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Achilles in Ireland:
The Translation of Epic to Lyric Narrative
in Michael Longley's "Ceasefire"

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Abstract

This essay discusses Michael Longley's sonnet "Ceasefire" and compares the political context of its composition to its classically informed content. Both Longley's expertise as a translator of ancient Greco-Roman texts and his lived experience as a Northern Irish poet during the Troubles informed "Ceasefire" – a poem which became so much more than Longley's unique take on Homeric translation and proved to be a highly significant and politically charged call to action for all who live through political unrest. Masquerading as a piece of lyric poetry, "Ceasefire" spoke to the pain of the past, addressed the continuing tension between English and Irish identities, and encouraged the possibility of peace, all without breaking free of the moving Homeric narrative that Longley sought to retell. The resulting poem is both deeply personal and universally applicable. This essay outlines the political and social context for "Ceasefire," discusses Longley's relationship to Classical texts and Troubles poetry, analyzes "Ceasefire" as a new translation of Homer, and discusses the reception and enduring legacy of "Ceasefire" in Ireland. Through "Ceasefire," Longley masterfully combined an epic tale with conventions of the lyric genre and created a powerful political and social commentary for his own time that has maintained its relevance for subsequent geopolitical conflicts.

Keywords: Epic, narrative, Troubles, poetry, lyric, hospitality, Longley, Homer

Introduction

Michael Longley's poem "Ceasefire," 1994, utilizes a pivotal moment in the *Iliad* to explore a modern conflict – the Troubles of Northern Ireland – and to acknowledge, encourage, and instruct Irish citizens in a moment of political and social distress. This essay will briefly outline Longley's political and literary inspiration, detail Longley's unique approach to translating epic poetry, compare "Ceasefire" to a more traditional translation of the *Iliad*, and discuss the reception and legacy of "Ceasefire." This analysis demonstrates the continuation and relevance of the Homeric tradition in 20th-century Irish poetry and politics.

It is worth pointing out that of what has previously been written about Michael Longley's "Ceasefire" and its social impact, few scholars have published a close textual reading of the poem and linked a word-by-word analysis to the political moment during which "Ceasefire" was written. Florence Impens provides a comprehensive overview of Longley's experience as a classicist who responded to politics by rewriting sections of *The Iliad* (90-91). Impens uses "Ceasefire" as one example among many to illustrate Longley's work as a translator. Similarly, Lorna Hardwick's research analyzes "Ceasefire" as an example of the relationship between the classical and the modern in Longley's poetry (205-206), but does not provide in-depth analysis of the poem. Others, such as David Mason, Moya Cannon, and Simone Weil focus more on the political aspects of the poem than its poetic structure. Mason touches mostly on the context of the poem's composition and its initial reception (75-76), while Cannon and Weil briefly celebrate the form of "Ceasefire" as a means to a political end (78). Sarah Broom explores "Ceasefire" as a romanticized retelling of Homer, deeming the insertion of Homer into the Troubles as unrepresentative of reality in Northern Ireland (109-110). While

existing scholarship has touched on the political significance of “Ceasefire” and charted the classical influences on Longley, there is little scholarship that focuses solely on “Ceasefire” and still less that analyzes its internal meaning or the full context of its emotional power.

Longley and His Influences

Irish poetry is known for its engagement with moments of political significance, especially those occurring in Northern Ireland. Because of Irish poetry’s reflection of the social and political divide of Northern Ireland, it is little wonder that poetry also became a means of providing some clarity to the complicated cultural heritage of the Northern Irish. Michael Longley (1939-2025) deeply felt this complicated heritage and spoke of, at times, feeling either Irish or British (“Memory and Acknowledgment 156), and his poetry often echoed these feelings by balancing English stylistic influences with decidedly Irish sentiments (John 140). Longley lived in Belfast throughout the Troubles (Mason 75) and, as was typical of Irish poets, wrote of the horrors he witnessed and read about. One of Longley’s poems, “Wounds,” was part of an emerging tradition of Troubles poetry that linked experiences in the First World War to experiences in the Troubles as a way of processing collective trauma (Longley, “Songs for Dead Children: The Poetry of Northern Ireland’s Troubles”). However, unlike other Northern Irish poets, Longley adopted an attitude similar to WWI English poet Wilfred Owen, believing that the responsibility of a poet was not to simply record traumatic events but “to warn” (John 145). The act of finding inspiration in the poets of the Great War and utilizing the shared emotions associated with wars to illustrate the emotions of the Troubles would later be echoed by “Ceasefire,” though the poem would go beyond the established poetic conventions of its time and link the Troubles to a much older conflict. The manner in which Longley connected the past and the present in “Wounds” was likely what laid the groundwork for his

later poem, "Ceasefire," to be accepted into the cannon of Troubles poetry (Brearton 237).

In addition to being an imitator of WWI poetry, Longley studied the Classics and was known for referencing classical works, notably those by Homer and Ovid, throughout his poetry (Broom 94). However, Longley's poetic relationship to classical, and specifically Homeric, texts went beyond a simple shared reference to the western canon. Longley used Homer as one voice in a conversation between the past and the present (Hardwick 205), and by engaging with classical texts, he presented ancient voices in a modern context for the purpose of exploring their wisdom. Several of Longley's poems such as "The Helmet," "The Parting," and, of course, "Ceasefire" – rework scenes from *The Iliad* into a specifically Northern Irish context (Impens 103-104). "Ceasefire," however, was different from the other reworkings of Homer; while "The Helmet" and "The Parting" highlighted the horrors of war, "Ceasefire" highlighted the humanity of the warrior. Though Longley acknowledged that "Ceasefire" branched out from previous poetic conventions of Troubles poetry which linked the Troubles to WWI (Longley "Songs for Dead Children: The Poetry of Northern Ireland's Troubles"), this deviation from the norm did not hinder the poem's popularity. According to scholar Fran Brearton, the public's reaction was quite the opposite (231). The dual allegiance that Longley felt to the Irish and to the English mirrored the dual allegiance presented by the depictions of Greeks and Trojans in *The Iliad*. By calling on an ancient story, Longley highlighted the enduring similarities of conflict throughout history. In "Ceasefire," Longley brought Homer's voice into the existing dialogue between a modern and an ancient conflict, and created a poem that would prove to be a timely reimagining of the classical past which brought humanity to a violent present.

Longley's Translation of Homer

Though "Ceasefire" builds heavily on Longley's expertise as a classicist, the form of "Ceasefire" has nothing to do with epic

poetry. “Ceasefire” is a straightforward, almost conversational retelling of the interaction between Priam and Achilles, as told in *The Iliad* (Homer 24: 599-804), with no poetic conventions added to mirror the style of epic poetry. As such, it is more fitting to call Longley’s poem a retelling than a translation. Though Longley as a student of Classics had extensive language experience with both Greek and Latin texts and loved to rewrite Latin love elegies (Impens 86), he did not like to translate or work with epic directly as he believed it to be a celebration of war (88). However, unwilling to abandon the vivid storytelling of Homer, Longley began to work on sections of *The Iliad* in the 1990s, hiding under the title of translator to rewrite moments from the epic poem of war into lyrical poems with pacifist themes (Impens 91). Lorna Hardwick observes of this creative moment that Longley’s “translations” of Homer occupy “a spectrum that covers the transplantation of Homeric episodes across time, place, languages, and genres and stretches to include the very close translation of lines of Homer within a poetics that exploits correspondences with the dynamics of Homeric situations and relationships, diction, syntax, and action” (210). Longley did not seek to translate Homer’s words, but to translate a Homeric moment into a more immediate political context (Hardwick 205) – this was the creative moment into which “Ceasefire” was born.

England, Ireland, and Troy

In order to translate Homeric moments into modern contexts, Longley focused on translating epic moments into lyric poems. In general, Longley was well-regarded for rewriting epic subjects in a lyrical style (Hardwick 204), which was partly due to Longley’s familiarity with and fondness for Classical works, but also due to his interest in borrowing poetry forms (205). Longley was not the first to merge epic subject matter with lyrical style, following in the footsteps of lyrical poets such as Sappho, who also wrote about war as something inferior to love and human connection (Papadimitropoulos 130). Longley went further than Sappho,

however, by not simply using a different poetic form to discuss the epic subject of war, but by borrowing and, arguably, appropriating the sonnet form to visually indicate a struggle against English poetics. Sonnets are a lyrical form often associated with English poets, but Longley only adopted the emotional tone of the sonnet, not any of its rules. "Ceasefire" is not written in iambic pentameter, does not have a volta, has no rhyme save for the final couplet, and is broken into four sections. Each section, with the exception of the final four lines that connect to the couplet, contains a single moment, yet all four sections work together to tell a larger narrative. By breaking up his sonnet, Longley demonstrated the fragility of a ceasefire – something that could break apart at any moment (Broom 111) – the way that such fragility necessitates viewing life as a collection of smaller moments, and perhaps also visually conveyed a breaking up of English traditions. Longley's liberated take on a sonnet stylistically foreshadowed the freedom from conflict that the poem encourages, and by combining epic subject matter with an almost free verse sonnet, elevated the content of his poem to the level of Homer without abandoning the modern moment he wrote for.

In addition to stylistically indicating conflict, Longley utilized modern English in "Ceasefire" to retell the story in a way that grounded the ancient scene in a present moment. "Ceasefire" includes several instances of common Northern Irish phrases (John 146), such as the opening line, "put to mind of his own father and moved to tears" (Longley, "Ceasefire" 1), which is the Homeric line "this made Achilles yearn/to mourn his father" (Homer 24:529-530) translated into Northern Irish dialect (Cannon and Weil 78). Also pertaining to Northern Irish concerns is the line "laid out in uniform" (Longley, "Ceasefire" 7), which holds modern indications of militaristic might, yet does so without interrupting the distinctly ancient, Homeric story that the poem tells. Other more modern phrases include: "for the old king's sake" (6), which is a much more empathetic take on Achilles' somewhat pragmatic choice to hide Hector's body

in case
the sight of [Hector] might make his grieving heart
unable to contain his rage, and then
Achilles would . . .
kill him and transgress the laws of Zeus. (Homer 24:728-732)

Then there is the line: "Priam good-looking still/And full of conversation" (Longley, "Ceasefire" 11-12) which translates "Priam – /his fine appearance" (Homer 24:791-792) and elaborates on the description by implying that Priam is comfortable enough with Achilles to maintain a conversation. By these modern phrase choices, the reader remains in the present moment even as they contemplate the mythic past.

Though Longley ignored several lyric conventions throughout "Ceasefire," he still relied on lyric poetry's convention of heightened emotion, even altering details from Homer to do so. In Longley's version of events, Achilles himself washes and dresses Hector's corpse (Longley, "Ceasefire 5-7), while in Homer the task is given to enslaved women (Homer 24:725-735). Longley's Achilles – a man who takes such a menial task upon himself in a kind of penance – is a much more likable figure than the Homeric Achilles who later struggles to keep his temper and threatens Priam (24:694-710), and thus makes for a more compelling lyrical subject. Additionally, Longley alters the wording of several Homeric moments to increase the emotional impact. "Ceasefire" states that Priam will "carry" (Longley, "Ceasefire" 7) Hector's corpse back to Troy instead of placing it in a wagon (Homer 24:735-738), which indicates a more tragic and paternal image of a father carrying his child home. Then, there is the almost erotic language of the third stanza which translates the Homeric moment: "Priam marveled at Achilles – /his size, his beauty. He looked like the gods/Achilles marveled at Dardanian Priam – /his fine appearance and the words he spoke./They gazed at one another in surprise" (24:789-793) into: "it pleased them both/to stare at each other's beauty as lovers might" (Longley, "Ceasefire" 9-10). The comparison to lovers calls to mind the expected subject matter

of lyrical poetry, and especially of sonnets, and elaborates on the moment's emotion while still preserving the narrative details of *The Iliad*. Thus, through altering some details, Longley masterfully balances the emotional tone and personal feeling of lyric with the subject matter of epic and creates a version of *The Iliad*, Book 24, which is both accessible and impactful.

In perhaps its greatest alteration to Homer, "Ceasefire" reorders the narrative established in *The Iliad* in a way that emphasizes Longley's call to action. While Homer has Priam state, "I have/endured what no man yet on earth has done – /I pressed my mouth to the hand of him/who killed my son" (Homer 24:626-629), in his very first speech to Achilles, Longley ends his poem with a recollection of this moment: "Priam . . . / who earlier had sighed:/I get down on my knees and do what must be done/And kiss Achilles' hand, the killer of my son'" (M. Longley, "Ceasefire" 11-14). By ending the Homeric scene with the remembered words of Priam, Longley rearranges *The Iliad* to drive home the extreme grief of the moment (Mason 76) and to further emphasize the beauty and impossibility of kindness between enemies. This rearranging of moments proved to be especially meaningful for the political moment that was occurring while Longley wrote. In the same year that "Ceasefire" was published, Longley wrote of the final episode between Achilles and Priam: "they're both emotionally drained by this time" ("Memory and Acknowledgment" 158). Emotional exhaustion was certainly familiar to Troubles survivors, and this familiarity made the image of enemies weeping together immediately applicable to Longley's context. However, Sarah Broom argued that, while "there is a profound bond between Priam and Achilles . . . the relationship is perhaps more complex and ambivalent than Longley, eager to emphasize the capacity in human beings for forgiveness, makes out; the subliminal anger that makes the exchange so highly charged in the *Iliad* is missing from 'Ceasefire'" (110). However, this simplistic retelling may very well be a creative choice that further contextualized the Homeric scene into Irish terms. The complexity of the relationship and the subliminal anger between Achilles and

Priam did not need to be explicitly stated for Longley's poem to be impactful to its intended audience, as the intended audience was living out a scenario quite similar to the one described in the *Iliad*, complete with its own kind of subliminal anger. Had Longley wanted to write a poem detailing the complexities of *the Iliad*, he certainly had both the translational ability and poetic talent to do so, but this was not what Longley sought to do with "Ceasefire." Longley later reflected on the creation and reception of this poem, stating that, "I still find warming the response of several readers, some of them damaged or bereaved in the Troubles" ("Memory and Acknowledgment" 158). This was the purpose of "Ceasefire" – not to directly retell either Homer or Troubles history, but to recall an ancient story of momentary reconciliation for a people who sorely needed to remember the possibility of kindness between enemies.

The Reception of "Ceasefire"

The publication of "Ceasefire" could not have been timelier to ensure a powerful reception. Longley later wrote in a 1995 piece for the *Irish Review* that he composed "Ceasefire" as a way to collect all the emotions that had sprung up in him while working on Book 24 of *The Iliad* and, "because at that time we were praying for an IRA ceasefire" ("Memory and Acknowledgment" 158). Longley explained that he "called the poem 'Ceasefire' and, hoping to make my own minute contribution [to Northern Irish peace], sent it to the *Irish Times*" (158). It just so happened that the poem was published two days before the IRA would declare an actual ceasefire ("Memory and Acknowledgment" 158). The particularly bloody weeks leading up to this ceasefire – one which, sadly, would not last – when combined with the subject matter of Longley's poem perfectly encapsulated the difficulty that a ceasefire would include, given the underlying anger and hurt which could not be banished through a declared moment of peace (Mason 75). This was a dilemma similar to that implied in Book 24 of *The Iliad*, which details another ceasefire that does not lead to the end of the conflict (Homer 24:825-839). Longley drew a connection between

ancient and modern conflict as a way of presenting the modern reader with the truth of ““what must be done”” (Cannon and Weil 78) and asserted that, just as the pain of intimate violence had not changed in millennia, neither had its remedy. Ireland, according to Longley, needed what Homer depicted – a watershed moment of vulnerability and compassion between enemies – but one that Longley hoped would last. This was the work of “Ceasefire;” in presenting a mythic story of momentary reconciliation between enemies and without denying the pain that either had endured, Longley encouraged those in his own time to look back to the mythic past, to grieve what had been mutually lost through conflict, and to do better than the ancients by remembering the power of laying down one’s weapons and connecting with an enemy as a fellow human being.

Conclusion

Longley is not a second Homer, nor did he claim to be by his participation in the Homeric tradition, but his participation in said tradition still succeeded in inserting an important ancient lesson into a modern context that was in desperate need of such a reminder. By translating Homer’s epic narrative into a lyrical style which blended English poetic conventions with Irish phrases and concerns, Longley contributed to both Northern Irish Troubles poetry and to the Homeric tradition in a powerful way. Longley’s “Ceasefire” showcased the enduring similarities of enemies, both ancient and modern, in their experience of pain, grief, and conflict, and, by doing so, included in his retelling of Homer all who had been hurt by the Troubles. In this way, “Ceasefire” bridged the gap not just between the ancient and modern worlds, but also between the warring sides of Ireland through an expression of shared humanity.

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