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The Use of Ulster Speech by Michael Longley and Tom Paulin

ABSTRACT

The article examines the application and exploration of Ulster dialects in the work of two poets of Northern Irish Protestant background, Tom Paulin and Michael Longley. It depicts Paulin's attitude to the past and the present of their community of origin, the former positive and the latter negative, which is responsible for the ambiguities in his use of and his comments on the local speech. Both poets employ the vernacular to refer to their immediate context, i.e. the conflict in Ulster, and in this respect linguistic difference comes to be associated with violence. Yet another vital element of their exploration of the dialect is its link to their origins, home and the intimacy it evokes, which offers a contrary perspective on the issue of languages and makes their approach equivocal. This context in Paulin's poetry is further enriched with allusions to or open discussion of the United Irishmen ideal and the international Protestant experience, and with his reworking of ancient Greek myth and tragedy, while in Longley's poetry it is set in the framework of "translations" from Homer which, strangely enough, transport the reader to contemporary Ireland. While Longley in his comments (interviews and autobiographical writings) relates the dialect to his personal experience, Paulin (in his essays and in interviews) seems to situate it in a vaster network of social and political concepts that he has developed in connection with language, which in Ireland has never seemed a neutral phenomenon detached from historical and political implications. Longley's use of local speech is seldom discussed by critics; Paulin's, on the contrary, has stirred diverse reactions and controversies. The article investigates some of these critical views chiefly concerned with the alleged artificiality of his use of local words and with his politicizing the dialects. Performing the analysis of his poems and essays, the article argues for Paulin's "consistency in inconsistency," i.e. the fact that his application of dialectal words reflects his love-hate attitude to his community of origin, and that

in the clash of two realities, of the conflict and of home, his stance and literary practice is not far from Longley's, which has been regarded as quite neutral as one can infer from the lack of critical controversy about it. The voices of the two poets and their use of local speech provide a crucial insight into the Northern Irish reality with all its intricacy and paradox.

ABSTRACT

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Michael Longley and Tom Paulin, two poets of the Northern Irish Protestant background, both make an extensive and remarkable use of the speech of their locale. They share an ambivalent attitude towards their community of origin, and their use of Ulster dialects reflects exactly this ambivalence. Some critics (Gerald Dawe, for instance) fail to notice this connection, especially in the case of Paulin, while Longley's use of the vernacular is rarely discussed. Both Longley and Paulin have written poems in which they present themselves as seditious figures using their Northern speech as a kind of a cipher. Paulin further envisages it as a secret code transmitted between the writer and the reader. He also seems to look for a style that would be close to such mode of writing, "coding" certain words and making his poems hermetic. The vernacular in his writing comes within a vast context of oral culture, sound, history (linguistic one included), and politics. Longley similarly sets the dialects against a social and political background, stretching its scope by references to modern European and ancient Greek history and myth, which occasionally happens to be Paulin's practice, too. Both poets explore the potential of the local speech as a powerful tool to treat the theme of the Northern Irish conflict.

Before going on to an analysis of their application of Ulster dialects in poetry, it is necessary to have a brief look at the poets' cultural background, realizing first of all that the tags "Protestant" and "Catholic" are often used in the North to demarcate one's community of origin without really referring to religion. Longley, whose parents moved from England to Ireland, spoke British English at home and attended a Protestant school. As he said in one interview, "The result of being brought up by English parents in Ireland is that I feel slightly ill at ease on both islands. . . . It's out of such splits, out of such tensions, that I write, perhaps" ("Q. & A.: Michael Longley" 20). Although basically Longley considers himself an Irish poet, his feeling of identity is never self-complacent and the confession of

it never easy. We are not going to focus on all aspects of his internal split—Irish, English, or linked to religion—but exclusively on the connection with “the sick counties we call home,” as he terms Ulster in his “Letters” (*Poems 1963–1983* 84). Trying to evade identification with Ulster culture, Longley does not renounce the region: “I still don’t think of myself as an Ulster writer. I think of myself as a writer who comes from Ulster, as an Ulsterman who writes” (“The Longley Tapes” 22). It is not geography that seems to be the issue, but politics and denomination. With regard to the former, he feels an outsider, alien to both his unionist community of origin and its nationalist alternative. He seeks to strike his own balance, find a middle ground between the two: “I’m like a support of a see-saw” (“Porządnie skrojony płatek śniegu” 265). Similarly to Paulin, Mahon or Muldoon, he takes on the air of a subversive, “spying on” the philistine and smug Protestant community: “Among nationalists I feel a unionist, and among unionists I behave like a nationalist” (“Porządnie skrojony płatek śniegu” 265). In reference to religion he defines himself in contradictory terms, as “a pagan and one of those awkward Protestants” (“Font,” *Gorse Fires* 29), the former meaning his current real state of beliefs, while the latter relating to his origins by means of the conventional label. He remembers that at the outbreak of the conflict he was “consumed with Protestant guilt” but ever since he “decided that feeling guilty is a waste of time” (“The Longley Tapes” 24).

Paulin’s background seems just as much, if not more, complex. Although extremely critical about the Northern Irish Protestant unionists and their “state,” he says he has never been “entirely detribalized” (*Minotaur: Poetry and the Nation State* 13). Born in Leeds, at the age of four he moved to Belfast together with his family of Presbyterian Scottish, English and Manx stock. Raised in Belfast, he went on to study at Hull and Oxford, then lectured at Nottingham and now at Oxford. He feels an Irish writer but denies a clear-cut sense of identity, be it Irish or English, and beware of the ancestry worship, though in his poetry he celebrates certain figures of the past, such as the United Irishmen. When an Ulster press baron once asked him, “Are yu an Ulsterman?” Paulin found himself unable to answer and slipped away (*The Hillsborough Script* 2). Leaving Belfast in a hurry, which he remembers in a penitential tone in “Fortogiveness” (*The Wind Dog* 56), he was fleeing the nets of “a crazy society, an ahistorical one-party state with a skewed and uncertain culture” (“Q. & A. with Tom Paulin” 31). Yet the formative Belfast years have dominated his feelings about the issue of identity: denying belonging anywhere, he still believes that the North is “one of the places you belong in,” as he states in “Surveillances” (*The Strange Museum* 6). Religion in his opinion constitutes one of the elements of the ‘sensed’ identity, which he confirms by devoting

many texts to social and political dimensions of Protestantism (both negative and positive), to Protestant imagination as both a creative and a limiting force, and to international Protestant experience as a context for the North of Ireland, where Protestants have paradoxically felt under siege. Paulin himself seems to be driven to and repelled by various aspects of his community of origin.

With time Paulin developed concepts behind language and poetic diction that aimed to liberate his style from the formality of his first collections. Employing a more colloquial tone, the poet started to make use of local dialect and emphasize the meaning of “orality.” Paulin’s thinking about language falls into the network of pronounced social and political ideas, which as a practice stands out from most of contemporary Irish poetry (Heaney comes closest in this respect). The vernacular and the oral qualities of the language, together with some other aspects of it such as punctuation or syntax, are involved, in his view, in the social and political struggle for territory, property, culture, national identity and power (*A New Look at the Language Question*).

Notions of “oral” style, sound and speech, connected with the influence of Hardy and Frost, seem to be vital for the analysis of Paulin’s poems. Yet this analysis reveals that it is not communal identification that lies at the heart of his focus on the language’s oral qualities or of his use of dialect. It is rather a love-hate relationship: love of his community’s language, oratory, and radical tradition (embodied in his poetry by the United Irishmen), and hate of their current ideas and state (unionism with its Orange parades). In his introduction to *Minotaur* Paulin sets orality against the social and political value of print: “Within oral culture there is an instinctive suspicion of print culture because it expresses power and law” (6), while “orality is synonymous with powerlessness and failure” (152–53). Paulin’s own poetry often seems to “strain to utter itself” (“Matins,” *Walking a Line* 10) against the power of print. Yet orality is not disabled, on the contrary. Paulin associates it with Protestantism: if speech is freedom, the United Irishmen’s accent, sounds and pronunciation support their political ideal. In “On the Windfarm” the poet compares both speech and history in the making, Being and Becoming, to an untamed wind (*Walking a Line* 48–52).

His comment that “the writer must aim to go beyond writing into a kind of speech continuum” (*Minotaur* 104) could be applied to his own poems starting with the *Liberty Tree*, where he began to combine various types of diction, among others Ulster speech and Belfast dialect. Neil Corcoran observes that *Liberty Tree* is more “supple and musical,” “by turns luxuriant and ascetic,” while *Fivemiletown* is “paring Paulin’s natural eloquence to the bone” (412–13). Paulin was also influenced by the energy

of American English after his stay in the United States in 1983–84, where among the American Scots-Irish he discovered “some sort of recognition of this displaced tribe which in some way I might belong to. I was trying to get a kind of redneck language in the book [*Fivemiletown*]” (“Q&A: Paulin”). This discovery converged with his reflection on the work of the American painter of Scotch-Irish stock, Jackson Pollock. Paulin in his own poetry has been trying to sound out Pollock’s spirit of “blindly and intuitively, not knowing what you’re at but doing it,” as he formulates it in “I Am Nature” (*Fivemiletown* 32–34). Detesting the style of the nineteenth-century English literary tradition, he found a formula of fighting it in “orality,” whose spontaneity and energy affected his acts of writing.

Paulin has kept his Ulster pronunciation despite, or perhaps against, his living in England and teaching at Oxford. “Fortogiveness” provides the reader with a clear indication of this attitude: “I’m still at home in [Belfast] speech / even though somewhere along the way / my vowels have maybe got shifted or faked” (*The Wind Dog* 56). The notions of home and community sometimes converge in his perception of the vernacular, just as they do for Longley and Heaney. In “The Wind Dog” Paulin recalls his native Belfast speech in the family context:

and why does my mother say *modren*
not *modern*?
a modrun nuvel not a modern novel
a *fanatic* not a fanatic
which is a way of saying
this is my mother tongue. (*The Wind Dog* 29)

My references to Heaney and Longley are not coincidental. The poem abounds with quotations from Longley (“no continuing city”), Heaney (“Broagh,” “exposure,” “muddy compound”), Muldoon (“quoo”), Rosenberg (“break of day in the trenches”), John Clare and others. Paulin cherishes the notion of the universal community of writers with its constant flux of ideas, and “The Wind Dog” is yet another “community-of-writers” poem in his creative output. Some of the local linguistic “investigations” in this poem suggest that Paulin speaks on behalf of his fellow poets immersed in the sounds of the Northern Irish conflict or in the “acoustic exposure” of another war (Rosenberg in the First World War). For Paulin it is a rare poetic statement of this kind. It slightly resonates with the “generational” tone of Longley’s “Letters.” In “The Wind Dog” he reifies sound and associates it with landscape. The allusions to Heaney’s place-name poems further provide a hint about his ironizing the genre and prove that Paulin cannot see the possibility of going back to harmony and safety

of the “origins,” be it childhood or etymology. The conflict in Ulster has put an end to “innocence.” Nature has been replaced by the bombed city, and the sound of the place is not the one of humans but of war machines.¹

Behind Paulin’s use of dialect lies the notion of creative, spontaneous and risky orality, which he writes about in *A New Look at the Language Question* when he argues for a Hiberno-English dictionary. Another aspect he values highly is the intimate complicity between the reader and the writer using a dialect. This may come as challenging for some readers. Paulin’s own use of local words is in this respect more extreme than Heaney’s or Longley’s, who would provide their readers with explanations in earlier collections. Paulin generally leaves local words unexplained. He recognizes the difficulty but is more interested in the effect of this experiment. Programmatically opposing the idea of linguistic purity which he regards racist, he uses local speech as a form of contestation: “If you look at the way in which the English language has been historically described, the central concept is of the well of English undefiled. I hope to defile that well as much as possible” (“Q&A: Paulin”). There is a detectable note of *enfant terrible*-ness in this statement, this act of sabotage, just as in his writings about England. It is a demonstration of not only personal or creative freedom, but also a political declaration of a “barbarian” opposing the British. In “The Wind Dog” he openly states that the linguistic purity of British English—and of Irish, for that matter—is a fake, and goes on to mockingly “defile” standard forms of the adjectives “English” and “Irish” with the regional accent: “this is echt British . . . / not a spring well / —the well of Anglish / or the well of Oirish undefiled” (28). Using the term “language” interchangeably with “dialect,” his linguistic project in *A New Look at the Language Question* involves Ulster Scots, Irish and Irish English mediated by the creative powers of Irish English. Paulin’s study of the use of the vernacular by fellow poets (*Minotaur*) offers yet a deeper insight into the issue and coincides at times with Heaney’s comments on the translation of *Beowulf*. They share the perception of Ulster dialects—private, secret, family speech—as a key to the official language once imposed by the conquest.

In Paulin’s poetry, the speakers of those dialects are mostly involved in political activities: Orangemen in “Drumcree Three” (*The Wind Dog* 15–18), the Paisley-like preacher in “Drumcree Four” (*The Wind Dog* 72–73; one of the most interesting of Paulin’s poems in terms of the sound layer of Ulster speech and rhetoric), the UDA in “Cadmus and the Dragon”

¹ Compare another ironic *dinnseanchas* of Paulin’s, “A Naïve Risk” (*The Wind Dog* 80–81), also referring to a bombing and commenting on the peace process and the role of poetry.

(*Walking a Line* 93–101), the unionist civil servants—paradoxically targets of ridicule for the British (*The Hillsborough Script*), some protagonists of *The Riot Act*, but also the schoolmaster in “Father of History” (*Liberty Tree* 32) whose distinct accent gives away not only his place of origin, but also his republican convictions and, probably, denomination. As opposed to the preacher’s of “Drumcree Four,” his faith is a humanist’s concern. The language of his ideas is lucid and practical, while his burr (the rough pronunciation of “r” in some accents) takes on rebelliousness and physique of the “liberty tree”—the symbol of the 1798 uprising. The dialect is also a kind of a “secret code,” shared with the rest of the United Irishmen. This free speech carries the promise of the rebirth of the republican ideal, which Paulin tries to resuscitate in his poetry. A similar correspondence between Ulster dialect and Protestant republicanism appears in “And Where Do You Stand on the National Question?” where fascination with local accent has sexual connotations, suggesting the emotional power of the political ideal.

Paulin himself does not always “relish” the dialect. Sometimes it evokes a fear of historical and political extremities, as in “Politik”:

I’d be dead chuffed if I could catch
 the dialects of those sea-loughs,
 but I’m scared of all that’s hard
 and completely subjective:
 those quartz voices in the playground
 of a school called Rosetta Primary
 whose basalt and sandstone have gone
 like Napoleon into Egypt. (*Liberty Tree* 30)

Paulin’s feelings about dialects, whose sounds he describes in an emotional way, are clearly contradictory. Despite its spikiness, the speech of the United Irishmen is friendly: warm, kind, loved and enjoyed. The unionist dialects are quartz, hard and subjective (Rosetta Primary in Belfast is predominantly Protestant). With its ironic title the poem distances Paulin from his community of origin, especially in the siege atmosphere of Belfast.

Gerald Dawe (29) pointed to Paulin’s inconsistency in this particular poem: “dead chuffed” (‘extremely pleased’) is a dialectal word, thus the poet wishes “to do what he has actually achieved—to use from ‘the dialects’ one term of reference ‘dead chuffed’”. So it is confusing to confess that he is *scared* of that world while simultaneously making deliberate use of parts of its language.” One can infer that Paulin’s attitude to the language seems to be the love-hate relationship—but Dawe draws a different conclusion:

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“The poet cannot really have it both ways. Only out of the control of the ‘completely subjective’ can any true grasp of a people’s language, and consequently their experience, emerge.” Dawe seems to differentiate unionists’ dialects from Paulin’s—but despite Paulin’s position outside that tribe and their ideology, their language is still part of the culture he hails from, while the vernacular is also a means of resisting the Standard (English, establishment), the state. In *A New Look at the Language Question* he remarks that the loyalist separatist idea of creating a dictionary for homeless Ulster dialect words “is a response to the homeless or displaced feeling which is now such a significant part of the loyalist imagination” (13). What is more, their consciousness of being a “minority people” (14) makes them believe that their dialect is threatened both by the British English and Ulster English—“the provincial language of Official Unionism” (15). Peter McDonald describes Paulin’s two-faceted attitude towards Ulster speech as “speaking as though from within the community he examines, whilst also subjecting that community to a withering, external scrutiny” (100). The opposition of belonging and homelessness perfectly illustrates this “dialect question.” Patricia Craig remarks that “homesickness in Paulin’s poems is the sickness of, not for, the place” and thus he is inventing “a style capable of . . . staying close to home and achieving a formidable range, of making gestures of nonconformity and taking account of tradition” (“History” 118). She traces his use of the vernacular to the Rhyming Weavers, who extensively used Ulster Scots and with whom Paulin shares political ideals. Craig also points to the affinity between Paulin’s plain, expressive use of dialect and Louis MacNeice’s unromantic use of language. The source of their attitudes lies with “the deracination of one and disaffection of the other” (“Reflexes and Reflections” n.p.).

In “Politik” the allusion to the Rosetta stone brings into play several factors: history of conquest and colony; enigma, intelligibility and inaccessibility of dialects; the dialects’ “stony” sounds associated with the die-hard ideas of the community; and the date of Napoleon’s discovery (1799), suggestive of sectarianism which won over the United Irishmen rising. Just as in Muldoon’s “Anseo” school Irish is later used by paramilitary nationalists as a “secret code,” so in Paulin’s poem the dialects of the Rosetta Primary embody the unionist past and present.

Critics such as George Watson (33) or David Wheatley (7) accuse Paulin of appropriating dialect, of using it for political purposes. Yet can this be avoided in the country whose dominant language is a colonial heritage? By depicting the use of the vernacular by the UDA (who back up their aspiration to Northern Ireland’s independence with Ulster Scots), by the United Irishmen and by himself, Paulin does not advocate the view that they all hold the same views. As a tool of the poet’s strife against standard

British English the vernacular does not lose its aesthetic value, marking the evolution of Paulin's poetry from the constricted, subdued diction towards linguistic freedom, association of images and sound games, as well as towards richer texture and contexts due to the use of local and colloquial expressions. Critics such as Robert Johnstone ("Guldering Unself-consciously" 87) judge his use of dialect as artificial, self-conscious and programmatic, contrary to his claims of "orality" and spontaneity. Elmer Andrews ("Tom Paulin" 338) is the only one, beside Clare Wills, to explain the linguistic associative freedom or anarchy of Paulin's poetry as an exploration rather than limitation, and who appreciates the poem that is not reducible to semantic "meanings." No matter how we approach it, in Ireland language with its inherent history seems not to be "politically neutral." Poets acknowledge this fact; instead of trying to "appropriate" it they explore those historical relations which also bear on politics.

Michael Longley's linguistic background was one of the reasons for his "double identity" or internal split. In *Tuppenny Stung: Autobiographical Chapters* he recalls the problems of acceptance he faced at school. His English accent acquired at home and associated with the better-off middle-class distinguished him from his working-class friends at that time. The moments of his going to school and back home were the ones of re-creating, re-inventing himself in order to integrate with his surroundings. This reaction is characteristic of immigrants' children, for whom difference means peer exclusion or even aggression. Twice a day Longley was crossing the border of two personalities, the two worlds where language defined identity and the sense of belonging.

In the course of his education, linguistic characteristics shifted from social class to regional difference. As Longley remembers in "River & Fountain" referring to his and Derek Mahon's studies at Trinity, "Etonians on Commons cut our accents with a knife." (*The Ghost Orchid* 55) Their accent was a clear mark of their origins: "We were from the North . . . College Square in Belfast and the Linen Hall / Had been our patch" (55). Again language was the reason for discrimination, classification and prejudice. Yet as an element of cultural difference, it also allowed the two poets to gain distance to their immediate surroundings—the Index, the Ban and other phenomena of the Irish Republic of that time—and to their home further away. It became the means of defying those issues, adding to Longley's and Mahon's imagined role of subversives with their own "secret" language (which appears quite similar to Paulin's stance).

In some of his poems drawing on antiquity Longley employs words from Ulster and Belfast dialects and, to a lesser extent, Irish. "Homecoming" or "The Butchers" employ individual Irish words, "Laertes"—Bel-

fast dialect, “The Helmet”—Scots, “The Vision of Theoclymenus”—Ulster Scots, and “Phemios and Medon” is written almost entirely in Ulster Scots.² The poet does not comment on his use of local words and he is rarely, if ever, asked that question. For sure, one would not expect such a linguistic variety in translations or poems drawing on the Classics. It again brings to mind Heaney’s practice in *Beowulf*: “In those instances where a local Ulster word seemed either poetically or historically right, I felt free to use it” (xxii–xxx). We may wonder about the practicalities of Heaney’s translation—how effective it is if there is no Ulster Scots or Hiberno-English dictionary or a Northern Irish person at hand, especially that his glossed translation of *Beowulf* was initially commissioned by Norton for American universities. Similarly, Longley’s “Phemios and Medon” is hardly definable in terms of dialect and not completely understood by a Southerner, not to mention a foreigner. We may wonder about the political aspects of choosing whether to resurrect Homer in Belfast dialect or in Ulster Scots, which makes a difference in the North of Ireland.

Referring to “The Butchers,” Robert Johnstone asks a rhetorical question: “And why ‘Butchers’ if not to make us think of the Shankill Butchers, loyalists who excused their acts of foul sadism as defensive actions?” (“Harmonics between Electrified Fences” 79) The Irish *sheugh* for ‘ditch’ (quite current in Ulster speech) marks the place of action of the poem rather than defines the protagonists’ identity, yet the adjective “bog,” bringing to mind Heaney’s “Kinship,” is associated with murderous impulses and death. Already “The Vision of Theoclymenus,” anticipating the *Odyssey* “butchers,” uses an Ulster Scots word, while “Phemios and Medon,” the episode directly preceding Homer’s original “butchers,” uses extensively Ulster Scots. Longley confirms Johnstone’s judgement by comparing “his part of Mayo” with Ithaca (sandy and remote) and Greece, and remembers that summer when everybody was talking about the Protestant gang:

I’ve often thought that that part of Ireland . . . looks like Greece. Or Greece looks like a dust-bowl version of Ireland. . . at that time one of the things people were talking about was the Shankill Road murders. There’d been some dreadful killings and torturings in outhouses, very remote places like that. My physical circumstances brought to the surface, or brought to my attention, perhaps, that passage in the *Odys-*

² In early volumes Longley provides explanations of the words in references, giving up this practice with the publication of *The Ghost Orchid*. “Homecoming:” ‘bullaun’ (‘stone-basin’), the word used also in “In Mayo” (*Poems* 118–19). “The Butchers:” ‘sheugh’ (‘ditch’—*Gorse Fires* 51). “Laertes:” ‘duncher’ (‘flat cap’—*Gorse Fires* 33). “The Helmet:” ‘wean’ (‘baby’), ‘mammy’, ‘babbie’ (*The Ghost Orchid* 38). “The Vision of Theoclymenus:” ‘peerie-heedit’ (‘confused, disoriented’—*The Weather in Japan* 15).

sey . . . where Odysseus, with the help of Telemachus and the swineherd and somebody else, wipes out the suitors. And I had in the back of my mind the Shankill Butchers. (*Metre* 18)

In “Phemios and Medon,” when Odysseus intends to “redd the house,” both suitors “hook it and hunker fornenst the altar of Zeus, / Afeard and skelly-eyed, keeking everywhere for death.” Generally in the poem, the Ulster dialect is used for communication and for the narrative: by Odysseus and Telemachos in direct speech, and by Telemachos as the narrator in indirect speech:

I gulder to me da: ‘Dinnae gut him wi yer gully,
He’s only a harmless crayter. And how’s about Medon
The toast-master whose ashy-pet I was? Did ye ding him . . .?
Thon oul gabble-blooter’s a canny huer . . .
Out he spalters, flaffing his hands, blirting to my knees . . .
[Odysseus:] ‘You may thank Telemachos for this chance to wise up
And pass on the message of oul dacency.’ (*The Ghost Orchid* 44)

Although “oul dacency” is a running term in the North denoting “peaceful coexistence” of the communities before the conflict (however such coexistence may have been considered “decent” predominantly by one community only), here it sounds grotesque in the context of Odysseus’ intended slaughter in his own house in the name of decency. Still, though they are accomplices, it is a conversation between a father and his son. In a few other poems by Longley, dialect accompanies intimate meetings, profoundly moving scenes of reunion and homecoming after years of exile. In “Laertes,” for instance, we can see Odysseus’ (and metaphorically Longley’s own) father wearing his Belfast *duncher*, while the speaker of “The Mustard Tin” tries to go back in time at the deathbed of his parent and *hokes around* his childhood for familiar objects (‘looks for them’).

Both Paulin and Longley situate language in a socio-political perspective. Although this aspect is more noticeable in Paulin’s poetry, language in Longley’s work is not free from political implications. Their use of Ulster dialects has a double edge. On the one hand it refers the reader to the Northern Irish conflict regarded by many in terms of the civil war, and is often placed in the framework of Greek mythology. In Paulin’s writings this trend is represented, for example, by “Cadmus and the Dragon” or his two plays, *The Riot Act* after *Antigone* and *Seize the Fire* after *Prometheus Bound*. On the other hand, the dialects evoke family bonds, childhood and home. They use local words to reveal the background and workings of violence, but also to express affection and the feeling of safety with which those words can provide the speaker. In the first case the poets show the

vernacular employed as yet another weapon of unionism, or they employ it themselves as a means of satirizing loyalists. It happens that the speakers of their poems are members of the linguistic, but not political, community, which attests to the internal split within the group of Protestant descent. In the second case, when it is associated with home, the dialect seems to be the North's cultural heritage which frequently gets somewhat depoliticized in Longley's poetry. In Paulin's, the notion of home is too political for the dialect to ever get liberated. In both cases it provides one of most vital foundations for the poets' active engagement in the discussion of history and politics, reflecting all inconsistencies and ambiguities of life in Northern Ireland in times of the conflict.

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