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Protestant Culture, History, and Religion in the Early Poetry of Derek Mahon

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Abstract

The late Derek Mahon (1941-2020) was among the most important and honored poets writing in Ireland at the time of his death. He was celebrated and remembered across English-speaking literary circles as an unreservedly 'Irish' poet, and he had been resident in the Republic of Ireland for almost three decades. However, this comfortable Irish designation to which the poet is now inarguably identified had not always been so easily given nor naturally embraced. Mahon hailed from the Protestant suburbs of Belfast in Northern Ireland, born into a politically unionist community that is known for emphasizing its Britishness and stressing loyalty to the crown. It is a sense of discomfort and dissonance with this heritage that many of the best poems of Mahon's early career struggle with. The physical and spiritual break of the poet from his community and place of origin was preceded by years of poetic engagement with and interrogation of the implications of the Northern Protestant identity and legacy in Ireland. These deeply reflective inquiries into Protestant culture, history, and religion will be shown to have been a necessary and effective strategy for transcendence and stand as a testament to the dissociation of the poet from his background. This paper revisits Mahon's early poetry in order to explicate the oftentimes complex explorations of the poet's Protestant inheritance. In doing so, a greater understanding of Mahon's early work as a necessary precedent for his later, unequivocally Irish sense of identity can be achieved.

Keywords: Protestantism, Irish poetry, Northern Ireland, identity, Derek Mahon

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Introduction

Upon Derek Mahon's (1941-2020) death, obituaries across the popular press in Britain, Ireland, and the United States paid tribute to the man whom they called 'one of the foremost contemporary Irish poets' (Smyth, 2020), 'a leading Irish poet' (Genzinger, 2020) and 'one of the great poets of his native Ireland' (O'Brien, 2020). Mahon, whose career began in the mid-1960s and who continued to publish well into his final years, was indeed one of the most compelling and impactful literary minds in the English-speaking world. However, in the early part of his career, it would have seemed incredible to have so confidently deemed Mahon so unambiguously 'Irish'. Mahon had resided in Kinsale, Co. Cork in the Republic of Ireland since the mid-1990s, but he was born in Belfast, Northern Ireland, politically a part of the United Kingdom, and grew up in the Protestant suburbs north of the city. Mahon's relationship to his cultural background and its influence on the notion of identity, as expressed in his poetry, was a source of anxiety, ambivalence, and discomfort. Further complicating the poet's connection to his heritage and home was the outbreak of sectarian violence in the form of the Troubles (late-1960s-1998). Mahon was among a group of poets (including Seamus Heaney, Michael Longley, and James Simmons) whose careers coincided with the beginning and escalation of the conflict. For writers of both Catholic and Protestant backgrounds, expressions of identity became more volatile as terms like 'Irish' and 'British' assumed nationalist/republican or loyalist/unionist political associations.

Mahon's later work, the poetry composed from the time of his settling in Kinsale, displays a greater sense of ease with his surroundings and is less self-consciously strained by the cultural baggage of his Northern Protestant background. However, this was not achieved through simple relocation to Ireland's South. Rather, it came after a long process of interrogation, negotiation and struggle with the negative associations of his upbringing and identity. These reckonings are most clearly manifested in poems that appear in Mahon's first four collections, *Night-Crossing* (1968), *The Snow Party* (1975), *Courtyards in Delft* (1981), and *Antarctica* (1985). Notes of estrangement are evident early on. As Elmer Kennedy-Andrews (2008) states:

> Mahon's relationship with his home place is profoundly troubled and ambiguous. Uneasy with the Protestant culture from which he sprang and without access to the racial landscape in which his fellow Northern Catholic poets could situate themselves, he epitomizes the displaced Northern Protestant, for whom ideas of community are highly problematic. (p. 155)

There is a cruel irony in that Mahon's uneasiness with the characteristics of Protestant identity would make him a characteristically Protestant poet in Ireland. As the work that followed this early period drifted geographically and thematically further away from the poet's culture and place of origin, it is essential to revisit Mahon's engagement with his 'home place' to properly grasp the necessity and inevitability of the poetry's spiritual break from his Northern Protestant roots. These early poetic deliberations with Protestant culture, history and religion are what this paper seeks to explore and explicate.

This paper builds on the foundations established by the early scholarship of such seminal figures as Terence Brown (1975) and Edna Longley (1994), whose efforts did much to draw attention to the flourishing poetic output that accompanied the outbreak of the Troubles. Furthermore, the disputed importance of notions of identity, as interrogated in Peter McDonald's aptly named study on poetry in Northern Ireland, *Mistaken Identities* (1997), is confronted and contested. The analysis also adds to the commentary found in the profound study done by Hugh Haughton (2007) on Mahon's life and work, having the benefit of posterity and knowing the reception that the poet received in the last decade of his life. By employing close reading of the poems and analyzing them from a cultural-historical perspective, the intensity of Mahon's sense of dissonance with his Protestant background will be revealed; the poet's expressions of anxiety and discomfort will be better understood as a catalyst for departure from Northern Ireland and liberation from Protestant identity. Mahon's clashes with Northern Protestant bourgeois values, past violence and theological tenets work to distance the poet from his background. The thoroughness with which Mahon attempts to come to terms with the negative associations of his identity will be shown to have been a necessary and effective strategy for achieving his successful liberation from them.

Analysis

A troubled sense of 'home' is evident at the very start of Mahon's career. Haughton (2007) asserts the subject of 'home' is 'the core of his early work' (p. 33). 'Spring in Belfast', originally 'In Belfast' in *Night-Crossing*, is narrated from the perspective of an outsider in his own community, 'Walking among my own this windy morning... Once more, as before, I remember not to forget'. Barry Sloan (2000) notes the irony 'that in a culture which places such high value on remembrance, he has to make the effort to do so' (p. 205). Mahon writes irreverently of Protestantism:

> There is a perverse pride in being on the side
> Of the fallen angels and refusing to get up.
> We could *all* be saved by keeping an eye on the hill
> At the top of every street, for there it is,
> Eternally, if irrelevantly, visible –
>
> But yield instead to the humorous formulae,
> The spurious mystery in the knowing nod;
> Or we keep sullen silence in light and shade,
> Rehearsing our astute salvations under
> The cold gaze of a sanctimonious God. (Mahon, 2004, p. 13)

The tone is reservedly antagonistic. Numerous references play upon distinctly Protestant aspects. Stereotypical Ulster Protestant obstinacy is registered by 'fallen angels… refusing to get up'; yet the 'fallen angel' of the poem is arguably the speaker himself, who insists on maintaining an isolated distance from his community, 'I resume my old conspiracy with the wet \ Stone and the unwieldy images of the squinting heart'. A notion that 'all' could be 'saved' might refer to the 'other' community of Catholics for whom salvation is of no concern for the Protestant community. Edna Longley (1994) observes, 'Mahon's use of the word "saved" indicates that once more a Protestant writer is turning Protestant orthodoxy, Protestant conscience, against itself' (p. 106). Mahon is more critical of the theological aspects of Protestantism than most, their influence on Northern Protestant culture and mentality compounding the poetry's sense of dissonance.

Salvation is ensured by 'keeping an eye on the hill \ At the top of every street'; as Haughton (2007) notes, 'Hills are an inescapable feature of Belfast but here they come with theological resonances (pp. 33-34). The idea of 'a city upon a hill' has Protestant resonances; the phrase, originally from Jesus' 'Sermon on the Mount' (Mathew 5:14), was famously used in John Winthrop's sermon, 'A Model of Christian Charity', to his Puritan congregation. Winthrop (1630) had directed his people, 'There are two rules whereby wee are to walke one towards another: Justice and Mercy'. Belfast of the late 1960s could not have been said to have exemplified these virtues. The hill as a site of salvation also recalls the Anglican hymn, 'There is a Green Hill Far Away' (Haughton, 2007, p. 34); 'a green hill far away… Where the dear Lord was crucified \ Who died to save us all'. In these stanzas Mahon does not just turn the religious values of Northern Protestant society against itself, but undermines them. The poem ends with the speaker expressing a sense of detachment, but his exact position in relation to the community is left ambiguous:

> One part of my mind must learn to know its place.
> The things that happen in the kitchen houses
> And echoing back streets of this desperate city
> Should engage more than my casual interest,
> Exact more interest than my casual pity. (Mahon, 2004, p. 13)

There is an impression of the speaker's sense of displacement within his own city, a city he calls 'desperate'. As Peter McDonald (1997) notes, the word 'carries both its specifically Northern Irish meaning of something comically wrong or inadequate, and the more standard one of being at the end of one's tether in an extremity of suffering' (p. 90). The speaker might also be reflecting his sense of desperation about his community, 'that sense of desperation about the culture he was born into, runs through all Mahon' (Haughton, 2000, pp. 158-159); 'at the end of his tether' with his people, the speaker is on the verge of leaving behind a city which 'should' engage and exact interest but fails to do so. The notion that he 'should' be more invested in the first place speaks to a self-conscious guilt about the speaker's relation to his 'own' place and people. Such anxiety about the Northern 'home' is

consistent in the early poetry.

'Glengormley' is set in the suburb of north Belfast where the poet was raised. Like 'Spring in Belfast', the speaker explores feelings of tension about his sense of 'place' at home among his 'own'. The poem opens:

Wonders are many and none is more wonderful than man
Who has tamed the terrier, trimmed the hedge
And grasped the principle of the watering can.
Clothes-pegs litter the window-ledge
And the long ships lie in clover; washing lines
Shake out white linen over the chalk thanes. (Mahon, 2004, p. 14)

The stanza offers subversive commentary on both bourgeois and Protestant aesthetics. This is the mundane landscape of the poet's youth; he grew up in a community for whom having an obedient dog or an orderly garden was something in which to take pride. The uninspiring environs of the suburb are contrasted with the dynamic landscapes of Ireland's mythological past:

Now we are safe from monsters, and the giants
Who tore up sods twelve miles by six
And hurled them out to sea to become islands
Can worry us no more. The sticks
And stones that once broke bones will not now harm
A generation of such sense and charm. (Mahon, 2004, p. 14)

The speaker is critical of his community's ethic, its 'new heroism of suburban survival' (Brown 1975, p.193). Eamonn Hughes (2002) comments, '[...] this suburban place is devoid of the literary, having been stripped of its relationship to the sagas and epics in which the ''heroes'' lived' (pp. 100-101). This stripping of past associations is seen to have been a conscious endeavour. The Protestant suburb is 'safe' from figures of Celtic mythology, distanced from Ireland's Gaelic tradition, 'No saint or hero, \ Landing at night from the conspiring seas, \ Brings dangerous tokens to the new era'. In the later poetry following Mahon's embrace of nationalism, certain mythologies will be redeemed. The poem was composed before the start of the Troubles yet 'insists on a darker sense of history nonetheless' (Haughton, 2007, p. 36):

Their sad names linger in the histories.
The unreconciled, in their metaphysical pain,
Dangle from lamp-posts in the dawn rain
And much dies with them. I should rather praise
A worldly time under this worldly sky –
The terrier-taming, garden-watering days
Those heroes pictured as they struggled through
The quick noose of their finite being [...] (Mahon, 2004, p. 14)

The speaker regrets the loss of the earlier tradition; an early indication of affinity for Irish culture. He only ironically considers praising the world of terrier-tamers and garden-waterers. The poem's sense of the place it describes is preoccupied by an earlier event of displacement. Mahon is not just averse to Protestant aesthetics, but self-conscious about the Protestant community's history in Ireland. The poem closes with the speaker acknowledging, 'By \ Necessity, if not choice, I live here too'. However, it is unclear as to what necessitates him living there. Terence Brown (1975) posits that the sentence suggests 'only partial acquiescence in suburban order' (p. 193). The unenthusiastic tone of the line implies only a marginal degree of affiliation. An emphasis on a lack of choice on the speaker's part perhaps indicates why he lives there, but also suggests that an alternative place would have been chosen had it been made available to him.

It is perhaps because the environment of the poet's youth is so uninspiring that Mahon is prompted to use creative ways of exploring it in his work. Glengormley is transformed in 'Courtyards in Delft', the title poem of his 1981 volume, to the setting of a painting by Dutch artist Pieter de Hooch (1629-1684). The speaker experiences a 'return to origins' through the painting, 'which leads him back to formative aspects of his own childhood and upbringing' (Sloan, 2000, p. 214). The poem opens by focusing on the orderliness and cleanliness of a Protestant domestic ethos:

Oblique light on the trite, on brick and tile –
Immaculate masonry, and everywhere that
Water tap, that broom and wooden pail
To keep it so. House-proud, the wives
Of artisans pursue their thrifty lives
Among scrubbed yards, modest but adequate.
Foliage is sparse, and clings. No breeze
Ruffles the trim composure of those trees. (Mahon, 2004, p. 105)

This setting expands on the trimmed hedges and 'terrier-taming, garden-watering days' of 'Glengormley'; 'the world of Glengormley finds a parallel universe' in a Dutch courtyard (Tobin, 1999, p. 296). The aesthetics of a Protestant suburb in North Belfast correspond to domestic values of a 17th-century Protestant community. Mahon remembers his mother as someone akin to the 'house-proud' wives in the painting:

> My mother stopped working when she got married [...] she became a housewife and very house-proud in the obsessive way that a woman in that position often is. It's almost a question of what else had she to do? She'd keep dusting and keep everything as bright as a new penny. Of course, this was a bit of a strain on the child, an irritant. In fact, with my mother, no harm to her, I think it was pathological. (Mahon & Grennan, 2000)

The poet implies that his mother's lifestyle was creatively unfulfilling, spiritually stifling and mentally damaging. His sentiment underlies the description of the world of the housewives in the poem. The 'obsessiveness' with which the courtyard has been managed is an evocation of a Protestant ethic. Sean Dunne (1981) observes, 'Everything is in its place, ordered and untouched by the carefree and sensual' (p. 34). Just as 'Glengormley' had been concerned with what was missing from its landscape, 'Courtyards in Delft' is preoccupied by what is absent from the painting's setting:

No spinet-playing emblematic of
The harmonies and disharmonies of love,
No lewd fish, no fruit, no wide-eyed bird
About to fly its cage while a virgin
Listens to her seducer, mars the chaste
Perfection of the thing and the thing made.
Nothing is random, nothing goes to waste.
We miss the dirty dog, the fiery gin.

That girl with her back to us who waits
For her man to come home for his tea
Will wait till the paint disintegrates
And ruined dikes admit the esurient sea; (Mahon, 2004, p. 105)

These lines are concerned by what is not there; absences of vitality and sexuality. There is a note of longing for these things; in the setting of the poem, the speaker only resignedly admits, 'Yet this is life too'. As Sloan (2000) points out, '[...] the catalogue of exclusions inevitably points to deficiencies or limitations' about the 'model of disciplined, respectable life' (p. 214). The plural pronoun 'We' could apply to either a historical Dutch community or a contemporary Northern Protestant one, or both; 'We miss' in a sense of both not having and desiring. The girl might wait until 'the paint disintegrates', implying self-destruction, or until her land is reclaimed by the sea, implying a surrender to a more natural state.

The final stanza introduces a personal dimension, 'I lived there as a boy':

I must be lying low there,
A strange child with a taste for verse,
While my hard-nosed companions dream of fire
And sword upon parched veldt and fields of rain-swept gorse. (Mahon, 2004, p. 106)

Mahon has said of himself, 'I was born odd, a slip of the pen' (Scammell, 1991, p. 6). The poet recalls, 'Since there wasn't any hurly-burly of siblings, I had time for the eye to dwell on things, for the brain

to dream about things. I could spend an afternoon happily staring' (Mahon & Grennan, 2000). In the poem it is the similarly 'strange' child's 'taste for verse' that partially redeems the absence of the sensual things missing from the painting. However, as Sloan (2000) comments:

> […] his artistic, imaginative interests had nothing in common with the narrow Protestant values that underpinned life in Belfast. Furthermore, he implies his distaste for the imperialistic tenor he associates with Northern Irish Protestant culture just as Dutch imperial ambitions were nurtured with the society represented by de Hooch. (p. 215)

An early version of 'Courtyards in Delft' stated that the companions 'dream of war'. Dutch and British imperialist traditions are linked by mentions of 'veldt', an Afrikaans term for an open space of grassy land, and 'gorse', a common shrub in Ireland. The 'strange child' is alienated from his companions whom he considers 'hard-nosed', a term with pejorative connotations of obstinacy and stubbornness. A different version that appeared in *The Hunt by Night* (1982) had ended with an additional stanza:

> For the pale light of that provincial town
> Will spread itself, like ink or oil,
> Over the not yet accurate linen
> Map of the world which occupies one wall
> And punish nature in the name of God.
> If only, now, the Maenads, as of right,
> Came smashing crockery, with fire and sword,
> We could sleep easier in our beds at night. (Mahon, 1982)

Haughton (2007) observes, 'The stanza registers violent recoil from the obsessively orderly Protestant ethos identified in the painting, portraying it as punitively colonial and theocratic' (p. 159). The 'not yet accurate' map evokes an imperialist directive to make it 'accurate' through conquest, subjugation and colonisation; yet one might also remember that the nationalist map image was of the whole island as a distinct geographical entity, bounded by the sea and with no internal divisions (O'Halloran, 1987, p. 1). In a show of defiance, the extirpated stanza's concluding lines ironically react violently to violence, with the same 'fire and sword' that the 'hard-nosed companions' dream of in the poem's later version.

In the early poetry, Mahon responds to violence by intimating a desire to escape; escaping not just in a geographical sense, but in a temporal, metaphysical one as well. In 'Last of the Fire Kings', originally from *The Snow Party* (1975), the speaker declares, 'I am \ Through with history':

> Who lives by the sword
>
> Dies by the sword.
> Last of the fire kings, I shall
> Break with tradition and
>
> Die by my own hand
> Rather than perpetuate
> The barbarous cycle (Mahon, 2004, p. 64)

Haughton (2007) comments, 'Like the disenchanted poet or humanist, the last (or would-be) last fire-king is sick to death of the endless cycle of violence and of ideas of authority based on ''the sword'', endorsed by ''the fire-loving people''' (p. 103). The poem registers a number of Ulster Protestant associations. The sword of the fire-king foreshadows the 'hard-nosed' Protestant children's 'dream of fire \ And sword' that is to come later in 'Courtyards in Delft'. The 'barbarous cycle' might generally refer to continuous sectarian conflict, but could also apply to an oppressive cycle of authority imposed in the North by Protestant regimes. The fire king expresses paranoia reminiscent of Ulster Protestant hysteria about nationalist aspirations:

> Five years I have reigned
> During which time
> I have lain awake each night

And prowled by day
In the sacred grove
For fear of the usurper. (Mahon, 2004, p. 64)

In addition, the fire king is resentful of a kind of conformity that recalls the environment of the poet's upbringing; 'the fire-loving \ People… Will not countenance this, \\ Demanding I inhabit, \ Like them, a world of \ Sirens, bin-lids \ And bricked-up windows'. 'The Last of the Fire Kings' forecasts the themes and vocabulary of 'Courtyards in Delft', the latter poem having been described by Mahon as a 'study in Protestantism' (Dunne, 1981, p. 12).

'Rathlin' appears in the same volume as 'Courtyards in Delft' (as 'Rathlin Island'), and repeats the fire king's expression of being 'through with history'. This sentiment is registered in context of the island's history as a site of numerous massacres:

A long time since the unspeakable violence –
Since Somhairle Buí, powerless on the mainland,
Heard the screams of the Rathlin women
Borne to him, seconds later, upon the wind. (Mahon, 2004, p. 107)

The speaker refers to a massacre from the Elizabethan conquest of Ulster ordered by the Earl of Essex, Walter Devereux. Members of the clan of an Antrim chieftain, Sorley Boy ('Somahairle Buí') MacDonnell, sought refuge in one of the island's fortifications. Following a siege, the castle surrendered to English forces under the command of John Norris and Francis Drake that began to murder 'men, women, children, the aged, the feeble and the helpless, without distinction' (Sugden, 2012, p. 85). John Sugden (2012) explains:

> It is said that they had been enraged by the stiff resistance the castle had made and by the losses they had sustained. However, after butchering two hundred of the prisoners on the surrender of the castle, they roamed about the island for several days, rooting out several hundred more from their refuge in caves and among the cliffs, and chopping them down on the spot […] Essex proudly informed Walsingham, the great minister, that Sorley Boy MacDonnell himself had watched the destruction of his people from the mainland and that he had been driven to distraction. (pp. l85-186)

The poem closes with the speaker's departure:

We leave here the infancy of the race,
Unsure among the pitching surfaces
Whether the future lies before us or behind. (Mahon, 2004, p. 107)

Time, depicted like the kind of 'barbarous cycle' alluded to in 'Last of the Fire Kings', is suspended; as Haughton (2007) notes, the poem ends with a 'disturbing arrest of historical progress' (p. 164). The cyclical perception of 'the long story of historical violence between English and Gaelic cultures' (Haughton, 2007, p. 164) is reinforced by an allusion to the violence of the Troubles, 'Bombs doze in the housing estates'. 'Rathlin' correlates Mahon's unease about historical Protestant violence to a contemporary conflict that is part of its legacy.

When Mahon writes about the Troubles, feelings of estrangement from the Northern Protestant community can only be reinforced. Estrangement from Mahon's community troubles the poetry's sense of the North as 'home'. Unease about the Protestant tradition into which the poet was born fosters notions of escape and dissociation that the later poetry will be shown to have realised. Seamus Deane (1990) comments on the poet's early work:

> […] Mahon does not enjoy or seek to have a sense of community with the kind of Ireland which is so dominant in Irish poetry. All his versions of community depend on the notion of a disengagement from history […] Nevertheless, he was born into an historical community, that of Northern Irish Protestantism […] The plight of his community was, of course, defined by the conflict of the last fifteen years […] (p. 160)

Mahon's later poems are at ease in the South; there is little anxiety about history, yet still no palpable sense of identification with a historical community. What accounts for a need to disengage? The contemporary context has much to do with it. In a 1981 interview Mahon expressed his feelings about having left his 'home ground':

> I have at times felt guilt about abandoning – if that's the word – my home ground, unlike

> Seamus Heaney, who, of course, digs deeper and deeper into the home ground. I left it not for poetic reasons, but for life reasons; I just found it impossible to live there [...] Although certain aspects of it survive in my memory, I have in many ways turned my back on it in life terms. I think it's my right to do so. I don't feel I'm under any obligation to devote my energies to the solution of the troubles in the North.
>
> I have felt guilt. My feelings are very complex. My attitude to Ireland is not a straightforward one because of the peculiar position of the Northern Protestant.
> (Mahon & Kelly, 1981, p. 11)

'Lives' is a poem dedicated to Heaney in which Mahon ironises a notion of a poet as archaeologist; 'An anthropologist \ With my own \ Credit card… I know too much \ To be anything any more… if in the distant \\ Future someone \ Thinks he has once been me… Let him revise \ His insolent ontology' (Mahon, 2004, p. 44). Instead of unearthing items that might foster a sense of personal, communal or national identity, the poem unearths a series of disparate objects from a wide range of time periods and places, undermining the idea of an 'identity' being recoverable through a search of 'roots'.

'Afterlives', dedicated to James Simmons, 'is part of a Northern Irish dialogue [...] between an expatriate Mahon and a poet who stayed at home' (Haughton, 2007, p. 94). Mahon remembers Simmons as 'forever accusing me of abandoning the North, forever urging me to return to my roots' (Mahon & Kelly, 1981, p. 11). The poem has two parts; one perspective is from a flat in London, the other depicts the speaker returning to Belfast 'For the first time in years'. In the first part, the speaker implicitly rejects Belfast, 'The orators yap, and guns \ Go off in a back street'; he is initially optimistic that in cosmopolitan London 'the faith does not die… in our time these things \ Will amaze the literate children \ In their non-sectarian schools… the dark places be \ Ablaze with love and poetry \ When the power of good prevails'. However, the last stanza undermines and ridicules such hopes for positive change when the speaker reflects on his own identity:

> What middle-class shits we are
> To image for one second
> That our privileged ideals
> Are divine wisdom, and the dim
> Forms that kneel at noon
> In the city not ourselves. (Mahon, 2004, p. 58)

Haughton (2007) posits that the kneeling figures are likely to be Catholics praying the midday angelus: 'If so, it is an attempt to unthink the profoundly sectarian identity politics that lurks within his liberalism, collapsing the founding opposition between the privileged middle-class poets [...] the ''dim forms'' which they naturally identify themselves against but which the poem insists are also ourselves' (p. 96). The self-indictment is damning, and expresses a great sense of discord about the culture and class of the community from which both poets derive. The speaker had originally referred to themselves as 'middle-class cunts', which more intensely registers a feeling of hostility for their shared background. The second part of the poem dramatises the speaker's 'homecoming' to Belfast:

> And I step ashore in a fine rain
> To a city so changed
> By five years of war
> I scarcely recognize
> The places I grew up in,
> The faces that try to explain.
> But the hills are still the same
> Grey-blue above Belfast.
> Perhaps if I'd stayed behind
> And lived it bomb by bomb
> I might have grown up at last
> And learnt what is meant by home. (Mahon, 2004, p. 59)

Aspects of ‘community’ and ‘home’ are ‘scarcely’ recognisable by the violence that the speaker escaped. Haughton (2007) notes, ‘The meaning of ‘‘home’’ eludes him’, and comments, ‘The fact that in Belfast ‘‘home’’ is rhymed with ‘‘bomb’’, reminds us that in his hometown, the word is riven with conflict’ (p. 97). Yet the speaker eluded ‘home’ as well. A notion that he would only have learned its meaning had he ‘stayed behind’ not only suggests self-consciousness about his displacement, but also implies that leaving represented a forward progression of some kind. In the poem this sentiment is implicit, but this feeling will manifest itself more clearly in Mahon’s later poetry which is more secure about its distance and dissociation from the Northern ‘home’.

The early poetry feels itself hindered by a self-conscious and simultaneous sense of affiliation to and alienation from its Northern ‘home’. As has been made evident, the anxiety has much to do with reservations about the Protestant community in which Mahon was brought up. ‘Afterlives’ characterises Belfast as ‘a den of tribal darkness’ (Hufstader, 1999, p. 118); the Northern Protestant community is implied to be the ‘lost tribe’ at the end of ‘Nostalgias’. The poem correlates a number of made objects yearning for origins to a people inconsequentially appealing to their God:

> The chair squeaks in a high wind,
> Rain falls from its branches;
> The kettle yearns for the mountain,
> The soap for the sea.
> In a tiny stone church
> On a desolate headland
> A lost tribe is singing ‘Abide with Me’. (Mahon, 2004, p. 75)

Elmer Kennedy-Andrews (2008) comments that ‘the poet speaks [...] out of the Protestant sense of loss and abandonment’ (p. 22). Yet Mahon is more so writing about rather than writing from that sense. Kathleen Shields (1994) asks, ‘But does the narrator not want to join his people also?’ (p. 72). It does not appear so; the prospect of God abiding with the lost tribe seems as unlikely as the prospect of the objects returning to their origins. The tribe may be seen to exhibit a determinedness characteristic of Ulster Protestants, but it is strongly suggested that their song is ineffectual and futile. A notion of the Northern Protestant community as a ‘lost tribe’ does not define ‘tribe’ in the traditional Irish sense, but in a sense of British Israelism which ‘maintains the theory that the British people are the descendants of the Ten Northern Tribes of Israel, commonly referred to as the Lost Ten Tribes’ (Dimont, 1933, p. 3). British Israelism is a ‘significant strand’ within a ‘multitude of small Protestant denominations in Ulster whose theology can be classified as ‘‘fundamentalist’’’ (Buckley, 1991, p. 265). Few terms could be less applicable to a poet like Mahon.

‘Ecclesiastes’ is critical of another fundamentalist line of thinking prevalent in the North, evangelical Calvinism of the Presbyterian sect.

> God, you could grow to love it, God-fearing, God-
> chosen purist little puritan that,
> for all your wiles and smiles, you are (the
> dank churches, the empty streets,
> the shipyard silence, the tied-up swings) and
> shelter your cold heart from the heat
> of the world, from woman-inquisition, from the
> bright eyes of children. (Mahon, 2004, p. 35)

The poem perceives a lack of vitality and function in this Protestant tradition. Like the Dutch courtyard in De Hooch's painting, the ‘purist little puritan’ is deprived of the sensual. The speaker's ironic tone mocks, what Gerald Dawe (1985) terms, ‘Protestant Ulster's deadly pieties’ (p. 228):

> Yes, you could
> wear black, drink water, nourish a fierce zeal
> with locusts and wild honey, and not
> feel called upon to understand and forgive
> but only to speak with a bleak
> afflatus, and love the January rains when they
> darken the dark doors and sink hard

into the Antrim hills, the bog meadows, the heaped
graves of your fathers. (Mahon, 2004, p. 35)

Terence Brown (1975) states, 'It is a denunciation of the Northern Protestant's self-understanding and a call to him, to abandon a stance of intolerant rectitude and ridiculous isolationism which is the fruit of an assertive, black-minded self-dependence' (195). The perspective of the poem is decidedly at odds with the community to which the poem is addressed. Where 'Nostalgias' maintained an objective distance from 'a desolate headland' (Mahon, 2004, p. 75), 'Ecclesiastes' is firmly set within the Puritan world of churches, streets, hills, meadows and housing estates in which the poet was brought up; because of this the tone is unequivocally critical and subversive. Mahon's negative appraisal of the 'credulous people' is confirmed by an assertion that their 'rhetoric' promises 'nothing under the sun'.

Conclusion

The early poetry is irreconcilably disenchanted with the Northern Protestant community. It is apparent that there is a feeling of little hope for change for the better in any meaningful way. The poetry registers so many negative associations with the cultural, historical, and religious aspects of Protestantism as to make any affirmative identification with it untenable. The bourgeois lifestyle, tastes and values of the North Belfast suburbs are incongruent to those of the cosmopolitan Mahon. The poet can neither overlook nor rationalise historic violence committed by Protestants, the effects of which were still destructively being felt throughout Northern Ireland in the turbulence of the Troubles. Protestant theology is deemed delusory and oppressive, distancing Mahon further from his community, one that is often characterised by its deep religious commitment and zealotry.

This paper has shown to a greater degree the depths to which the poet's sense of discomfort with his Northern Protestant background actually reached. By critically assessing Protestantism's theological tenets and cultural aesthetics, Mahon's discordancy with his 'home place', in both a spiritual and artistic sense, can be more appreciably perceived when reading his early work. In addition, the deep level of Mahon's historical consciousness has been shown to have been particularly influenced by the actions of his Protestant forebears, definitively making the famous desire of being 'through with history' a more personal expression of rejection. These findings bring the critical consensus of Mahon's early period up to date. Future studies of Mahon's poetry of the decades that followed would benefit from taking these revelations into account. If his later work could be said to have exhibited a greater sense of assurance in terms of identity and place, especially in the Irish context of those concepts, it can only be properly understood in light of the analysis presented here.

Considering the times, Mahon's home province could not have been expected to engender a stable sense of identity or place. The disempowering effects of contemporaneous violence robbed a certain amount of agency from writers who might otherwise have explored alternative artistic routes of expression. However, for Mahon, it was also this irreparably damaged relationship to his community of origin which necessitated a search for a more agreeable sense of self in a 'home' elsewhere. Thankfully, the poet found what he would later often call 'the right place' (Mahon, 2005) in Kinsale. Critical reception to Mahon since then has proven the move to have been beneficial. It has also helped confirm him as an unreservedly 'Irish' poet. Yet it is crucial to recognise the early poetry's explorations of the implications of Northern Protestant identity, as they made apparent that Mahon's original home was one to which he could not properly be said to have properly 'belonged'.

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