Northern Irish Poetry and Theology

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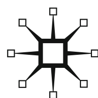

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For my father, William McConnell,
whose absent presence creates the questions

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Preface and Acknowledgements

In the last stages of preparing this book, an email arrived carrying the sad news of Seamus Heaney's death. I reached for *Seeing Things*, turned to 'Crossings' and read these words: 'Everything flows. Even a solid man, / A pillar to himself and to his trade, [...] Can sprout wings at the ankle and grow fleet'. Surprised by the sense of grief I felt for someone I had never met, I was reminded that the poetry of Heaney, Longley and Mahon has accompanied me for a decade and that my gratitude for their work finds expression in engaging critically their poetics and reception.

This book started its life as a thesis written under the supervision of Fran Brearton and Adrian Streete at Queen's University Belfast, and I owe each of them a particular debt of thanks for their guidance, provocations and patient readings and rereadings.

I am grateful to Michael Longley, and to his publishers, Jonathan Cape and Wake Forest University Press, for permission to quote from *Collected Poems*. 'Form', 'A Prayer', 'In Notre-Dame', 'A Norwegian Wedding', 'Montale's Dove', 'Cathedral', 'Il Volto Santo', 'Icon' and 'Ghetto' are taken from *Collected Poems* by Michael Longley. Published by Jonathan Cape. Reprinted by permission of The Random House Group Limited.

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A number of people contrived to bring about the moment in time captured on the cover. Adrian and Theresa Streete prompted the idea over good food and conversation. My thanks to Vic and Roger Simms for the loan of a pew that didn't quite make it, and to Mark McCleary and Sara Cook for the loan of three chairs that did. Niall Quigley lifted, shifted and stood around in the cold with me for more hours than were sensible. Tim Millen, my exceptionally talented friend, brought his unique eye to the concept and the wasteland.

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List of Abbreviations

CP Michael Longley, *Collected Poems* (London: Cape Poetry, 2006)

DC Seamus Heaney, *District and Circle* (London: Faber and Faber, 2006)

DN Seamus Heaney, *Death of a Naturalist* (London: Faber and Faber, 1966)

EG Michael Longley, *The Echo Gate* (London: Secker & Warburg, 1979)

EV Michael Longley*, An Exploded View* (London: Gollancz, 1973)

FK Seamus Heaney, *Finders Keepers: Selected Prose 1971–2001* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2002)

FW Seamus Heaney, *Field Work* (London: Faber and Faber, 1979)

GF Michael Longley, *Gorse Fires* (London: Secker & Warburg, 1991)

GT Seamus Heaney, *The Government of the Tongue* (London: Faber and Faber, 1988)

HD Michael Longley, *A Hundred Doors* (London: Cape Poetry, 2011)

HL Seamus Heaney, *The Haw Lantern* (London: Faber and Faber, 1987)

L Derek Mahon, *Lives* (Oxford University Press, 1972)

MLW Michael Longley, *Man Lying on a Wall* (London: Gollancz, 1976)

N Seamus Heaney, *North* (London: Faber and Faber, 1975)

NC Derek Mahon, *Night-Crossing* (Oxford University Press, 1968)

NCC Michael Longley, *No Continuing City* (London: Macmillan, 1969)

P Seamus Heaney, *Preoccupations*: *Selected Prose, 1968–1978* (London: Faber and Faber, 1980)

SI Seamus Heaney, *Station Island* (London: Faber and Faber, 1984)

SL Seamus Heaney, *The Spirit Level* (London: Faber and Faber, 1996)

SP Derek Mahon, *The Snow Party* (Oxford University Press, 1975)

SS Dennis O'Driscoll, *Stepping Stones: Interviews with Seamus Heaney* (London: Faber and Faber, 2008)

ST	Seamus Heaney, *Seeing Things* (London: Faber and Faber, 1991)
SW	Michael Longley, *Snow Water* (London: Cape Poetry, 2004)
WJ	Michael Longley, *The Weather in Japan* (London: Cape Poetry, 2000)
WO	Seamus Heaney, *Wintering Out* (London: Faber and Faber, 1972)

Introduction

> The Judeo-Christian tradition has formed us in the west; we are bound to it by ties which may often be invisible, but which are there nevertheless. It has formed the shape of our secularism; it has formed even the shape of modern atheism.
>
> Flannery O'Connor

> It is only shallow people who do not judge by appearances. The true mystery of the world is the visible, not the invisible.
>
> Oscar Wilde

I

Observing modern secularism's debt to theological values, O'Connor's assessment illuminates the dynamics of contemporary culture and the only superficially polarized debate about the nature and value of religion. On the surface of things our secular humanist culture, from which the New Atheists[1] have emerged, might seem to consign religion to the scrapheap with satisfying certainty. But though 'moth-eaten', in Larkin's memorable phrase (190), religion is also too vast a brocade to be easily dismissed. Produced in response to Religious Right evangelicalism, New Atheist rhetoric quickly unravels to reveal its mimicry of the strategies of Christian proselytization.[2] There are Christian and New Atheist societies, advertising campaigns, church services and, with the publication of A. C. Grayling's *The Good Book: A Secular Bible*, even authoritative texts. But as John Gray argues so cogently, while Grayling and other secular humanists dispense with God and the idea

of providence, they continue to put faith in humanity, in teleological history and the possibility of progress – a possibility shattered in Gray's lucid critique of liberal humanism. In this time of evangelical atheism and secular Christianity, Gray (2007) intervenes by directing us back to Nietzsche[3] to show how liberalism has developed from Christianity, its faith in democratic reform and the free market an updated version of religious redemption. 'The modern conception of progress', he writes, 'is only one symptom of the hubristic humanism that is the real religion of our age' (2009: 329). Religion, then, takes many forms and this study pulls at the threads still visible in contemporary Northern Irish poetry and literary criticism to reveal its importance for a number of textual and interpretative practices.

This book explores the relationship between theology and poetic form in the work of three poets from Northern Ireland writing poetry from the 1960s until the present time. It examines structures of thought and feeling in the work of Seamus Heaney, Michael Longley and Derek Mahon. Though the immediate theological context for this study is a Christian one, this is not a book about orthodox Christian belief or devotional poetics, but about how the historical theological traditions and practices with which Heaney, Longley and Mahon grew up have shaped their understanding of the status and constitution of subjectivity, language and poetic form.

Religious orthodoxy is not the focus of this investigation. Personal belief in God is neither assumed, nor deemed a prerequisite for this mode of critical investigation. As O'Connor makes clear, the Judeo-Christian theological framework through which we can read cultural production leaves adequate room for agnosticism and atheism. This study does not aim to make claims about the existence or non-existence of God, or to transfer the signifying power of a transcendent deity to poetry. It is motivated by an interest in the difficulty of dealing with theology; with discourse about God and belief. It attends to the variety of critical responses to theology's textual presence in literature – from the either/or logic that demarcates literary texts into secular/religious categories, to arguments that distance poetry from theology but stress its numinous quality and even promote it as a form of aesthetic transcendence of material conditions. It shares Wilde's materialism by attending to poetic texts, while heeding his self-delighting ironizing of materialism's limitations by examining moments in which texts lay claim to mystical or transcendent capacities from invisible sources of inspiration.

In Northern Irish literature and literary criticism the difficulty of dealing with theology is complicated by the history of the violent conflict

known as 'the Troubles'. Analysing Northern Irish poetry and theology seems to risk the charge of redundancy; it is not that religion is perceived to be irrelevant to the period from the 1960s to the present time, but rather hyper-relevant. Conditioned by the Troubles, this excessive presence is witnessed in the pervasiveness of the Catholic/Protestant binary that has overshadowed historical and political analyses, as well as those of literary criticism. The nature, history and effects of this conflict are impossible to summarize. But in popular perception the Troubles are perceived to have begun in 1968, with the violent backlash against the Northern Ireland Civil Rights Association marches, and to have ended with the Belfast Agreement of 1998. That the Belfast Agreement is more commonly referred to as 'The Good Friday Agreement' suggests that a religious solution was found for a religious conflict. Indeed, the conflict is frequently described as a dispute – indeed, a war – between Catholics and Protestants.

It goes without saying that religious and political discrimination and violence has characterized Northern Irish life in the years before and after 1968–98, and that reading the violent conflict as a religious war is a highly reductive interpretative strategy – one that has already codified political and religious loyalties so as to read them as metonymies: Catholic for nationalist; Protestant for unionist. The persistence of this *perception* of the conflict, however, is worth attention for how it informs interpretative practices vis-à-vis Northern Irish poetry. To summarize 30 years of highly polarized literary criticism, critics of contemporary Northern Irish poetry read poets – and even poetic forms – according to the sectarian paradigm by which the Troubles has commonly been understood: Catholic and nationalist versus Protestant and unionist. By using Catholic and Protestant labels, such criticism seemed to address theological difference but in fact analysed socio-political division. This is particularly true of criticism in the 1980s (though contemporary analyses continue to play out the culture wars in similar ways) as it responded to the violence and dissension of its historical conditions.

As Heaney recounts in an interview in 1982, Heaney, Longley and Mahon have been dubbed the 'tight-arsed trio' because of their poetic formalism and schooling in New Criticism (Kinahan 408).[4] But, informed by the logic of sectarianism, Northern Irish literary criticism politicizes poetic form. Seamus Deane (1991: xxvi) argued that against the disorder of the Troubles, ordered, formal lyric poetry produced in Northern Ireland could be read in political terms as support for the maintenance of the dominant political order – that of Protestant unionism. Religious identities come to service a two-sided perspective

on poetry's flight from or engagement with Irish history and historical violence. There is, on the one hand: lyric poetry as private, Protestant and unionist; and, on the other, mythic poetry as communal, Catholic and nationalist. In the former camp, Derek Mahon, fleeing from Irish history in orderly, elegant verse; in the latter, Seamus Heaney, 'striking / Inwards and downwards' (1998: 42), digging the Irish bog with squat quatrains. This either/or perspective underscores the pervasive conceptual influence of territory and national identity for interpretative practices within Irish studies. This dichotomy is crude and easily subject to critique, yet it overshadows not only the revisionist/postcolonial debate of the 1980s, but also more recent criticism of Northern Irish poetry, as I will show in Chapter 1. Longley and Mahon have been read in terms of 'Protestant' introspection, fashioning the well-wrought poem while Belfast burns, while Heaney's poetry has been read in terms of its universal appeal – a universalism achieved through his Catholicism. Important also is the extent to which this dichotomy takes shape by imagining political and geographical borders. It is the context of the bordered North that generates a reading of Protestant introspection and order as symptomatic of Protestant unionist culture in general.

It's difficult to summarize this criticism adequately, however, especially in relation to theology, because theology is everywhere and nowhere. Theological identities are commonplace in this criticism, but often as uneasy metonymies for political identities. Contemporary criticism sets up Catholic and Protestant poetics, but it doesn't analyse any of the ways in which theology is constitutive of poetic forms. This is because Catholic and Protestant poetics are made to signify two socio-political cultures within Northern Ireland, and its poets are read as exemplary of one or the other. Various critics analyse Northern Irish poetry by describing it as secular, and yet theological language resurfaces in critical arguments about the numinous, sacred or transcendent qualities of such poetry. This attests to the formative influence of New Criticism on Northern Irish literary criticism, the attraction of which highlights the fact that this is a criticism still so recently troubled by traumatic violence and struggling to account for political and religious difference in literary terms. An escape from the violence of history into the sanctuary of a non-violent aesthetic is appealing in this context.

This book questions the terms upon which religion's influence on poetry has hitherto been articulated, and redresses theology's neglect in Irish literary criticism. While it does not dispense with the Catholic and Protestant labels assigned to Northern Irish poets, it self-consciously reflects upon the construction of those identities in political and

theological terms, and presents a fuller picture of theological difference. It critiques the subsumption of theology within the politics of nationhood and sectarian identity in Northern Irish literary criticism, and critical analyses that disentangle theology from politics so as to render it apolitical. This study contends that religion's relevance extends beyond its superficial use as a socio-political descriptor into a much broader aesthetic operation, in which theology shapes subjectivity, language and poetic form. As I will suggest below, poetic form could be conceived as a displaced theology, but in much more precise terms than those common to Northern Irish literary criticism.[5]

Religion and theology have recently been more fruitfully reassessed in broader contemporary critical and theoretical contexts. Since the 'theological turn' in critical theory signalled over 20 years ago, literary critics have drawn on the work of Jacques Derrida, Paul Ricoeur and Emmanuel Levinas to reconsider religion. The ideological assumptions underpinning this 'turn' in criticism invite scrutiny, but its focus has highlighted the necessary interplay between religious and literary discourse, and the often unexplored theological component to interpretative practices. More recently, Alain Badiou[6] and Slavoj Žižek have turned to Pauline theology and its radical possibilities for Marxist critics in a 'post-secular' age. In Žižek's work, Lacan, Lenin, St Paul and contemporary cinema vie for attention, enabling him to reimagine and recast Christian theology by drawing out its contemporary Marxist and psychoanalytic currency. He praises psychoanalysis and Christianity as confessional modes which accept that human life is characterized by a traumatic kernel resistant to redemption (2000: 98). Žižek frames Christianity as a theology in which God purposefully stumbles upon the limit of his omnipotence: 'The only way for God to create free people (humans) is to open up the space for them in *his own* lack/void/gap: man's existence is the living proof of God's self-limitation' (2001: 146). It is from within this horizon of God's imperfection that Christian love emerges – a love beyond mercy. Žižek argues that Christianity renounces the idea that God is the transcendent irrepresentable Other, since Christ's death acknowledges God's failure and is a means of redeeming God in humanity's eyes.[7] This psychoanalytically literate theological reading illuminates the logic of Calvinism. Chapter 4 examines Derek Mahon's poetry in relation to Christianity's failure to offer the subject a secure locus of identification for the constitution of subjectivity as expressed in Calvinist theology – the gap Žižek describes.

Indebted to Žižek within Irish studies is Terry Eagleton, whose work attempts to reconcile Marxism and Catholicism.[8] Eagleton usefully

frames the operation of theological enquiry as a philosophical and existential examination of subjectivity. He reclaims the philosophical action of theology, describing St Augustine as the first major philosopher to see the self as an abyss or infinity (2005: 46). In similar terms, John Calvin might be considered a philosopher of introspection, one through whom Derek Mahon encounters the abyss in which subjectivity might (fail to) be constituted. Mahon declares himself, and all of us, 'truly alone / With our physics and myths' (1982: 33). Eagleton's imaginative engagement with theology offers to Irish studies and the secular left a useful alternative perspective on religion. By addressing aspects of Christian theology that provide liberation from or resistance to the principles and structures of global capitalism, though, Eagleton risks emphasizing its redemptive possibilities at the expense of its destructive ones.

But as Eagleton is writing out of a literary critical tradition that has understood religious identity primarily in relation to territory and the politics of nationhood, his writing also marks an important break with the tramlines of an identity-focused criticism. Indeed, drawing on Žižek's work, Eagleton (2005: 94) casts the ideological entanglements of nationalism in a theological light:

> Nationalism is a lingering trace of transcendence in a secular world. Like God, the nation is immortal, indivisible, invisible yet all-encompassing, without origin or end, worthy of our dearest love, and the very ground of our being. Like God, too, its existence is a matter of collective faith.

Evaluating the threads of transcendent faith still visible in Northern Irish literary criticism's ostensibly secular forms of analysis is part of the task of the first chapter of this book. It examines the pervasive influence of identity politics and considers the conditions under which such criticism, and its expectations and demands of poetry, have developed. It explores the politicization of poetic form and the wish for poetic transcendence. In this we witness a double movement with regard to theology. Theological difference is both expressed and suppressed in much of this criticism. Although it often demarcates rigidly two distinct religious cultures, of which poets and poetry are deemed exemplary, such criticism is also troubled by an anxiety about naming theological difference. Slippages between terms like 'Protestant' and 'Unionist', and the downplaying of theological categories altogether, mark the difficulty such criticism has with speaking about theology. Yet theological language resurfaces in arguments about poetry's transcendent

qualities and the idea of aesthetic sanctuary through the non-violent poetic artefact.

The production of contemporary Northern Irish literature and literary criticism has coincided with at least three decades of violence at home, the effects of which – so recently traumatic – can be seen in the ways it speaks of and to politics, theology, identity and aesthetics. It is, perhaps, this experience of violence which has made the critical attempt to speak of poetry's encounter with theology, its relation to political communities, and its status as aesthetic material, so difficult and conflicted a process. Sensitive to the violence written into Northern Ireland's history books, but often unable to remember and articulate the specific violent acts that make up what has come to be understood as a prolonged and violent political and religious conflict – and accounted for under the euphemism of the Troubles – Northern Irish literary criticism has, in many ways, yet to come to terms with its traumatic history. The fixing of critical expectations on poetry's transcendence, plurality or liberalism, then, marks a desire to escape the conditions under which Northern Irish poetry has been produced.

Theology – in particular theologies in which a transcendent deity resides to oversee history – is sometimes a means of escape; a way out of history and violence through the construction of a deity outside history, or its symbolic poetic substitute. But theology can also mark the way back to history and its horrifying violence, and the conclusion of the fourth chapter considers an example from Mahon's poetry in which theological interpretation forces readers not only to confront such violence, but to examine the violence of their own and others' textual and interpretative practices. To put it another way, to eliminate God from historical and literary analyses is to take human history very seriously indeed. This is obvious enough, since we live after the death of God.[9] But gods appear in different guises. Self-proclaimed secular and atheist analyses might yet reveal ties to the Judeo-Christian context – and attendant metaphysics – informing their production. As I will suggest in the next chapter, while it might be clear that Northern Irish literary criticism is not produced with recourse to a transcendent deity, it could be seen to be importantly motivated by an idea of transcendent poetics. Similarly, though God makes few appearances in the poetry examined here, this does not point to the fact of his elimination, and raises instead the issue of his poetic substitution. Why, how and to what purpose are questions to which I will now turn, since, most crucially, this book considers how theology comes to constitute poetic form.

II

The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines 'theology' as follows:

> 1. a. The study or science which treats of God, His nature and attributes, and His relations with man and the universe; 'the science of things divine' (Hooker); divinity.
> b. A particular theological system or theory.
> c. Applied to pagan or non-Christian systems.

Theology is a study of God and belief that is not contingent on particular beliefs. It refers also to particular religious doctrines, such as the theology of transubstantiation or predestination. This study advances on the understanding that theologies are written: they are made; they are formed. To this end, poems are not merely containers of theological meanings, but rather they are constitutive of theologies. Theology, discourse about God and belief, is disseminated through poetic grammar and poetic form. To glance at the shape of George Herbert's 'The Altar' is already to understand something of the theology under expression in *The Temple*. This study considers how poetic form might be read as a displaced theology and, furthermore, how certain modes of literary analysis – such as New Criticism – might be read in a theological, rather than secular, light.

To theorize the relationship of poetry and theology I turned to scholarship of literature and theology in the early modern period. Here we see literary production and theological innovation in parallel – indeed, as forms of textual production increasingly indistinguishable. Reclaiming what he sees as the lost textuality of Luther's Reformation, Brian Cummings (9–10) contextualizes his brilliant study as follows:

> To examine the Reformation in writing and the writing of the Reformation is to uncover an unfamiliar archaeology of religion: an underground network of text and commentary, of translation and controversy. One view of this textual mass is that it is merely the vehicle for something else, the mechanism by which religion is transferred from one person or group of people to another. According to such a view, religious doctrine is already pre-formed somewhere else before being encoded in texts. Such a view is an illusion: doctrine is textual and exists in texts.

Cummings examines Luther's working methods to show that theology and philology are mutually productive for his textual practice, and

to demonstrate Luther's and Erasmus's eclectic use of scholastic and humanist methods of commentary. As he shows, 'Theology is not already there before writing, in some numinous world of ideas. Writing envelops the articulation of doctrine and dispute as it proceeds' (51).

This book takes Cummings's argument as its starting point, and it shares his conviction that 'Theology and humanism are uncomfortable bedfellows rather than sworn enemies' (12). Exploring the ways in which the humanist crisis of language merges with the Reformation crisis of theology, Cummings examines grammar as the ground on which the crisis was fought. He embarks upon an archaeology of grammar, examining the subtle, complex undertow of meanings it creates: 'in the vexed economy of religious writing [...] the inflections of single verbs can, and should, give pause for thought' (11).

Following Cummings's example, James Simpson stresses the profound institutional consequences of philological translations and glosses of Biblical text in his history of evangelical reading practice in England, 1520–47. One of Simpson's examples is the debate between Thomas More and William Tyndale over the translation of 'metanoia' from Matthew 3:2 as 'penitence' or 'repentance'. In Tyndale's translation of a single word, 'the cornerstone of the pre-Reformation Church's sacrament of penance was being pushed out from under a weighty sacramental edifice' (76). Simpson notes too that Luther's theological breakthrough came with a grammatical perception. As Luther interprets the genitive phrase 'the justice of God' from Romans 1:16–17 outside its customary usage, he establishes the alien standards of the divine against human action and 'a world is born of a word' (89).

To situate these ideas in contemporary Northern Irish poetry, we can compare a single word and phrase from a poem by Seamus Heaney, and one from a poem by Derek Mahon. In an early draft of 'Strange Fruit', Heaney presents the poem as a 'monstrance for the divine' (Undated). In the Catholic Church, the monstrance is the open or transparent receptacle in which the consecrated Host is exposed for veneration. Heaney's use of the word 'monstrance' underlines the significance of Catholic sacramental theology to his imagination and conceptualization of poetry. A different word would suggest a different meaning, as with secular terms like 'receptacle' or 'vessel'. This sense of the individual poem as a transparent container of sacramental meaning attests to the influence of both Catholic theology and New Criticism for Heaney's textual practice, themes explored in more detail in Chapter 2.[10] By contrast, an early poem by Derek Mahon, 'Matthew V. 29–30', presents in response to Christ's words a metaphor of 'lobotomy and vivisection' (*SP* 14) for

poetic production. As a single word, 'vivisection' intimates a key element of Mahon's writing practice, in terms of both his poetry's sharp examination and criticism of its subject matter and formal properties, and his practice of post-publication revision. Indeed, Mahon eliminates this poem from his *Collected Poems*.

To compare 'monstrance' with 'vivisection', the former points to sacrament and display, and the latter to dissection and malpractice. But Heaney's 'monstrance for the divine' is edited out of the poem. The reverential theme remains, but without the explicitly Christological references of the draft version. The phrase illuminates the Catholic sacramental theology that helps shape Heaney's poetry, but in its absence from the published version the poem's reach is altered by being purposefully limited. Revising his poems repeatedly, Mahon has swapped words, sentences, titles and whole stanzas in different published versions of individual poems – a process which presents his readers with some difficulties in deciding which version to read and to which to respond. The shifts between individual words mark interesting changes in Mahon's writing, but more compelling still is the process of vivisection itself, and how it might be read as exemplary of the Calvinist logic informing Mahon's textual practice. The status of the word, therefore, as well as its contextual meaning, sheds light on the theological aesthetics of Northern Irish poetry.

To examine how theology shapes the status and constitution of subjectivity, language and poetic form, the final three chapters identify three structures of thought. Chapter 2 examines Heaney's formative absorption of Catholicism to argue that Catholic sacramental theology shapes his conceptualization of and belief in his role as poet and the communicative power of language. It argues for the centrality of the icon – Catholic and New Critical – to his understanding and use of poetic form, and the meaning and value he ascribes it. Chapter 3 examines the poetry of Michael Longley in terms of the influence of his parents' English Anglicanism to argue that, in contrast to Heaney's iconographic poetics, the impetus of Longley's poetry is iconoclastic. It identifies a different view of selfhood and language in Longley's work, one which questions the potential idolatry of iconography. Learning from Herbert, Longley sculpts religious architecture but suspicious of the potential idolatry involved in his poetic iconography he seeks to fracture the lyric by writing fissures and holes into the fabric of its construction. In 'Edward Thomas's War Diary', light is 'spangling through a hole / In the cathedral wall' (*MLW* 38). The sanctuary is ruined, the cathedral has been bombed and its walls are crumbling. Instead of

Heaney's icons, Longley gives us broken religious masonry; instead of sacraments, improvised rituals; instead of Real Presence, elegiac commemoration. But if that sketch seems like an easy either/or between Catholic and Protestant poetics in a Northern Irish context, things are a little more complicated. And part of the purpose of this book is to trouble that binary between Catholic and Protestant aesthetics assumed on the basis of tribal divisions. The extent to which Longley's textual practice differs from Heaney's is strictly limited. Longley's iconoclastic poetics are also catechistical. The poems call and respond to one another across and between collections, firmly locating in the mind of the reader the cathedrals, fonts and prayers described. The cumulative effect of Longley's patterning thus mitigates the fissures of the individual lyrics. Each poem provides a self-consciously limited view, but meaning is restored in the relationship between the poems and so, too, the possibility that in the mind of the reader the ruined sanctuaries might be made whole. Longley's iconoclastic and catechistical textual practice shares more common ground with Heaney's iconographic poetics than with Mahon's radical distrust of language.

Turning to Mahon in Chapter 4, we see a mode of textual practice that diverges from that of both the iconographer and the iconoclast. Mahon perceives iconography and iconoclasm as two sides of the same coin, insisting instead on an unbridgeable divide between language and truth which poetry can only attest to and lament. Mahon's poetry is conditioned by rupture: of humanity from God and of Word from Flesh. Against Heaney, it refutes the lyric's capacity to incarnate or transcend; against Longley, to ritualize or elegize. This final movement explores the metaphysical disjunction between subject and object Mahon describes with reference to the separation of human and divine, and word and thing in Calvinist theology. It examines how Calvinist dynamics radically shape Mahon's view of the self, the word and poetry, and considers his practice of revision as a response.

In analysing the attractions and difficulties of Catholic, Lutheran and Calvinist theologies for Heaney, Longley and Mahon, this study looks back to the Reformation and the pre-Reformation. By widening the lens in this way it imagines Northern Irish poetry and its critical debates in new ways, within a much broader historical context than that of Irish modernity. This enables the evaluation of Northern Irish literary criticism's defining assumptions and expectations, New Critical moorings and local and contemporary view. It pays attention to the ways in which the violent conflict known as the Troubles has shaped the development of Northern Irish poetry and poetry

criticism. Theology and New Criticism cannot offer a way out of history and its violence. But by analysing their appeal as a potential means of escape from the difficulty and trauma of conflict and violence, this book also exists to acknowledge the profound reverberations of that conflict on literary culture in Northern Ireland.

Implicit in the methods and concerns of this book is the relation of 'Troubled' Northern Ireland to early modern theological history. While the Northern Irish conflict must be read in relation to modern Irish history and politics, in Patrick Grant's view, '[t]he Troubles are also a product of fraught relationships between imperialism and Christianity' (5). In strange but significant ways, contemporary cultural, religious and political life in Northern Ireland plays out Reformation struggles and conflicts. Orangeism has its historical roots in the Reformation, the apocalyptic theology of early modern Protestantism resurfaces in radical forms of unionism, and historical anti-Catholicism finds a contemporary megaphone in Ian Paisley's proclamations. Indeed, speaking to the European Parliament in 1988 at the time of a visit by the Pope, Ian Paisley (quoted in Elliott 120) said:

> There is no difference between Europe today and Europe in Reformation times [...]. The Hapsburgs are still lusting after Protestant blood. They are still the same as they were in the days of Luther.

By collapsing history in this way Paisley demonstrates that Reformation history and theological conflict shapes his conceptual understanding of the Troubles and, indeed, of contemporary Europe. In denouncing the Pope as the anti-Christ, furthermore, Paisley explicitly replays historical forms of anti-Catholicism.

Marianne Elliott highlights the formative historical influence of Calvin's predestinarian theology for modern Irish Protestantism, in its emphasis on the elect or chosen few. She writes (58):

> [Predestinarian theology] was reinvigorated by a specifically Irish brand of evangelicalism, particularly in the nineteenth century, and was core to both Orangeism and Paisleyism. The concept of 'God's people' has been invoked through the centuries to explain the peculiar virtues of British Protestantism, the victorious emergence of the Irish Protestants from their life and death struggle with popery in the seventeenth century, the defeat of Home Rule in the nineteenth, and any number of narrow escapes in the twentieth.

As Chapter 4 will suggest, Derek Mahon's poetry struggles with his inheritance of Calvinism. He engages this theology and its historical legacy in Northern Ireland not only at the level of cultural critique, however, but through poetic form. Because Calvinist theology is deeply cynical about the utility of 'works', and about human authorship and authority, Mahon's poetic endeavour is overshadowed by an anxiety about authorizing texts. By constantly revising his poems, Mahon tries to escape the paralysing conditions that ensue from a theological perspective that renders human volition – and, therefore, textual production – futile. In this way, a theological scepticism about the utility of literary composition importantly shapes Mahon's aesthetic practice, just as the hymnody and liturgy of the Church of Ireland shape the stanzaic structure and metric patterns of individual lyric forms.

To consider literature in relation to theological history is to examine the shifting status and interpretation of language, selfhood and textual interpretation, as with the new hermeneutics of early modern Protestantism. By considering theological textual production during the Reformation in relation to what preceded and followed, these shifts in the status of visual and verbal images come into focus, and with them the extent to which historical theologies are transmitted into contemporary poetics. In drawing from early modern theology and scholarship, this study does not seek to collapse or transcend historical boundaries, or to take a leaf from Paisley's history book. But it proposes that reading contemporary debates about poetic form in relation to early modern debates about iconoclasm, iconography and Calvinism is a productive critical tool of analysis – one which shines new light onto the Reformation's residual elements in contemporary Northern Irish literary culture.

Edna Longley's work is an important starting point for treating spilt and split religion in Northern Ireland. In 'The Rising, the Somme and Irish Memory' she examines the relationship between theology and forms of commemoration and memorialization. In its emphasis on the ways in which Catholic and Protestant theologies inform perceptions of the status and meaning of 'the verbal and the visual, text and image' (1994: 74), Longley's essay is discerning. She writes, 'Protestantism – and even Anglicanism is low-church in Ireland – eschews iconography, martyrology, mariolatry, saints, Christ on the Cross' (73). But the slippage between political and theological terms becomes problematic as the essay moves from discussing 'Orange visuals' to 'Protestant arches' (75); from Orangeism to Protestant churches and back to 1690. She writes,

'Protestants march, rather than process or "mass"' (75), before making the following comparison (76):

> In contrast, Republican ritual appears to commune with itself: *Sinn Féin*. Protestants read this self-communion, this silent rather than vocal bigotry, this indifference to their own insistent rhetorical display, this refusal to notice or argue with Unionism, as exclusive and threatening. But iconography too is a rhetoric, albeit one that tries to place itself beyond argument. Similarly, Catholics misread Protestant rhetoric as wholly anti-Catholic, rather than also as inner-directed mnemonic. Thus the two forms of commemorative religio [*sic*], of cultural defence or maintenance, bypass one another.

Edna Longley compares Protestants not with Catholics or nationalists, as in common pairings, but with republicans – furthermore, Sinn Féin republicans – and then with Catholics again. Listing underscores the author's own frustrations with the 'vocal bigotry' of republican ritual and Catholic misreadings of Protestant discourse. Longley usefully highlights the formative role of theology in artistic and political forms of remembrance in Ireland. But by entangling theological terms with political ones without commenting on their relation and by tacitly criticizing republican ritual instead of explicitly theorizing such criticisms, theology is somewhat weakened as a tool of analysis in her critique, which is rather more concerned with Orangeism and Republicanism. While it is necessary to critique these political ideologies and the role of theology in their constitution, the theological context that explains particular forms of signification – importantly for my purposes, iconography and iconoclasm – falls away. In revisiting the Reformation, then, this study seeks to set out the theological contexts under which communal and poetic forms of expression are wrought. Understanding these contexts enables a renewed perception of Irish historical forms of commemoration and poetry alike. Also, as I will argue in Chapter 3, the Protestant attempt to eschew iconography Edna Longley describes in relation to Orangeism becomes an impossible task in literary terms – a problem encountered in the poetry of Michael Longley and Derek Mahon.

This study considers Heaney, Longley and Mahon in terms of Catholic, Lutheran and Calvinist structures of thought and feeling, a methodology that reads contemporary Northern Irish culture through early modern history, and illuminates theology's importance for textual practice in different terms to those of the identitarian either/or of Catholic/Protestant. The low-church Irish Anglicanism to which Edna Longley refers has its

roots in the Reformation. Both Michael Longley and Derek Mahon were raised in the Church of Ireland, yet they inherited different strains of Protestant theology. There are differences in biography: Longley was the son of English Anglicans – a Protestant, but one who learned as a child that his disparagement of the Orange Order marked his alienation from the Protestant culture his classmates shared; Mahon absorbed much more of this culture through his family life and experience as a choirboy in St Peter's Parish on the Antrim Road. Early modern history casts a long shadow on these poets' biographies. Both poets are Protestant, and each is most familiar with the Church of Ireland in Northern Ireland. Yet Irish Anglican theological tradition cannot adequately account for differences in their poetic concerns and perspectives on language and literary form.

Seemingly, Church of Ireland theology is at a few removes from Calvinism. The image of a Paisleyite preacher armed with a sandwich board and megaphone raining hellfire on passing hearers remains a pervasive one in contemporary analyses of Northern Irish Protestant and unionist culture. This has produced the idea that Calvinist theology thrives only in Presbyterianism, indeed in its extremes. But another picture emerges when we consider the early modern foundations of the Church of Ireland. In his analysis of *The Protestant Reformation in Ireland, 1590–1641*, Alan Ford (16) pinpoints the Church of Ireland's coming of age:

> The defining moment was the passing of the Irish Articles of Convocation in 1615, a remarkable confession, not just in the Irish but also in the broader British context, identifying itself as firmly anti-Roman Catholic, and going considerably beyond the Thirty-Nine Articles in accommodating Puritan and Calvinist concerns, most notably doing what Elizabeth and James I resolutely refused to do – enshrining the Lambeth articles in an official confession.

Within reformed Protestantism in Ireland, the fear of popery and apocalyptic violence was the trauma for which Calvinist predestination – the fantasy of the elect – functioned as the cure. The 1615 Articles included the doctrine of double predestination, in which, as Elliott (53) notes, 'in addition to the elect who were predestined to salvation, the reprobate were predestined to hell'. Ute Lotz-Heumann's assessment of the 'markedly Calvinist 104 articles' supports Ford's analysis. After 1615, Lotz-Heumann (49) writes,

> the Church of Ireland was put on a consciously broad – but nevertheless clearly defined – Protestant footing. The correlative of this was its

> strong anti-Catholicism. Consequently, Protestant confessionalisation in Ireland shared important characteristics of the so-called 'second reformations' (Calvinist confessionalisations) in the territories of the Holy Roman Empire: first, its Calvinist doctrine; second, the late Protestant reformation in Ireland was a pure 'reformation from above' and was embraced only by an elite in state and church, the New English.

Thus even after the new Lord Deputy, Thomas Wentworth, forced the 1634 convocation to replace the 104 Irish Articles with the Thirty-Nine English Articles, the Church of Ireland clergy sought to maintain a united front against Catholicism on the basis of the 1615 Articles, having vigorously resisted Wentworth's intervention in their affairs. As Elliott explains (53–4) the Irish Articles were not repealed, they merely dwindled. Their spirit infused the teaching in Trinity College Dublin, Irish Protestantism's new seminary. Crucially, the Articles were also the inspiration for the 1646 Westminster Confession of Faith, Presbyterianism's central doctrinal statement, with its Article identifying the Pope as the Antichrist.

Of the Second Reformation of the nineteenth century, Elliott observes, 'The evangelical tradition of open-air preaching was particularly important in playing upon traditional fears of popery among the lower-class non-churchgoers and in convincing them that the undoubted prosperity of Ulster was conditional on its Protestantism and increasingly on its attachment to Britain and its empire' (81). In highlighting the receptivity of a non-churchgoing audience to political arguments drawn from theology and in sermonizing form, Elliott's analysis conveys theology's pervasive influence in modern Irish political, social and economic affairs outwith the issue of belief or church attendance. As John Gray (2007: 35) observes, 'Modern political religions may reject Christianity, but they cannot do without demonology.'

Reacting to the Oxford Movement, the Church of Ireland moved away further still from the Church of England. It became much more profoundly evangelical following disestablishment in 1871. Fearing the 'Romanization' of Anglicanism, violent protests broke out against excessive church ornamentation. This stripping of the altars re-enacted Reformation history as protesters smashed the stained-glass windows depicting the Apostles and Virgin Mary in Down Cathedral (Elliott 114). Calvinist predestinarian theology underpinned the campaign against Home Rule from the late nineteenth century, as Ulster Unionists portrayed northern Protestants as God's elect, a covenanted nation like Old