

Makale Geliş | Received: 21.08.2017
Makale Kabul | Accepted: 14.10.2017
DOI: 10.18795/gumusmaviatlas.357733

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Respect for Tradition: The Role of War Poets in Michael Longley's Poetry *

Abstract

This study investigates the reasons why the Northern Irish poet Michael Longley, who makes explicit and implicit references in many of his poems to the war poets who were killed during the First and Second World Wars, hosts his predecessors in his poems. It can be asserted that the said interest has three root causes: poetical, political and familial. Opening his poetry to the war poets, Longley told the futility of war and implicitly of the conflicts that besieged his country between the years 1969 and 1998, and warned the Northern Irish people of the aftermath of violence. The poet, who regards his father who served as a major and his uncle who worked behind the trenches during the First World War as brothers-in-arms with the war poets, transforms them into relatives of his family and distinguished members of his own poetic universe, as it were. On the other hand, through such a treatment, he aims to make a room for himself within the poetic tradition and commune with it. Accordingly, as Longley poetically re-gives presence to the war poets by remembering them and reminding the others, he simultaneously attempts to prove his own poetic presence. In this sense, remembering enables the society to take lessons from the past and Longley to make a room for himself within the poetic tradition.

Keywords: Michael Longley, War Poets, Northern Irish Poetry, The Troubles.

Geleneğe Saygı: Michael Longley'nin Şiirlerinde Savaş Şairlerinin Rolü

Öz

Bu çalışma, I. ve II. Dünya Savaşları'nda yaşamlarını yitiren savaş şairlerine birçok şiirinde açık ya da örtülü göndermede bulunan Kuzey İrlandalı şair Michael Longley'nin öncellerini şiirlerine konuk etme nedenlerini incelemektedir. Sözü edilen ilginin şiirsel, politik ve ailesel olmak üzere üç temel nedeni olduğu söylenebilir. Longley, şiirlerini savaş şairlerine açarak savaşın ve dolaylı olarak 1969-1998 yılları arasında ülkesini kuşatan silahlı çatışmaların boşunaliğini anlatmış ve şiddetin sonuçlarına yönelik Kuzey İrlanda halkına uyarılarda bulunmuştur. I. Dünya Savaşı'nda binbaşı olarak görev yapan babasını ve cephe gerisinde çalışan dayısını savaş şairlerinin silah arkadaşları gibi düşünen şair, onları adeta birer aile yakınına ve kendi şiir evreninin seçkin üyelerine dönüştürür. Öte yandan, böyle bir yaklaşımla, kendisine şiir geleneği içinde bir yer açmayı ve bu gelenekle bütünleşmeyi amaçlar. Buna göre, Longley savaş şairlerini hatırlayıp başkalarına hatırlatarak şiirsel düzeyde onlara yeniden varlık kazandırırken, eşzamanlı olarak kendi poetik varlığını kanıtlamaya çalışır. Bu anlamda, hatırlama topluma geçmişten ders çıkarma, Longley'ye ise kendisine şiir geleneği içinde yer açma olanağı verir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Michael Longley, Savaş Şairleri, Kuzey İrlanda Şiiri, İrlanda Sorunu.

* This paper is a revised version of the study entitled "Sharing a Common Fate: Michael Longley's Poetical Friendship with English War Poets" presented orally at "The 10th IDEA Conference" organised by Boğaziçi University, İstanbul, Türkiye, 14-16 April 2016.

Michael Longley (1939-), one of the prominent voices of Northern Irish poetry, has addressed the two World Wars in his *oeuvre* to reflect the grim reality of violence both in civilised Europe and in socially and politically fragmented Northern Ireland. In his poems, war becomes a subject which “incorporates but remains *distinct from* its Irish franchise” (Corcoran 2007: 690). Longley’s poetry demonstrates this engagement from the start, so much so that almost all his volumes make reference to the war poets, especially Wilfred Owen (1893-1918), Isaac Rosenberg (1890-1918), Edward Thomas (1878-1917) and Keith Douglas (1920-1944). Poems such as ‘Letters’ in *An Exploded View* (1973), ‘Edward Thomas’s War Diary’ and ‘Mole’ in *Man Lying on a Wall* (1976), ‘The War Poets’ and ‘Bog Cotton’ in *The Echo Gate* (1979), ‘No Man’s Land’ in *Poems* (1985), ‘Poetry’, ‘War Graves’, ‘The Moustache’ and ‘Death of a Horse’ in *Weather in Japan* (2000), and ‘Edward Thomas’s Poem’ in *Snow Water* (2004) all directly or implicitly cite his predecessors.

In Longley’s opinion, despite all his poems concerning war, writing about war does not make him a war poet. Introducing his *Cenotaph of Snow* (2003), a limited edition of a selection of his war-themed poems, he writes: “These are poems about war, not war poems. You have to be a war poet to write war poems.” He is, obviously, a non-combatant, but be that as it may, many critics regard him a war poet. For them, if Edward Thomas, who wrote all his poems in England before joining the army, is ranked among war poets, Longley, as a true follower of that poetic tradition, has already deserved to be assessed under that title. Ten years after the publishing of *Cenotaph of Snow*, he revised his view, but insisting on excluding himself from the ranks of war poets, noting that “if the cosmos of a poem is the Great War, then that’s it. And it doesn’t matter if it’s a woman writing, or Edward Thomas writing in England. War turns everything upside down, and redefines poetry” (Longley et al. 2013: 260).

Longley’s resolution not to see himself as a war poet might be due to his awareness of the nature of life in the trenches, in that, however many books you have read and however much knowledge you have acquired, you cannot fully understand it unless you have experienced it. Apart from his negative stance against being considered

as a war poet, his above mentioned poems indicate that he has a great affinity and affection for his predecessors. This study aims to divulge the root causes of the homage Longley pays to the war poets and reveal the poetic chances he gets for himself while hosting them in his poems concerning war. Its focus is that along with giving the war poets a poetic presence, he attempts to prove his own poetic self.

In general, Longley expresses his attachment to the war poets over three grounds which are poetical, political and familial. He is a non-combatant but assuming Northern Ireland as a battlefield during the Troubles, a three-decade civil war (1969-1998) during which the terror carried out by paramilitary Catholic-Nationalist and Protestant-Unionist organisations was inextricably intertwined with that of the state, is no mean judgment. During those years the poets of Northern Ireland were called to give a voice for the sectarian strife and tell the conflict by composing photographic lines:

I have heard many charges similar to those drummed up by the popular dailies during the last war: 'Where are the war poets?' Too many critics seem to expect a harvest of paintings, poems, plays and novels to drop from the twisted branches of civil discord. They fail to realise that the artist needs time in which to allow the raw material of experience to settle to an imaginative depth where he can transform it and possibly even suggest solutions to current and very urgent problems by reframing them according to the dictates of his particular discipline. He is not some sort of super-journalist commenting with unfaltering spontaneity on events immediately after they have happened (Longley 1971: 8).

As a dutiful artist, who was also exposed to the chaotic atmosphere of the Troubles, Longley responded to them by conveying the war poets into his poetry. It is beyond any doubt that he did it without sacrificing his artistic self, and avoided from adopting a journalistic attitude. Hosting the war poets in his poems enabled him to discover some grounds to link the two battlefields (Somme and Belfast) to each other, and thereby to link Longley of the Troubles to the poets of the World Wars. It was a tactic of his that allowed him to remind the collocutors, the Northern Irish society, the futility and inanity of war, and warn them of what might happen in the future.

Among others, probably the most fundamental motive for Longley to convey the war poets into his poetry is his familial history, which includes fragments from war

experiences of his father Richard Longley, his retarded uncle Lionel and the short life of his grandmother, Jessica Abrahams. As a veteran of the First World War, Major Richard Longley, whose nickname was 'Squib' in the trenches (Longley 1994: 18), fought for 'King and Country' with the London-Scottish Regiment in the Somme "aged twenty, in command of a company/ Who, because of them shaved only once a week/ And some not at all, were known as Longley's babies" (Longley 2006: 258) and received several wounds, including one resulting from "shrapnel shards that sliced [his] testicle" (Longley 2006: 30). From the outset of Longley's career as a poet, the father figure has been an almost constant motif in his poems as evidenced by 'In Memoriam' from *No Continuing City*, 'Wounds' from *An Exploded View*, 'The Linen Workers', 'Last Requests' and 'Second Sight' from *The Echo Gate*, 'The Kilt' and 'Behind a Cloud' from *The Ghost Orchid*, 'The Moustache', 'The Choughs' and 'Anniversary' from *The Weather in Japan*, 'Harmonica' and 'The Front' from *Snow Water*. In these poems, Richard Longley appears to the reader in various roles: as a representative of the soldiers who fought in the First World War, a dominant image reflecting the poet's mindscape and poetical landscape, and a bridge between his son and the war poets.

As for his 'sad retarded uncle', Lionel, Longley does not share much about him other than to say that he served the British army on the Western Front, but "Was not once entrusted with rifle or bayonet but instead/ Went over the top slowly behind the stretcher parties/ And, as park attendant where all hell had broken loose,/ Collected littered limbs until his sack was heavy" (Longley 2006: 102). Lionel, whose head was blown off in the trenches, is rather a symbolic figure denoting the instrumentalisation of individuals, irrespective of their military incompetence.

As Longley's father and uncle link him directly to all combatant poets, his Anglo-Jewish grandmother, Jessica Abrahams, specifically connects him with the Anglo-Jewish poet Isaac Rosenberg, highlighting the point from an ethno-religious perspective. All these associations ultimately feature the roots of Longley's poetic choice which is well-encapsulated by himself: "[t]he two World Wars were part of my family history before they became part of my imaginative landscape" (Brown 2002: 94).

It would not be wrong to say that Longley’s poems concerning war marshal his familial and literary ancestors, hence his can be reckoned an attempt to give presence to their absence. ‘War Poets’ reverberates with this intent. The very title of the poem evokes uncertainty, for the names of war poets are unstated, in compliance with this intent. Not that Longley, in essence, considers their identities important, because the word ‘war’ signifies an intentionally global resonance (Redmond 2003: 269). Despite the generalized context of the poem, however, the reader can infer that the title implicitly refers to Isaac Rosenberg, killed in the First World War on the Western Front soon after his night patrol, whose body was never found. He is invisibly placed at the centre of the poem. Here, to be remembered is to regain presence, at least imaginatively:

Unmarked were the bodies of the soldier-poets
For shrapnel opened up again the fontanel
Like a hailstone melting towards deep water
At the bottom of a well, or a mosquito
Balancing its tiny shadow above the lip.

It was rushes of air that took the breath away
As though curtains were drawn suddenly aside
And darkness streamed into the dormitory
Where everybody talked about the war ending
And always it would be the last week of the war (Longley 2006: 136).

Like the many nameless and faceless victims of war, the unmarked and unremarked subjects of this poem are obliterated from history (Brearton 2006: 148). In underscoring this fact, Longley implicitly compares the First World War with the Troubles, thereby making all those forgotten soldiers, who fought with the 36th Ulster Division at the Somme and died for their country at a tender age, members of contemporary Northern Irish families. The inference is completely in accordance with his mission: to “act as an early warning system” (Russell 2010: 18) or, borrowing from Wilfred Owen, “to be tuned in before anyone else to the implications of a situation” (qtd. Longley 1971: 8).

Accordingly, Longley holds a mirror to the horror of the First World, for the benefit of Northern Irish society, to show what had happened in the past, what exactly

was happening during the Troubles and will happen soon. In other words, he tries to give presence to past warriors so as to prevent his contemporary neighbours turning into absence. The horror described in the first stanza leads us to another form of death in the second: breath is taken away in a rush of air, depicted as the abrupt intrusion of ‘darkness’ which interrupts the hopeful conversation of soldiers preparing for bed. The end to war is urgent but seems to never come. The same was true of Longley’s home, Ulster, which looked for a solution for its thirty years of political and social turmoil until the Good Friday Agreement of 1998. There, the forlorn hope for peace was repeatedly tested by the harsh reality of violence.

‘No Man’s Land’, a poem dedicated to the memory of Isaac Rosenberg, takes Longley’s relation with the war poets a step further. Although the title evokes a clear image of battlefields, especially those of the First World War, it also suggests uncertainty, as do its unnamed corpses. No one belongs nowhere, but anyone may belong anywhere, in the context of this uncertainty. Such a dilemma opens a door to an artistic realm, since the title could also symbolise a poetic space in which Longley aims to make a room for himself among war poets. In a sense, this space is “both the area which must be challenged if the poet is to find his own aesthetic space, and a metaphor which can create that space” (Brearton 2000: 254). With its multi-layered connotations, it is also a space, whether past or present, real or poetical, where people, including soldiers, poets or soldier-poets, are driven to the margins and doomed to be forgotten.

Longley’s ‘No Man’s Land’ juxtaposes his beloved Anglo-Jewish granny, Jessica Abrahams, who “has come down to [him] in the copperplate writing/ Of three certificates, a dog-eared daguerreotype/ And the one story [his] grandfather told about her” (Longley 2006: 157), with the Anglo-Jewish poet Isaac Rosenberg. It is a poetical attempt to give presence to his marginalised and almost forgotten familial and literary ancestors. The question posed by the first line of the poem -“Who will give skin and bones to my Jewish granny?”- espouses this idea, being both a question and an appeal. The answer winks at the poet himself: It is ‘me’, ‘Michael Longley’. Although he cannot resurrect her physically, he can keep her memory alive in his poetry.

The first part of the poem relates the disappearance of Jessica, after her premature death at the age of twenty, from Longley’s family history; the second focuses on the marginalisation of Rosenberg in literary history. As Tara Christie (2007: 555-556) puts it, “Longley’s desire to recover the memory of his Anglo-Jewish grandmother (marginalized in family history) prompts the poet’s turn to Anglo-Jewish Rosenberg (marginalized in literary history).” This association of Jessica and Rosenberg offers, in all aspects, a poetic resurrection:

I tilt her head towards you, Isaac Rosenberg,
But can you pick out that echo of splintering glass
From under the bombardment, and in No Man’s Land
What is there to talk about but difficult poems?

Because your body was not recovered either
I try to read the constellations of brass buttons,
Identity discs that catch the light a little.
A shell-shocked carrier pigeon flaps behind the lines (Longley 2006: 157).

When Longley tilts his granny’s head towards Rosenberg, he attempts to make his predecessor a member of his family, or at least, of his poetic family. Since the exact locations of both their graves are unknown (the headstone for Rosenberg standing over an empty grave in the Bailleul Road East military cemetery in France signifies not the exact but the approximate place where he was killed), the poet probes evidence of their deaths in order to balance their absence with the presence of anything that recalls them. ‘The constellations of brass buttons’ and ‘identity discs’ cannot bring Rosenberg back; on the contrary, they function just to prove his absence. Only the poet himself can raise him from the dead and turn his absence into presence.

Both his belongings and Jessica’s certificates, daguerreotype, and the story his grandfather told about her also function as carriers of messages from the past, which are symbolised in the poem by the pigeon. Their absence might cause a complete break from the past, just as the loss of the pigeon ‘behind the lines’ could result in the complete destruction of the communication network. Westendorp interprets these lines from a similar perspective, writing

Longley's pregnant image brings together the familiar shell-shock, the difficulty of carrying messages from the past to the present, and the impossibility of reading the signs of history both in time of war and peace, and all this is projected on the wounded pigeon flapping behind the lines (Westendorp 1991: 137).

The shell-shocked carrier pigeon is also suggestive of soldier-poets such as Siegfried Sassoon and Wilfred Owen, who suffered from psychological disturbance caused by their terrible experiences of the First World War. With their diaries, letters and poems written on the front, war poets, embodied in Longley's poem by Rosenberg, serve a similar role as reporters whose writings continue to portray the past long after their deaths. It, therefore, falls to Longley to reawaken the memories of his familial and poetical ancestors and "try to piece their stories (and their bodies) back together" (Christie 2007: 557).

The shell-shocked carrier pigeon of 'No Man's Land' is, in 'The War Graves', replaced with woodpigeons that call from the wood and tell the stories of the gallantry of the soldiers who did well in the war. It could be argued that they represent two successive generations, in that the former is a symbol of sacrifice and the latter evokes a sense of obligation. Longley, as a member of the post-war generation and as a poet expressing his gratitude to his predecessors, also poses as such a bird and conveys those stories into his poetry. In 'The War Graves' he strengthens his relationship with the past by invoking the names of dead soldiers and secures his position amongst the war poets by citing Charles Sorley, Edward Thomas and Wilfred Owen. In so doing, the possibility of a more positive future beyond the horrific instantiations of wartime past are revealed: "we pick from a nettle bed/One celandine each, the flower that outwits winter" (Longley 2006: 257).

The apprehensive cry of the blackbirds and the elegies of the woodpigeons also suggest "a music that hints at nature's sorrow for human misdeed" (McNair 2003: 273). Similarly, the comet at Edward Thomas's grave can be said to evoke "the pathetic fallacy, an elegiac convention that creates the impression that nature itself responds to the loss" (Potts 2011: 94). Such audio-visual images, like the flowers growing at

Wilfred Owen’s grave, imply a realm that promises serenity in the face of war. This emphasis on life-affirming nature is a literary mode handed down by Edward Thomas, “an illuminating ghost” (Longley et al. 2013: 257) for the Ulster poet. What fascinates Longley about Edward Thomas is not only his literary work but also the diary he kept in the trenches from 1 January to 8 April 1917, the day before he was killed at the Battle of Arras. The diary is so precious to Longley that both ‘Edward Thomas’s War Diary’ and ‘Mole’ irrefutably bear its traces. By citing its various pages and poeticising the original sentences Longley reinforces his bond with his poetical mentor. The diary notes on March 16 that “The first thrush I have heard in France sang as I returned to Mess at 6 p.m. [...] A horrible night of bombardment, and the only time I slept I dreamt I was at home and couldn’t stay to tea” (Thomas 2011). These lines, reeking of horror and muteness, echo in the first two stanzas of ‘Edward Thomas’s War Diary’. Repetition, underlining Thomas’s state of mind, serves to strengthen the relationship Longley seeks to establish:

One night in the trenches
You dreamed you were at home
And couldn’t stay to tea,
Then woke where shell holes
Filled with bloodstained water

Where empty beer bottles
Littered the barbed wire –still
Wondering why there sang
No thrushes in all that
Hazel, ash and dogwood,
Your eye on what remained (Longley 2006: 103).

Longley draws a sharp contrast between nature and war by following in Thomas’s steps. The last stanza, in which Longley imagines Thomas dreaming about “larks singing/ Like a letter from home/ Posted in No Man’s Land” (2006: 103) is an example of such a contrast. To create beauties in the midst of violence is an inherited tactic used by Longley himself during the years of the Troubles. Standing close to nature and keeping himself aloof from the political strife, at least imaginatively, he finds the opportunity to ask the most unsettling questions. His poem ‘Mole’, for example, is

introduced with a crucial question drawn from Edward Thomas’s war diary entry of February 25: “Does a mole ever get hit by a shell?” (Thomas 2011). Answering this question with another question, Longley’s poem, which focuses on the mole’s decaying body, depicts the horror of war quite effectively. The brevity and form of the poem heighten its impact:

Who bothers to record
This body digested
By its own saliva
Inside the earth’s mouth
And long intestine,

Or thanks it for digging
Its own grave, darkness
Growing like an eyelid
Over the eyes, hands
Swimming in the soil? (Longley 2006: 104).

‘Mole’ is an implicit elegy to the dead soldiers of the First World, of course, including Edward Thomas himself, and more generally all “those forgotten by history” (Brearton 2000: 268). Sarah Cole reads the poem in a similar vein relating its message to colonial history or literary history. For her,

If the corpse in war is a site of the traumatic will to forget, but also, at times, of elegiac compassion, here Longley seems to have very little empathy for it at all. Those rotting moles have been swallowed up not only by the ground, but by a half-century of bloody history (Cole 2007: 500).

In this context, the poem gives rise to another question: Will the victims of the Troubles and the poets who composed during those bloody years also be forgotten by history? If so, it is highly likely that another poet will emerge in the future to compare the violence of his/her era to that of the Troubles and, as the fourth rotation of the poetic cycle that began with the poets of the First World, to forge a friendship with Longley. While such repetition historically points to on the one hand a nightmare, it represents a continuation of a literary tradition, on the other. ‘Bog Cotton’ gives a clear and satisfying example for such a point. The poem transforms the two World Wars an open ground, where Longley tries to make a room for himself in the tradition of war poetry

by citing Keith Douglas's 'Desert Flowers', which pays homage to Isaac Rosenberg's 'Break of Day in the Trenches'. He underlines the poetic chain by writing "Let me make a room for bog cotton, a desert flower-/ Keith Douglas, I nearly repeat what you were saying (Longley 2006: 136), which is a clear imitation of Douglas' lines "Living in a wide landscape are flowers-/ Rosenberg I only repeat what you were saying (Douglas 1998: 108). It is very easy to notice the bond between Rosenberg, who wrote about the First World War, and Douglas, who wrote about the Second World War, a bond which extends from them to Longley, writing about the Troubles. If 'Break of Day in the Trenches' and 'Desert Flowers' are reveries on the persistence of poetry in the midst of war, 'Bog Cotton' is an urgent confirmation of that persistence.

Longley also demonstrates his fidelity to the literary tradition in 'Letters', a long poem dedicated to the three Irish poets and true friends, James Simmons, Derek Mahon and Seamus Heaney. It opens with the second and the third lines of Keith Douglas's Second World War poem 'Vergissmeinnicht': "returning over the nightmare ground/ we found the place again" (Douglas 2000:118). In a sense, Longley gathers his actual poet friends and those with whom he wishes to forge a friendship, emphasising the importance of the predecessor-successor relationship. In this interpretation, the nightmare ground of Douglas's desert war ('Vergissmeinnicht' was written in Tunisia in 1943) is coupled with that of the Troubles and generalised "as the term is re-applied (it is repeated in the text of the poem) to the environment to which the son is heir" (Peacock 1995: 269).

The similarities between Douglas' 'nightmare ground' and Longley's home ground are not only physical but artistic and intellectual as well. On this point, Brearton (2006: 81) writes that "for Longley, as also for Douglas, the ground is both landscape and mindscape, external and internal, private and public." In this regard, Douglas serves as a role model who shows his successor the unchanging nature of violence and how to react against it artistically.

To conclude, Michael Longley's desire to follow in the tradition of 20th century war poetry has evidently centres around three grounds which are poetical, political and

familial. By hosting the war poets into his poetry, he both responded to those who called the poets of Northern Ireland to duty for a depiction or description of the Troubles and made a room for himself in the literary tradition. Such a tactic enabled him to discover some grounds to link the two battlefields (Somme and Belfast) to each other, and thereby to link Longley of the Troubles to the poets of the World Wars. In accordance with this tactic he frequently pairs his family ancestors with literary ones, highlighting their role as the source both of his career as a poet and of his very existence. It also enables him to remind the collocutors, the Northern Irish society, the futility and inanity of war, and to warn them of what might happen in future. In this sense, each of his related poems can be considered as an implicit critique of the Troubles.

For Longley, remembering is a means of cherishing as well as preserving the past. Therefore, in his poems about war, he raises all the forgotten or marginalised soldiers of the two world wars, including the war poets, from the dead, thus restoring to them a poetic presence by remembering. In this way, he protects both his own historic and poetic selves. On the other hand, through such a treatment, he makes a room for himself within the poetic tradition and communes with it. As Longley poetically re-gives presence to the war poets by remembering them and reminding the others, he simultaneously attempts to prove his own poetic presence. In this sense, remembering enables the society to take lessons from the past and Longley to make a room for himself within the poetic tradition.

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