

The Cave of Making: the Poetry of Louis MacNeice

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The thesis is a study of MacNeice's poetic development, with particular attention to his methods of composition. Its intention is similar to MacNeice's own in The Poetry of W.P. Yeats, to make clear that he is 'a less simple and more substantial poet than many of his admirers and some of his detractors think him'. (p.193). Available draft material, unpublished prose and letters have been used as a guide to MacNeice's intentions, as an indication of poetic sources and as a means of appreciating his technical dexterity.

Chapters I and II cover the thirties' volumes: the first concentrates on the themes of childhood and Ireland in this period, and events in MacNeice's private life which helped shape his choice of subject and style; the second is more concerned with the public sphere, and MacNeice's reactions to the dilemmas of the decade, culminating in Autumn Journal's brilliant counterpoint of public with private occasions. His letters and reviews attest to MacNeice's own sense of changed direction in the war years, which are covered in Chapter III's discussion of a structurally tighter poetry, its less personal tone and more integrated imagery. In Chapter IV, long poems from the forties, Ten Burnt Offerings (1952) and Autumn Sequel (1954), are grouped together as evidence of MacNeice's turn to a more discursive and meditative style. A lengthy consideration of the latter volumes was prevented by the sheer bulk of draft material, which would require several chapters to gloss; however the forties' poems, showing equal care in their planning and composition, are studied attentively. With Visitations and Solstices, the subjects of Chapter V, MacNeice regained a lyric intensity which he sustained powerfully in the posthumously published Burning Perch (Chapter VI).



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Though leaves are many, the root is one;  
Through all the lying days of my youth  
I swayed my leaves and flowers in the sun;  
Now I may wither into the truth.

Yeats

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A draft version of 'Elegy for Minor Poets' is reproduced following p.138, by courtesy of the Humanities Research Centre.

Preface: a note on manuscripts

In this study I have used manuscripts from both public and private sources. Letters from MacNeice were made available to me by Professor E.R. Dodds, Faber and Faber, John Hilton and Lady Nicholson; I have also quoted from those Sir Anthony Blunt deposited in the King's College Library, Cambridge. Any references to the latter are followed by the number of the envelope in which they are kept. Radio programmes were read either in the Play Library or the Script Library of the BBC.

The unpublished poetry and prose, and the drafts, are to be found in four collections:

1. The MacNeice Estate. I have cited from three manuscripts in Mrs Hedli MacNeice's possession: a typescript article entitled 'Broken Windows/Thinking Aloud'; a large holograph notebook containing mostly fair copies of poems dating from summer 1929, closing with an unpublished poem, 'Aeroplane', dated May 1934; a similar notebook beginning with the 'Eclogue by a Five-barred Gate' (May 1934) and ending with a deleted poem, 'The songs of jazz have told us...', dated June 1936. In the text these are referred to as the 1929-34 Notebook, and the 1934-36 Notebook.
2. The Berg Collection, New York Public Library. The MacNeice section consists of plays and radio scripts; prose, including seven notebooks with outlines for a series of lectures given in Cape Town in 1959; and a selection of poetry manuscripts, many of which record only the final version of a poem, although some have interesting emendations. There are four notebooks with drafts for Visitations. The most extensive record of

composition is provided by the manuscripts for Autumn Sequel, approximately two hundred and sixty pages in all. Since my visit to the United States in 1977 was limited in both time and money, I had to choose between transcribing Autumn Sequel and reading and noting the rest of the collection: I settled for the latter, managing to skim through some of the former. The Berg also has letters and postcards from MacNeice to Rupert Doone, together with an interesting archive concerning the Group Theatre.

Manuscripts are labelled '(Berg)' in the text.

3. The Poetry Collection, Lockwood Memorial Library, State University of New York at Buffalo. This also contains poems in their final versions, but has a few typed manuscripts with autograph corrections of interest. There is a small octavo BBC notebook with miscellaneous notes, including drafts of five poems for Solstices. Unfortunately the pencil writing has become so badly blurred that it is extremely difficult to decipher. The other two notebooks are valuable. One, which I have called the 'spiral notebook' has drafts for eleven poems written in 1940, among them the ballades. The second, identified as the 'blue-covered notebook' has diaries of MacNeice's trips to Spain and to Iceland, some of the poems for Letters from Iceland and various deleted or unfinished drafts.

The manuscripts are labelled '(Lockwood)' in the text.

4. The Humanities Research Centre, Austin, Texas. There are letters to and from MacNeice, and the largest collection of his manuscripts, between five and six hundred items. These are not always reliably catalogued according to the Centre's

alphabetical system: for example, drafts for Autumn Sequel cropped up under 'notes', far from the beginning of the collection. Again many of the manuscripts can be discounted as they do not differ from printed versions of the poems, but the notebooks and pages excerpted from them contain many interesting drafts. After the first few days of requesting items from the catalogue which I then found to have been described mistakenly or inadequately, I began to work through the material box by box from the shelves. Three days before I was due to leave Texas, I came across one hundred and fifty three pages of drafts for Ten Burnt Offerings, with notebooks concerning The Burning Perch, among others yet to be read. I chose to leave aside the bulkier work as less relevant to the scope of the thesis, but greatly regretted having to do so.

The manuscripts are labelled '(Texas)' in the text. Where they are not filed under their title, I have briefly described their location, usually with a group of other drafts for the same volume, or in a particular notebook.

I have not thought it useful or appropriate to append a complete bibliographical listing and description of the holdings: apart from the letters in King's College, no manuscripts have identifying numbers.

Manuscripts in all the collections are well-preserved: the problem they present arises from MacNeice's habit of drafting in pencil, which has often smudged over the years and become illegible. His handwriting is generally not difficult to decipher; Grigson has characterised it as angular, 'rather like Gerard Manley Hopkins's hand'. (Radio Portrait, p.8).

The drafts have been tentatively assigned their stage of

composition. A misleading idea of MacNeice's method has been given by Terence Brown in Louis MacNeice: Sceptical Vision (Dublin: Gill and MacMillan, 1975) when he quotes a passage from Robin Skelton's The Poetic Pattern. The description of manuscripts like mosaics is by MacNeice, but it refers to the poetry of Dylan Thomas, not to his own. (Brown, p.155-6; Skelton, p.25). MacNeice was generally thought of as scribbling lines on scraps of paper, and these of course have not been preserved. There are emended drafts, 'Prayer Before Birth' (Texas) is one, which are obviously not first attempts. The impression given by the BBC notebooks, where poems are interspersed with addresses, titles of books, notes of debts and shopping, ideas for radio programmes, is that MacNeice did jot down his poems in them directly. However, as Karl Shapiro remarked apropos of the Lockwood Collection, the 'habitual poet has probably learnt a technique of discard of which he is no longer aware. Therefore much valuable material will always be missing from the record'.<sup>1</sup>

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1. 'The Meaning of the Discarded Poem', in Poets at Work, Rudolf Arnheim, W.H. Auden, Karl Shapiro, Donald A. Stauffer (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Co., 1948), p.94.

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I am grateful to the following for kind permission to use material and to quote from copyright sources: Henry W. and Albert A. Berg Collection, The New York Public Library, Astor, Lenox and Tilden Foundations; the BBC; Dan Davin, as MacNeice's Literary Executor; Faber and Faber; the Humanities Research Centre, University of Texas at Austin; King's College Library, Cambridge;

Marlborough College, for the excerpt from the Literary Society's minutes; Edward Mendelson for the letter from Auden, which is Copyright © 1979 by the Estate of W.H. Auden; the Poetry Collection, Lockwood Memorial Library, State University of New York at Buffalo.



Chapter I      The Thirties: Private Faces

In 1934 Louis MacNeice informed his friend Anthony Blunt of his intention to begin 'a sort of limited autobiography, concerned chiefly with the changes in one's taste etc--all the things one has ever liked or disliked'; four years later this idea flowered in Modern Poetry as 'My Case-Book', which charts with analytic affection the course of his reading and the residue it left.<sup>1</sup> He included a poem to a neighbour's parrot, composed when he was seven, and remarked that it seemed better 'than much which I afterwards wrote in the fervour of my adolescence. There is a nucleus of observed fact, and my naive idea that putting anything into rhyme makes it a poem at least enabled me to convey this fact in memorable form'.<sup>2</sup>

His adolescent work, alternating verbal exuberance with a languor reflecting the schoolboy's attachment to Keats and Swinburne, merits some critical severity. Betjeman remembers MacNeice at Marlborough as looking like a poet, and 'always writing poems in that thick hand with those very strong uprights in the letters. He was then very much under the influence, as would be natural, of the Celtic Twilight--probably the earlier Yeats, and also he very much admired Alfred Noyes,...'.<sup>3</sup> The Yeatsian influence in his published poetry is not yet discernible; Moore suggests that Noyes provided a wide range of metrical models, including terza rima.<sup>4</sup>

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1. Letter postmarked 3 February 1934. Misc. 37F, King's College Library, Cambridge.

2. Modern Poetry (London: O.U.P., 1938; second edition 1968) p.40.

3. Radio Portrait of Louis MacNeice, narr. Goronwy Rees, 7 September 1966. Transcription, p.2.

4. The Poetry of Louis MacNeice (Leicester University Press, 1972), p.23.

It was T.S. Eliot who struck first and perhaps hardest. Minutes of the Marlborough Lower Sixth Literary Society include the record of a meeting on 13 June 1926, in MacNeice's last term, to which he had brought poems by T.S. Elliot [sic]. Mr Waring, an American master, 'kindly gave some rather necessary explanatory remarks' before 'Rhapsody on a Windy Night', 'Morning at the Window' and 'The Hollow Men' were read. The secretary recorded the audience's being 'very interested by these, though we did not feel competent to pronounce any definitive judgement on their comparative methods'. When MacNeice set out to describe the impact of Eliot's poetry on his school contemporaries, who 'wanted to play Hamlet in the shadow of the gasworks', he naturally found they had taken from Poems 1909-1925 what they needed to support such an attitude.<sup>1</sup> There was scant appreciation of technical skill but quick identification with Prufrock and with the atmosphere of 'Preludes', in which MacNeice 'found not only that "smell" of a modern city which your first visit establishes as part of your mentality, but also the human element below that surface,...we knew in our bones, if not explicitly, that this which Eliot expressed so succinctly and vividly, this was what we were up against'. He accounts for the immediate appeal of 'The Hollow Men' by adolescent preference for a dream/nightmare landscape, without instancing its influence on his own poems: 'To-morrow falls the shadow / From Death, the broken statue;' ('Inaugural Rant', Blind Fireworks, p.7), or 'Through fields bone-tenanted, / Striated column, / Pillar truncated,' ('Song in the Back of the Mind', *ibid.*, p.34).

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1. This and subsequent relevant quotations are from: 'Eliot and the Adolescent', in T.S. Eliot, a symposium, ed. Richard Marsh and Tambimuttu (London: Editions Poetry, 1948) pp.146-51.

Blind Fireworks (London: Victor Gollancz, 1929) shows other signs of the reaction to Eliot: MacNeice's idiosyncratic version of Pythagoras, for example, has affinities with Prufrock and 'Preludes': 'While on his bald head the weary rain drips. / In the street below bob windy bits of paper,' ('A Lane Idyll', p.43); 'Gerontion' is the source for part of 'Coal and Fire', lines of which briefly imitate Eliot's quatrains: 'The overarching fossil frondage / Hides each sable carnivore,' (p.45). Of course The Waste Land impressed MacNeice most, with its 'cinema technique of quick cutting, of surprise juxtapositions, of spotting the everyday detail and making it significant', yet it was the least easy to assimilate in practise.

This first volume is an explosion of artifice, which does not entirely conceal the search for a pattern capable of accommodating childhood, isolation, death and a world not easily reconciled to the mythologies with which reading had equipped him. MacNeice later admitted that the welter of images and phrases had been amassed without regard for any organic unity; it had been simply the mood that mattered. 'I made little alteration in a poem after writing it and sometimes the writing was almost automatic. I attempted to dope my mind and see what would come out of it. I went up to Oxford with a belief in blind inspiration...' (Modern Poetry, p.61).

A voluntary abdication of control over the words perhaps matched MacNeice's sense that events in the world were arbitrary, and that the only way to cope with them was to detach oneself, chronicle decay and give it mythic proportions. In a paper written during his first term at Oxford (1926), MacNeice claimed 'we understand that all art is theatrical', the coherence within a piece being the criterion of success, not its accurate likeness to anything outside

it. (Ibid., p.66). At this stage he could not deal poetically with the external facts of his life, and found artificiality an acceptable means of distancing emotion. Of 'The Sea' he noted later 'the conventional poetic diction, the pose, the tricked-out or "sublimated" sexuality':

The sea, now hoary with desire,  
Yet follows feet that walk the beach;  
The sensual plumes of brine aspire  
But cannot reach beyond their reach--  
Will amour'd Neptune never tire?

(Ibid., p.60)

The very regularity of the stanza tames the insistence of desire, curbs aspiration.

Elizabeth Bowen contended that a tendency towards 'bravado characterises much Irish, all Anglo-Irish writing...Nationally we have an undertow to the showy...There is this about us: to most of the rest of the world we are semi-strangers, for whom existence has something of the trance-like quality of a spectacle'.<sup>1</sup> In the case of Blind Fireworks the spectacle is the ending of one existence --many of the poems concern the close of childhood and a consequent spiritual deterioration--and of Existence, with death as the collection's pervasive theme, autumn the prevalent season, sunset the favoured time of day. The demise of gods, 'corpse carousal', the universe fading in the distance, 'the alabaster clock / Waiting or awarding death' ('Senescence', p.65) affront the facts of MacNeice's life, which proved sufficient to generate poetic themes throughout his career.

Perhaps, as Cyril Connolly declared, 'the golden recipe for Art is the ferment of an unhappy childhood working through a noble

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1. Pictures and Conversations (London: Allen Lane, 1975), p.23.

imagination'; certainly MacNeice remembered his early years in an Ulster rectory as predominantly grim. There was the natural apartness of a rector's son, compounded by the Reverend MacNeice's political stance in a period of profound disturbance in Ireland. Not that the family was a classic example of the Anglo-Irish crisis of identity: on the contrary, its forebears on both sides were Irish, as MacNeice boasted in the 'Last Will and Testament' that closes Letters from Iceland:

And to my own in particular whose rooms  
Were whitewashed, small, soothed with the smoke of peat,  
Looking out on the Atlantic's gleams and glooms,

Of whom some lie among brambles high remote  
Above the yellow falls of Ballysodare  
Whose hands were hard with handling cart and boat

I leave the credit for that which may endure  
Within myself of peasant vitality and  
Of the peasant's sense of humour...<sup>1</sup>

In the genealogy of heroic dimensions he constructed in a letter to Blunt, MacNeice included Conchobar MacNessa; ancestry marrying strength and style, undiluted by planter's blood. However, John Frederick MacNeice's position in the Church of Ireland allied the family with the Protestant Ascendancy, which had dominated the Church since the eighteenth century. When MacNeice compared his childhood to Yeats's, he felt that the similarities began in the outspoken Home Rule sympathies of their fathers, whose political position was typical rather of the Catholic Irish. Elizabeth Nicholson (his sister) justly points out that their father was revered by his parishioners, whose real affection took no account of the Rector's stand against the Ulster Covenant in September 1912.

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1. (London: Faber and Faber, 1937), p.237. Although his father asserted that 'the MacNeices were never peasants'. William T. McKinnon, Apollo's Blended Dream (London: O.U.P., 1971), p.7.

The MacNeice and Clesham families were from the west of Ireland. Mrs MacNeice particularly felt Carrickfergus to be alien territory, and talked of Connemara to the children so that it became for them a dream world, where speech was soft like their father's: '...my mother spoke of it so constantly and with such love and such longing that I think it was she who really made it come alive for both Louis and myself. It became for us both a "many-coloured land", a kind of lost Atlantis where we thought by rights we should be living,...'<sup>1</sup> Such a tangle of allegiances especially affected MacNeice. While Lady Nicholson recalls contact with children outside the Rectory, for MacNeice as the youngest child the nursery was the centre, and he shared it with a brother whose mongolism was not then recognised as such. He took to school the memory of William's seeming idiocy, the more vivid for William's having been away and the other two supposing that in the interim he had become companionable. 'And the boys at Sherborne seemed suddenly terribly young; I had learned their language but they could not learn mine, could never breathe my darkness'.<sup>2</sup> MacNeice rarely referred to his brother but as his letters home show, he was deeply concerned for him. Not only was there that constant shadow, but also the death of an adored and vital mother, who had inexplicably fallen into sadness and weeping, then had left when MacNeice was five years old. The superstition already rife in the household, unbeknown to his father, must have coalesced with his mother's growing obsession with the hellish aspects of religion, his childhood nightmares, his father's anguished

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1. Elizabeth Nicholson, 'Trees Were Green', in Time Was Away, ed. Terence Brown and Alec Reid (Dublin: The Dolmen Press, 1974), p.14.

2. The Strings are False (London: Faber and Faber, 1965), p.75.

distance, to produce a feeling of intense, elemental isolation.

All this was thrown into relief by schooling in England: the yellow of Sherborne, the downs of Marlborough, communal rites. MacNeice recalled the contempt of the Irish for the English, 'an identification of Ireland with the spirit and of England with crass materialism'.<sup>1</sup> Yet in his autobiography he recorded the sense of release he experienced when Littleton Powys dismissed the Orange Day celebrations: '"What is all this they do in your country today? Isn't it all mumbo-jumbo?"... To be speaking man to man to Powys and giving the lie to the Red Hand of Ulster was power, was freedom, meant I was nearly grown up' (Strings, p.78). At the same time he felt he had betrayed a Unionist master at Sherborne, who was after all Irish.

Through this mesh of circumstances MacNeice sieved all subsequent experience. The place, time and family one is born into condition the images a poet uses instinctively, so he maintained in a revealing essay, 'Experiences with Images'.<sup>2</sup> Four components of the Ulster landscape in the early years of the century persisted in both his work and dreams:

Sea (i.e. the grey Lough fringed with scum and old cans), fields (i.e. the very small, very green hedged fields of Northern Ireland), factories (i.e. those small factories dotted through the agricultural patchwork), and gardens (i.e. my father's medium-sized lush garden with a cemetery beyond the hawthorn hedge),...

('Images', p.128)

To illustrate the use of his childhood environment, MacNeice cites an early autobiographical poem, one of the few he chose to

1. The Poetry of W.B. Yeats (London: O.U.P., 1941; paperback edition 1967), p.52.

2. In Orpheus Vol.2, ed. John Lehmann (London: John Lehmann, 1949), pp.124-132. Henceforth referred to as 'Images'.

retain from his juvenilia. 'Trains in the Distance' (Collected Poems, p.3), written in 1926, is not free from the kind of outmoded poetic epithets that abounded in Blind Fireworks; the 'smoky ribbons' rising from the trains are also described as 'full-rigged galleons', but the rooting of images in experience serves him well. MacNeice was not concerned, as his contemporaries later were, with any sense of mechanical intrusion into a pastoral setting, nor to exult in the power of the engines. These are almost disembodied sounds and signs of trains, they are reassuring, a physical quality conveyed by the lines 'purring, 'Trains came threading quietly through my dozing childhood, / Gentle murmurs nosing...', 'that metal murmur'. An alliterative pattern is used with enough constancy to convey the tranquillity of the summer and, because of its continuation in the last line, the fog-horn both cuts across the quiet and is made part of the pattern, alien and recurrent. 'That menace from the sea' is an early example of the fear and fascination water held for the poet, on which he dwelt to his last volume. The Lough was rarely blue, foreboding and dangerous, yet a symbol of escape.

In Poems (1935) this sometimes benign, sometimes threatening landscape was much more sharply particularised. MacNeice himself ascribed the change in his approach partly to growing-up--that is, 'a) working for a salary, b) living in a large city, c) married,' --and partly to reading T.S. Eliot's essays, thereby being 'diverted from anarchism'. ('Images', p.130). He said that at this time he found significance in his own act of seeing, and it is precisely this unencumbered, critical, occasionally still apocalyptic, vision that is noticeable in the poems. Committed to living in England, MacNeice is harsh about Northern Ireland, visually and to some



extent, politically. There are real threats bearing out childish intuitions: in 'Belfast' (1931) and 'Turf-stacks' (1932) the community that sends the trains, and the ones that ignore them, or would prefer to do so, are bleakly portrayed.

At the end of the Lough now it is not merely the foghorn that sounds out, but an industrial clamour inseparable from the two creeds which support it: that of puritan industrialists to whom 'the salt carrion water' brings wealth, and of the men who labour where 'like crucifixes the gantries stand'. ('Belfast', p.17). The violent religious imagery, the sense that like the 'harsh / Attempts at buyable beauty', the Virgin's protection is up for sale, and like the merchandise is false to its outward promise, this bitterness is a more complete denunciation of the context of his childhood than MacNeice approached in the wistful sensuousness of the poems in Blind Fireworks. The 'cowled and pilgrim moon' of an early poem ('Sunset', p.28) becomes the sinisterly tangible 'country of cowled and haunted faces'. Even the syntax has a tortuousness one might connect with evangelistic rhetoric. Although MacNeice associates himself with those 'who walk in the street so buoyantly and glib', the poem has neither quality. It tends to confirm his status as outside both the sections of society he portrays, a position made explicit in 'Turf-stacks' (p.18).

In such a poem, MacNeice comes nearest to the stereotype thirties poem, which praises the proletariat and prophesies the millennium. Because of his background he idealises not the factory-worker but the peasant; that it is an idealisation, perhaps a reaction against life in Birmingham, is plain in the poem's progress to the more deeply felt third stanza, where desperation gives a keener edge to the language than when it is employed in somewhat facile praise or

contempt. The 'iron horses' are symbolic of the mechanisation which for MacNeice characterised the very soul of the city-dweller, and they are simply trains, harsh penetrators of country order and peace, far from the soothing rumble of his childhood. 'The peasant shambles on his boots like hooves / Without thinking at all or wanting to run in grooves'. From the 1930's onwards, MacNeice was to inveigh against any agents of mass salvation, anything seeking to undermine the strength of individuality, to blur uniqueness. In 'Turf-stacks' he deliberately trivialises his own preoccupations ('For we are obsolete who like the lesser things / Who play in corners with looking-glasses and beads'), forestalling criticism by admitting a penchant for things shining, multi-coloured, narcissistic, confessing the insidious attraction of intellectual theorising. Still MacNeice identifies his outlook with the phenomenon of natural destructiveness, in a powerful closing simile, thus managing to ally himself with the peasant against the artificial life, destroyers before they are destroyed.

The question of MacNeice's relation to the South, or to Ireland as a whole, is puzzled out in many of the poems he wrote in the 1930's. Love and disillusionment co-existed, Dublin tugged at him. Late in his life, MacNeice said he had always found it 'a home away from home', while acknowledging that he had liked the city more than it had cared for him: 'Let him go back and labour / For Faber and Faber'.<sup>1</sup> The journey in 'Train to Dublin' (p.27) is a journey of acceptance, a movement which perhaps parallels the physical distancing from the North. The poem concerns not only what we think about but also the way in which we think, and this MacNeice

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1. 'Under the Sugar Loaf', New Statesman, 29 June 1962, p.948.

endeavours to convey with sensuous particularity, no longer by abstractions. Instead of division, he looks for an identity of the 'basic facts repatterned without pause' with the thoughts about them, an abandonment to perception.

An interesting earlier version of the poem exists in the 1934-36 Notebook, the text of which is printed at the end of this chapter. I shall call that A, the printed version B. After the first stanza, which remained unchanged, MacNeice went on in the manuscript to develop the contrast between man and animal. It is part of his reaction against an intellectual tendency towards over-reflectiveness, and his anger with observation that massed rather than separated. No doubt he was influenced by the fashionable concern with men as ciphers--economic, industrial, social--but at a more fundamental level, MacNeice was repulsed by the idea of men as some kind of counter in a game played out between invisible masters. At the same time he wanted to preserve a sense of the mystery inherent in creation. Thus he deplores in Aii man's search for exactitude of definition, this insistence that the 'metal of our mind / Answers the magnet of inexplicable fact'. MacNeice could relish sheer quantity, 'batting averages and lists of subscriptions to charities', however, in Aiii,iv he protests against

the mere  
Reiteration of integers, the bell  
That tolls & tolls & gets no further, the fear  
Of being nowhere because one is nowhere else but here.

By this means he brings the poem back to its setting. The danger for MacNeice was the fluency of his word-association, an alert mind indulgent to the pleasure of uncovering similarities, or simply seeing where assonance and rhyme could take a line of thought.

In this poem though, revision curbs digression. Whereas in A 'the hollow shell' is passive and images are explained, in B he

relies on the adjective to carry a suggestion of nightmare. The scenario is kept present, the awareness of time kept alive both in the conventional image of the tolling bell and in that of the telephone posts, which gives the exact sense of a train moving on and the past receding, of the monotony inherent in both movements. Whether the poet next records a distant memory, or a recollection of an event that has just occurred, is not clear. Nor is it obvious in B whom he is addressing; A does not clarify the point, as there the only figure spoken to is an imaginary taxi-driver later in the poem. It is possible that the 'Georgian house' refers to the Bishop's residence in Waterford, which MacNeice had visited (his father became Bishop of Cashel and Waterford in June 1931) and which he bracketed with Carrickfergus as a place where he felt 'suspended in a world without progress'.<sup>1</sup> For the first half of the poem, at least, the notion of movement without progression provides the undercurrent of uneasiness: it is the theme of A which MacNeice loses in B in his optimistic catalogue of objects to pit against it. The syntax, too, is repetitive, particularly in the play of one/won in A. 'Georgian' does suggest the elegance of Dublin itself, perhaps implying that direction to or from is illusory, that movement is circular, turning, as questionable as the shadowy coils of smoke. The closing line of the second stanza, which appears only in B, seems to echo lines of Tennyson that MacNeice liked: 'Their thousand wreaths of dangling water smoke / That like a broken purpose waste in air...' (The Princess, VII, ll. 198-9). Happily he drops the stanza about buttons and coughing, an enactment of what he had already castigated as 'mere repetition

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1. Zoo (London: Michael Joseph Ltd., 1938), p.83.

of integers', and turns instead to the new idea of God and idols.

It may be that this direction was suggested by the figure addressed, who might be his father although he later seems to be a general reader. In A, MacNeice continues to be concerned with the numberless vs unity, with One which both represents a victory over 'the stream of fidgeting digits' and is a pitiless exposé, a 'lethal stream'. The movement of the train becomes incidental, something to be forgotten while he takes off in pursuit of a concept apprehended but not sharply realised, abstract for all the talk of sun and clouds and dust motes, and the glib juggling of homonyms ('jammed / In the beam that pours through the pane, the pane, pain / This life is not a gain because it is again'). In B, the train is integral to what MacNeice is saying about perception, and freedom: it is clear that, while ensconced in a railway carriage, a person is separated from what he perceives, is arbitrarily propelled, presented with a random collection of sights from which he has no time to cull a personal meaning, nor to register what is individual. This sense of separation is reinforced by the two references to rain: in stanza three 'the rain holds off', it is an incidental condition of the journey; in the fifth stanza there is suspension then a deluge, contact with what is 'real':

For during a tiny portion of our lives we are not  
in trains,  
The idol living for a moment, not muscle-bound  
But walking freely through the slanting rain,  
Its ankles wet, its grimace relaxed again.

The mention of water in MacNeice's poems usually has a suggestion of benediction; here it is a regenerative sluicing, part of whose power for MacNeice comes perhaps from its contrast with the pouring sunbeams he had written about in A.

A recalls us abruptly to the city, 'And so to Dublin, name on

the backs of seats / The brown scum sinks in a glass in someone's hand', and briefly introduces a cheerless celebration. This becomes gayer in B as 'Red lozenges of light', no longer a general but a particular toast, marking the transition from the predetermined course a person follows to the way in which he prevents an entire circumscription of his vision. The connection is a little tenuous, willed. Such a change of gear in a longer poem is typical of MacNeice's method, as though he is not prepared to argue a theme through, happier to abandon it for a multiplicity of impressions. The original keeps to the symbolic: 'a cloud the size of a man's hand' covering the sun (cf I Kings xviii, 44), 'all-absolving mist', transference from train to taxi in an effort to take personal control, or at least to resign one's fate to a visible driver. Dublin and Ireland provide 'some surface to clutch' but are not in themselves important, whereas in B they are treated with affectionate specificity.

'I give you the incidental things which pass / Outward through space exactly as each was' (B): this might be taken as an abbreviated poetic manifesto for MacNeice at the time. The use of a phrase verging on slang is a favourite trick, and sometimes gives a conversational freshness and directness to the verse, although here its repetition tends towards formula rather than liveliness. What immediately follows his declaration of intention is abstract, 'the disproportion between labour spent / And joy at random', seeming to veer away from the proposal. The seventh and eighth stanzas of the published poem, however, continue to enumerate things passing. They have an antecedent in a quatrain entitled 'A Prospect of Ireland' in the 1929-1934 Notebook, a particularly indulgent version of the myth of feminine Ireland that MacNeice was to pumice in 'Valediction':

The fuschias weep their blood over white walls,  
The quilted fields chequer the indolent hills  
Combed by the winds to colour, while the sea is heard  
Wooing this full haunched gentle-breasted country,  
undeterred.

'Combed by the winds to colour' is strikingly felicitous. The mild anthropomorphising of the sea becomes in B (stanza 10) a more contrived metaphor, perhaps an effort to recapture the universality MacNeice felt he had achieved in the sun/cloud metaphor of A.

'Tumultuous marble' has permanence without stasis, and is followed by an absolving combination of Thor the destroyer (perhaps a reference to the Norse invasions) and the surgeon-healer. It seems unnecessary embroidery after particular stretches of water have been appropriately noted. The tautness of the poem's construction is lost, and cannot be entirely regained by the mention of the train in the last stanza. The ninth stanza also seems superfluous, it must have originated in A's eleventh stanza, in the desire to be carried to some place where things are differentiated, unique; not skulls but 'black or mouse or auburn or carrots or fair', the dance of electrons solidified into 'hands or hair'. As the poem stands, one suspects that MacNeice simply liked the rather ostentatious assonance of 'suave' and 'mauve', so threw them in, although it could equally be argued that random inclusion exactly meets his poetic requirements. It is unfortunate that no draft of the intermediate stage is available.

Whereas A ends on a note of desperation, relying on a taxi-driver's sleight of hand to transform his vision of the world, the final version's emphasis falls on the potential and accessible material. Instinctive perception and synthesis win out against number and analysis, people find that 'they are rich and breathing gold'. The poem was undoubtedly much improved by revision, not least in the excision of verbal tricks that occurred in A, notably

in stanzas five and eight. MacNeice learned from that experiment and deployed it to much better effect in the final verse of 'Passage Steamer' (1937, p.72). Internal rhyme went too, and the slightly hysterical tone along with the original lame ending.

F.O. Matthiessen remarked, apropos of 'Train to Dublin', that MacNeice had evolved a 'neat craft of making the inner coherence of a poem depend on the subtle and precise interrelationships of a series of things observed', the danger being that if any image asserts itself 'too vividly, the balance is upset and the whole effect falls into obtrusive fragments'.<sup>1</sup> Despite that poem's avowed intention the more successful effort is 'Valediction' (p.52), where the objects' interrelationship is felt to be integral, exposed rather than imposed by the poet. Sustained in its dismay and anger, it was written earlier in the same year and at first entitled 'Eclogue on Ireland'. (1929-34 Notebook). 'Valediction' is more appropriate to its intention and tone as there is no real discussion, not even MacNeice against himself. His position is clear from the beginning and there is no attempt at persuasion. This is the same tone that informs his references to Ireland in Autumn Journal: 'she gives her children neither sense nor money / Who slouch around the world with a gesture and a brogue / And a faggot of useless memories'. (Canto XVI, p.134). 'Valediction' is fiercely resolved to resist the seductions that MacNeice cannot help enumerating.

The poem builds slowly to its climax. The opening is oblique, an odd sidling into the subject, with its repetitive first phrase and details that slowly coalesce. Whose 'verdure', what is being described as 'cant and randy', the subject of 'died...sniped...taken':

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1. 'Louis MacNeice', in Responsibilities of the Critic, ed. John Rackcliffe (New York: O.U.P., 1952), pp.107-8.





rhyme causes trouble only in lines thirty-nine and forty, otherwise, when not replaced by assonance, it is skilful.

MacNeice seems to insist that all the visitor sees is sham Irish charm, the facet that struck him as a child in Dublin--'... what I chiefly noticed was a shopwindow with little souvenirs of bog oak and Connemara marble'. ('Under the Sugar Loaf')--and the things with which the Irish charm themselves, the litany of heroic names. He sees the whole nation trapped by its past and its landscape 'in drug-dull fatalism'. Although he cannot 'deny my past to which my self is wed', he can attempt, in taut lines, to immunise himself, preserve himself in detachment. Some Irish critics have seen this willed separation as detrimental to his poetry, but MacNeice sensed that remaining in the country, where he would still be something of a foreigner by his upbringing and education, would involve him in a constant battle of definition: '...I must in course discuss / What we mean to Ireland or Ireland to us; / ...I have to gesture, / Take part in, or renounce each imposture'. From the line 'I will exorcise my blood', onwards, MacNeice is very sure of his direction: genuine loveliness is admitted and left behind in his decisive progress. His lyricism over the land was echoed later in prose:

An Irish landscape is capable of pantomimic transformation scenes; one moment it will be desolate, dead, unrelieved monotone, the next it will be an indescribably shifting pattern of prismatic light...I do not think it fanciful to maintain...that there is something palpably in common between the subtle colour and movement of [Yeats's] verse and that western landscape which is at the same time delicate and strong.

(Yeats, p.50)

So in 'Valediction' MacNeice succeeded in matching his verse to the alacrity of light, the bleakness of factory files and Ulster farms.

He communicates a pastoral vision of Ireland in his list of animals, from peasants' hens to landowners' 'hunters beautifully bred', but the final line holds the country's terrors: 'Your drums and your dolled-up Virgins and your ignorant dead'. Protestant and Catholic, divided among themselves or against each other, responding only to violence, generating bitterness: this is the heritage he felt compelled to resign, exorcising it through poetry.

However, 'Farewell, my country, and in perpetuum' was premature. 'The South as a land of escape' continued to appear in the poems, and more hauntingly, 'the North of Ireland as prison'. Writing of the citizens of Belfast in Zoo, MacNeice temporarily settled his quarrel in prose: 'Who was I to condemn them? I was insulated with comfort and private memories. ... I had always dramatised them into the Enemy. They were not really grandiose monsters'. He allowed that 'even if I had adequate grounds for hating them, I still ought to make sure that I am not hating them mainly because I identify them with the nightmares of my childhood' (p.84). The year after 'Valediction', this sense of nightmares was articulated in 'Intimations of Mortality' (p.28), which has no overt connection with Ireland, except that we know it was the warnings of 'a well-meaning but barbarous mother's help from County Armagh' which inspired at least part of the night-fear (Zoo, p.79).

Whereas in Blind Fireworks MacNeice had subscribed to a Sitwellian view of childhood ('...life seemed less a stranger, then, / Than ever after in this cold existence', 'Colonel Fantock'), in which nightmares came lapped in gorgeous images, or draped in the pathetic fallacy, by Poems (1935) the same experience is transmitted in stark terms. Although he titled the earlier poems 'Child's Terror' (p.9) and 'Child's Unhappiness' (p.12), and in them dwelt

on time passing, death, the problem of identity, their sensuous images, repetition and lulling rhythms rob them of the real terror 'Intimations' conveys. The poems have in common changing perspectives, but in 1935 MacNeice was more adept in his control. 'Child's Unhappiness' particularly escapes into lines purely decorative, as:

Draw the velvet from his head  
Over that ominous regal bed,  
Reveal Apollo in sleep as fair  
As when Daphne half enjoyed despair.

whose elegance entirely removes it from the sphere of the child's supposed search for himself, or proof of his identity. The widening of the search, from the shelf on which the child feels he has been placed, to plumbing 'the veiled precipitate west'; the passing of seasons, 'A shroud of yellow lace, a shroud of snow' (in 'Child's Terror', p.10): these were no doubt intended to emphasise both the child's ease of identification with natural objects, and his feeling of insignificance in their shadow. Much more effective is the domesticity of the opening line of 'Intimations': 'The shadows of the banisters march march', the dissociation from the first-person so that the poem can be inside the boy's mind and observing it. From the contentment darkness brings to the lovers, lingering in concealment, the vision expands to include the normally soothing sea-sound, that here becomes insidious, as though its stealth partly causes wakefulness: 'On the beach the waves creep, / The little boy cannot go to sleep'. It has a nursery-rhyme simplicity of diction, so that God and the Devil enter the poem on the same matter-of-fact footing as the sea and the banisters. At the end of the third stanza, the appearance of a lamp restores order, and the first metaphor, accompanying it, has a reassuring solidity, 'Time on horseback under a Roman arch', halted in its march. The

fear of clocks ticking out of silence, and of falling, comes in a nervous rush, plainly; in 'Child's Terror' ('I fell in a nightmare down suddenly / Into a hole without a bottom.') the slight awkwardness of the phrasing attests to the pressure of this memory on MacNeice, which he refines in 'Intimations', re-enacting the sensation by the way he breaks his lines: 'The tick of his pulse in the pillow, the sick / Vertigo of falling in a fanged pit.': regularity produced by alliteration, internal rhyme and then the drop to 'vertigo', looping to the finality of 'pit'.

'Child's Terror' ends in desperation, but is swaddled in a self-conscious literary language--'Turn a light on my snowy counterpane,... / And the pampas grass will raise plume aloft again--'--which becomes a pose in 'Child's Unhappiness': 'I faint as memoried distress / In the mouth melts to forgetfulness'.<sup>1</sup> The real terror emerges in 'Intimations' by means of a telescopic enlargement that has no end: 'The night watchman with crossed thumbs / Grows an idol. The Kingdom comes....' The prayer a child might say to ward off evil takes on infinitely sinister meaning.

The last pre-war exploration of childhood and Ireland occurs in The Earth Compels (1938). 'Carrickfergus' (p.69) is direct autobiography and signals the taut style of the volume as a whole. The brisk movement of the verse matches its observations of external factors, there is nothing introspective or speculative. Objects are catalogued with adult detachment, yet they possess that solidity they have for a child, who sees them in juxtaposition without

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1. The second line occurs more appropriately in 'A Serene Evening' (p.21): 'The garden to-night is all Renoir and Keats, / In the mouth melting to forgetfulness'. Self-quotation is frequent in Blind Fireworks.

distinguishing them in terms of value: the terrier's yapping and the soldiers' singing make an equal impact on the consciousness. This picture of Carrick is dominated by the War, an incomprehensible event, MacNeice wrote in Strings, because 'all foreigners were foreigners to me and at first I could not distinguish between the English and the Germans.' (p.53). It was also the period of his mother's departure (1913) and death (1914), and his own dispatch to Sherborne (1917). None of the emotional turmoil is recorded. Perhaps MacNeice did not recall, as Lady Nicholson vividly does, the lines of weeping women coming to the Rectory for comfort in July 1916 ('First, the Ulster Division at the Somme / Going over the top with "Fuck the Pope!"', 'Wounds', Michael Longley). Except for an identifying sentence in the fifth stanza, 'Carrickfergus' is a public poem, while it escapes the charge of journalism sometimes levelled against MacNeice.

The almost jaunty rhythm of its quatrains conveys none of the brooding, subdued fury of 'Belfast'; no item is dwelt upon, no scene intensified by adjectives in the manner of the earlier poem's 'melancholy lough / Against the lurid sky over the stained water', for instance. The vocabulary, too, is spare, so that the one note of flamboyance has resonance: 'Under the peacock aura of a drowning moon'.

I was the rector's son, born to the anglican order,  
     Banned for ever from the candles of the Irish poor;  
 The Chichesters knelt in marble at the end of a transept  
     With ruffs about their necks, their portion sure.

It is an extremely economical notation of alienation: the candles carry a hint of liveliness and warmth as well as poverty, set against the arrogance of the Elizabethan monument in his father's church, confident of gaining heaven, and secure in their earthly glory founded on their exploitation of precisely the Irish poor.

Following 'sure' with 'The war came' in the next stanza, and the springing up of a military camp, at least partially undercuts any sense of order.

There is perhaps no other poem that touches on World War I in this way. Its attitude might not have been acceptable from a civilian, from the Home Front, whereas the difference war makes to the appearance of familiar territory is the only way it might be expected to impinge on a child. Graves, Blunden and Sassoon all register in memoirs their notion that the War would never end, and in 'Carrickfergus' this conviction is domesticated by MacNeice:

I thought that the war would last for ever and sugar  
Be always rationed and that never again

Would the weekly papers not have photos of sandbags  
And my governess not make bandages from moss  
And people not have maps above the fireplace  
With flags on pins moving across and across--

The great accumulation of heroic myth, in the shadow of which MacNeice's generation grew up, is entirely excluded from the poem. The isolation he experiences is both that of a Protestant rector's son, and that common to children sent away to school, whose world becomes completely separate from that of their family and town: 'the world of parents / Contracted into a puppet world of sons'. With the transition from smoky Carrick to Dorset the sense of division is confirmed, and henceforth the poems about Ireland and childhood betray a suspicion that paradise had been within his grasp, and that all his art cannot recover it.

In the summer of 1930, MacNeice received a First in Greats, married, and then moved to Birmingham to take up a Lectureship in Classics at the University. For the first years of their marriage his wife created a multi-coloured home that became their island, as detached as possible from its Birmingham context (see Strings, Chapters XXV and XXVI). Perhaps for MacNeice it was a return to

the remembered security of his earliest years, presided over by a figure warmly domestic. He could manage optimism about the human capacity to make what it will of time, condemning:

The pathetic fallacy of the passing hours  
When it is we who pass them--hours of stone,  
Long rows of granite sphinxes looking on.

It is we who pass them, we the circus masters  
Who make the mayflies dance, the lapwings lift  
their crests.

but the re-assertion indicates a lack of conviction, and 'Mayflies' (p.13) ends, dramatically, with a capitulation to time: 'But when this summer is over let us die together, / I want always to be near your breasts.' This is the first entrance of a loved person into the poems, which are on the whole firmly self-centred.

His new preoccupations were, however, not proof against the movement of the year, which from this time terrified him. 'The buoyant months are May and June. Once they are over, I feel defeated.'<sup>1</sup> MacNeice gave poetic expression to this feeling in 'August' (p.23), in which he is concerned, obliquely, with the inability of art as well as of people to follow 'the living curve which is breathlessly the same.' Frames and limits have a tendency to petrify experience, yet there is grace in their artificiality, and MacNeice himself puts his thoughts into end-stopped quatrains that fix each image. The ease with which he moves, inside one stanza, from Poussin to lawn-mowers shows his growing ability to use the props of contemporary life without self-consciousness, as in the camera-image of the striking opening line: 'The shutter of time darkening ceaselessly'. The gathering formality of the verse works to a conclusion that reads like a classical translation, fit for the sundial or garden-statue's plinth:

1. I Crossed the Minch (London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1938), p.155.



But all this is a dilettante's lie,  
 Time's face is not stone nor still his wings;  
 Our mind, being dead, wishes to have time die  
 For we, being ghosts, cannot catch hold of things.

Insubstantiality and transience obsessed MacNeice as though, when he chose to describe so precisely the world in which he moved and fix it in the poems, it was an effort he knew to be inadequate from the outset. This gives them the edge of melancholy or sombreness that rescues them from triviality. For all that he proclaimed in 'Wolves' (p.29) that he did not 'want / To be always stressing either its flux or its permanence', MacNeice's poems swing between the two, as in 'Sunday Morning' (p.23).

The poem begins by describing 'a weekly moment of choice which Louis and Mary shared with a thousand other young couples, and laments its passing (Louis loved fast cars).'<sup>1</sup> While the suburban Sunday is economically rendered in terms of its sounds, without any strain the dimension outside space and time is also brought into play. The philosophical point springs from a simple, common experience: Monday's pressure is just discernible, how then to make the most of 'free' time? By saying that the morning is 'Fate's great bazaar'--a typical MacNeice phrase--he removes some of this sense of freedom, and the self-generated limitations emerge: the nimble scales 'may grow to music' but the most one can realistically hope for is 'to drive beyond Hindhead' at a speed that removes one from the working week. Perhaps it restores that carelessness, living in the 'Now' that existed before work and responsibilities had to be acknowledged; 'the windy past' alive with movement. MacNeice's own past would not let him ignore the counterpoint provided by the church bells, which had for him 'a sinister

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1. E.R. Dodds, Missing Persons, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1977), pp.117-8.



'a child of you & me to come down this street / & run the gauntlet of such ancestors', seemed too private an image to expose.

He did compose and publish a lengthy poem for his son, requesting a turn to 'homeliness'. Certainly the opening lines of 'Ode' (p.54) are homely enough: 'To-night is so coarse with chocolate / The wind blowing from Bournville / That I hanker after the Atlantic'. The poem turns out to be less for Daniel than a meditation to help the poet arrange things in his own mind. Although its references are accessible without biographical knowledge, with it they become less random. In the first stanza the connection between MacNeice's hankering for the Atlantic and the longing of film-fans, seems less forced when we consider what the Irish coast meant to him, and also the degree to which he felt alien to the routine of Birmingham.

When the wind blew from the south the air would  
thicken with chocolate; we were only a mile from  
the Cadbury Works. ... The girls in their white  
aprons each with her own little monotony, ...  
[bonbons] are shot round the world to people's  
best girls and mothers and the frilly paper is  
trampled underfoot in cinemas and railway trains  
and stadiums and every day is somebody's birthday.

(Strings, p.132)

This distaste for whatever is produced en masse is extended to anything that might be construed as limitless. 'Ode' is a plea for the recognition of particularity and yet it is conducted in oddly general terms: 'I want a sufficient sample, the exact and framed / Balance of definite masses, the islanded hour'. Sample, balance and distinction are the poem's methods.

It is inevitable that a comparison with 'A Prayer for My Daughter' should be implicit. The ostensible occasion for the 'Ode' is not immediately apparent; once it becomes so, Yeats's opening stanza is recalled, with its mention of the 'haystack and roof-

levelling wind, / Bred on the Atlantic', and the poet walking and praying as MacNeice does. Neither man wishes intellectual gifts for his child: MacNeice asks that he have 'five good senses / The feeling for symmetry', and then in quasi-Yeatsian terms that the boy not be fated to wear a hollow mask but to be, as Yeats has it, 'Rooted in one dear perpetual place'.

By the eleventh stanza, he abandons the attempt to make this delineation of the golden mean ('Which contains the seasonal extreme') directly relevant to his son's future. MacNeice's central dilemma emerges: how to make the 'blessedness of fact' immediate and lasting, how to stop time without souring it, how to maintain the balancing act without being false to emotion and experience:

That people are lovable is a strange discovery  
And there are many conflicting allegiances;  
The pedals of a chance bicycle  
Making a gold shower turning in the sun,  
Trains leave in all directions on wild rails  
And for every act determined on and won  
There is a possible world denied and lost.

The conflict is seen in the very expression of ideas. MacNeice opens the stanzas about desiderata for his son with subjunctive clauses; the ninth and tenth begin with infinitives, making the actions they describe potential rather than possible, existing in an abstract sphere before an audience 'of the dead and the unborn'. They have the effect of isolating the human drive to perpetuate, at the same time a wry edge of cliché--'To throw his bread on the waters, the best deposit.'--a nod in the direction of worldly wisdom. So far he has considered the child in relation to his non-human environment; it is now implied that he will make the 'strange discovery' about people. The directness of the first sentence suggests that it is a fairly new puzzle for the poet also, a conflict

with which he is much less at home than persistent philosophical/metaphysical dilemmas. Swerving into images, first of movement that can be controlled and then of that which carries a person willy-nilly, it seems that MacNeice cannot deal with what has to be said about people, retreating into generalisation. He mimes in the personal context an act of revolutionary decisiveness, neither regretful nor vacillating:

We must cut the throat of the hour  
That it may not haunt us because our sentiments  
Continued its existence to pollute  
Its essence: bottled time turns sour upon the sill.

Typically, MacNeice concludes an imperious announcement with an image from daily life, tempering the impossibly dramatic.

His perambulation brings him now to the immediate setting, a city park in summer and all the play of light on colours, everything to which the senses respond, 'demand homage of words.' This is what MacNeice had earlier wished his son to 'accumulate, corroborate', each tree and plant named or described, separate, the slices of colour balanced one against the other. To 'Compose ourselves, fit out an ethic' involves turning from all that, and is thus partly an inadequate effort when, MacNeice seems to say, immersion in physical fact can itself lead to some kind of super-natural intuition: 'the angel / His song like the heat dancing on the gravel / ... Moving south while the clapping of a run turns chill in echo'. The stanza's last line works on two levels, retaining the mystery and the matter-of-factness, unlike 'bottled time' which simply deflates.

Not only does the extra-terrestrial impinge on the observer's consciousness, but also the present threat. Hynes sees the 'Ode' as a poem typical of its disordered decade in the way it is 'invaded by public elements--mob mania, newspapers, a bombing plane, Europe--which are all threats to a fulfilled private life for his infant son';

for the father, too.<sup>1</sup> There is, Hynes continues, 'a sense of violation of intimate private occasions', bodied in passages such as in the eighteenth stanza:

But this identical sound the then epitome  
Of summer's athletic ease and the smell of cut grass  
Will sometime be our augury of war  
When these tiny flies like nibs will calmly draw  
our death  
A dipping gradient on the graph of Europe

MacNeice presumably liked the image, as he used it in Modern Poetry to exemplify 'the blend of cerebral and sensuous...almost a meta-physical image, but the picture of the moving aeroplanes is intended to persist.' (p.112). As he had long since broadened his perspective beyond the occasion of birth, the entrance of the planes does not take its force from a contrast with intimacy. The really violent image is in the next stanza, where MacNeice moves by associational logic to the town-dweller, suffering and alienated from his environment, who like a rabbit 'Hangs by the heels gut-open against the fog / Between two spires that are not conscious of him.' If anything violates the predominantly meditative tone of the poem, it is this stanza, constructed around a few words--hang, red, gut, spire--incorporated from a short poem in the 1929-34 Notebook. Wrenching the 'Ode' back to his son's predicament, he seeks to modify the example by generalising from it, warning the boy not to split apart 'Cause and Effect, Form and Content', returning to the theme of not lingering over a moment of perception. The onward movement of the poem imitates the advice, which seems partly an effort at self-persuasion. A later stanza returns to the rabbit image, the body being whole this time: 'These moments let him retain like limbs / His time not crippled by flaws of faith or

1. The Auden Generation (London: The Bodley Head, 1976), p.187.

memory'; lines MacNeice thought good, if 'typical of Spender's manner'.<sup>1</sup>

So finally, it appears, MacNeice is in a position to sum up what he wants for the child, after negatively defining it. But the conclusions he draws are not particularly for his son's benefit, they revert to the subject of his own temptations:

But as others, forgetting the others,  
Run after the nostrums  
Of science art and religion  
So would I mystic and maudlin  
Dream of the both real and ideal  
Breakers of ocean.  
I must put away this drug.

The desire to escape into an unreal world, whether dignified by mysticism or not, has to be rejected, though it occurs again and again in MacNeice's poems. 'Breakers of ocean' takes us back to the beginning of the 'Ode', and there too they were seductive, despite his nostalgia's being labelled 'frivolous'. The pressure the birth exerts on the poet's life is resisted in so far as it might lead to a false construction, however he admits to a kind of Romantic yearning for an existence 'innocent and integral', where the real and ideal merge.

Framing the right metaphor, at once flexible and hopeful, on which to end the poem, was not easy. It appears in the 1934-36 Notebook in its final form, except for the following stanzas after 'I must put away this drug':

~~I must acquire the humility~~  
~~Of the migrating bird~~  
Its readiness to follow the routes  
Which are felt but not charted  
~~That humility which is also pride-~~  
~~There is nothing more proud~~  
~~Than this acceptance of life,~~  
Amenable because forgetful  
& forgetful by instinct  
forgetting by instinct.

Must be the migrating bird

Despising the sea below the sky??

Than humbly to accept

to win by ignoring

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1. 'Poetry To-day', in The Arts To-day, ed. Geoffrey Grigson (London: John Lane The Bodley Head, 1935), p.61.

We must, accepting life,  
 Because of those who are near.  
 You, 3 miles away,  
 Were further than the Atlantic  
 I could feel that curtain of imagined  
 Spray between us,  
 But now I will focus on you  
 In whom consist my  
 My [ ] lady my foam pattern  
 the music of my thoughts.

Metrically this would have approximated the opening stanzas, perhaps making the close too neat. MacNeice wants to broaden and generalise; dropping 'I' renders 'must' more imperative, also fitting in with the idea of abandoning the self to a pattern. The creation of good patterns, in whatever sphere, always seemed to him an admirable activity, indeed a human duty. He condenses the four draft lines into 'following felt routes', eventually, delaying the stress on humility and introducing as a counter to the domestic drive of the birds the comet's orbit, predestined but proud. In the draft, the point that life is made 'amenable because forgetful' is not entirely clear, but it is improved by the alteration hinted at in MacNeice's second revision, and expands into lilting fulfilment: 'And without soaring or swerving win by ignoring / The endlessly curving sea and so come to one's home'.

No doubt this return prompted the further stanza in which acceptance appears a much tamer, perhaps enforced alternative. His wife is reintroduced in a troubled tone, whereas she had been a source of happiness in stanza three, 'My love, my limit' there being preferred to the infinite, although there may be an undertone of exasperation. Here her epithet carries the idea of natural order--MacNeice connected an instinctive talent for pattern-making with women--and with it, disquietingly, of evanescence. Fortunately he realised that the extension of the poem in this direction could not be sustained, and he ended the final version



instead in imperfect peace: the waves threaten absolute serenity.

MacNeice admits in the poem that he 'cannot draw up any code / There are too many qualifications'. It was his first important attempt at working out a philosophical position in poetry; it reveals him as given neither to steady introspection nor to tough intellectual reasoning, but principally to delight in the physical world and a lauding of instinct, of emotional response. At Oxford he had felt the attraction of transcendentalism, yet the contradictions in his environment were not sufficiently accounted for by any variation on a doctrine of Forms. 'Ode' demonstrates the pull of universalising; however, as Dodds suggests, MacNeice wrote best when his poems were rooted in immediate personal experience.

Such a one is 'Snow' (p.30), conceived on a winter's evening at the Dodds' house in Birmingham: 'Out of doors it was snowing, but in the study window Bet had placed a big bowl of roses from our heated greenhouse, "soundlessly collateral and incompatible", while we sat around the fire eating tangerines. The scene was no invented symbol ...' (Missing Persons, p.117). The poem appears in the 1934-36 Notebook, with two alterations in the second stanza. 'Indomitably plural' is replaced by 'incorrigibly', the earlier choice being fractionally less flexible. The other change is 'various' for 'different' (second stanza, fourth line), alliteration not providing quite the sense of expansiveness for which the euphoria calls. In a letter to John Hilton in 1930, MacNeice had called for 'lots of lovely particulars; I suggest keeping generalisations out of it...', but in 'Snow' the general statement flowers from specific details, leaves a space for mystery without depriving snow, fire, roses and tangerines of their richness, or leaping into abstraction.

Although apparently content in that poem with both the evidence

of his senses and what he made of it, there is also a distrust of words, tempering the astonished delight which is the well-spring of 'Snow'.

So we whose senses give us things misfelt and misheard  
Turn also, for our adjustment, to the pretentious word  
Which stabilises the light on the sun-fondled trees  
And, by photographing our ghosts, claims to put us at  
our ease;

('Nature Morte', p.21)

By using the camera-metaphor, MacNeice implies that the act of selection made by an artist necessarily involves a degree of distortion, while the illusion is of stability and substance. Turning from people to objects, from photography to painting, the medium becomes transparent:

even a still life is alive  
And in your Chardin the appalling unrest of the soul  
Exudes from the dried fish and the brown jug and the  
bowl.

Nevertheless, having to rely on 'the pretentious word' MacNeice endeavoured to portray a world of terrifying flux: as insouciant as his poems often appear, his personal, fearful obsession is with time.

Train to Dublin - Notebook version

Our half-thought thoughts divide in sifted wisps  
 Against the basic facts repatterned without pause,  
 I can no more gather my mind up in my fist  
 Than the shadow of the smoke of this train upon the grass--  
 This is the way that 'animals' lives pass.

Man claims more, his mind must have the world defined  
 Must pry with its eye, prize with its chisel till the world is  
 cracked  
 Or is it that the unconscious steel within our mind metal of our  
 mind  
 Answers the magnet of inexplicable fact  
 In this explanatory but illusory act?

This act of noble dogma that usurps  
 The rights of matter which matter cannot apprise,  
 This gorgeous wrong upon the sums & surds  
 Which are the world they say, this spidering out of ways  
 Upon the trackless chaos of mathematical days.

God save us from mere number, the hollow shell  
 Of nightmare held to the ear, the mere  
 Reiteration of integers, the bell  
 That tolls & tolls & gets no further, the fear  
 Of being nowhere because one is nowhere else but here.

Nowhere but here, the train keeps moving and the rain holds off  
 The buttons on the seat are one & one & one,  
 The man who thinks he sees through things achieves a cough  
 One sees it through his midriff rise & one  
 Pities the self-important phantom fancying it has won.

Fancying it has won against the sun, the One  
 Against the storm of iron, the dustmotes that dance  
 In the pitiless beam and lethal stream of sun  
 Lethe which is remembering the fixed advance  
 The stream of fidgeting digits, of dumb chance.

And so to Dublin, name on the backs of seats,  
 The brown scum sinks in a glass in someone's hand,  
 A couple of infants mumbling rubber teats  
 [For] nothing of the pageant which has been planned,  
 The flag wagging round the mad bandstand.

But let this stream be damned, be damned, be damned,  
 Let me forget the movement of the train  
 The notes of dust, like souls, jiggling & jammed  
 In the beam that pours through the pane, the pane, pain,  
 That life is not a gain because it is again.

But look, there is a cloud the size of a man's hand  
 Hanging between the [sheds]: now for a supple wrist  
 To work that hand from here & with a seemingly bland  
 Sleight of hand of the conjuror or hypnotist  
 Cover that gorgon sun with all-absolving mist.

There, it is gone, it is forgotten; taxi or cab  
 Regain their relevance & you can be their fare  
 This monstrous power is in your hands, to dab  
 At this or that; try this; Taxi! I could swear  
 It is coming on to rain--Where to, sir? Where!  
 Anywhere out of here that is not here but there.

Not here but there--the toy Liffey & the vast gulls,  
 Not here but there--Nelson stone in air,  
 Or anywhere where Time instead of checking skulls  
 Differentiates them with black or mouse or auburn or carrots or fair,  
 [Faking] the electron into hands & hair.

Do you hear, taximan, let out the clutch  
 & take me out of that dream which may be true  
 Give me some surface to clutch  
 Make the lie be new, the old be other and the trick come true  
 & I shall be forever grateful to you.

Sept. '34.

Chapter II      The Thirties: Public Places

MacNeice's sense of transience and profound unrest, whose private sources were explored in the first chapter, could only be fostered by the anxieties of the time, the suspicion of existing in a parenthesis. When Auden and Day Lewis edited Oxford Poetry in 1927 they contributed a preface anticipating one of the most pressing literary problems of the next decade: 'All genuine poetry is in a sense the formation of private spheres out of public chaos...'<sup>1</sup> The relation of the one to the other troubled MacNeice, until he temporarily found a poetic solution in the deft counterpoint of Autumn Journal.

In considering the literary tendencies of the period, it is hard to avoid the notion of Auden's generation, which has of course an element of truth. At a time of manifestos, groups, analysis, MacNeice like the others issued statements about art with apparent facility. His tone may be distinguished, however, by its wryness, by his not being committed enough to preach, by his not being able to subscribe to even Auden's seductive moral imperatives. He did generalise, but only to preface shrewd attention to particulars, as in his contribution to Grigson's symposium, The Arts To-day:

The best poets of to-day belong to, and write for, cliques. The cliques, lately, have not been purely literary; they identify themselves with economic, political or philosophical movements. This identification is more fruitful when it is voluntary;... The best English poets have been those most successfully determined by their context.... The English context is now more congenial to poets than it has been for a long time.

(pp.30-1).

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1. (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1927), p.v. The volume included three poems by MacNeice: 'Γνῶθι σεαυτόν', 'Harvest Thanksgiving' and 'This Tournament' pp.18-20.

The slightly waspish remark about the nature of a writer's identification marks the passage as MacNeice's: the point about poets and their context perhaps reveals the stamp of the decade, in its recognition of the artist as a social being. Aware of the danger contemporary poetry ran, of being 'judged by its party colours', he still welcomed the 'intoxication with a creed' as being 'a good antidote to defeatist individualism', of the kind found in Prufrock and Mauberley (p.44). He resisted being carried away himself, just as he eschewed some features he thought notable in the poetry of his contemporaries: '... the topical, the gnomic and the heroic.... The personal element is a bridge between the topical and the heroic; these poets make myths of themselves and of each other.... Comradeship is the communist substitute for bourgeois romance; in its extreme form... it leads to an idealisation of homosexuality.' (pp.56-7). MacNeice was outside the clique in his almost aggressive heterosexuality, and was not given to idealisation at this stage, although in the 1950's he constructed his own myths of friendship. The 'gnomic' is particularly Auden's contribution: mysterious landscapes and journeys; nameless figures receiving hermetic instructions; both protagonists and readers being urged to moral judgement, moments of choice. Topicality was their common factor: there was 'material for poetry everywhere.' (p.66).

MacNeice enlarged on these themes when he wrote 'Subject in Modern Poetry' for Essays and Studies in 1937 (Volume 22, pp.144-58). He adopted the distinction Auden had made in his essay for Grigson's survey, concerning the moral function of art. Auden had declared that 'there must always be two kinds of art, escape-art, for man needs escape as he needs food and deep sleep, and parable-art, that

art which shall teach man to unlearn hatred and learn love,...' ('Psychology and Art To-day', p.20). Conceding that Auden's poetry embraces both categories, MacNeice assigned Eliot and Yeats to escape, Auden and Spender to parable, a word he was to find especially useful in discussing poetry in the 1960's. What gives life to contemporary poetry, provides its vital literary context is, he suggests, a combination of 'the pity of Owen, the Whitmanesque lust for life of Lawrence, and the dogmas of Lenin' (p.149). This prefigures MacNeice's plea for 'impure poetry'; Auden and Spender are esteemed for their 'great gift of compromise' (p.152). The world is of value and interest, contemporary life should be written about--at least indirectly--and because they are a part of the poets' environment,

pylons and gasometers are not merely décor. The modern poet is very conscious that he is writing in and of an industrial epoch and that what expresses itself visibly in pylons and gasometers is the same force that causes the discontent and discomfort of the modern individual, the class-warfare of modern society, and wars between nations in the modern world.

(p.156)

This is the most politicised statement about poetry that MacNeice ever made, and it was clearly under the pressure of the time. It must have amused him to have it appear under the staid auspices of the English Association, but it was not just a nod in the correct, Marxist direction. The sentence may be seen as both a justification and a way out of a dilemma: the justification for inclusion of pylons is clear enough, there is also an implied strategy. If a poet writes about industrial and urban surroundings, then he indicates the forces behind them, shows acceptable awareness and does not have to articulate the lesson to be learnt. A poet without belief in political progress may thus acknowledge the existence of





taking pleasure in finding the exact shades for the lights--'creme-de-menthe or bull's blood'--and revelling in the obedience of the machine, its 'engine gently breathing'; then colour drains from the lines as the factory chimneys appear, which 'on sullen sentry will all night wait / To call, in the harsh morning, sleep-stupid faces through the daily gate'. The tone is no longer despising, rather a resentful acceptance of stolid fact, unalterable by any words. Factory chimneys are not décor in the poem, they are symbolic of that artificiality MacNeice hated but for which he had no alternative.

In 1934 MacNeice was proposing at least five books for publication over the next year. The most likely of these was a collection of poems that T.S. Eliot had provisionally approved, though requiring that they be rearranged:

That was one for me as I had taken great trouble arranging them in their present order. However, I am going to scrap some more and see what I can do. ... Also I shall have time to include one or two eclogues. These I find have great possibilities. There is going to be one all about my education.

(letter to Blunt, postmarked 3 February 1934. Misc.37F).<sup>1</sup> The discovery of the potential of the form was made at Christmas in 1933, according to MacNeice in The Strings Are False. As his wife submerged herself in preparations for their first child, he looked outwards from the island and discovered his contemporaries

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1. Gollancz had rejected this second volume after the failure of Blind Fireworks: 834 copies remained out of 1,000 printed. Sheila Hodges quotes the reader's report: 'The collision of a Sitwell with an Alousian [sic--Aldousian?] strain has here produced a telescoping of pregnant similes in most admired confusion of echolalic cadences. The process often strikes out brilliant images, but it is too caviare, I feel, for your list'. Gollancz: The Story of a Publishing House 1928-1978 (London: Victor Gollancz Ltd., 1978), p.73.

'swallowing Marx with the same naive enthusiasm that made Shelley swallow Rousseau'. Unable to sink his ego that way, he still found himself entirely sympathetic to 'their hatred of the status quo'. The way he found to express an urge to destruction, while 'Mariette performed her usual rites--the rustle of coloured paper', was the deliberate composition of 'An Eclogue for Christmas':

I wrote it with a kind of cold-blooded passion and when it was done it surprised me. Was I really as concerned as all that with the Decline of the West? Did I really feel so desperate? Apparently I did. Part of me must have been feeling like that for years.

(p.146)

It was published in New Verse (April 1934, pp.3-7); 'Valediction: an eclogue' appeared in Life and Letters (April/September 1934, pp. 352-4), and when Poems was published by Faber and Faber in 1935, these two opened the collection, followed by 'Eclogue by a Five-barred Gate'.

MacNeice had experimented with a dialogue form once before. In 'A Conventional Serenade' (Blind Fireworks, p.14) the protagonist Amyas speaks first to a Rustick, then to himself and an Owl; the voices are not greatly differentiated and the poem might as well be a monologue, Amyas's meditations on a sensuous summer evening: 'See how the trees with vegetable desire / Stretch themselves upon the yielding sky; / Am I a tree that clouds should satisfy?' This is Marvell out of T.S. Eliot. The eclogues in Poems, however, have a genuinely dialectical structure. Part of MacNeice's enjoyment of classical literature must have stemmed from a feeling of affinity for what J.A.K. Thomson, in The Classical Background of English Literature, calls the 'profoundly antithetical' cast of the Greek mind, which manifested itself in the commonplace of Greek philosophy that it was possible to state a counter-proposition to

every proposition.<sup>1</sup> The exploration of a dilemma without forcing a conclusion meant that MacNeice could preserve his detachment, without excluding passion, which is certainly present in 'An Eclogue for Christmas' (p.33). 'Eclogue by a Five-barred Gate' has more the air of an exercise in an interesting form.

It is not simply the static dialogue form, nor even the convention of shepherds, that MacNeice takes from the eclogue tradition. He needed to look no further back than Yeats for a master in the former: to the early Michael Robartes and the Dancer (1921), or to the volumes he would have recently read, Words for Music Perhaps and Other Poems (1932), The Winding Stair and Other Poems (1933). Eclogues are part of that pastoral tradition critics have struggled to define: W.W. Greg's contention that 'a sense of the contrast between town and country was essential' is generally accepted. He maintains that this contrast animates various kinds of pastoral: 'the ideal where it breeds desire for a return to simplicity, [of] the realistic where the humour of it touches the imagination, and [of] the allegorical where it suggests satire on the corruption of an artificial civilization'.<sup>2</sup> Three out of MacNeice's four eclogues are clearly in the ideal / allegorical tradition, where some degree of degeneracy is presumed: 'Valediction', which dropped its subtitle in Poems, nevertheless contains criticism of a predominantly rural and unsophisticated society from an outsider's viewpoint; while 'Eclogue Between the Motherless' is patently a dialogue between analogues of the self, and has nothing to say about society.

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1. (London: George Allen and Unwin Ltd., 1948), p.24.

2. Pastoral Poetry and Pastoral Drama (London: A.H. Bullen, 1906), p.7.

Besides the copy in the 1929-34 Notebook, there is one manuscript version of 'An Eclogue for Christmas' extant, typed, with scanty autograph corrections (Lockwood). MacNeice's account of its composition would anyway seem to suggest that it was a 'given' poem, its definite shape taking the author by surprise. Some images surfaced from previous poems, however, such as the striking lines 'I who was Harlequin in the childhood of the century, / Posed by Picasso beside an endless opaque sea,' which is a more apt version of the opening of a deleted poem, 'For some time poets have been harlequins or playboys' (1929-34 Notebook). This particular passage perhaps has a residue of 'Prufrock', the speaker standing aside to assess what society has made of its victim. While Prufrock considers spiritual consequences, A sees the result in aesthetic terms and in autobiographical ones, if we identify 'A' with MacNeice.

In his last, intellectually heady year at Marlborough, with Anthony Blunt as mentor, MacNeice discovered Modern Art, and both of them under the spell of Roger Fry and Clive Bell, believed 'without any qualification in Pure Form' (p.165). Blunt, in his article 'From Bloomsbury to Marxism' (Studio International, November 1973, pp.164-8), explicitly links the worship of abstraction with the prevailing social ignorance that was to continue throughout MacNeice's time at Oxford, and his own at Cambridge, a period of 'complete unreality, ...we lived in this little self-contained world of art and literature, with no awareness of what was taking place in the outside world at all.' (p.166). Or, as MacNeice puts it in the 'Eclogue', 'Without reference to this particular life.' When he was writing the poem, he must have been conscious of the change in Blunt's milieu, since 'quite suddenly, in the autumn term of 1933, Marxism hit Cambridge.' (p.167). The artists praised in the 1920's

were either demoted, or praised on quite different grounds, and it was seen that the real danger 'lay in Cubism, which began the final movement away from humanist painting and led towards abstraction, towards an art which had lost all contact, we thought, with the general public, with humanity at large, ...' (p.168). MacNeice put his rejection in A's mouth: 'They have made of me pure form, a symbol or a pastiche, / Stylised profile, anything but soul and flesh'. He elaborated the thought in a contribution to the Auden number of New Verse (November 1937, pp.11-13), after a misquotation from Marx: '"Other philosophies have described the world, our business is to change it."...if we are not interested in changing it, there is really very little to describe. There is just an assortment of heterogeneous objects to make Pure Form out of.' (p.11).

It is doubtful that 'An Eclogue for Christmas' offers potential for change; the speakers appear to accept their doom with a kind of morbid relish. The countryman, B, notes that 'the moon's glare, / Goggling yokel-stubborn through the iron trees, / Jeers at the end of us, our bland ancestral ease;' an ease and a landscape MacNeice is not quite so deft at portraying as he is the 'beauty narcotic and deciduous' acknowledged by A, the city-dweller. Even this slight uncertainty might be accounted part of the pastoral tradition of the urban observer's distance from the rural setting he praises. In the end both speakers determine to indulge themselves in ways of life already established, finding refuge in living for the self. The dialogue form protects MacNeice from the accusation of endorsing a reactionary code: if he is identified with any statement in the poem, it is perhaps with B's closing lines, 'Let all these so ephemeral things / Be somehow permanent like the swallow's tangent wings'. This is the volume he chose to preface with the line from

Agamemnon ('like a boy who chases a flying bird'); the poems are suffused with a sense of the necessity and futility of the effort to capture the transient. The image had a particular connection for MacNeice, recalling his penultimate summer term at Oxford, punting up the Isis with his fiancée:

... one evening at twilight a squadron of swallows swooped down over the water, their reflections were been and gone, a moment of annunciation. I felt very near to Mariette and it was a relief not to have to discuss if the descent of swallows was "significant".

(Strings, p.122)

After the natural austerity evoked by B, and the hedonism of A, the swallow lines lift the poem from nostalgia to real yearning, so that the reminder of the Incarnation that ends the poem is saved from being dismissive or sneering and there is a sense of its mystery.

God enters the 'Eclogue by a Five-barred Gate' too (p.37), but in more wilful guises. Here MacNeice plays with the form quite openly, making his first shepherd confess to being 'of the Theocritean breed, / Been pasturing my songs, man and boy, this thirty year--'. The use of dialect became one of the salient features of pastoral; MacNeice has one rustic shepherd and one pedant, so that when Death asks if they have thought of him, the replies are at opposite ends of the scale:

1. Only off and on  
Thanatos in Greek, the accent proparoxytone--
2. That's not what he means, he means the thing behind the  
word  
Same as took Alice White the time her had her third--

Parody is proper to the poem, whose subject is partly poetry itself, and the relation of things to words. MacNeice's liking for philosophising in verse, which becomes a liability in some of the later poems, in these is apt and not laboured. Death defines poetry in negatives, skims over the issue of poetic fashions (which

MacNeice dealt with later, in prose) and rounds on the kind of lyrical assertion unworthy of 'poetry': 'I feel a wave intensely bitter-sweet and topped with silver--' is mere attitudinising on the first shepherd's part.<sup>1</sup> In his swift response, Death employs an almost too flexible diction: he ranges from 'All time is not your tear-off jotter', to the dignified (Audenish?) 'But for you your privilege and panic is to be mortal', immediately reverting to MacNeice's favourite device of the metaphor-cliché: 'And with Here and Now as your anvil / You must strike while the iron is hot--'. The problem again occurs of image succeeding image without advancing the poem. In the eclogues MacNeice can get away with proliferation because he cuts from speaker to speaker, interrupting and to some extent explaining himself. Thus the shepherds, anxious to expound their dreams, can dismiss Death as a prosy old man. The patent artificiality of the poem's construction does not obscure lapses within the convention: the shepherd supposed to speak in dialect trips up when he tries to explain the effect of Death's talking. He finds a surprisingly apt simile, 'Like the thrumming of telephone wires in an east wind' (pylons not as mere décor), then lapses into uncertainty, veering between 'bellyache' and 'nausea'. The best lines in the poem are descriptions of light: by the first shepherd, who 'sank through the blue soft caves / Picked with light delicate as the chink of coins'; by the second who had seen 'Angels ascending and descending with a shine like mackerel--', both appropriate to the caricatured personae speaking them.

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1. 'I would rather be very humble and say that changes in poetic technique are on a level with the changes each season of women's fashions in dress. ...the great majority of innovations are due to the love of novelty. And the love of novelty and variety is psychologically the mainspring of the universe'. He defends the statements in a footnote: 'But I do not say this frivolously. A new poem remains a higher thing than a new hat'. The Arts To-day, p.46.

The eclogue is also a narrative and an allegory. It is a distant precursor of some of MacNeice's radio dialogues, a less subtle version of his turn to parable in the 1960's. The narrative closes with the death of the two shepherds, who go through the gate on an echo of Lycidas. The vision was undoubtedly apocalyptic, in its odd form, and Apocalypse was a pervasive theme of the decade. Whereas the Christmas eclogue expresses it in the appropriate social context, here it is more subdued, but the conclusions are similar: the impotence of words against inevitable endings.

Quite different in scope from the others is the 'Eclogue Between the Motherless' (p.48). There is no record of its composition, and it does not appear in the notebooks which contain much of the material for Poems and The Earth Compels, the volume in which it was published. The 1934-36 Notebook contains a few poems on Mary MacNeice's departure (she left MacNeice and their son, without warning, in December 1935), and the blue-covered notebook (Lockwood) with many of the poems for Letters from Iceland, has various deleted drafts on the same theme, so we might date it 1936. Unlike the other eclogues, with their appropriately parodic or satiric elements, this is unrelievedly sombre and revolves around a personal dilemma. Although the speakers are identified as 'motherless', their discussion concerns their lover-less state, and the connection between the two is the more disturbing for its remaining unstated, hovering. It is a much less self-pitying presentation of loneliness than some of the poems of this period, perhaps because the dialectical form encourages detachment. MacNeice can both warn--'One marries only / Because one thinks one is lonely--and so one was / But wait till the lonely are two and no better'--and bleakly pursue: 'There I sat / Concocting a gambler's medicine; the afternoon was cool, / The ducks drew lines



of white on the dull slate of the pool'. The poem is moving because of the particular experience of double desertion MacNeice brings to it, and the universal longing he taps: for love that is 'heaven come back from the nursery--swansdown kisses', or the search for 'the perfect stranger'; and for the resolution he finds, of which our daylight minds would disapprove, with B, while we give assent at A's fantasy level. Contracting marriage with a dying woman gives the relationship its limit, ensuring that its end is no one's 'fault'.

When Julian Symons reviewed The Earth Compels for Poetry (Chicago, May 1940), he singled out 'Eclogue Between the Motherless' as one of the poems not conforming to MacNeice's ideal, poetry as a natural extension of conversation. An ordinary man, he thought, would find the language 'too strange for him. ...It is the scholar and the literary man who have written Mr MacNeice's other poems, with their gleaming Bloomsbury wit and sophistication'. (p.88). 'Homage to Clichés' (p.59) may deserve this judgement, but the eclogue is closely and comprehensibly wrought. It has MacNeice's delight in female vitality: 'The hard light of sun upon water in diamonds dancing / And the brute swagger of the sea;' a comparison made again in 'Leaving Barra' (p.86): 'While you are alive beyond question / Like the dazzle on the sea, my darling.' And there is a grim combination of his childhood nightmares with the image he made of his unborn child's ancestry (in the unpublished poem mentioned above, p.26): 'Helpless at the feet of faceless family idols / Walking the tightrope over the tiger pit, / Running the gauntlet of inherited fears'.

A more public realm of inheritance is explored in the last of the eclogues, also written in 1936 and published as part of the

Letters from Iceland in 1937. MacNeice had been to Spain with Blunt for the Easter of 1936, undertaking the Icelandic commission with Auden in August and September. They were his first trips outside the British Isles since his marriage, a mixture of diversion--  
 'I have come north, gaily running away / From the grinding gears,...  
 / The ambushes of sex, the passion to retrieve / Significance from  
 the river of passing people,'--and quest: 'the crude / Embryo  
 rummages every latitude / Looking for itself, its nature, its final  
 pattern.' ('Letter to Graham and Anna', p.63). The number of  
 travel books written in the 1930's reflects, among other things,  
 the awareness of the English intelligentsia that wherever things  
 were going on, it was not at home; the sense of diminishment was  
 very strong. MacNeice's instinct, however, was not to head for the  
 centres of artistic, intellectual or political innovation: in his  
 autobiography he emphasised that the trip to Spain had no political  
 implications. 'Our new revelation was the painting of Zurbaran.  
 ...a lyrical intense placidity; a haunting matter-of-factness'.  
 (Strings, p.159). Discussions with Blunt about the future of  
 communism became visions of an artistic revolution, a paean to the  
 new medium: 'concrete is vital' (p.161). Instead he retreated, to  
 Iceland and later to the Hebrides, looking at communities where  
 traditional patterns of living, though doomed, might hold.

Hynes concludes, unsurprisingly, that the journey to Iceland was  
 interesting to the poets as an opportunity to meditate on themselves  
 rather than their ostensible subject. The book they produced,  
 'though it appears to record a temporary escape from Europe and the  
 present, is really about the generation's inescapable involvement in  
 its time, and in contemporary European disasters...' (p.289). Auden's  
 attachment to Anglo-Saxon and Norse/Teutonic literature is well-known;

that they attracted MacNeice is less obvious. Like Auden, he would have been drawn by its dwelling on the theme of exile, on homes longed-for and destroyed. Certainly he ranked Dasent's translation of Burnt Njal with his 'sacred books' at Marlborough (Strings, p.98), and he adapted Icelandic sagas for radio in 1947: The Death of Gunnar, The Burning of Njal and Grettir the Strong.

It is Grettir who makes a ghostly appearance in the 'Eclogue from Iceland' (p.40). He is a less sympathetic hero than Njal, but might have appealed to MacNeice in this context because the saga compares him to Audun of Audunarstad. Auden himself is sketched in the speaker Craven, MacNeice in Ryan, in the dialogue with Grettir. The theme of the poem is appropriate both to the eclogue, in its comparison of a sophisticated society with a simpler past, and to the saga, whose authors tended to look back from an age of deceit and corruption to a time of integrity and honour. Like them, MacNeice is not interested in idealising the past, but in using it as a means of comment on the present, yet through Grettir he conveys the strangeness, superhuman action and magnitude of scale of Icelandic life, which the nineteenth century translators such as Dasent and Morris tried to communicate.

In the bibliography to Chapter VI of Letters from Iceland, William Morris's Journal 1871-1873 is specially recommended. Morris recorded the excitement with which he visited places associated with Grettir, and as May Morris notes in her introduction to Volume VII of the Collected Works, 'greeted him "through the dark" in two sonnets, one of which appeared in the first pages of the volume [i.e. Journals]. I give here the other,...'<sup>1</sup> The sonnet, 'Grettir,

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1. Volume VII: The Story of Grettir the Strong, the Story of the Volsungs and Niblungs (London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1911), p.xix.

didst thou live utterly for nought' meditates on his 'fame unsought' and the way his story has reverberated in men's minds, closing, 'Speak, Grettir, through the dark: I am anear'. MacNeice obviously knew the first, and possibly the second, sonnet; his own eclogue thus links him with the late nineteenth century passion for the Nordic past. As he flippantly expresses it in 'Letter to Graham and Anna':

I will set forth  
The obscure but powerful ethics of Going North.  
Morris did it before, dropping the frills and fuss,  
Harps and arbours, Tristram and Theseus,  
For a land of rocks and sagas.

The prefaces to the Collected Poems do not indicate that the 'Eclogue from Iceland' differs from the version published in Letters from Iceland; it corresponds to that appearing in the American Poems 1925-1940 (New York: Random House, 1941). The extant draft of the poem is of the first and longer version, marked 'for New Writing', whose first issue had appeared in Spring 1936 (Lockwood: blue-covered notebook). MacNeice altered it by excising most of the initial conversation before Grettir's appearance. Reference will be made to three stages of the text: A being the Lockwood draft, B as it appears in Letters (p.124), C its form in the Collected Poems. A and B make what Craven and Ryan leave behind them more explicit and personal. They are presented as two men who at home lead a regular, bourgeois life--'kowtowing to boss or wife', B ('wage or wife': A)--but who, in wanting to 'stay here a week like a placid brute' (A and B), express a desire to escape from external pressure towards conformity. Moreover, they wish to escape the intrusion of particular nightmares, and here perhaps the poets' 'real' personalities are hinted at, with Craven's 'Never dream of the empty church' and Ryan's déjà vu scene of abandonment: 'Nor of waiting in the

familiar porch / With the broken bellpull, but the name / Above the door is not the same'. Ryan's lines in the draft, '& beside this cold & cutting stream / We should sleep & never dream' become in B more murmurous, lulling: 'And beside this cold and silicate stream / To sleep in sheepskin, never dream'.

The entrance of Grettir in A and B is prefaced by Ryan's saying 'Who could it be? / Except the echo of you and me'. This is physically possible and also gives Grettir a rôle as the projection of an interior running debate, not only a saga ghost. It was omitted with the other lines--thirty-three in all--perhaps because MacNeice felt it too lengthy an approach to the meeting, lessening the drama, and made redundant by later conversation which does reveal what absences their isolation involves. The remark by Ryan in A and B, 'And he is limping in one leg', is split in C into 'What are those limping steps I hear?' and 'He is walking lame in the left leg', presumably a reference to the self-inflicted axe wound that helped to hasten Grettir's death, though alliteration wins over fidelity to the saga.<sup>1</sup>

MacNeice constructs for Grettir speech both slightly archaic and colloquial, full of phrases that might be proverbial or quasi-formulaic. In A, his rhetorical question goes: 'Tell me / Are there still men with [ ] [ ] / Whose people drive them to the hills?'; in its altered form there is perhaps an Audenish tinge, compasses and forbidden roads; the men are self-impelled, not compelled by others. Grettir characterises Craven as 'You with crowsfeet round your eyes', Ryan as 'you with the burglar's underlip':

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1. Morris's translation reads: '...but as soon as ever the axe touched the wood, it turned flatlings and glanced off therefrom into Grettir's right leg above the knee, in such wise that it stood in the bone, and a great wound was that' p.194.

Too many people. My memory will go,  
 Lose itself in the hordes of modern people.  
 Memory is words; we remember what others  
 Say and record of ourselves--stones with the runes.

(C, p.41)

The statement is ambiguous: the memory of Grettir will 'lose itself in the hordes of subject modern peoples' (A), that is, the example of a man whom disaster kept witty and restless will be lost; and in time his own memory will go, becoming less secure with each encounter, as has already been shown. Originally MacNeice wanted to make the point that:

~~Subjective & objective [~~<sup>memory</sup>~~], closer connected~~  
~~Than is commonly thought, / here renders what others~~  
 Say & record of oneself--Stones into runes. (A)

He would have been acutely aware of the common experience of not knowing whether what one remembers--of a childhood incident, for instance--is a memory peculiar to oneself, or what has been retailed by others. The A text, 'Stones into runes', is a nicer phrase than that for which MacNeice settled; gravestones runically carved mean that death freezes memory, but might be interpreted in the wider context of the stony landscape in which the dialogue takes place: telling its own story, summoning its ghost, serving as the grave of the sagas.

On the other hand, the alteration of Ryan's following speech, which in A reads:

~~My countrymen like [~~<sup>diehard</sup>~~]~~ drayhorses  
 Bludgeoned with sectarian religion  
 Drag their own deaths behind them.  
~~Snipers on the roof tops for~~

generalises the comment and in so doing, strengthens it. The same phasing out of emotive words, only more ruthlessly because he is less involved in the country, occurs in the reference to Spain given to Craven (although Auden did not visit the country until the Civil

War had broken out). The draft begins: 'This Easter I was in Spain which now is burning', becomes cavalier: 'This Easter I was in Spain lucky to get my month', returns to the dramatic, '... before the bombs' and finally seizes the factual: '... before the Civil War'. MacNeice was tempted to enlarge on the culinary delights of the trip, then omitted mention of 'The paella on Sundays, prawns & [montilla]'. The line 'Why shd I ~~bother~~ trouble who was only looking for dope' has the journalistic phrase that fits the earlier admission, 'It was all copy', but it prompted him to change the description to 'addict to petty drugs', which appears in B and C as 'addict to oblivion' (without the melodrama of A's further qualification, 'the gloved exile'). As it stands, the phrase is reminiscent of 'Ode': 'I must put away this drug'. The tug of nothingness, repellent and seductive, reappears throughout the poetry.

While his manner of speaking is successful in the main, Grettir is made to take risks with language as his last way of living on the edge. 'I was the doomed tough' is acceptable, but at the close of that speech the balance between archaism and colloquialism is very uneasy. MacNeice apparently had trouble working out Grettir's 'daily goods' (p.43); A has:

~~I did~~ ~~Not~~ wishing to die, preferred ~~good food and drink~~  
the common gods  
the jokes of peasants  
~~& peasant jokes~~  
women's  
~~& jokes & bodily fleshly love~~  
~~the jokes of thralls & women in their beds~~  
~~women in bed & a joint of meat per day~~  
a joke, a woman's thigh's, a joint ~~per day~~ of meat

The final version is still unsatisfactory: 'For I, / Joker and dressy, held no mystic's pose', the combination is ill-sorted, and the synecdoche of 'women's thighs' next to 'a joint of meat' is



unfortunate, though no doubt deliberate. MacNeice seems concerned to present Grettir as entirely unsophisticated, unlike Dasent or Morris who infused the speech of their saga heroes with a certain courtliness. When Craven wants to compare modern men with those of the sagas, he removes all flamboyance from his description of the former--the A version has the age wearing 'a blasé face to face its doom'--and blunts the motives of the latter, who were originally (A) allowed to risk their lives 'to protect a friend', as well as 'to fill their bellies' and 'to avenge an affront'. This is as close as MacNeice comes to condoning a cult of force. Although he was a great admirer of physical skill--as his later poems about games testify--there was never a hint of his praising strength for its own sake, nor was there the slightest inclination towards following a leader. Action was, for him, just part of the balanced life.

The particular tawdriness of 'this dyspeptic age of ingrown cynics' is symbolised at this point by the World War I soldier, crippled and begging, the man to whom it had been sworn that a society fit for heroes would be established. The saga heroes had been served no better: Grettir makes the point that the survivors, in any age, are 'the sly and the dumb'. Cutting across the evocation of decline and hardship comes the music of the world Craven and Ryan endeavoured to escape, where the more real experience is that culled from books, not direct encounter. The artists he chooses are admired for being 'tortured' but Cézanne, at least, was not part of the Marxist pantheon, having begun 'the dehumanizing of art, a too great concentration on formal qualities', (Blunt, p.168). Or else the everyday world is blotted out by the new magic of



films.<sup>1</sup>

Grettir is both haunting and haunted. In the saga his fear of the dark is linked with his meeting Glam, a legendary adversary, and his declining fortunes thereafter. At first, when night begins to fall in the 'Eclogue', MacNeice had him asking Craven and Ryan to share his vision: 'Look, do you see his eyes, the idiot glare' (A), but he changed this to something private and sterner, perhaps recollecting the line from The Choephoroi that had struck him some year before ('... I am feeling silly after the Orestia--You don't see them you don't but I see them'.)<sup>2</sup>

The dark is falling. Soon the air  
Will stare with eyes, the undying ghost  
Who cursed me when I threw him. Must  
The curse go on for ever? I,  
A ghost myself, cannot hope to die. (A)

The alterations make the speech less dramatic: 'undying' to 'stubborn' for example. Meanwhile Craven and Ryan are indulging in their own dream of 'Strauss and roses'. 'The sweet confetti of music falls' replaced 'Heavily scented petals fall' (A), matching the artificiality of the whole, including the stagey 'Corinthian capitals'. The more suggestive 'Blend to the marrow as the music dies' supplants in B and C MacNeice's various attempts around 'His lazy hand cajoles her thighs', which besides being too close to Grettir's 'daily goods' is reminiscent of the mechanical seduction of the typist in The Waste Land, whereas MacNeice wants to convey the swooning sensation.

The eclogue form was particularly suited to an adaptation of Eliot's poetic method, the cutting and swift changes of tone that

1. 'The pause before the film again / Bursts in a shower of golden rain'. Bergonzi suggests that MacNeice is alluding deliberately to Zeus's appearance to the Danae: 'The film could manifest a godlike power and the cinema was a temple as well as a picture-palace'. Reading the Thirties (London: Macmillan, 1978), p.126.
2. Letter to Blunt, postmarked 27 March 1927. Misc. 37B.

MacNeice admired. His pleasure in manipulation can be sensed, his delight in the words apparently pelting down so easily. The counter-point works well when, with the Voice of Europe as parenthesis, the three speakers spin a litany of dead heroes. The Voice is jazzy-- 'Always on the dance with an eye to the main / Chance', (the caesura mimicking syncopation)--and nonchalant: 'Who cares / If floods depopulate China?'; while Craven, Ryan and Grettir give Yeatsian acknowledgements to the boldly individual dead:

There was MacKenna  
Spent twenty years translating Greek philosophy,  
Ill and tormented, unwilling to break contract,  
A brilliant talker who left  
The salon for the solo flight of Mind.<sup>1</sup>

The poem continues as a catalogue of obstacles against which man is urged to go his own way, 'give the voice the lie, / Outstare the inhuman eyes'. The 'minute gesture' to be made is the adoption of a moral stance: duty is the 'assertion of human values'. Although action is imperative, and the contemporary context in which it must be carried out is made quite explicit by Craven--'Where any day now may see the Gadarene swine / Rush down the gullets of the London tubes / When the enemy, X or Y, let loose their gas'--the possibility of its being political is not even mooted. Hynes's remarks about 'Auden and MacNeice: Their Last Will and Testament' are also applicable to 'Eclogue from Iceland'. He notes that while the poem is riddled with private jokes, the beginning and end are sombre, and the whole is meant seriously: 'What Auden and MacNeice have done is to remove the growing sense of threat from the world of politics,

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1. Dodds describes in Missing Persons Stephen MacKenna's 'heroic struggle' to edit Plotinus (p.63). While he was compiling a life and letters of MacKenna, MacNeice joined him in Dublin; the trip included a sedate tea with Yeats.

and to place it in the world of morality. It is a significant change of heart'. (p.291).

Unseriously, the poets proposed a list of beneficiaries for 'Their Last Will' (p.236) which in the notebook is enormous (Lockwood). Not all of them are included in the poem as printed, and for some the appropriate gift could not be decided on: Virginia Woolf was to have had Hampton Court (she and her husband got the towers of the Crystal Palace); in the New Verse spirit the three Sitwells were to have been left to the S.P.C.A.; Isaiah Berlin's 'saucer of milk' was at first a less subtle 'Doctorate in Gossip'. The conservative list of bequests to T.S. Eliot, including a Stilton, remained unpublished. Besides this collaboration, MacNeice contributed five out of the fifteen sections of Letters from Iceland. Auden's 'Letter to Lord Byron' is clearly the pièce de résistance, but 'Hetty to Nancy' is, as the TLS reviewer said, 'a joyous document' (he suspected Auden to be the author. 7 August 1937, p.572). Indeed most of MacNeice's prose, apart from occasional dull stretches in the pot-boilers, has this verve and precision; it is still evident in his portrait of Dublin, 'Under the Sugar Loaf', and makes one wish he had turned to prose more often.

There is intermittent gaiety in the 'Letter to Graham and Anna' (Shepard: son of E.H. Shepard, Graham was one of MacNeice's closest friends at Marlborough and Oxford), which circles around dilemmas similar to those of the 'Eclogue': escape, what is left behind, what is to be salvaged; the distance between the simple past and 'this complex world'. The extant draft version is not substantially different from that printed, changes being mostly in the direction of substituting shorter phrases (Lockwood: blue-covered notebook). Sound is often the spur: for instance 'This is the sort of thing

that makes me stretch' becomes 'This is the fret that makes us cat-like stretch'; 'Aristotle with his formal phraseology' is cut to 'Aristotle's pedantic phraseology'; 'The Medici manuscripts have ~~handed down the tale~~ told of places / Where common sense was ~~memorial~~ wedded to the graces'. MacNeice had as little patience with a psychological interpretation of life as with a Marxist one, though it is doubtful that his knowledge of either was deep. When accounting for his journey he wanted to underplay the sense of quest, and yet give it some place: Auden had asked and 'I said yes, having nothing better to do'. Originally he continued, 'As the psychologists say, we do not make a choice / On such a merely mechanical stimulus', but he substituted the more general assertion that 'all the same we never make any choice ...'. The old Celtic connection conceivably influenced his assent; he mentions in the 'Letter':

certain unknown  
 Old Irish hermits, ~~sanctified~~ holy skin & bone,  
 Settled among these crags in order to forget  
 Sleek Kerry cows in pastures green & wet.

The settled/sleek alliteration goes in favour of 'Camped on these crags', and colour is assigned not to the pastures (too biblical?) but the cows.

That Iceland did symbolise a real alternative for MacNeice is obvious from the 'Letter'. Lady Nicholson has remarked on his love of the west of Ireland, how he treasured the isolation and would maintain that it was the right place for him to live, and then a while later would begin to hanker for the city. Perhaps it would be more accurate to say that Iceland represented a way of living he wished he could settle for:

Who feed our brains on backchat and self-pity  
 And always need a noise, the radio or the city,  
 Traffic and changing lights, crashing the amber,  
 Always on the move and so do not remember  
 The necessity of the silence of the islands,  
 The glacier floating in the distance out of existence,

He had at first written 'backchat and our emotions': the change conforms to the pattern of rhyming couplets, but is also a harder judgement, perhaps more strictly honest. This is a glacier (once in the 'non-existent distance') from the actual environment, and carries a different value from the metaphorical glacier in the poem of that name (1933, p.24), where it is a deadening object, an inexorable advance of stone.

'And there are some who scorn this poésie de départs', but not MacNeice, whose ruminations on the significance of departure and the potential of destinations were clearly associated with the rupture of his marriage. His lines in the 'Letter' on the illusory promise of escape, 'The songs of jazz have told us of a moon country...' are echoed by the last poem in the 1934-36 Notebook, which in a jazzy way itself creates the mood of the island the MacNeices inhabited in Birmingham, and is explicit about MacNeice's sense of abandonment, 'dizzy with her repercussions / Among striped doors & cups & patch-work cushions'.

Mary is directly mentioned in the 'Last Will', but it is possible that MacNeice also considered her as a recipient of a letter from Iceland. The draft of a valedictory poem takes up several pages in the blue-covered notebook, which suggests that he was working on it while in Iceland, although the immediate occasion seems to be packing up house in Birmingham for the move to Keats Grove, Hampstead. This may have been accomplished mainly before the Icelandic trip, as MacNeice did not return until September, and the term at Bedford College--where he took up a post as Lecturer in Greek--would have begun shortly afterwards. Iceland marked the break in his life: the finish of his marriage, of his first job, of his residence in Birmingham. The poem MacNeice drafted is full of similes for

closure--'a day's play is sealed / & put away in a drawer'--and becomes the source of lines in Autumn Journal (notably in Canto II) about the kind of life that was ending:

The past holds on to us. Those who have taken food  
In the sunless kingdom never again make good  
Their escape into the world of sunny crops  
As found Persephone who gaily going up  
Learned that she had been tricked and must return.

It was in this mood of desolation that MacNeice composed a 'Postscript to Iceland: for W.H. Auden' (p.73; entitled 'Epilogue: for W.H. Auden' in Letters) and drew together, as later in Autumn Journal, private and public causes for melancholy. Three adjacent poems in the collected edition, 'Passage Steamer' (p.72), 'Postscript' and 'Sand in the Air' (p.75), use the same stretch of experience: greyness, monotony of sea or sky, the bleakness of desertion after the 'fancy turn, you know,': it was at first a 'comic turn'; 'fancy' is flipper. The form of the 'Postscript' is appropriately Audenesque; 'Sand in the Air' also seems vaguely reminiscent of Auden's song 'Stop all the clocks, cut off the telephone', which was part of The Ascent of F6.<sup>1</sup> 'Postscript' is a long fuse of fear: 'down in Europe Seville fell' and the Aryan Olympics were run; the city closes in with the approach of winter and a return to interpreting dead books:

Through that forest of dead words  
I would hunt the living birds--

Great black birds that fly alone  
Slowly through a land of stone,

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1. The third and fourth stanzas were revised when the poem was printed in Another Time (p.81) as one of 'Four Cabaret Songs for Miss Hedli Anderson', the singer who became MacNeice's second wife.

And the gulls who weave a free  
Quilt of rhythm on the sea.<sup>1</sup>

A set of birds different from those who in 'Passage Steamer',  
'insinuate that nothing we pass is past, / That all our beginnings  
were long since begun'. Fear of 'loneliness / And uncommunicable-  
ness'--the very clumsiness of the word attesting to obstacles--  
operates on the personal level and by implication, dangerously, on  
a public one; the fuse ignites in the last stanza:

Our prerogatives as men  
Will be cancelled who knows when;  
Still I drink your health before  
The gun-butt raps upon the door.

This has the air of an earlier world of Auden's, the arena of  
missions and trials of strength, unknown destinations and dangers.  
But it is not the stuff of legend nor, as Hynes points out, of  
melodrama. That year the poet Lorca was killed and, in different  
circumstances, John Cornford. MacNeice had met Cornford once, as  
a hitch-hiker, and had been enormously impressed (see Strings,  
p.157). He wrote to Blunt with uncharacteristic enthusiasm:  
'... obviously he is the one chap of the whole damn lot of you who  
is going to be a great man. There is still hope for the human  
race'. (7 May 1936. Misc.37G). Referring to the stanza quoted  
above, and to Auden's 'I'm home to Europe where I may be shot',  
Hynes concludes that: 'these passages render images of a possible  
reality that had not existed for earlier English writers; as the  
end of the decade approached, the alien and frightful violence of  
The Brown Book of the Hitler Terror was becoming domesticated in  
English imaginations' (p.292).

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1. c.f. the Agamemnon epigraph to Poems, as a metaphor for writing.  
The idea of natural movement somehow inhering in texts appealed  
to MacNeice; he had used it in the poem 'Glacier', mentioned  
above:

And therefore turn away to slower things  
And rejoice there to have found the speed of fins and wings  
In the minnow--twisting of the latinist who alone  
Nibbles and darts through the shallows of the lexicon

One of the most famous poems of the period, distinctly more insouciant than any of the Icelandic ones, was MacNeice's 'Bagpipe Music' (p.96). It first appeared in England in New Verse (January 1938, p.2), having already been slipped into Poems (1937) published by Random House. The Humanities Research Centre at Texas has a bound set of New Verse with annotations and letters received by the editor. Grigson noted at the end of 'Bagpipe Music': 'A poem refused by The Listener as indelicate'.

There is a recording of MacNeice reading a selection of his poems, made in 1961; 'Bagpipe Music' is the light relief ending the first side.<sup>1</sup> His prefatory remarks are adapted from his commentary on the record sleeve: he sees the poem in the context of the Munich year, though anticipating it; like 'The Sunlight on the Garden' (1937, p.84) 'very much of its period in that it is permeated with a sense of imminent doom in the outer world'. On the surface, it is 'a nonsense poem and a piece of technical fun and games (the bad feminine rhymes are meant to suggest the wheeze of the pipes)', underneath it is 'a satirical elegy for the Gaelic districts of Scotland and indeed for all traditional culture'. MacNeice's reading of the poem is a raspingly vigorous performance, gathering speed as it goes and ending on an up-beat. McKinnon detects the 'skirling rhythms of the reel (predominant iambs and trochees) interwoven with the slower trisyllabic rhythms of the strathspey' (p.203): to such rhythmic virtuosity MacNeice adds ingenious rhymes--'...it's no-go Blavatsky / ...a bit of skirt in a taxi'--and sophisticated yet accessible wit. It is readily comprehensible because it

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1. Louis MacNeice Reading His Own Poems, Argo, RG196.



connects so precisely with contemporary life, from 'their knickers are made of crêpe-de-chine' to Willie Murray's brother who 'went upon the parish'; it uses facts that were really painful ('the winds will blow the profit') with the awareness that playing with them removed the sting, yet in the act the player was himself debunked.

His visit to the Hebrides was the result of a commission from Longmans, lightly fulfilled under financial pressure with I Crossed the Minch. MacNeice was blunt about his reaction to the commercial invasion of the islands: the process might be inevitable, but he would prefer 'to watch it somewhere where it is further advanced, where differences of wealth are of long standing and where, though the primitive culture is gone, a sophisticated culture has succeeded it. More than one generation is required before a man can be a capitalist with grace.'<sup>1</sup> But the 'Life of Lord Leverhulme' expresses his distaste for the exploiters, in the satirical vein of 'Bagpipe Music' and in ballad form (Minch, p.79. It was not reprinted in any English collection). The quatrains are in more conventional short lines, the rhymes more obvious, as indeed is the whole poem. MacNeice had experimented with the adaptation of popular songs (1929-34 Notebook), and he uses this trick to open the long poem, which closes with Leverhulme plying his trade amidst the heavenly host. The sedate final stanza would seem to belie MacNeice's fears of the damage imported culture would wreak on the Isles:

But far below in the Western Seas  
The moors were quiet in the Hebrides,  
The crofters gossiped in Gaelic speech  
And the waves crept over the lonely beach.

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1. 'The Hebrides: a tripper's commentary', The Listener, 6 October 1937, p.718.

If these quatrains attest to the influence of Auden, whom MacNeice consistently praised and not least for his 'return to a versification in more regular stanzas and rhymes' (New Verse, November 1937, p.12), then the monument to his contemporary was undoubtedly his play: '...[I] was mortifying my aesthetic sense by trying to write as Wystan did, without bothering too much with finesse (witness Out of the Picture),...' (Strings, p.169). F.O. Mathiessen remarked that the play seemed to have been affected 'by the least valuable elements in Auden' (Responsibilities, p.108).

MacNeice had tried his hand at plays twice before: at Birmingham the University Dramatic Society produced his Station Bell to round off a term, and the Group Theatre acted his translation of the Agamemnon in November 1936. He wrote to Blunt about the former: 'My play is still unfinished--so protean--but I hope it will be done in London by a thing called, I think, the Group Theatre. I am afraid it wouldn't be allowed in the I.F.S. as De Val. wld take it personally. It will look very well on the boards' (postmarked 8 June 1934. Misc. 37F). It was a satirical farce about a future Ireland under a very topical dictator and an Irish brand of fascism: the dictator is a woman, Julia, and part of the play concerns her relationship with her unaggressive husband. A feeling of unreality pervades the work, particularly the chaotic ending involving men dressed as giants. (Texas).

When MacNeice approached T.S. Eliot about publishing the Agamemnon translation, he slipped in a word for a play of his own, then called The Rising Venus (letter dated 9 May [1936]). He had mentioned it sometime before to Rupert Doone, referring to the 'Irishness' of an unnamed play--presumably Station Bell--and saying that he was writing another which would be less of a compromise

between two traditions (22 July [1935], Berg). MacNeice articulated his theoretical position in a 'Dialogue on the necessity for an active tradition and experiment', which he and Doone spoke in the Group Theatre rooms on 22 November 1936 (Berg), and later in an article 'The Play and the Audience', contributed to a symposium.<sup>1</sup>

In the Group Theatre dialogue, MacNeice argued for an essentially Aristotelian version of tragedy, centering on the idea that a play should be an 'organic unity'. He admired Yeats's effort to revive poetic drama, but maintained that his values were anachronistic and that the verse itself was 'too obviously traditional in style'. However, he found Yeats's theorising valuable, in its reaction away from character, its emphasis on ideas, plot and poetry. MacNeice suggested that Eliot in Murder in the Cathedral, and Auden in The Ascent of F6 corroborated the theory in practice. 'We go to a play to see the bold patterns of life stripped of the ivy and creepers of personal idiosyncrasies. This was so in Greek tragedy. The main pattern of the play will of course be very greatly brought out and reinforced by the producer'. This nod in Doone's direction would not have been entirely reverent: to MacNeice's anxiety over the Agamemnon's being static (letter dated 13 March 1936, Berg), Doone's response was, 'I am dynamic, so fuck all' (this and subsequent information from Missing Persons, p.132). His proposal to have Cassandra 'gibbering unseen in a sort of portable bathing tent', as MacNeice described it, was fortunately eliminated during rehearsal, but on the first night the Chorus were still dressed in dinner jackets. Dodds felt that in the general

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1. Footnotes to the Theatre, ed. R.D. Charques (London: Peter Davies, 1938) pp.32-43.

attempt to prove Aeschylus 'relevant', Doone had made a 'dreadful hash', and did not wonder at Yeats's comment that they were assisting at the death of tragedy. Nevertheless, the dinner jacket detail must have impressed at least one member of the audience: T.S. Eliot originally planned to have the Furies in The Family Reunion dressed likewise.

Agamemnon was better received than Out of the Picture, though the latter was undoubtedly more suited to the Group Theatre style. It was a play that nearly conformed to the credo MacNeice set out in the symposium:

I think that plays should be written about the important problems which fill the lives of nations and individuals....Plays on generalised subjects should probably be written by poets, using probably some non-naturalistic technique.... Belief and rhythm--the two things least evident in our modern theatre--are the two things most to be desired in it.

(Footnotes, p.42)

By 'important problems' MacNeice did not intend political ones; indeed in the same article he wrote contemptuously of what was passed off as theatre because of its political content, by playwrights catering to a clique; he mentioned particularly 'the aegis of Mr Victor Gollancz and the shadow of Spain' (p.37). Out of the Picture has two plot levels: one is the fairly complicated life of a portrait painter, Portwright, and Moll O'Hara (the model for his picture 'Venus Rising'), which intersects with that of Clara de Groot, a film star who is being incompetently analysed by Dr Spielmann; the other is the slow advance of war. It is plain that Portwright and Moll represent the life-giving powers of art: when his painting is auctioned and then unveiled, everyone in the room--as Dr Spielmann has predicted--falls in love. But the artist cannot stand against the inhuman, life-denying forces, which grind on

despite Portwright's killing the Minister of Peace.

The mechanistic progress of destruction is conveyed by means of a Radio Announcer, and a Listener, who close most of the scenes of the first act. Hynes is right to say that the entrance of war in radio announcements--'... and that is all that now remains of Paris. The destruction was completed under schedule time. The remaining population is calculated at not more than...' (Picture, p.113)--is a way of giving it remoteness and pestilential inevitability (pp.294-5), but it is also a clumsy device at times, as in the announcement of a talk about the Olympic Games. No nation is competing, so a Mr Smith is asked to read a poem in praise of the 'great Greek athlete Pindar'. He complies with 'Pindar is dead' (C.P., p.79), a rather negligent ode to decadence, and is followed by the Radio Announcer and Listener, drinking whisky together and beginning to declaim the section entitled 'Les neiges d'antan' in Collected Poems (p.80). A chorus (off) takes over with lines of urban apocalypse, shouting 'FIRE' at intervals in a mock-Eliot style.

Another echo of Eliot is found in 'The jingles of the morning' (p.82), MacNeice's paeon to the commonplace joys that will disappear with the war:

Shall we remember the games with puffball and plantain,  
Searching for the lost handle to the silent fountain,  
Hiding in the shrubbery, shutting our eyes and counting?

Burnt Norton was published in April 1936; Out of the Picture sent to Faber's in June of the same year.

The elegiac mood, already present in the Letters from Iceland, and at its finest in Autumn Journal, was peculiarly suited to MacNeice's temperament: it even crept into his literary criticism in 1938. Modern Poetry, despite all the signs of revival and hope that MacNeice found in Auden and his contemporaries, was written in the

shadow of crisis, in the expectation that poetry might 'for the time be degraded or even silenced' (p.205). This 'plea for impure poetry, that is, for poetry conditioned by the poet's life and the world around him' (Preface, n.p.), was concerned with the anatomising of that life, in terms of taste and intellect, as well as analysis of his generation's poetry. MacNeice has been unfairly subsumed in 'MacSpaunday', a myth perpetuated in part by his own book. Randall Jarrell noted in the Kenyon Review that his having to bracket Spender with Auden, out of modesty not calling attention to his own work, led to a certain weakness in his examples.<sup>1</sup>

He produced 'My Case-Book' because he believed that personal factors were vital in determining what was written, but these were themselves offered as typical of his class, background and age, which he held in common with most of his literary peers. For Hynes, one of the values of the book is MacNeice's ability to describe 'the sentimental bases of his generation's attitudes. He stresses the generation's nostalgia, which was already in their childhoods a part of consciousness (to be post-war was to be nostalgic, almost by definition), and their bookish ignorance of life, and their essential elitism (which is simply class-sentimentality, after all)' (p.332). The result of this conditioning was a change of attitude among the poets: they would take sides on issues, make an emotional stand; and they would make form more flexible to match altered circumstances, even simplify reality if necessary. Thus the break

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1. 'From that Island', Autumn 1939, pp.468-71. Jarrell also pointed out, with some acerbity, that the title actually meant modern English poetry, since MacNeice took no account of Wallace Stevens or William Carlos Williams, for example, and made only fleeting mention of Pound.

between Auden and Eliot: although MacNeice himself is quick to say that moving away from an aesthetic or mystical view of poetry, taking greater account of the material world in which he moves, must not blind the poet to human sympathies, or render his world picture crudely coloured.

The insistence in Modern Poetry is above all on poetry as a non-specialised activity, almost a natural overflow from conversation, and correspondingly on the poet as a man wholly alert, but not essentially different from other men. The conclusion of the book contains the nub of MacNeice's contentions, his much-quoted ideal of a poet, who is:

a blend of the entertainer and the critic or informer; he is not a legislator...nor yet, essentially, a prophet....His object is...to record a fact plus and therefore modified by his own emotional reaction to it;...

...I would have a poet able-bodied, fond of talking, a reader of the newspapers, capable of pity and laughter, informed in economics, appreciative of women, involved in personal relationships, actively interested in politics, susceptible to physical impressions.

(pp.197-8)

This characterisation was to set the pattern for MacNeice criticism, inescapably: it accounted for many facets of his own personality and it was in the spirit of the decade, if belatedly, in rendering the artist more accessible to his public. What poetry added to life, MacNeice went on to say, often consisted 'merely in the illumination of that public's own experience' (p.200).

However limited a definition, it did provide the critical rationale for Autumn Journal, as Walter Allen points out in his introduction to the 1968 edition of Modern Poetry. The poem is generally considered to have captured the mood of the Munich weeks more successfully than any contemporary writing: '...he put a lot of day to day living, almost journalism, into it, and yet the total

effect is that of a complete phase of the thirties, the post-Munich depression one might call it, absolutely realised and felt in every line of the poem, even when it's about something else,...'<sup>1</sup>

Disappointingly, there are no traces of drafts, emended copies, or notes for the poem in any available collection. Ernst Stahl, recalling MacNeice's periods of creativity 'over the years in unexpected places', remembered that 'he wrote a section of Autumn Journal in a Paris bar' ('The Faust Translation', in Time Was Away, p.70). The only, and scarcely telling, hint is a comment in a letter to Eliot (4 October 1937) to the effect that MacNeice was considering the possibility of writing a book about his experience teaching Classics--and learning them at Marlborough and Oxford--some of which, he thought, could be in verse.

Besides the explanatory note which prefaces the poem, MacNeice provided one extensive gloss on his intentions. This was attached to a brief letter to Eliot (22 November 1938) and was intended as the relevant entry, or a basis for it, in Faber's Spring Catalogue.

Autumn Journal:

A long poem from 2,000 to 3,000 lines written from August to December 1938. Not strictly a journal but giving the tenor of my intellectual and emotional experiences during that period.

It is about nearly everything which from firsthand experience I consider significant.

It is written in sections averaging about 80 lines in length. This division gives it a dramatic quality, as different parts of myself (e.g. the anarchist, the defeatist, the sensual man, the philosopher, the would-be good citizen) can be given their say in turn.

It contains rapportage, metaphysics, ethics, lyrical

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1. Cyril Connolly, Radio Portrait, Columbia transcription, n.p. The transcriptions held in the Columbia University Library (New York) are unedited versions of the contributions, and will be indicated henceforth as C.t.



emotion, autobiography, nightmare.

There is a constant interrelation of abstract and concrete. Generalizations balanced by pictures. ...

It is written throughout in an elastic kind of quatrain. This form a) gives the whole poem a formal unity but b) saves it from monotony by allowing it a great range of appropriate variations. ...

I think this is my best work to date, it is both a panorama and a confession of faith.

A poem elastic enough to include all the above has of course earned criticism, summed up by John Lehmann in New Writing in Europe (Harmondsworth: Allen Lane, Penguin Books, 1940) '...rambling, facile, prosy at times, never very deep or certain in thought, rather too conspicuously elaborating the picture of an easy-going but attractive personality' (p.116). On the contrary, the poem does have a discernible structure and movement; its verbal ease, though sometimes self-indulgent, has precision as well as facility; the thought is of necessity uncertain, and does not set out to be profound; the personality emerges as attractive, but primarily troubled and diffident.

Most of the poem's concerns are broached in the opening canto: the life of the secure bourgeois, the potential for its being undermined, the life of other classes--the poem is very conscious of social hierarchy--and the feeling for endings: end of a season, of one way of living, of a marriage; all the old dispensations going. There is also a pervasive sense of movement, of urban rhythm. Although there are glimpses of the countryside, they are usually caught from moving vehicles. MacNeice sees domesticated nature, city parks and well-kept gardens.

In the first section of Autumn Journal (p.101), there is the faintest echo of the summer before the last war, which was remembered as the most brilliant in years:

Close and slow, summer is ending in Hampshire,  
Ebbing away down ramps of shaven lawn where close-  
clipped yew  
Insulates the lives of retired generals and admirals  
And the spyglasses hung in the hall and the  
prayer-books ready in the pew  
And August going out to the tin trumpets of nasturtiums

The recurrent cantos of philosophizing are probably the least strong elements of the poem, but they are not inessential. II and III are concerned with the difficulties of continuing, the necessity for change, the hankering for the past and stability in both private and public spheres. The temptation to oblivion, 'pure Not-Being, Nirvana', is weighed against the thought that 'Becoming is a match for Being': MacNeice as indulgent solipsist against MacNeice who wishes to bear witness to 'the human animal's endless courage', to align himself with the others. They, too, are returning at the end of August, taking up old lives, routines of work and solace. He may have borne in mind the thirtieth poem in Auden's Look Stranger (1936, p.63), the birthday poem to Isherwood which opens 'August for the people and their favourite islands', and contains the lines:

So in this hour of crisis and dismay,  
What better than your strict and adult pen  
Can warn us from the colours and the consolations,  
The showy arid works, reveal  
The squalid shadow of academy and garden,  
Make action urgent and its nature clear?

MacNeice implies that this is not only the novelist's but also the poet's dilemma, and considers as honestly as he might the position of an a-political, or at least non-aligned intellectual, faced with the possibility of action. He had engaged in the same debate in I Crossed the Minch, with a censorious Guardian Angel who doubted the extent of his political commitment:

My sympathies are Left. On paper and in the soul.  
But not in my heart or my guts. On paper--yes.  
I would vote Left any day, sign manifestoes,  
answer questionnaires. Ditto, my soul. My soul  
is all for moving towards the classless society.  
But unlike Plato, what my soul says does not seem  
to go....With my heart and my guts I lament the  
passing of class.

(pp.125,127)

In Autumn Journal he is more willing to take the Angel's part, yet

the main impression is of a divided being. This was written at a time when other intellectuals, who had readily espoused the proletariat cause, were beginning to waver: few who had made their avowals publicly now publicly disavowed their stance; it was just a quiet drift. Although MacNeice's position may not have been entirely admirable, his admission of it and fidelity to it have their own courage. In Canto III, there is still room for hope, for change on a personal scale at least:

But may I cure that habit, look up and outwards  
And may my feet follow my wider glance  
First no doubt to stumble, then to walk with the others  
And in the end--with time and luck--to dance.

This takes us naturally into Canto IV's homage to a woman, since MacNeice always associates the beloved with an ability to give life pattern and rhythm. It is in memory of an affair already over; 'And all of London littered with remembered kisses' was not an experience he would have shared with his wife. The images match some employed in 'Leaving Barra'; the woman 'whose hair is twined in all my waterfalls' is likely to be Nancy Sharp, who accompanied MacNeice on the Hebridean trip (she illustrated the book, and Zoo). Her 'words would tumble over each other and pelt / From pure excitement', a description sometimes appropriate to his own poetic style, where the choice of words and their combination seem fortunately hit upon, rather than inherently exact. The canto's exhilaration, the recognition of distinctive qualities in people and objects to which she has alerted him, sweeps him into V, which is concerned no longer with memory, but with menace.<sup>1</sup> It is the

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1. MacNeice's thanks:

...that the ranks  
Of men are ranks of men, no more of cyphers.  
So that if now alone  
I must pursue this life, it will not be only  
A drag from numbered stone to numbered stone  
But a ladder of angels, river turning tidal.

first of MacNeice's many London poems; each impression is sharpened by anxiety--'Hodza, Henlein, Hitler' replace the cricket score as the 'latest'--everything named may be destroyed.

Nelson is stone and Johnnie Walker moves his  
 Legs like a cretin over Trafalgar Square.  
 And in the Corner House the carpet-sweepers  
 Advance between the tables after crumbs  
 Inexorably, like a tank battalion  
 In answer to the drums.

He uses the technique noted in Canto I, creating unease by the insertion of military images into domesticity. The old literary game of the thirties, with spies, tests and above all, frontiers, drops its guise of play: 'The bloody frontier / Converges on our beds'. For MacNeice, going home does not obscure the fraying edges, it emphasises them.

The transition from a troubled sleep in London (V) to Spain (VI) is facilitated by a reminder of Auden's line, 'But today the struggle', from 'Spain'. Looking back on his trip to the country with Blunt, it is the Spain of literary/artistic imagination that MacNeice evokes, seen through the rain by a disgruntled tourist, noticing the 'fretted stone the Moor / Had chiselled for effects of sun and shadow', realising painfully in 1938 that

... only an inch behind  
 This map of olive and ilex, this painted hoarding,  
 Careless of visitors the people's mind  
 Was tunnelling like a mole to day and danger.

Connolly thought that MacNeice was more balanced than either Auden or Spender in his attitude to the Civil War: '...he kept his head. He was of course anti-Franco but somehow he wasn't ever one

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fn 1 continued from page 76

perhaps owes something to a recollection of Francis Thompson's 'In No Strange Land': 'The angels keep their ancient places;-- / Turn but a stone and start a wing!'; '...upon thy so sore loss / Shall shine the traffic of Jacob's ladder / Pitched betwixt Heaven and Charing Cross'.

of those bogus hunger-marchers that some people become too easily' (Radio Portrait, C.t.) From all the early Civil War writing at least, the conviction emerges that this was a simple contest between Right and Wrong. Such emotional assent is comprehensible, if at odds with the retrospective view that an imposition of foreign objectives on the Spanish struggle made the cause as complex as any. For many intellectuals it was not only a showdown between Fascism and Democracy, but also a clear polarisation of forces at work in British society. The theme of England in Spain runs through the poetry: Auden declared that 'the struggle in Spain has x-rayed the lies on which our civilization is built'; Rex Warner stressed its clarifying effect, the way it made open identification of oppressors possible: 'There the sea recedes and there the mirror is no longer blurred' ('The Tourist Looks at Spain'). MacNeice gave it the most memorable expression at the close of Canto VI; they departed from La Linea

...not realising

That Spain would soon denote  
 Our grief, our aspirations;  
 Not knowing that our blunt  
 Ideals would find their whetstone, that our spirit  
 Would find its frontier on the Spanish front,  
 Its body in a rag-tag army.

This and Canto VII are full of the world of newspaper events, the atmosphere of preparation: 'They are cutting down the trees on Primrose Hill. / The wood is white like the roast flesh of chicken';

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1. c.f. Canto III:

But some refusing harness and more who are refused it  
 Would pray that another and a better Kingdom come,  
 Which now is sketched in the air or travestied in slogans...  
 But in time may find its body in men's bodies,...

the simile is an example of his ability to draw on a fund of domestic images, a strength MacNeice admired in Herbert. Here it evokes the threatened Sunday traditions, roasts and leisure, an end to 'the old régime'. The private order that has vanished for MacNeice is described in the following canto: the sensuous carelessness of the first years of marriage in Birmingham, the companionability, the isolation from others' worries that it is part of Autumn Journal's business to break down. As Hynes justly remarks, 'somehow that life of careless love in the careless early 'thirties is made to share responsibility for the way things are at the end of the decade, for the general loss' (p.370).

The resumption of routine after Munich ('only the Czechs / Go down and without fighting'), meant for MacNeice returning to his rôle 'As impresario of the Ancient Greeks'. The Argo selection includes his reading Canto IX, of which he says: '...far from being objective about the Ancient Greeks, I see them here in the light of the mood induced in me by Munich'. Connolly noted that 'although he loved the classics, he didn't get stuck in that English Hellenistic mould, which people like Flecker and <sup>his</sup> predecessors did' (Radio Portrait, C.t.) Allowed their intellectual graces at the beginning of the canto, the Greeks degenerate as it proceeds, slipping into the same factional and double-crossing political games that compromised the policies of the thirties.

This consideration leads back naturally to MacNeice's schooling in the classics, to nostalgia for and criticism of Sherborne and Marlborough. The details he chooses are a distillation of the letters he wrote home, though undoubtedly he did not consult those for the purpose: the 'jerseys striped like tigers' for instance, and the sense of life as 'an expanding ladder', which recalls his

excitement during his first Summer Term at Sherborne.

'Generalizations balanced by pictures...': the technique works within cantos, and from one to the next; from details of school years, to statements about what was gained, and on to an emotional education: 'I am harassed by my familiar devils, / By those I cannot see, by those I may not touch';--an adaptation of a line from The Choephoroi encountered in his formal education. Canto XI is for his wife, giving her faults but wistful for a woman whose 'instinct sanctions' all she does. The balance in his worldly judgements praised by Connolly, is here implied to be a liability in coping with or matching the wife 'whose kaleidoscopic ways are all authentic, / Whose truth is not of a statement but of a dance'.

The endings of most of the cantos are muted and XI though avowing content is passive, its tone carrying over into XII: 'I wait content, banking on the spring and watching / The dead leaves canter over the dowdy grass'; 'These days are misty, insulated, mute / ...And we hardly have the heart to meddle / Any more with personal ethics or public calls'. 'Roman weather', MacNeice calls it, threading philosophy with a childhood memory of 'the sergeant barking at bayonet practice', when troops were stationed at Carrickfergus in the First World War. Between Aristotle and Plato he had for a long time chosen the 'biologist', the latter's 'world of capital initials, of transcendent / Ideas is too bleak'; he felt more comfortable with Aristotle's stress on 'function', intermittently able to find the reality of himself in his function as poet when other touchstones seemed to disappear.<sup>1</sup>

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1. '...oddly it might seem, in view of my romantic disposition, I was beginning to prefer Aristotle to Plato. ...For all his famous dryness, Aristotle,...never let transcendental radiance destroy the shapes of creatures or impose a white-out on everything'. 'When I Was Twenty One', in The Saturday Book 21, ed. John Hadfield (London: Hutchinson, 1961), pp.237-8.



MacNeice states his ideal modestly enough in this canto:

All that I would like to be is human, having a share  
In a civilised, articulate and well-adjusted  
Community where the mind is given its due  
But the body is not distrusted.

On the one hand education past a certain level encourages conformity, a desire for safety; on the other 'If it were not for Lit. Hum. I might be climbing / A ladder with a hod'. The analysis of Lit. Hum. proves to be one of the best cantos in the poem (XIII). It carries both the intellectual excitement of the course and the cool puncturing of its pretensions; it has the arrogance of the classical student 'bred to the purple', who, Connolly remarked, 'could be inclined to make other people feel they hadn't got these Firsts' (Radio Portrait p.9), while it mocks that attitude. 'That the actual was not real and the real was not with us / And all that mattered was the One' was a concept with which it was fun to play, but it did not win MacNeice's allegiance. Writing later of the same period, he was more serious about his predilection for Nietzsche, the German idealists, his flirtation with Schopenhauer:

Having been brought up in a traditionally religious family, and having, true to my period, reacted violently against the Christian dogma and, to some extent too, against the Christian ethic, I felt morally naked and spiritually hungry. So I was tempted to experiment simultaneously with two very different types of cure or defence--the Gallic grain of salt...and the hidden magic of the Rheingold. Let everything either be vanity or One! It was to take me some time to close for a middle way.

('When I was Twenty-One', p.232)

Whereas Oxford did not foster any political awareness during his undergraduate years, the by-election there in October 1938 was controversial enough for MacNeice to be 'Driving voters to the polls / In that home of lost illusions'.

Quintin Hogg, son of the Lord Chancellor and a university contemporary of MacNeice's, was defending the seat specifically on

the issue of foreign policy and the Munich Agreement. Against him stood A.D. Lindsay, the Master of Balliol, an Independent Progressive who symbolised the willingness of the Liberals to vote with the Left and the radicals against the National Government. Hogg's majority was almost halved but he retained the seat. MacNeice came away in a mood that recalled the warning he had put in Grettir's mouth:

'Each occasion must be used, however trivial':

The nicest people in England have always been the least  
Apt to solidarity or alignment  
But all of them must now align against the beast  
That prowls at every door and barks in every headline.

It is an old mood he recaptures, too, in the nightmare canto: the desire to turn his back on the menace, to blot it out with drink and companionship. There is desperation in the almost incoherent, quickly succeeding phrases, snatches of nursery rhyme, proverbs, philosophy; everything uselessly heaped up to keep the real knowledge out, though it is solidly there at the close. The predicament is that voiced in 'Wolves', now shared by a whole community.

Real violence had been present in MacNeice's life long before the thirties, in the actions of his intransigent countrymen, whom he attacks in canto XVI with some virulence. His emotion almost takes him by surprise: 'I thought I was well / Out of it, educated and domiciled in England'. The undesired strength of Ireland's attraction provides the canto's tension, and fuels its dismissive fury, to which there can be no sequel. XVII is a philosophical meditation from the bath, as though such leisurely theorising is a way of immunization against futile anger. Yet the cantos are joined in that MacNeice is exploring in both possibilities of community and division; in XVI in a national context, in XVII on a personal level, making the difficult admission that 'other people are always / Organic

to the self, that a monologue / Is the death of language'.

The next four cantos are governed by their month, December. It is a time for taking stock and for peering into the new year: pessimistic activities. The 'seeds of energy and choice' (XVIII) are barely noted, what persists is fear for the future, England diminished in the present, everything shadowed, rebirth an illusion. Christmas was associated with his wife and she is gone, he now acknowledges, without hope of return. Not only the old philosophies--Christian or humanist--mock, but also the Old Masters: 'The unfounded confidence of the dead affronts / Our own system of values' (XX, p.142). MacNeice, who sees 'the quiet hands seduce / Of the god who is god of nothing', who can appeal to no established system of belief, manages to resist the temptation to make the great refusal, and he couches this resistance in contemporary terms: 'I feel that such a defeat is also treason, / That deaths like these are lies' (XXI).

This densely interwoven poem of public and personal life does not end without its affirmations, tentative or speculative though they may be. In December as the first snow fell on London (with its still embattled air: 'At night we sleep behind stockades of frost'), MacNeice ran south--via Paris, where he absorbed the 'tourist values' and longed for flirtation--but not ~~exactly~~ for a holiday. If the tourist stance towards Spain had been knowledgeably abandoned, what took its place for the involved intelligentsia was really only a variant: the trips followed by reports in the New Statesman, Spectator, Left Review of the Spaniards' courage, the feeling of solidarity, the urgency of the case for British intervention. Such accounts left out much of what was discouraging about the Civil War, notably the bloody division among the Communists:

'these people contain truth, whatever / Their nominal façade'  
(XXIII).

By the time Autumn Journal was published, Barcelona had fallen and the Loyalists were defeated. But on this New Year's Eve, they prompted MacNeice to shame and a harsh assessment of himself and those who had joined him in self-pity, 'the fun of cursing the wicked / World into which we were born / And the cynical admission of frustration'. In his Spectator article he wrote, 'It is impossible to be a Hamlet in Barcelona' (10 January 1939, p.84): the end of a year and an era was an end, also, to poses:

I have loved defeat and sloth,  
The tawdry halo of the idle martyr;  
I have thrown away the roots of will and conscience,  
Now I must look for both,  
Not any longer act among the cushions  
The Dying Gaul;

MacNeice had no programme of action to offer: solutions are not usually the province of journals. It is only in fiction that a shape can be given, a real end imposed; or in loose narrative poetry such as Clough's Amours de Voyage, which surely MacNeice knew and must have admired for its play of doomed personal relations (and successful / amusing ones) against tumultuous political events, for its flexible versifying and modulation of tone. Like Horace, whose poetry greatly influenced his own, MacNeice did not have a primarily didactic intention; like him, he wished to operate rationally and conducted much of his attack by means of debate. Horace's Satires and MacNeice's Journal are permeated by political disenchantment, are bereft of religious hope and sceptical--MacNeice less so--of the nature of personal relations. They also share stylistic affinities: ease, neatness, rapidity; MacNeice perhaps lacks Horace's elegance, but does attain a lyricism unsuited to the Satires ('alias iustum

sit necne poema, / nunc illud tantum quaeram, meritone tibi sit / suspectum genus hoc scribendi').<sup>1</sup>

He closes Autumn Journal with a dismissal of his doubt, a lullaby for the people he loves, in acceptance that takes its strength from all that has gone before. It is not exactly hopeful, but MacNeice's mood is resolute:

Sleep to the noise of running water  
 To-morrow to be crossed, however deep;  
 This is no river of the dead or Lethe,  
 To-night we sleep  
 On the banks of the Rubicon--the die is cast;  
 There will be time to audit  
 The accounts later, there will be sunlight later  
 And the equation will come out at last.

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1. 'Some other time we'll see whether this kind of writing is true poetry or not. To-day the only question I'll ask is this, whether you are right in viewing it with distrust'. I iv, 63-ff. Satires, Epistles, Ars Poetica, trans. H. Rushton Fairclough (London: William Heinemann Ltd., Loeb Classical Library, rpt 1970), p.53.

## Chapter III

An End to Nostalgia?

But just seeing things is a tourist activity;  
 a poet is allowed to be a tourist just as he  
 is allowed to be a journalist--but only so long  
 as it satisfies him. After The Earth Compels  
 I tired of tourism and after Autumn Journal I  
 tired of journalism.<sup>1</sup>

With the War came a discernible, if gradual, change in MacNeice's poetry. The 1930's had seen a rash of books, witness to financial pressure and a compulsion towards self-definition: Zoo and the travel books are full of personal asides, entirely subjective digressions that have little bearing on the ostensible objects of writing. The culmination of self-exploration was reached in The Strings Are False, which MacNeice outlined, although not under that title, in a letter to Eliot in September 1939. Only manuscript drafts of the autobiography survived, Dodds as literary executor deftly editing them for posthumous publication. Many other artists began their autobiographies at the time, when reminiscence seemed a vital act of preservation.

MacNeice also felt challenged to provide a defence of the kind of poetry he and his contemporaries had produced in the previous decade. It was attacked by Virginia Woolf in a paper read to the Workers' Educational Association in Brighton in May 1940, which was published in Folios of New Writing in the autumn of that year. MacNeice's reply, with those of Edward Upward, B.L. Coombes and John Lehmann, appeared in Folios for spring 1941 (pp.37-41). Although he did not refer to it specifically, Woolf had quoted quite extensively from Autumn Journal, which she thought 'feeble as poetry but interesting as autobiography'.<sup>2</sup>

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1. 'Images', p.130.

2. 'The Leaning Tower', in Collected Essays Vol.2 (London: The Hogarth Press, 1966), p.172.

As Hynes concisely says, 'in 1940 she was prepared to dismiss the entire generation as casualties of history' (p.393). Woolf gave a brief sketch of nineteenth century writing conditions, persisting until the abyss of the Great War. She looked at education, saw the influence of public and private schools, of Oxbridge, and concluded that the writer had been sitting 'upon a tower raised above the rest of us; a tower built first on his parents' station, then on his parents' gold' (Essays, p.169). The 'us' was disingenuous: despite her lack of university education, Virginia Woolf was also firmly seated. After 1918, this secure tower had begun to lean, under the pressure of war and continual social upheaval, and lean leftwards. Elevated by the same means as their predecessors, writers were nevertheless victims of consciousness: of self, class, change, falling and the imminence of death. Circumstances sent them back to the only stability they could discern, themselves; 'they have been great egotists' (p.177). Circumstances forced them to be politicians, as 'Mr MacNeice bears witness', compelled them 'to preach, if not by their living, at least by their writing, the creation of a society in which everyone is equal and everyone is free' (p.175). She argued that, having no knowledge of a 'towerless' society, after their destruction of the present bourgeois one--from which they had benefited--the thirties writers offered nothing to put in its place.

This was her weakest line and MacNeice exposed it in his reply, defending didacticism as the inevitable response to the world she herself admitted to be chaotic, and full of evils needing to be stigmatised. He explained and diluted the Marxist connection: '...some at least of these poets--in particular Auden and Spender--always recognized the truth of Thomas Mann's dictum: "Karl Marx

must read Friedrich Hölderlin" (Folios, p.40). But the main tenor of his defence is intuitive: Auden and Spender brought 'a new spirit of hopefulness' into English poetry; 'my generation at least put some salt in it' (p.41). He concluded very defensively, with none of the elegant rhetoric of Woolf's attack:

We may not have done all we could in the Thirties, but we did do something. We were right to have thrown mud at Mrs Woolf's old horses and we were right to advocate social reconstruction and we were even right--in our more lyrical work--to give personal expression to our feelings of anxiety, horror and despair (for even despair can be fertile).

(ibid)

The tone is of a man firmly, if resignedly, packing away the past. Yet it could not be so simple, as MacNeice realised: 'Recantation is becoming too fashionable; I am sorry to see so much self-flagellation, so many Peccavis, going on on the literary Left'.<sup>1</sup> It is perhaps not surprising that MacNeice's prose in the 1940's, particularly during the War, is greatly occupied with moral/ethical issues, with the skeleton of belief so necessary to the body of art. The idealism of the thirties persisted; the form it took was an insistence on the value of community, and on the inclusiveness to which art could attain.

In this decade, as in the previous, tumultuous public events were matched by devastating personal experiences. MacNeice had visited America for the first time in spring 1939, and in the course of his lecturing had met 'someone whom according to fairy story logic

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1. c.f. Empson's comment in the Radio Portrait: 'After the end of the war, [the poets] nearly all said how bitterly ashamed they felt for having turned out so dreadfully wrong, and said that now they weren't left-wing any more...But Louis at any rate never appeared in a white gown as a penitent; he went on being sardonic and responsible, hardly surprised even when appalled.' p.12.



I was bound to meet but according to common sense never. A woman who was not a destroyer' (Strings, p.204). This meeting he described in fairy-tale fashion in his autobiography. By the autumn of that year he was in Ireland, applying for the Chair of English at Trinity College Dublin, and very unsure about his rôle in the War: '...I think of plumping for something brainless. There must be plenty of people to propagand so I have no feeling of guilt in refusing to mortify my mind' (letter to Dodds from Belfast, 24 September 1939). He returned briefly to England in January 1940 before setting out for America once more, this time to teach at Cornell. It looked to some as though he were emigrating in the wake of Auden and Isherwood, whose departure for the U.S.A. in January 1939 Cyril Connolly called 'the most important literary event since the outbreak of the Spanish War' (Horizon, February 1940, p.68). He is probably the third writer in Christopher Lee's poem on the subject, emotively titled 'Trahison des Clercs':

One sailed for New York: a second followed;  
 one at that moment broke his heart for a woman  
 showing the pieces to strangers in cafés,  
 making of the world's calamity  
 a mirror of his own sensitiveness; ...  
 But what of us  
 remaining, so perplexed:  
 shall we still honour poets of the people, look  
 for wisdom in their words, or vexed  
 watch down the wind these swift migrating birds?<sup>1</sup>

Although peritonitis and convalescence forced MacNeice to remain in America, and his love for Eleanor Clark must have inclined him to stay, in December 1940 he was back in London. McKinnon cites

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1. As quoted by Robin Skelton in the introduction to his anthology Poetry of the Forties (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books Ltd., 1968) p.17.

convincing evidence of his attempt to join the Royal Navy and his rejection on medical grounds (p.32). Propaganda was to be his fate after all: he joined the BBC Features Department in May 1941. 1942 held three important events: the death of Bishop MacNeice, marriage to Hedli Anderson, and the death of Graham Shepard.

At the outbreak of the Second World War, then, MacNeice was in Ireland on a journey he had planned with Ernst Stahl (Lecturer in German at Birmingham); '...the fatalist within me said, "War or no war, you have got to go back to the West. If only for a week. Because you may never again"' (Strings, p.210. See p.210ff for an account of this Irish visit which complements 'The Coming of War'). This time it was not the Ireland of his childhood that his poetry evoked; the quality of menace and nightmare arises not from the imagination but from real events, a flight dogged by radio bulletins. The poems that make up The Last Ditch (1940) are filled with nostalgia, longing and futile anger: for Ireland, for America, for Eleanor Clark (to whom the volume is dedicated), for the certainly disappearing world MacNeice had known. The fact that the book was brought out by the Cuala Press, the small press run by Yeats's sisters in Dublin, 'somehow tied MacNeice up with the Irish movement in a way that his other books of poems hadn't ever done', Connolly remarked (Radio Portrait, C.t.). In this sense, too, it was 'the closing album'; during the War of course he could not go back and forth to Ireland, and especially while the Blitz was on, his identification with London life became very strong.

The sequence called 'The Closing Album' in Collected Poems (p.163) was originally titled 'The Coming of War: (Dublin, Cushendun,

the West of Ireland, and back)' in The Last Ditch (p.2), and then consisted of ten poems:

- |      |                                      |  |
|------|--------------------------------------|--|
| I    | Dublin                               | published in <u>Plant and Phantom;</u><br><u>Collected Poems</u>                       |
| II   | Here in this strange room...         |  |
| III  | Cushendun                            | published in <u>Plant</u> ; <u>C.P.</u>  |
| IV   | O my darling...                      |  |
| V    | Running away from the War...         |  |
| VI   | In Sligo the country was<br>soft;... | published as 'County Sligo' in<br><u>Plant</u> ; as 'Sligo and Mayo' in<br><u>C.P.</u> |
| VII  | (Galway)                             | published in <u>Plant</u> ; <u>C.P.</u>  |
| VIII | Eastward again,...                   | published as 'Clonmacnois' in<br><u>Plant</u>  |
| IX   | The sky is a lather of<br>stars,...  | published as 'Cushendun Again'<br>in <u>Plant</u>                                      |
| X    | Why, now it has happened,...         | published in <u>Plant</u> ; <u>C.P.</u>  |

'Dublin' is a much less bitter poem than might have been expected in the aftermath of the Irish canto of Autumn Journal, its perspective undoubtedly softened by the apparent finality of the farewells MacNeice must make. Yet he does not lose sight of the extraordinary Dublin combination of a famished remnant with all to which Ascendancy pride laid claim: 'the bare bones of a fanlight / Over a hungry door'. His own feeling of exile, his desire to belong, is gently anatomised:

This was never my town,  
I was not born nor bred  
Nor schooled here and she will not  
Have me alive or dead  
But yet she holds my mind  
With her seedy elegance,  
With her gentle veils of rain  
And all her ghosts that walk  
And all that hide behind  
Her Georgian façades--  
The catcalls and the pain,  
The glamour of her squalor,  
The bravado of her talk.

Running through the poem is the attempt to catch the quality of the city's talk, in which he revelled and saw her betray herself. The statues are 'declamatory bronze', the capital's history is in words, 'a fragment of Church latin'; with 'an oratorical phrase', the violence it has seen can be distanced and its lesson forgotten. Irish history reverberates in the European context without that being mentioned, in this and in the sixth poem about Sligo, the War is briefly escaped although it is implicit always. MacNeice addresses Dublin in the last stanza:

You poise the toppling hour--  
 O greyness run to flower,  
 Grey stone, grey water,  
 And brick upon grey brick.

After the appropriate relaxation of Autumn Journal, its digressions, extended similes and metaphors, this is taut verse, eschewing an indulgence in description for its own sake. The last four lines, quoted above, have a beautiful economy: the hour is Europe's, held in slow Ireland whose appropriation of 'all / The alien brought' is an object lesson in the poise of compromise; the greyness contains both dignity and decay--MacNeice's turning of 'run to seed' is an example of the surprising aptness his use of a common phrase does not always manage; the final line echoes the first, but the circle contains destruction, ruined perfection: 'Nelson on his pillar / Watching his world collapse'.

Stahl and MacNeice proceeded to the north, where the family 'had taken a beautiful house at the end of Cushendun bay' (Strings, p.210). MacNeice bracketed his portrait of the house in The Last Ditch with two poems of yearning. Both of them are about the space stretching between himself and Eleanor Clark: he probably omitted the first--'Here in this strange room' (p.5)--from subsequent collections because although it is undoubtedly accurate about his

feelings, it is also self-pitying. It is 'more to the point' to wonder whether himself, rather than an abstraction like democracy, will be dead the next year, but to conclude the poem 'And God damn Hitler / That she is not here' trivialises the emotion, gives it a merely petulant tone. 'O my darling' (p.7) measures the distance more tellingly, yet 'the new horror that is the old redoubled / Were not there waiting in the dark' is not sufficiently sharp about the War or the childhood fears--the tiger pit--with which it connects. Cushendun is set down inbetween in all its solidity, 'passages of great stone flags / And a walled garden with plums'; nature almost inexplicably persisting in familiar rhythms, itself an un-rationed, luxurious commodity, 'the air a glove and water lathering easy'. Blocking all that out is the obsession with radio-listening, 'a little box with a well-bred voice' announcing, as in Out of the Picture, the ultimate incongruity.

The fifth poem retails the effort to get beyond the Empire which is necessarily involved in the War. Running away from it does not produce a very interesting poem, though the counties they reach are quintessential Irish countryside, the kind MacNeice had already celebrated in 'Valediction'--'the falling ear-rings / Of fuschias red as blood'--and summoned bleakly for Grettir, bogland and turf-stacks now 'Like the tombs of nameless kings'. Monuments to the dead recur in the poems: 'Galway', where 'the war came down on us', begins with the emblem of death, and in the eighth poem MacNeice invokes the 'millenarian dead' of Clonmacnois, the bond he has with them being human stupidity. Back in Cushendun, where 'the sky is a lather of stars', 'no one / Can drive the war away'. Thus the last poem of the sequence accepts the fact and wonders why the world has not altered to meet it:

And why, now it has happened,  
 And doom all night is lapping at the door,  
 Should I remember that I ever met you--  
 Once in another world?

(p.11; C.P. p.167)

The accent is more final than in 'O my darling', where the mention of legend and dream lent a fairy-tale possibility of overcoming obstacles, and endearment softened ending: 'For now, my love, there is more than the Atlantic / Dividing me from you'.

The sequence is poignant: in its reduced form in Collected Poems the narrative is more spare, the love-lyrics omitted which gives the fifth poem greater weight. They are very simple poems, relying ('Why now it has happened') on the contrast between natural beauty and human threat, natural indifference and human impotence.

Although they concern defeat and offer no way of coping with war and separation except lament, that the poems emerged at all was to MacNeice a positive fact. There is an unpublished manuscript, 'Broken Windows or Thinking Aloud', dated 1940/41 by Dodds, in which MacNeice considers the effect of the War on writing. It was probably intended as an article and communicates a sense of exhilarated discovery. For the first time MacNeice comes out directly against the Communist Party, bound to logic whereas he is committed to intuition, and against the pre-War Marxist emphasis on humility: 'we need not be so anxious for self-effacement, we can leave that job to the bombs. This is our time to be arrogant'. He does warn against the denunciation of past selves along with past work, but goes on confidently to distinguish between his thirties and War poetry:

But different circumstances change the 'message'--  
 the content--and so the method--the style.  
 I notice myself that my two old methods--  
 reportage and lyric--are ceasing to suit me

and I notice I have lost my nostalgia, am  
no longer worried by the passage of time.

Am ready to jettison the past--that is,  
my personal past. The general and historical  
Past remains printed in eternity;...

There are several letters from this period, testifying to the same sense of changed direction, or at least to an urge to experiment with various kinds of poetry. The War and the feeling that everything vital to his life had gone into Autumn Journal freed him for less self-absorbed writing, and The Last Ditch poems may mark this transition.

The power of MacNeice's poetry in the early 1940's comes from its simplicity: there is less verbal play, fewer arabesques of wit. His lyric gift persists, nostalgia does not. Connolly said that 'he gave the impression of great detachment' (Radio Portrait, C.t.), and while this is not a particularly apparent trait in his previous poetry, he now began to develop a distance between himself and the objects he contemplated, was less insistent on the 'I' that saw. Even in 'Meeting Point' (April 1939, p.167) MacNeice does not identify himself as one of the lovers, nor directly address the woman (as had been his custom in love poems); his not doing so contributes to the sense of almost disembodied enchantment, in which objects exist on new planes of space and time. Each stanza has the same first and last line, enclosing the moment, creating its immobility. Symbols MacNeice had used negatively before--the stopped clock, the desert, music from a radio, a bell--are felicitously transformed. Although it was written before the War, 'Meeting Point' later seemed so apt to the period, something snatched from the surrounding destruction which made feeling and sensation preternaturally sharp. The steady poise of the poem, the calm assurance of its repetitions, encapsulate the meeting, providing the only solution to life in time;

an art which would transcend it. And yet the poem is firmly rooted, two people in a coffee-shop, the woman smoking.

God or whatever means the Good  
 Be praised that time can stop like this,  
 That what the heart has understood  
 Can verify in the body's peace  
 God or whatever means the Good

A similar calm and absence of scepticism informs 'The British Museum Reading Room' (p.160), written in July of the same year. MacNeice is perfectly aware of bogus scholarship, and escapism, and intellectual myopia: 'Some are too much alive and some are asleep, / Hanging like bats in a world of inverted values', but he seems able to afford tolerance. Being walled in by dead words, the nightmare which entered the Iceland poems and 'Sand in the Air', is now seen as a form of public refuge, a way some hope to 'deaden / The drumming of the demon in their ears'. Now the fear is palpable, reasonable, domesticating itself in London: MacNeice plants it stealthily amongst the familiar London pigeons, opens briefly an enormous perspective:

And under the totem poles--the ancient terror--  
 Between the enormous fluted Ionic columns  
 There seeps from heavily jowled or hawk-like foreign  
 faces  
 The guttural sorrow of the refugees.

The other sequence that spans the beginning of the War is 'Novelettes' (p.170). In The Last Ditch (p.21) it consisted of five poems: 'The Old Story is True', 'Suicide', 'Les Sylphides', 'The Gardener', 'Christina'; in Poems 1925-1940 (Random House) and in Plant and Phantom (1941) the sequence expanded with 'The Expert', 'Provence' and 'The Preacher'. 'Suicide' and 'The Expert' were wisely dropped for subsequent collections; they appear superficial beside the others, although in the latter there is a striking description of alcoholic desolation:



Drunk and alone among the indifferent lights  
 In stark unending streets of granite and glass  
 He ducked his head to avoid illusory stalactites  
 And fell, his brain ringing with the noise of brass

Captions; the groundswell of the pavement, steady  
 As fate, rose up and caught him,...

The six poems that remain are in various degrees autobiographical, except for 'The Preacher', who can bear no relation to Bishop MacNeice, unless that of a nightmare projection. While they do not jettison the past, or demonstrate indifference to the passing of time, MacNeice's angle has shifted.

'The Old Story' (Summer 1939) cannot be a record of MacNeice's visit to his ex-wife and her husband in New Jersey, which took place in October 1940 after his peritonitis operation (he had seen them both in New York in 1939), but the setting seems prophetic. On that occasion they went to Atlantic City, 'which was meant to be a spree but it is hard to have a spree when you are walking with your past' (Strings, p.30ff); they promenaded by the grey sea, on grey sand and afterwards MacNeice sat up late, 'wondering if it made any sense, with Tsalic who had once been a star American footballer and Mariette who had been the best dancer in Oxford'. This direct, bewildered pathos becomes in the poem an act of exorcism, a recognition of emotional deaths. A woman whom he had described in terms of air, light and especially colour, is now as drained of that life as the shore on which they walk: 'With years behind her and waves behind her / Drubbing the memory up and down the pebbles'; MacNeice could scarcely have chosen a more telling verb, with its weight of monotony, harshness, drudgery. But the hurt is given to a third person, narrated not confessed.

The ability to see beyond his own predicament is demonstrated in 'Les Sylphides', the best poem of the group. Part of its

success is the result of the tighter control MacNeice exercises over his imagery; in the poems of this period detail is subordinate to a whole. Five of the six stanzas have an appropriate water-image: in the first 'the white sails'; in the second of the dancers' naked arms, 'moving / Like seaweed in a pool', suggesting not only their undulant grace but also the slightly narcissistic exercise ballet sometimes appears; in the third, 'we are floating--ageless, oarless, --', the stanza which marks the height of romantic, dreamy ecstasy. MacNeice shifts his point of view then to make a general observation, not in the man's tenor, as the dancers depart: 'we cannot continue down / Stream unless we are ready / To enter the lock and drop'. He detaches himself from that choice to observe drily the practical divisions of marriage (compare this with the lines about conjugal loneliness in 'Eclogue Between the Motherless'), but his compassion goes to the wakeful woman in the final stanza, wondering whether 'It was really worth it and where / The river had flowed away / And where were the white flowers'.

If this were from his personal past, MacNeice was not claiming it as such, and more surprisingly he did not elucidate his connection with 'The Gardener', a portrait of Archie, who had been the MacNeice's gardener in Carrickfergus. He is described in much the same terms at the end of Chapter IV of The Strings Are False: 'Archie's the great worker; ye wouldn't find his like in County Antrim' (p.48). The occasional lines in italics seem to represent comments about the man that a child might overhear: Mrs MacNeice's gentle 'He was not quite right in the head'; Reverend MacNeice's impatient but charitable 'He was not quite up to the job', the conclusion that he was yet 'Happy as the day was long'. MacNeice, however, employs a novelistic objectivity, refraining from allusion

to the fact that as a child he found Archie the 'best antidote to [these] terrors and depressions', and that, presumably for him as for his sister, Archie was the one link with their mother's time, as their stepmother refused to employ Roman Catholic servants.

Similarly, although the story of Christina comes directly from his childhood he dissociates himself from it. In his autobiography, a brief account of the incident is prefaced by the comment, 'there was always a sense of loss because things could never be replaced' (p.37). The child learns that things have their separate character: bricks may be knocked down and reassembled with impunity, dolls cannot. The grown man discovers nightmare identities. MacNeice uses regular nursery-rhyme stanzas, where repetition mocks instead of reassuring, enacting the emptiness of ritual.

Until the day she tumbled  
And broke herself in two  
And her legs and arms were hollow  
And her yellow head was hollow  
Behind her eyes of blue.

In the prose MacNeice said that he built the house for the doll, who proved too heavy for it and fell. Responsibility for the breakage is carefully not assigned in the poem, matching the casualness of 'He went to bed with a lady'.

'He and she' in 'Provence' can be identified with the MacNeices, who spent some time in St Tropez in the long vacation of 1929. MacNeice referred to it, rather acidly, as a time of domestic castle-building: 'my rôle in life was to be the Good Jewish Husband', a rôle which seemed to exclude growing up and writing poetry (p.124). Something of their naivety gets trapped in the poem, with its images of shared sensual happiness; there is also the presence of an old man on the beach every day to point the contrast: 'His wife and three of his children dead, / An old man lay in the sun, perfectly

happy'. The assessment is simplistic.

All the 'Novelettes' involve death in some way, the death of love or of the body, but 'The Preacher' is the most sinister. Its landscape might be compared to that in one of Graham Greene's wartime novels, blitzed and bombed, a skeletal city: 'old iron, cinders, sizzling dumps / A world castrated, amputated, trepanned'; the preacher walks in 'the lost acres', his nightmare vision of humanity taking actual form. The God of Retribution stalks the poem, the underground world of Greek myth is present without relief.

A pencil draft of 'The Preacher' is to be found amongst ballades and some of the poems for Plant and Phantom (Lockwood); it may not be the first draft although others in the notebook appear to be original versions. The opening lines ran: 'He carried a ball of darkness with him, unrolled it / Everywhere he went in streets and rooms'; the underlined phrase (my marking) was cancelled and replaced with 'To find his way by', which reinforces the labyrinthine suggestion, also immediately introducing the idea that the world may be dark, but the preacher is blind too. The second stanza was altered from:

He never smiled but spun his strands of black  
Round the feet of the secular crowd, they tripped,  
Saw their own faces in a wet pavement, saw  
Below the stone crypt.

to:

He never smiled but spun his strands of black  
Among the secular crowd who, when he tripped their feet,  
Saw their own faces in the wet street, saw  
Their hell beneath the street.

The change in the second line, while it preserves the random direction of the spinning and tripping, allows for the preacher's concern with his own action, his intention to catch people out. The choice of words in the third and fourth lines is more powerful because the image of death is less confined and conventional; the

crowd see 'their hell', a compact and horrific suggestion. The poem has something of a ballad air so repetitiveness, as here of 'street', fits into its scheme.

In the third stanza, the third line began as 'He walked into hot acres'. The land, either real scrap-yard or war-damaged, is hot in that it is hellish, but 'lost' is more appropriate in several senses: it is lost to its proper use, it is the preacher's view of all that he looks on, and it is also the disoriented world the poet sees his subject as occupying. The replacement of 'Death' for 'God' in the preacher's call to repentance has its clear relevance to a bombarded city, as well as to his obsession. Another change MacNeice made, in the seventh stanza, confirms this obsessional quality: 'an eagle / ~~Looking down on~~ Riveted on a world of vice'. For the preacher, God's anger is 'a more basic'--then fittingly biblical--'a more primal fact than love'.

MacNeice composed what is printed as the last stanza and then the penultimate, but saw that the order needed reversal. He started with 'Dying at last he drew in all the thread / Wrapped it...' crossed that out, wrote 'Pulled it in through the chink beneath the door', which emphasises the terrible contraction of the preacher's world. The only mention of faith occurs at the end of the poem, when it carries no redemption. All the daily deaths a Christian might die, the self-abnegation one might expect of the fanatic, have instead been exterior crusades, conducted where 'the roses reeked of an abattoir'. Like the secular crowd who saw their own faces, the preacher trips over his own ingathered strand, 'all / His faith and his despair a ball of black / And he himself at the centre of the ball'.

Writing to Eliot from Belfast concerning a projected prose work (The Strings Are False), MacNeice admitted to being 'pleased at the prospect of writing prose for a change (it will be rather different from my pot-boiler prose), especially as in verse at the moment I can write nothing except short--almost Greek Anthologyish--lyrics' (6 October 1939). A month later he confessed to Dodds that 'the only verse I am writing now is kind-of-epigrams (did I tell you?)--4 lines going forward & 4 lines coming back again. I have written about 20 of these'. He adds resignedly, 'I expect E. [Eleanor Clark] would think them awfully "slight"' (22 November 1939). Of these thirteen were published: three were never collected, and of the ten that were printed in Poems 1925-1940 under the title 'Octets', only four were retained in the Collected Poems (1949 and 1966), collectively titled: 'Entered in the Minutes'.<sup>1</sup> All the poems, as MacNeice indicated in the letter to Dodds, set out premises in the first four lines that are undermined in the next four; in some of them, war is the catalyst. He plays with the old conundrum of reality and appearance, of battered illusions about what really constitutes identity. The Greek Anthology character emerges in 'Night Club', worldly and mordant: 'Salome comes in, bearing / The head of God knows whom'. Three of the 'Octets' concern reflections, which exercised a fascination for MacNeice.<sup>2</sup>

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1. The uncollected poems are: 'Idealist', New Statesman, 9 December 1939, p.820; 'Clock', *ibid.*, 6 January 1940, p.11; 'Leaves from a Journal', New Republic, 3 June 1940, p.767. 'Poem in Seven Spaces', listed in the MacNeice Bibliography as appearing in the National Review, April 1940, p.451<sup>(sic)</sup>, may be a poem of this kind; I have not been able to trace it. The 'Octets' are: I 'Interregnum', II 'Barcelona in Wartime', III 'November Afternoon', IV 'Radio', V 'Shopping', VI 'Business Men', VII 'Night Club', VIII 'The Lecher', IX 'Prospect', X 'Didymus'. Plant and Phantom included VI, VII, X; II was restored to the sequence for the Collected Poems (1949).
  2. See, amongst others, the early poems 'Circe' (p.19), 'Museums' (p.20), 'Perseus' (p.24); later 'Corner Seat' (p.218), 'The Strand' (p.226), 'Reflections' (p.503).

In 'Business Men' the fact that his awareness of their common language coincides with the meeting of their reflections makes the reality of the meeting ambiguous, tenuous. 'November Afternoon' is a juxtaposition of season, scene and 'the war outside' with MacNeice gazing in a dim mirror, so that there is room for his uncertainty about his actions to seep through the space between, and in the alternatives the reflection provides, 'A faded portrait, a drowned / Face looking back at me'. The last of the 'Octets', 'Didymus', is neither personal nor contemporary although MacNeice uses the image of birds' wings, associated previously with moments of particular felicity. It is the best of a series which sometimes verges on banality, and constructed in a manner of which MacNeice was proud. He quoted it in his radio discussion with L.A.G.Strong, 'Are There Any Rules?' (Well Versed, 8; broadcast 13 June 1941):

Refusing to fall in love with God, he gave  
Himself to the love of created things,  
Accepting only what he could see, a river  
Full of the shadows of swallows' wings

That dipped and skimmed the water; he would not  
Ask where the water ran or why.  
When he died a swallow seemed to plunge  
Into the reflected, the wrong, sky.

The rules of metre might have dictated a different final line, but MacNeice wanted to point out both the advantage of fitting intuition to rules and the scope for breaking them:

I could have written there--'Into the wrong, the  
reflected sky'--that would have been a smoother  
rhythm, but the order of epithets wouldn't have been  
so good and quite apart from that, just the sheer  
sound. I prefer in this poem to mass the two  
stresses--'wrong' and 'sky' together. 'Wrong' and  
'sky'. That I feel makes you dwell on the wrongness  
of it.

In the same debate, he remarked: 'I'm not sure that a prescribed form doesn't often help the poet to clarify his original impulse', and instancing the Horatian Ode and Villon's Ballade as

examples of useful formal limitation, he mentioned that he had himself written 'five very regular ballades straight off just for the interest of it', the previous year.

Drafts for the whole or parts of these are to be found in the spiral notebook in the Lockwood collection. Two of the poems were published in American journals and they all appeared in Poems 1925-1940, indicating that MacNeice wrote them for a particular audience at that point in the War when he was not involved directly. Perhaps he felt later that they were too much of their time to be preserved, as with the slightly self-righteous 'Straight Words to a Crooked Poet' (New Yorker, 19 September 1942, p.34), a reproach launched in the other direction across the Atlantic. They take the form of three eight-line stanzas and an envoy, which is Villon's pattern, with the traditional a-b-a-b-b-c-b-c rhyme scheme, the envoy rhymed b-c-b-c.<sup>1</sup>

The first, 'Ballade on an Old Theme' (p.294), is a variation on 'ou sont les neiges d'antan', though MacNeice laments not the loss of people but the loss of a future, from whatever perspective it had been seen. Lament is less the tone, in fact, than brisk dismissal--of 'The dilettante bric-a-brac / The ideologies of jade', for instance--and an acceptance of a gamble that has not paid off. The Lockwood draft has the first two stanzas in pale ink, the third and the envoy in darker ink, like that used in correcting the first. MacNeice did begin as Villon had: 'Tell me where, in coign or crack' ('Dictes moy ou, n'en quel pays...'), but altered it to 'Where are now...', perhaps because he did not want to overemphasise the connection.

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1. Presumably it was also to Villon's 'Le Lais' (1456) and 'Le Testament' (c.1461) that MacNeice and Auden owed some of their inspiration for their 'Last Will and Testament'.



'Ballade for Mr MacLeish' (p.295) is the second and most interesting of the group. It was written before Virginia Woolf's 'Leaning Tower' attack could have been known to him, but clearly there had been other critics hitting the same nerves. Archibald MacLeish lashed out against the intellectuals in The Nation (18 May 1940) labelling them 'The Irresponsibles' because of 'their collective failure to defend "western culture" against the totalitarian threat'.<sup>1</sup> The ballade's opening line is a snide thrust, if MacNeice is addressing rather than including the American poet. As it is not easily available, the poem is here quoted entire:

You say, who read, that we who write  
Have failed to do our duty by  
The blind and bogged who needed light,  
The prisoners who needed sky,  
The puzzled masses doomed to die,  
The stunted youth that could not grow.  
Yes, we failed and we know why:  
You need not tell us what we know.

Easy to niggle and indict  
Charges none of us deny:  
We have not made the Negro white  
Nor taught the wombat how to fly.  
We neither caught the Future's eye  
Nor yet preserved the status quo.  
The world we found we left awry:  
You need not tell us what we know.

We have not set the epoch right,  
We would not if we had to lie;  
Writers by trade we have tried to write  
By evidence of mind and eye;  
The day for that is perhaps gone by,  
Truth is unfashionably slow  
And shuns the opportune reply:  
You need not tell us what we know.

#### Envoi

Gentry, you ask us to deny  
The only right the arts bestow.  
We know our failure to comply;  
You need not tell us what we know.

[August, 1940]

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1. Eric Homberger, The Art of the Real (London: J.M. Dent & Sons Ltd. 1977), p.43

The refrain occurs also in an earlier poem, 'Men of Good Will' (Poems 1925-1940, p.257), not collected in any English volume, admitting that 'our life is slight and ineffectual', that 'we put in words what is topical and transitory'. A close reading is not necessary to detect that the ballade is a defensively specious argument, at least in parts. In England in 1940 the Times Literary Supplement was asking 'Where are the war poets?': 'The popular press asked the same question, only with patriotic indignation. Soon there were accusations; it was implied that while everyone else had taken up their action stations, the poets had not--and they who had been so noisy about Spain!'<sup>1</sup> This is exactly the kind of hypocrisy against which MacNeice was protesting on a more general front: Day Lewis in his celebrated reply to the clamour caught its irony accurately and with some bitterness. MacNeice asserts that the writers knew the reason for their failure, but he does not elucidate, which is either simple evasion or a refusal to condescend to the accusatory tactics of his opponents. The two alterations to this stanza might indicate that while he wanted to take a shot at the messianic role in which the poets were belatedly cast, such hyperbole was too easy a target: he substituted 'the blind and bogged' for 'the hungry sheep', and 'stunted' for 'crippled youth' (Lockwood).

MacNeice had some difficulty with the rest of the poem. His persistent idea for the second stanza was that out of chaos and obscurity, the degree of lucidity retrospectively desired could not be forthcoming. The first attempt was only three and a half lines,

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1. Ronald Blythe in his introduction to Components of the Scene (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books Ltd, 1966), p.14.

ending: '...Because they only had the night / To chart'. The next, more sonorous, described the indicted as 'Those whose ~~doom~~ fate it was to ply / A daytime trade ~~in solid~~ only by night'. Unresolved, MacNeice tried to continue: 'We did not make a day of night / Nor teach the ostrich how to fly', and deleted that. But it suggested to him 'What was black', which he firmly crossed out, to proceed with 'We have not made the negro white / Nor taught the ~~turtle~~ ~~tortoise~~ wombat how to fly'. The ostrich was a fairly obvious choice; the wombat sounds appropriately ridiculous, yet it is the kind of ridicule that boomerangs; too much was expected of the writers, but they let things pass that were betrayals on their own terms. The printed version of the ballade--it also appears in that form in the notebook, in ink--is certainly more cavalier than the draft, where MacNeice is inclined to put the blame on history, and at first wrote 'Charges no one dare deny' for the second line.

How he reached the form of the third stanza is conjectural, as only five lines of it appear in the draft, and then the whole as published two pages later in the notebook. 'We have not set the epoch right' was at first the penultimate line of stanza two, and then the fifth line of stanza three, following:

Writers by trade we tried to write  
By evidence of heart & eye;  
Nor representing black as white  
We shunned the comfortable lie--

That last line spawned three in the final version, and became much more powerful by accretion. The change from 'heart' to 'mind' probably fits better with the idea of literature as a trade, and perhaps strengthens the logic of the claim for truth.

The envoy was originally quite abject. Presumably MacNeice addresses as the 'gentry' those who would not soil their hands with partisan literature, or in aid of failing causes. There is also

the implication of amateurism on the part of 'literary gents'.

'Gentry, we would not deny / Little enough there is to show / For ~~our aims~~ all our artists the [sic] hue & cry'. This was deleted; in the later version the thing denied was 'The self that tells us things are so', which glosses 'The only right' that appears in the final version. It is odd that this ballade has not found its way into the anthologies at least; it has great interest as a period piece, even if it is not as deft a defence of practice as Day Lewis's, for instance in the ambiguity of its penultimate line.

The others were as well omitted from subsequent collections: 'Ballade in a Bad Temper' (p.296), aptly titled and a general grouse against 'Gentlemen who boss the age'; 'Ballade of Dirty Linen' (p.298) against much the same group of people, profiting from undeserved pickings; in his reply to Virginia Woolf, MacNeice commented, 'No doubt we spent too much time in satirizing the Blimps, but some of these old dead horses--as this war shows every week--have a kick in them still' (Folios, p.38). In 'Ballade for King Canute' (p.299)--published in the New Yorker as 'Ballade of England' (30 November 1940, p.32)--the refrain, with varying pronoun, runs: 'And cut his losses and proceed'. Provided that England will consent to a change of heart, whatever its material prospects the community 'can bloom again'.

In retrospect, these and the other poems of 1940 look as though they were written in suspension. MacNeice felt at the time that he had found a new direction, a great expansion and engagement of his being because he was happy in love; he wrote to Dodds with high optimism: '...also I am going to write (at least I hope so) quite new kinds of poems' (from Connecticut, 5 February 1940), and to Mrs Dodds later, with conviction:

Talking about work I am writing a new kind of poetry (very slight so far but will gain body, I hope). ...Am also (this sounds terribly like Wystan too but its all right) formulating a new attitude, the basic principle of which is that Freedom means Getting Into things and not Getting Out of them; also that one must keep making things which are not oneself--e.g. works of art, even personal relationships--which must be dry and not damp; as sticking cloves into an orange makes a pomander,= something NEW.

(from Ithaca, 22 March 1940)

Yet as the year finished, he was writing his foreword to the Random House Poems 1925-1940, and claiming another end and beginning: the tone of the whole is faintly provocative, certainly jaunty: 'When a man collects his poems, people think he is dead. I am collecting mind not because I am dead but because my past life is. Like most other people in the British Isles I have little idea what will happen next. I shall go on writing, but my writing will presumably be different' (p.xiii). The end of the foreword insists on the poet as an ordinary man, as in Modern Poetry, but the gravity of that book's conclusion is matched here by phrases that might appeal to potential war allies: '...I enjoy it [writing poetry], as one enjoys swimming or swearing, and also because it is my road to freedom and knowledge' (p.xiv).

Of course to group the poems of 1940 as poetry of hiatus does not do entire justice to each one, and it should be emphasised that the break between 1939-40, and between 1940-41, was not a wrench. Nevertheless what MacNeice called in his letter the quality of dryness, always to some extent present in his work, is as pervasive as the cloves he mentions.<sup>1</sup> It is not the work of a tourist or a

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1. Connolly remarked it in 'An Eclogue for Christmas', which he thought owed 'nothing to Auden and Spender...that poem has that dryness which one associates with him, with everything he writes, a very dry astringent quality of observation...' Radio Portrait, C.t.

reporter, nor does it stem from the partly confessional impulse that gave rise to Autumn Journal. The one intensely personal exception is the sombre and moving 'Autobiography' (p.183). There are poems, of which 'Autobiography' is one, of spare form: most are in quatrains, many have very few words to the line. When a poem such as 'Jehu' appears (p.182), closer in form to those of the early thirties, it seems clotted and over-insistent: reaching for symbols of what the War might be, it has little imaginative power set beside the poems MacNeice wrote back in London, having undergone the Blitz. The experience of being, as he wrote to Dodds, 'timelessly happy' perhaps accounts for the persistent optimism of the poems' endings: however sombre their burden, there is nearly always hope and expansion in the last lines. The poem does not circumscribe the experience, but launches it.

The two poems from the period for which we have drafts prove exceptions to this generalisation. 'Stylite' and 'Entirely' (p.158) were written in March 1940, a prolific month for MacNeice; some months before he had written to Dodds saying that Eleanor Clark 'rebukes me for being prolific, saying that I'm not an old man yet' (22 November 1939). For 'Stylite' there are two attempts at the second stanza: on the back of the same page the poem stands nearly in its printed form (Lockwood: spiral notebook). The notebook gives no clue as to how the poem occurred to MacNeice, or from whence sprang the god on the other pillar. It is mysterious and austere; it personifies the opposition of Christian and Hellenic culture. The petrified (literally, though MacNeice often attaches the word figuratively to the Church) saint, with his consciousness of guilt and his determination to exclude the world, at the moment of instinctive reaction--in the face of death--has to recognise

physical beauty, sensuality and worldliness in the form of 'A white Greek god, / ...his eyes on the world'. The telling phrase 'the conscience of a rope', does not occur in the two drafts of that stanza.

A similar sense of the poem's being 'given' is found in 'Entirely': on one page of the spiral notebook its first two stanzas are jotted down in pencil, with few alterations; two pages later the third stanza is inked between the address of the Southern Review and some doodles, in the form in which it was published. The deftness of the poem was thus not, to our (imperfect) knowledge, laboured at; the apparent effortlessness of its composition suits the airiness of the work itself. Such changes as were made foster ease:

And when we try to eavesdrop on the great  
 Presences it is rarely  
 That by a stroke of luck we can appropriate  
 Even a phrase entirely.

(my underlining)

The object of eavesdrop began as 'the gods', then 'the dark', before MacNeice settled on his more neutral and flexible 'great presences'; while the pedestrian 'we can catch and then appropriate' underwent a blithe substitution. The 'city's yammering fire alarms' were once the shriller, less insistent and mechanical 'screaming fire alarms'; the 'spears of the spring' went through 'our hands', which must have seemed inappropriate, and 'hands' became 'flesh'. The vivid 'blue / Eyes of Love' (stanza two) was originally merely 'anyone else': perhaps MacNeice looked back a few pages to a deleted poem on the human obsession with happiness, which included the lines 'But the bony body / & the blue eye / Of Nature...', and rescued the



idea for a new context.<sup>1</sup> The bell as destroyer of joy is a recurrent image, which may be attributable to childhood associations, but here it does not dislodge potential. Despite the poem's insistence on the frustrations of experience, the buoyancy of its rhythm, the frequency of run-on lines and the swift succession of images give it an ironic optimism. It encompasses both the delicacy of 'All we know is the splash of words in passing / And falling twigs of song', and the turbulent 'mad weir of tigerish waters'. 'Entirely' is the most attractive and persuasive statement MacNeice made of his inability to be dogmatic--in art or love or the world--though that was not, presumably, the poem's purpose.

The old themes of exile, home and journeying continue in this period, appropriately. They have direct relevance to the hundreds of war-created refugees, whom MacNeice considers in his poem of that name (p.180), 'disinterred from Europe' and arriving in New York, with modest enough hopes and all the mystery of the continent before them; it is one of the poems that eventually opens on to dizzying prospects: '...they still feel / The movement of the ship while through their imagination / The known and the unheard-of constellations wheel'. 'Exile' (not republished after Plant and Phantom, p.58) deals less successfully with the same alienation. There is the long catalogue 'The Sense of Smell' (which only appeared in Poems 1925-1940, p.304), unadulterated and sensuous nostalgia: 'Turf-smoke for Ireland', 'French fern soap / And bath powder'; evoking 'a vanished / April, an ended / Voyage, a picnic...'; listing 'How many delights? / How many adieus?'; too self-indulgent

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1. He elaborated on Nature's indifference in 'Evening in Connecticut' (p.185), where autumn and winter are seen as attacks against which there is no defence: '...Nature is only herself, / Only the shadows longer and longer'.



to be retained. This search for lost worlds from the distance living in America provided, takes some of its impetus from dreams: one briefly encountered in 'Eclogue from Iceland'--the B text--is expanded in 'Order to View' (p.169); the bleak house and mouldering garden,

The bell-pull would not pull  
And the whole place, one might  
Have supposed, was deadly ill:  
The world was closed,

which are transformed by a tree shaken by the wind, a movement of clouds:

Somewhere in a loose-box  
A horse neighed  
And all the curtains flew out of  
The windows; the world was open.

The extreme suggestiveness of the poem lies in the metaphors being so simple and capable of containing a spectrum of interpretation: home-coming, reconciliation, déjà vu, rejuvenation, the random nature of illumination, the surprise and excitement of its occurrence, of the form it takes. It may even be an image of derelict England. MacNeice, in 'Experiences with Images' (p.130), links this with 'The Dowser', which also ends in unexpected discovery (p.188: 'More of a tomb... Anyhow we backed away / From the geyser suddenly of light that erupted, sprayed / Rocketing over the sky azaleas and gladioli'), as poems 'which are a blend of rational allegory and dream suggestiveness'.

Both the Random House collection and Plant and Phantom close with the 'Cradle Song for Eleanor'. Twelve years before, MacNeice had written a 'Cradle Song for Miriam' (p.12), which was really an excuse for playing with metaphors of muddle and confusion, calling on a bored deity and paying very little attention to Miriam (Mary?). The gentleness, felicity of style and grasp of reality in the later poem measures MacNeice's enormous progress. Whereas in 1928 a

reader might have sensed him wanting attention himself, imposing a theory of the universe on the poem, in 1940 he is a spectator still but actually knows what he sees, knows the precariousness of his disengagement. Eleanor he asks to

Sleep and, asleep, forget  
The watchers on the wall  
Awake all night who know  
The pity of it all.

Impersonal meditations emerge from the post-American period too, but there are many poems in which MacNeice tries on other voices, other habits. Writing about Keats's description of the poetical character, he commented: 'That a poet has no identity is a useful half-truth, for it counteracts the common opinion that a poet is some one hawking his own personality'.<sup>1</sup> The War forced him to be engaged in the community, which may have fostered an ability to identify with different lives. It also saw the second phase of MacNeice's obsession with death and loss: that moves out of the personal sphere and the disguises of nightmare, because the threats were imminent and tangible, oddly exhilarating. In 'Broken Windows' there is the relief of attack, finally, after the years of private and public vacillation:

And why not shelve your private salvation and see  
what you can do with the world? Without bothering  
too much about life--your own--or life with a  
capital L, and taking special care not to think of  
death as cancellation...

Death in its own right--as War does incidentally--  
sets our lives in perspective. ... Death as a leveller  
also unites us in life and Death not only levels but  
differentiates--it crystallises our deeds.

...But applied science, by shattering a town  
overnight, by superimposing upon ordered decay a  
fantastic but palpable madness, has shown us the  
integral function of death. Death is the opposite of  
decay; a stimulus, a necessary horizon.

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1. 'John Keats' in Fifteen Poets (Oxford: the Clarendon Press, 1941), p.354.

However, the world at war imposed its tasks and did not leave a great deal of room for individual manoeuvre. MacNeice found in the atmosphere of threatened London exactly that sense of community whose passing from more primitive regions he had regretted, but he also feared that the necessity for collective effort, for accepting the dictates of Authority, would encourage a uniformity and lack of initiative which might persist after the War. So while he celebrated the one, he campaigned against the other, as in his article 'The Way We Live Now' for Penguin New Writing (April 1941, pp.9-15). Still holding to his Irishness, and indeed to his preference for America as a place in which to live and write, MacNeice was nevertheless glad to be in London; since the Blitz it had 'become more comprehensible. Because this great dirty, slovenly, sprawling city is a visible and tangible symbol of freedom' (p.13).<sup>1</sup>

In 1941 MacNeice published as much prose as poetry: he reviewed films for The Spectator, books for the New Statesman, recorded some American impressions for Horizon (which had come into existence in January 1940), and for five months wrote a 'London Letter' for the American journal Common Sense. Most of the letters are quasi-political and fairly critical of the government's handling of the Home Front: '...the Ministry of Food is still too timid to organise (it hardly even co-operates with the Ministry of Agriculture)' (June 1941, p.175); and he kept a vigilant eye on any

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1. MacNeice wrote to Eliot from New York listing the proposed contents of Plant and Phantom, with their dates of composition, an indication as to whether they concerned the War and/or were composed in America. He mentioned that he expected 'to add one or two more--possibly a new Eclogue. There is one long poem already (300 ll) on Freedom'. It is listed between 'Refugees' and 'Jehu' as 'Freedom 1940 7.40 Am. W', but has not yet been tracked down (24 September, 1940).

suppression of free speech. But the tone of the letters is generally optimistic, admitting to mess and muddle and to the conviction that attitudes were changing, positive things emerging. The best of them is an account of the April raids, one of which had become known as 'the Wednesday', and 'the Saturday' raid in May which hit the House of Commons, and which was to be the last major German effort. On May 10 MacNeice was fire-watching from St Paul's: 'great tawny clouds of smoke, rolling in a sumptuous Baroque exuberance, had hidden the river completely and there we were on the dome, a classical island in a more than Romantic Inferno'. He wrote that it was astonishing and absolutely impossible to describe, the old clichés 'are utterly and insultingly inadequate' (July 1941, p.206).

Nevertheless he attempted to do it in poetry, as did Day Lewis and Dylan Thomas. His prose description reaches for the exact shades of flame, the surrealist combination of objects glimpsed in roofless, half-walled buildings, and for the layers of feeling the fires prompted: exhilaration, awe, fear, sadness. The poems are not concerned with appearance--as they probably would have been, ten years earlier--so much as with the complex reaction of mind and heart to these events. MacNeice found a way to cope with their incredibility by making them part of a Grimm fantasy. He asserts against the lumbering, mindless destruction the nimbleness of the maker, quick-footed and triumphant words: '...The trolls can occasion / Our death but they are not able / To use it as we can use it'.

Skittle-alley horseplay, congratulation... they  
 don't know what they are doing,  
 All they can do is stutter and lurch, riding their  
 hobby, grinding  
 Their hobnails into our bodies, into our brains, into  
 the domed  
 Head where the organ music lingers:  
Pretty Polly won't die yet.

While 'The Trolls' (p.196) after a masterly first section becomes repetitive in its insistence on man's capacity to survive 'the crawl of lava', in 'Troll's Courtship' (p.198) the slight clumsiness is exactly appropriate to the lonely troll going to immense trouble over futile display. The idea that the raids are an attempt to woo by destruction hints at the truth MacNeice articulated in 'Brother Fire' the next year (p.196; the Texas autograph manuscript dates the poem November 1942):

O delicate walker, babbler, dialectician Fire,  
 O enemy and image of ourselves,  
 Did we not on those mornings after the All Clear,  
 When you were looting shops in elemental joy  
 And singing as you swarmed up city block and spire,  
 Echo your thought in ours? 'Destroy! Destroy!' <sup>1</sup>

MacNeice's job amongst all this was officially to provide the words that would make the war experiences accessible to those not undergoing them: broadcasts about damaged buildings in London, for instance, for an American audience, and later programmes about Russia, Yugoslavia and Greece for home consumption. Propagandising despite his earlier distaste for the task, and associating with a frequently dispirited intelligentsia, MacNeice expended not a little of his poetic energy worrying at the efficacy of verbal communication. Robert Hewison, in his account of London's literary life Under Siege (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1977), maps out the territory haunted by the writers during the War--Fitzrovia or Soho--and quotes

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1. In his London letter, MacNeice wrote about the heart-break of seeing disembowelled houses in the East End, and his contrary exhilaration observing damage done to the great West End emporiums: '... the whole street is tinkling as the shop-walkers stand in their windows and sweep the glass on to the pavement where luxury objects lie scattered among torn-up flagstones and drunken lamp-posts;...' (July 1941, p.206). Part of his description of 'the Saturday' is worth quotation also: 'These fires were a wedding of power with a feminine sensuous beauty. A glowering crimson power mottled with black; a yellow liquid power-- ... But up above were the softest clouds of smoke--soft as marabou--purple and umber and pink and orange which spread

MacNeice when talking about the stimulus and drawbacks of the pub world, the 'factitious popular front in booze' which he mocks in 'Alcohol':

Take away your slogans; give us something to swallow,  
Give us beer or brandy or schnapps or gin;  
This is the only road for the self-betrayed to follow--  
The last way out that leads not out but in.

(p.208 C.P.)

The bitterness underlying the congenial intention of these gatherings--the insecurity of a non-combatant artist during the War must have contributed to it--surfaces again in 'Epitaph for Liberal Poets', '...us who walked in our sleep and died on our Quest' (p.209; Texas dating, December 1942). The poem relies on a constant double-take effect to undermine most statements: for example, they had been 'conditioned to think freely'. The memorial to the Quest is merely 'certain frozen words' (the conjunction of this phrase with the vision of truth-telling or inspirational birds is reminiscent of images used in the Iceland poems), whose eventual effect is conjectural: they 'may melt / And, for a moment or two, accentuate a thirst'. MacNeice does not often so determinedly sidestep the dramatic, and it is the quiet of the sarcasm that makes it telling.

The notion that, however distant from physical action, each man took some responsibility for the havoc of war, is linked in the poems with religious images. When MacNeice used the Bible or Christianity in his earlier work, it was usually in a needling or satirical fashion, as one very familiar with them but uncomfortable, or sometimes outright defiant. His more tolerant, genuinely puzzled and inquiring attitude in the forties is that of a man who

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fn 1 continued from page 117

out and shade off to blue. ...first of all it is the building that is on fire, but later it is the fire that is the solid object, the building is just a gimcrack screen that the fire has folded around itself' (pp.206-7).

has grown past the need to repudiate his family's ethos, and--though in no simple sense--has been forced by war to re-examination. He concluded the Blitz letter to America, which was his last one, with a kind of manifesto:

... sometimes I say to myself 'This is mere chaos, it makes no sense', and at other times I think 'Before I saw war-time London I must have been spiritually colour-blind'. ... There is, in some quarters, an understandable swing-back to religion but the revival of religion (with its ordinary connotations) is something I neither expect nor desire. What is being forced upon people is a revival of the religious sense. And after the hand-to-mouth ethics of 19th century liberalism and the inverted and blinkered quasi-religion of Marxism and the sentimentality of the cynical Lost Generation--after all that, we need all the senses we were born with; and one of those is the religious.

(p.207)

In 1940 the New York company Liveright had brought out The Lyric Psalter: the Modern Reader's Book of Psalms, which included MacNeice's variations on the themes of Psalms 35, 139 and 142, apparently composed--presumably commissioned--in 1933. 'Prayer in Mid-Passage' (p.212), written ten years later, though simpler in vocabulary and construction, is in sentiment quite close to the psalms. 'The Springboard' (p.213) and 'Thyestes' (p.211), also written in 1943, are much more equivocal in their use of Christian symbolism. A draft of 'Thyestes' (Texas), probably not the first, shows that MacNeice was interested in making the contrasts in the poem as harsh as possible, as in the barbarism and elegance of the first stanza, where Thyestes sits down to a meal of his own children. The War as disorientation pervades the second stanza: 'Thus Here and We ... in perfidy are linked'; the word fits better with the deceit involved in Thyestes' story than simply 'crime', which MacNeice had originally written. The poem comes from the

middle passage of the War, when the Blitz was over and the long preparations for a European invasion were getting under way.

Boredom is conveyed in the published version, at which MacNeice had a little trouble in arriving: 'This orchard blooming in despite of Duty' he began, then tried 'contempt', dropping that for a more general statement: 'This landscape undermines our sense of duty', finally hitting on the precision of 'This green foam frets away our sense of duty'.

MacNeice had qualified time, in the bitter third stanza, as 'a chain of violations', which matched the preceding pictures of injury done to natural bonds in the course of revenge, and of the consent of a warring nation to destruction carried out in its name. The change to 'a trail of shaking candles', may be explained by MacNeice's very early use of guttering candles as symbolic of decline and death; it is just possible that he also had in mind a poem by C.P. Cavafy (Forster had drawn attention to his work in the early 1920's, and MacNeice certainly knew it by the fifties), 'Candles', in which the poet had seen his days in terms of those burning and those burnt out. 'Thyestes' closes on a declaration of universal guilt: we are '~~Blood brothers~~ Messmates in the eucharist of crime / & homesick for those ~~3~~ heirs to two of those three black crosses on the hill'. This is one of his grimmest war poems, with its insistence on the inhumanity of impulses gilded by a civilised surface.

The period also witnessed optimism, if of a tentative sort. There is a draft for 'The News-reel' (p.203; Texas) which differs from the printed poem after the first two and a half lines: 'And



scissors clicking daily. Cave of shadows / In a volcanic country'. The image does not add to the meaning, nor fit with the cutting-room picture already established.<sup>1</sup> MacNeice seemed originally to want to question whether the process of editing could make sense of what was, anyway, an 'ill-designed drama', 'the scenes being so many / The moments of ~~deliberate~~ positive action so few?' He changed this idea of events as blunderingly manipulated and badly played, to their nosing forward, propelled by internal volition: an 'undesigned / Evidence of design' engendered hope, an organic pattern of meaning emerged, not to be made sense of retrospectively, but to be surrendered to almost ignorantly: 'Something half-conjectured and half-divined'.

Where religious symbols or a search for pattern might be expected, neither is to be found. In Autumn Sequel (1954) MacNeice gives a circumstantial account of his hearing the news of Graham Shepard's death ('Gavin' in the poem); in two previous poems he had spelt out what that loss meant. Perhaps it was this and his father's decease that sent MacNeice back to the past he thought jettisoned; it certainly reasserts itself in Holes in the Sky (1948). 'The Casualty (in memoriam G.H.S.)' appears between 'The Springboard' and 'The News-reel' in Springboard (1944).

To the Spring 1941 edition of Folios of New Writing, MacNeice contributed a poem which has understandably not been reprinted,

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1. Published version:

Since Munich, what? A tangle of black film  
Squirming like bait upon the floor of my mind  
And scissors clicking daily. I am inclined  
To pick these pictures now but will hold back  
Till memory has elicited from this blind  
Drama its threads of vision, the intrusions  
Of value upon fact,...

titled 'Casualty of War (New York)' (p.148). It is in an odd form, couplets interspersed with free verse, and turns upon the time difference between England and America, a part of the distance between the living and the dead. The poet is unengaged in the event he describes, he lines up what seem to be appropriate metaphors for death, but they do not touch emotional reality. He is not entirely at ease when writing of Shepard's death either: grief may have been, for him, an incommunicable emotion.

There are two versions of 'The Casualty' in the Texas collection. One, possibly a first draft, is to be found in a BBC notebook, and may be dated c. October, 1943. The other is a four-page autograph manuscript, with some emendations. At an early stage the poem was prefaced by a line from Dante, 'Lascio lo fele e vo per dolci pomi', which is consolatory, but perhaps MacNeice felt it too literary and out of character with the opening, or decided that it did not match the poem's concentration on his friends' loss rather than Shepard's fate.<sup>1</sup> The title deleted from the manuscript, 'One out of many' was better abandoned for the chosen title, which conveys the fact that Shepard was simply a casualty of war along with all the others, but also the one whose dying most touched MacNeice.

The notebook draft reveals that he had some trouble in writing the poem: there was the natural emotional difficulty and his awareness of literary antecedents in the elegy, especially for death

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1. 'Lascio lo fele, e vo per dolci pomi  
promessi a me per lo verace duca;  
ma infino al centro pria convien ch'i'tomi.'

'...I am leaving the gall and going on for the sweet fruits  
promised me by my truthful Leader; but first I must go down  
to the centre'.

by water. The combination of loving praise and the inconceivable voyage to the centre, of jauntiness and gravity, does not quite come off. The colloquial opening, with the force of the living personality still felt to be undiminished, could be combined with an evocation of Homer, but the transition between the two is uncomfortably reminiscent of the Cheshire Cat: '...and you would grin / Dwindling to where that fading star allures'. When the poem has to consider the actual means of death (Shepard's corvette was torpedoed), MacNeice handles it much better, the break between the second and third stanzas enacting his point: '...they will not sever // That thread of so articulate silence'. Again he is confronted with the different perceptions of time that we accord to the dead and the living, and after rejecting a teasing out of 'conjecture', he at first reverted to the casualness of the opening:

How  
You died remains conjecture. Instantaneous  
Is the best bet but in perspective since  
That impact all your past becomes a Now.

The clumsiness of these lines was recognised, and others substituted:

Is the most likely--that the shutters fell  
~~Making of all your movements a blank~~ Now  
Stopping the whole kaleidoscope at

The connection between movement and sudden blankness makes the choice of a kaleidoscope understandable: MacNeice altered 'stopping' to 'freezing' and then in the page draft found 'congealing', which introduces the possibility of a bloody death, makes it less disembodied. He sees it as another of the experiences they might have talked over, yet void where there might have been an answer. In the sixth stanza, MacNeice had written:

How was it then? How is it? You and I  
Have often since we were children discussed death  
And giggled at the preacher and wondered how  
He can talk so big about mortality  
And immortality more. But you yourself could now  
Talk big as any--if you had the breath.

Of this he altered only one word, in the page draft 'giggled' (1.3) became 'sniggered'. The former implies simply finding such talk funny, if embarrassing; the latter is more knowing, mocking, and makes a better transition to the dead Shepard, encompassing both the shallowness of their reaction then and MacNeice's existing ignorance. At first he addresses his friend in the tense of continuance, then switches to the past; the closing qualification recalls 'In Memory of Major Robert Gregory': 'I am accustomed to their lack of breath', but MacNeice's uneasy control of tone does not compare with Yeats's muscular grace. Writing about Yeats's treatment of his friends in poetry, MacNeice likened it to Shakespeare's: '...the hero is conceded full individuality, his Marxist conditioning is ignored. This means simplification...the explanation of a man not by his daily life but by one or two great moments' (Yeats, p.110). He himself worked in the opposite way: while death provided a singular and unifying perspective, against it MacNeice hurled every disparate memory he could catch, a riot of snapshots attesting to movement and confusion, to dailiness. At the same time, as Yeats's concern was to present Gregory as one of a Renaissance company, so MacNeice wanted to claim for Shepard more than potential. His sociable life, with his perception of folly as well as delight in geniality, was complemented by an inhabitation of the world 'beyond the spiked / Railing where in the night some old blind minstrel begs'. MacNeice had written, 'the blinded minstrel': he changed it in the page draft probably because it too clearly anticipated the identification he went on to make. In the notebook draft the claim at first was modest: 'He begged & you responded, being yourself / One of his kind', but was immediately enlarged to: 'Like Raftery or Homer, one of his kind--'; the

quality he shared being described: 'Creative not for the counter or the shelf / But born to ~~wonder~~ admire innocently...', which became just 'But innocently...' in the printed text, so that it might refer back to 'creative' and be less passive.

MacNeice then twice seeks to convey the contrast of this many-faceted existence with its ending: 'your multi-coloured passion / Having been merged by death in universal Blue', reads lamely like an advertisement; '--O did you / Make one last integration, find a Form / Grow out of formlessness when the Atlantic hid you?' The abstraction has dignity; MacNeice's tone is not of facetious curiosity but of longing for reassurance; the rhyme carries the poem's burden of a finality that is yet unaccepted.

Obviously MacNeice felt there should be a formal resolution, although the poem might well have ended with that (penultimate) stanza. He had a great deal of difficulty with its closing, sorting out the exact nature of the remaining fact. The notebook draft has first, 'That you aspired to pattern', which gives the impression of a certain achievement, even inflexibility, not in accord with the rest of the poem, so that is altered to 'passion and endeavour':

say  
(Though you might ~~argue~~ that this is nothing to shout of  
& that it is no one's loss if you have lost your pains)  
The fact remains that you, who had much to give, are out of  
This life and out of touch with all your friends for ever.

Dissatisfied with this, MacNeice began again, retaining his first line, and by expanding the 'you' (1.3) into '~~that all your living showed~~', 'that all your life till then showed', he shifted the responsibility for the summary on to himself. Having tried out and deleted 'a passionate endeavour', he experimented with 'an endeavour / Towards a full life', which kept the suggestion of

passion, but was also repetitious and rather like a school report; the change, 'Towards a discovery', has the required openness. As though arguing with Shepard, MacNeice insists that the loss of his pains is more than personal. The page draft shows him still wrestling with the last line. 'For you are / Out of touch with all your friends for ever' attempts the note of casualness. 'To lose touch' is a phrase that assumes the other person's life goes on its course, outside your range, as yours continues beyond his. However, this use of a common turn of phrase cannot adequately support the kind of metaphysical reverberation necessary to the end of an elegy. 'Cannot laugh at any of your friends...' is another cancelled line, insufficiently characteristic. 'Cannot raise a laugh again for ever' was left as the alternative, but the printed version emerges as '...and cannot start any more hares for ever'. That conveys the quality of a lively, ranging curiosity not far removed from everyday life, and yet the strength of 'start any more hares' is such as to lessen the power of the negatives bracketing it. It must have been this vividness, and an inability to accept eternal absence, that MacNeice wished to dominate the poem.

Springboard ends with 'Postscript', called in the Collected Poems 'When We Were Children' (p.214), which perhaps obliquely expresses his doubt about the comparative crudeness with which he had to deploy his verbal skills in broadcasting (he mocked those methods lightly in D Day, a programme recorded 30 May 1944), and of course reverts to his old theme of the intensity of childhood perceptions.

A notebook which contains the introduction to He Had a Date (the broadcast variation on the theme of Shepard's death) and notes



for what appear to be London letters, includes a three-page draft of 'Postscript' (Texas). MacNeice scribbled by the first lines:

words

x

spring

x

women

which form in essence the subjects of the three stanzas: the last most obscurely, although the timeless flowers indicate some romantic resolution. The first stanza makes a false start:

When words were coloured but not understood--

Harlot & murder were dark purple ~~in childhood~~ for children  
dangerous

Each ~~fearful~~ [cure/care] was fringed with [ ] good

& others' highways were our woodland paths

In distinguishing between the charges of words for children, MacNeice is tempted into explanation and sets of unco-ordinated images. The primary effect of most of his revision is to concentrate and contract, since his tendency is towards exposition and accumulation. Here he curbs that and begins again, with less distance between the poet's voice and the children's experience:

When we were children words were coloured  
(Harlot & murder were dark purple)

The effect of the parenthesis is of an attempt at concealment, an equivalent of a dropped voice, as though these words still possessed their forbidden richness:

& language was a prism, the light  
houses, hoardings, ~~the naked fact~~  
Diffused on ~~carpets~~ [ ] [ ] [ ]  
But now those rays are concentrated  
& language grown a burning glass.

The transparency of language for children, its suggestiveness even

when applied to mundane surroundings and the (cancelled) 'naked fact', needed a less diffuse presentation, MacNeice seems to have felt. He tried out a couple of phrases in the margins: 'whose rays today are concentrated', 'ruined inlay on the grass'; the second, by its placing, appears to have been considered as an alternative to 'language grown a burning glass', but jotted at the top of the page are:

a grand	)	
	)	
gay	)	mosaic
	)	
gold	)	

confetti

A tessellation on the grass

The fourth line eventually became (not in this draft) 'A conjured inlay on the grass', which combines the dense texturing of the light--a synaesthesia intensified in the next stanza--with the sense of its being magical, yet made by children. It exists for the sake of its own beauty, not bent to a destructive purpose.

When we were children Spring was easy  
~~Sousing~~  
~~Later~~ Washing our heads in suds of hawthorn  
 & scrambling the laburnum tree--

<del>lips that yet could hardly speak</del>	comfort As <del>dish</del> for the gluttonous eye
<del>For each so hasty youthful mouth</del>	
<del>verve</del> tactless	
But now the <del>strength</del> of spring is <del>mainly</del>	
hint	
A [ <del>that we ourselves are</del> ]	To men whose tongues are [ ]
<del>weak</del>	& dry

This time MacNeice embarks on a contrast in the second line, only to cut it after one word in favour of elaborating 'Spring', thus confirming the pattern of four lines to youth and two to experience. Even the rhythm of the sentence is springy. MacNeice's



idea of blessing is often connected with some form of drenching: here the 'suds of hawthorn', as later 'foaming white edges of roads' in The Stygian Banks, which has a similar theme. The homely, unexpected image of the laburnum in this season is close enough to the first line to suggest also the children 'scrambling' up a tree.<sup>1</sup> To continue it as he did in the draft makes for an awkward literalness: the marginal substitution sums up the metaphor, but in the printed version 'comfort' has been replaced by 'breakfast'; the earlier word, in its sense of 'sweetmeat', may have influenced the choice of words in the penultimate line, (spring's) 'winds and sweets have now forsaken...'. 'The verve of spring is tactless' is a typical MacNeice sentence in its colloquial energy and panache; he abandoned it for something graver, and a much stronger final line.

Also marking the poem as MacNeice's is the mention of cards in the third stanza: he had a lifetime passion for games of all kinds and frequently used metaphors derived from them. As in poetry, there are accepted rules, and equally, scope for circumventing them. He tries out the idea in an unsophisticated way at first:

older                      apprenticed  
Now we are adult we are conscious  
   & must gamble  
Of time & meaning & are sceptics.

If [now] at all, upon a new  
Miracle on a higher plane,  
Where meaning can remarry colour  
& Spring be timeless once again

Inducted  
graduated  
subpoenaed  
By time & meaning  
under [credit  
To t.& m.

1. MacNeice expressed doubt concerning this simile in the context of his last term at Marlborough: 'Our habit of precious cerebration too ran counter very often to the integrity of our senses. When you keep trying to think up a simile for laburnums--scrambled eggs or anything else--the burst of yellow evaporates and all you are left with is words. And one's mystical self was sidetracked'. (Strings, p.100).

MacNeice is careful not to suggest that growing up means enrichment or maturity: he replaces 'adult' with 'older'. Time and meaning have a more inexorable rôle to play than mere consciousness of them implies; his successive options become more commanding, although at this stage MacNeice cannot settle on one to his satisfaction. Scepticism was quickly sacrificed to gambling, giving a more desperate edge; he was uncertain of 'remarry'. The stanza was struck out and recommenced:

Now we are older, with our spirits

Accredited to time & meaning,

Our hopes hangs only on a new

~~on the love of man-~~  
Reshuffle ~~on a different plane-~~

~~inward life~~

Where meaning can remarry colour

& flowers be timeless once again.

shuffle of cards behind the brain

MacNeice's unease over 'spirits' as the subject of 'accredited' is not resolved in this draft: it is not exactly clear what he means; the earlier 'conscious / Of time and meaning' was plain but evidently inadequate. The shuffling of cards, as a refinement of the straight 'gamble', retains the notion that regaining a child's vision is a matter of luck, to be angled for without any certainty of its being secured. When so many of MacNeice's more directly autobiographical poems are full of childhood terrors, it is unusual to encounter this almost Wordsworthian conviction of its pristine vision. This stanza reverses the pattern of the two preceding it: four lines for experience and two for youth, but since those are the closing ones, the poem ends on a strong note of promise.<sup>1</sup>

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1. c.f. 'The Cool Web' by Robert Graves. It introduces the more subtle point that language is a defence against immediacy of impression, which as children we can bear but as adults cannot. Graves's poem hints at a darker world than MacNeice's, and at moral imperatives.

Holes in the Sky (1948), MacNeice's fourth volume of poetry for the decade, is the last to be dominated by the War and reckons with the strangeness of that ending, the reassertion of things forced underground: 'The kings who slept in the caves are awake and out' (The National Gallery', p.221). There is the brilliant Blitz ballad 'The Streets of Laredo' (p.217), then all the poems, puzzled in varying degrees, which register the cessation of bombing, fighting and blackouts. The thirties schoolboys are now men,

Having kept vigil on the Unholy Mount  
And found some dark and tentative things made clear,  
Some clear made dark, in the years that did not count.

('Hiatus', p.218)

Separated couples are reunited, uncertain now: 'For all green Nature has gone out of gear / Since they were apart and hoping, since last year' ('Bluebells', p.220). The death of friends mocks at the world reforming: 'That the world will never be quite-- what a cliché--the same again...'; this poem, 'Tam Cari Capitas' (p.220), obviously harks back to the elegy for Shepard, taking its title from Horace's Odes I 24, the line MacNeice translated, 'Why moderate our grief for one so dear?' In the same month, July 1946, he wrote 'The Cyclist' (p.229), drawing on the memory of a ride out from Marlborough with Shepard, when 'all the white horses were wishes' (Strings, p.88). Like 'The Casualty' it is concerned with stasis, but here of joy, of sensuous integration (in 'Street Scene', p.234, art can provide such a moment, when the crippled singer 'Hitting her top note holds our own lame hours in equipoise'); the boy riding the hill and the heat, before hitting the valley:

For ten seconds more can move as the horse in the chalk  
Moves unbeginningly calmly  
Calmly regardless of tenses and final clauses  
Calmly unendingly moves.

MacNeice wrote to Dodds from Achill, in a letter we may date 31 July 1945, 'During the last two months I have written eleven poems (after a year long lull)'. Holes in the Sky reveals an altered approach, the poems being generally less concentrated than in the preceding three collections, and frequently reverting to his personal past. This was no doubt given impetus by a long stay in Ireland, and a renewed connection with the country was marked by MacNeice's appointment as Poetry Editor for the flourishing Irish periodical The Bell (November 1945, p.660), to which he contributed poems in 1946. As he writes in 'Carrick Revisited' (p.224), 'Memories I had shelved peer at me from the shelf'.

The astonishment voiced in this poem bridges gulfs: between childhood and adulthood, one war and another, catching the surprise of attachment to that from which so much subsequent experience had alienated him. From his return to 'the Norman bridgehead... the garrison town' (as he wrote in a cancelled draft for stanza five; Texas), MacNeice abstracts the significance of any locality for any person:

Time and place--our bridgeheads into reality  
But also its concealment! Out of the sea  
We land on the Particular and lose  
All other possible bird's eye views, the Truth  
That is of Itself for Itself--but not for me.

It is an admission that he cannot utter a final valediction, as he had once attempted; at the same time as acknowledging his 'childhood's frame' to be inescapable, he does not extend any affection to Carrick. Four lines of the penultimate stanza are extant in their first-draft form. The clumsy 'Schooled & colleged' was quickly given its final form: 'Schooled at the age of ten to a foreign voice'; the axis of inheritance/acquisition sorted out.

MacNeice had some difficulty with the last line, trying 'Cannot now be deleted by my choice', then 'May not now be corrected by my choice', finding the right rhythm:

Yet neither western Ireland nor southern England  
Cancels this interlude; what chance misspelt  
May never now be righted by my choice.

Each stanza ends on a similar note, of something awry: the resignation that it should be so is tinged, still, with disbelief.

MacNeice retraces steps too in 'The Strand' (p.226), which in its reticence praises his father more than the direct eulogy to be found in The Kingdom. He hints at the complexities of his relationship with his father, and the metaphysical reaches of their skirmishes, without going beyond the simple familiarity of the scene he sets. The apparent ease with which he handles the terza rima form was perhaps his first indication that he could use it at much greater length, although not--it may be thought--to such advantage. Here the opening line is a biographical miniature; the reader does not need to recognize it as such, but it enhances our appreciation of MacNeice's poetic economy. His association of natural phenomena with their portrayal in art, especially with the dramatic Venetian painter, sets him apart from someone 'Carrying his boots and paddling like a child'--the sensuous quality of 'my naked feet' on the wet sand is quite absent--while MacNeice also repeats his father's steps; like the mirrored clouds, is this a true or illusory repetition? He has already judged that mirror, it only 'imputes a lasting mood / To island truancies'. Like his parent, he is escaping from duty or routine: there is the faint suggestion that a boy, having seen his father unbend so far, might have thought the mood would linger back in the ordinary world. The clerical 'black figure whom the horizon understood' is belatedly

identified, and the assessment is that of an adult son, it attests to his perception of the man's relation with the infinite. In the BBC notebook which contains copies of poems from Holes in the Sky (Texas), the manuscript has just two authorial emendations, both in the direction of greater generosity towards Bishop MacNeice:

'laboriously compiled / Account books' becomes 'responsibly', and 'no tree's green / Pleased him...' becomes 'fulfilled'. MacNeice catches the childlike quality, the devotion, the element of something 'solitary and wild', in his father, and also the strength that enabled him among other things to take his unpopular political stand; this he transfers to the landscape, but it is the Bishop who is 'Eyeing the flange of steel in the turning belt of brine'. Father and son are linked by the same experience, whose meaning for the former we might guess at; for the latter uncertainty prevails. Ending as he does with a notation of natural fact, and the departure of visitors for home, MacNeice encompasses both his own continuing life and his father's death, since images of sea, shore, and of home are familiar to those accustomed to Anglican prayers as metaphors for the soul's passage and arrival.

A month before writing 'The Strand', MacNeice had already been occupied with the theme of the contrast between his English and his Irish life, and its personification in himself and his father:

Thus from a city when my father would frame  
Escape, he thought, as I do, of bog or rock  
But I have also this other, this English, choice  
Into what yet is foreign; whatever its name  
Each wood is the mystery and the recurring shock  
Of its dark coolness is a foreign voice.

( 'Woods', p.230)

MacNeice deliberately opposes his view of woods, coloured by art, to his father's reaction, 'who found the English landscape tame'.





hesitancy of purpose is revealed by his changing in the second stanza 'they handled the same language' to 'fingered'; but at an intermediate stage 'Accident was a coryphaeus' (stanza two) became 'Chance', since the poets were not so passive as the earlier word implies.

The first Texas version continues with what is printed as stanza four, followed by the present stanza three, then the present sixth stanza, the fifth being written out on another page without alterations. MacNeice was certain of his first line, 'And give the benefit of the doubtful summer' and of the last, but the development of the poets' missed opportunities in fitting terms caused him some trouble, and his indulgence to them he eventually extended to himself over one phrase.

worshipped  
To those who ~~stayed~~ the sky but stayed indoors  
Chained to a [clerical] desk or prevented by the spirit's  
prevented by material needs or  
Hayfever inhibitions duty some mental  
by social duty circumstances or by the spirit's

From  
Ironical Hayfever. Across those office or study floors  
on to  
Let the sun creep & clamber up on their open note books  
shine

& fill in what they groped for between each line.

In the lightly emended manuscript, the third line stands as:

'Bound to a desk by ~~duties~~ conscience or a <sup>mental</sup> intellectual / Hayfever'.  
It eventually reverts to the original 'spirit's hayfever', which is  
slick rather than thoughtful.

Perhaps MacNeice added what is now the third stanza recalling Enemies of Promise, in which he was cited among his literary contemporaries as a cautionary example: drink, sex and domesticity were some of the obstacles to writing Connolly had labelled. The



stanza's mention of great talkers touches on MacNeice's Irish inheritance, and on his contention that poetry is a natural extension of conversation: 'Who were the world's best talkers, their intonations / ~~Exact~~ but as writers lost lacked that sense of touch'. 'Superb' was written in the margin to replace the queried adjective; the later change to 'in tone and rhythm / Superb' gives their talk more body.

After relegating these minor ones to their place in the establishment, at least mimicking the tone in which they are assigned their various functions, but dissociating himself from it ('Some of their names--not all--we learnt in school'), MacNeice closes the elegy in praise, making common his and their cause. There is charity in this, not the grudging community he allows with Shakespeare in the next poem ('though more self-reliant / Than we, you too were born and grew up in a fix'). Still, settling on the precise nature of this shared endeavour was not easy:

In spite of--partly because of--which, we later <sup>who, unlike them</sup> ~~inheritors of their debts~~ / stay young  
 Suitors to their mistress, gamblers with their dice  
~~shd hang the graves of each~~ with a flower or [medal] ~~shd underwrite~~  
~~Shd raise them each his trophy~~ his appropriate trophy ~~their debts~~  
 Such as each might have wished to find there hung  
 Do right to hang <sup>on</sup> the grave of each with a trophy ~~—~~ had he been  
~~cd he have paid for it,~~ he might himself have solvent  
 Such as he or we (though might choose to have hung  
~~a forgotten field~~  
 Above and forgetful [ ] [ ] that forgets its ancient corn  
 ↳ | We underwrote his debts before we were born  
<sup>surmount</sup>  
 Above themselves; ~~these gamblers are above our scorn~~  
~~These gamblers graves we should not, must not scorn~~  
 Whose debts we <sup>had underwritten</sup> } before we were born.  
<sup>underwrote</sup>

The concept of indebtedness was there almost from the start: for the

gravity of the stanza MacNeice pruned away the natural images, choosing to emphasise the formality of the transaction between generations of the minor poets. It is a graceful maintenance of his old line about poetry, and lends a touch of grandeur to the least literary undertaking: '...these debtors preclude our scorn-- / Did we not underwrite them when we were born?' We might see it as a sign of poetic re-establishment, of MacNeice's linking himself to a tradition--however loosely conceived--that matches his return to themes temporarily eclipsed by the War. But he is, in the mid-forties, a somewhat wearied suitor 'to their mistress'.







3 Who were lost in many ways, though comfort, lack of knowledge,  
 Or between women's hearts, who thought too little, too much,  
 Who were the world's best fulcrums, their interaction  
<sup>English</sup> ~~English~~ but as writers' ~~best~~ <sup>best</sup> had sense of formula, <sup>Super</sup>  
 So either gave up or just went on & on —  
 Let us salute them now their chance is gone;

5) Who . . . etc . . .

6) Life be's ~~that~~ we ~~like~~ read their poems

Their apocrypha are gazed, their lives are library phobias  
 Some of their names — not all — we ~~had~~ heard in school,  
 But life be's ~~that~~ we ~~like~~ <sup>lovely</sup> read his poems;  
 There are ~~some~~ <sup>some</sup> ~~books~~ <sup>books</sup> to print or except a rule &  
 And ~~some~~ <sup>some</sup> ~~as~~ <sup>as</sup> ~~propose~~ <sup>propose</sup> to advance them ~~can be placed~~ <sup>they are</sup>  
 Because ~~the~~ <sup>as men who</sup> wish to be ~~different~~ <sup>different</sup> or ~~lost~~ <sup>lost</sup> taste  
 While the judgment of such as ~~admire~~ <sup>praise</sup> ~~him~~ <sup>him</sup> ~~is~~ <sup>is</sup> based  
 On a wish to be different or on ~~lack~~ <sup>lack</sup> of taste.

who, unlike him, ~~stays~~ <sup>stays</sup> ~~young~~ <sup>young</sup>

7) In spite of ~~the~~ <sup>which</sup> ~~partly~~ <sup>partly</sup> became of — which we later  
 Suit up to their ~~mistakes~~ <sup>mistakes</sup> ~~and~~ <sup>and</sup> ~~try~~ <sup>try</sup> ~~to~~ <sup>to</sup> ~~do~~ <sup>do</sup> ~~it~~ <sup>it</sup> ~~right~~ <sup>right</sup> ~~and~~ <sup>and</sup> ~~not~~ <sup>not</sup> ~~make~~ <sup>make</sup> ~~it~~ <sup>it</sup> ~~right~~ <sup>right</sup>  
~~Such as each might have wished to find these things~~  
~~As might be <sup>on</sup> the point of each with a trophy~~ <sup>had he been</sup>  
~~Such as <sup>be</sup> ~~the~~ <sup>the</sup> ~~best~~ <sup>best</sup> ~~of~~ <sup>of</sup> ~~the~~ <sup>the</sup> ~~world~~ <sup>world</sup> ~~and~~ <sup>and</sup> ~~the~~ <sup>the</sup> ~~most~~ <sup>most</sup> ~~valuable~~ <sup>valuable</sup> ~~things~~ <sup>things</sup>~~  
~~Above <sup>as</sup> ~~the~~ <sup>the</sup> ~~most~~ <sup>most</sup> ~~valuable~~ <sup>valuable</sup> ~~things~~ <sup>things</sup> ~~in~~ <sup>in</sup> ~~the~~ <sup>the</sup> ~~world~~ <sup>world</sup> ~~and~~ <sup>and</sup> ~~the~~ <sup>the</sup> ~~most~~ <sup>most</sup> ~~valuable~~ <sup>valuable</sup> ~~things~~ <sup>things</sup>~~  
~~Those <sup>as</sup> ~~the~~ <sup>the</sup> ~~most~~ <sup>most</sup> ~~valuable~~ <sup>valuable</sup> ~~things~~ <sup>things</sup> ~~in~~ <sup>in</sup> ~~the~~ <sup>the</sup> ~~world~~ <sup>world</sup> ~~and~~ <sup>and</sup> ~~the~~ <sup>the</sup> ~~most~~ <sup>most</sup> ~~valuable~~ <sup>valuable</sup> ~~things~~ <sup>things</sup>~~

8) ~~be~~ <sup>be</sup> ~~understand~~ <sup>understand</sup> ~~his~~ <sup>his</sup> ~~illness~~ <sup>illness</sup> ~~before~~ <sup>before</sup> ~~we~~ <sup>we</sup> ~~are~~ <sup>are</sup> ~~born~~ <sup>born</sup>  
~~Have~~ <sup>Have</sup> ~~known~~ <sup>known</sup> ~~it~~ <sup>it</sup> ~~that~~ <sup>that</sup> ~~offers~~ <sup>offers</sup> ~~and~~ <sup>and</sup> ~~is~~ <sup>is</sup> ~~born~~ <sup>born</sup> ~~in~~ <sup>in</sup> ~~the~~ <sup>the</sup> ~~world~~ <sup>world</sup> ~~and~~ <sup>and</sup> ~~the~~ <sup>the</sup> ~~most~~ <sup>most</sup> ~~valuable~~ <sup>valuable</sup> ~~things~~ <sup>things</sup>  
~~Those~~ <sup>Those</sup> ~~delts~~ <sup>delts</sup> ~~we~~ <sup>we</sup> ~~understand~~ <sup>understand</sup> ~~before~~ <sup>before</sup> ~~we~~ <sup>we</sup> ~~are~~ <sup>are</sup> ~~born~~ <sup>born</sup>



5 - Who were too careless ~~or~~ or careful, who were too many  
Though always few & alone, who went the pace  
But ran in circles, who were lured by passion,  
Who lived in the wrong time or the wrong place,  
Who at last caught fire had ~~only~~ <sup>only</sup> a spark occurred,  
Who knew all he was but did not achieve the Word —

## Chapter IV

The Middle Stretch

The 'necessary horizon' provided by death now began to recede, and although the release from tension was vital to his general well-being, it was not advantageous to MacNeice's poetry. Relaxation into much longer poems testified to a regained sense of stability, but the more he shows signs of being driven, by powerful emotions or by external events--as in Autumn Journal--the more rewarding is his work. Then the dialectic is between an initiating force and the controlling imagination, a tension lost when domination is too easy, or when solutions are imposed. MacNeice's fluency was an enviable gift, against whose seductions he needed to fight. This period finds him tending to succumb. On reading Springboard, Auden wrote commending 'Prayer Before Birth' above everything ('Troll's Courtship' was one of his favourites); he suspected MacNeice to be:

an 'anima naturaliter Christiana', which means that when you try to be a Classical Humanist, as in some passages in The Kingdom, I imagine I detect a certain lack of conviction. I'm glad you're moving away from the elegant detail, 'the triple mirror' etc to a more chastened and abstract style, not because you don't handle the former beautifully and better than any of us, but just because you can do that standing on your head.

(21 January 1945;  
in Mrs MacNeice's possession)

The Kingdom was the longest poem of the war years; it celebrated not that possibility of concerted action MacNeice canvassed in Autumn Journal, praised in his wartime articles and was required to salute in broadcasts, but the sheer existence of 'the Kingdom of individuals'. He appended a note to Springboard concerning the use of the definite article in many titles for the volume: he was 'not offering a set of Theophrastean characters.

"The Conscript" does not stand for all conscripts but an imagined individual; any such individual seems to me to have an absolute quality which the definite article recognises'. Yet this quality, while more subtly delineated, resembles that essence of character which a moralist tries to pin down. In poems such as 'The Libertine' (p.209) or 'The Mixer' (p.205), desolation gives the portrayal its edge, whereas the unexpected idealisation of the cast of The Kingdom muzzles MacNeice's power, reducing some lines to caricature.

It is commonly said of MacNeice that the BBC took its toll, presumably in terms of time and diversion of his talent. Writing for radio in fact seems to have had a discernible influence on his poetry (The Kingdom being an apt illustration), encouraging a manner he had to learn to discard. If we set aside the dramatic successes, such as The Dark Tower, and the anthology programmes involving a choice of other poets' work (for instance Auden's, 16 November 1946; Tennyson's, 8 November 1959), the remainder may be said to rely on the technique of the representative voice. A feature programme required the swift and intelligent assimilation of a great deal of factual information, and a sense of the appropriate atmosphere or landscape, which had to be made into compelling listening. MacNeice's general method was to attack his subject through a collection of voices that could counterpoint impressions and offer facts relevant to their perspective: in a programme on Delhi he used a nanny and a missionary (among others) (Portrait of Delhi, 2 May 1948); in India at First Sight (13 March 1948) he gave voices to History, Topography, Literature and Ignorance; to characterise Vienna, interpolations from Mozart, Beethoven, 'lieber Augustin', Hitler (Vienna, 12 March 1942).

Thus he became accustomed to cutting from one voice to another, each of which would have its distinguishing trick of style, and also to vignettes of salient personal characteristics, or features of landscape. It made interesting listening; it must also have reinforced tendencies towards superficiality and concentration on detail, not the abstraction for which Auden had hoped. Things written to be heard, and that only once, must differ from those which may be meditated upon. Valentin Iremonger, in a review of The Dark Tower and Other Radio Scripts, made the trenchant criticism that radio would affect MacNeice's work because of its 'depreciating for the poet the value of individual words'; what counted was the dramatic build-up. (The Bell, October 1947, p.69). His broadcasting colleagues have said that he had an extraordinarily acute sense of the potential of a script, and knew exactly what had to be done to make it effective: William Empson said of the War period that 'Louis was a tower of strength for putting on little elegant features about boating on the lakes of Nanking or what not' (Radio Portrait, C.t.). The craftsman's approach was typical of MacNeice and he appreciated radio's demands; that they might not have served his poetry well, he never publicly acknowledged. It should be remembered too that during the War, when he wrote his greatest number of scripts, he was also poetically prolific, composing some of his best poems.

Although three of the characters in The Kingdom (p.248) are specifically English: the old man 'dressed in tweeds like a squire' (probably a portrait of his Sherborne headmaster, Littleton Powys), 'Our Mother' in section III, and the dead man in section VII (Bishop MacNeice), the pressure of international events has shaped their portrayal. MacNeice's broadcasts were concerned with the efforts



of various allies to resist Germany, for example the mobilisation of entire cities like Leningrad, and underground activities in Greece and Yugoslavia. Despite the necessary simplicity of their message, these programmes were not the kind of propaganda of which MacNeice might be ashamed. He saluted human qualities beyond nationality: patience, courage, self-sacrifice, integrity, steadfastness, faith. Having to present national pride and endeavour, he did so through individuals with whom listeners could identify. The Kingdom also has this dual emphasis, on distinctiveness and on cohesion. As in the broadcasts MacNeice had no political solution to offer beyond the devotion to freedom, so in the poem he does not specify the belief by which his characters live (except in section VII); their salvation need not be religious, their motivation may not even be consciously articulated. A refusal to be dogmatic can be a personal strength, and in this area it is obvious why MacNeice did not wish to proselytise, yet it is not always valuable for poetry. Auden mentions a lack of conviction; there is also a diffuseness, an inclusiveness that is generous but lacks rigour. MacNeice especially responded to pattern in life--this has been noted already, and would have been accentuated by the War--and in the poem emphasises its self-generating nature, and the individuals' self-reliance.

Drafts show that he worked hard on The Kingdom: Texas holds a thirteen-leaf draft with revisions, a shorter incomplete version with emendations, also section V in a BBC notebook, and an incomplete version of section VI. The ten opening lines of the poem, which identify members of the Kingdom, were originally followed by the printed text's last six lines: 'Go wherever you choose, among tidy villas or terrible / Docks...', the section then

resembling the kind of camera sweep to which his radio work had accustomed MacNeice; that in its turn may have come easier for Auden's example in the thirties, the hawk's view. This was apparently an inadequate exposition of distinguishing characteristics, however, despite the lines 'Apart from those who drift... These are the people / Who vindicate the species. And they are many', which brought the section to a close. He wanted to stress their position as being in the kingdoms of this world but not of them, so later wrote and inserted the seven lines beginning 'These, as being themselves, are apart from not each other', an addition that clogs rather than advances the poem. MacNeice rearranged the section, ending it not with rhetoric but on a quieter note, 'Loyal by intuition, born to attack, and innocent', to introduce his first portrait.

This is somewhat sentimental, although derived from a recollection of Powys's genuinely intimate identification with the countryside. The initial draft experiments:

His hands are gentle with wild flowers, his memory

~~Rich~~ latticed )  
~~Sweet~~ trellised) with dialect and ~~kindly~~ anecdotes  
~~mellow~~

And ~~tags~~ of nature poetry;  
wisps

Settling for 'latticed' was the sturdier choice, retaining countrified connotations. 'Wisps' avoided rigidity of learning, and a similar retreat from implying that any of this man's qualities are formally induced occurs when MacNeice strikes out the qualifying sentence in 'And his blood attuned to the seasons--he finds them always / New like a pentecost--whether it's...'; also some images for section VII, to which mention of pentecost would be appropriate, may have been in his mind already.

In fact religious imagery is pervasive, but used with varying degrees of success. Section III about the death of a mother is the most contrived of them all, where the domestication of symbol and rite is unconvincing: 'they did not see / The tall clock stretch his arms like a rising Cross / Or see the steam of the kettle turn to incense'. Its failure is tinged with embarrassment: this is MacNeice's effort to get inside a workingclass family, without condescension, indeed with a desire to pay tribute to the pivot of its life, perhaps transposing some memories of his own mother as a focus of his earliest childhood. In section V, the source of a young woman's life is symbolised by a pitcher of water: 'Anarchic, pure and healing. For she filled it / One day that is not dead at a lost well / Between two rocks under a sombre ilex'. Not being exact, though distantly biblical--if influenced by Eliot--the symbol has more power.

This exercise in extending comprehension even alters MacNeice's harsh attitude towards science, which he usually sees as too ready an explanation of the mysterious, too crude and unwondering an account of the plural world. Section VI has a sympathetic portrayal of the scientist as craftsman, proceeding by intuition and faith, an ironic reversal of MacNeice's position given the experimentation of the war years.

...in the end  
His reasoning hinged on faith and the first axiom  
Was oracle or instinct. ~~Is it Progress?~~  
~~Yes I can smell the salt.~~ For He was simple

The deletion was fortunate: MacNeice must have realised that the scientist's experiments with the abstract tools of his trade are not convincingly epitomised. The shorthand of the capital 'P' does not really allow for the modulations of what progress meant; two





& mourned by us the unbelieving'; then decided to use only the symbol of the daffodils, removing the passages of disbelief or query as unsuited to the man who 'would come in to breakfast on Easter Day beaming as though he had just received a legacy;'

(Strings, p.233):

I am the Resurrection and the yellow  
Fanfares of the daffodils, the pedals  
Of the harmonium in the tiny church      spendthrift  
I am the brass on the coffin, I am the god of the  
Sun. I am the Word, the Law & the Prophets,  
But am I the Resurrection?

MacNeice's flaunting is untrue to the man, and the Son's self-questioning an intrusion. The juxtaposition of daffodils with the mention of Easter carries sufficient weight. 'Spendthrift' was retained, but applied to the plants.

In the first version, MacNeice was more concerned with the actual fact of death--'muzzled by the indifferent earth / Absorbed in sprouting bulbs'--and physical dissolution. He continued:

For us the literal

[      ]

Interpretation can be burned, what matters  
Is that he lived according to his lights  
Anticipating sainthood, strong, forgiving  
& generous to a fault, who now deserves  
All that his ancient but still living colleague  
Can say about him dead into the quiet aisle  
Where none but flowers are noisy.

MacNeice's general effect in revision is to make his contrasts less blunt, also to claim less for his father's character (a description underlined dubiously anyway), or rather to enumerate his qualities more precisely. The Resurrection is courteously doubted: 'What that means / He may have thought he knew'; at first this is merely intellectual assent, but 'thought' was changed to 'felt'. The sprouting bulbs and noisy flowers become one image, the daffodils' trumpets above the dust. Thus MacNeice encompasses the burial,

dissolution and the possibility of resurrection. He made the minor substitution of 'lost his voice' for 'broke his voice', a verb too active for the preacher who had originally 'quavered down from the pulpit'. Mention of 'our brother, a Christian kind & truthful' was altered to 'who was kind...', and finally added to the one ecomium.

The concluding section of the poem eulogizes the members of the Kingdom as those who respond 'Both to the simple lyrics of blood and the archetectonic fugues of reason', and the rhetoric expands to its finale: 'The hierarchy of the equal--the Kingdom of Earth'. It is not, after all, the city not made with hands. The defiantly humanistic ending constitutes no sudden illumination for the reader, nor, it seems, a deeply felt statement of faith. It was an effort to go beyond the poses rejected at the end of Autumn Journal, beyond too the various facile political solutions to the problem of preserving both individuality and community, or the exigent answers provided by the War. Yet, for all MacNeice's skill and care, it does not ring true.

Nevertheless, the poem indicated the contemplative turn his work was to take in this difficult period. It fitted in with the direction he saw as generally profitable for British writing, which he discussed in two articles for The New York Times, July and August, 1945 (Texas). MacNeice remarked on the change from the 'facile internationalism' of the pre-war years to the new isolation of the War, which was also fertilised by contact with emigré European intellectuals; from the 'chunk-of-life realism' to an intensified religious note in poetry. He maintained that although there had been relatively little direct description of horror and violence, the War would be fermenting in writers' imaginations: 'the good writer will still be the better for having a journalist inside him'.

The second article is partly a denunciation of the wholesale swallowing of dogma; MacNeice stated that writers had 'regained both humility and dignity. ...We are turning away from the kind of specialisation which means a mutilation of the world'. In prose he saw signs of a possible 'fusion of symbolism and realism', a return to attention to form. His poetic predictions were optimistic. The thirties poets had weathered better than prose writers, he thought; the War had caused them to grow out of 'their more childish disabilities' and had closed the gap on either side. They were closer to Eliot because of a 'renewed religious sense--or, at the least, a wider gamut of values', and to the younger generation (excepting some of the Apocalyptic), 'whose dangerous youth has made them both humane and mystical'.<sup>1</sup> He concluded that their values, 'as is consonant with Britain's position in the world', would henceforward be 'qualitative rather than quantitative, i.e. spiritual rather than material'.

Geoffrey Grigson diverged very sharply from these opinions when he diagnosed the state of British poetry in 1949, and looked back on his own hopes for it in the thirties. In his introduction to Poetry of the Present (London: Phoenix House Ltd), he recorded his initial repulsion from MacNeice's early poetry, 'a little mixed perhaps with the effect of the dark undergraduate stalking... in a cloak about the deep lanes of Oxford', and then his growing respect

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1. Against 'the politically-conscious, over-intellectualised writers of the early thirties' (Henry Reed, quoted by Hewison, p.110), were pitted the extreme romanticists, the Apocalyptic. Predictably, MacNeice did not care for their tendencies: 'This group of poets compares badly with their predecessor on Patmos. ...' 'An Alphabet of Literary Prejudices', The Windmill 9, 1948, p.38.

for it: 'The icicles, the ice-cream, the pink and white, the lace and the froth and the fireworks were still there, but underneath the game was the drop, the space and the knowledge' (p.18). With Eliot as stimulant, and Auden and MacNeice widening the territory open to poets, Grigson had felt secure in stating--in his foreword to a selection of poems from New Verse--that a common-sense view of poetry was the only one acceptable, and that 'if a poem (or a mind) is more than the sum of its details and constituents, that extra something is explicable in material terms' (quoted, p.21). Naturally the neo-Romantic upsurge had disappointed him, in fact he described it in terms of a recurrence of disease, and complained that there had been 'a weakening then of the penicillin in which one had trusted'. Loyal to the poets whom he had published, Grigson did not indulge in more direct criticism than that. However, his final generalisation was damning:

The First War shocked several writers and painters into a sudden humanity devoid of sham, and left a few of them changed and receptive. The Second War shocked other writers and painters out of themselves or out of healthier modes into mystifyings or commonplaces moribundly imaged and dressed. One war killed much sham; the other revived it, as a refuge, at least in frail and noisy talents.

(p.22)

Presumably the last qualification exempts MacNeice from these strictures.

The poems MacNeice wrote after the War often suffer from a sense of being steered to a pre-determined course, and as they lengthen they lose impetus. Eliot rehearsed the necessity for dull patches in long poems, which MacNeice endorsed in 'Experiences with Images' (p.132), but Eliot's practice in the Four Quartets



was to wrestle with problems of expression openly, to enact his difficulties as part of the poem's strategy. MacNeice, on the other hand, manages to push a poem ahead without its really developing: in The Stygian Banks he takes seven sections to elaborate a theme which could have been comfortably contained in one. The title is apter than intended, in that the poem lingers between two worlds, neither sufficiently realised.

MacNeice gave a clue to his intentions when he remarked: 'The same quasi-musical interlinking of images, with variations on contrasted themes, is used... with a more leisurely accumulative effect, in a recent long poem, The Stygian Banks. Such poems are tentative, though unforced, essays in the genre in which Rilke achieved such astonishing exactitude' ('Images', p.132). He would have read Leishman's translations of Rilke, which were published at intervals throughout the thirties: Spender collaborated with Leishman on a translation of the Duino Elegies published in 1939 (a version by Victoria and Edward Sackville-West had been available in 1931); Ernst Stahl, who knew Leishman, may have discussed the poems with MacNeice. Rilke was much in vogue during and after the War, translations appearing in Poetry London and other magazines. The book on Yeats reveals MacNeice's admiration for the German poet, who would have reinforced his conviction about death at that time; he quotes from the Ninth Elegy, '...your holiest inspiration's / Death, that friendly Death' (Yeats, p.161). Most important is MacNeice's interpretation of Rilke's concept of Verwandlung, 'transformation':

Man's gift of seeing is, paradoxically, for Rilke a bridge to the inner invisible world. Sense experience can surmount the senses. Articulation in speech instead of pinning things down can release them from the slavery of the moment. ... As he wrote in the First Elegy (Leishman and Spender's translation):

Yes, the Springs had need of you. Many a star was waiting for you to espy it. ...

... Yeats expressed himself differently but he too was ready to vindicate Here and Now as means of canalizing eternal truth.


(pp. 127-8)

This seems to chime with MacNeice's own ambition, to extract from the finite signs of transcendence, but Rilke--as he pointed out--had experienced a genuine mystical vision to which his work gave expression. MacNeice could manipulate history, previous literature and natural phenomena to embody his desire for renewal, yet the syntax and imagery are tired. The assertion that these efforts were 'unforced' begins to look like a defence, especially in view of the available drafts.

In two sets of notes among the Texas manuscripts, there are indications of the general plan for the poem, and ideas for the first section alone. Some of the words are not clear, but the opening question is plain: 'To keep themselves young--Is that why people have children?!--So the river bank represents the states between childhood and adolescence and maturity, as well as death. The child is seen in terms of itself and of history, as though medieval man were child to the twentieth century adult. MacNeice's plan was jotted down thus:

(i) = Intro. (child x Med.)

(ii) [ ] (different childhoods

N.B. nec. of difference  selection

(iii) - Hence love (sex) - Desire unsatisfied

gdners x choice

(iv) - Hence Humanity )( acceptance  
action

(v) - Hence 'God' (hierarchy) )( Desire

Acceptance

(vi) → Death (as systematiser)

Wake - praise ['sin are']

(vii) System → Life (Med. cp again)

fresco of judgement



Church Ale

The poem itself yields less of an impression of logical development. Its constant season is spring, and MacNeice uses several figures to knit the sections together: the child with a hoop, Alison, the lover. He imbeds in the poem memories that have intense personal significance: the medieval reference is particularly connected with the idyllic last term at Marlborough, when MacNeice and Blunt 'would spend whole afternoons lying naked on the grassy banks of the bathing place, eating strawberries and cherries and reciting the Pervigilium Veneris or 'An hendy hap ichabbe y-hent'.<sup>1</sup> Although the walled garden has particular medieval associations which he meant to conjure, the combination of wall and wind blowing recurs in MacNeice's poetry, and is undoubtedly rooted in a childhood experience: the extraordinarily vivid concatenation of taste--ginger, sensation--the salt breeze, smell--herring, and the sight of the sea. It was on this same Portstewart holiday that he had 'a revelation of space':

We were walking along a road between high walls  
and I could see nothing but the road and the air  
on the road was quiet and self-contained. On  
the top of the walls, on the contrary, there  
were long grasses growing in the stonework and

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1. Strings, p.99. The refrain of 'Alisoun' runs: 'An hendy hap ichabbe y-hent, / Ichot from hevne it is me sent, / From alle wymmen my love is lent / Ant lyht on Alisoun'.

these were blown out, combed, by a wind which  
I could not see. I wondered what was over  
those walls and I thought that it must be space.

(Strings, pp.39-40)

The wall becomes both the necessary horizon and the suggestion of what lies beyond it: as section IV has it, 'What makes in fact the garden, saves it from not-being' is perhaps also a stepping-stone:

So that what is beyond it  
(That which as well perhaps could be called what is Not)  
Is the sanction itself of the wall and so of the garden?  
Do we owe these colours and shapes to something which  
seems their death?

This is 'the fertilising paradox' which is central to the poem: space and enclosure, distance and intimacy, each helps to define the other.

However, the idea of the poem and the possibilities of construction and exploration it suggested were more vivid to MacNeice than its execution ever conveys. He did not conceive of the genre clearly enough, despite Rilke's example (or Eliot's): the personal allusions are disguised, losing the force they might have contributed; we feel no pressure or urgency in the poem's advance. This emerges in a comparison of The Stygian Banks with 'Plain Speaking' (p.187), which adumbrates much of the theme of the later poem. Both are concerned with language, with the way context can alter words, with the relation of word to object. In 'Plain Speaking' MacNeice conceives of language as existing in two phases: tautological at the beginning and end of life, 'entities unfurled' in between. Thus the child identifies the word with the object--tree, woman--and death cannot turn into other than itself. In the middle passage words may be invested with meanings beyond their original capacity-- 'a tree becomes / A talking tower, and a woman becomes world', or, too flexible, they escape the user, are dulled by repetition or

become frustratingly inadequate. Yet the experience persists, whether accurately named or not, even if the words are only shorthand for its occurrence: 'But dream was dream and love was love... / And I am I although the dead are dead'. The insistence is economical. The value of 'Plain Speaking' lies in the irony the title initiates, a dialectic the poem sets up. The Stygian Banks lapses into assertion rather than illustration, provides signposts ('Making the transient last by having Seen it / And so distilled value from mere existence') like that capital 'S' which we might expect MacNeice to avoid. Such defects also mar 'The North Sea' (p.271) whose much worked-over drafts, especially of the final stanza, are matched by the laboriousness of the finished version (Texas).

The dominating event of the late forties for MacNeice was his visit to India. While the above poems still bear an imprint of war, India forced him to look at an entirely different crisis, challenged assumptions from a new angle. The BBC dispatched MacNeice and Wynford Vaughan Thomas at the time of Partition, autumn 1947. Vaughan Thomas, in his contribution to the Radio Portrait, said how surprised he was by his orderly, detached companion's immediate attraction 'to that vast muddle that we call Indian life' (p.16). MacNeice produced three radio programmes about India, many of his poems touch on it, and there is also a prose piece, obviously culled from India at First Sight, called 'The Crash Landing' (Botteghe Oscure IV, 1949). In this, the voice of the Visitor brushes aside the comparisons offered by the Nanny, the Missionary, the Uncle (pukka sahib), which threaten to tame the continent's impact: 'I don't want any tips from you vested interests, I want to forget all

my own preconceptions--everything I've heard and read' (p.380). The Still Voice warns that 'enmeshed in your own background' it is impossible to 'start from scratch' (ibid), but MacNeice can at least enumerate aspects of the country's fantastic diversity.

In the first poem to emerge from the experience, 'Letter from India: for Hedli' (p.268), MacNeice conveys not his delight but his appalled shock: 'This was the truth and now we see it, / This was the horror--it is deep'. The beauty of south India was entirely over-shadowed by the Punjab massacres; Vaughan Thomas and MacNeice had witnessed the aftermath of one: 'I have seen Sheikhupura High School / Fester with glaze-eyed refugees'. The letter records the distance any traveller feels from what is familiar and loved, and more, the clash of cultures that seems to set 'Western assurance' at nothing. MacNeice's personal resolution of the problem is graceful but not wholly believed in.

The poem's draft (Texas) shows that MacNeice was anxious to discard any intolerance, any Western frame of reference that might foil his attempt to communicate the alien quality of India. So in the second stanza, for example, his setting makes his wife's 'remote so that even lust / Can take no tint nor curve on trust / Beyond these plains' beyondless margin': 'beyondless', while awkward, aptly expresses this particular revelation of space, and it replaces the loaded 'unhallowed'. This is the Forsterian experience of India, confounded by age, expanse, multiplicity, seeing the 'measureless under / Pretended measure'. MacNeice worked on posing the question, allowing that 'even should humanism always / Have been half-impotent, debased':

Yet how can its foster-children conquer  
This retina in which encased  
Our vision can but mark the waste  
Which thus invalidates our vision

The printed version stresses the closer relation between humanism and its offspring, keeps the notion of vision while sensibly dropping 'conquer'. His alteration of the last two lines, with the favourite device of repeating a word, here as verb and noun, makes the humanist viewpoint less blinkered, blurs the simple impact of waste on vision that the first effort marks: 'encased / In which our vision here must waste, meeting but waste, the chance of Vision'. A similar movement takes place in the revision of the following stanza, which had read:

& a more searching question: Xtian  
                                   still work in  
 Values ~~yet hold for~~ you & me  
                                   Who wish assume  
 We ~~think~~ the individual sacred  
 & though all rivers reach the sea ...

The change to 'a Testator half-forgotten' shows MacNeice's unwillingness to attach specific labels to himself, and with his customary dislike of terms such as 'the individual' (which, if he values, he often capitalises), switches to 'Presuming Jack and Jill so sacred'.

The distance that bulks between the continents, and between husband and wife, gives Hedli MacNeice only a fairytale reality, 'Beauty asleep in a Grimm story'. A sleeping girl surrounded by thorns is an image of which MacNeice was particularly fond; he uses it in connection with his first wife, for example, in Autumn Journal: 'Inaccessible in a sleeping wood / But thorns and thorns around her / And the cries of night / And I have no knife or axe to cut my passage / Back to the lost delight' (Canto XI). Here it is a way to slide back into a European framework, a quasi-metaphysical wedding, 'in either [of us] / An India sleeps below our West'. Nevertheless, finding harmony in personal relationships is a retreat from the dilemma the poem poses, and MacNeice cannot solve that.

He is naturally more at ease with learning, cultural assimilation, bypassing the 'things that creep'. This is not to judge MacNeice; as Vaughan Thomas related, where he could act to relieve misery, he did so directly and efficiently. Perhaps poetry can never cope with mass suffering, unless to satirise those who occasion it. He was not only fascinated but genuinely moved by India. In an article entitled 'India and England 1952' (Texas), MacNeice wrote of his emotional sympathy with the country, and claimed that it had supplied some lost part of himself. More sceptically, he said in a review of Edward Lear's Indian Journals that India, 'being too large and too complex to be "comprehended", invites us to select from her vastness only our own pet properties, rediscovering in fancy dress things we have always fancied' (New Statesman, 4 April 1953, p.402).

'Mahabalipuram' (p.273) displays this sense of discovery: 'these are the dreams we have needed'.<sup>1</sup> Near Madras, the place was once the chief seaport of the Pallava dynasty, a great trading people. In the seventh and early eighth centuries they carved the coastal granite out-crop with giant reliefs, and sculpted cave temples. On the outskirts of Madras there is also the Portuguese church of the Little Mount, dedicated to St Thomas who is believed to have reached India. MacNeice jotted down a brief note of what he had seen at both sites: he did not develop the contrast until he wrote 'Didymus' (Ten Burnt Offerings), starting at once with the prolific images Mahabalipuram offered him: the massive relief of the Ganges' descent to earth; adjacent boulders with carvings from Hindu mythology; four free-standing temples carved from one long

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1. Texas: the first of a group of eleven notebooks contains drafts of '[The North Sea]', 'Mahabalipuram', and 'The Window'.





rhyming ones reflects the multitude of figures to be gathered in, expansion and the contraction that makes the whole graspable. MacNeice succeeds in expressing the great swirl of movement caught in stone: the eight-armed Durga, for instance, who bears down on the buffalo-headed Demon. He tries 'sculptured turmoil', rejected it for 'wild reliefs', decided to save any mention of relief for the play on the word at the end, and specified: 'the rockhewn windmill / That brandishes axe and knife', rhyming this destruction with the stanza's last line, 'Behold what a joy of life'. The sculptures have been described as having the elongated elegance characteristic of Pallavan art: 'It is as if the action took place behind a gossamer screen which expands with the straining forms but always holds them to a constant plane'.<sup>1</sup> This effect MacNeice captures, yet when he arrives at a summing-up, it is as if his force has been blunted by the surge of words:

But the visitor must move on and the waves assault the temple,  
Living granite against dead water, and time with its weathering  
action

Make phrase and feature blurred;  
Still from today we know what an avatar is, we have seen  
God take shape and dwell among shapes, we have felt  
Our ageing limbs respond to those ageless limbs in the rock  
Relief. Relief is the word.

In 'Letter from India' he had complained of crossing letters, 'Each answer coming late and little, / The air-mail being no avatar'. From grumbling over the impossible MacNeice has moved to marvel at genuine incarnation: fumbling at first, 'How men have made rocks become gods become man, we have felt / The rock in our flesh respond to the flesh in those rocks', he found a more satisfactory manner of communicating the element of mystery in the sculptors' handling of the rock, and the sensual element of his own response. The final

1. Roy Craven, A Concise History of Indian Art (London: Thames and Hudson, 1976), p.148.

sentence hints at eroticism as well as the intellectual/emotional achievement of comprehension.

'The Crash Landing' has a penultimate statement by the Still Voice: 'Ambiguity, continuity, perpetuity' (p.385). It may have been these broad themes that MacNeice had in mind when he wrote to Eliot: 'I am also planning a long poem (about the length of "Autumn Journal" but much more tightly knit) which would not be so much "about" India as suggested by India...' (9 February 1948). In a letter of 1 June 1948, he concluded that it was not taking shape, by which time he was probably working on 'The Window' which he had begun drafting in the same notebook as 'Mahabalipuram'.

The poems confirm the impression given by Ten Burnt Offerings that MacNeice was establishing a discursive style as a vehicle for his meditations on art and otherness. During the War he had written a great many short poems from an altered perspective, his always intense sensuous impressions heightened by daily tension. Afterwards he perhaps felt the need to consolidate intuitions, attach them to some philosophic spine. The desire to bring into coherent relation the sense of flux and an essential stability must have been deepened by his Indian experience, and by the current uncertainties in British society. There are traces, too, of the emotional unease that was to prevail in the 1950's, in MacNeice's seeking to fortify his trust in personal relations.

'The Window' begins with what the draft specifies as a French painting of flowers at a window (Texas), as a symbol of suspended equilibrium: not a reflection as in 'Corner Seat', but like that involving multiple spectators and mediation between two sides. We might imagine a canvas similar to Dufy's Open Window at St Janet in the Tate. In the draft the first four lines are in the form



What I judge to be the first draft breaks off here, following a rather unprofitable and tendentious line. The savage step and the island reappear in the final version as metaphors for a workable relationship between the perfectibility of art and the inevitable clumsiness of the living. Here in the sand and the painted clock, although they fit in with surrounding images, have a look of the thirties and 'that other savage, the wind', could have been lifted from one of the poems in Blind Fireworks. They were lines well discarded, as not being organic to the poem, and hinting at Dylan Thomas's influence. MacNeice was trying to clear his work of what might be judged as purely decorative.

In a second notebook the above draft is copied out, and there is a list headed 'The Window':

- 1) The Painting
- 2) The Child
- 3) The Sportsman
- 4) The Lover
- 5) The Globe-trotter [expert]
- 6 5) The Wkers
- 7 6) The Artist
- 8 7) The Home
- 9 8) The ---

MacNeice seems to have had in mind broad themes of vision, harmony, everyday life, and to have plotted out this method of embodying them. The sportsman could have symbolised grace of action, the co-operation between players, and of eye, hand and mind; the lover, transcendental vision--also its sully (though this is not a disillusioned poem)--delight in daily, shared life, but necessarily transience. The globetrotter is a typical MacNeice addition, seeing everything at a

comfortable distance, contriving unreal reconciliations. In the spirit of 'Leaving Barra' the workers would be praised for their 'routine courage', warned too of the deadening of vision through monotony. The artist's rôle is elaborated in the poem as it stands; the home might have been seen as both source and destroyer of harmony, recalling the bored gathering in 'Happy Families'. MacNeice's concern for the architecture of his poems is shown in this kind of planning; that he abandoned the scheme indicates his willingness to be more flexible. It reveals a wish not only to convey the fascination of surface, of incidental details, but also to generalise from some moral core by providing 'types', thus giving rein in poetry to the leaning towards parable which he exploited in broadcasting.

The other notebook drafts deal with recognisable forms of parts I and II of the poem. If there was an intermediate stage, which seems unlikely, it is not to be discovered in American collections. The opening now shifts from the symbol and its explanation to being immediately about time and balance; the painting itself waits for the second stanza. 'Hermitage' is introduced, implying that security is only possible in the shelter of isolation. The first stanza combines and sums up the ideas of the second and third in the original draft. MacNeice continued:

The painter knew when he placed the pot  
 Highlights upon chrysanthemums--  
 [ ] [ ] & the open air  
 vase  
 Flowers in a pot [imponderably]--  
 The painter knew who set them there  
 tricks  
 The laws of closed & open  
 bloom & bulge  
 Highlights upon delft & calyx  
 He hung this bridge in timelessness  
 Preventing  
 Precluding traffic hence or hither



& claimed  
 Claiming his own authority  
 span  
 To bridge, to ban, to bless.

The artist has invested the flowers with inevitability; his ability to do so, which had come from a knowledge of 'laws', became eventually a 'knack', a matter of skill with an element of chance. MacNeice wanted 'not merely a formal pattern' in a poem, but also 'the sort of [internal] structure which will creep in willy-nilly if a poet has some positive values' (The Listener, 2 September 1948, p.346). In 'The Window' the image of the bridge, and the authority of the artist to place it, is the lynch-pin of the structuring belief. Interestingly, MacNeice does not differentiate here between the gifts of visual and verbal artists: as in 'The National Gallery', the vital function of any art is to 'purge our particular time-bound unliving lives', to fling open windows. The fixity of the painted window means that its grace cannot be discomposed, nor may it be extended; this quality troubles MacNeice in the last stanza of the section. He began its draft with a now-illegible Greek phrase, went on uncertainly:

& the picture, a window ~~itself, permits~~ too, must preclude  
rebutts  
denies  
defies

Ventilation or burglary--  
 egress No entrance to its solitude,  
 No access to an enterprise  
 No exit No exit to adventure  
 No entrance to well-being;  
 For works of art give no solution  
 To those who live in a changing Now  
 that lives  
 For life who live from mind to moment  
 none  
 From mouth to mouth from never to now  
 never rival into that circle,  
 Cannot achieve art's perfection  
 At sense ) by)  
 Can most can know ) it at) a tangent  
 glimpse)

& without knowing how.

That MacNeice should associate art, on second thought, with solitude rather than 'well-being' is unsurprising; he had chosen Rilke's advice to a young poet as the epigraph to Chapter IV of The Poetry of W.B. Yeats: 'Therefore, dear sir, love your solitude...' By massing objects, experiences, encounters in the next section, the things 'distracting the heart', he makes the stillness of the painting the more desirable, and in the printed version the flat statement that 'works of art give no solution' is omitted; also the fact that we cannot partake of perfection is qualified: 'Must never, they say, infringe that circle'. The way in which art may be apprehended becomes successively more tentative: know - glimpse - sense.

When MacNeice goes on to describe the intervening world, he is interested in achieving 'something of art's coherence' in life, not in how the artist takes from it what he needs for his work. This section is the weakest of the poem: MacNeice self-indulgently rakes through the debris of illusion, of significant moments lost and the few--unaccountably--salvaged, until the last stanza which shows his lyrical power undiminished. The structure with which he was concerned emerges easily with the assertion of a battered belief; the window reappears as a means of communication, no longer locking watched and watcher in their own worlds. The image draws strength from its biblical and fairy-tale associations.

Loss and discovery, froth and fulfilment, this is our medium,  
A second best, an approximate, frameless, a sortie, a tentative  
Counter attack on the void, a launching forth from the window  
Of a raven or maybe a dove  
And we do not know what they will find but gambling on their  
fidelity  
And on other islanded lives we keep open the window and  
fallibly  
Await the return of love.

Taking its cue from this patience, the opening of section III



has lost the exclamatory impatience of section II and become a meditative question, which in the next stanza is replaced by affirmation. Not that the mystery can be elucidated, except tangentially: 'that which art gleaning, congealing, / Sets in antithesis to life / Is what in living we lay claim to'. The gentleness of the ending evades all the questions; it is nearly the gentleness of resignation because the poet places himself inside the room, with the air blowing in. When 'Order to View' (1940) ends, 'And all the curtains flew out of / The windows; the world was open', the poet is outside, everything invites and thus invigorates him.

In 1949 Faber and Faber published MacNeice's Collected Poems 1925-1948. His reputation had begun to slide: the TLS dismissed the book as showing 'small talent and limited achievement'.<sup>1</sup> When he wrote to an American who hoped to organise a recital by the MacNeices in Chicago, giving a lengthy professional and personal assessment, MacNeice remarked defensively:

I remain, though I say it(!), one of the best known--  
and best selling--poets in the U.K. This is in spite  
 of the fact that I have recently had a bad press  
 which is partly, I think, because my friends,  
 having become successful, have largely stopped writing  
 book reviews which have consequently fallen into the  
 hands of the younger and as yet less successful writers...

(To Mrs Borden Stevenson,  
 31 March 1953)

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1. 'A Poet of Our Time', 28 October 1949, p.696. The reviewer was a Dr Cox, probably the R.G. Cox who used to review for Scrutiny, which was generally hostile towards MacNeice.

The early 1950's seem in retrospect subdued years for the reception of poetry. The War boom was over, and magazines began to disappear: Poetry Quarterly, Horizon, Poetry London; Penguin New Writing, whose print order had been 100,000 in 1946, dropped to 40,000 by 1949, and was discontinued in 1950. Nevertheless, the period saw 'the emergence of a really new attitude to poetry', according to G.S. Fraser in the introduction to Poetry Now.<sup>1</sup> Fraser labelled the thirties poets 'Augustans'; they were succeeded by 'romantics', who in the fifties lost ground to Amis, Wain and company: an 'ousting of the bohemians by the pedants' (p.54). MacNeice objected to this kind of grouping on principle: 'As individuals then, we must welcome some of these New Liners, but as a group or a Movement, well, let them go. And behold, they go--with what docile arrogance, with what lowered but polished sights; roped together, alert for falling slates, they scale their suburban peaks--the Ascent of C3.'<sup>2</sup> He had no objection to lucidity and neatness, holding that any professional should be able to employ these qualities at will, but his sympathies went to poets able to get 'creative seizures': W.S. Graham and W.R. Rodgers, for instance. Poets should dare, he had remarked some years before, to return to 'Shakespeare's catholic receptivity' ('Images', p.126). This was hardly the fashionable line.

MacNeice claimed to Mrs Stevenson that his own most recent volume broke new ground: '...these poems being more architectural--or perhaps I should say symphonic--than what I was doing before'. In the introduction to Eighty-Five Poems (1959), he still maintained

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1. Quoted by MacNeice in his review of it and Mavericks (ed. Howard Sergeant and Dannie Abse), London Magazine, April 1957, p.52.

2. *Ibid.*, p. 54.

that Ten Burnt Offerings was his best book. Although the TLS was non-committal, noting the change of poetic form, characterising it as a 'meditative exercise in poetic apprehension' (8 August 1952, p.510), the poems had an extremely enthusiastic and sympathetic reception from W.S. Merwin, in the Kenyon Review (Summer 1953, pp. 473-6).

In his notes for lectures given in Cape Town in 1959, MacNeice included points to be made in one on his own poetry; he felt that his post-War poetry was reflective and had become more difficult. He apparently intended to talk about Ten Burnt Offerings in terms of their structure: '(cf music) --one subject from different angles--historical perspectives → MYTH e.g. Byron & Day of Returning'. These poems were written in Greece, where MacNeice was attached to the British Council in Athens, from March 1950 to March 1951. When they were published in 1952, they were prefaced with a verse which reveals a much fiercer attitude to the poet's craft than was shown in 'The Window' ('Then let the poet... be proudly humbled / And jettison his doubt'):

Every voyage is a death,  
Every action is a loss,  
Every poem drees its weird,  
Carries its meaning like a cross;  
Yet the burnt poet loves the fire  
Which gulps what pittance he can give--  
Dry words dying, dying, dead,  
Burning that the Word may live.

Each poem is in four 'movements', one of which is usually unbroken. MacNeice called them 'experiments in dialectical structure' (Bulletin, May 1957): such a structure is particularly clear in the Suite for Recorders (p.283), where it operates in the alternations of pastoral and violence; <sup>in</sup> Areopagus (p.287), with its tension between ancient and Christian beliefs; in Cock o' the North

(p.291), which explores the myth and the actual life of Byron, himself plagued by conflict; and in Didymus (p.295), which plays on the same contrasts as 'Mahabalipuram', further complicated by the introduction of Thomas the Doubter. There are few structural parallels, but the poems are linked by recurrent imagery, especially of water (although Our Sister Water, p.299, is one of the less interesting poems). The Death of a Cat (p.318) is the only one in which there is no mention of water, but it echoes others of the sequence: for instance the description of the cat, 'Fluid as Krishna chasing the milkmaids' matches other evocations of Indian gods in Didymus; the words of Gauguin in Our Sister Water--'Now a metre of green being, as a Frenchman said, / Greener than a centimetre'--connect with the knowledge 'that green grass / Is more than grass or green' in Cat. That and Flowers in the Interval are the lightest and most charming poems, chains of graceful similes, needing no other argument than praise. MacNeice can absolutely indulge his pleasure in sensuously charged words: in Modern Poetry, apropos of 'Fear No More', he admitted that 'even now words like "gold" and "roses" tend to strike me as if written in block capitals, and in writing myself I have to avoid playing to this primitive reaction...' (p.43). In Flowers (p.321) he uses his sleeping-princess-in-a-thicket image with a romantic variation, 'a quickset hedge of fiddlebows', and spends the entire third movement luxuriating in comparisons: 'Because your colours are onyx and cantaloupe, / Wet seaweed, lizard, lilac, tiger-moth / And olive groves and beech-woods...'

While the Suite and Cock o' the North may be praised for the scholarship they manifest, wearing it lightly (and MacNeice gently mocks it in Cat: '...The Greek Anthology / Laments its pets (like

you and me, darling), / ... / Those poets were late though, Not really classical'), Day of Returning makes use of classical myth in a more personal way, linking it in conception with Day of Renewal. When MacNeice sent the poems to London for broadcasting, he wrote a long explanatory letter to the producer Terence Tiller, which was then used as a basis for the introductions (21 April 1951. Texas). He indicated that the opening lines of Returning III (p.315)--'But even so, he said, daily I hanker, daily / Ache to get back to my home, to see my day of returning'--were an approximate translation of his key text from the Odyssey and that the poem counterpointed Odysseus and Jacob, 'both "practical" men--in spite of their supernatural digressions'. The idea of home was central: 'variations on home proper, "home from home", and home beyond the sky etc.' This returns to an old preoccupation, no doubt sharpened by the years of travelling for the BBC and the sojourn in Athens: 'We are all homeless sometimes, homesick sometimes'. In part II, in which that line occurs, MacNeice dwells on neither Odysseus nor Jacob--until the last stanza--using again the vision of a home made by a self-denying woman that he had pictured in The Kingdom. This time it is considerably less sentimental, casting doubt on the Chapel version of the heavenly home the woman hopes is awaiting her. MacNeice is best when he composes Odysseus' meditations on the seductions of Calypso, whose perfection falls short of the real challenges of Ithaca; nostalgia for a grittier way of life, for the sight of remembered seas.

Merwin was particularly excited by the extension in range these poems showed, beyond the range of MacNeice's previously limited personae; 'Didymus', he thought, was the most impressive. MacNeice here chose a subject exactly suited to his gifts and his own

quandaries: he could verbally imitate the metaphysical tension between the One and the Many. Thus the opening section describes the Mahabalipuram shrine, enacts the Indian 'riot of dialectic', both artistic and human, with which Thomas was confronted. The second pits against the confusion Thomas's simplicity, 'With his two hands and his cruse of doubt / Which never ran dry', figured in the austere Church of the Little Mount. Simplicity and doubt co-exist in Thomas, who is not given to tortuous analysis but to elementary questioning:

Was he that once, the sole delight of my soul?  
 My memory wilts in the heat. I was mending a net  
 When I sensed with a start that I was under his eye  
 And he called my name; the rest of his words I forget.

The homophones, occurring in the first or third line of each stanza in III, emphasise his dubiety: words that are apparently the same with quite different meanings, identity and disparity. Part IV expands once more into evocation of the Indian landscape, interrupted by two eight-line sections in couplets, like the voices of tempters challenging the saint and the poet himself. The former presumably, and the latter deliberately, come to rest on the same indisputable finality: 'On a bare plaque the bare but adequate tribute / To one who had thrust his fingers into the wounds of God'.

Yet the solution for MacNeice is only poetically possible. He asks sombrely in Day of Renewal (p.309): 'Do I prefer to forget it? / This middle stretch of life is bad for poets;' back then to autobiography, and 'instead of high-powered myths (e.g. Meleager, Calypso) Whittington and nursery rhymes' (letter to Tiller). The second section where these predominate is the least successful. MacNeice is better with the wistfully personal, places, emotions and birthdays linked inextricably, spread out like browned photographs for him to puzzle out the connection between the man in 'Lahore /

Blood, cholera, flies, blank eyes, becoming forty', the man of forty-three 'At sea in the small hours heading west', and the child told 'that ten was a ripe age / When presents must be useful'.

The thread he finds is the season of his birth, time for bonfires:

For all my years are based on autumn,  
Blurred with blue smoke, charred by flame,  
Thrusting burnt offerings on a god  
Who cannot answer to his name.

The last stanza proffers a less melancholy conclusion: perhaps in the end 'through blown smoke' there will drift 'a god who needs no name'.

Since the long poems written before 1952 were dealt with in some detail, the brevity of the foregoing comments on Ten Burnt Offerings and those on Autumn Sequel which follow, may seem disproportionate. To a great degree the earlier poems adumbrate both themes and methods of the latter, displaying in their drafts the same care and manoeuvre, but the concentration is also explained by the reference in the Preface to the circumstances in which the manuscripts were seen, especially those of Ten Burnt Offerings. A proper reading of that sequence would involve a careful investigation of the extensive drafts, and I am convinced that such attention would be rewarding. Autumn Sequel is more problematic. Again the extent of manuscript material would have caused an imbalance in this study, which is intended to provide a broad view of MacNeice's poetic development. Moreover, it is by no means certain that a reconstruction of the compositional process would here illuminate the poem. MacNeice's account of its inception supplies the key to its eventual failure. To use Merwin's distinction, this is 'material to be worked-up' not, as in the case of Ten Burnt Offerings,

'access to new command and new subject to command' (p.475).

After that sequence, MacNeice faltered into silence. Extremely depressed, in August 1953 he 'suddenly and quite cold-bloodedly decided to write another long poem hinged to an autumn season', which would be called Autumn Sequel: '...changes in the world and changes in my own poetic aims have made the sequel a more calculated and less occasional work than its predecessor', he admitted in the introduction to the first broadcast programme of the poem's early cantos (28 June 1954). Whereas public events in 1938 had dictated the flow of Autumn Journal:

In 1953 public events, rightly or wrongly, failed to inspire me in the same way. Autumn Sequel, however, is not, I would say, a private poem. There are certain themes running through it, often presented in a mythical form, which throughout history have been the stock-in-trade not only of poets but of all thinking men--perhaps I should say of all brooding men. The point of Autumn Sequel is the wedding of myth and topicality. ... while the newspaper material is greatly diminished, there is a corresponding increase in the topical human element.

The idea of such a poem, although only realised in 1953, seems to have occurred to MacNeice nearly a decade before. When he sent Eliot some revised proofs for Springboard, he wrote that he did not expect to produce another volume of short poems for a considerable time, having in mind a long poem that might take years to shape:

I can't tell you much about this project at the moment except (1) that the main characters will be imagined contemporary individuals, but will exist on two planes, i.e. the symbolic as well as the naturalistic. (2) That there will be some inter-shuttling of past and present (though in a much more modified way than Ezra Pound's Cantos). (3) That the total pattern will be very complex, and in fact rather comparable to the "Faerie Queene" in its interlocking of episodes, sub-plots, and digressions which aren't really digressions.

(7 April 1944)



Connolly judged the poem to be more ambitious than Autumn Journal, 'loosely constructed round the portrait of a group of friends like Elgar's Enigma Variations'.<sup>1</sup> Some are easily identifiable: Gwilym as Dylan Thomas, Gavin as Graham Shepard, Egdon as Auden. For MacNeice, who details in the poem the pressures working for disillusionment, conformity, anonymity, despair, who finds death coming prematurely to many, his friends are the bearers of value in his world. It may be courage or humour, kindness or wit that marks them out; most importantly, they may have rescued a pattern from the encroaching formlessness. MacNeice's scepticism did not include the people he had accepted as friends; reluctant to commit himself, he was tenacious once he had done so, 'a great cherisher of friendships'.<sup>2</sup>

The knowledge that he set about writing Autumn Sequel so deliberately accords with our reading of the poem: it seems wilful, contrivance is sometimes painfully apparent. The very first canto, in which MacNeice proliferates the clichés, tags, turned colloquialisms he feels have the power to excite, fails on those terms.<sup>3</sup> August is the opening month for Autumn Journal also, and MacNeice makes constant reference to the earlier poem, 'scrawled on the sky / In my hand of unformed smoke'; remembering the excitement

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1. 'Lianas Over the Void', a review of the Collected Poems, Sunday Times, 15 January 1967, p.28.
  2. Dan Davin, 'In a Green Grave', Closing Times (London: O.U.P., 1975), p.55.
  3. 'To my present taste this sort of economy--the twist of an ordinary phrase, the apparently flat statement with a double meaning--is far more exciting than the romantic elaboration of glamour images' ('Images', p.132).

which laces it, and the comment to Eliot that it contained everything of importance in his life, the weariness of this Canto I seems even more dispiriting: 'It is not time I resent, it is that the hand should stick / On a lie which the heart repeats again and again'. The brief salute to Wimbush (Gordon Herrickx, who was a stonemason by day, sculptor by night), chiselling 'his vision in a midland shed / Chip upon chip, undaunted and unknown', (I), the panegyric to Graham Shepard (II), indicate that if MacNeice did not resent the passage of time, he was certainly obsessed by it. Like Eliot's publican in The Waste Land, MacNeice has his park-keepers call 'All Out', their whistles sounding for closing time. Unlike Eliot, he is not content to let the command stand, but must explain:

A harsh voice cries All Out--all out of Regent's Park,  
Of Everest, of Eden--casts a doubt  
If we were ever in. The whole massif is dark,

The one tree silent, one day (to-day) ruled out, all out.

(Canto III)

By such symbols: the Fall, fall; the Tree--of knowledge, the Cross; like expulsion and subsequent search for a home, the cantos are linked. MacNeice creates his own myths: the climbing of Everest (he wrote a commentary for a film on the subject), which is part of the Quest theme but appealed to him particularly for Mallory's reason, 'because it is there'; the 'Parrot', who appears periodically as a symbol of mechanical civilization, and is related to the betraying Cock. There is also, of course, the unification provided by the terza rima form; the trick of connecting one section with the next by means of last and first lines had already been practised in The Stygian Banks. Despite such care in construction, cantos such as the eighth appear as pure digression, Thucydides mentioned to drag them into the main stream. Thucydides speaks for Ancient History, intermittently, arguing for instance

that poets ought to have 'civic virtues'. In Canto XIX, 'the point is made that modern society is very unlike the ancient Greek city state' (introduction to the fifth broadcast) but was it worth making? Sandwiched between the lament for Dylan Thomas--'More power to the Makers'--and the account of his funeral in Wales, Canto XIX seems irrelevant, distracting no one from grief.

Notes for Autumn Sequel in the Berg Collection witness to MacNeice's thorough planning, down to a list of reference books marked according to their relevant cantos: Willey's Seventeenth Century Background, for instance, for the one on Norwich (XVI); Fox's The Personality of Animals for the penultimate canto which was intended to include the animals--also earmarked was The Mentality of Apes; for the last two cantos a Guide to Ravenna and The Oxford Book of Carols. MacNeice might have treasured most his version of the Quest--cantos XIV, XV, XVI--which he found a perennially interesting theme, but because of their relaxed coherence the two Oxford cantos, XII and XIII, read better, with their affectionate portraits of Boyce (E.R. Dodds) and Aloys (Ernst Stahl); and for sustained insight, there is the impressive Canto XXII, about Sherborne and Marlborough. As D.B. Moore remarks, a concern with himself is the least prevalent theme of Autumn Sequel, and this canto is an unusually shrewd piece of self analysis. What makes it the most notable of the whole sequence is the recounting of the dream MacNeice had at Marlborough (see also Strings, p.101). This was the appalling vision of the Crucifixion occurring as part of a tawdry fun-fair; MacNeice breasts the hill and sees it all in a hollow, knowing his father is climbing behind, 'and through the noise I foresaw the world collapse// In my father's mind in a moment'.

The Texas collection holds an undated manuscript called 'Three Dreams', written in the third person. The first is a boy's dream of his clergyman father's humiliation, the second is the Marlborough experience and the third bears out MacNeice's admission in Autumn Sequel: '...I had the worst of it, in the lack // Of my own faith and the knowledge of his'.

The structure that would emerge willy-nilly from belief is absent from the poem. MacNeice writes about his wife's preparations for Christmas Eve and gallantly puts aside 'chill and sallow thoughts';

While I, brought up to scoff rather than bless  
And to say No, unless the facts require

A neutral verdict, for this Once say Yes.

(Canto XXIV)

He prays in the last canto that each of his friends might have 'the fruits of his desire', travels homeward in the company of visionaries, Blake, Aristotle, perhaps the Kings, towards one 'who takes the ancient view that life is holy'.

But if I were asked whether this were a Christian poem, I should not know what to reply. All I know is that I have been saturated from my childhood in Christian symbolism and that some of these symbols seem to me still most valid.

(Introduction to the sixth  
broadcast, 1 August 1954)

So it appears in the poem, the newly constructed symbols carrying little weight of conviction and experience. It seems an immensely sad work, so laboured over and so little satisfying. The unmoving traveller carried to his destination is much more despairing than the man who railed against injustices he could not right, in Autumn Journal, but felt he could himself take a new, more honest direction. At the outset of the later poem MacNeice accepted, even welcomed,

contradiction, in Whitman's words; he seems to search, nevertheless, for some means of resolution, haunted by not being able to accept his father's. Endeavouring to give almost every object significance, he leaves nothing to that chance he admires in sports, 'Because they are not foregone, move in more fluid borders' (XXIII). The TLS reviewer remarked acutely that what we miss in the Sequel is the 'sense of an area of unused force outside the poem' (26 November 1954, p.754). MacNeice yoked myth and actuality together, but their marriage eluded him.

## Chapter V

The Lyric Return

While MacNeice deplored reviewers' misinterpretations of Autumn Sequel, he perhaps had less to complain of in the reception of Visitations (1957). Although critical approval was qualified, it was generally concluded that MacNeice had rejected an aberrant style, the new poems suggesting a fresh development. He later remarked acidly that most critics needed 'something deeper than a well and wider than a church-door' before they could perceive poetic development (Bulletin, February 1961), but admitted to seeing certain changes in his work. The 'lyrical impulse, suppressed in the writing of longer poems, had returned: 'I like to think that my latest short poems are on the whole more concentrated and better organised than my earlier ones, relying more on syntax and bony feature than on bloom or frill or the floating image', he wrote in the Bulletin for May 1957.

Nevertheless, earlier poems provide models for Visitations. MacNeice's description of the volume matches one he jotted down for Springboard, when he was preparing an autobiographical lecture for Cape Town: 'verse more austere & unified--new concentration on syntax, bony structure' (Berg). 'April Fool' from the later book is reminiscent of 'Nuts in May'; 'A Hand of Snapshots' or 'Jigsaws' resembles the sequence 'Novelettes' in Plant and Phantom. This rediscovery of a former style is beneficial; the less successful poems have closer antecedents: for instance 'Donegal Triptych' bears traces of 'The North Sea' and 'The Window'. MacNeice does not quite know how to jettison or modify the style he stabilised with such effort in the 1950's, yet he also anticipates themes and phrases that become striking in his next volume.

The dedication to Visitations indicates that MacNeice is ready to bypass topicality, the world interpreted by the media; it had made his Journal memorable but had failed in the Sequel. In changing 'With all those public dilemmas which bruise our minds' to 'fears', he implied that events had passed beyond the point where the reasoning individual could make a contribution; better then for the poet, 'the timeless vagrant', to find and transmit value (Texas; 'To Hedli'). MacNeice had thought of using 'To Posterity' (p.443) as the dedication, a poem which also assigns importance to the truth-carrying function of words: so much so that he questions whether objects themselves can be the same 'when books have all seized up like the books in graveyards'.

Certainly his way forward seems to be through a constant clarification of the past, a return to scenes to find out what residue of feeling remains, what might be reawakened or revealed. MacNeice seeks not only sources of value, but also resources for art. In this way the poems of Visitations are connected with Ten Burnt Offerings: '... a sombre view / Where neither works nor days look innocent / And both seem now too many, now too few' (Day of Renewal). Recurrence has been a matter of nightmare and of vision, more often a guarantee of hope than of melancholy: MacNeice had Jacob ask in Day of Returning simply 'that day should return'. In 'Donegal Triptych' (p.445), however, to the contention that 'each arrival means returning' he opposes:

Returning where? To speak of cycles  
Rings as false as moving straight  
Since the gimlet of our fate  
Makes all life, all love, a spiral.

Change, absence and possession gnaw at him. A Heraclitan paradox runs 'it stays by changing'. MacNeice is unsure. Can he perceive

the essential familiarity of objects despite change, and thus convey their nature; are his altered perceptions bound to falsify what he sees or will they become more accurate with age?

Here for instance: lanes of fuschias  
 Bleed such hills which, always mine, as, earlier mine  
 Mine once more & yet now shine Vanished later; later  
 More than ever, with my collusion. shine

(Berg; Visitations notebook 3)

It is not clear whether the fuschias vanished merely to his sight, and burnished by memory now glow more intensely when seen again; or whether these flowers in a different place re-create a youthful memory. The collusion may be recollection, and it may be words, since MacNeice often mentions fuschias in his descriptions of the Irish landscape whose possession he forbade himself. Revisited, Donegal holds its core of fear: 'Youth and poetry departed'.

Against logic MacNeice assembles in the second part ancestral presences, elemental permanence, and in the third surveys time loftily, proving that he can let things go, can accept and not insist on reasons or, especially, on answers. It does not seem to have occurred to him that description could be a retreat, an evasion of the formulation of questions. His characterisation of the human mind as 'A halfway house between sky and sea, being of the water earthy, / And drenched in echoes of our earlier lives', is the way into identifying his own plight with that of the rest of mankind; facing out to sea he feels:

... the hand of the wind on my throat again  
 Retreat into solitude to regain communion  
 With all the other solitary persons, with all men.

(Berg; Visitations notebook)

The last two lines were re-written as:

Once more having entered solitude once more to find  
 communion  
 With other solitary beings, with the whole race of men.



The alteration emphasises the repetitiveness of the action, makes it a rather dutiful exertion; the whole remains portentous, although the replacement of 'beings' for 'persons' sounds more human and less official. McKinnon's interpretation of these lines as an example of MacNeice's 'basic longing for a religious or mystical identification with the One', it being 'probably Buddha's kind of mystical union that he has in mind' (p.92), further inflates their pretension. MacNeice indicated his source in the Bulletin, when he stated that he agreed with Christopher Caudwell 'that poetry is inevitably subjective--but this need not imply either imprecision or isolation; as Caudwell pointed out, the poet retires into his inner world thereby to re-establish communion with his fellows...'.<sup>1</sup> The hand of the wind is an ambiguous symbol, since it could be seen as preventing the speaking voice, or as some elemental inspiration. MacNeice attains his communion through the poem which solitary contemplation enables him to write.

MacNeice's choice of style in 'A Hand of Snapshots' (p.448) may have been motivated by concern to make his experience less ostensibly autobiographical, more accessible. The Berg Collection draft of 'The Here-and-Never' (Visitations notebook 4) is marked by frequent changes of pronouns to distance memories: in the third stanza, for instance, 'Few were few and we knew them all' became 'Few were few but all knew all'; in the second 'The face you find in the posted photograph' is altered to present the photograph detached from a viewer. These poems about return are unremittingly bleak, only revelatory of inadequacy and failure. The language is

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1. 'The instinctive ego of art is the common man into which we retire to establish contact with our fellows'. Quoted by MacNeice in 'Poetry, the Public and the Critic', New Statesman, 8 October 1949, p.381.

extremely plain. 'The Gone-Tomorrow' and 'The Here-and-Never' are both about exile and death, one from the world of childhood, the other from a familiar community. When MacNeice writes about the child's apprehension of its world, it is not with his usual nostalgia for that clarity: what matters in this poem is that senses fail, nature is lost to us:

And the blaze of whins, the smell of turf,  
The squelch of mud, the belch of surf,  
The slop of porridge, the squawk of gulls,  
Enter that smallest of small skulls.

The last lines of the poem, 'Will all have vanished and the skies / Have lost their blue like those blue eyes', remind us of Yeats's 'The Lover Pleads with His Friend for Old Friends': 'Your beauty perish and be lost / For all eyes but these eyes'; MacNeice allots to memory no consolatory power. The two dimensions in his poem, of wide landscape and small skull, correspond to those of eternity and now in the more abstractly expressed despondency of 'The Here-and-Never'. MacNeice juggles with a restricted vocabulary in the poem as though to enact human inadequacy to cope with loss; the sequence as a whole has a neatness of construction, balance of assonance or alliteration within lines, end rhyme or repetition, all severer than he normally tended to impose. The remark by Auden that MacNeice quoted in a review may be relevant to his own practice here: '... the more he (the poet) is conscious of an inner disorder and dread, the more value he will place on tidiness in the work as a defence,...'<sup>1</sup>

The two poems admitting first-person pronouns are quite different in their tones. MacNeice began 'The Left-Behind' with a

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1. 'He Weeps by the Side of the Ocean', New Statesman, 5 December 1953, p.721.

series of five riddles, one of which he made into a line for 'The Once-in-Passing'. He then thought of simple description: 'Flotsam of families, husks of homes', cancelled in favour of inducing the kind of reverie to which riddles might be appropriate: 'Looking into your stout you see a succession of lazybeds, / A flutter of paper ships leaving the husk of a home'; began again with what became the final version. A self-indulgent note characterises the poem, except for the brief flare of energy in the riddles, which are an attempt to dignify and generalise the speaker's predicament. 'Pimpled haycocks' was a phrase he had scribbled down by the seventh stanza of 'Donegal Triptych'; it was too dismissive for that poem, while it suits this rather maudlin one.

'The Once-in-Passing' employs the familiar symbol of the window: here it is marked with a cross, as in a photograph:

And here the cross on the window means myself  
But that window does not open;  
Born here, I should have proved a different self.  
Such vistas dare not open;  
For what can walk or talk without tongue or feet?

The riddle goes unanswered. Clearly the open window always signifies in his poems potential, communication, even inspiration. In the last stanza, where the open window is linked with an 'ancient' cross, the nexus seems Christian, a wind blowing in, and that connects with the roots whose lack he laments in stanza two. This is an adult and despairing version of the fabled West. MacNeice wrote 'The Here-and-Never', then 'The Once-in-Passing', then 'The Gone-Tomorrow'; by the order in which he chose to print them he emphasised not the frail hope which closes 'The Once-in-Passing', nor the finality which marks 'The Gone-Tomorrow', but the less acceptable finality of 'The Here-and-Never' which means that return,

especially 'to the opened eye', can only involve recognising its impossibility, in any true sense.

MacNeice returns to Ireland, also to India and the subjects of former poems. His perspective is shaped by death, his own or that of others. There is no bravado, or even acceptance, just a notation of reverberating fact. He is not yet provoked to unserious and sardonic poetry on this subject.

In the Bulletin MacNeice said that he hoped his 'poems of place' existed on more than one level, though they were 'superficially ... merely descriptive pieces'. Unfortunately the contrasts he points are too obvious in some poems, whose perceptions belong to the radio travelogue genre: 'Return to Lahore' (p.453) for example, or 'Visit to Rouen' (p.454), which concerns the fifth centenary of the rehabilitation of St Joan, with its accompanying commercial exploitation. He is better observing Wessex and Africa, where he registers imperturbable natural forces working independently of man.

MacNeice went to Africa to obtain material for a documentary programme The Fulness of the Nile (broadcast 3 July 1955); the rest house he wrote about was near Nimule, where the Nile flows north from Uganda to the southern Sudan. In the poem (p.452), MacNeice domesticates the river for the English imagination, 'bowling its agelong bias out of Uganda'; it takes a character akin to Kipling's Limpopo, 'Tipsy with goggled hippo and drifting lilies', a line which mimics the constricted then leisurely movement of the water. Thus the element of mystery and a hint of terror are more potent when they appear in the last stanza:

The bed beneath the ghostly netting beckoned  
To chrysalid or sepulchral sleep. But such  
Was now the river's dominance that he filtered  
Through even the deepest sleep, weaving his journey  
Out of too little history into too much.

The last line not only encapsulates a British view of the continent's history, but also obliquely involves the dream-laden sleep, summons shadows of older metaphors in which Africa was an image of the unconscious.

In 'Wessex Guidebook' (p.451), too, MacNeice tames the seasons so that in the end their real aloofness is more striking. He began the poem under the title 'Museums' with what became its third stanza and is--with the first--its strongest (Berg, Visitations notebook 2). His poems about repositories of 'culture', museums, art galleries, universities, the BBC (in Autumn Sequel), make an interesting group in the ambiguity of the attitudes they display; except for 'The National Gallery', which is an unreserved celebration of the paintings' return after the War. While he was a beneficiary of such institutions, indeed a transmitter of their values to some extent, their static quality alarmed MacNeice, and their entrenched isolation from ordinary lives:

As here in Oxford shadow the dark-weathered  
Astrakhan rustication of the arches  
Puts a small world in quotes:

He had written 'Puts the whole college in quotes', but his revision catches the self-sufficiency he meant to portray.<sup>1</sup> In that poem 'Relics' (p.235), MacNeice moves from the elegant (qualified) obsolescence of Oxford--'obsolete as books in leather bindings'--

To downs where once without either wheel or hod  
Ant-like, their muscles cracking under the sarsen,  
Shins white with chalk and eyes dark with necessity,  
The Beaker People pulled their weight of God.

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1. Texas. Bound notebook, first of a group; it still has a blue BBC cover. It contains the drafts of 'Relics', 'What is Truth?'; notes for MacNeice's article in France Libre, 'L'ecrivain britannique et la guerre'.

These folk obviously appealed to MacNeice's imagination: here their effort and passion outweighs the light pinnacles of a subsequent city; in his radio play The Queen of Air and Darkness, the protagonist is proud of his Beaker ancestry, inherits their single-minded endurance; and in 'Wessex Guidebook' they outlast even the Roman occupation, barrows against barracks. What lasts has not always been intended to do so, thus a museum is to some degree a freak collection of objects: a flake-tool has survived, so has a butterfly. In comfortably casing and labelling them we reveal the pattern we wish to establish, and in our monuments distort what is preserved. MacNeice sees galleries as potentially subversive, if minds can be alerted to hints people may emerge with 'a sheaf / Of inklings fluttering in their minds, and now even the open / Air is half-articulate and unsafe' ('Picture Galleries', August 1940, Plant and Phantom); or as a refuge for delusion, in which the viewer

Mirrors himself in the cases of pots, paces himself  
by marble lives,...  
And then returns to the street, his mind an arena  
where sprawls  
Any number of consumptive Keatses and dying Gauls.

('Museums', 1933)

When he writes in 'Wessex Guidebook' of the survival of history, it is in the form of popular myth; where history is ignored, it is the 'homebrewed past' that is despised. Both lopsided views are, however, dwarfed by the movement of 'those illiterate seasons'. MacNeice has an oddly cosy picture of them which becomes stern and measured:

Still smoke their pipes in swallow-hole and hide-out  
As scornful of the tractor and the jet  
As of the Roman road, or axe of flint,  
Forgotten by the mass of human beings  
Whom they, the Seasons, need not even forget  
Since, though they fostered man, they never loved him.

The original version of the last line, 'Since they have helped them once but never knew them' has been honed to perfection, man's illusion about nature's benignity, or even interest, dismissed with a finality exceeding that which MacNeice had achieved in 'Evening in Connecticut' (1940).

Similarly history is discounted, though in favour of a kindlier nature, when he returns to the subject of the British Museum. There history is both personal and impersonal, and the poem would have once included the lines, 'I smoke to postpone return / Into that pantheon of the printed word / Where Marx and Mazzini worshipped' (Berg, Visitations notebook 1), except that MacNeice decided to keep his catalogue general, closer to the spirit of the boy who knew no such names, who

Prefers to linger here with pigeons and sparrows  
For whom neither truth nor falsehood, heaven nor hell,  
Holds any purport, who have no regrets,  
No ideals and no history--only wings.

('Time for a Smoke', p.455)

MacNeice is searching, throughout Visitations, for some means of reconciling disparate experiences to form a continuum which will plot his life. At times he construes one incident--the child running upstairs to beat a hotel lift--as a paradigm of subsequent effort, and in 'Time for a Smoke' he can identify with the child 'come down in the lift which he failed to beat'. More frequently the past is alien territory, and from what happened there nothing can be learnt, although sometimes it speckles a dream or a nightmare. We see these concerns from different angles in the grouping of 'Time for a Smoke', 'Jigsaws' (p.455), 'Easter Returns' (p.458).

'Jigsaws' was originally called 'Four Puzzles' (Berg, Visitations notebook 1), the second poem being omitted, the change

in title emphasises that each poem is puzzling and that the whole sequence, while it basically concerns one man, can only be fitted together with difficulty. The third poem concentrates on the similarity between man and the 'brutes', after the differences enumerated in 'Time for a Smoke':

The iceberg of our human lives  
Being but marginal in air,  
Our lonely eminence derives  
From the submerged nine-tenths we share  
With all the rest who also run,  
Shuddering through the shuddering main.

It contrasts sharply with the mocking gaiety of the preceding poem-- 'Property! Property! Let us extend / Soul and body without end'-- which fastens on human acquisitiveness, bourgeois clutter, and the stunted soul. Life seems farcical in the jaunty rhymes and rhythms, but not desperate and naked. The two generalised predicaments are flanked by two personal ones, versions of the same question concerning identity. The first--'What ghosts of cuckoo-spit and dew / Veil those fields that once I knew?'--despite its air of being a mere philosophical conundrum, a variation on the tree-in-the-quad debate, is genuinely disquieting, the other even more so: 'Fresh from the knife and coming to / I asked myself could this be I / They had just cut up' (IV). MacNeice recounted the experience of his peritonitis operation in America in The Strings are False in almost exactly the poem's phrases, although he had long abandoned the prose manuscript, and the same is true of a later phase of his illness, which he describes in 'The Messiah (a memory of 1940)' (Strings, pp.27-9). This sensation of being a stranger to his own life troubles the poems. Their regular form, the reassurance of repetition and couplets, gives them an almost nursery-rhyme simplicity crossed with the tone of nonsense poetry, and still the



bewilderment leaks out. The attempt in the fifth poem to end with some certainty--'...we know / We need the unknown. The Unknown is There'--emerges as a palliative, a way out of the dilemma of belief proffered without much conviction.

In 'Easter Returns', however, the Christian festival is allowed to convey some essential truth, correspond to some visible and invisible movement of grace.

Further, who failed last Friday to feel grieved,  
 What right have we to this day's joy?  
 Whether our childhood stand deceived  
 Or not, the years destroy  
 What happened in the garden, bliss or pain.

This stanza carries its religious charge--Eden and Gethsemane--and its burden of memory: of Bishop MacNeice's sorrow and joy at Easter, perhaps of his mother weeping as she walked the garden path, and of himself as a child on Good Friday, 'keeping my face austere, trying not to be pleased by the daffodils' (Strings, p.59). The 'green shooting from the wounded mind', the secular version of resurrection offered in the poem, could be an image of the art whose creation stems from pain. MacNeice reserves his assent.

He was more at ease experimenting with fairy-story and allegory, forms which increasingly occupied his attention. They were a natural recourse for broadcasting, since the lack of a visual dimension facilitates fantasy; MacNeice commented in his Clark Lectures, Varieties of Parable, that the medium tempted him to modern morality or parable plays, 'but only once, I think, to my own satisfaction'.<sup>1</sup> Possibly that was The Dark Tower, first broadcast on 21 January 1946, to which listeners responded enthusiastically. In the 1950's, besides various travel features

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1. Varieties of Parable (Cambridge: at the University Press, 1965), p.9.

and poetry programmes, MacNeice wrote One Eye Wild, Prisoner's Progress (which won the Premio d'Italia in 1954), and adapted a Norwegian folk tale, East of the Sun and West of the Moon.<sup>1</sup>

Previewing the first of these in the Radio Times, MacNeice remarked of his 'would-be hero' that he, 'like many of us today, suffers from the lack of a mythology' (7 November 1952, p.8). The most acceptable solution to this problem was to use as the core of his allegories the Quest, in its various guises. The prisoner tunnels to escape but also journeys--with the aid of a woman and a fine memory for verse--towards a Truth he dimly discerns. Helga, in East of the Sun, searches for the means to release a Bear/Prince, so MacNeice can here combine the quest with the transformation of vision that springs from the recognition of love. When he gave the Clark Lectures, MacNeice admitted that at times he had become a journalist rather than a creative writer, and continued:

In the 1930's we used to say that the poet should contain the journalist; now I would tend more often to use 'contain' in the sense of control or limit.... What the poet is far more concerned with is that 'inner conflict'... [requiring] metaphorical writing. So in English poetry I was sorry to see a few years ago that movement which was called The Movement deliberately lowering its sights and concentrating on neat observations within a very limited sphere. What I myself would now like to write, if I could, would be double-level poetry, of the type of Wordsworth's 'Resolution and Independence', and, secondly, more overt parable poems in a line of descent both from folk ballads such as 'True Thomas' and some of George Herbert's allegories in miniature such as 'Redemption'.

(Parable, p.8)

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1. Broadcast respectively: 9 November 1952, 27 April 1954, 25 July 1959. Only the folk tale was published, in Persons from Porlock and Other Plays for Radio (London: BBC, 1969).

Although these lectures were delivered in 1963, he was trying his hand at double-level and parable poetry well before that time.

George Herbert does not belong to his early pantheon, but in 1944 he wrote 'Prayer Before Birth' on the model of 'Sighs and Groans', and in 1952 and 1954 gave approving reviews of books about Herbert.<sup>1</sup> He subsequently planned a lecture or radio talk on Herbert and Herrick, for which the Berg Collection holds notes.

In the New Statesman review MacNeice chose construction as Herbert's first virtue; in the talk he compared his 'order (subtle)' to that of Horace, with its elaborate regular patterns and intricately varied syntax, and quoted Summers concerning 'the attempt to make formal structure an integral part of the meaning'. 'Prayer Before Birth' (p.193) has these same virtues. On the sleeve of the Argo recording, MacNeice placed the poem at the end of his war phase, in which '--I myself grew more relaxed while my poetry tightened up'. That he was 'much concerned with paradoxes and ironies' also suits his metaphysical model. When he reads the poem, MacNeice hastens through the third stanza, in which the only positive note sounds, and grimly relishes the doom he describes in the fifth: 'my children curse me' has an Ulster harshness. Herbert's petitions in 'Sighs and Groans' are all negative--'O do not fill me', 'O do not kill me!!--until the last stanza; MacNeice reverses this, asking for charity--consolation, provision, a hearing--until his last stanza, whose opening runs 'I am not yet born; O fill me', but closes, 'Otherwise kill me'. The extant draft of the poem (on

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1. Rosamund Tuve, A Reading of George Herbert, New Statesman, 13 September 1952, pp.293-4; Margaret Bottrall, George Herbert and Joseph H. Summers, George Herbert, London Magazine, August 1954, pp.74-7.

notebook leaves, which usually indicate an early version), is written almost without hesitation; if it is a first draft it shows extraordinary control. The scattered revisions are for clarity, as in the fourth stanza 'my life when they massacre through me' becomes '...when they murder by means of my / hands', and for concision, as in the fifth stanza: 'In the parts I must play that I know how to answer when...' is altered to '...and the cues I must take when' (Texas). Like Herbert, he rhymes the first and last lines of the stanzas, runs the first line on to the second, repeats for emphasis in the final stanza. As Herbert considers in each stanza a new punishment that might be visited on him by God, so MacNeice rehearses each stage of the embryo's possible fate. His subtle variation lies in the way one list of disasters is exceeded by the next until the short gasp of the sixth stanza, which repeats the structure of the first and poses two extremes of human behaviour that would not benefit from elaboration:

I am not yet born; O hear me,  
Let not the man who is beast or who thinks he is God  
come near me.

Whereas the opening is intensely threatening, it is in the fashion of ancient superstition about the effect on the child in the womb of things seen by its mother; in the sixth the warping is both physical and spiritual, and the words have their contemporary political resonance. In a manuscript fair copy of the poem (Texas), MacNeice included an epigraph from Herbert, 'Even poisons praise thee'. It pointed to the paradox the poem's syntax enacts: the unborn child's speech, with its strong and urgent pulse, concerns only what is life-destroying, except in the third stanza. While enumerating methods of grinding destruction, the resistant human will asserts itself. By referring indirectly to Herbert's poems,

MacNeice has an added source of irony. In 'Sighs and Groans' the petitioner acknowledges his sins and abases himself, 'But I am frailtie, and already dust', humble before a God who is both 'Cordiall and Corrosive'. In 'Providence' the balance of His creation is hymned, and His omnipotence:

Ev'n poysons praise thee. Should a thing be lost?  
Should creatures want for want of heed their due?  
Since where are poysons, antidotes are most:  
The help stands close, and keeps the fear in view.

In 'Prayer Before Birth' the petitioner is less humble than desperate, the universe is seen to be entirely hostile; at least the brief reference to natural consolations is outweighed by the list of human follies. 'The fear in view' dominates the poem, and the speaker lacks Herbert's certainty that contrite prayer will weigh in the scales. Indeed, he asks for 'a white light in the back of my mind to guide me', thus Herbert's basic assurance as to Whom he is addressing is absent.

MacNeice's projected talk illustrates the many voices Herbert could assume (he considered Herrick, 'pagan and playful', the lesser poet), the dramatic openings and endings, hyperbole and surprise, his suggestive simplicity, his use of everyday diction and images drawn from 'something so prosaic as real estate', which he also remarks in Varieties of Parable (p.50). This range of qualities is drawn on for 'The Streets of Laredo' (p.217), in which MacNeice had already achieved the kind of poem whose line of descent he traced in the first Clark Lecture.

In the 1929-34 Notebook there are three poems written to popular tunes, using some of their song forms; in a notebook compiled c.1943 there are adaptations of traditional ballads such

as 'Greensleeves', possibly for use in a radio programme.<sup>1</sup> 'The Streets of Laredo' is a very sophisticated version of such experiments. By imitating the form of the cowboy ballad, and writing about a contemporary event while alluding to historical occasions, MacNeice can play off his direct or oblique allusions against each other without ever having his narrator adopt a particular tone. There is irony and a measure of judgement, but none of the open didacticism of the original. Both are dirges, one for a man and the other for a city. MacNeice's is also the song of a doomed man, since Agag only temporarily survived his people, and was eventually the victim of God's wrath as they had been (I Samuel 15). But that identification was not made originally: the surviving draft of the poem is probably the penultimate one, in which the first line reads: 'O early one morning, my head like a handsaw', is cancelled and replaced by two illegible versions, amongst which 'my liver' is decipherable, and then by the printed form. (Texas: BBC notebook with poems for Holes in the Sky; poem lightly amended, d. July [1945]). That he hit on Agag introduces the idea of fatalism which anyway underpins the poem.

It has been minutely and, on the whole, persuasively analysed by John Irwin in his article 'MacNeice, Auden and the Art Ballad' (Contemporary Literature, Winter 1970, pp.58-79). He identifies MacNeice's biblical sources for the poem, chiefly Revelations, where Babylon is referred to as the golden and fallen city, plainly parallel to London, her great commercial wealth now consumed in the

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1. Texas. The third of a group of notebooks, with a grey cover stamped BBC. It also contains various quotations and notes, a draft for section V of The Kingdom, a fragment of 'The Newsreel', the dedication and note for Springboard, and two London Letters.

bombing raids. He also points out the aptness of Blake and Bunyan's appearance, who were both much concerned in their work with symbolic cities as a means of conveying contemporary moral dissolution.

The two points at which I would diverge from Irwin's interpretation are in stressing the verve of MacNeice's poem, and casting doubt on the moral judgement Irwin is sure MacNeice is passing. Unlike the cowboy ballad, which becomes slower and slower and has a uniformly lamenting tone, 'The Streets of Laredo' does not slacken its pace until the appearance of the Angel, whose very whisper is triumphant. The fourth stanza originally ran:

Then out from a doorway there sidled a cockney,  
A rocking-chair rocking on top of his head:  
'O fifty-five years have I lived in Laredo  
But now I've no home I'd sooner be dead'.

As printed:

∴  
'O fifty-five years I been feathering my love-nest  
And look at it now--why, you'd sooner be dead'.

The picture has a surrealistic quality; the anarchy of a bombed landscape was often described and photographed. The simple pathos of the earlier version has been replaced by complexity as well as a livelier turn of speech; the man's efforts are seen to have been futile from the beginning, and his drawing in the spectator reminds us that his immunity is limited. MacNeice does not dwell on this loss nor on the plight of the refugees in the seventh stanza: sensitive perhaps to possible criticism, he altered the second line from '"As enemy alien," says Schwemstein, Baalam, Aron the Jew' to "Says Tom Dick and Harry the Wandering Jew". 'They tell me report at the first police station / But the station is pancaked--so what can I do?' Irwin is right to see in this choice of detail

MacNeice's distaste for authority; we may go further and interpret the tone of the whole poem as partaking of that exhilaration at destruction found in 'Brother Fire'. Whether the moral of the poem can be summarised as Irwin suggests is more questionable. He maintains that MacNeice is saying destruction is paid for by destruction; if England had stood by other people when they were bombed--particularly Spain (Laredo as a Spanish rather than a Texan town)--and had not been concerned with feathering her own nest, this punishment would not have been visited upon her. Given the biblical parallels MacNeice establishes, this is conceivable. Irwin's final contention, however, that the older naive romanticism of the cowboy ballad is played off against the irony of the modern one, and that in so doing MacNeice judges an earlier moral framework which by implication led to the contemporary moral state, is driving his argument too far. The business of ballad, before the slightly corrupted form it assumed, was never to judge, merely to narrate. This is not to deny that MacNeice was ironic in his use of the original dirge for a subtle and stunning poem.

When he returned to the mode in Visitations, it was less spectacular, more traditional in conception and execution. The quatrains of 'The Burnt Bridge' (p.460) are patterned a-b-a-c; the last line's not rhyming deadens it, except for the one stanza ending with a question, so that each stage of the story seems self-contained. This is in keeping with the ancient ballad technique of a rapid series of scenes rather than continuous narration (MacNeice's 'Laredo' is more traditional in this respect than the cowboy ballad), whose skill lies in the juxtaposition and selection of events, as may be seen in 'Sir Patrick Spens'. The quest in



'The Burnt Bridge' thus appears a random affair, unpurposeful; that MacNeice intended his protagonist not to be in command of his progress, he shows by revising the third line: 'As he took quick strides to ~~seek~~ tempt his fate' (Texas). The poem has a ballad's economy of vocabulary, rhyme and frequent alliteration, which are intended to lull the reader into acceptance, to maintain his interest without distracting it. Scant revisions made by MacNeice in the available draft are to quicken the pace of the narrative. He had opened the poem, 'When he had passed through the rustic gate'; the change to 'So, passing through...' assumes a previous history, and strengthens the impression of the protagonist's impetuosity. Its tentative title had been 'Third Son's Progress' and by the ninth stanza, with the wood safely traversed, the dragon in abeyance and a lady won, the fairy-tale luck of the third son seems to have held. By choosing to call it instead 'The Burnt Bridge', MacNeice emphasised the only decisive action, and the lack of certainty in a superficially fairy-tale ending:

So, far they came and found no shore,  
The waves falling, the night falling.  
To board a ship sunk years before,  
And all the world was daylight.

With slight variations, the first and last lines match the opening: does this mean some dragon still has to be vanquished, that the finding of love is only a beginning, that paradise soon ends (the Miltonic echo in the tenth stanza is surely intentional) or that it has no end? The ballad's cadences are reassuring but the situation is unresolved. MacNeice, true to the tradition, draws no moral.

He is prepared to be explicit in his allegory 'Figure of Eight' (p.463) and in 'The Tree of Guilt' (p.461), still tentative in 'Visitations' (p.464). Death seems a more vivid presence to him

than moments of illumination, although he often deals less effectively with an actual death than with its prospect. 'Death of an Old Lady' (p.463) on his stepmother's dying begins with a promising eeriness: 'At five in the morning there were grey voices / Calling three times through the dank fields'; MacNeice had really heard the banshees. The poem might have been improved by the excision of its second stanza, which labours over the metaphor at its centre.

The warning cries from shadows are countered by other voices from the heart of light, heard in 'the indefinable moment' ('Visitations' II), not so much encounters as presences briefly apprehended. MacNeice presents these in a religious guise only twice: in the seventh poem, where the Lord is not found in whirlwind or atom, but 'Suddenly Something, or Someone' gives voice to 'pure affirmation'; and in the fifth poem whose implicit text is entertaining angels unawares. Making the angel so determinedly earthly robs its visitation of the frisson supposedly felt, 'a shiver in the scalp which seemed like fear'. If MacNeice had Herbert in mind, he was not able to attain that singular balance between incredulity and familiarity which 'Love' achieves. The dominant emotion of the 'Visitations' sequence is a longing for comfort, for an assurance that 'we had not always lived alone' (I). MacNeice's way of envisaging its descent is oddly disengaged: he holds experiences of illumination at arm's length--as in the gaily literary 'Never so lithe in the green dingle'--wanting to believe in them yet not trusting to their truth entirely. 'When the unobtainable / Seeming-disdaining / Vision is captured', it is 'Beyond explaining', only to be accepted (II). In the third poem the ending of isolation is conveyed by the parable of the merman and mermaid ('which is really a love poem', as he said in the Argo notes),

whose obstacle is not being able to imagine a meeting, and whose salvation is an act of daring. But it is rare that an act can rescue; in the other poems it is patient alertness that bears fruit.

At one time the sequence was to consist of nine poems. The deleted ninth was about the apparent failure of love until the lover learnt to move beyond touch and words to a communication more austere: '... the expanding space / Which birdless, wordless, windless frames her face, / Is his as well, is something they can share'. The penultimate poem had also concerned apparent paradox: 'And dying, twirl ourselves alive / Like leaves that fade, like flakes that melt' (Texas: 'The Snow Fell Upward' VIII; 'Silence' IX). In their two-quatrain form these do not match the seven others, but they share something of the general tone, a determination to sieve out from the ordinary world some extraordinary and sustaining moment. However, MacNeice may be articulating his own plight in Visitations when he writes about the 'unimmediately apparent' (VI), which is in fact the awaited Muse:

So those who carry this birthright and this burden  
Regardless of all else must always listen  
On the odd chance some fact or freak or phantom  
Might tell them what they want, might burst the cordon  
Which isolates them from their inmost vision.

The phantom for MacNeice turned out to be an unexpected love affair. Davin, among others, refers to it as the source of 'one of those rare bursts of creativity when the poet is first astonished and then alarmed by the way the mill goes on grinding', as MacNeice recalled it in the Bulletin for February 1961. Solstices (1961) carries the epigraph '...age iam meorum / finis amorum', from Horace's Odes, IV, xi. The volume has much in common with Visitations,

but MacNeice found that 'fewer of these later poems strike me as forced (in revising I eliminated one or two compulsive bits of trickery) and more of them seem to be "given"' (Bulletin). An example of such elimination is to be found in the typed manuscript of 'The Park' (Texas: among the corrected typescripts and proofs for Solstices), where 'avoid the void' in the second stanza is altered to 'ignore the void', and similarly in the third stanza 'No pause for their paws' is changed to 'No rest...'.

The preceding chapter noted the problem posed for MacNeice by his own facility; seeing 'material for poetry everywhere' meant that he shunned few topics. There is sometimes a clear discrepancy between the verbal gifts and formal skill MacNeice deploys, and the inconsequentiality of the resulting poem. Although a just critic of his earlier work, MacNeice was generally insufficiently severe, and was loathe to prune or jettison. However, in Solstices he achieves harmony between his intention and the effect it creates, taking pleasure in the tight technical control of the 'Nature Notes' sequence for example, which Auden chose to illustrate MacNeice's excellence in the sixties (Radio Portrait, pp.22-3).

In tentatively assessing his own development for the Bulletin, MacNeice said:

... I have become progressively more humble in face of my material and therefore less ready to slap poster paint all over it. I have also perhaps... found it easier than I did to write poems of acceptance (even of joy) though this does not--perish the thought--preclude the throwing of mud or of knives when these seem called for.

This is borne out by a reading of the group of travel poems in Solstices. Instead of trying to construct a mosaic that, through sheer diversity, will convey something of an alien continent, or

working out tenuous reconciliations, MacNeice is ready to shape his experience sufficiently for a poem to form, without imposing an interpretation. In 'Jungle Clearance Ceylon' (p.498) and 'Half Truth from Capetown' (p.499) he uses particular events while not confining their significance: in the former his scepticism about the use of technology, his suspicion that the natural order of things has been subverted, emerge powerfully from an understated observation of aloof pelicans. The draft for this poem shows MacNeice taking great care to capture the desolation of the scene and the human disaffection:

In a manmade lake at first light  
 Cruising whited  
 Paddling between the tops of ~~skeleton~~  
~~Trees~~ Skeleton trees we waited for elephant [sic]  
 Coming to drink. They never came  
each bare  
 But, focusing in, on every branch ...

Thus 'cruising' is appropriately mechanical; and 'bleached' is later substituted for 'whited', avoiding the 'whited sepulchre' that lay beneath the earlier construction and made it more emotive.

'Half Truth from Cape Town' draws on an old experience of divided community to parallel the fissures in South Africa, but MacNeice is detached from both, speaks in the tone appropriate to a departure lounge. The bell that tolled for ever in his youth, the dove that now goes on, are twisted symbols of peace. The observer's isolation is here more telling than in 'Solitary Travel' (p.500): that asks for pity--'from this neutral zone / Where all tomorrows must be faced alone...'--whereas 'In each glib airport between here and you' is almost parenthetical, implies that there is someone whose presence eventually rescues him from being one of



His own cultural confrontations take place across centuries, in 'Dark Age Glosses' (p.484): on Bede's image of the swallow in the barn; on Grettir and Njal's sagas, and the Four Masters' version of the battle of Clontarf.<sup>1</sup> MacNeice is quite open in making his bridges between then and now in the first three poems, as in 'On the Grettir Saga': 'The burly major they denied / The Victoria Cross ... / ... for some reason reminds me / Of the strong man of Iceland...'. Beneath such calculated resemblances gaps and continuities are revealed: Grettir and the major are doomed, but Grettir is also haunted, knew fear no man could induce; the bird's flight remains a potent symbol even to men unconfined in winter barns. The lesson drawn from Njal's saga, 'that even then, / ... Men had the nobler qualities of men', seems too pat a conclusion when contrasted with the subtler consideration of Clontarf. Here, because the place still exists, MacNeice could play with interpretations whose possible validity stands independent of his own: modern visitors, ancient historians, contemporary historians. 'The light was no doubt the same, the ecology different: / All Ireland drowned in woods'.<sup>2</sup> The shift from 'ecology' to 'drowned' makes the two extremes: modern and factual, and the romantic past, into which MacNeice seeks to inject a little realism by recalling that destruction was as likely to be wrought by 'the monks' compatriots',

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1. MacNeice wrote a 'sceptical historical romance' for radio about the latter, They Met on Good Friday; broadcast 8 December 1959 and included in the Persons from Porlock selection.
  2. In conversation with Louise Bogan, MacNeice had said 'it was a curse to be Irish, and I said, not at all, that [it's] an advantage you have,... I also outlined my idea that the Irish went mad when the forest disappeared, and he said, "I hadn't thought of that"'. Letter to Morton D. Zabel, 18 April 1939, in What the Woman Lived: Selected Letters of Louise Bogan 1920-1970 (New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1973) p.186.



as by the Norsemen. He had noted before the internecine rage of the Irish, who 'would stop / At nothing--which so often led to nothing'.

And this is true--tell it not in the Gaelic League--  
Even of Brian, who decade after decade  
Caught in a web of largely his own intrigue,  
Turned sour with the lust for power, Brian the Great  
Who died in a tent of skins on a cold Good Friday.  
So earned his niche.

(Texas: Solstices typescript)

The changes MacNeice made in this to achieve the printed version are all in the interest of exactitude and subtlety: 'Which is even... / True of the High King Brian' manages both to undermine the bias of the League while using its own exalted tone; 'whose eighty years' is more precise than the slightly magisterial decades, and making their action responsible for his decline leaves Brian not wholly corrupt. 'Lust for power' is a cliché even MacNeice cannot revive: 'lust' may have suggested 'rust' to engender the improved lines: 'Soured him with power and rusted him with blood / To let him die...'. The causal inference is replaced by 'To earn his niche. And yet he earned his niche', which takes account of the seeming irony of his death and of its power for legend. The poem's circularity, ending on 'The light was no doubt the same--and just as rich', makes amends for astringency, admitting that each might be persuaded by the gilding light into his varying conjectures.

The half-loving, half-willing belief, yet exasperated and disillusioned tone of the poem is MacNeice's now customary reaction to Ireland. Solstices contains many poems referring back to his childhood, although the memories rely less on nightmare and harshness than usual. 'Half Truth from Cape Town' elicits those qualities:



When I was young and at home I could not tell  
 What problems roosting ten miles to the west  
 Waited like vultures in their gantried nest  
 Till Prod should tumble Papish in the river.

But the speaking voice is the adult's on looking back, it lacks the bitterness of 'Belfast' and the barely-distanced terror of 'Auto-biography'. So in 'The Riddle' (p.474), the child's 'clammy suspicion' that its answer was 'going round and round the house, evil, waiting to get me' (Strings, p.38), does not surface because of the calm perspective in which the question is posed. The warmth of the kitchen range on small faces, the adult existential query, rob the cook's riddle of its original power.

'Country Week-end' (p.488), which MacNeice described in the Bulletin as one of his 'deliberate exercises in simplicity or at least in a penny-plain technique', also returns to a cosier view of childhood than had been admitted into the poems before. MacNeice was at this time establishing himself in Hertfordshire and left the BBC the next year to take up free-lance work, although he had a programme contract with the Corporation for half a year. In gradually loosening his ties with London, he perhaps felt that he was embarking on a way of life closer to that which tempted him in rural Ireland, a way of recovering a more natural sense of time. The first section of the poem establishes constants of experience stretching back beyond memory; untypically, MacNeice does not dwell on how long he will be there to see them, or how long they will last. Real children are present, whose function is similar to the ghostly ones in Burnt Norton: they are gaiety, discovery, movement, continuity. The section's symbol is the circle; in the notebook draft he had thought of beginning the third stanza, 'Concentric circles: cups and plates'; by choosing 'Outgoing heirlooms' he

allows that the countryside may not survive, instead of emphasising security, but 'outgoing' here also means 'going outwards', and the stanza expands from domesticity to infinity (to Larkin's 'unfenced existence' in fact, without the younger poet's endorsement of its superiority):

Outgoing heirlooms: cups and plates,  
Nettle and colt's foot, elder hedge,  
Blackthorn beyond, then field on field,  
And then the skyline; then the sky.<sup>1</sup>

The second section spans a smaller history, goes back to the War when MacNeice ferrets out a pair of hobnail boots. The relaxed indulgence of this poem is somewhat deceptive: the urban-dweller recognises an element of make-believe in his week-ending, wants the earth to 'add weight to what I have read / And wish to think I feel'. Boots connect him to his own past, to a possible future and to 'the world of folk-tales: / What third son setting forth to fox bilk an ogre / Or pluck a bride from her redoubt of thorn / Ever wore shoes?'(2). This could be taken too far: MacNeice recalls a walk in 1944 'in the Constable country' (the literary/artistic references are both instinctive and an indication of a lack of genuine intimacy with the countryside, of which he is perfectly aware), and the remark of a man in a pub; he was going to ascribe the words to an 'ancient yokel' (2), but fortunately altered that to 'old farm-labourer'.

The sequence seems to be very loosely organised to cope with each of the four elements: air in I, with sky and birdsong; earth in II and now water, light/fire dominating IV. MacNeice is washed back to days before the War:

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1. BBC notebook draft (1). Among the corrected typescripts and proofs for Solstices, there is an incomplete typed manuscript of 'Country Week-end', with some autograph emendations (2).

As if hypnotised, as if this wet  
 Day were the sum and essence of days  
 When the mind was numbed or revived by the shafts  
 Of shining water the [wind] steely  
 When such spinning shafts of shining water  
 Struck to numb, or revive, the mind. (I)

Altering the lines from the passive, and changing the adjective to 'steely' gives this section a sharper edge, makes memory itself less indulgent, needling and testing. The 'we' from London is not the same as the 'we' on Tiree: he had been with Nancy Sharp, who recalled MacNeice's being 'superstitious too in a sort of mocking way; having his hand read by a native in the Hebrides filled him with gloom for hours. He was apparently never going to get what he wanted in the way of good fortune' (Radio Portrait, C.t.) And a past affair is conjured in the marooned Irish room:

... in a world of water  
 Where even the mountain that loomed above us  
 Had become a solution of rain and wind  
 Part rain, part brine, through which no ark  
 Could find land other than Atlantis,

But we did not dare embark. (I)

Where detail is pertinent--the fortune-teller as 'a young Glaswegian in broad checks'--it remains; mere addition is deleted. The change MacNeice makes concerning the ark renders its voyage more precarious, as does the pronoun 'I' instead of 'we'. The whole section implicitly holds other possibilities: if the fortune had been told correctly, if the embarkation had taken place, if the child had not lived next to a graveyard... . When MacNeice wrote 'Much further back, in my childhood' (1), he took some of the immediacy from the experience of watching funerals. He restored it with 'Much further back, a child ...', and thus links it more precisely with his echo from Corinthians, seeing the graveside

mourners 'Crossing the pane, through the rain darkly'.<sup>1</sup> Not only is this an important and poignant vignette, it is also expressed compassionately: it comprehends the childish emotion while allowing for a potentially un-childlike acceptance of death in a different spirit. The mutability of lives is conveyed explicitly by the memories, implicitly by the rain itself, the 'First element [~~these~~ dissolving (1); ~~that flux~~ of (2)], those fluent spears'. Water is almost always benedictory in MacNeice's poetry and so it proves at the end, combined with wind to encourage a new setting out.

'Country Week-end' bears more than one trace of MacNeice's reading of Four Quartets, as in the old theme of arrival as return in the fourth section, when the circle is drawn and the lighting of lamps establishes stability. 'We have been here a thousand years / Nor yet have reached the age of gas'; these lines from the first stanza of section I link the opening with the oil lamps of IV, a light which makes 'a different / Evening from those elsewhere', as MacNeice originally wrote (1); in changing it to '... from our usual' he touchingly makes of their company an old habit.<sup>2</sup> The night-lights of his childhood have previously thrown only the shadows of nightmare, but here candlelight is distinguished from

1. 11. When I was a child I spake as a child, I understood as a child, I thought as a child; but when I became a man, I put away childish things.  
12. For now we see through a glass, darkly; but then face to face: now I know in part; but then I shall know even as also I am known. 1 Corinthians 13.
2. This accords with the spirit of the lyric 'All Over Again' (p.513) which closes the volume, 'As if I had known you for years'.

the reassurance of the lamps carried by 'Bustling dead women with steady hands, / One from Tyrone and one from Cavan / And one my mother;' the identification has a Yeatsian cadence. This natural calm induces MacNeice to inveigh against technology as symbolised by the switch, only a brief flicker though before he rounds off the poem, tongue-in-cheek: 'One good night in a naughty world'.<sup>1</sup>

Brisk 'Nature Notes' (p.492) succeed 'Country Week-end', again dealing with his childhood which had been, according to these poems, brightened by dandelions, leavened by cats, bridged by corncrakes, rattled by the sea. Each is 'incorrigible' in its own way, the 'unsubtle' alternating with the 'subtle'. That MacNeice should choose 'incorrigible' as the key word, after having used it so memorably in 'Snow', indicates a freshened delight in unpredictable nature. The neatness of the sequence carries its own buoyancy, plucking each light string. MacNeice is not interested in the inherent nature of dandelions or corncrakes in the way Ted Hughes or Jon Silkin are when they describe a pike or a bluebell; the notes are half comparisons with facets of human nature, flirtatious women, confident men. They are jeux d'esprit, as are the 'Sleeping Winds' (p.493) and in a drier tone, 'Indoor Sports' (p.486).

This renewed confidence which enables him to celebrate the tangible pleasures of childhood also encourages exploration of old fears, notably in 'The Blasphemies' (p.507). It bears resemblance to an unpublished poem of which there is only an undated draft extant, called 'Tipperary' (Texas). It was probably written in the 1950's, perhaps during the period of Visitations. 'The Blasphemies' is

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1. The evocation of serenity is akin to that in a very early poem, 'Evening Indoors' (p.5). The closing lines play on Portia's words to Nerissa, on seeing her house's lights: 'So shines a good deed in a naughty world'. The Merchant of Venice, Vi.



organised around the theme of belief, whereas 'Tipperary' is a chronological account of events in MacNeice's life, especially those influencing his poetry. He recounted how day-time activities, particularly writing, began to absorb him sufficiently for the night-time haunting to cease, 'except for an obsession with the Sin against the Holy Ghost'. Having discovered the sin to be saying 'Damn God', he could never resist saying the words in his mind, although he struggled against the urge to do so, 'and once you said that you were lost' (Strings, p.59). 'The Blasphemies' opens with the nightly tussle: 'Damn anyone else, but once I--No, / That is the unforgiveable blasphemy'.<sup>1</sup> Changing 'That is' to 'Here lies' intensifies the sense of defiance which possesses the child, who knows the consequences. MacNeice goes on in the autobiography to describe the background of his life, the War, and it is this the first stanza of 'Tipperary' describes:

From the papering of the nursery the time of Tipperary  
He had come a long way,  
From the chasing of fritillaries & sticking flags in  
war-maps,  
From the brash bells & bonfires on Armistice Day,  
From the forgetting of childhood pains, the learning  
to be sly & wary,  
He had come a long way.

From the rich purple sulks & the glimmers of adolescence  
There was yet a way to go,  
~~From the shot silk of his early loves threaded with~~  
~~self-pity~~  
From the doubts & the devils & the cock about to crow,  
From seventeen years of iron & bronze & stone-age  
effervescence,  
A long way to go.

In 'Tipperary' MacNeice is more indulgent of his youth, or at least his self-criticism is tempered with a certain affection for

1. Texas: typed manuscript with autograph emendations, filed with the other corrected typescripts and proofs for Solstices.

the outward show; in 'The Blasphemies' the second stanza reveals the bleakness behind the mocking exterior. The turn to parody-- here he no doubt remembered his 'I once had a dear little God, dears, / So neatly and sweetly aloof' (Texas: c.1928)--could not make nonsense of shibboleths because they were not believed in the first instance: 'And what is a joke about God if you do not / Accept his existence? Where is the blasphemy? / No Hell at seventeen feels empty'. Rising thirty, humanism is all, so grounds for blasphemy are lacking again: 'The only failure was not to face the / The facts'. The facts at thirty are dismissed in 'The Blasphemies'; in the earlier poem they still smart, and need three stanzas for their exorcism:

From his so-called coming of age, from the search for the  
Universal,

He had come a long way,  
From that island of Calypso where no one could grow older,  
From the flowers and the fetters of the torchlight play,  
From the break-up on the raft, the storm & the dispersal  
He had come a long way.

From the maze of <sup>lust</sup>~~love~~ & guilt, from the attempt to be public-  
minded

There was yet a way to go,  
From the spy glass on Madrid or Addis Ababa or Munich,  
From the gradual dissolution of the mockery kings of snow,  
staring into the sun  
From thirty years of ~~looking, looking again~~ & being blinded,  
A long way to go.

From that tower of ice & ~~longing~~ <sup>passion</sup> ~~dropping sparks on~~ New York  
City

He had come a long way,  
From that <sup>voice</sup>~~box~~ letting 'Evil Things' <sup>out of a box</sup>~~into a room~~ in neutral  
Dublin,  
From years which added up to one black night & one grey day,  
for which he felt he should feel  
From the carcase of a world ~~on which a vulture might have pity~~  
He had come a long way.

From the pendulum swing to God, from professional complacence,  
There was yet a way to go.  
                world-watching  
From forty years observing from a seat back to the engine  
With both the world & himself snapping 'I told you so',  
                                love  
From the searching for a something to make suit to or obeisance,  
A long way to go.

& nagged at by the world's & his own I-Told-You-So  
As he listened to the world's & his own 'I told you so'

This deep disillusionment and weariness has already been remarked in the poems MacNeice wrote in his forties. He judges the poetry specifically in 'The Blasphemies': his need is presented in professional terms, whereas the swing to God had appeared to answer more than that. Using the symbols familiar to him from childhood is seen as mere word-play, insufficient without belief, and no longer universally comprehended. MacNeice had felt in the War a kinship with his community born of circumstance, but in the 1950's the shared frame of reference had dissolved. In this penultimate stanza his symbolism is deliberately Christian but explicitly questioned:

Have we not all of us been in a war  
So have we not carried call it a cross  
Which was never our fault? Yet how can a cross  
Be never your fault? The words of the myth,  
Now merely that and no longer faith,  
Melt in his hands, hands which ~~were never~~  
~~Truly pierced,~~ & he can no longer  
which were never proved  
Hard as nails, nor can he longer  
Speak for the world--or himself--at forty.

The turning of the phrase about his hands avoids the identification he had just queried and relies on a colloquial simile, although the religious connotation is inescapable.

The two poems conclude on quite different notes. 'Tipperary' returns to its opening image as though the previous scenes have been dreams, excursions from childhood that always end back there. The penultimate line plays on 'a way to go' as meaning death, and his



one positive claim doesnot alleviate the general tone of slightly embittered discontent.

So with nearly fifty years of cancellation & frustration  
 He has come a long way  
 (Maybe yet a way to go)  
 And his self-examination has been both contrived & cursory  
 While the men he made of snow  
 Have consumed their fitful day,                      daemonic  
 Yet he still can claim some moments of a given illumination \*?  
 While he waits for his old nurse to finish papering the  
    nursery--  
 Which is perhaps a way to go,  
 Perhaps a long long way.<sup>1</sup>

'Daemonic illumination' recalls a poem written in 1937, published as 'Thank you' in The Earth Compels, as 'For Services Rendered' in Poems (1937), and as 'Daemonium' in Poems 1925-1940, in which the daemon celebrated is a fount of sensual awareness, of physical dexterity: 'Who skating on the lovely wafers of appearance / Have held my hand, put vetoes on my reason, / Sent me to look for berries in the proper season'. No such gaiety enters 'Tipperary' or 'The Blasphemies', but the latter does finish with an unassertive assurance, a tolerant curiosity that is an advance on his earlier humanism because it dismisses nothing out of hand. He is now 'a walking question'. The first weakly inclusive qualification, 'but not a cheap one, no more / Than anything else is cheap', has been tightened: '...but no more cheap than any / Question or quest is cheap'. This is a more self-accepting, less egotistical poem than the earlier one, although their basic structure is clearly similar. 'Tipperary' uses its model to generalise the experience and to distance it from its narrator, but the poise is not always successfully maintained. By the time he wrote 'The Blasphemies',

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1. 'The Snow Man' (Solstices; p.506 C.P.) also uses the image for a crumbling past; but it contains the possibility that the thaw is not simply destruction: 'Or is it rather a dance of water / To replace, relive, that dance of white?'

perhaps only a few years later, MacNeice could be both frank and detached.

Sometimes his admissions could only be framed in 'contemplative parable' (see the Argo recording sleeve notes), and then they do become genuinely accessible types of experience: such a poem is 'The Truisms' (p.507), about a generation's inheritance, abandoned and then unwittingly entered into. The symbol of the unknown yet familiar house is a particularly potent one for MacNeice, as in 'Order to View', where the sudden gust of wind that brings things to life around and inside the house opens the world. Here too, the spirit finds itself instinctively at ease, 'it was where he had come from':

He raised his hand and blessed his home;  
The truisms flew and perched on his shoulders  
And a tall tree sprouted from his father's grave.

If this circularity seems too easily reassuring, the same symbol as used in 'Selva Oscura' (p.512) is disquieting. MacNeice chose the poem for his Argo recording to demonstrate that he was 'often back with personal relationships but, I trust, with a deeper perspective and with less frills, less fever'.

Perhaps suddenly too I strike a clearing and see  
Some unknown house--or was it mine?--but now  
It welcomes whom I miss in welcoming me;  
The door swings open and a hand  
Beckons to all the life my days allow.

The gravity and simplicity of the poem had not been within his range for a long time: it looks effortless, not facile. The reference to Dante via Eliot is lightly carried; its recognition is far from essential although it increases appreciation of the personal landscape that MacNeice constructs. Comparison with two poems from 1946 having similar components, confirms an impression of new mastery. The third stanza of 'Selva Oscura' closes: 'Or, finding

bluebells bathe my feet, / Know that the world, though more, is also I'. In 'Bluebells', MacNeice had used the flower as a symbol of hope, of the re-birth of a marriage strained by its resumption after the War. To explain their precise significance, the woman is given a stanza to spell out the analogy between blue flowers in a dark wood and her own desire for a means of reconciliation. After the direct statement of their plight, it is too mannered. Whereas in the later poem meaning can be safely implied in a phrase, left flexible yet not vague. 'Woods', an excellent poem not intended to convey the darker meaning of 'Selva Oscura', is packed with illustration, similes, overt literary references, and ends with a stanza of description indulged in for sheer pleasure: it helps to gauge how difficult the lesson was that MacNeice chose to learn.

'And I recognise even more than before that form is part of the content and that one of the most important formal activities is omission'. This comment on the Argo record sleeve echoes an earlier one, made in a review of George Seferis's Poems. 'It would be interesting... to make an analytical comparison of Seferis and his Italian contemporary Salvatore Quasimodo, the title of one of whose poems "A me pellegrino", might serve for so much of Seferis's work. In both of them the sense of absence seems to become something positive' (New Statesman, 17 December 1960, p.978). MacNeice produced a programme on The Poems of Salvatore Quasimodo (broadcast 2 November 1961), for which he translated 'Dialogo', a more complex and rhetorical composition than 'A me pellegrino' but no doubt its use of the Orpheus myth appealed to him. 'A me pellegrino' indeed relies on absences for its charge: the returning traveller is no longer met by a welcoming voice, the square is abandoned, even the beauty conjured by light is illusory. Quasimodo juxtaposes this

encounter with his past with a memory of the black-shawled women of his southern province, 'parlano a mezza voce della morte'. It is as though the source of the poem were barely tapped; signs are given but there is no attempt at circumscription. Such reticence is extreme and fruitful. MacNeice would have been drawn by both poets' continual concern with themes of voyaging and exile, with explorations of blurred personal and racial histories.

He pointed to 'The Wall' among his own poems as an example of the attempt 'to write very simply and starkly' (record sleeve). The problem lay in finding the balance he achieved in 'Selva Oscura', so that the reader feels absence has resonance, is not simply a failure. 'The Wall' (p.506) describes a transfiguration: wall to window, light and intimations of a garden; it emerges as mere sleight-of-hand instead of profundity. The identification 'The first garden. The last' is also made in 'Apple Blossom' (p.473), only turned around. In both poems there is the assertion that endings are beginnings, equally both lack the sense that this is an earned conviction, it looks more like a pleasant juggling with words. What MacNeice admired in Herbert, the conveyance of deeply felt truths in sometimes deliberately flat diction, eludes him.

On the other hand, 'Homage to Wren (a memory of 1941)' (p.481) demonstrates several of Herbert's lessons learnt: organic images, an element of surprise, the use of domestic detail. Whereas in the poems about London's bombing MacNeice had caught the spirit of Pepys, whom he had quoted in his broadcast on St Paul's, 23 June 1941--'horrid malicious bloody flame'--this is written with undiluted exhilaration, has a nursery-rhyme aura of watching danger from comfort, '... Sir Christopher Wren had made everything shipshape'.

He can afford to celebrate the flames as they leap and curvet; and after strictly maintaining the correspondences ship/St Paul's, sea/fire, he finishes his tour of duty with a natural gesture that in these circumstances springs its own surprise:

I climbed to the crow's nest for one last look at the  
roaring foam,  
League upon league of scarlet and gold,  
But it was cold so I stretched out my hands from the  
drunken mast  
And warmed my hands at London and went home.

In the Bulletin note on Solstices, MacNeice concluded by saying that his position had been

aptly expressed by the dying Mrs Gradgrind in Dickens's Hard Times: 'I think there's a pain somewhere in the room but I couldn't positively say that I have got it'. So, whether these recent poems should be labelled 'personal' or 'impersonal', I feel that somewhere in the room there is a pain--and also, I trust, an alleviation.

There is a marked recognition of the possibility of global catastrophe, as well as of lurking individual doom: 'Some one has got to pay for the round' ('Yours Next', p.483); 'Neither sense nor conscience stirred, / Having been ultimately deterred', ('Jericho', p.482); 'He turned and saw the accusing clock / Race like a torrent round a rock' ('The Slow Starter', p.478). MacNeice rarely lends an 'I' to these perceptions: they are presented as overt/covert parables, using common turns of phrase, known situations, and giving them unfamiliar significance. His is not the 'making strange' technique, by which objects are lifted out of their usual context and in the new one the writer provides become freshly themselves; MacNeice strips a familiar thing and puts it in such a light that its eeriness is revealed. This faculty was present in his earliest poetry, but there it could appear wilful, even a morbid distortion.

The skill in this late volume lies in making the transformations unforced, answering to the logic of his imagination and persuading ours.

The process may be observed in two poems: 'Breaking Webs' (1928, p.9) and 'The Wiper' (c.1960, p.504). The first has a different subject for each of the first three stanzas, dwells on another in the next two and returns in the sixth to the subject of the third, with sinister emphasis. Stanzas one, two, four and five are connected by the theme of movement: 'The spider's belly-mind creates / Thoroughfare on thoroughfare'; 'The fatally inquisitive moth / ...Leaves its bed and board of cloth' and:

Over asphalt, tar, and gravel  
My racing model happily purrs,  
Each charted road I yet unravel  
Out of my mind's six cylinders.

Shutters of light, green and red,  
Slide up and down. Like mingled cries,  
Wind and sunlight clip and wed  
Behind the canopy of my eyes.

Against these is set the tapping of branches on a window-pane, which is at first merely wistful, then they grope 'After unseen fatalities'. MacNeice clearly wishes to create an aura of doom into which the inquiring or lively propel themselves unknowingly. In 'The Wiper' although his intention is somewhat similar, the treatment is greatly sophisticated. The car-driver appears in every stanza but its centre is the road at night, an image for the monotony, mystery, isolation of life. Thus a much simpler set of integrated metaphors carries a complex perception. The car ride in 'Breaking Webs' is the most striking of its images because least derivative, whereas the pessimistic omens are more contrived. MacNeice makes use of the same accessibility of experience in 'The Wiper', but the apparently inexorable pessimism of the journey itself is made to

yield its one consolation: the road

Which through the tiny segment  
Cleared and blurred by the wiper  
Is sucked in under the axle  
To be spewed behind us and lost  
While we, dazzled by darkness,  
Haul the black future towards us  
Peeling the skin from our hands;  
And yet we hold the road.

When writing this poem, MacNeice added in the Bulletin, he felt himself 'just as mythopoeic as if I were writing about the Grael (though I notice, to my own surprise, that Solstices contains practically no references to either Graeco-Roman or Christian legend)'. Allusions to a paradisal garden have already been noted, and they are perhaps more frequent than MacNeice himself realised: he is explicit in 'Idle Talk' (p.487), which is partially intended as a defence of his poetic practice. Despite its being ill-used, casually and thoughtlessly employed, dense with banality, language can unpredictably be made to come alive, can be used in new perspectives which reveal true meaning, can be a flexible means of communicating the impossible. Adam to Eve:

Looked and felt for the same three words  
Which he had uttered time and again  
But never like this, and said: 'I love you'.

This example in particular witnesses to MacNeice's old conviction that personal relationships, however uncertain, rewrite the world for us: 'Between the lines the words were strange / Yet not to be misunderstood', as he wrote in the exhilarated love poem 'Solstice' (p.497). 'Vistas' (p.502) similarly offers the alleviation of love as re-birth, as potential fulfilled. When MacNeice first drafted the poem, he possibly did not envisage the first stanza: its addition widens the context from which a personal





likelihood. Yet he rhymes 'cliff' with 'if' at the beginning and end of the poem, knowing that supposition is dizzying, dangerous, the state itself only seemingly true.

These two poles of experience: being in love, completing a journey, being saved and, if that had not chanced, being alone, a confused transient, unable to help being lost, are staked out in the poems 'Good Dream' (p.510) and 'Bad Dream' (p.509). When MacNeice explained in the opening Clark Lecture why he was personally attracted to parable writing, he gave as his first reason that he had 'from childhood been a steady dreamer (I mean in the literal sense)'. Before reading psychologists, he had already taken for granted that his dreams had their roots in his own real world, and he remembered 'in all periods of my life having dreams which had a fair degree of shape... often akin to fairy stories' (Parable, p.7). This accounts, at least in part, for the way he perceived the threat inherent in familiar objects. In 'Good Dream', there is the fairy-tale component of a journey across water to find the lost love on the other side: the whole dream has an accumulative magic and is given a dimension beyond that by MacNeice's use of biblical analogy, 'in the beginning / Is darkness upon the face of the earth'. It is a dialogue in which the dream voice is the truth, socratically leading the dreamer to revelation. He 'hears / The ripples round the chair legs, hears / Larksong high in the chimney, hears / Rustling leaves in the wardrobe,...' The room expands and becomes indivisible from the natural world, the dreamer awakes into a shared beatitude. The same domestic surrounding in 'Bad Dream' is utterly hideous, cankered by the intrusion of animals and insects: the hand reaching out to help becomes the hand pleading for help,

which the dreamer cannot stir to grasp. It is a landscape of howling despair, and the dreamer is locked into it:

Then everything buzzed and boomed. The chaps outside on  
the lamp posts  
Hooted, broke wind, and wept,  
Men the size of flies dropped down his neck while the  
mansized  
Flies gave just three cheers  
And he could not move. The darkness under the floor gave  
just  
One shriek. The arm was gone.

While MacNeice's portrayal of joy has nearly always the same associations--'the gush / Of green, the stare of blue, the sieve / Of sun and shadow' ('Solstice')--his grimmer visions increase in power and range, marshal new images. Both kinds of poetry, and the lighter verse too, benefited from his more rigorous approach at the turn of the decade. The regained strength of Solstices springs partly from a rediscovery of the lyrical impulse, and from the use of parable, whose potential is realised in The Burning Perch (1963). MacNeice would have acknowledged the irony of his most acclaimed volume since the War being a posthumous one, might have appreciated Empson's laconic tribute in the Radio Portrait (C.t.): 'He had done on developing as hardly any of the rest of us had. And his early death is therefore particularly bad luck'.

## Chapter VI

Funeral Games

The Burning Perch was the Poetry Book Society's choice for Autumn 1963, and MacNeice's comments on it for the Bulletin must have been one of the last things he wrote. He admitted to being perplexed by the general sombreness of the collection, and uncertain as to the reason: 'Fear and resentment here seem to be serving me in the same way as Yeats in his old age claimed to be served by "lust and rage", and yet I had been equally fearful and resentful of the world we live in when I was writing Solstices'. Both Hedli MacNeice and Lady Nicholson have remarked in conversation on his fear of ageing: that he had to die disturbed him less than the prospect of slow decline, or the sight of elderly complacency. So in these poems the insistence on themes of lost time, lost opportunity, degeneration and death is not morbid; it is a defiant confrontation, a recognition of facts lurking beneath many guises.

An edge of wit remains, as in the elegant 'Tree Party' (p.532), which is unserious because of its nice rhymes and the formula of the toast, while continually courting the possibility of disaster. MacNeice listed fifteen trees at the outset, including the English poetic stalwarts of lilac, ash and oak, and the Mediterranean vine and olive; he then roughed out nine stanzas, beginning and ending as in the final version. (Texas: BBC notebook with drafts of four Perch poems). The salute to the pine was originally: 'Your health Master Pine, you stand in the snow / Needling away...'; the change shows MacNeice's willingness at this time to avoid the easily punning connections which he formerly would have indulged. When the thirteenth stanza is reached, with the mention of the poet's own death (the opening stanza implied the eventual death of his

creative energies), it comes with the surprise and simplicity of lines from Herbert. The rhyme gives a faintly mocking intonation:

Your health Master Yew. My bones are few  
And I fully admit my rent is due,  
But do not be vexed, I will postdate a cheque for you.

In a volume in which two-thirds of the poems are about, or marginally concerned with, dying, such chiding acceptance is uniquely unresentful.

The greater power of this late poetry is demonstrated too in the poems of place. When he drew attention to these in Visitations, MacNeice wrote that he hoped they existed 'on more than one plane' (Bulletin, May 1957), a hope fulfilled in The Burning Perch. The comparison of 'Ravenna' (p.527) and 'Constant' (p.528) with two unpublished poems also written in 1961, 'Ghana' and '[Greeting] from Singapore', illustrates that MacNeice is much more at home when the historical perspective is European and medieval, or earlier.<sup>1</sup> Ghana and Singapore get postcard treatment, plenty of local colour-- 'whitewashed forts on the whitefanged coast'; 'And the bare ground bristles with fuming joss sticks'--and bustle, with a nod to the legitimate ending of empire, and in Ghana's case acknowledgement of degradation: 'Black sold by black to white, a bloody smear / Across the Atlantic all the way from here'. But in neither country is MacNeice really affected by his experience, nor has he a deep sense of the interaction of history with the present. In his reaction to India, his touch was noticeably surer when he could deal with the sub-continent through its art: so with Ravenna and Constantinople, when art is inevitably his touchstone, MacNeice's poetry is no longer one-dimensional.

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1. Texas: 'Ghana' exists in an autograph manuscript with few emendations, d. 1961. '[Greeting] from Singapore' is in the same form, also d. 1961. Both appear amongst a group of eleven autograph poems for The Burning Perch.



Who calmly, having other things in mind,  
Bears on his palm the Church of the Holy Wisdom.

The random end-rhyming here has the effect of tightening the structure before the final line is set loose, its drifting length enacting the unconcern of the saint. Constantinople bears witness to different kinds of changelessness: a recurrently ruinous history, the enduring image of Santa Sophia.

Egypt gave rise to two poems for Visitations, in which MacNeice grappled with the inconceivable age of the Nile and its civilisation, less corruptible than that of Byzantium (for 'The Rest House', see p.185 above). In 'Beni Hassan' (p.453) the cliff tombs seem to stare at him, focusing 'on some different day / On which, on a long-term view, it was I, not they, had died'. Perhaps spurred by the Aswan Dam crisis, he returned to the pharaohs' tombs in 1961/2 as a subject of apprehension, and cause in 'This is the Life' of satire, Roman in its mockery. Whereas in 'The National Gallery' art was for MacNeice a window on to 'a vital but changeless world-- / a day-dream free from doubt', in 'Réchauffé' (p.527) art of an unfamiliar culture has infinite power to disturb.

Drafts of 'Réchauffé' (Texas) show that MacNeice had his perspective on the feasting, and certain phrases, from the beginning. He had to work at making the first stanza crisper, at ensuring that the relation between the inspectors and inspected was pointed without being over-simplified, at isolating the character of the paintings:

dark

The food on the walls of the ~~tombs in the dark~~  
Under  
~~Is there to remark when the dragoman's [ ] torch~~  
Bakes) Rebakes it  
Cooks) it anew and the deep freeze hums  
In the high-pitched dried-date voice; by turns  
The filing past inspect  
~~The trippers~~ tourists peer at the painted slaves



The painted

~~Filing past in a [ ] people houseboys filing past~~  
 Who ~~Never stopping and never dropping or drop~~  
 The food on the walls of the tombs.

This in its turn needed alteration. Although the description of the food comes off in the French title, which is ironic about the whole experience, the English translation 'rebakes' is too literal; 'warms' is less strained in relation to the heat put out by the torch. MacNeice wanted to picture the mirror-boredom of tourists and slaves, but the art's static quality is missed in 'who never stop or drop...'. He curbs the possible literal interpretation of the first line and produces orderliness:

These live men  
~~The tourists filing past inspect~~  
~~The painted houseboys filing past~~  
 These dead that carry past the painted  
dark  
 Food on the walls of the tomb

By replacing 'tomb' with 'dark', he encloses the action but it is not safely sealed off, a mysteriousness remains. The eventual emendation in the penultimate line of 'carry past' to 'serve by turns' reinforces the mirror image, and draws attention to the way that art is being served up at regular intervals like meals, a comparison also made in 'This is the Life'.

The second stanza was more easily composed; again MacNeice compressed when he revised, particularly the fifth and sixth lines. He worked to produce an impression of barely contained energy at the close:

And yet who knows what sudden <sup>thrust</sup> cursed  
~~Impulse might be the first to burst~~  
~~In the guts or gripe in the soul might~~  
 In the guts, what gripe in the mind, might burst  
 The dams on the breast of the mad?

By leaving off 'Nile', he could trade on its implication from the

first line ('The dams on the breast of the mad Nile / Secure both budget and mind'), and allow for a vision of apocalyptic deluge breaking over the insanelly docile inhabitants of and visitors to the delta.

Tourists are pilloried again in 'This is the Life' (p.538), specifically the elderly female American variety. MacNeice thought the poem the nearest to pure satire in the volume, but it seemed to him 'no more purely satirical than, for example, a medieval gargoyle' (Bulletin). Here his old penchant for using and subverting clichés succeeds entirely, since he relies upon a well-defined frame of reference. His draft for the poem shows that after the first two lines he had an idea of how it should close: he jotted down '& Pharoah's portions of turkey and pumpkin pie', lightly deleted it, continued with what are printed as the eighth and ninth lines, then the sixth and seventh and the conclusion (Texas: BBC notebook with drafts of fourteen Perch poems). This shorter version lacked the description that fleshes out the title, and the sense of burrowing descent. It did have the lines beginning with the felicitous phrase 'Gracious in granite', with its exactly appropriate House and Garden air. The eventual organisation of the poem is masterly, ten long lines of eight stresses forming one sentence. Stephen Wall, in his generally rather disparaging review of The Burning Perch, calls the poem 'excellently professional' and justly remarks that it 'swims free of its creator' (Review, July 1964, p.94).

The 'deep peace' offered by the tombs is that of the fall-out shelter: even more than in Solstices, the possibility of a global catastrophe haunts MacNeice, shadowing poem after poem. Newspaper events no longer impinge directly on his work, but an atmosphere of crisis profoundly affects it. The threat is not merely personal,



nor is its form precise, thus its repercussions are unconfined. Nature itself is thrown out of gear. In 'Spring Cleaning' (p.525) MacNeice abandons his usual, if qualified, optimism about the season, drops any suggestion that it might bring renewal. As in 'Bagpipe Music', the reader is pelted with a heterogeneous collection of objects and situations. For all the futility of the gestures described in the earlier poem, the verse itself has a harsh gaiety, a reeling measure; while each wish or act may be ultimately useless against the impending crash, it is temporarily seductive. The poem written in 1961 barely holds out against the centrifugal tendency of the world it depicts. Sentences are staccato and tenuously connected. This is not the midwinter spring that presages discovery, it is an unholy, sterile confusion:

Blain and dazzle together, together  
Magnolia in bloom and holly in berry  
In the writing desk where nothing is written  
Lurk latchkeys, counterfoils and lockets.

The denial of continuity is contained even in these hidden objects. An incomplete draft of the poem shows MacNeice juggling with stanzas four to seven: the sixth composed (printed as the seventh) needed not the slightest alteration, and is the most self-contained and coherent (Texas). Although he thought last of the line 'Let someone soon make all things new', to have left it at the end would have been an implicit endorsement of hope. As the poem stands, it does what it says, and the time seems past for spring cleaning to have any effect.

Three poems in succession come to the same deadly halt: 'Spring Cleaning', 'Another Cold May', 'The Pale Panther'. The second of these (p.525) returns to the chess metaphor of 'Solitary Travel', elaborating it throughout the poem; everything moves not of its

own volition, but time's. 'The tulips tug at their roots and mourn / In inaudible frequencies': these windblown flowers are strikingly different from some MacNeice described in 'The Policeman', an undergraduate paper he gave at Corpus Christi: 'No one knows what the soul is like who has not seen a flower drunken, tousled, flushed and swaying, tugging and swearing at its stalk and trying to break away and failing' (Strings, p.274). Excitement has drained away, boredom and horror have set in. 'The Pale Panther' combines the tone and phrasing of thirties' poetry--'...burns / Whose gift is not to cure'; 'As for you, airman,...'--with the savagery to which MacNeice was aroused by the renewed threat of apocalypse.

He felt that boredom impinged strongly on 'October in Bloomsbury' (p.529), where it shades into a leisurely indifference. In previous poems about the neighbourhood, centering on the British Museum, MacNeice had conceded some power to the statues and books, or had implied that value lay in the simple fact of being sentient in those surroundings. His last poem remains undisturbed by anything after the Edwardians, including the less sedate of the phrases it contains, neutralising any signs of vivacity or of doom. The affront to time which the sculptures constitute is only possible to artefacts: the living, nearly always taken by surprise (as in 'Birthright', p.531), must resentfully submit. The third of the 'Three Dreams' has a potent episode which encapsulates the common predicament of The Burning Perch. Following his father rapidly down a street, the dreamer sees stone walls on either side beginning to funnel in, leaving a six-inch gap at the end through which the widening street beyond is visible. His father pushes back the walls as if they were rubber, and passes through: the son cannot

even touch the gap. 'He was wedged as it was and reach and push as he might he could make no headway. Only he could see his father walking away, never turning, walking away easily and rapidly down the other half of the hour glass' (Texas). The other two dreams concern the father's actual or potential humiliation: here he is effortlessly the winner. How it might be interpreted in terms of religion and belief is debatable, but as an image of impotence, longing and sudden threat it is sharp.

MacNeice had always proposed love as a way of sidestepping temporality, or at least of successfully disregarding it. In 'Déjà Vu' (p.517) the old defiance is shown--'Our love must extend beyond time because time is itself in arrears / ...we can snap our fingers and laugh'--but a certain weariness is also evident. 'The green improbable fields' of the dedicatory poem are perhaps only half believed in. Clearest of all is the statement made by 'The Introduction' (p.531). The potential lovers meet at the wrong time in their lives, and the green of nature indicates corruption rather than rebirth; instead of becoming butterflies, 'the larvae / Split themselves laughing'. The 'grave glade' of the opening line, evocative of romance (as in Robert Weever's poem, 'In a harbour greene...', which MacNeice liked to quote), already hints at the closing transmutation:

The string quartet in the back of the mind  
Was all tuned up with nowhere to go.  
They were introduced in a green grave.

A sense of alternatives slithering from his grasp is given autobiographical expression in 'Star-Gazer', 'Memoranda to Horace' and 'Goodbye to London'.

Possibly the memory of a particular 'brilliant starry night' surfaced at this point because MacNeice had been commissioned to put

together a book on astrology, which was published posthumously. The draft of the poem in the Berg Collection suggests that he dashed it off as an incident vividly recalled; the occasional clumsiness in syntax and the way the first stanza reads, as casual as a diary entry or a letter, must have been deliberately retained to recreate the excitement he had felt as a boy.<sup>1</sup> The first draft finishes three lines into the second stanza:

& this remembering now I think that what  
 Light was leaving some of them at least then  
~~That is 42 years ago, will be nowhere near me when~~  
 will never arrive

It is in the undrafted lines that MacNeice develops his generally relevant point: no one may be left on earth to receive the star light. He tried out 'Star Crossed' and 'Child Astronomer' before settling on 'Star-gazer' as the title, which connects with the element of prediction. Despite MacNeice's discernible intention, the poem remains curiously unrefined, as though he lost the impetus to convert the memory thoroughly into poetry. It is the more striking when put beside the balanced art of the following poem.

'Goodbye to London' (p.544), judging by the Berg draft, seems to have been written with the same ease as 'Star-gazer'; while the latter is rhymed yet relaxed in syntax, the former has a flatness of diction relieved by the formal, rhyming refrain. MacNeice took the last line from Dunbar's poem, 'In Honour of the City of London', also in seven stanzas, with its refrain 'London, thou art the flour of cities all'. Dunbar has only praise to offer, comparing the city to flowers and jewels--'jasper of jocunditie / Most myghty

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1. The incident is recorded in a letter home from Sherborne, postmarked 21 January 1920.

carbuncle of vertue and valour'--and to Troy, rejoicing in the life of river and street; the whole has the dense-packed brilliance of medieval miniatures. When MacNeice calls it 'the great mean city' in the opening line, he sets the tone of the poem: 'great' could merely refer to size, but here it also indicates quality; although 'mean' is pejorative, it hints at the opposite sense, as in Paul's declaration that he was 'a citizen of no mean city' (Acts xxi,39). Such ambiguity of judgement persists, reinforced by the refrain which acknowledges that London has been a flower, though its petals are now falling. As in 'October in Bloomsbury', MacNeice is not confident that absence will enable him to be entirely detached from old haunts. He queried his first attempt at disowning London--'...I make / Swift to pretend I am no longer [ ] dependent / Though such I shall be as long as I work'--and returning to the lines made them crisper.

MacNeice had long been divided in his reaction to city life, seeing its unexpected beauties, its citizens battered by the routine it imposes. When he connected London with love, it became marvellously exciting and sensuous, so also when it was endangered. 'Trilogy for X' (p.88), written in the summer of 1938, is a compelling instance:

March gave clear days,  
     Gave unaccustomed sunshine,  
 Prelude to who knows  
     What dead end or downfall;  
 O my love, to  
     Browse in the painted prelude.

Regent's Park was  
     Gay with ducks and deck-chairs,  
 Omens were absent  
     Cooks bought cloves and parsley;  
 O my love, to  
     Stop one's ears to omens.

(III)

'Christmas Shopping' (p.95), on the other hand, portrays the commercially harried citizens, '...through the tubes of London /



The dead winds blow the crowds like beasts in flight from / Fire in the forest'. Connolly remarked that MacNeice's 'real preoccupation was with everyday life in bohemian London', and quoted from Autumn Journal 'A smell of French bread in Charlotte Street' (Canto V) ('Lianas Over the Void'). The bombing of the city put an end to these notations of daily life, and description centred on buildings under fire rather than people or his own London round. Autumn Sequel blends real London with myth, so that Regent's Park exists only briefly in its own right before becoming a type of Eden. All these strands, stretching from the earliest astonishment--'and never in the world had there been so much so quickly' (Strings, p.63)--to the late disillusionment, were to be tied off. MacNeice separated some for counting in the poem.

After expressing his intention and describing London's assault on a child's ear and nostrils, MacNeice turns to his 'peering teens' to evoke the sophistication he then discerned. This artificial allure was not easy to capture:

... she was foreign  
a rotation & [ ]  
Names over winking doors, she was whirling she was wheels  
& lights & eyeballs, larger than life a kaleidoscope  
of wine & ice, of eyes and emeralds.

apart from a slight difficulty with the first line of stanza six ('From which reborn into anticlimax'); it is downhill all the way and the final refrain makes a causal connection: the 'meaningless buildings' and renewed estrangement of the Londoners are the reason 'why now the petals fall / Fast from the flower of cities all'. The failure of community, definitive and ugly isolation, bear witness to human inadequacies resurgent after the extraordinary demands made by war were lifted. MacNeice backs away from the scene more in sadness than in resignation.

Directly autobiographical poems comprise approximately one fourth of The Burning Perch. MacNeice's bent at this time, indeed for some time past, was more towards myth, allegory, fairy-tale, the modes of writing he characterised as 'parable' in the Clark Lectures. His love of fairy-tales was long-established, documented in Modern Poetry as well as Varieties of Parable. Anthony Blunt, recalling their reading at Marlborough, mentions that 'on the completely fancy side--and this went with the cult of the childlike and childish which we all had--we read Edward Lear, Lord Dunsany's fairy stories and Grimm; Andersen we thought rather smug and we preferred Grimm as being more vivid' ('From Bloomsbury to Marxism', p.164). MacNeice's later preference was for Andersen, whom he praises in Varieties of Parable for the spiritual quality of his quests and his lack of sentimentality. Grimm, and Dunsany in another way, satisfied a craving for the baroque and fantastic, elements whose excess eventually lost its appeal for MacNeice. When he was nineteen, he could still identify with a book by Dunsany, albeit half-seriously: 'I am having a golfing holiday with the curate as a result of The Charwoman's Shadow where the magician

decides boar hunting to be the surest way to happiness and the best philosophy. It's a good book and the last chapter--"The End of the Golden Age"--is just like me only refined' (to Blunt, post-marked 25 September 1926. Misc.37A). Dunsany is charmingly archaic, a little dusty, stately in gold and silver, a tapestry-maker. There is not a hint of modernity, or much of humour, nor is there a strong moral sense. The magician skilled in black arts closes the book with his disappearance from earth into a community beyond the grave, which is neither heaven nor hell. John Hilton, in his contribution to the Radio Portrait, suggested that MacNeice's having 'preoccupied himself so much with fables and legends and myths, and abstract thought and visual sensations, and poetry of course' meant that he encountered the world with more of a shock than most people, but also with 'an extraordinary freshness of vision' (p.6). By the 1960's, unsurprisingly, almost the reverse of this movement was taking place, a return to parable in which MacNeice could utilise his sharp contemporary observations, meshing this world with that of legend. When the fabulous and everyday interact in his late work, it is rarely in the benign sense of 'Good Dream', and is usually a cause for unease or dread. His interest in the quest, never dormant since his discovery of the Morte d'Arthur, and an increasing fascination with death, could not be served by a dazzling style, which would only conceal and soften. A deep admiration for Bunyan and Herbert emerges from Varieties of Parable; their method of revelation is plainness: 'the knife that almost killed the writer will cut the reader to the bone' (p.23).

Obviously the result of MacNeice's preoccupations bore no resemblance to the ornate poetry of Blind Fireworks--'I was in those days only too happy mixing up Greek, biblical and Nordic



[mythology]' ('Images', p.129)--nor much to the carefully constructed myths of Autumn Sequel. He was aware that '"things have come to such a pass that we do not even recognise great numbers of symbols" belonging to our tradition, which is half Judaic-Christian and half Graeco-Roman': he was conscious of the danger of employing private systems.<sup>1</sup> Yet others were no longer widely comprehensible to a writer's audience because of 'the destruction of the rigid base of cultural authority upon which allegory traditionally depends'.<sup>2</sup> MacNeice chose not to reprint most of his own early eclectic poems. But it was possible to draw from classical, medieval and folk traditions those recurrent patterns and images which remained valid. Undoubtedly the experience of adapting and writing for radio alerted him to their potential.

This vein of writing was formally and metaphysically challenging: the dilemmas are more clearly posed by the work for radio. In 1949, when MacNeice previewed his play The Queen of Air and Darkness, he claimed that 'rather than trying to write a morality, I have been trying to write a myth', in which fleshed-out characters would carry the allegorical burden; in 1962 he admitted The Mad Islands to be 'another attempt to write a modern morality'.<sup>3</sup> The problem in writing allegorical drama, MacNeice found, was that tragedy and the concepts of good and evil edged their way in; he compared his

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1. Quotation from Tuve's A Reading of George Herbert in his review of the book, op.cit.
  2. Honig, The Dark Conceit, quoted in Parable, p.28.
  3. '"Listeners are Warned..." a study in Evil', Radio Times 25 March 1949, p.10; programme note, Radio Times, 29 March 1962, p.39.

difficulties to those facing George MacDonald in Lilith. 'But my superstructure was less convincing than MacDonald's', he confessed, 'because I lacked his groundwork of belief' (Parable, p.112). The interplay between belief and artefact caused MacNeice anxiety intermittently throughout his life. In Modern Poetry, he owned to feeling 'hampered by this lack of belief or system' when he went up to Oxford; part of his optimism about contemporary poetry arose from the fact that beliefs were increasing among poets, which 'should conduce to a wider, more fertile and possibly a major poetry', although he emphasised that 'for the poet, any belief, any creed... should be compromised with his own individual observation' (pp.62, 101). Apropos of Dante, MacNeice made the point in his first Clark Lecture that while in poetry 'the formal elements are part of the meaning or the content', the content (which includes beliefs) will naturally 'have a part in the shaping of that poem. Which means that in this respect the beliefs are formalising elements' (Parable, p.19). MacNeice knew why he had failed outright in The Queen, and the reason for his return to Everyman as a dramatic model is also explained by remarks in the second Lecture. 'It moves forward inexorably from beginning to end and there are no ambiguities. ... Its virtues are the prose virtues of Bunyan,... [the style] is spare and undecorated and sometimes colloquial' (Parable, p.30). While MacNeice did not ignore psychological intricacies, the structure of his moralities is quite plain: the protagonists move towards their deaths, and at some stage recognise the direction they are taking. The shape is dictated by the summing up of a life. Many of The Burning Perch poems are also cast in this mould. The pattern is readily apprehended and need not expose the author's own inability to cope with the problems to which it draws attention.

One for the Grave (1958/9) is Everyman played out in the world of mass-media, his twentieth-century fate which makes 'the whole device of the Television Studio (where the floor represents the Earth and the production gallery Heaven)... very much more than a gimmick'.<sup>1</sup> Rapid changes of mood to incorporate revue or music-hall elements recall the mixture of styles used in the old Group Theatre productions. The play did not receive its first performance until 1966 (in the Abbey Theatre, Dublin) and so could not benefit from authorial revision. Although Everyman's predicament is occasionally touching, and MacNeice has a keen perception of the way his life is manipulated, the satire often distracts from the serious struggle which should be the play's centre. It is hard to tell how it would appear on stage; it certainly reads less successfully than Persons from Porlock, a correspondingly less ambitious radio play. The last Person in the life of Hank, a frustrated painter, is death, encountered underground on a pot-holing expedition. The play requires of MacNeice only worldly judgements and predictions (that death will help sell Hank's late canvases, for instance): the intrusion of a parabolic element is confined to the personification of death. On a large scale, with one or two exceptions, this mode of writing was wrong for MacNeice. In his lecture 'Contemporary Poetry and Drama', he quoted Beckett as having said 'I am interested in the shape of ideas even if I do not believe in them', and continued: 'Now a playwright, like a poet, being a maker (or 'makar') is thereby ipso facto a shaper... and this very act of shaping may

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1. One For the Grave, (London: Faber and Faber, 1968), Notes p.13.

bring him back full circle into something very like belief...'.<sup>1</sup>

The script MacNeice wrote for the CBS series 'What I Believe' (Texas: d. c. November 1952) reveals a circularity in his thinking. This public avowal consists mainly of rather simplistic word-juggling; MacNeice does not appear interested in giving the question deep consideration. He eventually gives an answer: 'What I do believe is that, as a human being, it is my duty to make patterns and to contribute to order--good patterns and good order'. Ten years later he might have answered differently, however the idea of pattern still seems central to his thought. How 'good' is to be defined--aesthetically or morally--is left unsaid. MacNeice's unwillingness or inability to define it could only be a weakness when he came to writing avowed moralities.

The compass of a poem was better suited to his strengths; implications could be left inexact, as in 'The Taxis' (p.522), whose very simplicity is disquieting. The parable/poem partakes of 'the nightmarish world of the drunk or of the haunted', MacNeice wrote in an uncharacteristic note on a typescript (Texas). His observation in Zoo that 'the taxi represents Escape' (p.125) indicates some of the poem's irony, since clearly the passenger's past is riding with him. The nuances are particularly delicate: the placing of 'tra-la' in the four stanzas for instance, insouciant at first, knowing in the second, automatic in the third and by the fourth wearied. An incomplete draft shows MacNeice taking care in

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1. Parable, p.118. Cf. his point that while astrological determinism could be pushed to excess, the concept of universal 'correspondences' is attractive: 'This grouping of inter-related creatures and objects has the same appeal as certain card games with their sequences, flushes and so on. It all goes back to the basic concept of sympathy...' It draws 'the mystic in us. And there is an equally strong attraction for the poet in us, or at any rate for the patternmaker'. (Astrology (London: Aldus Books in association with W.H. Allen, 1964), pp.16-17.

the third stanza to get the memory right: he had intended to introduce the driver in the third line, as in preceding stanzas, but cancelled that in favour of '& an odd / Scent that reminded him of a trip abroad to Paris to Cannes'. 'Abroad' is too vague for the sensation, 'Paris' too obvious, 'Cannes' keeps the exotic/erotic suggestion. Of course there may have been an autobiographical foundation for the choice (Texas: with autograph drafts and typed manuscripts for six other Perch poems). The fourth stanza did not quite settle into its final form in the available draft, which illustrates MacNeice's capacity for taking pains:

As for the 4th taxi he was alone      It's no use  
    tra-la      I'm sorry, Guv,  
 When it pulled up but the driver shook his head,  
 It's no good, Guv, he said, I just can't take  
 So many of you, let alone the dog.  
                  cabby  
 The driver said, I just can't take so many  
                                  tra-la I just can't  
                                  but I can't tra-la well take  
 So many of you, let alone  
                                  not to speak of the dog.

The alteration to 'but the cabby looked / Through him and said:...' was a nice stroke, conveying incidentally the driver's disgruntlement as well as the passenger's joining the insubstantial company. Technically the poem is beautifully finished, but its meaning is not circumscribed, gingerly balanced between this world and another.

McKinnon draws attention to the comment of MacNeice's English master that he should 'avoid G.K. Chesterton and slang in writing' (Sherborne, Easter 1921), and quotes a passage from Chesterton's essays The Uses of Diversity (1920), concerning the image of strangers who become companions on a journey: 'That profound feeling of mortal fraternity and frailty, which tells us we are indeed all in the same boat, is not the less true if expressed in the formula that we are all in the same bus' (McKinnon, p.71). If

MacNeice had read and recalled this, it was not in Chesterton's genial, consolatory way that he perceived the metaphor. He used it three times before the definitive version in The Burning Perch: in 'Figure of Eight' (Visitations; C.P. p.463), 'Hold-Up' (Solstices) and in an unpublished poem 'The Move', probably written in 1961 (Texas: in the group of eleven Perch poems, autograph manuscript). The essence of 'Hold-Up' (p.503) is that the travelling strangers stay distant, verbal and non-verbal communication is suspended, 'the girls no longer flagged / Their sex...'. The outcome is inconclusive:

... for miles behind  
The other buses nudged and blared  
And no one dared get out. The conductress  
Was dark and lost, refused to change.

The poem almost succeeds, certainly as a picture of general confusion and paralysis it works, but MacNeice seems to want it to represent some situation that it in fact evades. His list of consequences-- 'the hot news froze' and so on--are expressed in too artificial a manner. In 'The Move', on the other hand, his control of symbols is too tight: 'Having moved house from the Butt of Nowhere / On the route of the Thousand and Thirty bus / A request stop that dare not stop', and leaves the poem hollow.

These three attempts are eclipsed by 'Charon' (1962, p.530), one of MacNeice's most powerful poems. His initial idea for it exists in draft, with the first and last lines which remained unaltered.

The conductor's hands were black with money  
 ↓  
 If you want to die, you will have to pay for it.  
 Charon  
 with so many people aggressively vacant  
 pigeons & rumours of wars

When we reached the Thames  
All the bridges were down.

This time a certain community exists on the journey, a community of anxiety and doom. Tricks of repetition suit the narrative voice, which manages to be both incredulous and matter-of-fact, noting significance with hindsight. It has some of the London motifs of Autumn Journal: pigeons, wars, cock-crow; and 'that dissolving map' is a thirtyish property. The transition to the ferryman reveals both how bleak MacNeice's vision of ordinary life had become, and how much more sophisticated his craft, that Styx and Thames could now merge. He clearly had made the connection at once between the London bus conductor's grimy hands and those of Charon, who traditionally demanded an obol from his passengers; the Greeks used to bury the dead with the coin in their mouths. His age, labour and distance from the beauty of Hellenic statues is economically, chillingly conveyed. MacNeice's narrative assurance makes the poem's progress inevitable, its ending inescapable. Whether this is a warning from someone who has paid and gone over, or the terrible memory of someone who could not pay but knows what will, some time, take place again, we cannot tell. The flatness of the closing statement is an example of that sleight-of-hand writing MacNeice spoke of admiringly in Varieties of Parable: it promises an end yet it goes on reverberating.

... We flicked the flashlight  
 And there was the ferryman, just as Virgil  
 And Dante had seen him. He looked at us coldly  
 And his eyes were dead and his hands on the oar  
 Were black with obols and varicose veins  
 Marbled his calves and he said to us coldly:  
 If you want to die you will have to pay for it.

Charon, who in the Inferno is grim and violent, with flashing eyes and a quick tongue, is terrible here because of the sheer lack of passion in his transaction with those on the bank. MacNeice himself pointed to the difference between this poem, and others on

a similar theme, when he divided fantasy into two categories borrowed from Coleridge:

The greatest traditional myths, ... are ... works of Imagination: the myth, that is, appears inevitable and fulfils a need in the reader that he may or may not have been aware of. The fantasies of mere Fancy, ... seem ... arbitrary; they have surface but no depth; they amuse but they do not nourish; they are almost a form of doodling.

(Parable, p.78)

He needed the established myth, with its power already accumulated, and could bring to it his peculiar sense of the way something domestic or routine can be an ambush.

It is surprising that MacNeice used the classical myths comparatively rarely, given his training and his obsessions. Day of Returning counterpoints Odysseus and Jacob to explore the meaning of exile and home, and has something of the ease of reference of 'Charon', yet lacks confidence in making the material MacNeice's own. Except for the brilliant translation of 'Solvitur acris hiems' (Horace, Odes I.4) published first in The Listener, 17 November 1937, MacNeice did not translate much classical poetry (as distinct from drama) until the mid 1950's. A radio programme on Horace, Carpe Diem (broadcast 8 October 1956), spurred him to translate two more odes, and in 1960 he undertook 'Hades', the third episode of a radio production of The Odyssey. In 1963 he produced Latin Poetry (24 March) and Medieval Latin Poetry (11 August), the former repeating the Horation odes, the latter including three poems newly translated. The common theme of all these programmes is death.

Most of them are simply presentations of the poetry, with brief linking commentaries, but Carpe Diem is a moving tribute to Horace, spoken by a dying man. 'Quintus', named by a father who revered Horace and bequeathed a love of his poetry to his son, waits for the



doctor to call and ruminates aloud on his life to Elaine, 'meorum finis amorum'. MacNeice gave this programme an autobiographical slant, disguised partly by making Quintus a generation older than himself. It opens with lines that could serve as an epigraph for 'Goodbye to London' or 'Memoranda to Horace': 'fastidiosam desere copiam...' (Odes III,29), which Quintus interprets as: 'Say goodbye to arrogant luxury and to the towering buildings that reach the clouds and cease to admire the smoke and the riches and the racket of wealthy London [Rome]'. With appreciative mention of Milton's translation of 'Quis multa gracilis' (I,5), he passes to the sinking of the Titanic:

nequiquam deus abscidit  
prudens Oceano dissociabili  
          terrass, si tamen impiae  
non tangenda rates transiliunt vada.

Yes, the Unsinkable Ship--the old Greek idea of hubris. Many of the preachers the next Sunday took Horace's view about it. And I remember talking in the 1930's to one of the young writers of the time--was it Day-Lewis? no, MacNeice--and he told me that in the town where his father was rector ... one of the locals ... wrote a doggerel broadsheet on the subject.

Quintus quotes a verse from this, and continues with the closing lines of Horace's third ode (Book I), 'nil mortalibus ardui est...'. The direct interpolation from MacNeice recalls an incident that Lady Nicholson also remembers vividly: the vessel had been a topic of consuming interest, especially as the children had actually seen it sail out of Belfast lough, 'one shining glimpse / Of a boat so big it was named Titanic'. MacNeice thought of its voyage again in 1956, as a metaphor for his stepmother's death, with the icebergs waiting. The memory of the ship is associated there with neither pride nor punishment, but calm inevitability; at the time of its sinking it must have compounded the element of awe in his reaction

to the sea. The episode is followed by his translation of 'Tu ne quaesieris' (I,11: 'Do not, Leúconoé, seek to inquire what is forbidden'), and that by the coming of the Great War; thus the sinking of apparently invincible systems is allied, the doctrine of living for the day justified. The epitaph chosen for the First World War is the twenty-fourth ode (Book I), associated for MacNeice with Graham Shepard's death in the Second.

Quintus has had Horace's experience in reverse: peace and a stable society, then war and chaos. To characterise the period entre deux guerres, he quotes from Horace's seventh ode (Book I):

o fortes peioraque passi  
mecum saepe viri, nunc vino pellite curas;  
cras ingens iterabimus aequor

which he translates for Elaine's benefit:

O my brave comrades who with me have suffered  
worse things often, now dispel your cares with  
wine.

Cras--tomorrow: ingens--the huge: iterabimus--we  
shall repeat, have another slap at: aequor--the sea.  
And whatever the sea stands for.

This anticipates the theme of some of The Burning Perch poems; 'Round the Corner', for example, and 'Thalassa', and the lines to which Quintus turns next are directly quoted in 'Memoranda to Horace': 'lusisti satis, edisti satis atque bibisti: / tempus abire tibi est...', which he renders: 'You have played enough, you have eaten enough and drunk enough. It is time for you to depart' (Epistles II,2).

The Horatian counsel Quintus values is to preserve 'a level mind in crooked times' (Odes II,3); he scorns the view that the poet only offered commonplaces. Certainly Horace enjoyed his time on earth, but he recognised the drawbacks. He should be appreciated for his civilised mind and his strong sense of human decency. He was often inconsistent, even escapist ('quid sit futurum cras fuge

quaerere...' I,9), yet knew the shadows under which men live. The closing note is that struck by 'Solvitur acris hiems' (I,4):

Equally heavy is the heel of white-faced Death on the pauper's  
Shack and the towers of kings, and O my dear  
The little sum of life forbids the ravelling of lengthy  
Hopes. Night and the fabled dead are near

And the narrow house of nothing, past whose lintel  
You will meet no wine like this, no boy to admire  
Like Lycidas, who today makes all young men a furnace  
And whom tomorrow girls will find a fire.

Although the poem ends with beauty's personification in Lycidas, the burden of the preceding lines almost annihilates that, beauty overborne by the knowledge of its brief duration.

Carpe Diem is clearly the product of a mind which felt deep affinities with Horace's poetry and the attitudes it revealed, nevertheless MacNeice was aware of their differences, and chose to argue out the matter some years later. Formally,

there is a conscious attempt to suggest  
Horatian rhythms (in English of course one  
cannot do more than suggest them) combined  
with the merest reminiscence of Horatian  
syntax. ... I suppose it goes with something  
of a Horatian resignation. But my resignation,  
as I was not brought up a pagan, is more of a  
fraud than Horace's: Memoranda to Horace  
itself, I hope, shows this.

(Bulletin)

From boyhood MacNeice had admired the glitter of Horace--'O fons Bandusiae splendidior vitro' (III,13)--and 'his tidiness, realising that English with its articles and lack of inflexions could hardly ever equal Horace either in concentration or in subtlety of word-order' (Modern Poetry, p.49). In 'Memoranda' he does suggest the alcaic metre, and adopt some Horatian habits: the dry, sometimes prosaic diction, sentences spread over several stanzas, anaphora; he does not follow Horace in the occasional separation of adjectives from their nouns, though a similar effect of suspension is achieved

in section III: 'And another called it "intense" but admiringly "levity"'. The conversational tone has something of Horace's urbanity, of his public moralising also, an assumption of shared and civilised values. Section IV describes the ground on which they meet as poets: 'an appetitive decorum', more Apollonian than Dionysian, that is tending to stress rather than obliterate distinctions; 'The point is never to recognize / Any preconception: let commonplace be novelty'. That the integrity of this poetic--and personal--stance is threatened from all directions seems to provoke from MacNeice a desperately bleak response, distant from both the resignation and alleviation Horace offers.

The prospect of 'a second childhood remembering only / Childhood' affords scant consolation in 'Memoranda', in part because MacNeice's attitude was not that of a writer who, in re-enacting childhood experience, could rediscover his faith in innocence and vision. In his poetry at least, recollection proceeds from an adult perspective, the chasm between then and now is always visible, although a bridge may be slung across it. Apart from the brief mention in 'Memoranda', MacNeice left his Irish childhood behind in The Burning Perch, preferring to deal with it in prose. He did tinker with a poem about changing homes, using the longer lines with which he latterly tried to sidestep 'the "iambic" groove which we were all born into' (Bulletin):

We never, when I was a child, moved house, it was always the  
 Rectory  
 Though the town encroached and the corncrakes left but when I  
 left too  
 My father was translated south to a walled garden and a rookery  
 And portraits of earlier bishops...

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1. Texas: BBC notebook with drafts of four Perch poems; one unfinished deleted poem about [Ajanta]; this unfinished poem c.1961.

The poem continues with a play on the linguistic rather than ecclesiastical associations of translation, tails off on a description of familiar photographs trying to acclimatise themselves to change, 'cricking their necks / In the strange rooms'. This has a certain charm, but its lack of incisiveness makes it untypical of MacNeice's poetry in the 1960's. It is interesting to see him abandoning a poem which relies for its impetus on the sort of word-play he might have found adequate to its support a few years before. Both the rectory and the bishop's residence are firmly in the past, there is none of that interplay of past and present which gives meaning to the recollection in 'Soap Suds' (p.517). That demonstrates in its four stanzas the control MacNeice could now exercise, his austerity (the notebook poem is, surprisingly, almost genteel) and his ability to universalise an experience. The deliberation of the unpublished poem's opening, a determination to shape his memory in a particular way, contrasts with the uninsistent immediacy of 'Soap Suds': 'This brand of soap has the same smell as once in the big / House he visited when he was eight'. By putting an obviously personal experience--Lady Nicholson identifies the house as Oakfield, their stepmother's home--into the third person, MacNeice confirms the separation of the child's experience from the adult's, their temporary coalescence being the subject of the poem. The second stanza has something of Yeats's portentousness in its use of demonstrative pronouns; its weight earned by the child's pleasure, it partakes of his gloating and of the adult's efforts at exactitude:

And these were the joys of that house: a tower with a telescope;  
Two great faded globes, one of the earth, one of the stars;  
A stuffed black dog in the hall; a walled garden with bees;  
A rabbit warren; a rockery; a vine under glass, the sea.

The inclusion of both detail and immensity is facilitated by the echo of Alice in Wonderland and a mad game of croquet: transmutations

seem natural, 'The day of course is fine' is the convention for childhood weather--as in the golden hours that Carroll evokes in the prefatory poem to Alice--but MacNeice's 'of course' can be an assent and also an ironic inflection. At least one owner of 'the angry voice' which cries 'Play!' must be Time. Less personally, more satirically, MacNeice uses the same telescopic effect in 'Perspectives' (p.519): 'The further-off people are sometimes the larger', and that includes 'the child that was once yourself'.

When his mood is less reductive, MacNeice can establish some continuity, as in 'Round the Corner' (p.518). Nevertheless it is the sea, not the man who confronts it, which has the element of constancy. One prose version of this stunning childhood impression has already been quoted (see above Chapter IV, p.152); there is another in 'Landscapes of Childhood and Youth':

... walking slightly up hill and round a corner I  
ran head on into a yet tangier surprise, one which  
is with me still when the open sea catches me  
unawares. That first time it hit me with every-  
thing it had--a sting of salt, a gust of herring,  
a concert of gulls, a circus of white horses, a  
dazzle of distance.

(Strings, p.218)

To the mature poet distance, anarchy, persistence matter more than the sensuously immediate associations. In a late version of the poem, he eventually cancelled lines that drew too close a parallel between the natural realm and the political one we inhabit:

... Round  
That corner regardless there will be always a realm  
That splinters into cantons then swells to empire,  
Multifaceted monolith, drunken yet stable economy.

(Berg)

They would have been out of place in a poem finding hope in constant change, in the reminder of immense forces out of human control, dwarfing the tergiversations of one life. Terence Brown is right

to connect this poem with MacNeice's review of Seferis' Poems, and to draw attention to MacNeice's own comment in the Bulletin that most of the poems in The Burning Perch 'are two-way affairs or at least spiral ones: even in the most evil picture the good things, like the sea...are still there around the corner'. Quoting Seferis' lines:

We knew it that the islands were beautiful  
Somewhere roundabout here where we are groping,  
Maybe a little lower or a little higher,  
No distance away at all.

(from Mythistorema, No.8)

MacNeice added: 'Which perhaps is an answer; on a plane just a shade above or below our own or just around the corner which after all is our own corner, so near and yet so far in fact, lies something which might make sense of both our past and future and so redeem our present'.<sup>1</sup>

The sea as the plane of self-discovery dominates MacNeice's radio play The Mad Islands, written the following year.<sup>2</sup> It is based on the story of the ancient Irish Voyages, one of the few Celtic legends 'which in their own right, without gloss or analysis, can excite our sense of mystery or sympathy', MacNeice remarked (Varieties, p.11). Like Tennyson in his 'Voyage of Maeldune', MacNeice used some of the thirty-one original islands and invented others for the series of fantastic visits paid by Muldoon in the course of his quest. It begins at his mother's behest, as she wants her husband's murder avenged; traditionally the vendetta is

1. 'A Modern Odyssey', op.cit. Chapter V, p.216. See Brown, p.121.
2. Broadcast 4 April 1962. The Mad Islands and The Administrator, (London: Faber and Faber, 1964).

abandoned, but MacNeice introduces a seal-woman to aid the process of self-knowledge into which the voyage's purpose is transformed. The play was not intended to be essentially Irish nor consistently of the saga period; half its point, MacNeice commented in his introduction, lies in the anachronisms. He acknowledged a debt to Alwyn and Brinley Rees' Celtic Heritage, also used in the Clark Lectures, where he quoted their remark that 'boundaries between territories, like boundaries between years and between seasons, are lines along which the supernatural intrudes through the surface of existence' (Parable, p.100). It is just this sense of worlds intersecting that he captures in the encounters of the seafarer with the islands.

Where the sea meets the land is always potent territory for MacNeice's imagination: the scene of childhood memories, of particular associations with his father, the passage between his two allegiances, England and Ireland; the sea as symbol of escape and freedom but also of exile, and in Horace's poetry, a metaphor for 'eternal exile'. Drawing attention to Auden's book The Enchafèd Flood, MacNeice pointed out that the Romantic attitude to the sea, which we have inherited, is 'dialectical: the sea, Auden says, is "the Alpha of existence, the symbol of potentiality", but it also remains what the ancients thought it, the first and last symbol of primeval chaos, of the indefatigable destroyer. It corresponds to the figure of Siva in Hindu mythology' (Parable, p.84).

Thus it is appropriate that the last of MacNeice's Collected Poems, which was not published in The Burning Perch and appeared



posthumously in The London Magazine, should be 'Thalassa'.<sup>1</sup> Daring the surge, knowing the history of such attempts, MacNeice holds courage as an absolute value. The poem gathers resonance from centuries of literary precedent, but bears an absolutely personal stamp. He ended The Burning Perch with a just conceivable prospect, 'when the tunnels meet beneath the mountain', recalling the fantastic landscape of a MacDonald novel, or the symbolism of his own Prisoner's Progress. The Collected Poems finishes by breaking out of that enclosed world, balancing pessimism with a steadiness that has taken into account the worst and is still capable of affirmation. MacNeice himself escapes his poetic limitations, is triumphant.

Butting through scarps of moving marble  
 The narwhal dares us to be free;  
 By a high star our course is set,  
 Our end is Life. Put out to sea.

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1. February 1964, p.5. It may have been sketched years before. Texas holds a typed carbon-copy contents list for Springboard, with autograph additions and deletions, which includes the title 'Run Out the Boat', dated January 1944. Unfortunately there is no corresponding manuscript.

### Conclusion

MacNeice's juvenilia, culminating in Blind Fireworks, were written with extreme ease. Concerning the poem 'Twilight of the Gods' (published first as 'The Dissolution of Valhalla', The Marlburian, 23 October 1924), with its fantastic mythological mixture, he remarked that 'this sort of thing was not, in the ordinary sense, fake; it sprang from an only too genuine emotion and was indeed poured out "as the bird sings"-- ... The fault of such a poem lies not in its feeling but in its technique' ('Images', p.129). The young poet, as he says, usually reads more than he can catch up with; it is as immediately absorbing as his everyday experience, and in MacNeice's case served partly as a defence against that. The excitement of literary and artistic discovery could crowd out parts of his life that seemed incommunicable: nightmares, his mother's death, his brother's mongolism. Moreover MacNeice suffered a geographical division of experience: Carrickfergus, with the rectory 'lit by oil lamps (not enough of them)... full of shadows' (ibid.), church and cemetery, and little beguiling companionship; Sherborne/Marlborough/Oxford, with their attendant mental stimuli, gradually secure friendships and country expeditions chiefly associated with spring and early summer. Of course this is too simple a map, emotional territories overlapped, there was unease on both sides of the Irish sea as pleasure on both. Nevertheless there is much truth in it. MacNeice felt that there were certain traits in his poetry that were a reaction to the fear, monotony and loneliness he associated, however exaggeratedly, with life in Ulster: '... what I now think an excessive preoccupation in my earlier verse with things dazzling, high-coloured, quick-moving, hedonistic or up-to-date' (ibid.).

A certain verbal flamboyance may also have been a result of his decision to 'exploit the fact that I was Irish' when going away to school (Strings, p.63). Littleton Powys recalled that he kept his Sherborne dormitory enthralled by stories, and although his early poems do not have a narrative cast, their rapidity of association and movement from one image to the next demonstrate his inventive skill.<sup>1</sup> Thus extravagance in speech conformed to the English stereotype of the Irish, but was also an assault on Ulster dourness and restrictions, by a boy who increasingly cherished his western Irish ancestry.

At Marlborough, a counterbalancing influence on his poetry was exercised by Eliot; even when MacNeice moved beyond the first, very literary phase in his writing, Eliot claimed his attention. An echo from Burnt Norton has been noted (see Chapter II, p.69 above); a connection could be made between the tone of some of the fifties' poems and Eliot's style in the discursive sections of Four Quartets. The older poet's 'sincere belief and genuine courage' won MacNeice's admiration in his review of The Family Reunion (New Republic, 3 May 1939, p.384), and perhaps also his envy. Their publishing relations seem to have been cordial, if slightly formal, and on MacNeice's death Eliot wrote to The Times and The Guardian to express his sadness at the passing of a younger poet 'of genius'. The tribute is generous, the description disputable.

MacNeice's criticism in the 1930's was much occupied with various poets' legacies to his generation, and by the end of the decade he was inclined to give precedence to Yeats. He said of

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1. Littleton Powys, The Joy of It (London: Chapman and Hall, 1937), p.61.

Yeats that he escaped the quicksands of the nineties because 'he harnessed the aesthetic doctrine to a force outside itself which he found in his own country' (Yeats, p.45). To some extent this was the saving of his own work. Establishing a home in Birmingham and taking up his first job there meant opting for English urban life; the tug of Ireland forced MacNeice to consider conflicting claims upon his allegiance, while marriage--he said--jolted him into recognising the existence of other people in their own right. A new alertness to his environment radically altered both the subject matter and form of the poems, which had been part of an essentially private fantasy world, sensuous yet artificial. In Modern Poetry, where MacNeice was particularly concerned to present the poet as an ordinary man, his writing being a way of returning to normal from the 'kink or deficiency' he starts out with, he concluded the 'Case-Book' with his move to Birmingham:

... I realised that while it is an asset to have an idiom, an idiom is only valuable as a differentiation of what is communal. Further, I had to earn my own living and this is antipathetic to a purely aesthetic view of life. And lastly, living in ... Birmingham, I recognised that the squalor of Eliot was a romanticised squalor because treated, on the whole, rather bookishly as décor.

(Modern Poetry, p,74)

The cities in MacNeice's poems, Belfast and Birmingham, later London and Dublin, had their squalor but also their excitement; they were not abstractions from many cities. It may be that this very precision makes them lesser poems than Eliot's, which is not to say that they are not good, or a necessary complement to the older man's grim vision. MacNeice was intoxicated by his own act of seeing: the poems are mostly series of direct impressions. He turned away from Pater, whose essay on style he first read in 1926,

and whom he had followed in attaching primary importance to style; he came to agree with Arnold, that the most important thing was 'the choice of a subject; the necessity of accurate construction' and thought he was right to insist on 'the subordinate character of expression'. In short, 'the poet's first business is mentioning things' (Modern Poetry, p.5).

Recording concrete impressions was not a hedonistic indulgence. MacNeice was aware of time and, from a very early age, of death. So most of the poems attempt to pluck things from the flux and give them such permanence as art may. Because he wanted to remember and to fix things in his readers' memories, he could not be at all indifferent to style. If subject was first--and now it was his own experience, unobscured by myth--form concerned MacNeice. An admirer of the élan vital of Whitman and Lawrence, he felt that structure was necessary as well, and that it could be supplied 'partly by reason, partly by emotion intelligently canalised to an end, partly by the mere love of form' (Modern Poetry, p.18).

Differences in form betray differences in attitude: when Eliot shored up his fragments in The Waste Land, dropped punctuation, elliptically juxtaposed his own with others' words, he was despairing. MacNeice thought that this nihilism, despite some superficial resemblances, was distant from the poetry of Auden and his contemporaries, who like Yeats staked their belief on a system and on human capacity for heroic action. He suggested that the two earlier English poets who influenced them most were Blake and Donne: '... it is significant that, whereas we shared Donne with Eliot, we shared Blake with Yeats; our aim was to use our brains, as Donne and Eliot had done, but to follow Blake in not abjuring life or the world of "created things"' (Yeats, p.191).

The admiration of MacNeice's generation for Yeats's later poetry was a response, as to Eliot's previously, to its 'modernity'. They appreciated the widened range of subject matter, which accorded with their own concept of poetry, 'dealing fairly directly with contemporary experience, some of it historical, some of it casual and personal' (Yeats, p.156). His reaction against the assumptions of chaos that Eliot had made also pleased them: things should be selected and patterned, and naturally poems had a regular pattern also; this is a notable association in Auden's thought and practice. The language avoided 'poetic' diction, was flexible and could become noble.

MacNeice criticised Yeats too, but his general attitude was appreciative. He probably learnt from him the uses of the refrain, which he had met before in the poetry of Morris, Noyes and Housman, where it was traditionally sentimental. Yeats used it to counterpoint the verses, or to reinforce meaning at a more subtle level, as MacNeice does in 'Autobiography'. There were two areas of considerable difference. For Yeats, as for Eliot in some respects, the past was irrecoverably glamorous, especially the Anglo-Irish version of it which he constructed for himself. MacNeice and his contemporaries wrote in the conviction that the world they knew was imminently threatened, and they did not look to any historic model for its reconstruction. In MacNeice's case the inevitability of change was reluctantly registered since he did not subscribe to a political or religious belief which would make him optimistic. He asked in a short poem, 'Aubade', what there was to look forward to: 'Not the twilight of the gods but a precise dawn / Of sallow and grey bricks, and newsboys crying war' (November, 1934). So the heroically affirmative endings of Yeats's great poems could not

serve as a model. MacNeice's tended to finish on an uncertain or troubled note, or if they were firm, they were backward looking: 'And one feels the earth going round and round the globe of the blackening mantle, a mad moth' ('Perseus', August 1934); 'But glad to have sat under / Thunder and rain with you, / And grateful too / For sunlight on the garden' ('The Sunlight on the Garden', 1937).

The detachment, irony and divided spirit of MacNeice, more marked than in any of his contemporaries, found its apt poetic medium in the eclogues of the mid 1930's, and in Autumn Journal at the end of the decade. The eclogues allowed MacNeice debate without requiring a resolution, and this clearly defined dialectic helped to improve the structure of his poetry. He was not always able to impose a clarifying order on his impressions and could just drift from one to the next. Although he maintained in Modern Poetry that it was sometimes only in the act of writing that the poet became sure of what he wanted to say--'he works up to his meaning by a dialectic of purification' (p.21)--in practise he occasionally gave the impression of not being sufficiently rigorous in his consideration of the finished poem. The eclogues escape this criticism, however, and so on the whole does Autumn Journal. MacNeice liked Baudelaire's comment that he had tried, 'plus d'une fois, comme tous mes amis, de m'enformer dans un système pour y prêcher à mon aise. Mais un système est une espèce de damnation... Je suis revenu chercher un asile dans l'impeccable naïveté'.<sup>1</sup> Delmore Schwartz, in his intelligent review of Poems (1935) calls MacNeice's way of handling his material 'adroitly naive', liking his ability to move from

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1. Quoted by MacNeice in his review of Cocteau's Infernal Machine, London Mercury, February/April 1937, p.430.

general statements and wide reference to direct impressions, tangible sensations (Poetry, May 1936, pp.115-117). The journal form was exactly the way to avoid system, to encompass everyday life, political commentary, philosophical excursions, the structure being provided by the passing months: 'the circumference is always social and the centre is always personal' (ibid.,p.117).

Both eclogue and journal indulged MacNeice's penchant for writing in the contemporary idiom as well as about the current crises. His fondness for using and twisting clichés led him to banality sometimes, at others he achieved the intended quality of surprise. Perhaps this style had its literary sanction in the Latin poets, whose use of similes and allusions he defended as being the main point of the poem, not just decoration; '... the apparent theme is the mere occasion for the birth of something new, something achieved through the redeploying and reshuffling of myths or images or, as often with these Romans, clichés' ('Images', p.124). It was the linguistic equivalent of his subject matter, both veering away from obscurity and esotericism.

The decade 1935-1945 was MacNeice's most prolific, in poetry and prose, with the occasional sidestep into drama. Out of the Picture, as has been noted, is his most Audenesque work; otherwise, in a period dominated by Auden, MacNeice's verse showed remarkably little trace of his influence. Auden's use of ballads had been anticipated by Yeats (and they had been used self-consciously by Housman); MacNeice commended both for their compromise with tradition: '... the poet achieves some of the simplicity or directness or swing of the primitive form but he does not pretend away ... his own sophisticated self' (Yeats, p.149). His own



'Laredo' is a powerful example of such compromise. The distinctive tone of Auden's poetry, confident and at least with abstractions--Love, History--was based on the assumption that a pattern could be imposed on the diverse elements a poem might include. MacNeice, despite the attraction patterns had for him, and his conviction that a poet is a shaper, doubted the validity of the exercise.

Oddly enough, World War II brought him out of this uncertainty, at least for a while. First it threatened most things he loved, and that gave rise to poetry of longing and nostalgia that had its roots in more than an individual obsession. Then it created willy nilly the communal life of whose existence he had despaired, and with which he could identify. The exhilaration of these years, and their boredom and horror, emerges from poetry that is structurally tightened, its imagery better integrated. After the sequence of farewell poems to Ireland, MacNeice's perspective widened, and the poetry's centre is less often personal.

Being less aloof, MacNeice partook to some extent in the general revival of religious feeling. This was an old battleground for him and perhaps always remained a source of sadness, that he could neither accept his father's faith nor be content with the hiatus its absence left. To endorse a system would have been to falsify his belief in the world's being 'incorrigibly plural'; Dodds felt that his ambiguous attitude towards religion came from the conflict between fascination for imaginative constructs, and empirical commonsense. Some transcendent sense persisted, yet MacNeice was trapped by it; not having a basis of genuine mystical conviction, his poems could tip over into sentimentality, as in The Kingdom. The recurrent use of Christian imagery seems to indicate that it corresponded to some level of his experience, or to something

vaguely discerned.

By the 1950's, however, when the war-engendered moods had faded, MacNeice was beginning to register failure: personal, metaphysical, poetic. When he collected his poems in 1949, the dedicatory poem to his wife expressed only dissatisfaction with his achievement, leaving no room for the misinterpretation that these words might be modest disclaimers. He admitted to 'having lived, and too much, in the present, / Askance at the coming gods, estranged from those older / Who had created my fathers in their image' (C.P., p.xvii). The one certainty he finds is the existence of 'the Word, like a bulb', some creative touchstone of truth at present buried. The expression of his unhappiness is quite plain:

At one time I was content if things would image  
Themselves in their own dazzle, if the answers  
Came quick and smooth ...

But now I am not content, the leaves are turning  
And the gilt flaking from each privage image ...

His poetic solution was to turn to longer poems, some of which come to optimistic conclusions. 'Mahabalipuram' takes its strength from MacNeice's exposure to Indian systems of thought, to the continent and its art, in which ways are found to include and reconcile a multiplicity of conflicting elements. Tolerant acceptance informs the poem; when it comes to rest on a pun, that is not out of key. Others are more contrived, some of the Ten Burnt Offerings and especially Autumn Sequel. The latter was a strategy of despair, a way of working through a barren period: presenting himself with the technical rigour of terza rima, giving himself his own distant model from which to diverge, MacNeice composed its twenty-six cantos with a deliberation that strains the poem. When he wrote character sketches in the War, 'The Libertine',

'The Drunkard', they were brilliant abstractions, typical yet particular; there was an edge of satire but also understanding. In the portrayal of his friends in Autumn Sequel detachment gives way to undiluted admiration, and the spectatorial manner appropriate to earlier poems here looks like a failure of comprehension. Spender has remarked of the portrait of Dylan Thomas that it is 'brilliant and vivid and produces exactly the effect which Dylan himself wanted to produce' (Books and Bookmen, August 1975, p.21). MacNeice lacks Yeats's confidence in making heroes of his friends, nor does he hold the doctrine of the mask which gives a rôle its raison d'être. He praises integrity but can only describe the external show. The next year MacNeice adapted The Waves, which he saw as a long prose poem, 'elegiac and yet defiant'. He quoted Bernard in a note for the Radio Times: 'We have proved, sitting eating, sitting talking, that we can add to the treasury of moments' (11 March 1955, p.5). This, he felt, was characteristic of Bloomsbury; it is also close to his attitude in the Sequel, an appreciation of friends who could enrich each other's lives simply by being together, though some were trying to create things more lasting than conversation. MacNeice's poem is elegiac by virtue of the dead it commemorates; its length and range make sustained intensity impossible.

Critics have blamed this often unrewarding period on the demands made by the BBC work. MacNeice was new to the medium in the 1940's and produced then his greatest number of broadcasts, at the same time as his poetry gained in power. In 1948/49 strength for his own work would have been siphoned off by Faust, whose creatively taxing translation he undertook with Ernst Stahl. This is generally considered an extraordinary feat, although Stahl later

distinguished between the strict versification and the lyrics-- which he thought could not have been bettered--and the parts where 'Goethe is slack or loose in poetic style, and Louis perhaps went too far in following [him]' (Radio Portrait, p.17). This may have had its repercussions in the longer poems of the fifties.

When MacNeice resumed writing lyrics, he seemed uncertain of his direction, going back to some of his earlier poems for models and returning to earlier experiences. Visitations shows him waiting for a sign, unwilling to impose one interpretation or form on his material, trying out sequences that circle round a theme. With Solstices and The Burning Perch he has found his voice: most of the poems are taut, concentrated; landscapes of dream and nightmare reach beyond one man's experience, occasionally attain a mythical strength. He achieved the balance in some that Eliot called in Catullus 'intense levity'. After appreciating in his early verse qualities of spontaneity and casual brilliance, the late measured passion takes us by surprise.

It would be satisfying to trace out in the drafts of forty years' poetic practise a progress matching that visible in the printed works. Unfortunately it is not possible, partly because many poems are unavailable in manuscript, chief among them Autumn Journal. Neither do we have remarks in the autobiography, nor many in accessible letters, about MacNeice's methods of writing.<sup>1</sup>

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1. Professor Dodds has said that MacNeice did discuss his poetry in letters to Eleanor Clark, but these cannot be consulted at present.

In an early unpublished poem, MacNeice wrote 'I watched the words, / Coming to drink at my mind' (Missing Persons, p.117). This is the impression given by the Marlborough and Oxford poems, fluent and unedited. Afterwards he was more critical. Of the forty-nine poems in the 1929-1934 Notebook, only eighteen were published; from its successor, fourteen out of twenty-seven. Rejected ideas, lines, images were used in poems that went into print, but not a great many; it may have seemed to MacNeice that with material for poetry everywhere, there was no need to be thrifty. Most of the notebook work must have been copied out from earlier drafts, as there are few changes. However, both 'Ode' and 'Train to Dublin' are substantially altered, which suggests that MacNeice found the direction of longish poems more difficult to control; these are alterations in content. From Birmingham he contributed poems to New Verse, with short accompanying letters that gave nothing away. 'This was the man who walked very, very much by himself--I mean he'd send you the poem. He wasn't going to talk about it, he wasn't going to discuss it. If you liked it well and good and that was that' (Radio Portrait, p.8). So Grigson remembered; it would seem that Eliot was one of the few people from whom he invited criticism, although he also discussed poetic techniques with Dylan Thomas.

The earliest manuscripts which can confidently be identified as first drafts are those for poems in Letters from Iceland, in the blue-covered notebook in the Lockwood Collection. Again this contains unpublished poems, some abandoned unfinished, most of which are concerned with the collapse of the MacNeices' first marriage. One entitled 'Sonnet' ('You who will soon be unrecapturable ...'), appeared in Poems (1937), but was not reprinted. It is typical of

the surrounding drafts, with its confident beginning which survives all subsequent changes; then lines altered, deleted, tried again in new combinations; a version settled on in which a couple of lines or groups of words have been telescoped; then the final, often adjectival, emendations. MacNeice rarely changed the length of line, the rhythm or the general structure once he had set the pattern. When this was established for the longer poems, he seemed to be able to continue indefinitely, as in the draft for Eclogue from Iceland from which many lines were eventually excised. It was in the process of writing that he discovered where he wanted to go: the deletions do not seem to be afterthoughts, but to be made immediately according to his emerging sense of the poem's structure.

Unfortunately the period is not prolific in drafts. MacNeice perhaps did not consider them worth preserving at this stage, and from the time of his wife's departure led an unsettled life not conducive to conservation. I suspect anyway that many of the thirties' poems were not heavily worked over. Talking about the years in which she knew him best (c.1936-39) Nancy Sharp commented:

In those days Louis was warm and expansive and gay, he wrote poetry most of the time. He used to slip an envelope over to me sometimes across the table, and on the back of it was scribbled a new poem. This was tremendously exciting. He talked about his poetry sometimes, and I remember him telling me he was writing a poem on the British Museum Reading Room. I was unimpressed and he mocked me. 'You think poems should always be about life and death, don't you? Well, I don't'.

(Radio Portrait, p.13)

Between Poems (1935) and Autumn Journal MacNeice tended to write at some length, poems of more than four stanzas or those straight runs of about one hundred lines. This expansiveness was slightly curbed in the next collection, particularly in the Greek Anthology type poems. There were two sets of formal experiments,

the poems finally collected under the title 'Entered in the Minutes', and the ballades published in America. Drafts of the latter certainly show little hesitation, except for difficulties with the 'Ballade for King Canute'; a stanza might be deleted, but its replacement is written with only minor changes. Such confidence is also evident in the few poems from The Earth Compels for which there are drafts; MacNeice appears to be both poetically fertile and technically secure.

The long stretch of fluency MacNeice enjoyed ended in about 1943, one of its late products being the song cycle he wrote for Hedli Anderson, unpublished--except for one lyric--until 1975. Taking a dislike to the Giraud/Schoenberg Pierrot Lunaire she was singing before their marriage, he casually announced his intention to compose for her, and 'equally casually... he sat down and wrote [The Revenant]'.<sup>1</sup> The cycle of twelve songs and eleven interludes is simply-worded, reliant on repetition and rhyme, and on alliterative balance in the interludes. It reads as though it has been tossed off, a charming gift.

The poems of the mid to late 1940's are more laboured over. Some of them are emended with a ballpoint pen--they are almost always composed in pencil--which suggests that they were not written at one sitting, as appears to have been the case with earlier poems. The exigencies of war-time composition, or pressure of work, may have helped to modify MacNeice's habits. Careful revision is particularly noticeable in the poems for Holes in the Sky: the

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1. The Revenant (Dublin: the Cuala Press, 1975), introduction by Hedli MacNeice, p.7. C.P. contains the last lyric, 'The nearness of remoteness like a lion's eye', p.199.

eight lines of 'Corner Seat', for example, went through four versions, their final form being reached in an alteration on the galley proofs. The process made it tighter, adjectives were cut (drafts at Berg and Texas). The plainer statements of the printed poem make its hollowness more apparent: the images of windows, reflections and trains are so characteristic of MacNeice. But his revisions did not always simplify; another train poem in the volume, 'Slow Movement', becomes increasingly complex (Texas).

Voluminous drafts for Ten Burnt Offerings and Autumn Sequel attest to the immense trouble MacNeice went to in writing them. To manipulate themes and connections throughout the Sequel involved pages of key phrases assigned to later cantos and paired with earlier ones, a check kept on months and dates appropriate to certain places and people, lists of relevant books. There are dozens of brief notes, such as one for Canto XI which runs:

infiltration of myth to love affairs  
Nina on autumn  
Gower ) early 19 predom. of white - esp. muslin

The last is not taken up, except for the passing mention of 'Nicolette, whose magic was white and pink'; autumn is the canto's season, and the myths are elaborated--Hero, Circe--or mentioned: 'Jocasta, Medusa, Medea'; the whole concerns the brilliant transience of love. Nevertheless the painstaking plotting affects the poem adversely; it caused MacNeice to obscure the one thing that might have held the poem together: his own observant, striving, desolate, sociable, isolated self. Going through these difficult years it might have been his saving to be less self-effacing in the poetry, but he was not inclined to the exhibition of pain or failure. His attempt to create in Autumn Sequel something independent of himself, without being able to rely on any



belief or coherent philosophical underpinning, fails in his not regaining the balance achieved in the Journal.

The three last collections have in common an increasing patience with the material, a willingness to abandon an attractive solution for something less facile. Drafts for The Burning Perch show that although MacNeice might frequently think of a near-cliché or tag, he was more rigorous at this stage than previously, and mindful of his weaknesses. On the other hand the one-stanza, long-lined poems, which look as though they have been poured out with barely a hesitation, in fact read this way in draft. Particularly in the poems for his final volume, MacNeice often seems to have known, at the moment of beginning it, how he wanted a poem to end, and this clarity of thought ensures spareness and control without in any way confining the poems' power. Material is rarely discarded, and in that respect there is a return to his early practice, but whereas MacNeice's youthful poetry was inclusive because everything seemed to him instinct with interest, the last poems do not require pruning because of the initial sureness of their conception. True to his own critical insistence, form and content here go hand in hand; the change in one parallels the alteration in the other: from the reliance on things seen, smelled, touched, to provide a starting point, to the growing concentration on states of being whose meaning could only be approached by symbols.

MacNeice quoted in his book on Yeats a reminder from the poet's father: 'It should never be forgotten that poetry is the Voice of the Solitary Spirit, prose the language of the sociable-minded' (Yeats, p.38). He himself seems to have been divided between these

extremes: the mercurial, gay, enchanting, witty companion of whom his close friends have spoken, who almost always surfaces in the vivid prose; argumentative, as ready to watch a rugby match as write, conscious of his ancestry in the nation of great talkers. And the aloof, solitary, uncommunicative spirit, burdened by memory, bruised by exile, ready to love and expecting to be abandoned, intensely aware of ephemerality and unable to console himself with his father's belief, or any other. Out of this conflict issued his poetry, which he held in any case a Jekyll and Hyde affair, and in his own collaboration 'it is mostly Hyde--self-pity, greed, nostalgia' (Minch, p.176). It was informed by decent, humanist values: such values combined with a troubled sense of their shortcomings have belonged to fine poets, but not to the great ones without some leavening intuition of transcendent powers. He sometimes pretended that the vision was sufficient and answered to his needs; more courageously he admitted to dissatisfaction, the absence of a source of strength. Neither had he that supreme confidence and the necessary degree of self-absorption, to insist that readers be interested in his personal relationships and in contemporary events from his point of view, so that he could use poetry explicitly as his quest, a public dialogue with himself. A pervasive scepticism prevented that, just as his natural inclination to be engaged with what he was communicating ruled out a classical objectivity. Things were important because he saw or experienced them and the act of his doing so stamped their verbal formulation. 'But the things that happen to one often seem better than the things one chooses. Even in writing poetry, ... the few poems or passages which I find wear well have something of accident about them...' (Strings, p.220). Our quarrel is that the

personality generally expressed in the poems is fractionally removed from that centre of his being from which a poet must know how to write.

If MacNeice is not in the company of Yeats and Eliot, among modern poets, his achievement is still considerable. Most of his poems indicate the limits within which they operate: as the drafts show, MacNeice rarely surprised himself by a perception, did not stretch himself beyond his capacities. But these were technically impressive from the beginning; equally striking was his sensuous apprehension, which gave everyday objects and events an unsuspected resonance, combined with irony and a knowledge of the bleak patches of life. MacNeice was dedicated to being a professional poet, one of the Makers; he eventually learnt, through a period of deep discouragement and effort, to temper the kind of writing that came easily to him with the more demanding art of opening his poems to imponderable forces, tapping reserves of dream, parable and myth.

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