

LANGUAGE AND THE TRANSCENDENT IN MODERN IRISH POETRY

By BERNARD O'DONOGHUE

SEAMUS HEANEY'S MOST RECENT volume of poems, *Seeing things*,¹ plays on the two senses of its title: having visions, or imagining things that are not there. Perhaps surprisingly, the first of these – the transcendent – is the dominant idea in the book, for example in the title-poem which extols the notion of *claritas*: visionary precision. The passage which really establishes the centrality of transcendence in the book comes from the poem 'Fosterling', and it has already been much quoted:

Me waiting until I was nearly fifty
To credit marvels. Like the tree-clock of tin cans
The tinkers made. So long for the air to brighten,
Time to be dazzled and the heart to lighten.

(*Seeing things*, p 50)

The example of a 'marvel' – the tinkers' tree-clock which Heaney had already used as the title for a shorter book, *The tree clock*,² in which 'Fosterling' was the last poem – is not a specifically religious one, but that does not affect the impulse involved. The sense of the 'me' at the start of the quoted passage is 'me of all people': the puzzle is that crediting marvels took so long for the Catholic-Christian Heaney who grew up in the world of marvels and apparitions, a world where the numinous was always immanent, ready to appear.

This spirituality which is a matter of impulse, rather than being founded on an explicit system of dogma, is nothing new in poetry, Irish or otherwise. T. S. Eliot's *Four quartets*, which are arguably the greatest English religious poems of the century, are concerned with the numinous impulse rather than with an achieved set of beliefs. They end with the great passage drawing on the late medieval mystic Julian of Norwich:

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And all shall be well and
 All manner of thing shall be well
 When the tongues of flame are in-folded
 Into the crowned knot of fire
 And the fire and the rose are one.³

The Dantesque imagery of the last three lines is obviously deeply embedded in the Christian tradition; nevertheless, the meaning of even these lines – and they are the nearest the *Quartets* come to Christian explicitness – is more a general statement of the spiritual urge towards faith than an exclusive dogmatic pronouncement, whatever the source of its imagery.

This redefinition of the religious, extending its scope beyond the confines of a particular system of belief, had been an important theme in Eliot's thought from the first. What he admired in James Joyce was what Eliot called the 'mythic imagination': the capacity to see the history of thought and literature as a recurrent set of patterns so that, for example, the experience of a twentieth-century Jewish Dubliner can be seen in the same cultural perspective as Homer's Odysseus in *Ulysses*. One consequence of this viewpoint was the way in which Christian models of reality corresponded to contemporary secular-humanist philosophies. Hence we find world-views which combine Marxism with Christianity and the Christian existentialism of Kierkegaard.

This is very different from the reaction to what was seen as the end of the era of faith in the nineteenth century, prompting such poems as Coleridge's 'Dejection ode', which Matthew Arnold called 'a plangent threnody for a lost wholeness and peace', or Arnold's own 'Dover Beach' with its famous elegiac reflection:

The Sea of Faith
 Was once, too, at the full.

In the early part of this century some Christian thinking evolved in such a way as to address the same problems as the secular philosophies of the earlier century, which had been thought to have superseded Christianity. More significantly, it has become clear that these new post-faith philosophies are addressing the same existential problems as religions address. An obvious case is Heidegger's philosophy of being, which describes humankind's 'thrownness' on to an unsupportive universe in terms similar to those of the Christian Pascal in the eighteenth century: those infinite spaces which terrify us, rather than providing reassurance. Similarly, it has been observed more than once that the 'absent signifier',

proposed by the literary philosopher Derrida as an explanation for contingent things which cannot be the explanation of their own being, performs a function strikingly similar to Aquinas' argument for the existence of God based on contingency.

This concern shared amongst believers and unbelievers is an essential backdrop to the understanding of any serious modern poet. What I am concerned with here is the ways in which this arises as an issue for the Irish poet in particular. Heaney's tree-clock, as a secular response to the religious impulse, is interestingly balanced in this mixed world. There is a further important consideration: given the moral imperative for the responsible Irish writer in the era of the current Troubles not to align too expressly with either of the two Christian religious traditions, which have been redefined in combative political terms, it is very useful to have a serious ethical area which does not require an explicit dogmatic alignment. This need is met by the general, rather than the particular, world of the spiritual or numinous.

But the dilemma is that, despite this urge away from particular dogmatism, the Irish writer, in representing a culture in which the religious has been so pervasive, can hardly be expected to avoid the terminology of the religious. This problem was addressed interestingly, if not entirely satisfactorily, by John F. Deane in the introduction to his valuable anthology *Irish poetry of faith and doubt: the cold heaven*.⁴ Deane says that his material is

poetry that has sprung from a reaction to religious beliefs, that is reaction in terms of acceptance, rejection or suspicion of the existence of a higher, unseen controlling power known as 'God'. I have excluded poetry that is merely devotional, that is a response in terms of service or homage to an already accepted God . . . Included is poetry that rejects the existence of God, as this, too, is a reaction. But most important . . . are the poems that spring from hesitation, doubt and 'vacillation', as these appear to be the most common themes over the last hundred years. (p 11)

I have quoted this definitive passage at some length because I think it sorts out the issues to some extent. When I said that Deane does not solve the anthology's problems entirely satisfactorily (and that, of course, would be a lot to ask), my reservation is that I think this passage, and the anthology as a whole, slants the discussion too much towards the *terminology* of religion (reactions to the word 'God') rather than its *spirit*. Of course the terminology is important too; but it is striking that Deane uses the term 'reaction' three times (and the synonym 'response' once) in

this passage. He confines discussion to the terminology of the religious and reactions to it rather than to the feeling of the religious itself.

This distinction can be clarified by reference to a gifted Northern Irish poet not included by Deane, Tom Paulin, who often draws on the terminology of religion despite being a socialist humanist with a marked political model of the world and no active Christian affiliation:

O Absalom, Absalom, my son,
an hour is too long, there are too many people.
(‘Inishkeel parish church’)⁵

This poem, from Paulin’s first collection, *A state of justice*, ends with a beautiful use of the traditional image of transcendence, the sea:

There was an enormous sight of the sea,
A silent water beyond society.

Paulin’s work is emphatically political, but the language of his poetry has continued to draw on religious resources. His most recent book *Walking a line* has a poem called ‘Matins’ with a church bell ringing through it, and ‘A Belfast *Bildungsroman*’ with the Pentecostal epigraph: ‘And suddenly there came a sound from heaven as of a rushing mighty wind and it filled all the house where they were sitting’.⁶ In a different spirit, the occasional anti-Christian sardonicism of another compassionate humanist poet, Paul Durcan, falls back on the terminology of religion in poems such as ‘The seminary’ and squibs such as ‘Irish hierarchy bans colour photography’.

Deane’s title, however, is very well chosen: faith and doubt are complementary and vacillation is at the centre of the issue. Here, as pretty well everywhere in twentieth-century Irish poetry, the dominant influence is Yeats, and his pronouncements clarify the matter more than anyone else’s. He insists on the centrality of the religious impulse, describing himself as someone of spiritual inclination who has been robbed of his Christian inheritance by the rationalism of Darwin and Huxley. Throughout his life Yeats, in common with many of his contemporaries, attempted to supply this privation by adapting and mixing various creeds, describing the occult as one of the two great passions of his life. From his activity with the theosophy of Madame Blavatsky in the 1890s, to Irish fairy lore in the Sligo which he always felt was his real home, to the spiritualist revelations of his wife’s automatic writing, Yeats was absorbed by matters of belief. Out of this complex and in reaction to the same sense as Eliot’s ‘mythic imagination’, he

wrote his strange, eclectic book, *A vision*, which attempted to pull all the elements together into a single, privately constructed philosophy. At the end of his life, he summarized the impulse in one of his greatest synoptic statements. When asked whether he really *believed* the tenets of this philosophy, he replied: 'Man can embody truth but he cannot know it'.

It is probably not putting it too strongly to say that this statement is the context in which all non-dogmatic discussion of religious issues by Irish poets is to be seen. Deane recognizes this in two ways: firstly, his sub-title is the title of one of Yeats' great poems, 'The cold heaven'. (Deane includes it in the anthology though its religious application is not that obvious.) Secondly, the prominence he gives to the idea of 'vacillation' in the passage quoted above is surely owed to Yeats' mystical poem of that name, which Deane includes in the anthology. It includes a marvellous passage of secular mysticism:

My fiftieth year had come and gone,
I sat, a solitary man,
In a crowded London shop,
An open book and empty cup
On the marble table-top.

While on the shop and street I gazed
My body of a sudden blazed;
And twenty minutes more or less
It seemed, so great my happiness,
That I was blessed and could bless.⁷

It would be hard to imagine a more exact poetic expression of the collaboration of the secular (the shop and the street) with the spiritual impulse (blessing, and the Dantesque image of blazing again).

The passage is also immensely influential; most obviously we recall that Heaney was 'nearly fifty' when he began 'to credit marvels': a reference, no doubt, to the first line here. Heaney, like Yeats, has always considered himself to be by nature of a spiritual disposition (though by no means 'pope-holy', to use a medieval term). The poem which most extensively represents the religious in him is the long sequence 'Station Island' in the collection of that name.⁸ This sequence of twelve longish poems describes a fictional journey by the poet through the purgatory of Irish tradition, 'St Patrick's Purgatory' on Lough Derg in Co. Donegal. From the 'hurry of bell-notes' with which the first poem opens to the conclusion in which the shade of James Joyce urges Heaney to strike out for artistic freedom rather than reverting to his 'peasant pilgrimage', the poem is urgently concerned with duty and repentance. The terms in

which Joyce's advice is given (more accurately, of course, invented by Heaney for Joyce) are well known:

You lose more of yourself than you redeem
doing the decent thing. Keep at a tangent.
(p 93)

The language of this does not need labouring in the context of this essay: the Christian verb 'redeem', or the ethical word 'decent' derived from the dutiful Latin verb *deceat*. And Heaney in his later writings is at least vacillating in the face of Joyce's advice. By the time of *Seeing things*, as we have seen, he is ready to celebrate the spiritual again, in the seeing of marvels.

Heaney's nature as a poet of duty and inwardness is not in question. Despite the pull of the public world for a Northern Irish poet of his era, he tells us himself in a television interview with Melvyn Bragg that his 'temperament is not Brechtian'. He is more inclined to the artistic-spiritual than to the political, even if he is not afraid to address that too when the occasion demands. What is less generally recognized, I think, is how steeped in the language of the Christian spiritual tradition is the poetry of the most admired Northern Irish poet of the semi-generation immediately following Heaney's, Paul Muldoon. Muldoon is a cryptic, elusive, witty writer who has occasionally been accused of ducking major issues by retreating into a world of metaphors and poetic analogies. He expresses the charge against himself in 'Lunch with Pancho Villa', the first poem in his book *Mules*:

'Look, son. Just look around you.
People are getting themselves killed
Left, right and centre
While you do what? Write rondeaux? . . .
You want to get down to something true . . .
'When are you going to tell the truth?'
For there's no such book, so far as I know,
As *How it Happened Here*,
Though there may be. There may.'⁹

Although the argument here is about whether or not political involvement is a moral obligation, it is couched in decidedly moral terms: 'truth', and the transcendental question of whether such books as *How it Happened Here* exist or not, a question which becomes philosophical by being left open. This discussion, for all its lightness, fits into the existentialist world of uncertainty.

Later major poems by Muldoon draw on Christian-spiritual structures in a much more overt way. This is especially the case in the two long poems with which the next two volumes of Muldoon end, 'Immram' from *Why Brownlee left* (1980), and 'The more a man has the more a man wants' from *Quoof* (1983). The first of these uses the medieval Irish *immram* form, the saint's *navigatio*, appropriate for Muldoon because one of the Irish medieval prototypes was the *Immram Maelduin* which might be translated as 'Muldoon's pilgrimage'. This modern version of the pilgrimage is decidedly secularized, consisting of a zany, drug-clouded 300-line mini-epic in the style of Raymond Chandler, involving the protagonist's search for an Irish-American father. (It has often been noted – by the critic Edna Longley, for example – that twentieth-century male Irish poets are much preoccupied with fathers: a preoccupation that might easily be translated into a sense of alienation from a traditionally paternalistic God. But that is too far from the subject here.) Again, Muldoon, like Paulin, draws on religious terminology for his titles, if decreasingly so through his career: 'Vespers', 'Good Friday, 1971. Driving westward' (alluding to John Donne), 'Behold the Lamb', 'Lives of the Saints', 'Our Lady of Ardboe', 'Armageddon, Armageddon', 'The Bishop', 'Palm Sunday', 'Holy Thursday'.

The second of the long Muldoon poems I mentioned, 'The more a man has the more a man wants', is another loose, extensive narrative, but this time with much more overt and grimmer bearing on Northern Irish politics. This poem contains some slight Catholic references, predictable in its context (the 'Child of Prague', 'Beatrice', 'Someone on their way to early Mass'); but much more significant in this volume, *Quoof*, of which this discovery poem is the climax, is the eclectic, Yeatsian religious impulse, drawing mostly on Native American shamanist myths, one of which provides the volume's epigraph. Muldoon's work, whose stark and disturbing wit has led to its being called 'postmodernist', has a strangely ethical basis. Often this occurs in a perverse form; as in his poem 'Trance', the pseudo-spiritual references in his poetry are often ostensibly accounted for by drugs. The volume *Quoof* begins with 'Gathering mushrooms', a poem which balances the biographical fact that Muldoon's father *was* a mushroom-farmer with the book's interest in conditions of trance induced by starvation (as in the IRA hunger-strikers) or by ingesting hallucinogenic mushrooms. No less than Yeats, Muldoon wants to invoke states of mind beyond the quotidian. Yeats' route to those higher psycho-spiritual realms was the occult: theosophy or séances; Muldoon's is ostensibly through drug-induced trance. But

the spiritual objective in both cases is the same: the truth that, to use Yeats' terms again, man can embody but cannot know. I would suggest that this, rather than political evasion, is the ultimate rationale for what has been seen as Muldoon's obscurity, as it was for Yeats'.

The point I am making with Muldoon is that for any Irish poet, however allusive or whimsical, to be taken seriously, he or she must draw on the religious wells of the language and culture. Mention might have been made of a minor but respected tradition in Irish poetry which has links with existentialism and European modernism, but which uses the language of Catholic Christianity much more overtly. The principal figures in this tradition are Denis Devlin and Brian Coffey. But I want to consider finally two poets in the forefront of contemporary Irish poetry, Michael Longley and Medbh McGuckian. Longley is one of the Northern Irish poets who has most stressed the dilemma of the writer in the Troubles: discuss them in poetry and you are accused of exploitation of suffering for the poet's own ends; ignore them and you are accused of heartless, ivory-tower indifference. Longley's solution has often been to give evidence of the gravity and caution with which political suffering must be taken by using hieratic language. In one of his finest poems, 'The linen workers', which is a lament for ten linen workers massacred as they drove home from work, Longley strangely begins:

Christ's teeth ascended with him into heaven.¹⁰

Another poem in the same series, 'Wreaths', is an elegy for a green-grocer shot in his shop. It ends:

Astrologers or three wise men
Who may shortly be setting out
For a small house up the Shankill
Or the Falls, should pause on their way
To buy gifts at Jim Gibson's shop,
Dates and chestnuts and tangerines.

(p 148)

We might note in this small masterpiece how religion, like poetry, can work to heal sectarian division (the Protestant Shankill and the Catholic Falls Road together), despite its co-option into the service of sectarianism. But more particularly here Longley illustrates how spiritual reference is used as tender of seriousness and sensitivity.

The last – and most cryptic – poet I want to discuss briefly is Medbh McGuckian, considering whether her obscurity can, like Muldoon's, be

explained in the context of developments in twentieth-century spiritual thought. Her language has usually been explored, often enlighteningly, in feminist terms (and, in a brilliant study by Clair Wills, in political terms); but there is much to be learnt by looking at her poems in the light of traditional religious language, especially given the inclination since Yeats to extend the range of belief into areas beyond what is statable in dogmatic terms. I am selecting a few poems from McGuckian's book *Venus and the rain*¹¹ almost at random. A poem called 'Underground' begins with lines which I find hauntingly evocative in eschatological terms:

The death-linen was a present from my mother-in-law.
I have packed it in a trunk which is already too full.

(p 51)

The last poem in the book, 'Sabbath Park', begins with lines reminiscent of the mystical passages from the great fourteenth-century visionary poem *Piers Plowman*:

My absolute address is Sabbath Park,
And the traditional light blue of its
Paradise Lost room, which I took to be
My mother. Sometimes in the evenings
I would ask, a step not easily taken,
Whether the bird learns to build its nest
Like that – a perfect nest from such
Arthritic wood.

(p 54)

Well before its conclusion –

the sewn

Lilies near the ground growing downward

– the poem has established its transcendent concerns.

Death-linen, light blue and lilies all link inseparably with the Christian iconographic tradition. This is not to say that McGuckian's poetry is not to be read also in personal terms: perhaps more naturally so. The point I want to make, as with Muldoon and Longley, is that this writing achieves its *gravitas* by locating itself within the traditions of religious language and themes.

In the end, then, the distinction I made at the outset here between the terminology and the spirit of the spiritual is not sustainable. Language is

never value-free; it brings with it traces of the tradition to which it belongs. This recalls distantly the old scholastic argument about whether the use of the term 'God' must presuppose God's existence. The greatest existentialist Irish writer, Samuel Beckett, alludes to this when one of the characters in his highly philosophical, absurdist play, *Endgame*, observes of God with bitter disappointment: 'the bastard! he doesn't exist!' Irish poets throughout this century have not only gratefully drawn on the traditional language of religious discussion; they have relied on it to express a general sense of the numinous which the post-Enlightenment nineteenth-century poets had despaired of feeling again. It is a fact which has been surprisingly little noted that the three great poetic influences from the early modernist period in English – Hopkins, Yeats and Eliot – were all of a strongly spiritual disposition. Hopkins' 'The world is charged with the grandeur of God'¹² has remained as true of poetic language as it is of the world. The tinkers' tree-clock of Heaney's poem is only marvellous because it is perceived as such; and the language of Irish poetry since Yeats is always predisposed to meet the transcendent half-way.

NOTES

¹ Seamus Heaney, *Seeing things* (London: Faber and Faber, 1991).

² Seamus Heaney, *The tree clock* (Belfast: The Linen Hall Library, 1990).

³ T. S. Eliot, *Little Gidding*, closing lines, in *Collected poems 1909–1962* (London: Faber and Faber, 1963), p 223.

⁴ John F. Deane (ed), *Irish poetry of faith and doubt: the cold heaven* (Dublin: Wolfhound Press, 1990).

⁵ Tom Paulin, *A state of justice* (London: Faber and Faber, 1977), p 15.

⁶ Tom Paulin, *Walking a line* (London: Faber and Faber, 1994), p 80. Quotation from Acts 2:2.

⁷ W. B. Yeats, *Collected poems* (London: Macmillan, 1950), pp 283–4.

⁸ Seamus Heaney, *Station Island* (London: Faber and Faber, 1984).

⁹ Paul Muldoon, *Mules* (London: Faber and Faber 1977), pp 11–13.

¹⁰ Michael Longley, *Poems 1963–1983* (Edinburgh: The Salamander Press; Dublin: The Gallery Press, 1985), p 149.

¹¹ Medbh McGuckian, *Venus and the rain* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984).

¹² N. H. Mackenzie (ed), *The poetical works of Gerard Manley Hopkins* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), 'God's grandeur', p 139.