Dispassionate Syntax: Irish Poetry at the End of Yeats's Century

Bernard O'Donoghue
Wadham College, Oxford

Abstract
Because the Irish literary revival of the late nineteenth century, in which Yeats was the principal poetic voice, was a product of Romanticism, Yeats's conception of the ideal poetic language—what he called "passionate syntax" (1961, 521–22)—conformed to a Romantic ideal. However, Yeats's twentieth-century Irish successors became increasingly uneasy with the subjectivism that this conception of language implies, especially when the subject-matter of poetry was public as with the Northern Irish poets of the last third of the century. The more serious the subject, the more poets felt constrained to return to a more neutral and standard language to express it: a movement away from the abnormal or what Derek Attridge (1988) calls "peculiar language". This essay considers some of the linguistic strategies adopted by various Irish poets to avoid the implication of irresponsibility that 'passionate' language might carry. In the end though, it is suggested that the dispassionate, 'correct' language which was adopted becomes displaced in turn with a tendency to revert to more personal and idiolectal linguistic voices. That is, writers can be shown both moving towards a standardizing norm amd then attempting to escape its constrictions again.

In his pursuit of the ideal poetic language which he said must coincide with "passionate, normal speech", Yeats used the strange term "passionate syntax" a number of times in his late writings, to characterize the excitement of the way language is used structurally in his later poetry. What was required was "a passionate syntax for passionate subject-matter" (Yeats 1961, 521–22). One of the implications of this is that the grammar of poetry can be bent out of shape by the force of feeling—the passion—that it is called upon to express. Yeats was greatly excited by this idea: that the force of emotion could distort the grammar of language (in late poems such as "High Talk", for example, but in fact throughout his writing life). Of course this notion is not unique with Yeats, nor indeed with Irish writers; it is commonly found in the pronouncements of nineteenth-century Romantic commentators such as Coleridge who says of the variation of syllable-counts in the four-stress lines of his poem "Christabel" (they vary from seven to twelve) that "this occasional variation in number of syllables is not introduced wantonly, or for the mere ends of convenience, but in

correspondence with some transition in the nature of the imagery or passion" (Coleridge 1969, 215): the word 'passion' again.

The trouble with this claim to be writing a language that is made irregular by passion—it is also, of course, Wordsworth's "spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings" (Wordsworth and Coleridge 1996, 246) and Keats's "holiness of the Heart's emotions and truth of Imagination" (Keats 1978, 37)—is that it is, so to speak, easily faked. Of course all writing is faking, and all poets are artificers who are making a dubious claim to some kind of naturalness. Notoriously and stunningly, Conor Cruise O'Brien argued that Yeats's "passion" was always well in the control of what O'Brien calls his "cunning"; in his epoch-making essay "Passion and Cunning: the Politics of W.B.Yeats", O'Brien argues that Yeats always knew what he was up to, in pursuit of his great overarching enterprise of becoming "a great poet". According to this argument, if what the poet needs is passion and perverted syntax is necessary to imply it, then perverted the syntax must be, to meet the requirement of passion. This idea does not originate with Romanticism of course, any more than it does with Yeats. It is present in all rhetorical handbooks and in their tradition: for example the early thirteenth-century love-theorist Andreas Capellanus in *De Arte Honeste Amandi (The Art of Honourable Loving)*, advising lovers how to press their suit in order to win the beloved, instructs that at a certain point, you should become confused and blush and forget what you are going to say under the influence of your emotion.

A reservation about O'Brien's accusation against Yeats is that it doesn't give the poet enough credit for establishing the poles of this argument himself, in poems such as "The Choice". The major question—and the one I want to bear in mind in looking at Yeats's successors and followers—is *when* the poet wants to claim passion, and when not. Certainly it is easy to give examples of Yeats apparently using language passionately and claiming that the language is bending under the impact of the passion. It is easier to find examples in him than in most poets: a measure of his own constant rhetorical presence in the poetry. In "The Tower" he uses the stanza-break to suggest such emotional interruption:

> Hanrahan rose in frenzy there
> And followed up those baying creatures towards—
>
> O towards I have forgotten what—enough! (Yeats 1990, 242)

Since Donald Davie's great book on the syntax of poetry, *Articulate Energy*, there has been a good deal of interest in such syntactic shifts, particularly at line-endings; of course Davie's book in general was a response to the way writers such as Yeats and T. E. Hulme used and discussed syntax as a poetic device. A more recent discussion of these effects in Yeats is Joseph Adams's

brilliant book *Yeats and the Masks of Syntax* (1984); what Adams means by 'mask of syntax' is precisely this kind of shift of meaning through syntax. A famous instance is the cunningly couched pseudo-question at the end of "The Second Coming": "But now I know ... What rough beast slouches towards Bethlehem to be born?" (Yeats 1990, 235). Question-mark. Well, does he know or doesn't he? Yeats manages to imply both at once. Notoriously, Yeats extended this kind of double practice greatly in the urgent late poems, as in the idiomatic oddness of "High Talk" where "what if" is used in place of "what does it matter if", and so on. What Yeats is doing is to draw attention to the radically subversive themes of his modernist late poetry by deregulating his syntax. It is an implicit reversion to the complexities of Shakespearean, pre-neoclassicising syntax, according to which, for example, the mental confusion of Othello or Macbeth can be betrayed by their own language. This again keeps the matter within the world of the Romantic poets since it was they—especially Keats with his verbless sentences and inexact usages—who harked back to Shakespeare and the pre-regulation freedoms of Elizabethan syntax.

I don't want to get embroiled in extended renewed discussion of this carefully controlled rhetoric in Yeats. What I want to carry forward is the general point that Yeats used syntactic irregularity to connote passion. And what I want to suggest about his followers is that they tended initially to take on this general practice of using irregular forms (the kind of thing that Derek Attridge (1988) calls "peculiar language") to express heightened emotion, as in the quotation from Coleridge above. Yeats established the practice as a norm in Irish poetry in English, so that successor-poets, such as MacNeice, Heaney and Paulin, make great play with colloquialism, dialect usage and syntactic truncation. Progressively though, for various reasons that I will go into, Irish poets have been inclined to abandon the practice. At the risk of overgeneralizing, "peculiar language" and "passionate syntax" have been judged by most writers appropriate for expression of the private realm—the Romantic's home territory perhaps—but not the public. To put it crudely, some things are too important for their concentration to be dissipated by the self-reflexive attention-seeking of rhetorical game-playing. This distinction indeed is already partly evident in Yeats himself; the disruptions tend to occur in poems about the poetic enterprise such as "The Tower" and "High Talk" ("The Second Coming" is a complex case, but even there Yeats's view of history could be said to be a series of projections from private experience), rather than in poems of public comment such as "Easter 1916" or "Meditations in time of Civil War" which use a more standard, public language.

To explore this further, I want to look at a number of effects in a follower of Yeats who greatly reveres the master and studies his practice, Seamus Heaney. He clearly believes in (and has often declared) the idea of a language appropriate for (and 'adequate to') the particular occasion. This

is by no means only a matter of abjuring peculiar or colloquial language on solemn occasions; it is also the corollary: the adoption of a personal language for a personal occasion (as by Yeats in his poems about his own poetics). Heaney argues this second case very winningly in his essay "John Clare's Prog" in *The Redress of Poetry* (1995, 63ff). Heaney praises Clare for using the dialect word 'prog' in his mouse poem:

> I found a ball of grass among the hay
> And proged it as I passed and went away.

Heaney says: "Clare progged the ball of grass. With equal metrical ease and lexical efficiency, he could have poked it, or with some slight readjustment of the pentameter, he could have prodded it" (Heaney 1995, 66). Heaney admires Clare for sticking to his personal language, and regrets his own failure to keep faith with the colloquial usage with which his famous early poem "Follower" from *Death of a Naturalist* (1966), originally began:

> My father wrought with a horse-plough.

This was changed in the published version to the standard English

> My father worked with a horse-plough, (Heaney 1998)

thereby (Heaney says with relentless self-castigation) suppressing "the one touch of individuality that had appeared in the first version" (Heaney 1995, 63). As it happens there is a good reason for avoiding the term "wrought" which would be intelligible in its dialect sense only to users of that dialect; Heaney's wider readership, in a volume published in London by Faber, might read it as a piece of archaic poetic diction: the last thing that a poem as locally rooted as "Follower" would want. But Heaney is not concerned to present a defence in the essay.

Given Heaney's regret at losing the touch of local individuality here, it is striking to find an instance of his doing the exact opposite of what he preaches here in a later case of his own poetic practice. In "The Strand at Lough Beg", one of the great elegies from *Field Work* (1979)—poems universally agreed to be amongst Heaney's most assured achievements and thus least in need of revision—Heaney evokes the locality of Colum McCartney:

> There you used hear guns fired behind the house
> Long before rising-time. (1979, 17)

In the large selected volume *Opened Ground* (1998), the syntax of the first line here is standardized to:

There you once heard guns fired behind the house. (1998, 152)

Why has Heaney made this change which loses the warmth of the lyrical habitual-past of "used hear" in the rather more conventional "once heard"? Is this not a loss of individuality, like the substitution of "worked" for "wrought"? Heaney's remarks about Clare's use of "progged" makes it clear that he knows what is involved here; besides, it seems not to be simply a doctrinaire correction of a non-standard usage since the very title of the McCartney poem keeps a dialect usage: the Irishism "strand" for 'seashore', which could have been standardized to 'shore' on metrical and lexical grounds at least as easily as Clare's 'prog' to 'poke' or 'prod'.

I want to suggest two linked reasons for this change by Heaney: one particular and one with more general application. At the end of the McCartney elegy, Heaney imagines himself blessing his dead cousin "with rushes that shoot green again", borrowing the terms of Dante's *Purgatorio* 1, 135–6. But in a later poem, "Station Island VIII", the poet represents himself as meeting McCartney in the Dantesque afterlife of Lough Beg and being rebuked by him

> for the way you whitewashed ugliness and drew
> the lovely blinds of the *Purgatorio*
> and saccharined my death with morning dew. (Heaney 1998, 261)

Although we mustn't forget that this is a fiction and is therefore really another *self*-accusation, what the charge amounts to is sentimentalization. The colloquially irregular syntax in "you used hear" might be felt to be an instance of sentimental appropriation. The second reason for this change to the standard idiom relates to my more general contention here: that the relatively personal indulgence of the local usage might be thought inappropriate to the weight of the wider political context of sectarian killing in 1970s Northern Ireland. It is a personal context being rewritten as a public one, more appropriate to panegyric. The change in *Opened Ground* is a response to the demand by McCartney in *Station Island* (1984) for the dignity of a formal language appropriate to his public status as a political victim of a sectarian killing.

This tendency of the colloquial in syntax (even more so, I think, than in vocabulary) to be confined to personal rather than public contexts is well evidenced in Heaney's practice. I will give just two more examples, each from clearly defined private events. In "Glanmore Sonnets IX" in *Field Work*, the poet's wife is shown recoiling in horror at the sight of a black rat swaying on a briar and urging "Go you out to it". And in an equally close domestic context amongst the great elegies of the sonnet-sequence for his mother in *The Haw Lantern* (1987), in another much-loved Heaney poem the

poet's mother says "with more challenge than pride", "you know all them things" ("Clearances IV"; Heaney 1998, 310). That poem ends, significantly for the present discussion, with the poet abandoning standard usage in favour of "Naw" and "Aye", recognizing this domestic world as one where colloquial language is appropriate: indeed dominant.

What I am primarily concerned with though is the complementary case noted first: where the intimacy or noticeability of colloquial language is thought inappropriate for certain contexts. Drawing on another Romantic ideal—Wordsworth's "emotion recollected in tranquillity" (Wordsworth and Coleridge 1996, 266)—Yeats also declares that passion has to be balanced against its opposing principle. While claiming in his late poems, implicitly as well as explicitly, that passion translates into a fragmentary, 'modernist' syntax, he also cautions that emotion in turning into art must be packed in "ancient salt": subjected to formal control. Since both propositions are made on consecutive pages in the same essay, "A General Introduction for my Work" (Yeats 1961, 521 and 522), it is a typical example of the way Yeats reserves the right to say opposing things at once: "the converse of this is also true", as he puts it triumphantly. His ambition in "The Fisherman", we must always remember, was to write for that idealised figure a poem "cold and passionate as the dawn" (Yeats 1990, 198). Passionate syntax, after all, is a doubtful matter; the everyday ways language breaks down under the force of emotion (for example, when we lose our tempers) is hardly a model for poetry. The idea of passionate syntax, then, is an attractive rhetorical sophistry—like, we may be tempted to add, Yeats's contemporaraneous 'tragic gaiety' (see "Lapis Lazuli" in Yeats 1990, 341–42).

I want to turn next to another insightful poet-critic of a half-generation later than Heaney, and again starting with a discussion of John Clare. Tom Paulin, in his essay "John Clare in Babylon", also considers Clare's position in relation to standard language. Paulin begins, as he means to go on, trenchantly, saying: "John Clare wrote before the long ice age of standard British English clamped down on the living language and began to break its local and vernacular energies" (Paulin 1992, 47). Like Heaney, Paulin goes on to the question of anti-standardizing individuality, claiming that "from Tennyson to the poets of the Movement and beyond we can see how a dead official language and a centralizing conformity have worked to obliterate individual speech communities". (We might note in passing the Yeatsian adoption of Tennyson as the universal whipping-boy.) Paulin goes on to argue a case different from what I am proposing here, suggesting that what distinguishes Clare's language is not that it is "the timeless product of purely personal experience" but that it "is always part of a social struggle, entangled with and pitched against Official Standard" (48). Paulin goes on to list the dialect words attacked by a contemporary reviewer of Clare's *Shepherd's Calendar*: "crizzling" – "sliveth" – "whinneys" – "greening" – "tootles" – "croodling" – "hings" – Heaney's "progged" – "spindling" –

"siling" – "struttles" (53). He then praises the "beautifully intimate quality" of these words (the term he coins, half-mischievously, I think, knowing how little his adversary critics like this root-creating tendency in him, is "soodling"), and nowadays I think most of us would find sympathetic his praise of this intimate power: at least its quality as 'normal speech', whether passionate or not.

But, in proposing Clare as a kind of, in Thomas Gray's words, "village Hampden ... with dauntless breast" (Gray in Londsdale 1991, 356) pitching against an Official Standard, Paulin ignores the extent to which Clare's practice is a *Romantic* ideal. Can this "beautifully intimate" alternative language of Clare's really offer a wider *social* language, as an alternative to the official standard, as Paulin claims? Does it offer a plausible political alternative? In claiming that it does Paulin is strengthening the claims of irregular language, as one to be taken seriously and to be more than expressive. It is striking that from early in his career Paulin has placed himself in the same position as Clare, writing a fragmentary and dialectal language which has tended to provoke the same kind of critical indignation as Clare's did. He often draws on syntactic irregularity ("real good", "a brave long while"), as well as other dialectal markers: phonetic ("yella") and—most commonly—lexical ("sheugh", "jaggy" and so on). And, unlike his predecessors, Paulin uses this language in public contexts too. In one of his most ambitious long political poems, "The Caravans on Luneberg Heath" which ends *Fivemiletown* (1987), delineating a Protestant history for contemporary Northern Ireland extending back to the Thirty Years' War of the seventeenth century, he creates a rich alternative language: "a sizzly shifting block of midges"; "Simon you're the It that isn't there".

I have spent some time on Paulin here precisely because he is what seems to me an unusual case: the poet who does use local language in public contexts. Most writers seem to have felt that public language should not be invaded by the passion implied by private terminology. We can see why; in Northern Ireland the loudest public voices have not been the most persuasive. Accordingly some Northern Irish writers—and I think they too can be seen as the broad heritage of Yeats—have avoided dialectal intimacy altogether: Mahon, Longley and McGuckian, for example. The language of Mahon and Longley in particular could be called broadly Classical, as distinct from Romantic. Even in contexts that might be expected to require alternative language, Longley sticks strictly to standard usage. In his beautiful poem "On Hearing Irish Spoken", Longley finds an eloquent but exclusive image for the uncomprehended language of two fishermen he overhears:

> An echo of technical terms, the one I know
> Repeating itself at desperate intervals
> Like the stepping stones of a river in spate. (Longley 1985, 160)

This urbane language holds emotion in check (in Yeats's terms, perhaps packs it in ice) in a way that serves public subjects very well. In poems such as "The Linen Workers" or "The Butchers", some of Longley's most admired political poems, there is a struggle to contain the emotion engendered by particularly horrific Northern Irish killings. But Longley's struggle is to find an adequate *image* to express the emotion; the language is left unbroken. "The Linen Workers" opens with a very extraordinary and unforgettable image:

> Christ's teeth ascended with him into heaven:
> Through a cavity in one of his molars
> The wind whistles. (Longley 1985, 149)

This is a very disturbing amalgam of a theological tenet—Christ was assumed bodily into Heaven—with a bleak cosmology, both perhaps linking riskily—the kind of success that Heaney finds 'chancy' in Patrick Kavanagh (Heaney 1984, 115–30)—with the opening MacNeicean variant on the clichéd exclamation "God's teeth"! The poem moves on to a factual description of the massacre in terms of the elegiac fragility of the ordinary:

> There fell on the road beside them spectacles,
> Wallets, small change, and a set of dentures,

before concluding strangely again:

> Before I can bury my father once again
> I must polish the spectacles, balance them
> Upon his nose, fill his pockets with money
> And into his dead mouth slip a set of teeth. (Longley 1985, 149)

The reference here is very intimate, but there is no disruption of word-forms or use of non-standard vocabulary or pronunciation. The syntax indeed could be said to be slightly anachronistic—almost, one is tempted to say, hypercorrect: more correct than the standard—in the delayed subject "spectacles" in the first quotation and the placing of the indirect object before its verb in the last line. But the effect of these two things seems stately, not disruptive: the language of panegyric rather than opinionation. It is what I mean to suggest by the phrase 'dispassionate syntax' rather than Yeats's "passionate".

The next writer I want to consider at some length is Paul Muldoon; but before him, I want to make the obvious point that there are other ways of addressing public issues apart from this "pack[ing] in ancient ice" of formal language: other ways of conveying emotion without forcing the language. A clear recourse is the political song, such as James Simmons's "Claudy"

which describes another massacre in mostly dispassionate language, held together by the formalities of metre and rhyme. Only once does it break through into raw expression of passion:

> And Christ! little Katherine Aiken is dead.

Mostly the events are left to speak for themselves. A more controversial strategy is the straightforward expression of political views in standard language (or in any language), as in MacNeice's "Autumn Journal XVI" (MacNeice 1979, 131–34) or Kinsella's "Butcher's Dozen" (Kinsella 1996). It may in each case be the only way of putting it: MacNeice's anger at what he saw as the betrayal in Irish neutrality in World War II, or Kinsella's at the whitewash of the Widgery Report. But both are moving, it might be felt, into the area of political verse-journalism rather than the more philosophical realm of the poetic: a different kind of contribution to the public debate from what has been traditionally claimed as the high-minded intervention of poetry. It is significant, for example, that both are written in standardizing verse-forms, as another variety of language thought appropriate to particular occasions and of "adequacy to the predicament". The passion is not in the syntax here; it is what Yeats called "poetry of the point of view".

The strategies adopted by Kinsella and MacNeice do raise another facet of the central discussion: how can political passion and compassion be expressed without rousing and inflaming the passions of those involved? (This is the question most famously addressed in Yeats's "The Man and the Echo".) In Muldoon we encounter a different version of dispassion: a poetry at the furthest remove from "the point of view". The language is clearly not standard in any usual way; neither is it passionately declarative on the surface, nor does it readily fall back on dialect or disrupted forms for emotional impact. Like Joyce's language, it is a free polyphony of voices. Certainly dialect—and expertly represented at that—is part of his repertoire. Occasionally he uses it to enormous emotional effect, in counterpoint with a standard language. To take a famous example, "The Fox" (Muldoon 1987) is a controlled, musing elegy on the poet's father's death. The poem reflects that, given the wet weather, his father is not so much buried as drowned in Collegelands graveyard. It is a rueful context in which the learned word "formaldehyde" occurs without strain. Then, suddenly and devastatingly, the poem ends with a dream. The poet as a child comes upon his father marking mushroom-boxes, absorbed; he tells the child to go back to bed: "It's only yon dog-fox".

This is a classic instance of the intimate use of dialect mentioned above in relation to Heaney's poems of wife and mother. But elsewhere Muldoon illustrates the complexity that arises with dialect in more public contexts, especially once again in the cautious tact that dealing with violence

requires. The great political fantasia with which his book *Quoof* (1983) ends, "The More a Man Has the More a Man Wants", concludes like this.

> 'Next of all wus the han'.' 'Be Japers.'
> 'The sodgers cordonned-off the area
> wi' what-ye-may-call-it tape.'
> 'Lunimous.' 'They foun' this hairy
> han' wi' a drowneded man's grip
> on a lunimous stone no bigger than a...'
>
> 'Huh.'

Local syntax ("next of all", "drowneded" and so on) is part of this Dickensian mix, in collaboration with phonetic indicators ("sodgers", "han'", the metathesis of "lunimous") and other well-observed idiomatic features, like "what-ye-may-call-it" and the learned term which has gone into local usage "cordonned-off". It is hopelessly ambitious to attempt to account for Muldoon's very various practice in a single adjective; but one word which might be offered to start with is 'cool'. It can't really be called dispassionate (or packed in ice) because the events noted in this poem are often horrific and bloody; it is the writing of a poet who can express concern for the fate of your pudding in the course of a bomb-scare and will take care to describe it adequately ("A Trifle"). The passion in the long poem seems to find its own route through compassion; but it is done with a terrifying coolness of description. A local councillor is blown-up when a car park ramp upsets the "delicate balance/of a mercury-tilt/boobytrap":

> Once they collect his smithereens
> he doesn't quite add up.
> They're shy of a foot, and a calf
> which stems
> from his left shoe like a severely
> pruned-back shrub.

In passing we might note that this is pretty well as complicated a mix of register as the dialect lines I've just quoted: the MacNeicean play of cliché in "add up" and "shy of a foot"; on this occasion, as it happens, there is also a Yeatsian double-structure, a 'mask of syntax', reminiscent of the question at the end of "The Second Coming". Strictly they are not "shy of" the calf which sticks out of the left shoe and is therefore visibly present ("shy of" presumably means "short of").

But I hope the crucial centrality of this coolness for my main theme is clear; the cheerful impercipience of this language is at the furthest possible remove from the claim that the horror of the event forces the language out of

shape. The horror does not seem to have registered with that voice at all. Just as the classical post-Yeatsian poets keep to a standard language, rejecting the implications of excitement or exhilaration in the "passion" of syntax on grounds of decorum, similarly there is no audible passion here, far from decorum as it is. It is exactly the opposite; the horror of the event stands out in terrible relief against the moral neutrality of this faux-naif voice. To describe it we might borrow the title of Thomas McCarthy's book *The Non-Aligned Storyteller*. I have already invoked Joyce and Dickens and MacNeice in relating Muldoon to predecessors and originary masters; but perhaps the most obvious source of this cheerfully neutral, disengaged voice in English is Chaucer: the voice that says in the Prologue to *The Canterbury Tales* that the doctor loved gold (i.e. money) especially because "gold in physic is a cordial". Muldoon takes this disengaged voice as far as it will possibly go. In that same poem of 49 sonnets and the concluding "'Huh'", he pulls in quotations from a much more formal language:

Live then forever in that lake of yours,

as well as making a very unlikely fourteen-liner out of the joking jingle: "'Just throw him a cake of sunlight soap, let him wash himself ashore'". In her brilliantly illuminating 1998 study of Muldoon, Clair Wills has shown just how far he goes in imposing formal demands on his writing, such as including recurring patterns of line-endings across widely separated poems, for instance: the extraordinary extent to which, adapting Frost's phrase, he chooses to play 'tennis with a net'.[1] This too, of course, is a form of dispassion and coolness: finding a balance between emotion and formal finish. What I am suggesting is that Muldoon, like a number of his contemporaries, chooses emphatically not to wear his heart on his sleeve or declare his case. Hence when he discusses Yeats's famous heart-searching about whether "that play of mine sen(t) out/ Certain men the English shot" (Yeats 1990, 392)—that is, whether the ringing nationalist conclusion of *Cathleen Ni Houlihan* in 1902 roused passions and set in motion at least part of the process that led to the 1916 Rising—Muldoon's Auden in "7 Middagh Street" may conclude "Certainly not" (Muldoon 1987). It is true that this is no more than to echo Auden's celebrated observation in his great elegy for Yeats "Poetry makes nothing happen" (Auden 1986, 241–43); but Muldoon in his own practice is by no means so sure about the admissability of "poetry of the point of view". In any case, he is certainly not taking the risk of adopting it.

Before going on to consider briefly Muldoon's use of the Irish language in the context of the problem of the 'passionate voice', leading on to a consideration finally of how Irish has been used by Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill (and English by her translators) as a less compromised medium for the expression of passion, I want to take stock of how the various writers fit the

argument so far. Yeats in his late poetry makes the Romantic claim to be writing a "passionate syntax", under the sheer force of emotional circumstance; this refers to his disrupted grammar but also affects other areas of "peculiar language". Though occasionally, and often to great effect, writers like MacNeice, Simmons, Kinsella and Paulin have spoken out directly in their poetry, and often in colloquial voices, for the most part writers such as Longley (and increasingly Heaney) have found the gravity of the standard language more appropriate to public pronouncement. I have suggested that this is because major public events and tragedy are too urgent and delicate to mediate them through the indulgence of a self-consciously constructed, "peculiar" language. Muldoon clearly introduces a variation on this somewhat simplistic schema. His language is decidedly shaped and worked; it is unquestionably "peculiar". And it is certainly far removed from the panegyric stateliness I said was appropriate to public language. Yet its coolness is as definite a rejection of the impassioned volubility of late Yeats as the classic panegyric tones of Mahon and Longley are. What I am suggesting is that Muldoon's practice is another way of being dispassionate in the face of events of great moment.

But there is a further factor: Wills demonstrates conclusively (and with great originality) in *Improprieties,* her study of Muldoon, Paulin and McGuckian, that the public and private worlds are unusually interlinked in him, as in the other two. As an example of the way Muldoon makes this linkage, as well as an illustration of how the Irish language figures as a way of avoiding the patently passionate in his writing—his coolness again and lowering of the public temperature—we might look briefly at the long poem "Yarrow" at the end of Muldoon's 1994 collection *The Annals of Chile*. This 150-page poem dominates the book, being preceded by a mere eleven poems: ten short pieces and the much-admired and discussed elegy "Incantata". "Incantata" begins by tenderly addressing Mary Farl Powers, the dead woman of the elegy, as "A leanbh'" (the Irish for "my child"; "my love" would be a more idiomatic translation). The half-dozen Irish references in this poem serve to increase the feeling of intimacy, in keeping with the normal state of affairs: language chosen for its abnormality within its context, whether dialectal or personal, expresses intimacy. But how does "Yarrow" and the prominent part Irish plays in that, fit into Muldoon's career, that increasingly oblique and bleak sweep through the language of Northern Irish politics? Wills quotes Muldoon's view of this poem as a painful and intimate return to the world of his childhood: to what Yeats called

> The ignominy of boyhood; the distress
> Of boyhood changing into man;
> The unfinished man and his pain
> Brought face to face with his own clumsiness.
> ("A Dialogue of Self and Soul"; Yeats 1990, 286)

It is over 30 pages into the poem before the first occurrence of "our beloved Goidelic" (a variation on Beckett's famous phrase "our own dear dead Gaelic"). That first occurrence is the word "tuathal" which the poem glosses "withershins"; it means maladroit, sinister and so on—all those 'left/gauche' words. But it also carries the word for 'north' in it, by contrast with 'deiseal', the 'right'-connoting word which links to the word for south. Muldoon has resorted to Irish to express a north-south overtone (one that, like Heaney's "wrought", will not be picked up by an English readership, like many of the Irish references in this poem); in the context of English poetry, Irish and its derivatives are dialect.

This excursus into Irish serves a limited purpose, as far as it goes here. The point—which may seem reductive to the point of absurdity, but it remains significant—is that its use is a very significant departure from the syntax and usage of standard English, in an extreme form of the way that the dialectal is. Thus, there is a great sense of release in the Muldoon versions of Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill's Irish originals in *The Astrakhan Cloak* (1992). I want to take Ní Dhomhnaill as my last case-study, in order to make some further reflections on the word (and idea) 'passion', as well as syntax. Of course the reductive point that the incorporation of Irish phrases into English sentences by Muldoon represents a very "peculiar language" in English poetry, applies even more forcibly (and, it might be thought, more absurdly) to a writer whose work is entirely in Irish, like Ní Dhomhnaill's. But it is a significant point too, since Ní Dhomhnaill's poetry is received and read to a considerable extent in the context of poetry written in English. Uniquely amongst poets who write only in Irish, Ní Dhomhnaill is considered by critics who do not know Irish at all: a curious fact which warrants a consideration of her language as a special-case departure from the norms of English.

Likewise, in Muldoon's versions of Ní Dhomhnaill (for example of one of her great political poems, "An Traein Dubh", "The Black Train"), he can play with the English syntax of his own version as well as standing at a remove from literal clarity, the remove that translation and the poem's Irish language origin provides. It would take too long to argue this conclusively in two languages, but I think that Muldoon hardens the metaphorical base of Ní Dhomhnaill's imagery. The poem takes the train to the death-camps as a metaphor for the inevitability of the movement of all of us towards death:

Níl éinne againn nach dtriallfidh
ann uair éigin.
Níl éinne beo nach bhfuil sí dó
i ndán.

In Muldoon's English, the first two lines here are omitted, replaced by a specific reference to "Dachau or Belsen", and it ends:

> There's no one for whom it's not a foregone
> conclusion. (Muldoon and Ní Dhomhnaill 1992, 30–31)

Interestingly, Ní Dhomhnaill plays with idiom and cliché in exactly the way that MacNeice and his followers (including Muldoon) have: Muldoon's "foregone conclusion" uses a cliché in favour of Ní Dhomhnaill's delicate pun: "*i ndán*" meaning 'able' or 'fated' also echoes the word '*dán*', 'poem', sounding as if it could mean 'in a poem'. Muldoon's naming of the death-camps toughens the signifier at the expense of the signified: Ní Dhomhnaill's poem is primarily about the inexorable movement towards death, taking the train to the concentration-camp as a terribly grim expression of it. Muldoon's reinforcing of the image is a characteristic mixing of the public reference in with the private. In addition, although the extreme weight of the image distracts us from the fact, attention to the image rather than what it expresses literally is a movement away from literal expression of "point of view".

My point about Ní Dhomhnaill though is that her writing in Irish escapes the anxieties set up by the Yeatsian claim that the expression of passion must be audible in the poetic voice. Her writing in Irish, as it happens, is in many ways in Romantic traditions: it is mythopoeic, extravagant, adventurous. It is also politically committed in important ways, especially in its representation of female experience. But, seen from the perspective of the modern Irish poetic tradition in English with which it is often taken, it does not need to labour its difference. The question of whether or not it is like Yeats, or reflects his views of passion, does not come to mind. It doesn't need to make a point of either its passion or dispassion. Increasingly the same is true of Irish poetry in English; at the end of the century when Irish poetry was dominated by Yeats the terms of the debate set by him are receding. But it is a recent development. The questions raised in "Man and the Echo" which kept Yeats awake, and the passion or caution with which they should be addressed, remained the crucial decisions for Irish poets in English for most of that century:

> I lie awake night after night
> And never get the answers right.
> Did that play of mine send out
> Certain men the English shot?
> Did words of mine put too great strain
> On that woman's reeling brain?
> (Yeats 1990, 392)

These lines were remarkably prophetic of the dilemmas faced by Irish poets who were again required in the last third of the century to address public events, urging caution before they threw care to the wind in expressing their passion. But, in balance with the instruction to find "passionate syntax for a passionate subject-matter", they set at once the moral and linguistic agenda for Irish poetry.

NOTES

[1] Frost famously said, "Writing free verse is like playing tennis with the net down." Address at Milton Academy, Milton, Massachusetts, 17 May 1935.

WORKS CITED

Adams, Joseph. 1984. *Yeats and the Masks of Syntax*. Basingstoke and London: Macmillan.

Attridge, Derek. 1988. *Peculiar Language: Literature as Difference from the Renaissance to James Joyce*. London: Methuen.

Auden, W. H. 1986 (1977). *The English Auden*. Ed. Edward Mendelson. London: Faber.

Coleridge, Samuel Taylor. 1969. *Colerdidge's Poetical Works*. Ed. Ernest Hartley Coleridge. London: Oxford UP.

Davie, Donald. 1958. *Articulate Energy: An Enquiry into the Syntax of English Poetry*. New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovitch.

Heaney, Seamus. 1966. *Death of a Naturalist*. London: Faber.

——. 1979. *Field Work*. London: Faber.

——. 1984 (1980). *Preoccupations: Selected Prose 1968–1978*. London: Faber.

——. 1984. *Station Island*. London: Faber.

——. 1987. *The Haw Lantern*. London: Faber.

——. 1995. *The Redress of Poetry: Oxford Lectures*. London: Faber.

——. 1998. *Opened Ground: Poems 1966–1996*. London: Faber.

Keats, John. 1978 (1966). *Selected Poems and Letters of Keats*. Ed. Robert Gittings. London: Heinemann.

Kinsella, Thomas. 1996. *The Collected Poems 1956–1994*. Oxford: Oxford UP.

Longley, Michael. 1985. *Poems 1963–1983*. Edinburgh: Salamander Press.

Lonsdale, Roger. ed. 1991 (1984). *The New Oxford Book of Eighteenth-Century Verse*. Oxford: Oxford UP.

MacNeice, Louis. 1979. *Collected Poems*. London: Faber.

McCarthy, Thomas. 1984. *The Non-Aligned Storyteller*. London: Anvil.

Muldoon, Paul. 1983. *Quoof*. London: Faber.

——. 1987. *Meeting the British*. London: Faber.
——. 1994. *The Annals of Chile*. London: Faber.
Muldoon, Paul and Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill. 1992. *The Astrakhan Cloak*. Oldcastle: Gallery.
O'Brien, Conor Cruise. 1996. "Passion and Cunning: An Essay on the Politics of W. B. Yeats". *Yeats's Political Identities: Selected Essays*. Ed. Jonathan Allison. Ann Arbor: U of Michigan P. 29–56.
Paulin, Tom. 1987. *Fivemiletown*. London: Faber.
——. 1992. *Minotaur: Poetry and the Nation State*. London: Faber.
Wills, Clair. 1993. *Improprieties: Politics and Sexuality in Northern Irish Poetry*. Oxford: Clarendon.
——. 1998. *Reading Paul Muldoon*. Newcastle-upon-Tyne: Bloodaxe.
Wordsworth, William and Samuel Taylor Coleridge. 1996 (1800). *Lyrical Ballads*. Eds. R. L. Brett and A. R. Jones. London and New York: Routledge.
Yeats, W. B. 1961. *Essays and Introductions*. London: Macmillan.
——. 1990. *The Poems*. Ed. Daniel Albright. London: Dent.