemorations lies a more oblique allusion in the poem ('heavy guns put out / The night-light in a nursery for ever...') to Patrick Rooney, the nine-year-old killed by an RUC tracer bullet on 14 August 1969 as he lay in bed in the family flat in Divis Tower.¹

On one level, and given the media frenzy surrounding Northern Ireland's politics and its poetry in the 1970s, the poem's very topicality accounts for its habitual citation in reviews of Longley's work through the 1970s and 1980s (the reception of Heaney's 'Casualty' is comparable in this regard). In a 1973 *Observer* review Peter Porter claims 'Wounds' as 'a poem which political and religious fanatics'

should read, 'in case they have forgotten what an equaliser murder is', the first of many comments on the poem which suggest its potential as a force for good in troubled times.² For others, it is a poem which answers the demand that poetry finds an 'adequate response' to violence, if only by exposing the inadequacy of the terms on which such demands are made.³ It is also taken to exemplify a change in Longley's oeuvre, from the stylized and personal stance of his first book to the more expansive and public voice adopted in the second, at a time when the Troubles, as Douglas Dunn observed, were 'an experience against which poetic technique (let alone imagination) had to contend in ways which to most of us are hardly imaginable'.⁴

But mere topicality, of course, is a far from adequate explanation of the poem's long-term influence, however much it might account for media attention in the 1970s. It is not the fact of the poem's response to the Troubles which renders it so compelling but the manner of it. As with the later sequence, 'Wreaths', from 1979, 'Wounds' is notable for a deceptive simplicity of style allied with a complex political (in the broadest sense of that term) layering. In a letter to Longley from 1973, Brendan Kennelly describes it as 'the best poem I know written about the troubles in Belfast'. 'The problem with most of the poetry written about your city', he continues, 'is that, to put it bluntly, the poems are sectarian and therefore crippled. "Wounds" knows no frontiers and its pity is unconfined'.⁵ His last point – of which more anon – relates to style as well as substance, form as well as theme. If critics of Longley's elegies habitually mention 'pity', rightly placing such poems in a tradition of protest-elegy that goes back to Wilfred Owen and the Great War ('The Poetry is in the pity'),⁶ they tend also to identify a capacity for ordinariness, for a direct and uncluttered diction that heightens the poignancy of the seemingly mundane. The detail of 'Wounds' – 'Before they could turn the television down / Or tidy away the supper dishes' – is what the newspapers do not tell us. The 'pity' is in the bits and pieces of the everyday.

The everyday resonates through juxtaposition with a political and historical perspective that is also, like the poem's pity, 'unconfined'. 'Wounds', it is perhaps now easy to forget, treads a political minefield in the 1970s; nor have the controversies surrounding the events it describes (with, in at least one instance, far-reaching legal consequences) disappeared. The poem does not 'tidy away' political complexity in favour of ideological certainty any more than it sanitizes or depersonalizes its closing murder. Rather, it perceives black-and-white certainty – on the part of the screaming boy in stanza one and the 'shivering boy' in stanza two – with a necessary 'bewilderment'. Early manuscript drafts of 'Wounds' pose some bewildered questions about Sydney Agnew to highlight the inadequacy of political and religious

labelling as an explanation of atrocity; the more subtle ironic neutrality of Agnew's identification as a bus-conductor in the final version makes the same point. His 'uniform' is a symbol not of power but, like his 'carpet-slippers', of anti-power. Similarly, the 'teenage soldiers' are identified not by nationality or faith but by their youth and, implicitly, their natural youthful exuberance for life ('bellies full of / Bullets and Irish beer, their flies undone.'). In another early draft of the poem, the 'sacred heart of a Jesus...looked on' as 'artillery put out / The nightlight in a nursery...'. In the finished version, the Sacred Heart is, more effectively, 'paralysed', as if the Christ-figure himself is both physically and permanently damaged by actions perpetrated in the name of religion, as well as spiritually helpless (the 'wounds' of the title are, among other things, the wounds of Christ; but they offer no redemption here); and 'heavy guns' operate (unlike artillery), metaphorically as well as literally, as an oblique reference to the forces of power (the big guns) who trample on the fragile and vulnerable it is the poem's concern to record.⁷ '[P]ut out / The night-light', an echo of Othello's 'Put out the light, and then put out the light', evokes a loss of innocence that reverberates beyond the poem's interaction with contemporary history. Paul Durcan describes Longley's poetry through the 1970s as work in which 'an ever-deepening simplicity of the verse as it approaches greater and greater complexity' is developed.⁸ The point is particularly applicable to 'Wounds': the qualities of directness and simplicity – the clarity and familiarity of diction; the avoidance of rhetorical flourish – for which the poem is rightly praised are also the qualities which expose more complex truths than those evident merely from the reported facts.

'Wounds' may thus be read as a deeply committed political poem utterly resistant to the forms of political commitment that the age, it seems, demanded. As Longley put it in a letter to *The Irish Times* in 1974: 'With the score-board reading as it does at the moment, the logical outcome of most calls for a certain kind of commitment would be IRA art, UVF art, UWC art and so on, ad nauseam'. The solution is not, he makes clear, avoidance of the subject: '[t]he artist', he argues, 'would be inhuman if he didn't respond to tragic events in his own community, and an irresponsible artist if he didn't seek to endorse that response imaginatively'.⁹ But part of the responsibility of such a response lies in the poet's avoidance of simple antithesis, of tit-for-tat thinking, 'us' versus 'them'. 'Wounds' opts instead for complex echoes, doublings, and dual perspectives – formally and thematically. Part of its depth as a 'Troubles' poem, responsive to and immersed in the present day, comes from the expansiveness of its historical imagination, its careful counter-pointing of past and present, public and private, personal and cultural memory.

If 'Wounds' treads painful and sensitive ground in its own time and place, it opens up another potentially controversial subject area in its evocation of the 36th (Ulster) Division at the Battle of the Somme more than half a century earlier. The 'Wounds' of the poem are psychic as well as physical, historical wounds as yet unhealed, fault-lines running through the century and the society. The Ulster Division's wartime exploits have become the stuff of unionist, Protestant myth, their heroic sacrifice on the Somme (the casualties were in excess of 5000, of whom over 2000 were fatalities) was implicated in memory of the Home Rule crises and in the establishment of a Unionist government in Northern Ireland after the First World War. The motivations behind the 1 July 1916 attack – 'Going over the top with "Fuck the Pope!" / "No Surrender!"' – determined the way in which the catastrophic loss of life was memorialized in unionist culture, and nationalist Ireland's wartime casualties were correspondingly airbrushed out of the picture. Significantly, the 'pictures' Longley's father recalls from 1916 are ones which the poet has 'kept...like secrets until now'. The personal memory only belatedly shared is suggestive of the broader issue surrounding remembrance in Ireland, particularly as regards the year 1916. (Fiftieth anniversary commemorations of the Battle of the Somme and the Easter Rising shed new light on both events in the 1960s). In another sense, it might be read as an oblique comment on the politics of Northern Ireland before 1968, where the inequalities and divisions in its society festered beneath the surface. The poet's father is a 'belated casualty' of the First World War, 'lead traces flaring till they hurt' (the earlier poem 'In Memoriam' pre-empts 'Wounds' by explaining that his 'old wounds woke / As cancer'); there is also, by implication, a continuity here that renders Northern Ireland itself a belated casualty, as well as the product, of an earlier conflict. Yet the articulation of such problems in the poem is also indicative of the potential for their redress.

Over the last twenty-five years, the various tendencies to downplay, forget, over-politicize or simplify the narratives of Irish involvement in the Great War have themselves become historical: official forms of remembrance are more ecumenical and less controversial than was once the case; cultural representations of Irish involvement in the War, north and south – from Frank McGuinness's 1986 *Observe the Sons of Ulster Marching Towards the Somme* to Sebastian Barry's 2005 *A Long Long Way* – have proliferated. McGuinness's play is in many ways pioneering. Yet 'Wounds' pre-empts it, an imaginative evocation of the 36th Division at the Somme that suggests some of the historical complexity of the event through recognition of its long-term reverberations. Even in the few short, seemingly simple lines which paint the picture of the Ulstermen 'Going over the top', Longley's

perspective is light years away from the patriotic writings earlier in the century which toed a unionist, commemorative line. The uncompromising attitude of the 'boy about to die' is in stark contrast to the memory offered here, which is uniquely complicated in ways which reflect back on the war itself. The poet is at two removes: the memory is not his; rather it is 'inherited' from his English father, who looks on as an outsider at the Ulstermen in some 'bewilderment'. (The allusion to Yeats's 'excess of love / Bewildered them' in 'Easter 1916' also obliquely connects the Ulstermen to those who, for the opposite cause, were nevertheless similarly 'Enchanted to a stone'). Nor is his own voice that of an insider who has learned, growing up in Northern Ireland, to understand a 'Fuck the Pope' mentality. Instead, we are shown, by the end of the poem, a culture which has 'bewildered' itself, whose actions are no longer comprehensible to its ordinary citizens. As bodies and mementoes are buried in the poem, in a convergence of past and present, the commemorative act works also as a counter-movement which unearths the difficult memories certain versions of history might try to repress.

As a poem of dual perspectives, a response both to the early 1970s and to the Great War, 'Wounds' has had something of a critical double life too. Paul Fussell's early discussion of 'Wounds' as a text which draws on the Great War to establish 'an archetype for subsequent violence – as well as a criticism of it' in the closing chapter of his highly influential *The Great War and Modern Memory* has helped to ensure a critical afterlife for the poem outside an Irish context.¹⁰ 'Wounds' belongs in a tradition of war poetry and protest-elegy that dates back to 1914-18, even as it has redirected that tradition in response to the unique circumstances of Northern Ireland; it appears in anthologies both of Irish and of First World War poetry. That the poem is in some ways ahead of its time in terms of Ireland's historical memory of the Great War, and that it reveals Longley's indebtedness to an English as well as an Irish poetic tradition has also made it, and the poet's work more broadly, subject to some misreading in an Irish critical context. Various labels have been tried – Longley as Anglocentric, as a benign unionist, as a poet whose work is akin to a Larkinesque post-war Britishness¹¹ – and none has proved satisfactory. It is, however, a measure of how much the cultural and political climate has changed that such critical perspectives (which tend to assume the two world wars are somehow remote from a genuinely 'Irish' experience) now look rather dated. 'Wounds' is notable for its uncompromising presentation of sectarian bigotry, its complex acknowledgement that ideological certainty can engender an almost insane bravery that commands 'admiration', its simultaneous exposé of the human capacity to commit atrocity, and its subtly sustained critique of identity

politics. The way it filters the Troubles and the Great War through each other complicates both to help eliminate some of the 'frontiers' that politicize and circumscribe memory. The poem is, in consequence, enduringly resistant to being read in the identitarian terms which it undermines.

It is appropriate, too, that 'Wounds', a poem of careful contrasts and parallels, stands at a transitional point in Longley's oeuvre. It comes midway between 'In Memoriam' – his early elegy for his father – and the sequence of Troubles elegies, 'Wreaths', and midway between overt formalism and the more fluid and relaxed style and idiom increasingly in evidence by the late 1970s. In Longley's first collection, and in a number of the poems in his second which pre-date 'Wounds', the poet's formalism is worn very much on the sleeve. Every poem in *No Continuing City* is rhymed, sometimes with an extraordinarily intricate patterning; the 'Letters' sequence of *An Exploded View* which paves the way for 'Wounds' is in octosyllabic rhyming couplets, self-consciously aware of its own stylization. In contrast, 'Wounds', with its more flexible blank verse, facilitates the kind of conversational, almost confiding tone familiar to readers of Longley's later work. The poem exemplifies the art that conceals art, hiding its virtuosity under the surface. As with the difficult and repressed memories it brings to light of day, its own subtle connections are there to be disinterred, an almost invisible stitching that pulls the disparate times and places together. Thus, the first stanza of the poem effectively rains down consonants like bullets. Its hardhitting 'k' sounds – always carrying 'kill' behind them even though the word itself never appears – are scattered through 'Fuck', 'Shankill', 'Gurkhas' 'kilts', 'stick', 'buttocks' to culminate in 'King and Country'. In the second are the explosive, lower-pitched 'b's – 'badges', 'rainbows', 'bury', 'bellies', 'Bullets', 'beer', 'Woodbines', and 'bus-conductor' (the absent presence is 'bomb'). Against both, and through the poem, play the softer 's' and 'sh' sounds that provide a sometimes ironic counterpoint in the music of the poem. (One might note, too, that the later 'Ceasefire' reconciles in its final line some of those oppositions, as it also revisits and reverses the father/son grief of 'Wounds', with 'And kiss Achilles' hand, the killer of my son').

The poem's ironic juxtaposition of the Great War battlefield and a Belfast sitting room, its two killing fields, underpins a sequence of doubles and parallels embedded throughout. The 'Screaming' boy, the 'teenage soldiers', and the 'shivering boy' are implicitly linked in ways which throw into question any easy distinctions between killer and victim. '[M]y father's head' in the opening line finds a full rhyme in the 'what he said' of the closing line; in between it picks up 'He said', 'his thin head', and 'shot through the head', the irregularly buried rhymes

here intersections between past and present. The difference between this hidden rhyming and the ritualistic, rhyming couplet which concludes 'Ceasefire' is sufficiently telling in terms of pointing up the deliberate formal disruptions of the earlier 'Wounds'. The 'impure' is also central to its rhythmical variations, of which two instances are particularly noteworthy. The first – his father's observation "I am dying for King and Country, slowly" – drags on for an extra syllable to turn patriotic cliché into poignant irony. The second – 'I think "Sorry Missus" was what he said' – inverts the underlying iambic pattern with the trochaic stresses on 'Sorry' and 'Missus'. The comment unsettles the line as it also unsettles its reader: while most would agree the closing line of 'Wounds' is extraordinarily emotive and powerful in its effect, the complexity of the issues it opens up is such that most would also hesitate to try and explain why.

I noted at the outset that 'Wounds' was probably no longer the most famous of Longley's poems. For a younger generation, 'Ceasefire', the moving sonnet detailing Achilles's meeting with Priam in the Trojan War, with its obvious public resonance, tends now to be better known, and its world is more familiar than that of 'Wounds'. In a way, the shifting profile of the two poems renders them barometric of a society that has itself moved from the incomprehensible brutalities and the 'Sorry Missus' of 'Wounds' towards the painful necessity for accommodation in 'Ceasefire' – to 'do what must be done'. Northern Irish society's own public face has become one less of death and destruction, more of painstaking negotiation. Yet to call it barometric of its society may still underestimate the significance of a poem such as 'Wounds'. Rather it stands with the handful of poems in the twentieth century which, however intangibly, affect the political context they describe. Controversial though the claim may be, it is possible to argue that 'Wounds' is responsible for its own displacement by a later 'Ceasefire' in as much as its critical involvement with the complex and painful processes of memory and remembrance, allied with its extraordinary and exemplary compassion, have helped, in the decades following its appearance, to engender the conditions which render a 'Ceasefire' possible.

'Wounds' is included in the following collections by Michael Longley: *An Exploded View: Poems 1968-72* (London: Gollancz, 1973); *Selected Poems 1963-1980* (Winston-Salem, Wake Forest University Press, 1981); *Selected Poems* (London: Cape Poetry, 1998); *Poems 1963-1983* (Edinburgh and Dublin: Salamander Press and Gallery Press, 1985); *Collected Poems* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2006). It is to be found in the

following anthologies: *Penguin Modern Poets 26*, edited by Anthony Thwaite (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1975); *The Penguin Book of Contemporary British Poetry*, edited by Blake Morrison and Andrew Motion (London: Penguin, 1982); *The Penguin Book of Contemporary Irish Poetry*, edited by Peter Fallon and Derek Mahon (London: Penguin, 1990); *Poets from the North of Ireland (New Edition)* edited by Frank Ormsby (Belfast: Blackstaff, 1990); *The Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing*, Vol. III, edited by Seamus Deane et al. (Derry: Field Day Publications, 1991); *Modern Irish Poetry: An Anthology*, edited by Patrick Crotty (Belfast: Blackstaff, 2003).

NOTES

1. For full details see the entries in David McKittrick et al., *Lost Lives: The Stories of the Men, Women and Children who Died as a Result of the Northern Ireland Troubles* (Edinburgh: Mainstream Publishing Co. Ltd., 2007), pp. 34-5, pp. 70-2, p.142.
2. Peter Porter, 'A Poet from Ulster', review of *An Exploded View* by Michael Longley, *Observer* (5 August 1973).
3. See, for example, Hayden Murphy, 'Grace under Pressure', review of *Poems 1963-1983* by Michael Longley, *Scotsman* (27 April 1985). For further discussion of this issue see also Fran Brearton, Chapter 2, 'Stereophonic Nightmares', in *Reading Michael Longley* (Tarsset: Bloodaxe, 2006), pp.51-101.
4. Douglas Dunn, 'The Poetry of the Troubles', review of *Selected Poems 1963-1980* by Michael Longley, *Times Literary Supplement* (31 July 1981) p.886.
5. Brendan [Kennelly], letter to Michael Longley, 23 November 1973. Michael Longley Papers, collection 744, Robert W. Woodruff Library, Emory University, Atlanta.
6. Wilfred Owen, draft preface, *The Poems of Wilfred Owen*, edited by Jon Stallworthy (London: Chatto & Windus, 1990) p.192.
7. See the manuscripts of 'Wounds' held in Collection 744, Longley papers, Emory University.
8. Paul Durcan, 'Poetry and Truth', review of *The Echo Gate* by Michael Longley and *The Strange Museum* by Tom Paulin, *The Irish Press* (20 March 1980) p.6.
9. Michael Longley, letter to *The Irish Times* (18 June 1974).
10. See Paul Fussell, *The Great War and Modern Memory* (London: Oxford University Press, 1975) p. 324.
11. See, for example, Thomas McCarthy, 'Northern Voices', review of *The Echo Gate* by Michael Longley, *The Irish Times* (9 February 1980) p.13 or Declan Kiberd, 'Contemporary Irish Poetry', in *The Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing*, Vol. III, edited by Seamus Deane et al. (Derry: Field Day Publications, 1991), p.1375.