
*Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data*

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p. cm.
Includes bibliographical references and index.

PR6062.O515Z85 2010
821'.914—dc22

2010024337

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Northern Irish Poetry, Imagination, and Ethics

Society makes statements and sends forth instructions, edicts, laws, definitions of reality. Literature makes counterstatements, Greek when the official designations are Roman.

—Denis Donoghue

Taking poetry seriously can also mean taking poetry seriously as an authority: the unique property of a real poem is its capacity to work against the grain of opinion, or in complex and guarded relation to it, so as to create an original order in which language overpowers the "weight of judgment or opinion" through an individual (and essentially unrepeatable) form.

—Peter McDonald

Of course, reading a poem will never subdue a bigot or dissolve the political divisions inherited from sectarian attitudes. It might, however, open the door to look anew at history, the individual's place in it, the willing and frank acknowledgement of what has been done in their name and the possibility thereby of transforming this experience into a sustaining creative one.

—Gerald Dawe

I begin by recalling two moments, one personal, the other public, where the literature and politics of Northern Ireland intersected in fascinating ways. The first and more distant: In August of 1972, the poet Seamus Heaney left Northern Ireland and relocated himself and his family to County Wicklow, south of Dublin, not so much out of a fear of being killed in the so-called Troubles, although that was undoubtedly a factor,
as because “I was . . . being interviewed as, more or less, a spokesman for the Catholic minority during this early stage of the troubles. I found the whole question of what was the status of art within my own life and the question of what is an artist to do in a political situation very urgent matters.” Heaney’s refusal to be co-opted into being a spokesman for the Northern Irish Catholic community and his dedication to exploring both his art and its relationship to politics constitute a salutary response to a common set of anxieties manifested by writers who have emerged from Northern Ireland before and during the Northern Irish Troubles. Such a response should be construed, not as a retreat, as it was in some quarters upon Heaney’s departure, but rather (for him) as a necessary act of artistic independence. On the other hand, Michael Longley, a little-appreciated poet of tremendous talent from the Protestant community, chose to stay in Belfast, where he remains today. Neither poet’s decision was wrong, of course: the commitment to poetry expressed by one man in leaving Northern Ireland and the other in staying there exemplifies artistic faithfulness.

The second moment is of a much more recent vintage: On September 6, 2007, Michael Longley was appointed Professor of Poetry for Ireland Chair and was praised by the new Northern Ireland Assembly’s deputy first minister Martin McGuinness of Sinn Fein:

I believe that Michael, like previous holders of the chair, recognizes the responsibility that comes with having such a gift. The impact that poetry and literature have on people and society should never be underestimated. We have recently embarked on a new era of power-sharing here and the First Minister and I are firmly committed to building structures and institutions which will underpin a peaceful and prosperous future for all of us. Literature and the other arts have a crucial role to play in what we are trying to achieve. Participation and enjoyment of arts and culture promote imagination and can change our perceptions of events and each other. I believe that arts and culture will continue to play a crucial role in knitting together the fabric of our society.

The establishment of the Professor of Poetry for Ireland Chair itself was a momentous cultural event because it was the first cross-border ac-
ademic chair to be set up as a result of the 1998 Good Friday Agree-
ment; perhaps more momentous was that McGuinness, an alleged former
IRA member, allegedly holding at one time the title of commander of
the IRA's Derry brigade, was praising a (nominally) Protestant Belfast
poet! Additionally, McGuinness’s recognition of the role of poetry par-
ticularly and the arts generally in promoting reconciliation and peace in
the province indicates how literature’s imaginative power enables some-
times startling discourses, whether public conversations or pronuncia-
tions like McGuinness’s or the personal, silent dialogues set up between
writer and reader.

Both born in 1939, the year of W. B. Yeats’s death, Michael Long-
ley and Seamus Heaney are linked biographically, critically, and in the
mind of the public, especially in Northern Ireland and Ireland. They are
the two best poets who emerged from Philip Hobsbaum’s Belfast Group,
both because of the quality of their literature and because of their com-
mitment to their craft, the latter of which often conceives of their art in
spiritual terms. They also were very close friends in the 1960s and early
to mid-1970s as they participated in the Belfast Group together from
1963 to 1966, edited the literary journal Northern Review together from
1965 to 1969, marched for civil rights in the province together on at least
one occasion, took part in a 1968 Northern Irish Arts Council travel-
ing poetry and musical tour called Room to Rhyme, and dedicated poems
to each other.

Yeats’s profound influence upon both Longley and Heaney, one that
has not always been salutary for all Irish poets, further connects them, and
although this study attempts no systematic tracing of such an influence
on each poet, Yeats’s example—particularly his “two-mindedness,” a
quality of receptivity to multiple perspectives—has enabled both men
to maintain the imaginative integrity of their poetry in a time of violent
pressures on it to become propaganda or journalism. In A Jovial Hulla-
baloo, Longley’s inaugural lecture as Professor of Poetry for Ireland Chair
in 2008, Longley, having mentioned the pressures that Northern Irish
poets such as Heaney faced because of the violence during the Troubles,
warmly invoked Yeats, noting, “More than any other poet he helped us
to find our way through the minefield,” and further asserting that “we
did not write in Yeats’s shadow, as some would have it, but in the light-
house beam of his huge accomplishment.”3
Although Heaney came to Yeats much later than did Longley, only beginning to seriously study him in the 1970s, he nevertheless has long displayed a Yeatsian quality, as has Longley, that has strengthened their imaginative integrity—two-mindedness. Michael Cavanagh has recently argued, concerning Yeats’s famous statement, “We make out of the quarrel with others, rhetoric, but of the quarrel with ourselves, poetry,” that “there is perhaps no writer to whom Yeats’s famous judgment has meant more than Heaney.”

But as we shall see, Michael Longley has been similarly drawn to the positive two-mindedness that Yeats modeled. Fully recognizing that he and Heaney share this quality, Longley muses, in the last section of his sequence “Letters” entitled “To Seamus Heaney,” originally published in An Exploded View (1973),

And, since both would have it both ways,
On the oily roll of calmer seas
Launch coffin-ship and life-boat,
Body with soul thus kept afloat,
Mind open like a half-door
To the speckled hill, the plovers’ shore.
(CPL, 61, emphasis mine)

These lines explicitly suggest that both Longley and Heaney are divided within themselves, torn between pessimism about Ireland’s and the province’s past and present troubles—the “coffin-ship”—and hope about such conflicts—the “life-boat.” The poem has just invoked the conflict in its first four stanzas, the last of which concludes, “We sleepwalk through a No Man’s Land / Lipreading to an Orange band” (60). “No Man’s Land” is a phrase that always bespeaks in-betweenness to Longley, connoting sometimes the actual space between the trenches of opposing sides in World War I, as in his poem of that name honoring Isaac Rosenberg, and at other times doubt about his poetic enterprise, or an affirmation of Northern Irishness as a productive state between English and Irish cultures. The condition thus is one of uneasiness but finally suggests hope tempered by reality as the mind surrounded by conflict looks toward nature. Longley’s and Heaney’s bicultural identities and their poetics—oscillating between an inward notion of lyric poetry as
disinterested, even insouciant, and an outward desire to speak to and create community—have equipped them well to diagnose and offer tentative remedies for the ills of their divided society.

In 1999, each poet published his selected poetry: Heaney’s *Opened Ground: Poems, 1966–1996* and Longley’s *Selected Poems*. Writing on the two poets in 1999 and noting their very different strengths, Peter McDonald nonetheless makes a strong case for studying their work together because “both poets have passed the test of keeping faith with their own best strengths and instincts over these years”; he further holds that “the careers of both poets offer object lessons in fortitude.” While being appropriately cautious about literature’s impact on “the real world,” Longley and Heaney share a sense that poetry expresses values worth preserving and thus has an educational role to play in society. Heather Clark has argued that Longley, Heaney, and other Belfast poets who emerged from Philip Hobsbaum’s creative group in the 1960s believed that “literature, while functioning autonomously, could serve a social purpose by encouraging and upholding humanist values. . . . It was not the politicians who would bring about peace, but the artists, the Arts Council, the museums, and the universities working together.” As we will see, such beliefs would be tested sorely as the Troubles raged for over two decades in Northern Ireland.

Longley, Heaney, and Derek Mahon were so associated with each other by the late 1960s in reality and in the mind of the public that Michael Foley sarcastically called them “the tight-assed trio.” Longley even wrote in an unsent long letter to Heaney’s wife, Marie, that “my friendships, first with Mahon, then with Heaney, have been of central importance to me and contributed greatly to my own development as a man and poet: . . . my second book . . . explored the notion of an artistic community, a poetic sodality [with them].” While Longley wrote “To Seamus Heaney” (along with “To Derek Mahon” and “To James Simmons” for his second volume, *An Exploded View*), Heaney dedicated “Personal Helicon,” the last poem of his first full-length volume, *Death of a Naturalist* (1966), to Longley, its title suggesting something of Longley’s personal inspiration to Heaney. Michael Parker has argued that Heaney may have learned to suppress his “angry Catholic voice” over injustices against Catholics in the province because of “his new friendships
with the Longleys and [David] Hammond, who were both [sic] of Prot-
estant stock, and by that spirit of communality generated by the [Belfast] Group” (SHMP, 55). Longley’s and Heaney’s place in Northern Irish cul-
ture is perhaps epitomized by the Neil Shawcross portraits that at one
time hung in Belfast’s Linen Hall Library, reproductions of which grace
the cover of this book.

The Shawcross portraits suggest strongly the link between Heaney
and Longley in the public’s mind as well, as does a telling article in the
Irish Times celebrating the surprise seventieth birthday party for Mi-
chael Longley held at Queen’s University Belfast on June 25, 2009,
shortly before his actual birthday. The Northern Editor for the paper,
Gerry Moriarty, led the article with the phrase, “Seamus Heaney and
other literary figures assembled at Queen’s University Belfast yesterday.”
Moriarty also notes that “Heaney said Longley’s friendship was of vital
importance to him and his wife, Marie, for well over 40 years, going back
to 1963 when the emerging Belfast-based poets such as Derek Mahon,
Eavan Boland and Edna gathered in Longley’s flat on Malone Avenue
in Belfast.” He then quotes Heaney about his “intense” friendship with
Longley in 1960s Belfast: “It was certainly one of the centres of poetry
of these islands in the 1960s. It was sort of a high-voltage area,’ Heaney
recalled. ‘Friendships from the beginning are crucial and are never as in-
tense again. So I have a deep connection and deep respect for Michael’s
achievement.”

Despite my marked admiration for Derek Mahon’s poetry as some
of the best written in English over the last four decades (along with that
of Longley and Heaney), I have chosen not to focus on him in this study
for several reasons: because he was not a member of the Belfast Group,
because he has not consistently explored the situation of Northern Ire-
land in his poetry as Longley and Heaney have, and because he has been
absent from the island for long periods, although he lives there now and
has off and on for years. Although, as Dillon Johnston notes, Mahon’s
poetry is typically set “in an actual specified place, often Belfast, or, more
frequently, in some barren, primitive, or post-holocaust site” (IP, 225), it
has been repeatedly characterized as exilic and often is characterized by
its representations of distance, unlike much of the intimate particularity
of Longley’s and Heaney’s poetry. Significant exceptions to this charac-
terization thrust their way forward, of course, just as the clamoring, singularly rendered mushrooms do in Mahon’s “A Disused Shed in Co. Wexford.” Terence Brown may put it best when he notes that Mahon presents himself in his first collection of poetry, *Night-Crossing* (1968), as “a migratory imagination for which journeys away from and occasionally back to a native place would constitute a defining way of being in the world.”11 Mahon’s ironic stance of independence is well articulated in Heaney’s own observation that “Longley is Protestant and so is Derek Mahon—but Derek was never entangled with the Belfast faithful, as it were. I always think of Derek as the Stephen Dedalus of Belfast, the man who is an ironist and who refuses to serve that in which he no longer believes, whether that covers family, church, regional loyalty or whatever.”12

The creative work of other remarkable, younger poets from Northern Ireland, such as Ciaran Carson, Paul Muldoon, and Medbh McGuckian, and of a still younger generation represented by the poet-critic Peter McDonald, is not explored here either. First, there is the matter of space: a proper attempt to do justice to their profound poetry would far exceed the size of an academic monograph. Moreover, their engagements with Yeats, one of many significant connections between Longley and Heaney, have been extraordinarily more vexed than have those of my two chosen poets and, in the case of McGuckian, are even mediated through Heaney.13 More important, because they came of age during the Troubles, these younger poets’ particular explorations of the Northern Irish conflict and the peace process are markedly different from those of Heaney and Longley, who had time to develop their poetic voices beginning in the late 1950s for roughly a decade before the contemporary conflict began.

This book explores how the nuanced poetry written by Longley and Heaney upholds a commitment to artistic integrity through their concerns with poetry’s imaginative power and form. This faithful allegiance to poetry delights in the particular, the seemingly trivial, and the forgotten in its evocation and revelation of the transcendent. Although both poets emerged from particular Christian milieus—Longley from English Protestantism, Heaney from Irish Catholicism—their work’s emphasis on the sacred draws not only on Christian conceptions but also
on those of other religious traditions, such as Judaism and Buddhism in the case of Longley.

Writing in 1968, Vincent Buckley observed that “even in a desacralized society like our own, there are some poets who, as a mode of life, concern themselves with estimating, defining, and recreating manifestations of the sacred. In fact, in a heavily desacralised society there may be a few poets whose emphasis on this activity will be more intensive and exclusive than it would have been in a society more habitually open to the sacred dimensions of life.” Longley and Heaney are two such poets that have concerned themselves “with estimating, defining, and recreating manifestations of the sacred” in our “heavily desacralized society.” Their faith in the imagination suggests their connection to the sacred: as Denis Donoghue has argued, “I think it only reasonable to admit that a theory of literature which takes imagination as its ground or point of departure lays claims to certain axioms: that art is the inspired work of a few rare souls, adepts of a sacred mystery; that while common minds slide upon the surface of things, artists search the depths.”

Throughout their long and fruitful careers, Longley and Heaney have habitually rendered the sacred present in poems that often concern the beauty and fragility of the quotidian world. In so doing, their quiet insistence on poetry’s ability to evoke and even create sacred spaces and objects through words has enabled them to maintain their primary allegiance to the imaginative autonomy of art, yet also to make secondary contributions to the long and arduous peace process in Northern Ireland. Their success is all the more remarkable because they have worked in a society where traditional religious practices and expressions often divide human beings across relatively homogeneous communities.

Perhaps the best articulation of the aesthetic/religious attitude toward poetry held by Longley and Heaney and other faithful artists can be found in George Steiner’s Real Presences, where he suggests that “the making into being by the poet, artist and, in a way yet to be defined, by the composer, is counter-creation. The pulse of motive which relates the begetting of meaningful forms to the first act of creation, to the coming into being of being . . . is not mimetic in any neutral or obeissant sense. It is radically agonistic. It is rival.” As countercreators, poets and other
serious artists enact “a root-impulse of the human spirit to explore possibilities of meaning and of truth that lie outside empirical seizure or proof.” In a little-cited interview, Heaney himself put the matter well when he told Richard Kearney about the role of the poet in the Troubles, “He or she can be the magical thinker; he or she can stand for values that aren’t utilitarian. The artist can refuse History as a category, can say ‘No. I prefer to dream possibilities.’” In their sacred attitude toward their art, Longley and Heaney affirm with Steiner that “it is the enterprise and privilege of the aesthetic to quicken into lit presence the continuum between temporality and eternity, between matter and spirit, between man and ‘the other.’”

Longley and Heaney both have explicitly articulated their essentially religious view of art as revealing real presences, a conception that is grounded in the highest appreciation for art’s integrity. Longley, for example, in discussing his translation of the Baucis and Philemon story, pointed out that his favorite art “transforms the everyday and shows the divine . . . in everyday objects.” Elsewhere, he noted, “I’m anti-clerical, full stop. And I’m also an atheist, or certainly an agnostic,” but went on to suggest, “I am interested in what it could mean to write religious poetry, particularly at the end of this godawful century. . . . I like Horace’s phrase, ‘Priest of the Muses.’” Shortly after the publication of his *Poems, 1963–1983*, Longley told Robert Johnstone in an interview that “poetry, the effort to write it, reading it and living it, is, if you like, my religion. It gives me something akin to religious experience. Perhaps one of the things an artist should do is suggest the sacerdotal values of life—in a completely secular way, of course.”

In a review of Osip Mandelstam’s *Selected Poems*, Heaney provocatively holds that “art has a religious, a binding force, for the artist. Language is the poet’s faith and the faith of his fathers and in order to go his own way and do his proper work in an agnostic time, he has to bring that faith to the point of arrogance and triumphalism.” Coming from a poet who has spent a career, like Longley, writing against religious triumphalism, this affirmation of poetry’s power is revelatory. As Seamus Deane has argued, Heaney’s attitude toward his art is analogous to “the reverence of an acolyte before a mystery of which he knows he is also the celebrant.” For Heaney, as traditional religious faith continues
to decline in Ireland and in other Western countries, its proper replacement is poetry, an exalted calling that pledges allegiance to the inward occurrence of the poem over the action of outer reality. In one of his major essays, “The Government of the Tongue,” Heaney argues that “poetry is its own reality and no matter how much a poet may concede to the corrective pressures of social, moral, political and historical reality, the ultimate fidelity must be to the demands and promise of the artistic event.”

By inscribing their own poetry as a sort of sacred space, both rival to and continuous with the presence of the ineffable while being momentarily discontinuous with reality, Longley’s and Heaney’s imagining of poetry as a numinous zone accords with Mircea Eliade’s compelling conception of how the manifestation of the sacred interrupts the normal time-space continuum: “When the sacred manifests itself in any hierophany, there is not only a break in the homogeneity of space; there is also revelation of an absolute reality, opposed to the nonreality of the vast surrounding expanse.”

These two great poets have sought and found art as a verifiably religious calling, one that seemingly ironically but appropriately opposes sectarian violence. Their particular poetry of the sacred constitutes both a linguistic escape from violent vengeance and an alternate reality that habitually exists in the present, waiting for our inhabitation. If, as René Girard has famously argued, “Vengeance . . . is an interminable, infinitely repetitive process,” each enactment of which runs the risk of initiating “a chain reaction whose consequences will quickly prove fatal to any society of modest size,” the sacred poetry of Longley and Heaney instead instantiates singularity, not repetition, and constitutes a force that values all life. Heaney has explicitly suggested that the nuance and particularity of Northern Irish poetry penned by “the writers of my generation” contrasted with the brutal redundancies of sectarianism at the time: “The fact that a literary action was afoot was itself a new political condition, and the poets did not feel the need to address themselves to the specifics of politics because they assumed that the tolerances and subtleties of their art were precisely what they had to set against the repetitive intolerance of public life.”

Literary particularity is a vexed concept, one that is contaminated by criticism in the sense that generalizations almost always creep in
when critics seek to elucidate it, as Jon Kertzer has pointed out in a compelling and provocative essay: “Although the specificity of a literary work may strike us forcefully on first reading, it is difficult to define because all the modes of definition at our disposal have the perverse effect of depriving a work of its particularity. Explanations inevitably generalize.”

I believe that of all genres poetry is the most prone to generating particularity because of its verbal precision and also because of a process that Derek Attridge argues arises out of a reader’s performance of verbal singularity when reading poetry, “a sense of its real-time unfolding.” How then, can we attempt to approach the poems of Longley and Heaney, which are supreme examples of particularity? Kertzer helpfully suggests that “the course of a particular comes into focus if we imagine it situated in a present that expires as soon as it occurs, and is only known when it haunts us afterwards.” As we shall see, much of the poetry explored in this study focuses on the fleeting and the terminal; imagining poetry’s own expiration, as it were, may enable its haunting and revisiting of us later in a way that generates our ethical response and connects us to each other, a point taken up at the end of this introduction.

Salman Rushdie has made perhaps the most eloquent plea in the late twentieth century for art to occupy a middle ground “between the material and spiritual worlds” and, in the process, to “offer us something new—something that might even be called a secular definition of transcendence.” Transcendence, for Rushdie, includes events such as birth, lovemaking, joy, and the moment of death, spots of time in which one can experience a “soaring quality” and feel “the sense of being more than oneself, of being in some way joined to the whole of life.” He believes that art’s special role is to oscillate between the poles of religious fundamentalism and “secular, rationalist materialism” by capturing “that experience, to offer it to, in the case of literature, its readers; to be, for a secular materialist culture, some sort of replacement for what the love of god offers in the world of faith.”

Later in this essay, however, Rushdie backs away “from the idea of sacralizing literature” because he says he “cannot bear the idea of the writer as secular prophet” and because “all art,” according to Samuel Beckett, “must end in failure.” But, of course, as he further holds, “This is, clearly, no reason for surrender.” Rushdie finally settles upon the conceit of literature as “an unimportant-looking little room” in which
“we can hear voices talking about everything in every possible way. . . . We do not need to call it sacred, but we do need to remember that it is necessary. . . . Wherever in the world the little room of literature has been closed, sooner or later the walls have come tumbling down.”

Longley and Heaney would likewise not worship literature, including poetry, but do approach it reverently, even sacredly, because of precisely its capacity to set up conversations about any possible subject, a capacity that Rushdie identifies as literature’s life-giving quality, standing in opposition to deathly rhetoric and oppressive force. Longley has offered an analogous image to that of Rushdie, suggesting that “art in the community is like a small gland in the body, like the pituitary gland. It’s so small it seems unimportant but when it’s removed the body dies. It’s the totalitarian forces that always want to remove it.” Heaney has argued that fidelity to art constitutes a consistent witness to conscience over against conscription of the artist by the state. Writing again of Osip Mandelstam, he observes that “for him, obedience to poetic impulse was obedience to conscience; lyric action constituted radical witness.” Mandelstam thus bore “witness to the necessity of what he called ‘breathing freely,’ even at the price of his death; to the art of poetry as an unharnessed, non-didactic, non-party-inspired, inspired act.” Bearing witness—the phrase is borrowed from believers who testify to their faith. Consistently testifying to their faith in poetry’s power, Longley and Heaney have shown how art constitutes an extraordinary reality in its own right, separate from yet inextricably tied to our ordinary world.

In holding this critical view of literature, I share Rita Felski’s dismay at what she believes is the tendency of critics who value literature’s otherness, alterity, and singularity to “overlook the equally salient realities of its connectedness.” Such critics, according to Felski, by praising “the ineffable and enigmatic qualities of works of art,” actually “fail to do justice to the specific ways in which such works infiltrate and inform our lives.” Thus I believe Longley’s and Heaney’s poetry articulates an imagined community through their particular poetic language that emphasizes our deep spirituality and need for each other. I realize that such a focus on the literary imagination will be regarded by some as passé, retrograde, even untenable, given developments in literary theory over the past several decades. Such disregard for the literary imagination is
usually conjoined to a corresponding conception of those who profess such belief as bizarre creatures who think art operates in an hermetically sealed vacuum. No such caricature has ever existed to my knowledge, and I am happy to report I am no such critic, nor are the writers under consideration in this study. Nevertheless, because of the persistence of this critical suspicion of the literary imagination, I am led to conclude with Nathan Scott Jr., writing in 1985 about his own study of the poetic imagination, that “the entire project will no doubt by many be felt immediately to be something questionable. For in our own late phase of modernity the concept of the imagination has suffered so great a decline in prestige as to have lost very nearly altogether its admissibility into the lexicon normally controlling intellectual exchange.” And yet not altogether. There are hopeful signs that the study of the literary imagination is making a comeback, manifested in the recent upsurge of what Marjorie Levinson terms the “New Formalism,” an admittedly lumpy description of a general movement consisting of at least two somewhat distinct critical turns toward form over recent years. Suffice it to say that authors have faithfully maintained a belief in the literary imagination even as many critics over the last several decades have despised and denigrated it, preferring instead to treat the study of literature as sociology, history, or practically anything other than what it is by virtue of its form—a particular discipline with sufficient integrity in and of itself. Felski has succinctly identified what is lost in such narrowly ideological approaches: “To define literature as ideology is to have decided ahead of time that literary works can be objects of knowledge but never sources of knowledge. It is to rule out of court the eventuality that a literary text could know as much, or more, than a theory.” Perhaps nowhere in recent history has this authorial belief in the power of literature as a source of knowledge been so evident as in the particular case of Northern Ireland and the writers that emerged from that often benighted province in the second half of the twentieth century.

Fran Brearton has noted that although there are several problems with the flattened conception of a “Northern [Irish] Renaissance” in the 1960s, the poets from that era most often linked, Mahon, Heaney, and Longley, do “share the sense of art as an alternative spirituality; in varying degrees, this seemingly ‘traditional’ or romantic assumption makes
it a mode of subversion all the more telling in a context where sectarianism is rife." Longley himself has talked about poetry as a properly revolutionary activity, one occurring beyond the poet’s control yet formally measured:

Poetry is about something happening with words that is beyond that poet’s personality, way beyond that poet’s prejudices and beliefs in a way that is completely out of control but formally perfect. . . . I think that if poetry’s not revolutionary it’s lost. And by revolutionary I mean the Latinate sense of the word, of just turning things over. If you’re not taking people’s prejudices, our lazy ways of seeing and responding, and giving them a great shakeup so that we see the world and our circumstances anew, then it’s not really poetry. That’s what it’s about, it’s a revolution, and that’s why it’s dangerous.43

As chapter 1 will demonstrate, Longley’s and Heaney’s already deep regard for their craft was enhanced greatly by their participation in Philip Hobsbaum’s Belfast Group in the early to mid-1960s. During that period their commitment to their art was already enabling them to form an ecumenical outlook that would become an implicit part of their revolutionary poetry, a revolution that would enable their subtle engagements with the turbulence on the streets of Northern Ireland after the initial successes of the Catholic civil rights movement.

Even deeply religious believers admit that they struggle with doubt; hence the common prayer spoken by the father of the demon-possessed child that Jesus goes on to heal in Mark’s Gospel: “Oh Lord, I believe; help Thou my unbelief.” Poets, including Longley and Heaney, evince an analogous attitude toward their work in a quest for inspiration and creation. A significant portion of this study, including much of the opening chapter on Longley and almost all of the first chapter on Heaney, thus explores the ways in which these two wordsmiths have sought inspiration and corresponding postures from which they could write creatively. Longley has gone through two searching periods of writer’s block—in the late 1960s and very early 1970s and then from 1979 to 1985 and from 1987 to 1988—and a shy Heaney’s early pen name was “Incertus.” But this doubt is salutary for two reasons. First, as Buckley suggests,
“The very self-doubt of the poet is a testimony to, if not a proof of, his almost unwillingly persistent commitment to the writing of poetry as a sacred act and an aspiration to self-completion.”\(^\text{46}\) Additionally, such doubt creates a leavening effect in a society where, especially after the outbreak of the contemporary “Troubles,” certainty became the province of the ideologically committed. Bigots employed “sureties” often based on nothing but hearsay or cliché to mobilize their followers. Poetry, of course, dwells in ambiguity and suggestion, seeking to evoke pleasure, not partisanship. As Longley has remarked about his artistic goals for his readers: “The main thing I want them to receive is pleasure . . . some sense of reverence for the physical world, and some sense of mystery beyond the physical world.”\(^\text{47}\)

And yet there is a way in which Longley and Heaney and all good poets are supremely concerned with the truthful particulars they seek to depict; their poetry’s dwelling in specificity profoundly evokes the transcendent. Nathan Scott’s conception of poetry’s relationship to the sacred illuminates Longley’s and Heaney’s tendency to reverently gaze upon manifestations of worldly realities. Despite their differences, both poets share what Scott points out is Heidegger’s conception, in his *Holzewege*, of poetry’s truthful work: “Truth is at work because poetic art, by inviting an attitude of enthrallment before the various concrete realities of the world, prepares us to be laid hold of by that wherewith these things are inwardly constituted and enabled to be what they are—which is none other than Being itself.”\(^\text{48}\) Because of its compression and singularity, poetry, more than the other genres of literature, properly leads us into deep appreciation of the uniqueness of both our given world and what is beyond it. And because art generally, as Denis Donoghue has argued, “is sustained by the different form of attention it provokes” from the perceiver in comparison to other objects of perception, art becomes “inexhaustible to meditation,” a truth that is evidenced by the deep contemplation on display in many of the poems analyzed in this study.\(^\text{49}\)

This truthful transcendence derived from the material world in the poetry of Longley and Heaney confounds and subverts the sectarian boundaries often drawn in the province through its subtle perspectives. Rather like the ancient Janus-faced statue on Boa Island in County
Fermanagh, these writers generally exhibit the kind of two-mindedness that Heaney identifies in his 1984 lecture *Place and Displacement: Recent Poetry of Northern Ireland* as manifesting the “strain of being in two places at once, of needing to accommodate two opposing conditions of truthfulness simultaneously.”50 Using *two-mindedness* as a term is potentially problematic, as it often suggests someone in a state of indecision and thus of “two minds” about an issue. Yet it is an enabling term for Longley and Heaney. Longley has spoken repeatedly about being “schizophrenic” in an enabling way through his love of ambiguity and through his joint Irishness and Britishness. For example, he has pointed out about his poem “Persephone” that it “might also explain the state of being in two minds, or more extremely, schizophrenia. This seems to be a twentieth-century complaint.”51 Speaking of his dual cultural allegiances, Heaney notes in his essay “Frontiers of Writing” that “there is nothing extraordinary about the challenge to be in two minds. If, for example, there was something exacerbating, there was still nothing deleterious to my sense of Irishness in the fact that I grew up in the minority in Northern Ireland and was educated within the dominant British culture. My identity was emphasized rather than eroded by being maintained in such circumstances.”52 And the contemporary Northern Irish novelist Glenn Patterson has similarly argued that the bifocal vision of the typical writer from the province creates authorial freedom and enhanced cultural understanding: “As writers we are often pulled in seemingly contrary directions, looking inwards and appealing outwards. In reality, though, there need be no contradiction, for . . . in trying to understand one place very well it might just be possible to understand many other places at least in part.”53

This outlook has enabled Heaney and Longley to thoughtfully critique both the cultural tradition into which they were born, as well as traditions less familiar to them. In so doing, they have written skillfully and deeply about local conditions in Northern Ireland in a parochial, not a provincial, manner, in Patrick Kavanagh’s famous terms. As Kavanagh states in “The Parish and the Universe,” “Parochialism and provincialism are opposites. The provincial has no mind of his own; he does not trust what his eyes see until he has heard what the metropolis—toward which his eyes are turned—has to say on any subject. . . . The
parochial mentality on the other hand is never in any doubt about the social and artistic validity of his parish.” Kavanagh’s decision to write about his local culture modeled this sort of positive parochialism for Longley and Heaney, and both poets have repeatedly mentioned him as an early exemplar. Kavanagh’s concern with depicting much of the harshness of rural Irish life permitted Longley and Heaney to similarly depict static Northern Irish society along with their own immediate environments.

In its exploration of Longley and Heaney’s faith in poetry’s integrity, this study often tests that commitment by measuring their poetic “responses” to the Troubles in Northern Ireland, although such poems are usually filtered through their respective imaginations in such a way as to reaffirm their faith in poetry’s capacity to create worlds of wonder and thus develop alternate realms of potential from the given realities on the ground, while sometimes secondarily drawing on those seemingly unyielding facts. Their poetry reaches toward such a potential while also being written out of their knowledge that, as the poet and critic James Longenbach has held, “the power of a poem inheres in the realization that we cannot count on it. Its ephemeral consolation depends precisely on its being ephemeral, open to the vicissitudes of self-doubt.” Much of Longley’s and Heaney’s poetry focuses upon the ephemeral, the fleeting—celebrating vivifying qualities of plant, animal, or human life while knowing their short life span. These two poets thus share a corollary regard toward their art with one of their exemplars, W. B. Yeats, as supremely expressed in his “Lapis Lazuli”: “All things fall and are built again / And those that build them are gay.” As they are for religious believers, faith and doubt are essential components for poets. Doubt paradoxically strengthens faith or poetry and steels it in the fires of this world, just as untested faith or poetry is weakened and made brittle by being held only theoretically. Yet poetic or religious faith still has an elusive quality to it that we cannot fully articulate—if we could, why would we then believe? Some things are simply beyond our ken, and that should engender wonder and Yeatsian gaiety in us if nothing else.

Whether or not these poets even have an obligation to write about the Troubles warrants some investigation. As the discerning Northern Irish critic and poet Peter McDonald has argued, “Northern Ireland,
and its history during the last three decades, has been allowed to set the terms for almost all critical writing on poetry by Northern Irish poets. Inevitable as this must appear, there are senses in which it needs, and has long needed, to be resisted.\textsuperscript{57} The present study, while engaging with the specificities of Northern Irish history over the last four decades, has attempted to maintain faith with poetry’s particularities and pressures, with questions of diction, form, and the intersection of form with content—just as Longley and Heaney have.

The Troubles have thrust thoughtful Northern Irish authors into a recurring dilemma: whether they should warn of the implications of developing situations; comment immediately upon a development or atrocity; or wait until after the occurrence of an event—sometimes even years—to reflect upon it. Michael Longley discussed this dilemma when he attempted to articulate the role of the artist in 1971 in his introduction to \textit{Causeway: The Arts in Ulster}:

> Too many critics seem to expect a harvest of paintings, poems, plays and novels to drop from the twisted branches of civil discord. They fail to realise that the artist needs time in which to allow the raw material of experience to settle to an imaginative depth where he can transform it and possibly even suggest solutions to current and very urgent problems by reframing them according to the dictates of his particular discipline. He is not some sort of super-journalist commenting with unfaltering spontaneity on events immediately after they have happened. Rather, as Wilfred Owen stated over fifty years ago, it is the artist’s duty to warn, to be tuned in before anyone else to the implication of a situation. (“I,” 8)

Longley’s statement epitomizes the dilemma of the artist in Northern Ireland: on the one hand he wants a Wordsworthian reflection in tranquillity upon events so that he can properly write about them, but on the other he seems to feel that the artist should also act as an early warning system. He is correct to dismiss the third option—to act as a “sort of super-journalist commenting with unfaltering spontaneity on events immediately after they have happened.”\textsuperscript{58} He has consistently articulated this position, recalling in 2003, “From the beginning my friends and I
resisted the temptation to hitch a ride on yesterday’s headlines and write, to paraphrase John Hume, the poetry of the latest atrocity.”\textsuperscript{59} The artistic dilemma of whether to warn of the implications of a developing situation well in advance or simply to wait and reflect upon its repercussions is itself further complicated by the artist’s attempt, not merely to be a mouthpiece for his “tribe,” but to represent both his own community and “the other side.” Despite this double dilemma, Longley and Heaney have generally had a measured, evenhanded approach to writing creatively about the conflict. Their poems about the subject have been imaginative and thoughtful; they have usually not written to the moment; and they often react in such a personal way as to render simplistic an attempt to link them or their positions with a received political identity.

The arts in Northern Ireland had reached enough of a critical ferment for Michael Longley’s edited book \textit{Causeway: The Arts in Ulster} to be published by the Arts Council of Northern Ireland in 1971. Published against a backdrop of rising violence in the North, the volume constitutes an important literary intervention at a time of increasing despair in the province. The variety of arts in the province is indicated by its contents: two chapters on architecture, one on Irish traditional music, one on jazz, one on classical music, and one on the Ulster Folk Museum, as well as chapters on painting and sculpture, poetry, prose, and drama. Longley points out in his introduction the diversity evidenced by the different arts in Ulster at the time and crucially notes that the current flowering occurred before the political upheaval of the late 1960s: “The range and depth of artistic activity in Ulster are in themselves symptoms of its continued liveliness—even though it is this very vitality which most creative people here would wish to qualify and refine, just as surely as they recognise it as one of the sources of their energy. The political explosion was preceded, as is so often the case, by an artistic efflorescence. The Sixties began and continued with a surge of creativity which might have prevented and certainly suggested the upheaval with which they were to end” (“I,” 8). He is correct in pointing out that the arts in the province were flourishing before the outbreak of the current “Troubles”—an important assertion, given that some critics of this literature have assumed that contemporary Northern Irish literature is merely some sort of reaction to the fighting and dependent upon it for
its creative vigor. Nothing could be further from the truth, although this literature has been probably given greater scrutiny in the eyes of the world because of the widespread media coverage given to the Troubles over the last several decades.

Elsewhere, Longley has emphasized that he and his other poet friends at the time “hated what we now call ‘Troubles trash.’ . . . We disliked the notion that civic unrest might be good for poetry, and poetry a solace for the bereaved and broken-hearted.”60 Seamus Deane has also perspicaciously warned of the danger of identifying Northern Irish literature with the Troubles:

The beginning of the Northern troubles coincided with the emergence of the Northern poets as a clearly identifiable group. Although in retrospect it would seem to be one of those apparent coincidences which are really part of a recognizable pattern of related events, it is too easy and dangerous to stress this aspect. For, secreted within this attitude, is the view that there is an inevitable and even welcome connection between violence and art. The release of one and the efflorescence of the other are assumed to be simultaneous. The facts of Northern experience do not bear this out. Violence has often disfigured the society there, but art has not consistently flourished in its shadow. The twenties and thirties were particularly barren in the North as far as artistic productions were concerned. But violence, especially of the politically-directed, official kind, was frequent.61

Deane is not correct here, however, in suggesting that the emergence of the Northern poets and the Troubles coincided. The Belfast Group started in 1963, well before the outbreak of the current Troubles, and Longley, Heaney, and Mahon had all garnered critical recognition before 1969. More important, though, Deane’s warning is a clear call to scholars to examine this period thoughtfully and not argue a simplistic causal relation between the literature and the conflict. In both its origins and its current complex manifestations, contemporary Northern Irish literature, while undeniably responsive to the current conflict, has emerged from a tradition that is rooted in a pervasive aesthetic emphasis on the power of the imagination and a rejection of monolithic categories and identities.
My exploration of the varying responses by Longley and Heaney to the contemporary Troubles and corresponding artistic issues is grounded in my understanding of the long existence of Northern Irish literature that predates the contemporary Troubles. My use of Northern Irish literature is not meant to be taken as a political statement recognizing the legitimacy of the province; I employ it because it is gradually becoming the accepted term to describe the literature written in and about the province, although there is still at times a studious reluctance to employ such terms, often for compelling political and cultural reasons.\textsuperscript{62}

To be sure, literature from the province—especially that written since the start of the Troubles—is deeply marked by that conflict. But the writers under consideration view their primary artistic duty as being to the imagination—not, say, to the reintegration of the province with the Republic. Heaney, himself an admitted constitutional nationalist who desires a united Ireland, even has suggested that identification with a particular political stance compromises the writer’s autonomy: “A constant fidelity to a political position makes you uninteresting. You are factored in to a party’s calculations.”\textsuperscript{63} Once both of the poets in this study established a fidelity to the imagination, they engaged in an astonishing array of critiques of political, religious, and cultural identities, all the while maintaining that original and primary allegiance.

Some might suspect that literature issuing from a six-county, artificially drawn province cannot have an aesthetic or that any aesthetic it does have must be insignificant or limited. However, as I will show, the artistic projects undertaken by Michael Longley and Seamus Heaney demonstrate otherwise. Their common aesthetic project of fidelity to their art has resulted in some of the most carefully crafted literature over the last century in the English-speaking world and some of the most profound, nuanced critiques of identity in the province. The assiduous pursuit of their artistic vocation has enabled them both to be true to their own voices and to escape the cultural and political determinism of their environment. This pursuit has often come through a deep commitment to the form of their work, which allows them true artistic freedom.

Heaney argues in his 1984 lecture \textit{Place and Displacement} that “the appeasement of the achieved poem” enabled the Northern Irish poet of the 1960s and afterwards a liberation from the entrapping ways in which
one’s cultural/religious group attempted to “confine the range of one’s growth, to have one’s sympathies determined and one’s responses determined by it.” Note that Heaney reappropriates “appeasement” from the political realm and applies it to poetry, a necessary maneuver in those first violent days of the Troubles. Because thoughtful Northern Irish poets such as Heaney and Longley engaged in this move, they were then able to offer the beginnings of notions of reconciliation, far more long-lasting than the temporary (political) notion of appeasement. Poetry’s appeasement, though seemingly temporally appeasing, if entered into enough times enacts a long-lasting appeasement that does not merely soothe the mind but reconditions it by enabling it to be supple, nimble, and contemplative, qualities that are necessary for true imaginative daring.

Heaney then claims that this intensification of personal being and detachment from immediate predicaments “lies behind the typical concern of Northern Irish poets with style, with formal finish, with linguistic relish and play.” His argument that form and style in Northern Irish poetry act as linguistic buttresses against the constraining pressures of received identities accords with Denis Donoghue’s argument about form: “The beauty of literature seems to entail resistance to the official designations of reality. Even when it makes statements in ordinary language, a poem is not the sum of those statements. It maintains its autonomy — never absolute, however — by virtue of its form.” The autonomy of imaginative literature thus leads to artistic independence — a positive aesthetic variation on the oft-threatened Unilateral Declaration of Independence by hard-line Protestant loyalists — which is essential for establishing the autonomy of the Northern Irish writer, beckoned as he is by cultural, religious, and political loyalties.

As Heaney goes on to argue, this commitment to poetry does not preclude political engagement, but it ensures that this engagement is on the poet’s home ground, his consciousness:

It is a superficial response to the work of Northern Irish poets to conceive of their lyric stances as evasions of the actual conditions. Their concern with poetry itself wears well when we place it beside the protest poetry of the sixties: the density of their verbal worlds has held up, the purely poetic force of the words is the guarantee of
a commitment which need not apologise for not taking up the cudgels since it is raising a baton to attune discords which the cudgels are creating. To attune it within the pit of their own consciousness, of course, not in the arena of dustbin lids and shoot-to-kill operations.67

Heaney’s concluding musical metaphor suggests that harmony in all of its manifestations must start within the individual consciousness, then spread out to the community, not the other way round. Literature is capable of attending to the particular, embodying it and displaying it in such a way that it becomes a riposte against cultural, political, and religious abstractions and establishes a form of resistance that enables realignments, different imaginings, new possibilities. Elmer Kennedy-Andrews adumbrates this major strand of my argument in his book on fiction and the Northern Ireland troubles since 1969 when he says, “The most significant feature of the literature has been its resistance to, and liberation from, orthodoxy and ideology, its commitment to the ‘world elsewhere’ made possible by language.”68 Such an allegiance to the imagination enables a modeling of the order that could be instantiated into the disordered world outside poetry, while preserving its own autonomy. As Heaney puts it in his essay “The Government of the Tongue,” “Just as the poem, in the process of its own genesis, exemplifies a congruence between impulse and right action, so in its repose the poem gives us a premonition of harmonies desired and not inexpensively achieved. In this way, the order of art becomes an achievement intimating a possible order beyond itself, although its relation to that further order remains promissory rather than obligatory.”69

One of Michael Longley’s most discerning readers, Fran Brearton, has recently argued that the commitment to form by Longley and his fellow poets is itself a type of political maneuver: “The whole point of that formal technique is to bring it into collision—and collusion—with a disruptive element: order meets impurity; the rewards are mutual. That encounter of like with unlike, the mingling of different elements, becomes a paradigm of political responsibility. . . . The distinction drawn here is between a form of political commitment in poetry that too easily becomes a one-dimensional, even propagandist taking of sides, and a commitment to poetry which, by default, is a political activity.”70 Brearton’s
purposely provocative statement may well go too far for many readers, but she rightly stresses the commitment to poetry evinced by Longley and his contemporaries that is the foundation both for their art and for this study. Only art that is internally committed to itself as a work of art has even a chance of interacting thoughtfully with the conditions of the outer world. Heaney has recently argued, in response to an interviewer’s question about Sartre’s rejection of poetry as apolitical, that poetry’s form enables preservation and makes it political in a certain sense: “Poetry, after all, can save the world! Just as form keeps, so poetry keeps, saves and stays.”71

The focus on the specific conditions—physical, political, cultural, and religious—of Northern Ireland has led ineluctably to this literature transcending its specific location and often constraining identities and becoming truly universal in the way that all great literature that attends to the detailed and local does. The particularity of this literature, moreover, accords with what Cleanth Brooks has termed one of the major uses of literature, a function we might call the literary/epistemological: “The peculiar kind of knowledge that literature gives us is concrete—not a generalization about facts but a special kind of focusing upon the facts themselves—not the remedy for a problem but the special presentation of the problem itself.”72 As Brooks argues further, in a statement relevant to a central concern of this study to pay special attention to the formal qualities of Northern Irish literature and also to see the literature not as programmatic but as subtly exemplary, “In short, we oversimplify the way in which literature offers its characteristic knowledge if we see the form of literature as merely rhetorical and its method merely didactic.”73 Literature’s knowledge may be fleeting or deeply visionary, but it exists finally for itself and unto itself. Because of this quality, only in its dynamic expression of artistic integrity can it offer help for the vexing problems of the human condition. Heaney’s statement in an interview in the Irish Times in 1975 suggests as much: “I do believe that poetry is its own special action and that having its own mode of consciousness, its own mode of reality, has its own efficacy gradually.”74

Longley and Heaney emerged from the Belfast Group, a coterie that influenced them to value the artistic allegiance above all other loyalties—the first major contention of this study, explored at some length in chap-
ter 1. This first chapter also explores the early emergence of the writers from this group. My second argument about these writers—that they began laying the foundation for cultural, political, and even religious understanding in the province—hinges on the first. Artistic fidelity led to their significant contributions to imagining a new Northern Ireland, but this latter development was always subsumed by their first allegiance.

This study engages in significant explorations of poetic creativity, a necessary maneuver both because the poets themselves are so often concerned with this process and because creativity, with its refusal to be rushed, provides a striking analogy to reconciliation. The Mennonite peace scholar John Paul Lederach has pointed out in his engaging book *The Moral Imagination: The Art and Soul of Building Peace* that “the artistic process has its own sense of time and it is not chronological. When the creative process is forced or obligated, less than desirable and artificial outcomes emerge. People working with reconciliation need to rethink healing as a process paced by its own inner timing, which cannot be programmed or pushed to fit a project. People and communities have their own clocks.”

Attending to the creative process with its own integrity of time thus can lead us to the realization that reconciliation cannot be accomplished overnight and is a process like writing or reading poetry, which demands deliberation and a willingness to put our own self-interests aside.

Moreover, creativity and reconciliation share a belief in the irrational. The beginning of this introduction argues for Longley and Heaney’s pursuit of poetry as a spiritual search characterized by oscillating belief and doubt. Lederach suggests that just as “the artistic process initially breaks beyond what can be rationally understood and then returns to a place of understanding that may analyze, think it through, and attach meaning to it,” such a movement “is much like the process of reconciliation. Brokenness wanders all over our souls. Healing requires a similar journey of wandering.” Poets who so strongly believe in the spiritual capacity of poetry are adept in expressing tentative belief in the long and complicated process of reconciliation. The arrival of the unexpected in the mind of the artist may prefigure political and cultural events that no one ever believed possible, such as the parleying of sworn enemies.
Writing within a year of the 1994 IRA Ceasefire and the Combined Loyalist Command Ceasefire, Heaney made probably the most explicit comparison between poetry making and peacemaking that anyone ever has. After commenting on the “inspiration” that had “happened in the public life” in Northern Ireland after the cease-fires, he went on to liken that inspiration to “the kind of excitement that starts a poet writing.” Excitement, technique, persistence, sensitivity, and an ability to push the boundaries are all shared by poets and peacemakers, he suggests.

And just as the work of poetry depends for successful completion upon turning that original excitement into a process of sustained and resourceful composition, so in the work of peacebuilding, the outcome will depend upon the ongoing alertness and thorough-going technique of the workers at every stage of the process. Quickness in responding, readiness to discard one draft for another, feeling out and fitting in, sensitivity to nuance, readiness to go beyond where you knew you could go with the approval of your inner censor, all of those things which are operative in bringing forth the dark embryo of the poem will have to be operative on all sides in the embryology of the new Northern Ireland.

No strangers to disappointment about either the making of poetry or the lack of progress in resolving Northern Ireland’s Troubles for many years, Heaney and Longley have nonetheless preserved their excitement, their inspirational power, and while they realize that making peace will be difficult, fragile, risky work, they are, as they always have been, committed to helping imagine the birth of a new province.

Reconciliation is an exceedingly difficult subject, one that this project, whose primary aim is to explore how the imaginative artistic integrity of Longley and Heaney models such a process, cannot hope to and does not try to fully plumb. The best single book on the subject is Graham Dawson’s far-ranging and objective study *Making Peace with the Past? Memory, Trauma, and the Irish Troubles*, which studies the lingering presence of hundreds of years of past sectarian conflict in present Northern Ireland, the effects of the contemporary Troubles, particular atrocities such as Bloody Sunday and the Enniskillen Remembrance Day Bomb-
ing, the aftermath of the Good Friday Agreement, and the continuing problems for Catholics living in such areas as the Ardoyne neighborhood, which is nearly surrounded by loyalist areas of North Belfast, and for Protestants living in largely republican areas along the border with the Republic of Ireland. Dawson articulates the twofold process that Northern Ireland is currently going through: “the attempt to resolve the underlying causes of division and conflict by establishing the basis for peaceful co-operation and the securing of social justice; and . . . the attempt to address the damaging effects of violence inflicted and undergone in the course of conflict, whether through state repression and its resistance, war or civil strife.”

Norman Porter has pointed out that “the single greatest obstacle blocking receptiveness to an enthusiastic response in Northern Ireland is that reconciliation is hugely demanding: it potentially disturbs any number of our prejudices, self-understandings, priorities, and practices.” As Porter and any number of other commentators have noted, despite real progress in cultural dialogue in the province, significant problems remain: along with some citizens’ genuine recalcitrance toward reconciliation, segregated housing, education, and endogamy impede opportunities for cultural exchange. Nevertheless, Porter, for example, has persuasively argued for the pursuit of reconciliation as a worthy goal, while observing that “a reconciled society, unlike a perfect one, is a reasonable possibility . . . that hangs on the realization of inclusive citizen belonging . . . in terms of recognition of individual, cultural and political modes of citizen dignity.”

Porter argues that the foundational ground for reconciliation is a recognition of our “thick commonality,” a notion that rejects various types of pluralism in favor of recognizing “that we share a dignity by virtue of being persons” and “by virtue of being citizens.” Longley and Heaney seem to apprehend this thick commonality and often promote it in their poetry.

At the same time, I fully acknowledge and agree with what Rita Felski cautions are the pitfalls of placing too much weight on literature to change the world. As she argues about the best and subtlest literature that literary critics enjoy reading, such works are often “stripped of any direct links to oppositional movements, marked by often uneasy relations to centers of power,” while “their politics are revealed as oblique
and equivocal, lending themselves to alternative, even antithetical readings. Texts, furthermore, lack the power to legislate their own effects; the internal features of a literary work tell us little about how it is received and understood, let alone its impact, if any, on a larger social field. Political function cannot be deduced or derived from literary structure.”

Therefore, much of this study suggests that Longley’s and Heaney’s poetry — by virtue of its imaginative vigor, nuanced language, and carefully crafted forms — can be exemplary for the long process of reconciliation in Northern Ireland (and by extension, elsewhere in the world), but it does not often attempt to empirically prove their works’ impact on this process, with some significant exceptions such as Longley’s “Ceasefire,” explored in chapter 4, and Heaney’s *The Cure at Troy,* examined in the coda. The coda does, however, attempt to show how, in the dissemination of Longley’s and Heaney’s poetry through television, radio, and school syllabi, the conciliatory aspect of that work and indeed the poets themselves have been well received across the political divide(s) in Northern Ireland.

After exploring Longley’s important and deliberate melding of form and content, chapter 2 examines his search for remote places to literally and figuratively inhabit, such as oceans and islands, and the exemplary exotic qualities he could adopt — such as the verve and insouciance manifested in certain American jazz and blues singers like Fats Waller — in his early poetry collected in *No Continuing City* (1969). The most important of these far-flung locations for him, in establishing an isolated position in which to dwell and receive poetic inspiration, was the Hebridean Islands of Scotland. Longley’s reclamation of a Scottish component to Northern Irish literature in both traditional geographic and cultural terms, along with his anticipation of the so-called “Scottish” mode of history advanced by British historian J. G. A. Pocock in the 1970s, allowed him to suggest that this mode might be most appropriate for appreciating the liminal situation of the citizens in Northern Ireland, caught between expressions of British and Irish cultural and religious identity, and for enabling a mental dynamism that would move freely between these zones. Chapter 3 explores Longley’s carefully crafted poems about the conflict in Northern Ireland and shows the development of his theory of reconciliation through his particularized poetics and his readings in
contemporary theories of ceremony, ethics, and Christian forgiveness. Chapter 4 investigates Longley’s urban poems set in Belfast, his pastoral poems set in Counties Clare and Mayo, his poems about the Holocaust, and his Asian poems, all of which affirm the fragility of human and animal life and their interrelatedness in such a way as to reject the life-crushing forces of sectarianism that have often operated in the province. Longley’s poetry, especially his most recent work, finally imagines the world as a connected region with significant sites in America, Northern Ireland, Eastern Europe, China, and Japan.

Chapter 5 argues that Seamus Heaney’s development of his artistic identity, highlighted in a series of metapoetic poems in *Death of a Naturalist* (1966) and *Door into the Dark* (1969), is indelibly influenced by his meditative worldview, which has enabled him to stay true to his poetic inner self. Chapter 6 explores linguistically significant poems from *Wintering Out* (1972) that attempted to recover a common language for Catholics and Protestants in the province, then shows how, despite Heaney’s anger at the treatment of Northern Irish nationalists, significant poems from *North* (1975) suggest his embrace of his true north—the role of the poet. Chapter 7 offers readings of seminal poems from *Field Work* (1979), *Station Island* (1984), and *The Haw Lantern* (1987) that deal with the poet’s continued development of his vocation, while also speculating about the conciliatory impulse behind Heaney’s translation of *Sweeney Astray* (1983). Chapter 8 explains Heaney’s full transition from his interest in creativity, often anchored in evocations of sacred physical spaces, to a later phase, in which his mind itself becomes a luminous space, an outlook central to the poems beginning with *Seeing Things* (1991) and continuing through important poems from *The Spirit Level* (1996), *Electric Light* (2001), and *District and Circle* (2006).

Heaney’s move inward, in his later poetry, from the province to the country of his own mind thus stands in a chiastic relationship to Longley’s move outward from the province to the entire world. Heaney’s poetry increasingly draws upon a seemingly limitless state within his mind that he terms the “frontier of writing.” This is a nonsolipsistic position from which he can remain ever more attentive to poetry’s imaginative demands and secondarily imagine a new province of reconciliation. Heaney’s superb ability to contemplate, sometimes shown within
poems themselves, has allowed him to reach a higher plane of consciousness that radiates hope for the future of the province.

Close readings of particularly important (and often critically misread poems) anchor each chapter. Thus chapter 2 contains a long discussion of Longley’s “Words for Jazz Perhaps” and “The Hebrides”; chapter 3, extended explorations of his “Wounds,” “The Butchers,” and “Ceasefire”; and chapter 4, forays into his “The Linen Industry,” “The Ice-cream Man,” and “All of These People,” a suite of poems about the Holocaust, and a cluster of poems dealing with Asian themes. The chapters on Heaney’s poetry similarly are grounded in readings of major poems—“Digging,” “The Forge,” and “Bogland” in chapter 5; “The Road to Derry,” a series of philological poems from Wintering Out, and crucial metapoetic poems from North in chapter 6; “Casualty,” “Station Island,” and “From the Frontier of Writing” in chapter 7; and important later poems such as ones from the sequence “Lightenings,” “Poet’s Chair,” “Tollund,” and “Anything Can Happen” in chapter 8.

The coda to this study compares and contrasts the poetics of Longley and Heaney, then explores their influence on the Northern Irish peace process through the incorporation of their poetry into the political, artistic, cultural, and popular discourse of Northern Ireland. In this respect, the realism but also tentative hope of Longley’s 1994 poem “Ceasefire” and Heaney’s 1990 translation of the Greek play originally named Philoctetes as The Cure at Troy have become part of the lexicon of peace and reconciliation in the province. Heaney has remarked about The Cure at Troy that it “seems to me not only a declaration of a need for the imagination to outface the expectations of the topical but also a proof that it can happily and ‘relevantly’ do so.”83 Indeed, the seemingly oracular powers of each poet are on display in both of these major works, demonstrating that, as Heaney suggests here, an allegiance to the imagination supersedes the pressures of topical events and can create new realities in art that exemplify the analogous need for the emergence of new thinking about political and religious divisions.

Despite my choosing Longley and Heaney on the basis of their clear artistic merit, their friendship, and their similar attitudes toward their art, this move may be seen as some sort of misguided attempt at egalitarianism since Longley hails from an English, Protestant background,
and Heaney an Irish, Catholic milieu. More disturbing, featuring authors from seemingly opposed socioreligious groups may at first seem doomed to perpetuate preconceived binary notions of identity. But there are good reasons for this strategy. First, by showing how these writers were originally seen as linked closely to their respective communities, I am better able to chart how their work avoids simple representation of a “tribal” viewpoint. Second, while both of my chosen writers despise tribalism in any form, each retains a cultural tie to his original community that enables him both to speak to that community and, since the connection to that population is relatively loose now, also to converse with another community. Third, knowing a given author’s cultural and religious milieu aids in understanding his work. For example, Longley’s use of Ulster-Scots words does more than add a cultural veneer to his poetic translations and reimaginings of episodes from *The Iliad*: it injects this ancient literature with an updated meaning for Northern Irish culture and the role of the Protestant community in it.

This study has been preceded by several notable critical works on Northern Irish literature, for which I am grateful. One of these is Patrick Grant’s book *Breaking Enmities: Religion, Literature, and Culture in Northern Ireland*, 1967–97. My study, however, differs from Grant’s in an important regard. While he focuses on a variety of issues in Northern Irish culture, including education, gender, and imprisonment, I have restricted myself to exploring the ways literature from the province potentially unites seemingly disparate human beings by confounding and complicating, even making irrelevant, stereotypical notions of political identity. I too, though, want to “examine the embeddedness of literature in the culture that it mirrors, reproduces and criticizes,” and I agree with his assertion, “I do not believe that literature can be reduced to or fully explained by the cultural circumstances of its production.”84 Grant goes on, “I am at pains to provide a sufficiently coherent sense of certain cultural issues in order to explain the problems some authors address, but without losing the distinctiveness of the literature they write as a result. As I have suggested, such distinctiveness is central to the contribution literature makes in resistance to the mechanisms keeping old enmities alive in the culture at large.”85 I share this view of literature’s distinctiveness and its corresponding ability to resist calcified enmities.
Furthermore, I hope my own study implies that the cultural and political scenes in Northern Ireland and how they have evolved over the last several decades are important background for examining how two of its exemplary poets, when they so choose, can unravel and subtly explore identity in its many resonances.

At the same time, I fully agree with Peter McDonald’s assertion that “any celebration of literature in terms of identity is finally prescriptive in nature, because it can only recognize things within strictly limited ranges, and cannot afford to put itself at the mercy of literature’s actual unpredictability and variousness” (MI, 8). McDonald’s argument is compelling, especially since human experience continues to be, in the words of the Northern Irish poet Louis MacNeice, “incorrigibly plural.” I want to expose preconceived and stultifying notions of identity in Northern Ireland to the imaginative force of its literature, not the other way round, as has sometimes been done in critical writing on this literature. While always asserting the primacy of literature over criticism or theory, I differ with McDonald on an important point: writers from Northern Ireland make an important and enduring contribution to conceptions of identity there, even if—and especially if—they end up exploding any stereotypical notions of identity. McDonald’s own work, in Mistaken Identities: Poetry and Northern Ireland, and other books and essays, has been salutary for my own project.

After establishing these writers’ commitment to their art above all else, I hope to suggest the ways in which imaginative literature in the province has opened the “cultural corridor” between republicans and unionists about which Edna Longley has written so perceptively. I am aware of, but disagree with, Gerald Dawe’s rejection of this illuminating phrase. Dawe has argued that “the suggestion of fluidity here . . . is appealing, but the notion of more boundaries (corridor) in some indistinct way, like a nervous tic, poses more problems than it can possibly hope to solve. After all, corridors must lead somewhere and what might be working in a poem (the translation of influences) is a totally different story when it comes to politics and the struggle for power.” I agree with Dawe that poetry and politics operate in different ways, but this entire study emphasizes the imaginative power of literature and shows how it can sometimes subtly effect cultural, even political change, precisely by
not constantly seeking to do so but instead engaging in the pleasures of poetry. Edna Longley has further elucidated her image of the cultural corridor in “From Cathleen to Anorexia: The Breakdown of Irelands,” where she suggests that Northern Ireland is a “frontier-region, a cultural corridor, a zone where Ireland and Britain permeate each other” and holds that if the Republic “face[s] up to difference and division” the province can “relax into a genuinely diverse sense of its own identity: to function, under whatever administrative format, as a shared region of these islands.” Because the Republic gave up its claim to Northern Ireland for the first time ever in the Good Friday Agreement, the province now has precisely this chance to culturally relax that Longley calls for in her essay.

I do not wish to argue that literature exists to serve a political end, but rather that it has always offered a richer and more subtle way of imagining the possibilities of dialogue between the disparate groups in Northern Ireland than has been offered by traditional political conceptions of Northern Irish identity. I do believe that poetry can make things happen; what it makes happen, though, is not so much definitive, measurable social change as an imaginative realignment and reconfiguration of our thinking on a given subject if we immerse ourselves in it fully. As Michael Longley told Paul Keen in 1999, “Imagination is one of the key ingredients for a lasting political settlement, along with tolerance and patience.”

Although reconciliation in Northern Ireland is a secondary but important concern of this project, I view the approaches to reconciliation as evinced by Longley and Heaney as exemplary for reconciliation there and in other war-torn communities and for understanding relationships between the living and the dead, the ultimate suprahistorical community. The third chapter on Longley, for example, attempts to show how he connects human beings and the environment, Ireland’s evasion of fighting fascism in World War II with the burden we all share of the Holocaust, and Asian culture with Western art. Moreover, both Longley and Heaney have predilections for writing elegies dedicated to particular terrains, plants, animals, and people, and, taken collectively, much of their poetry seeks a reconciliation of the living and the dead across species. In collecting and commemorating such ecologies and organisms,
their work quietly but insistently celebrates the living and the dead and gathers them into verbal “cemeteries” that can be continually visited. As Vincent Buckley has argued, poetry is both “an art and act” that sets “aside certain experiences or places or people or memories as representatively revealing ones—in however attenuated a form, sacred ones.”91 The sacred poetry of Longley and Heaney preserves the dead and instantiates a conversation of sorts with the living through what Renee Ashley has called the “dimensional” time of the poem, “in which all the poet’s considered ‘times’ coexist—so that, in spite of our common perception, time is presented not as a merely linear, countable passage, is not unidirectional as we tend to assume, is, in fact, not directional at all, but is instead dimensional.”92

In this elegiac preservation of the continuity of the living and the dead, Longley and Heaney are swimming against a dehumanizing current endemic in Western civilization, especially in Europe and increasingly in America—the tendency to eliminate graveyards and funerals as part of a general drift into atomic individualism and eventual nihilism. Speaking of this issue, Joseph Bottum recently has argued that three propositions about human association and culture are manifested in our attitudes toward death: first, that “the losses human beings suffer are the deepest reason for culture”; second, that “the fundamental pattern for any community is a congregation at a funeral”; and third, “that [a] healthy society requires a lively sense of the reality and continuing presence of the dead.”93 Reading the poetry of Longley and Heaney through Bottum’s paradigm suggests their work’s thorough and healthy immersion in culture and community. Northern Irish society still contains certain elements that have often commemorated the dead in unhealthy ways, manipulating their passing to promote sectarian division, often through murals or street songs. In contrast to this “celebration” of the dead, Longley’s and Heaney’s poetry shows how the death of any person, animal, or even plant diminishes culture because of our interconnectedness. It also enfolds the dead into an ongoing, elegiac conversation with the living, enriching all of our lives in the process.

Imaginative literature confirms and strengthens us in our individual and collective identity as human beings—not as members of political categories—while allowing us access, insight, to the essential humanity of others. One of our wisest literary critics, C. S. Lewis, himself from
Northern Ireland, has pointed out the way literature effects this change and insight: “Literary experience heals the wound, without undermining the privilege, of individuality. There are mass emotions which heal the wound; but they destroy the privilege. In them our separate selves are pooled and we sink back into sub-individuality. But in reading great literature I become a thousand men and yet remain myself. Like the night sky in the Greek poem, I see with a myriad eyes, but it is still I who see. Here, as in worship, in love, in moral action, and in knowing, I transcend myself; and am never more myself than when I do.”94 Transcendence is still not too much to expect from great literature, whether from Northern Ireland, the Republic, or anywhere else. And this transcendence, coming in the form of particularized, concrete language across a range of genres, is precisely what is needed to overcome monolithic, abstract notions of identity in Northern Ireland. As Edna Longley argues, literature can be a powerful resister and destroyer of these simplistic notions of identity: “Poetry possesses the semantic means, the metaphorical audacity, to press beyond existing categories, to prepare the ground where, in Derek Mahon’s words, ‘a thought might grow.’ Certainly literature has helped to erode the compact majorities that came to power in Ireland after 1921 and the censorships they brought with them.”95 Poetry particularly, as Grant has concluded in his discussion of John Hewitt’s and Heaney’s poetry, “calls us to acknowledge the importance of a personal voice and of personal experience as a bulwark against sectarianism that feeds on stereotypes confirmed in turn by various kinds of over-simplified rhetoric.”96 Literature is not obliged to carry out this function because it is always sufficient unto itself, but it can provide points of connection between communities that all too often have set up rigid categories that admit no osmosis. Sometimes this process of connection is achieved through the creation of a sense of the sublime that penetrates quotidian life, suffuses it with moments of hope, and establishes, however temporarily, human community.

Seeing others—reading others through Lewis’s concept of “a myriad eyes”—creates a plurality of experience for the careful reader, an invaluable lesson in an age in which tolerance is often superficially applied as a salve to societal problems and the individual is exalted. What Denis Donoghue has termed “the pleasure of reading literature” recalls Lewis’s conception of reading as an outward-looking experience, an escape from
self-absorption all too common to our culture, which is obsessed with improving ourselves. This pleasure “arises from the exercise of one’s imagination, a going out from one’s self toward other lives, other forms of life, past, present, and perhaps future. This denotes its relation to sympathy, fellowship, the spirituality and morality of being human.”97

This sort of imaginative entry into other lives and other worlds, moreover, remains an ethical activity, in contrast to Donoghue’s construction of a “recovered disinterestedness,” in which we deny ourselves and our own values—at least temporarily. As he argues, “If we can’t or won’t sequester our immediately pressing interests, put them in parentheses for the time being, we have no hope of reading literature. If we read merely to have our political or other values endorsed, or to find them abused, by the work of literature, the situation is vain.”98 Citing George Levine’s 1994 study *Aesthetics and Ideology*, Donoghue holds that such an aesthetic position offers “what Levine calls a ‘space where the immediate pressures of ethical and political decisions are deferred.’”99 My own reading of poems and other imaginative literature in this study, however, shows that aesthetic activity is ethical in the terms that the Russian formalist Mikhail Bakhtin and a particular strand of recent aesthetic criticism have articulated.

While I appreciate Donoghue’s attempts to privilege literature’s imaginative power as a response to the often reductive activities of much current “literary” criticism, I concur with Paisley Livingston, who convincingly suggests that aesthetic appreciation commonly involves not just intrinsic appreciation but also instrumental appreciation: “An important background assumption here, which is often overlooked in discussions of aesthetic disinterestedness, is that it is not only possible but quite common to value something both intrinsically and instrumentally at the same time. Aesthetic appreciation may, then, be accompanied by the pursuit of various practical or instrumental goals, so it is not a question of defending the ideal of a purely detached or disinterested attitude.”100 Livingston’s “instrumental goals” include the pursuit of the ethical as part of proper, holistic aesthetic appreciation. Thus he later points out that “if . . . moral and political ideas are an intrinsic part of many literary works of art, their assessment would seem directly relevant to an evaluation of the work’s overall merits,” and he finally quotes Colin McGinn’s
stirring statement: “Ethical questions, I contend, are integral to the study of literature, and it can only impoverish literary study to try to bracket such questions.”\(^{101}\)

As Bakhtin writes in his classic essay “Discourse and the Novel,” a discussion that begins with a general exploration of all literary genres, “The study of verbal art can and must overcome the divorce between an abstract ‘formal’ approach and an equally abstract ‘ideological approach.’ Form and content in discourse are one.”\(^{102}\) As he further claims, “More often than not, stylistics defines itself as a stylistics of ‘private craftsmanship’ and ignores the social life of discourse outside the author’s study, discourse in the open spaces of public squares, streets, cities and villages, of social groups, generations, and epochs.”\(^{103}\) Although Bakhtin’s contention about the marriage between form and content is confined to the novel in this portion of his essay, his point nonetheless applies to other genres such as poetry as well.

The author’s needed attention to form and content articulated by Bakhtin suggests another fruitful understanding of the Northern Irish writer as “two-minded.” Neil Corcoran has argued that “much of the . . . contemporary writing of Northern Ireland . . . is characteristically double-focused, turned in a Janus-faced way towards both form and event, prominently intertextual but vulnerably anxious about responsibility and obligation.”\(^{104}\) Corcoran’s description aptly captures the position of strength from which the best Northern Irish writers operate: attuned to both the integrity stemming from the formal qualities of the work itself and their ethical responsibility to their role as artists in a culturally complex and divided society.

The present study largely concerns itself with the individual poetics of Longley and Heaney, a specific manifestation of what Bakhtin calls “private craftsmanship,” yet also consistently attempts to show how poetic privacy and contemplation lead not only to the created poem but also to a real contribution to public discourse on such issues as sectarianism when the poem is read in its proper, though secondary, context. As Grant has argued, “Reconciliation alone can be shaped through a personal knowledge and mutual understanding of which literature is the harbinger and example, and from which political discourse still has much to learn.”\(^{105}\) Reconciliation is a long, difficult process, but it is the only
real solution to centuries-long hatreds and prejudices in Northern Ireland. Literature, not politics, seems best able to unravel the cat’s cradle of contradictions and confusions attendant upon identity in Northern Ireland and to weave a new design that explodes nativist and exclusivist ideas in all of the communities in the province. The ethical aim of this project, as will become clear, is to articulate poetry’s aesthetic enabling of a refined and civilized discourse in the context of what McDonald has called one of Northern Irish poetry’s most profound achievements: a reinvigorated poetic imagination that has maintained its own integrity “by maintaining and insisting upon the privileges and properties of its own existence.”

Derek Mahon’s stirring description of poetry’s exemplary political power in 1970 is especially relevant to this concern:

Battles have been lost, but a war remains to be won. The war I mean is not, of course, between Protestant and Catholic but between the fluidity of a possible life (poetry is a great lubricant) and the rigor mortis of archaic postures, political and cultural. The poets themselves have taken no part in political events, but they have contributed to that possible life, or to the possibility of the possible life; for the act of writing is itself political in the fullest sense. A good poem is a paradigm of good politics — of people talking to each other, with honest subtlety, at a profound level. It is a light to lighten the darkness, and we have had darkness enough, God knows, for a long time.

In response to Dennis O’Driscoll’s question about the meaning of this statement by Mahon, Heaney discussed the nature of poetry’s truthfulness:

I think Derek meant that a good poem holds as much of the truth as possible in one gaze. Can a good untrue poem be written? If you are an Israeli or Palestinian poet at this moment, what poetry ideally requires of you is a disinterested gaze at how you are situated, whereas your people will require passionate solidarity, and opposition to the Other. The same situation prevailed in Northern Ireland
in a diminished way: Protestants, Catholics, nationalists, Unionists, are you with us or against us? But what Mahon meant, and what I would mean, is that we in Northern Ireland qua poets were subject to that larger call to “hold in a single thought reality and justice.”

Heaney’s approval of Mahon’s statement indicates that he believes in an ethical notion of poetry as telling the truth by gazing on reality’s starkness and yet keeping the poet’s fidelity to poetry. In his brief essay on Japanese poetry’s effect on English poetry, Heaney expounds on why poetry as a verbal art of particularity must be truthful: “In the course of the twentieth century, as empires and ideologies contended for supremacy, and atrocities were committed on a scale unprecedented in human history, poets became desperately aware of the dangers of rhetoric and abstraction. In these circumstances, the poet’s duty to be truthful became more and more imperative.”

As I argued earlier in this introduction, poetry’s particularity and especially the properties of Longley’s and Heaney’s precise poetry must be experienced ephemerally; moreover, and more startlingly, this ephemeral experience can effect an ethical response from us on an individual level that complements the theories of the intertwined nature of aesthetics and ethics articulated above by Lewis, Bakhtin, and Grant. Unfortunately, as J. Hillis Miller has argued, “Literary study hides the peculiarity of literary language by accounting for it, naturalizing it, turning it into the familiar. This usually means seeing in it as in one way or another a representation of the real world.” Because of Longley and Heaney’s deep allegiance to the imagination, which in turn has enabled them to create viable other worlds in their poetry, their strange and angular poetry works against literary criticism that would attempt to smooth its contours. Jon Kertzer articulates how “a comparable ethical dilemma” corresponds with what he has already identified as critical attempts to grapple with “the paradox of literary singularity”: “Ethical insights, like aesthetic ones, become intelligible only within a larger system framed by general principles and rules, but that very generality dispels the uniqueness of the insight and the urgency of the call.” Although Kertzer, following Emmanuel Levinas, rejects the traditional view of ethics as
based on a universal system and embraces a Levinasian, individual, subjective ethics, I follow Kant in believing that ethical judgments must be read against communally held, universal norms and that such norms can be determined, however faintly, from carefully nuanced readings of literature.113

Both Heaney and Longley seem to believe in a more traditional ethical system as well. For example, John Desmond has recently argued that Heaney’s criticism of deconstruction “makes clear his belief in a ‘covenant’ or community of meaning rooted in a shared understanding of words as the basis for ethical order in society and for ethical meaning in literature, a bond that is transgenerational, transnational, and ultimately transhistorical.”114 Longley, too, as I have argued elsewhere, rejects deconstruction and its relativity in favor of a shared plurality of difference that binds us together.115

How then, does the process of reading particular poems, such as those by Longley and Heaney, effect ethical responses from us? One way has been recently delineated by Derek Attridge in *The Singularity of Literature*. Attridge suggests that “what we experience in responding to the artwork . . . is not a generalized obligation but a call coming from the work itself—the work as singular staging of otherness.”116 If we “apprehend the other as other,” we “register its resistance and irreducibility” as well as seeking to render it more familiar.117 For Attridge, “A responsible response to an inventive work of art, science, or philosophy (to mention only a few possibilities) is one that brings it into being anew by allowing it, in a performance of its singularity for me, for my place and time, to refigure the ways in which I, and my culture, think and feel.”118 In this sense, thoughtfully experiencing the poetry of Longley and Heaney as singular events in our minds enables us to be confronted with an alterity beyond us that stretches us and leads us out of ourselves, even as it links us to values we share with others. Northern Irish readers and hearers of Longley’s and Heaney’s poetry have undoubtedly experienced this alterity over the decades, which may in turn have helped them to conceive more positively of “the other side.”119

While experiencing the otherness engendered by literary singularity can spur ethical refingerings of how we think and feel, beholding literary particularity can create ethical responses through seeing ourselves
as similar—as generators or replicators in a lesser, though still powerful, sense of that process as it is practiced by our best writers. I have already argued, pace Steiner, that Longley and Heaney see themselves as secondary or countercreators who struggle to bring into being secondary worlds that rival the original creation. Moreover, if we critics and readers see ourselves as tertiary creators or replicators, in Elaine Scarry’s sense of the term, we may heighten our ethical agency. Scarry’s study of beauty rescues this supposedly Platonic concept from its traditional passivity and holds that perceiving beauty is a potentially ethical act. Interestingly, the press release of the Nobel Prize Committee in 1995 for Heaney’s award explicitly recognizes this link: the committee points out that Heaney believes that “the task of the poet is to ensure the survival of beauty, especially in times when tyrannical regimes threaten to destroy it.”

My criticism of Longley’s and Heaney’s poetry in what follows takes for granted that critical perception is grounded not only in singularity but also in beauty and wonder—at literature’s capacity to inspire and awe us. Scarry argues that “there are attributes that are, without exception, present across different objects (faces, flowers, birdsongs, men, horses, pots, and poems), one of which is this impulse toward begetting.” Replication, she says, “reminds us that the benign impulse toward creation results not just in famous paintings but in everyday acts of staring.”

Staring closely at the following poems is a perceptual and critical necessity in order for us to recognize any ethical impulse that may arise in us as a result of such regard for the particular. Scarry points out several qualities of beauty relevant for my purposes: it is sacred, unprecedented, and life affirming, and, most important, “it incites deliberation.” A flower and a carefully crafted poem—not to mention Longley’s carefully crafted poems about flowers—epitomize all these qualities but especially invoke deliberation in us if we behold them deeply. Such attention to the aesthetic necessarily makes us more reflective and deliberate, qualities that are necessary prerequisites to undertaking ethical acts. I will return to more specific ethical applications of Scarry’s theory of beauty in my discussion of Heaney’s “Punishment” in chapter 6 and in the coda, but for now I want to emphasize how the following poetry readings implicitly assume they are dealing with the beautiful—not as
an abstract concept but as concrete examples—and accordingly linger
over them, recognizing their sacred, unprecedented, life-affirming power
and thus attempt to be thoughtful in an admittedly poor approximation
of the deliberation that it took to create them in the first place. Beauty is
linked to but separate from truth, as Scarry also propounds, and it is my
hope that this study reveals unifying truths about the human condition
such as our need for each other in a fragmented and fragmenting world.

To apprehend the truth of the poems that will be explored here, we
need to put ourselves in the posture of the poets in a series of essentially
Heideggerian maneuvers. Mark William Roche suggests that Heideg-
ger’s concept of truth as “aletheia or unconcealment has at least three
moments”: “First, poetic truth is not something that we can will or force.
Instead, it happens to us. It finds us; we do not find it. As with grace, our
primary action toward it must be openness of comportment. Second,
because this concept of truth arises not from our intentions but from our>alertness, our listening for it, we must be especially attentive as recipi-
ents. We must listen to the otherness of the other, quietly, patiently. . . .
Third, the artwork not only reveals, it also conceals. The artwork can-
not be exhausted by our conceptual analysis.”¹²³ A receptive alertness,
coupled with a humility that we will never completely plumb the depths
of such profound poems, should enable us not only to experience the
truths they offer us but also to realize that the poems are ultimately be-
yond our full ken.

Radically unlike the qualities of beauty grounded in perceptions of
the particular—the sacred, the unprecedented, the life-affirming, the
deliberate—the terrible reality of life on the streets of Northern Ireland
during the Troubles with its horrific violence offers a difficult challenge to
properly read the literature written before, during, and now after that time
period. Yet poetry itself is up to the challenge of being simultaneously
alert to ugliness and beauty, as Michael Longley points out in the con-
text of discussing Adorno’s often-misunderstood statements about cul-
ture’s role after the Holocaust: “Poetry has to face into awfulness as well
as into beauty. I am struck by the fact that the people who were going
into the gas chambers wrote poems, that poetry fulfills very deep needs
in humanity, especially in extremis.”¹²⁴ Longley has himself articulated a
fascinating image of art’s role in society, noting in his introduction to
Causeway: The Arts in Ulster that “in one of the dictionaries I consulted ‘causeway’ is defined as a path of stepping stones. This is, I think, a fair description of the role played by the arts in any society: it defines what should reasonably be expected of them in all civilised countries, but especially in a troubled community like our own” (“I,” 9).125

I see my own role as a critic in these pages as laying down stepping stones of another sort from those in Longley’s compelling description of art’s role in society, in a critical maneuver akin to that advanced by Louis MacNeice in the introduction to his outstanding and still valuable 1941 study of Yeats. MacNeice convincingly argues that poetry and life are intertwined, which is a basic assumption of this study, but that poetry nevertheless has a life of its own; the job of the literary critic, he claims, is ultimately to point to the experience of the poem itself: “The background of a poem, its origin, its purpose, its ingredients, can be analysed but the poem itself can only be experienced. All that the critic can do is lay stepping stones over the river — stones which are better forgotten once the reader has reached a position where he is in touch with the subject of criticism.”126 The unique experience, pleasure, and mystery that poetry gives to a host of readers are finally what this book exalts. Paul Muldoon has recently suggested that critics should submit themselves to poetry in a way analogous to a poet’s reception of a poem’s visitation, arguing that “our only decent end is to let the poem have its way with us, just as the poet let it have its way with him or her.”127 In the gifted hands of Michael Longley and Seamus Heaney, the poem shines and shimmers with a life of its own, unrepeatable, mysterious, and other, yet always humane and self-delighting, truly an instructive soul music for our time.