Stitching Divided Countries: A Study in Selected Poems by Michael Longley

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تضميد جراح البلدان المنقسمة : دراسة في قصائد مختارة لمايكل لونغلي

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المستخلص

تتناول هذه الدراسة حضور رمز اللحاف في مجموعة مايكل لونغلي الشعرية *الطقس في اليابان*، بوصفه استعارة مركزية لعملية الكتابة الرثائية، وممارسة فنية تُعيد عبرها القصائد تركيب الذاكرة والتاريخ. من خلال الغرز المباشرة—المتمثلة في الإشارات الصريحة إلى الأغطية، والأقمشة، والخياطة—والغرز غير المباشرة—مثل الإشارات الكلاسيكية، والصور الطبيعية، والرموز الأسطورية—يصوغ لونغلي نسيجًا شعريًا يجمع بين الحداد الشخصي والجراح الجماعية .تُميز الدراسة بين "الغرز المباشرة" و"الغرز غير المباشرة" في البناء الشعري، حيث تعكس الأولى الطابع المادي للحرف اليدوية بوصفها حاملة للذاكرة، بينما تتجلى الثانية في توظيف لونغلي للرموز الكلاسيكية والتضمينات الميثولوجية والبيئية في سياقات سياسية وإنسانية. من خلال هذا البناء الطبقي للقصائد، تؤدي عملية التقطيب وظيفة رمزية وجمالية تُحوّل الألم إلى شكل فني منظم .تخلص الدراسة إلى أن شعر لونغلي في *الطقس في اليابان* لا يسعى إلى إخفاء الجراح، بل إلى جمعها وتضميدها عبر فعل الكتابة ذاته. فالقصائد، مثل اللحاف، لا تمحو أثر الألم، بل تطرّزه، وتحوّله إلى عمل جمالي يحمل في طياته الذاكرة والتكريم، مؤكدة بذلك على قدرة الفن في مواجهة التشظي وبناء سرديات بديلة للمجتمعات المجروحة.
الكلمات المفتاحية: التبطين، الذاكرة، الرثاء، الصدمة، المصالحة، مايكل لونجلي.

Abstract

This paper investigates how Michael Longley's poem "The Weather in Japan" centers its metaphorical use of the quilt on the themes of poetic meaning-making and healing through culture. Longley's use of direct and indirect stitching imagery to explore memory, grief, war, reconciliation and creative repair is studied here, starting with Irish quilting traditions. The analysis tells apart "Direct Stitches," which display the quilting on the fabric and "Indirect Stitches," where the stitches hide quotes from poems, classical phrases and references to plants. By applying literary analysis and talking about culture, the paper shows that Longley's quilt poems gather together the various pieces of personal and historical suffering, turning their fragments into beautiful, ceremonial pieces. Not only is the quilt used in the home, but it also acts as a place for poetry, politics and religious healing.
Keywords: *quilting, memory, elegy, trauma, reconciliation, Michael Longley*

Historical Background

Patches of different design and purpose filled Ireland's homes and soon became part of how its people remembered, identified with and fortified themselves. Quilting, considered a home-based craft, keeps track of people's stories and the sometimes hidden details of Irish life. The many textiles, fabrics and stitches used in quilting express feelings, allowing individuals to deal with loss, challenges and their past. Because of their importance in religious, economic and artistic realms, Irish quilts provide valuable documentation of life experiences of many people (according to Ballard, 2006).

In Ireland's past, tea ladies from English estates brought quilting to the country and instructed servants in needlework. Shaw claims, in her writings, that these women used what they made as every day wear and passed quilting onto others in their area through frugality and pressing need (Shaw, n.d.). A quilt was often given at weddings, joined a girl's collection in her dresser and was made warmly by mothers for their kids. Some examples had colors, pictures of local animals or plants or owner's favorite symbols sewn to them—so every part represented a little part of the quilt maker's life. According to Shaw, women often reused mattress ticking to make sacks that she stuffed with corn husks. Patchwork quilts were spread for the family to sleep on top of (Shaw, n.d.).

Laura Jones, the former head of textiles at the Ulster Folk and Transport Museum, observes that in Ireland, in spite of its many divisions, quilting was common to women from all walks of life. As part of The Great Hunger in Ireland, the formation of a quilt pattern called the log cabin started to appear throughout Europe and became linked to emigration. According to Shaw, a number of emigrants pieced quilts together on the sea voyage and several

continued the work overseas by dispatching techniques and patterns to Ireland. “People who missed their Irish roots worked and crafted their Irish designs in America, while also sharing new ideas with relatives back home” (Shaw, n.d.).

Men and women both participated in Irish sewing activities that included knitting, dyeing and spinning, although quilting had a strong reputation as a female pastime. Furthermore, only women were involved in patchwork quilting on the whole. Geraldine Ponsonby, wife of the seventh Earl of Mayo, saw that women’s crafts could play a role in the growth of Irish cultural identity movements in the 19th century. Beforehand, the British government set up the National Schools in 1831 and philanthropic landlords such as Jones, believed patchwork supported industry, thrift, better living and kept costs down (as stated by Jones in Shaw, n.d.). Ponsonby’s approach made quilting closely linked to Canadian identity and the support of communities.

Lady Mayo, having worked with the Celtic Revival and the Arts and Crafts Movement, dreamt up the Royal Irish School of Art Needlework in 1874. Her devotion to traditional Irish design was at times cultural and at times political. Lady Mayo explained their goal as “to do expertly by needle any task we can, expressing our national identity (Lady Mayo, as cited in Shaw, n.d.). Lady Mayo hoped that renewing age-old Irish motifs would make women’s duties in the home seem as artistically significant as fine art and help Irish women improve their economic situation, encouraged by what she saw during the Famine and the challenge it brought to women.

As well as being an art and political tradition, quilting is meaningful on an emotional level. A woman from Ards noted in the Ulster Folk and Transport Museum said her mother treated

quilting as a quiet way to show her love. After sewing it, she held onto it in her closet... She never put it into effect. When she died, that was the first time and the last was as I laid her there," (Ulster Folk Museum Archives. This action turned the quilt into a blanket of remembrance and affection, carefully stitched to offer comfort as life ended.

A quilt instructor, Linda Ballard (2006), points out that even with shared or inherited designs, "each quilt always turns out uniquely." Every person who makes a quilt puts her feelings, hopes and ideas into what she does. Because every quilt is unique, it proves that quilting is shared work as well as a deeply personal affair, involving both tradition and the individual.

In recent decades, quilting has transitioned from domestic space to public art and political expression. Since the 1990s, particularly in Belfast and Derry, both Protestant and Catholic women have used quilts as peace-making tools in the aftermath of The Troubles (1960–1998). These quilts bear messages of healing, stitched expressions of resilience, and communal mourning. In this context, Longley's poem "The Quilt" becomes emblematic of this process: "We / Stitch a square of colour on the darkness, needle— / Work, material and words..." (Longley, 2000, p. 73). The "darkness" signifies the violence and trauma of history, while the "square of colour" represents the hopeful, creative act of mending—not erasure, but a soothing acknowledgment.

Thus, Irish quilting exists at the intersection of necessity and beauty, politics and tenderness. From famine to diaspora, from domestic ritual to poetic metaphor, patchwork has preserved Irish identity through the steady hands of its women. It is, in Longley's terms, both elegy and action: stitching not to forget but to remember with grace.

Direct Stitches: Quilt Imagery and Material Memory

Longley doesn't just compare quilting to memory in *The Weather in Japan*; he also actually creates quilts as a form of remembrance. The artist often uses patchwork, textiles and domestic fabrics such as blankets, quilts and eiderdowns which act as places for mourning, healing and remembering. Through her poems, Longley brings quilting out of daily tasks and makes it into a kind of ritual, symbolizing the way she cares for memory and the past.

Longley shows this metaphor best in "*The Sewing Machine*," when he brings in George Fleming, who stitches a quilt from the uniforms of sailors. Sewing in the poem has a weighty symbolism as Fleming plans to "cover the ocean floor and the graves / Of submariners in their submarines" (Longley, 2000, p. 58). Stitching here is a way to save shattered memories from the battles. The sewing machine appears like a lost object among us, serving as a tribute to something that happened. Longley replicates, through form, the way Fleming labors to connect pieces of loss into one final memorial.

The text also shows how everyday life and religious feelings touch on one another after death becomes an issue. Longley writes: "Communion in blankets and eiderdown and sheets / The only thing left in my mind is a broken-dish quilt" (Longley, 2000, p. 66). The way the film connects softness and fragmentation makes the story of terminal illness incredibly personal. The place where the life-pattern quilt is located, inspired by an old quilt, becomes a symbol for when a life crumbles, somehow finding comfort around it. He gives dignity to dying by filling household items with cloth to serve as comfort and support for the dead.

In "The Quilt," Longley steps back to talk about how poems are made. She writes, "We / Make a square of colour on the darkness,

use needle / Work, materials and words" (Longley, 2000, p. 73). Lennon uses lines like these to demonstrate that stanzas act as patches and poems are what brightens up a harsh world. Longley is convinced that poetic language, along with "needle, work, material and words," helps bring warmth, unity and emotion to painfully broken situations.

Jason Potter decides to further develop the metaphor in "The Sunburst" by picturing it as a quilt created with coat lining, uniform fabric and petticoats. The pattern is built so that a diamond radiates from the very end of the smallest grey square (Longley, 2000, p. 59). Using outgrown clothes to make a quilt helps me recall good times and good memories. Starting as a barely visible sadness, the tiniest grey spreads and forms a balance of color. Stylistically, the design helps people feel better and allows past memories to form beauty out of something small.In "The Yellow Teapot," Longley creates a list of quilt names to follow this pattern: "Snake's Trail, She Fly, Flying Bats, Spider Web... Among the works, he writes / "Grandmother's Flower Garden, Sun Dial, Mariner's / Compass, Detectable Mountains, World without End" (Longley, 2000, p. 62). Traditional American quilting patterns form these names which can mean danger and safety, memories and magic. Because their rhythm sounds like chanting, it appears as if each named pattern contains a tale, a ceremony or a magic spell. Using such domestic objects, Longley includes the often overlooked efforts of women in the main structure of her poetry.

Finally, the title poem "*The Weather in Japan*" closes the collection with an image of imperfection that radiates intimacy. "Some of the squares are cotton / And the stitching's a bit clumsy in places... / She made it out of her old dresses, / The ones she wore when she was young" (Longley, 2000, p. 91). The quilt here

is practical, nostalgic, and emotionally charged. Its clumsy stitching is not a flaw but a mark of truth—reminding the reader that beauty and memory are found not in perfection, but in the persistence of care. Just as the quilt preserves moments from the woman's youth, Longley's poems preserve emotional history in poetic fabric.

Across these poems, Longley weaves together fabric and form, text and textile. The "direct stitches" of *The Weather in Japan* are not just references—they are enactments of poetic grief work. Through literal cloth, Longley writes elegies that do not monumentalize death, but soften it—offering warmth instead of stone. As Elaine Scarry (1985) observes, objects created in pain can become "made things" of consolation. Longley's poems are such objects: stitched against forgetting, patterned in grief, and folded in care.

Indirect Stitches: Stitching Poetry—Square and Oblique

In *The Weather in Japan*, Michael Longley's "indirect stitches" take shape through subtle poetic strategies—classical allusions, mythological echoes, natural imagery, and references to collective trauma. These elements reflect the layered nature of quilting, not only in content but in poetic form. Longley weaves together fragmented narratives from Irish history and global conflicts, forming an elegiac tapestry that mends through metaphor rather than exposition.

A powerful example of this approach appears in "*At Poll Salach*," a poem written just two days after the signing of the Good Friday Agreement. Longley captures a moment of quiet reverence through the sighting of a wildflower: "You showed me, like a concentration of violets / Or a fragment from some future unimagined sky. / A single spring gentian shivering at our feet"

(Longley, 2000, p. 54). The spring gentian, delicate and rare, becomes a subtle emblem of reconciliation, its blue petals trembling on the threshold of a new political era. Longley binds the ecological to the historical, stitching together peace and place with understated poignancy.

This method of quiet commemoration is echoed in "*The Cenotaph*" which recounts the impromptu creation of a snowman memorial by Irish World War I veterans. "They couldn't wait to remember and improvised / A cenotaph of snow and a snowman soldier, / Inscribing 'Lest We Forget' with handfuls of stones" (Longley, 2000, p. 70). The impermanence of snow is matched by the fragility of memory, and the ephemeral nature of the monument parallels the fleeting presence of the poem itself. As Cathy Caruth (1996) argues, trauma resists direct representation, and Longley's poem exemplifies this resistance through its evanescent imagery—commemoration that dissolves as soon as it is formed.

In "*Heartsease*" Longley draws upon *The Odyssey*, reimagining Helen as an agent of poetic and botanical healing. "Helen, destroyer of cities, destroyer of men / Slipped the lads a Mickey Finn of wine and heartsease... / A painkiller strong enough / To keep you dry-eyed for a day" (Longley, 2000, p. 43). The heartsease, both a flower and a folkloric sedative, serves here as a means of forgetting grief. Yet Longley locates it in Donegal, linking the mythic with the local and infusing his verse with the therapeutic capacity of landscape and flora. In this way, healing becomes a cultural as well as botanical process.

Another mythic vision appears in "*The Vision of Theoclymenus*" where Longley adopts the voice of the Homeric seer to express dystopian anguish: "What class of nightmare are you living through, / Poor bastards, your faces, knees shrouded in

darkness... / And no / Sun while deadly marsh-gas envelops the globe?” (Longley, 2000, p. 25). Theoclymenus acts as Longley’s prophetic alter ego, channelling fears of global catastrophe through a classical lens. This indirect approach—using myth to speak of modern horror—allows Longley to universalize the experience of political suffering while maintaining poetic ambiguity.

In “*A Poppy*,” Longley bridges antiquity and modernity with a powerful image of death in war. Referring to the Trojan warrior Gorgythion, he writes: “When millions march into the mincing machine / An image in Homer of Gorgythion… / Lolling to one side like a poppy in a garden” (Longley, 2000, p. 47). The fallen soldier’s head is likened to a poppy—symbol of remembrance and ephemeral beauty. The poem ends with the striking image of rebirth and tribute: “Two thousand petals overlapping as though to make / A cape for the corn goddess of a soldier’s soul” (p. 47). This quilt-like cape, constructed of petals, becomes a metaphorical garment of remembrance, illustrating how poetry itself performs commemorative stitching.

Longley extends his patchwork of cultural memory across continents in “Found Poem,” where he imagines Harriet Tubman’s quilt as a floral map of liberation: “Thought her quilt pattern as beautiful / As the wild flowers that grew in the woods... / Yellow was like the Jerusalem flower, / And the purple suggested motherwort” (Longley, 2000, p. 89). Tubman’s craft becomes both guide and talisman, connecting the metaphor of quilting with themes of maternal protection, resilience, and the Underground Railroad’s hidden paths to freedom. The floral imagery affirms that beauty and defiance can coexist, even in the darkest historical moments.

In “*The Yellow Teapot*,” Longley continues his poetic catalogue of quilt patterns: “Snake’s Trail, She Fly, Flying Bats, Spider Web... / Grandmother’s Flower Garden, Sun Dial, Mariner’s / Compass, Detectable Mountains, World without End” (Longley, 2000, p. 62). These names, drawn from traditional American quilt motifs, create a verbal patchwork that mirrors the collection’s form. The juxtaposition of whimsical and ominous names—“Flying Bats” and “Grandmother’s Flower Garden”—reveals a world held together by pattern and naming, echoing the emotional logic of quilting itself.

Collectively, these “indirect stitches” function as rhetorical and symbolic devices that bind together disparate moments of trauma, healing, and cultural identity. Stuart Hall’s (1996) concept of “articulated identity” is relevant here: Longley’s poetic identity is not fixed but woven from multiple influences—Irish, classical, ecological, mythological. Through repetition, metaphor, and the careful placement of fragments, Longley mends what he mourns. His poems do not merely recall suffering; they participate in the act of emotional and cultural repair.

Ultimately, *The Weather in Japan* is a quilt composed not only of Irish sorrow but of global lament. From the wild gentians of Clare to the flower-drenched quilts of Harriet Tubman, from WWI trenches to Homeric prophecy, Longley threads together a poetic world where memory survives through delicate, deliberate stitching. These indirect techniques are not diversions from the real—they are the very fabric through which remembrance, resistance, and imagination take form.

Conclusion

Michael Longley's *The Weather in Japan* constitutes a poetic quilt that binds together domestic traditions, classical mythology, war elegy, and ecological observation into a layered aesthetic of consolation and remembrance. Through both direct and indirect stitches, Longley elevates the craft of quilting to a metaphor for the poet's labor—selecting fragments of human experience and sewing them into forms that preserve memory while confronting impermanence.

Direct stitches ground the collection in tangible, material references to quilts, blankets, and patchwork. These artifacts become vessels of mourning and care, where textile and text converge. In poems like "The Quilt" and "The Sewing Machine," Longley inscribes loss and memory into visible domestic practices. Indirectly, he draws upon Homeric prophecy, WWI imagery, and botanical symbolism to map the emotional terrain of violence and reconciliation. Poems such as "A Poppy," "Heartsease," and "The Vision of Theoclymenus" offer cultural healing not through overt declaration, but through mythic, floral, and lyrical invocation.

Taken together, the collection suggests that poetry, like quilting, does not erase suffering but shapes it into patterns of endurance. Longley's elegiac method speaks not only to Northern Ireland's troubled history but to broader human experiences of fragmentation and repair. His literary stitches connect Ulster to global sites of trauma—from the Trojan War to the Holocaust, from Irish famine to American slavery—offering a transhistorical tapestry of loss and hope.

By layering texture, voice, and symbol, Longley affirms that memory, though fragile, can be stitched into permanence—not in marble monuments, but in fabric and verse. *The Weather in*

Japan ultimately enacts a poetics of stitching: gathering what has been torn and binding it, not to conceal, but to remember and to mend.

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