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‘My Road to Freedom and Knowledge’:

Louis MacNeice’s Self-Conscious Art

Nao Igarashi

Doctor of Philosophy

Department of English Studies

Durham University

2019

Abstract

This thesis discusses the poetry of Louis MacNeice, with a special focus on his self-consciousness as poet. I read his poems written between the late nineteen twenties and the early fifties, considering that MacNeice represents and contemplates the role of the poet not only in poetic arguments about the relationship between art and society but also in the use of poetic form. He starts his career as a poet influenced by modernist poets and gradually formulates his own style of poetry, in which he tries to balance his aesthetic ideals with an awareness of the world outside himself. His interest in form becomes more dominant when the outbreak of the Second World War leads him to explore more varied ways of showing emotion and experience than direct, subjective expression. The consciousness of traditional genres and forms like the sonnet, the eclogue, and the elegy, and the arrangement of rhyme schemes such as the couplet and *terza rima* reflect MacNeice's ideas about the social function of poetry. MacNeice also acknowledges the support of his contemporaries such as T. S. Eliot, W. H. Auden and Stephen Spender, while he often renews his poetics by engaging with the work of predecessors, most notably W. B. Yeats. I claim that MacNeice advocates a belief in the value of life and individuality as essential for facing situations where one's physical and spiritual independence is threatened. MacNeice confirms that poetry has a valuable function in exploring and testing the very foundations of living. What lends distinction to his work is the high degree of self-consciousness with which the poetry articulates its own role and value in a time of tumultuous social and political change.

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For the late Professor Michael O’Neill

Contents

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Professor Stephen Regan at Durham University for supervising me for the completion of this PhD thesis. I appreciate the help and permission to use material given by the following institutions I visited for research: the Bodleian Library in Oxford and the British Library in London. I received financial support (Graduate Scholarship for Degree Seeking Students) from JASSO (Japan Student Services Organization) for three years, without which I would not have been able to pursue my degree in the UK. I appreciate the support of my college, University College, Durham University, which awarded me a Travel Scholarship in 2017 for research at the Bodleian Library. The Department of English Studies of Durham University supported me with administrative help and research grants for attending and presenting my work at conferences. I would like to show my gratitude to Professor Masami Nakao at the University of Tokyo, who has supervised me since my masters and kept encouraging me from Japan. Professor Nahoko Alvey Miyamoto at the University of Tokyo helped me by providing references for my university application and scholarship. I am grateful to my parents, Takeshi and Tomoko Igarashi, for always believing and being affirmative about my dream. Finally, I would like to thank the late Professor Michael O'Neill, to whom I dedicate my thesis, for telling me that the reading of poetry is a great knowledge.

List of abbreviations

*They are all works by Louis MacNeice.

CP	*Collected Poems*, ed. by Peter McDonald (London: Faber and Faber, 2007)
ICM	*I Crossed the Minch*, intro. by Tom Herron (1938; Edinburgh: Polygon, 2007)
Letters	*Letters of Louis MacNeice*, ed. by Jonathan Allison (London: Faber and Faber, 2010)
MP	*Modern Poetry: A Personal Essay*, 2nd edn (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1938; repr. 1968)
PWBY	*The Poetry of W. B. Yeats* (London: Faber and Faber, 1941; repr. 1967)
SAF	*The Strings Are False: An Unfinished Autobiography* (London: Faber and Faber, 1965; repr. 2007)
SLC	*Selected Literary Criticism of Louis MacNeice*, ed. by Alan Heuser (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1987)
SP	*Selected Prose of Louis MacNeice*, ed. by Alan Heuser (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990)
VP	*Varieties of Parable* (London, New York, Ibadan: Cambridge University Press, 1965)

Introduction

In the 'Foreword' to his first volume of collected poems, Louis MacNeice states that 'I write poetry not because it is smart to be a poet but because I enjoy it, as one enjoys swimming or swearing, and also because it is my road to freedom and knowledge'.[1] 'Freedom' and 'knowledge' are at once the circumstantial and fundamental terms. By the time he writes this in 1940, the physical, intellectual and artistic conditions of 'freedom' are in danger because of the Second World War. When the speaker cries that 'Our freedom as free lances / Advances towards its end' in 'The Sunlight on the Garden', it is the freedom of the poets as well as of everyone in Europe.[2] Poetry makes it possible for him to hanker after the freedom of thinking, writing, and living in the danger of losing it. On the other hand, 'knowledge' may be a little more obscure as a term. MacNeice states that he neither wishes to make his readers 'snobs' nor be 'smart' himself.[3] These denials suggest that the 'knowledge' he is concerned with here is not the quantitative or scientific kind of knowledge. It is in one sense a poetic term used by the Romantic poets when they write about what the poet is. In William Wordsworth's preface to *Lyrical Ballads* in 1802, 'knowledge' is correlative with 'pleasure'. He asserts that 'The Poet writes under one restriction only, namely, that of the necessity of giving immediate pleasure to a human Being [. . .] as a Man' and continues that 'pleasure' concerns everything: 'sympathy' is 'propagated by pleasure', and 'knowledge' is 'what has been built up by pleasure, and exists in us by pleasure alone'.[4] We can therefore assume that 'knowledge' is a

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[1] Louis MacNeice, '"Foreword" to *Poems 1925-1940* (New York: Random House, 1941), in *CP*, pp. 791-2 (p. 792).

[2] MacNeice, *Collected Poems*, ed. by Peter McDonald (London: Faber and Faber, 2007), p. 57. All references to the poems will be from this edition, unless otherwise indicated, and page numbers will be given in parenthesis in the text.

[3] Eleanor Clark, a woman MacNeice fell in love with in America, disapprovingly refers in her letter to this comment in the foreword and to the foreword itself. MacNeice replies, 'Can't remember the foreword which I wrote bang off – I dare say you are right about it; it's a mistake to have forewords – they asked for it'. MacNeice, To Eleanor Clark, 24 January [1941], in *Letters*, p. 420 (and footnote 2).

[4] William Wordsworth, '*Preface to* Lyrical Ballads, with Pastoral and Other Poems (1802)', in *William Wordsworth: The Major Works*, ed. by Stephen Gill, *Oxford World's Classics* (Oxford and New York: Oxford

part of the 'pleasure' the poet gives. Yet according to Wordsworth, there are two kinds of knowledge, 'our natural and unalienable inheritance' and 'a personal and individual acquisition', and while the latter can be enjoyed alone, 'the Poet, singing a song in which all human beings join with him, rejoices in the presence of truth as our visible friend and hourly companion'. Wordsworth means by this that the 'Poet binds together by passion and knowledge the vast empire of human society, as it is spread over the whole earth, and over all time'. In Wordsworth's poetics, 'knowledge' seems to be something we can share through poetry and at the same time represent poetry itself: 'Poetry is the breath and finer spirit of all knowledge'; 'Poetry is the first and last of all knowledge'.[5]

It is plausible that 'knowledge' for MacNeice is also something he can aspire to attain and offer through poetry or something included in the process of making poetry. Along with W. H. Auden, he actively engages in reacting to the Romantic concept of the poet during the nineteen thirties. MacNeice, when saying that 'Nothing [. . .] could be more vicious than the popular legend that the poet is a species distinct from the ordinary man', agrees with what Wordsworth claims about the poet in his Preface to *Lyrical Ballads* in 1802: 'Among the qualities which I have enumerated as principally conducing to form a Poet, is implied nothing differing in kind from other men, but only in degree'.[6] Percy Bysshe Shelley may similarly be conscious of the ideas of Wordsworth when he states that 'Poetry is indeed something divine. It is at once the centre and circumference of knowledge; it is that which comprehends all science, and that to which all science must be referred'.[7] Yet MacNeice and Auden disapprove of Shelley's transcendental view of the poet and mock his dictum that 'Poets are

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University Press, 2008), pp. 595-615 (p. 605).

[5] Ibid., p. 606.

[6] MacNeice, 'Subject in Modern Poetry' ([Dec.] 1936 [1937]), in *SLC*, pp. 57-74 (p. 59); Wordsworth, '*Preface* (1802)', p. 607.

[7] Percy Bysshe Shelley, *A Defence of Poetry* (1821), in *Percy Bysshe Shelley: The Major Works*, ed. by Zachery Leader and Michael O'Neill, *Oxford World Classics* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2003; repr. 2009), pp. 674-701 (p. 696). The editors' footnote refers to the influence from Wordsworth on the word 'knowledge'. Ibid., p. 834.

the unacknowledged legislators of the World'.[8] They consider that the 'legislator' or 'institutors of laws and the founders of civil society and the inventors of the arts of life and the teachers' are the figures who create out of nothing and become representative of the norms they create.[9] When MacNeice tells Auden that 'Poets are not legislators (what is an "unacknowledged legislator" anyway?), but they put facts and feelings in italics, which makes people think about them and such thinking may in the end have an outcome in action', he claims that the subject of poetry is what we can all recognise and the influence of poetry is uncertain, and if any, indirect and gradual.[10]

In this thesis, I read the poetry of MacNeice as indicative of his self-consciousness as a poet. It is based on the belief that MacNeice's poems, including the poems about contemporary issues, are the exploration of his concerns about making himself a poet. The focus on self-consciousness as poet might seem to be incongruous with MacNeice's own assertion. In *Modern Poetry*, the book that is partly his poetry manifesto in the thirties, he insists that 'The poet [. . .] in a sense is man at his most self-conscious, but this means consciousness of himself as man, not consciousness of himself as poet'.[11] This is a rejection of the Shelleyan poet, who MacNeice thinks is isolated from other men. The 'consciousness' of man, however, is a very poetic idea too. It is often the case that MacNeice shows his verbal ability as poet when he speaks 'as a man' in his poems. For instance, although he repeatedly claims that 'Snow' 'means exactly what it says', being the 'direct record of a direct experience', MacNeice seems to present in the poem his own perception as both original and universal through the intricate patterns and meanings of words.[12] In describing what he sees, 'the great bay-window was / Spawning snow and pink roses against it' (24), the speaker reacts as if the window itself were generating snow. It is not a mere metaphor but the strictest

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[8] Ibid., p. 701.
[9] Ibid., p. 677.
[10] MacNeice, 'Letter to W. H. Auden. October 21st, 1937' (Nov. 1937), in *SLC*, pp. 83-6 (p. 83).
[11] MacNeice, *MP*, p. 1.
[12] MacNeice, 'Experiences with Images' (1949), in *SLC*, pp. 153-64 (p. 162).

description of what and how the speaker was seeing. Since the window defines and limits his vision of the outside scene, the snow appears to be falling from the upper frame of the window. A significant paradox here is that the image is at once metaphorical and factual. The faithful adherence to the vision perceived in reality results in a highly poetical expression. In the last two lines of the poem, 'On the tongue on the eyes on the ears in the palms of one's hands – / There is more than glass between the snow and the huge roses' (24), the speaker avoids defining what it is that is 'more than glass'. For interpretation, some critics focus on the importance of the preposition 'between'. Edna Longley refers to the fact that the word 'both separates and joins'.[13] Michael O'Neill and Gareth Reeves also note that this 'tricky' word has 'two, "collateral" and "incompatible", meanings': '"between" as in "in common"' and '"between" as in "gulf between"'.[14] It is true that the 'glass' window, which is actually 'between the snow and the huge roses', can be regarded as a boundary that offers and limits the view. Yet read with the penultimate line about the physical senses of a man, we can also consider that it is the speaker's senses that stand between the snow and the roses in addition to the window. MacNeice insists that 'Snow' is about 'the realization of a very obvious fact, that one thing is different from another—a fact which everyone knows but few people perhaps have had it brought home to them in this particular way, i. e. through the sudden violent perception of snow and rose juxtaposed'.[15] It means that the experience itself is ordinary and the senses themselves can be anyone's, which may also be clear from the fact that the speaker does not specify whose senses are in the penultimate line. Yet a remarkable parallel, which must have been there before being noticed, becomes special in the poem by the poet who highlights it in 'this particular way'; if we follow this, it is also plausible that someone else perceives the same contrast and expresses it in a different way or expresses nothing at all.

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[13] Edna Longley, *Louis MacNeice: A Study* (London: Faber and Faber, 1988), p. x.
[14] Michael O'Neill and Gareth Reeves, *Auden, MacNeice, Spender: The Thirties Poetry* (Basingstoke and London: Macmillan Education, 1992), p. 68.
[15] MacNeice, 'Experiences with Images', p. 162.

Therefore ‘more than glass’ can refer not only to the human senses but also to a variety of the senses: the difference in perception leads to the different ways of evaluation and expression. MacNeice perceives as a man and expresses his responses as a poet. It is true that MacNeice ‘is not recording excitement, he is communicating it’ with the reader, and what is communicated is not only his excitement in his discovery but also his mode of perception in this experience that is accessible but different to anyone.[16]

As ‘Snow’ can thus be read as a self-referential poem about making a poem, many poems by MacNeice regard themes concerning the quotidian life of human beings, and through the very contemplation of them his self-consciousness as a poet emerges. MacNeice appreciates Keats’s self-consciousness as a poet because it eventually keeps his poetry in the real world:

> Poetry is *making*, and we must consider what things of positive value a poet can make, starting from his own negations. Keats in life could not have the world he wanted; he tried to build up a world in poetry. The value of such a world depends upon how egocentric its author is or rather, perhaps, upon how far he is a man like other men. Keats we might at first sight think very egocentric, but we should then have to remember that Keats was not a very peculiar person and that therefore his egocentricity, whatever its degree, would not necessarily isolate him from his fellows.[17]

MacNeice shows here again poetry as uncompleted, something in the ‘making’, and asserts

[16] C. B. Cox and A. E. Dyson, *Modern Poetry: Studies in Practical Criticism* (London: Edward Arnold, 1963), p. 89.
[17] MacNeice, ‘John Keats’, in *Fifteen Poets: Chaucer Spenser Shakespeare [and others]*, ed. by H. S. Bennett and others (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1941), pp. 351-4 (p. 352).

that the poet's own will, which is in its origin for his aesthetic purpose of making his imaginary world, is rooted in the real world because the poet is an ordinary man. Keats's egocentricity as poet paradoxically keeps him close to them. According to Michael O'Neill, critics such as John Bayley and Marjorie Levinson 'risk selling Keats short by seeing his self-consciousness as a poet in terms of entrapment'. However, O'Neill asserts that 'Keats is able to subsume this consciousness within artistic structures of compelling force'.[18] It means that self-consciousness can be a source of poetic creativity: 'Keats shows that he can take "stifling self-consciousness" as a subject, and win from it both eloquence and drama'.[19]

At the same time, the self-consciousness of the poet has a special importance in the context of the thirties, which is a 'highly self-conscious decade'.[20] Every event, every movement, and every art of the time is considered in conjunction with the future of the society. Julian Symons recollects that 'A painting, a play, a novel, even a lyric [. . .] does not exist (we went on to say) as something pure and absolute, a thing in itself, and could not be considered apart from the society in which it was created. It follows that the first approach to a work of art must always be a social one'.[21] There is therefore an assumption that an artwork should have a meaning for society. As a 'social consciousness poet' of the thirties, MacNeice considers self-consciousness as man half aesthetical but also half congenial to the demand on the poet to have a word for the contemporary world.[22] In his definition of a poet, MacNeice includes a man who is 'a reader of the newspapers, [. . .] informed in economics, [. . .] actively interested in politics', and he even insists that poetry 'is only valuable if it can add something to the experience of its public'.[23]

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[18] Michael O'Neill, 'Keats's Poetry: "The Reading of an Ever-Changing Tale"', in *Keats: Bicentenary Readings*, ed. by Michael O'Neill (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1997), pp. 102-28 (p. 107).
[19] Ibid., p. 123.
[20] Norman Page, *The Thirties in Britain* (Basingstoke and London: Macmillan Education, 1990), p. 3. Page here refers to Robin Skelton's comment that it 'is rare for a decade to be so self-conscious'. *Poetry of the Thirties*, ed. by Robin Skelton (London: Penguin Books, 1964), p. 13.
[21] Julian Symons, *The Thirties: A Dream Revolved* (London: Faber and Faber, 1960; repr. 1975), p. 66.
[22] MacNeice, 'Notes on the Way [2]' (12 July 1952), in *SP*, pp. 180-3 (p. 180).
[23] MacNeice, *MP*, pp. 198, 200.

Still, in asking himself 'how can an artist respond to the immediate crises of this time, and yet remain true to his art?', MacNeice always weighs the latter more.[24] The interest in political, economic, and social issues is essential, though 'Usefulness', MacNeice claims, is 'a conception which has never been commensurable with art'.[25] As Stephen Spender aptly points out, the young poets in his generation 'were extremely non-political with half of themselves and extremely political with the other half'.[26] Considering this conflict between the political and the artistic in MacNeice's poetry, my thesis attempts to realise the study of MacNeice's self-consciousness as poet by focusing not only on what he writes but also on how he writes it, especially his use of poetic form and genre. He is more a dexterous user of different kinds of patterns than an intensive explorer of a specific form. It seems therefore that we cannot associate his interest in a particular form with a phase of his poetic career. However, it is often the case that MacNeice thinks of his concerns through the traditions that each form or genre he employs has represented throughout literary history. MacNeice shows his recognition that form is 'essentially functional' when he reviews the recent history of English poetry in 1948.[27] It is worth focusing on the ways in which MacNeice explores the possible functions of form; for this purpose, I will focus on his sonnets and eclogues, as well as rhyme schemes such as the couplet and *terza rima*, and I will also refer to elegies and various poetic devices, including refrain, image, and inversion of syntax.

In addition, the form of poetry is one of the most discussed themes in studies of poetry in the early twentieth-century. It is largely due to the rise of free verse that the poetry of T. S. Eliot is said to encourage. Eliot claims that rather than destroying form, 'It [free verse] was a revolt against dead form, and a preparation for new form or for the renewal of

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[24] Samuel Hynes, *The Auden Generation: Literature and Politics in England in the 1930s* (London and Boston: Faber and Faber, 1976; repr. 1979), p. 207.
[25] MacNeice, 'Traveller's Return' (Feb. 1941), in *SP*, pp. 83-91 (p. 84).
[26] Stephen Spender, *The Thirties and After: Poetry, Politics, People (1933-75)* (Glasgow: William Collins Sons, 1978), p. 18.
[27] MacNeice, 'English Poetry Today', *The Listener*, 2 September 1948, pp. 346-7 (p. 346).

the old; it was an insistence upon the inner unity which is unique to every poem, against the outer unity which is typical'.[28] The conventional form is here considered static, but MacNeice explains that the poets in his generation react against Eliot, whose 'verse was carefully fragmentary to match the world as he perceived it', by getting 'more interested in tidying it up'.[29] Rather than changing form according to changes in society, the poets of MacNeice's generation employ form, the 'outer unity' which is already established, in order to realise the 'inner unity' of poetry and, thereby, to imaginatively reconstruct the world. MacNeice explains the poetry of the 'Auden-Spender school of poets' from three aspects: '(1) it is in a tradition and does not attempt to be over-revolutionary in form; (2) it has a mixed content and contains nearly all the elements which other schools severally ban; (3) it is not directed solely either to entertainment or instruction, uplift or aloofness; it develops itself instinctively but with a reasonable amount of self-consciousness and self-criticism'.[30] We will see in MacNeice's poems that these elements are closely related and establishing some balance serves to make sense of the chaos of the real world.

Throughout the thesis, my method is mainly the close reading of MacNeice's poems. Critical studies of MacNeice's works have seen a further development since the publication of a new collected edition of MacNeice's poems by Peter McDonald in 2007 and of his letters edited by Jonathan Allison in 2010. During the second decade of the 2000s, his radio works started to attract a number of critics. The works collected by Amanda Wrigley and S. J. Harrison in *Louis MacNeice: The Classical Radio Plays* in 2013 show the interrelationship between radio and poetry in MacNeice's creative experiment, for the classics and ancient history become not only the source of both media but also the model for MacNeice's criticism and thinking about the present. For instance, *Enter Caesar*, a radio play written for 'the

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[28] T. S. Eliot, 'The Music of Poetry' (1942), in *On Poetry and Poets* (London: Faber and Faber, 1957), pp. 26-38 (p. 37).
[29] MacNeice, *MP*, p. 13.
[30] MacNeice, 'Subject in Modern Poetry', p. 70.

bimillenium of Caesar's invasions of Britain' and broadcast in September 1946, has 'a suggestion of parallel between Caesar and Hitler' and Caesar embodies the 'problems and negative consequences of dictatorship'.[31] In *Autumn Sequel*, Caesar appears again at the beginning: 'August. Render to Caesar' (373). 'August' refers at once to a month and Caesar, and as an August is never the same in another year but recurrent as season, a dictatorial figure like Caesar can be regenerated in history. This example shows that the same image drives MacNeice's imaginative urge in different forms of art.

His radio production is also relevant to the role of art in society. Ian Whittington argues that 'Both during and after the war, MacNeice was aware that radio could only draw listeners in to a sense of imagined national community by first cutting through the crowded auditory field' and 'In an abstracted and aestheticized process of national self-formation, MacNeice's radio dramas urged British listeners to participate in the war effort through techniques of attentive listening that could reshape their involvement in the war by making them better, more perceptive sonic citizens'.[32] This suggests that MacNeice acknowledges the fact that radio has a function in communicating with people, which his poems aspire to perform.

I should note that MacNeice's connection with Ireland still remains one of the most discussed themes, as so finds the poet's want. Major critics such as Terence Brown, Edna Longley, and Peter McDonald have written about MacNeice's poems in the context of Irish Poetry as well as individually, and Tom Walker's *Louis MacNeice and the Irish Poetry of his Time*, published in 2015, is the first comprehensive study of the relationship between MacNeice and other contemporary Irish poets, which includes the close analysis of individual poems as well as biographical and historical comparative studies of the poets.

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[31] Amanda Wrigley and S. J. Harrison, Introduction to *Enter Caesar*, in *Louis MacNeice: The Classical Radio Plays*, ed. by Amanda Wrigley and S. J. Harrison (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), p. 203.
[32] Ian Whittington, 'Archaeologies of Sound: Reconstructing Louis MacNeice's Wartime Radio Publics', *Modernist Cultures*, 10.1 (2015): 44–61 (pp. 50, 57).

Even with those critical assets, however, each of MacNeice's poems has still much room for aesthetic evaluation. My approach to his poems in this thesis follows MacNeice's own statement that 'the individual poem is the norm'.[33] I analyse peculiar words and expressions and consider their poetical effects as well as their relationship to a specific topic, manifest or latent, in each poem. Francis Scarfe, writing about poets in wartime including MacNeice, also maintains that 'poetry should be treated empirically' and that 'Generalizations should spring only from the contemplation and analysis of individual poems'.[34] According to Cleanth Brooks, 'we emerge with nothing more enlightening than this graceless bit of tautology: the poem says what the poem says'.[35] Bearing these ideas in mind, I develop my argument about MacNeice's self-consciousness as poet, based upon poems with a seemingly dominant theme or form in each period or collection.

The thesis mainly focuses on the poems written between the pre-war period and the post-war period, starting from *Blind Fireworks* (1929) and ending with *Autumn Sequel* (1954). These periods, having the Second World War in the middle, are when MacNeice's self-consciousness as poet is contemplated most closely in relation to society. In Chapter 1 on *Blind Fireworks*, I argue that MacNeice's poems written during his youth show a poetic self-consciousness that is at once peculiar in its own right and anticipates his poems in the thirties. I discuss the poems concerning childhood and the mythical poems that picture the cycle of civilisations. Both of these themes are partly influenced by the poems in vogue in the nineteen twenties, but those poems can be regarded as MacNeice's attempt to connect the present and the past of his own, of the world, and of the poetic tradition. Chapter 2 discusses the poems written in the sonnet form and the eclogue in the early thirties. While the sonnets, along with the poems concerning visual arts, explore and reveal the limitation of art, the

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[33] MacNeice, *MP*, p. 33.
[34] Francis Scarfe, *Auden and After: The Liberation of Poetry 1930-1941*(London: George Routledge and Sons, 1942; repr. 1943), p. 191.
[35] Cleanth Brooks, *The Well Wrought Urn: Studies in the Structure of Poetry* (New York: A Harvest Book Harcourt, Brace & World, 1947), p. 74.

eclogues show MacNeice's consideration of how the poet in the current civilisation should write through an implicit conversation with the genre's own tradition. In these two major poetic genres, he reveals his vacillation between hankering after and rejecting 'pure' art. Chapter 3 sees this dilemma in the poems that directly reflect the mood of contemporary society. Deliberately employing images and terms relating to politics, MacNeice claims that his stance is to uphold the importance of poetry. On the other hand, he also uses the private mode of speech to show his recognition of the inevitable involvement of the writer in the world, eschewing any idea of the writer being confined to some internal, poetic sphere. In Chapter 4, *Autumn Journal* is analysed in relation to his ideological and aesthetical concerns. The first section is about the awareness of the necessity to renew the concept of individualism. At the same time as he desires to keep the notion of individuality intact, he recognises that individualism as exclusion of others ought to be discarded. I reveal that poetic contemplation serves in a special way as social action. The second section of the chapter discusses the recurrent images in *Autumn Journal*. They are not only aesthetically significant for realising the unity of the poem but also essential for confirming some hope in the future through the cyclicality they represent. Helen Vendler, in her book on poetic thinking, maintains that 'the image itself, as both the product of thought and the bearer of thought, becomes thought made visible'.[36] I argue that the recurrent images in *Autumn Journal*, not only by their meaning and symbolism but also by their ways of appearing in the poem, are MacNeice's 'thought made visible'.

The poems discussed in the first half of the thesis arguably give greater emphasis to content than to form. In the first section of Chapter 5, I examine a slight change in this balance between content and form after *Autumn Journal*. MacNeice is inclined to value the structure of the poem more noticeably, which seems to be inspired largely by his

[36] Helen Vendler, *Poets Thinking: Pope, Whitman, Dickinson, Yeats* (Cambridge, Massachusetts; London: Harvard University Press, 2004), p. 9.

re-encountering of Yeats's poetry. The formal regularity, including the refrain, is patently artificial and seemingly detached from the direct expression of subjective feelings. MacNeice's poems with refrain in 1940, however, make use of repetition rather to attain a greater sense of intimacy and get closer to reality. The second section of the chapter discusses the similarly indirect poems whose esoteric argument reveals MacNeice's philosophical position, in which he acknowledges man's intuitive attempt to gain something absolute. This is another change from the thirties poems in that he partially accepts the desire for the purity he used to deny, though he still insists that it should be sought in the recognition of plurality. The renewed and expanded poetics of MacNeice allows him to approach the war not as a defeatist but as a poet who holds a belief in the value inherent in humanity not to yield to the fear of death as a mortal being. In Chapter 6, we analyse how MacNeice expresses this belief in the poems about the Blitz in *Springboard*. The poems about types of individuals also offer affirmative views on living by presenting examples of how each person establishes and preserves his or her individuality at a particular time when individuality is threatened. In Chapter 7, I discuss the disillusionment after the war for MacNeice. It is a disillusionment affecting post-war society, as well as the post-war poet. When everything seems to return to the pre-war time not with gain but with loss, he resolves to create a new poetry through his returns to home, to his memories, and to the literature of the past. Chapter 8 focuses on *Autumn Sequel* as a kind of consummation of MacNeice's self-conscious art. The very poetic patterning of *terza rima* is found to achieve a balance with the familiar discursive lines of MacNeice, while the parable-like narrative that travels between reality and imagination enables the poem to highlight 'the real' within an overtly artificial medium. *Autumn Sequel* also shows MacNeice's self-empowering through his elegy for Dylan Thomas. It is significant to end my thesis with a discussion of *Autumn Sequel*. I intend to evaluate the poem not as a passing point in MacNeice's career but as a successful work that embodies his

self-consciousness as a poet both in formal and topical arrangements.

O'Neill states that 'many poems by the major Romantic poets are energized and subtilized by their consciousness of themselves as poems'.[37] Throughout this thesis, I regard MacNeice's poems as similarly energising themselves through their own imaginative contemplation on poetry and the conscious and delicate handling of the various poetic contrivances. To view his poetry in such positive terms may contrast with the familiar association of him with depression and fear. For Gerald Dawe, MacNeice is 'the uncertain, oppressed, doubting man of nightmares and the socialite drinker. A highly mannered style unites these two sides, creating poetry which is itself like a defence against himself, sometimes broached, giving us that distinctive mood of melancholia. [. . .] MacNeice is our anatomist of melancholia'.[38] It is undeniable that his melancholy is an important poetic emotion shown in his poems, but in terms of treatment of his contemporary world, he is one of those poets who 'recognize the existence of the Waste Land but believe that its fertility will be restored'.[39] Peter Childs notes that in *Autumn Journal* the 'tone is melancholy and regretful, but there is a quiet determination before the inevitable war, to which the previous years seem inexorably to have led'.[40] The creative activity of MacNeice as a whole is therefore not merely expressive of melancholy but includes a determined attempt, despite the causes of melancholy, anxiety and disappointment, to write for 'freedom and knowledge'.

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[37] Michael O'Neill, *Romanticism and the Self-Conscious Poem* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997), p. xv.
[38] Gerald Dawe, *Against Piety: Essays in Irish Poetry* (Belfast: Lagan Press, 1995), p. 87.
[39] MacNeice, 'Subject in Modern Poetry', p. 73.
[40] Peter Childs, *Twentieth Century in Poetry: A Critical Survey* (London and New York: Routledge, 1999), p. 116.

Chapter 1.

'All poems come this way sooner or later':

The Childhood and Mythologies in *Blind Fireworks*

This chapter examines MacNeice's poems that recollect childhood or use mythological images in *Blind Fireworks*. I consider that they are the dominant themes in the collection, which depict and contribute to the course of maturity in MacNeice's poetry. *Blind Fireworks* is the first collection of MacNeice, published in 1929. MacNeice later dismisses this collection as a juvenile work, calling the poems 'limited'.[1] Richard Danson Brown briefly notes that '*Blind Fireworks*, published while he was still an undergraduate, shows little evidence of social awareness. These often intriguing poems focus on childhood, while exhibiting a pervasive debt to T.S. Eliot'.[2] Although there is 'little evidence of social awareness', the poems with the themes that Danson Brown refers to, childhood and influence from Eliot, have notable aspects as self-conscious art. In those poems, we can see the self-reference to the making of a poem and a strong awareness of the major themes of the modernist poets. I argue in the first half of the chapter that he explores ways in which his own perceptions in the past and the present coexist and interact within poems. His tendency of looking back can also be associated with his interest in literary and religious myths, which I will discuss in the second section of this chapter.

I

The poems in *Blind Fireworks* are written in 1925-28. This period covers MacNeice's

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[1] 'Everything I have put into this book seems to me worth reading, though some of the poems, especially the softer adolescent ones in the first section, are very limited'. 'II "Foreword" to *Poems 1925-1940* (New York: Random House, 1941)', in Appendix 7, in *CP*, pp. 791-2.

[2] Richard Danson Brown, *Louis MacNeice and the Poetry of the 1930s* (Tavistock: Northcote House Publishers, 2009), p. 18.

adolescence, a transitional time between childhood and adulthood. He believes that the progress of time brings more loss than gain, considering that 'growing up is a spiritual deterioration'.[3] For MacNeice, it was his habit to look back and idealise the past even when he was still a child:

> At the age of about 7 I had an anthology of verse which included some of Blake's 'Songs of Innocence', some songs from Shakespeare, 'The Poplars are Felled', and ballads like 'Sir Patrick Spens'. Nostalgic poetry like 'The Poplars are Felled' always appealed to me very strongly because, as far back as I can remember, I was always looking back to some preceding, hardly remembered period as a kind of Golden Age.[4]

This tendency motivates his return to his own past when MacNeice reaches adolescence. He and Anthony Blunt, his friend who was well informed about the visual arts, absorbed the 'child-cult' in art when they were at the same public school: 'I painted deliberately naïve water-colour pictures of goldfish in imitation of Matisse'.[5] The 'child-cult', which is especially related to primitivism in the visual arts, is also popular in the poetry of the Sitwells in the nineteen twenties. In *Modern Poetry*, MacNeice points out that their poems 'were in tune with the "child-like" painting of Matisse and the sentimental harlequins of Picasso's blue period' and continues talking about the attractions of their poems:

> I liked about the Sitwells their 'difficulty', their Russian Ballet colouring, their pose as 'enfants terribles'. I liked their child-cult

[3] MacNeice, *MP*, p. 60.
[4] Ibid., p. 38.
[5] MacNeice, *SAF*, p. 97.

> because I was afraid of growing up and their contempt for public-school values because I wanted to grow up out of school. I liked their rococo ornament, their gallery of fantastic figures (at this time I was re-reading all my fairy-stories).[6]

A seemingly contradictory desire not to grow up but to evade the principles of schooling finds a satisfactory place to stay in the highly imaginary and artful world in the Sitwells' poetry. The 're-reading' of the fairy stories can also be counted as involvement in the imaginary and primitive.[7]

Interestingly, in spite of his interest in books for children, MacNeice's own poems in this period are neither for children nor written in a child-like simple language or rhythm. Instead, MacNeice tries to reconstruct the perception he had in childhood with intricate patterns of rhyming, images, and syntax. Elton Edward Smith points out that many poems about childhood in *Blind Fireworks* have a 'sophisticatedly innocent tone'.[8] In 'Reminiscences of Infancy', the sophisticated language and poetic devices work to reveal the innocent auditory perception of a child. The poem is a sonnet, but each line is longer than that of a traditional sonnet, which may give the poem a sense of the continuity of the running trains:

> Trains came threading quietly through my dozing childhood,
> Gentle murmurs nosing through a summer quietude,
> Drawing in and out, in and out, their smoky ribbons,

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[6] MacNeice, *MP*, p. 52.
[7] In his autobiographical essay, Blunt also enumerates the children's books they read together, including the works of Edward Lear, Lord Dunsany, and Grimm. Anthony Blunt, 'From Bloomsbury to Marxism', *Studio International*, (November 1973), 164-8 (p. 164). MacNeice also enlists the writers of their 'eclectic reading' in *SAF*, p. 98.
[8] Elton Edward Smith, *Louis MacNeice* (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1970), p. 20.

Parting now and then, and launching full-rigged galleons
And scrolls of smoke that hung in a shifting epitaph. (615)

The consciousness of the child is also ‘dozing’ and therefore becomes vague. In spite of the detailed descriptions, the speaker does not say that the child saw the trains. It seems that the child imagines the movement of the trains based on the subtle noises he hears in his drowsy state. Those noises, ‘Gentle murmurs’, become independent from the trains that emit them in the second line, but the reappeared ‘through’ implies that it intrudes as the trains do. The trains and their noise intrude not only into the perception of the child at that time but also into that of the poet at present, who is recollecting his memory of childhood. This assumption may be endorsed if we regard ‘dozing’ as suggesting not only the state of the child but also the vagueness of the memories of a distant past. The incessant movement of ‘in and out’ between ‘now and then’ may then refer to the movement in time as well as in space.

The synthesis of the child’s perception and the adult’s recollection is also seen in the image of a ‘shifting epitaph’. It is assumed that this oxymoronic phrase is invented by the speaker but a sense of ending suggested by the association of the trains with epitaph may derive from the child’s imagination about the trains’ destiny: ‘Then distantly the noise declined like a descending graph, / Sliding downhill gently to the bottom of the distance / (For now all things are there that all were here once)’ (615). The trains here are imagined as not merely passing but proceeding towards an ending. Again in these lines we cannot say if it is the speaker or the child who visually reconstructs the dwindling sound of the trains as a graph. The idea that there is ‘the bottom of the distance’ seems to be the child’s, since in reality the remote place is just invisible and there is theoretically no spatial end. It seems to show the limit of the child’s perception and knowledge, but it also proves that the very limit can enable a child to think imaginatively. Jon Stallworthy argues that there are ‘feminine associations’ in

the trains' 'threading' and 'smoky ribbons' and therefore the 'gentle murmurs' of the trains could be those of 'surrogate mother-comfort' for MacNeice, who lost his mother in his childhood. He reads the connotations of her death in a 'shifting epitaph' and the longing for the mother figure, stating that 'one after another the trains seem to follow her underground'.[9] It is highly plausible that the ending the child imagines is his mother's, but at the same time, the child may perceive an ending itself more generally, recognising that even the time of comfort will end, as the lulling noises of the trains will cease. In this sense, the 'bottom of distance' may also imply the outcome of an experience; after the child perceives the noises 'here' and 'now', the experience of perceiving them is stored 'there' as a memory of 'then'.

Yet the comfortable state comes to end even before it becomes a past:

> And so we hardly noticed when that metal murmur came.
> But it brought us assurance and comfort all the same,
> And in the early night they soothed us to sleep,
> And the chain of the rolling wheels bound us in deep
> Till all was broken by that menace from the sea,
> The steel-bosomed siren calling bitterly. (615)

The first person plural is used for the first time, connoting that this is an experience shared with someone else. This company must be MacNeice's sister or brother but may implicate the present speaker who re-experiences the past through writing about it. This latter half of the poem seems therefore to summarise the emotions of the child that can be remembered and felt again thanks to the act of reminiscence. However, in spite of the fact that the first line above divides the poem into octave and sestet, the division is slightly blurred by the conjunctions.

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[9] Jon Stallworthy, 'Louis and the Women', in *Louis MacNeice and His Influence*, ed. by Kathleen Devine and Alan J. Peacock (Gerrards Cross: Collin Smythe, 1998), pp. 68-84 (p. 72).

By the word ‘so’, which should show the logical connection with the previous lines about the trains’ going to the distance, the poet rather refers back to the first line of the poem: ‘Trains came threading quietly’. That is, the statement that ‘we hardly noticed’ seems to contradict the speaker’s detailed description of the trains’ noise so far in the poem. In addition, another conjunction, ‘But’, does not really work as it should, since the fact that he ‘hardly noticed’ the noise and the fact that the noise was assuring do not seem to contradict each other. A sense of contrast suggested by ‘But’ may be found in the fact that the ‘metal murmur’ can be soothing.

It is much later in the poem when a kind of *volta* appears. The word ‘Till’ in line 13 announces the time when the sound from the sea breaks the comfort, and the change is also suggested in the disappearance of ‘we’, which only appeared between lines 9 and 12. Nevertheless, strangely enough, the tone of the poem does not seem to change, thanks to a relative moderate conjunction, ‘Till’, and the rhyming couplet. They attenuate the shocking ending brought to the state of dozing. This relatively mild contrast reminds us that the poem consists of ‘reminiscences’. However shocking and disturbing the change might have been, everything is now in the poet’s memory under recollection. It could then be considered that rather than showing the contrast of the sounds, the poet’s main concern is to illustrate how the child perceived the world within his limited perception. The title also speculates that the subject of perceiving is in his ‘Infancy’, which implies that the perceiver was before the phase of acquiring language that he could command himself. MacNeice recollects in ‘Experiences with Images’ that the sea was ‘something that I hardly ever went on but there it was always, not visible from our house but registering its presence through foghorns’. He could imaginatively see the sea through the noise related to it. It is the same in the case of the ‘noise of the trains’, which is also ‘a symbol of escape’ for MacNeice; he continues that ‘the noise of the trains [. . .] had a significance apart from what caused that noise; impinging on me before I knew what they meant, i.e. where they came from, these noises had as it were a purely

physical meaning which I would find it hard to analyse'.[10] 'Reminiscences of Infancy' is therefore the exploration of the 'purely physical meaning'. The poem makes this un-verbalised meaning imaginable with the delicate arrangement of the sonnet form and the images based upon the child's auditory perception. In that sense, MacNeice not merely recollects his childhood but also foregrounds the process of the making of art.

In contrast, the child's partial perception is treated as part of the cause of fear in 'Child's Terror', which is placed after 'Reminiscences of Infancy' in *Blind Fireworks*. It is another reconstruction of MacNeice's memory of childhood. The speaker starts with a recollection of the pleasant memories in childhood:

> When I was small, each tree was voluble,
> Each shrubbery Dodona. I would sit
> In a prancing swing and soar through wonderful
> Confetti of green and blue. Each arbor'd tongue
> Lisped me music, the rain dropped me music,
> And I replied to music, being young. (615)

The child could perceive the sounds that trees and shrubberies make as their speaking voices and had conversation with the 'music' of trees and rain. A seeming passivity in his sensing them implies his strong affinity with nature; rather than him talking to nature, nature is willing to talk to him and waits to be 'replied' to.[11]

A number of caesuras and enjambments, both of which give division different from

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[10] MacNeice, 'Experiences with Images' (1949), in *SLC*, pp. 153-64 (p. 158).

[11] MacNeice states that this part 'was exactly in the same keys as much of Edith Sitwell's "Troy Park"' where she recollects about her childhood. *MP*, p. 60. At the same time, it seems to have an echo from Wordsworth, who thinks that 'we can feed this mind of ours, / In a wise passiveness'. William Wordsworth, 'Expostulation and Reply', in *William Wordsworth: The Major Works*, ed. by Stephen Gill, *Oxford World's Classics* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), pp. 129-30 (p. 130).

the division by line, seem to reflect the smooth communication the child enjoyed, but the inability to organise them by line-divisions may imply that the memories are already becoming fragmented. Indeed, in the lines that follow, the impossibility of staying in the state of the child is described in the image of the ride of a swing. It is revealed that the child 'planned / To mount the swing and escape – prance, swing, prance', 'But the falling laggard swing answered, falling, / "Next time; not this time, but next time," / And then it broke' (616). The swing's repetitive movement is considered to secure the same state for the child, but the swing ceases its movement and is unable to bring the child to 'next time' or to keep him 'this time'. For the child, growing up is like riding on a swing that no longer prances but only falls. The image of 'falling' frequently appears in *Blind Fireworks*. There are poems whose titles contain the word 'falling': 'Falling Asleep' and 'Glass Falling'. 'A Serene Evening' announces the end of the day and the poem by saying 'The dew is falling' (621). In these poems, the 'falling' represents some kind of ending and therefore possibly implicates the Fall. Once one falls, it is impossible to return to the previous state. We can assume that a sense of irrecoverableness accords with young MacNeice's reluctance and resistance to growing up.

In 'Child's Terror', the child discovers other things that fall: 'the waterfalls of pampas grass / And fuchsias weeping drops of blood' (616). He imagines himself becoming the fuchsias because their 'Red tears', perhaps their blood, can 'stain the years' (616), by which they can leave the mark of their own living. Although he fancies the involvement in nature in the park where he strolls, the speaker falls in a kind of trance as if he were the child and facing a pain now:

> Beyond the park lies the cemetery –
> I saw my reflection in a polished tomb.
> Am I then really dead, dead really?

A shroud of yellow lace, a shroud of snow
Or a marble shroud – what is the difference?
I am not; I have been; always the perfect tense. (616)

The mere reflection of his face upon a tomb confuses him, making him believe that he is in the tomb himself. Accordingly, to be in the 'perfect tense' seems to refer to the state of being dead. A sense of unreality threatens the speaker and troubles his identity. Here is seen a paradox that the act of facing himself causes the speaker to separate and lose his self. The confused child cannot even identify things around him:

Nurse, nurse, drive away the nightmare,
Turn a light on my snowy counterpane,
Tell me it is linen, it is not rock,
Only tell me I am alive again
And the sun will come again, the spring again,
And the pampas grass will raise plume aloft again –
And stop the clock, nurse, stop the clock. (616-7)

This is the ending of the poem. That the poem ends with the child's cry means that the speaker does not return to the original state as an adult in the present and stays in the consciousness of the child in the past. It suggests that the speaker fails to define his old experience as past and holds the terror as an ongoing threat. In spite of the poem's title, 'Child's Terror', in the end 'my' terror seems to be that of the speaker. While the speaker in 'Reminiscences of Infancy' interacts with his own past partial perception by reconstructing it as it is in the language of the grown-up, 'Child's Terror' fuses the haunting past with the

present.

MacNeice develops the theme of the confusing identity of the child in 'Child's Unhappiness', the poem placed after 'Child's Terror'. One of the notable aspects of 'Child's Unhappiness' is that the formal regularities heighten the confusion and fear of the child. William T. McKinnon points out that MacNeice uses 'octosyllabic' lines in this poem, which is one of the 'commoner traditional forms'.[12] In addition to this, the poem also repeats the same lines in the beginning and the end: 'Ring the gong and come in to tea; / Where is yourself, my child? said she' (617, 618). This announces that the child's quest for his self that is depicted in the poem results in failure. To find 'yourself' seems to be a quest for his own identity, since the speaker's self is divided: 'They posited me on the topmost shelf; / Run, run, run and find yourself' (617). There seem to be at least three parts of his self: 'me', which is stored, the one who is asked to go for a quest, and 'yourself', which should be somewhere else. It may therefore be suggested that the speaker can form his identity by collecting and integrating his divided self. His journey, however, is unpromising from the beginning:

> In the next street the buses wait,
> A grim eternal penultimate;
> I never got there, though I left thence,
> Stranded still in the perfect tense. (617)

In spite of the proximity of the street, the speaker can never reach there. That the street cannot be the ultimate end suggests the circulation of the speaker's exploration. It can be assumed that the stagnation in the same state is an aspect of life. In 'Middle Age', another poem in *Blind Fireworks*, 'perfect' in 'the perfect tense' reveals the emptiness of the life of a

[12] William T. McKinnon, *Apollo's Blended Dream: A Study of the Poetry of Louis MacNeice* (London, New York, Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1971), p. 175.

middle-aged man rather than its perfection (‘I cater to the public’s common sense, / I pander tastelessly the public taste / And live a perfect life in the perfect tense’) (643). It is as if MacNeice regarded that reaching some point, here adulthood, means a mere end, which is almost like death, or a stasis without further growth or change.

The speaker in ‘Child’s Unhappiness’ seems to know this truth, but he launches his quest, suspecting that the sun has ‘stolen myself away / In his red caravanserai’ (617). Since the sun symbolises time, the speaker may be able to recover his lost self by catching up with the sun. He traces the course of the sun then finds out that the ‘sun-god’, ‘Apollo’, is dead rather than sleeping:

> The curtain drags with a gasp back,
> My search is a ghastly cul-de-sac;
> A stark stranded wreck I see,
> The bones of dead divinity. (617-8)

The death of an immortal god presents an end as inevitable and irredeemable. If this death suggests that an end will always come, a part of the self that the speaker is pursuing may be his past self that should be left as time goes by. After the failed journey, the speaker finds himself ‘far beneath the shelf / Looking up at my tortured self’ (618). Not only is the regaining of a past self impossible, but also the integration of the present self is made difficult. The repeated words of someone, ‘Ring the gong and come in to tea; / Where is yourself, my child?’, sounds more ominous, now that a part of the self is eternally lost. In this poem, the identity of the ‘child’ is also questionable in a different sense. When ‘she’ addresses the speaker as ‘my child’, it does not necessarily mean that the speaker is a child. It rather indicates a relationship between them. Moya Brennan thinks that ‘she’ is an echo of the nurse

in 'Child's Terror'.[13] Yet I assume that 'she' could also be mother or God, considering her omniscient attitude. It is as if 'she' knew where the speaker's self was. What is clear is that the speaker neither knows nor finds 'yourself', but he keeps living in the helpless state. Referring back to MacNeice's nostalgic feeling for childhood, we can consider that the confusion of one's own identity and the loss of a part of one's self are both part of the process one must go through when becoming an adult. The omniscient 'she' already knows it, being herself a grown-up, and with this very reason, she cannot help the child.

All the poems we have read so far are based upon certain imperfections of the child—his limited ability to find a meaning in what he physically perceives and to recognise what he should inevitably miss in the course of his growth. Although in both 'Child's Unhappiness' and 'Child's Terror', the child seems to be threatened because of his ignorance of a way to evade the fear, the real difficulty lies in the fact that time does not wait for him to find the way. MacNeice not only finds the poetic subject in his childhood but also associates it with the present condition of himself that is under continuing fear. We can assume that this ability to fuse autobiographical facts with imagination and intricate patterns of lines and speaking voice shows a certain excellence in his early poems and anticipates his life-long interest in looking into the nature and growth of a self. In the next section, we will discuss the poems in which MacNeice approaches the contemplation of time in a larger span than his childhood.

II

Another notable characteristic in many poems in *Blind Fireworks* is the use of rich imagery from various myths. In the 'Foreword' to *Blind Fireworks*, MacNeice explains that he deliberately mixes images from different sources:

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[13] Moya Brennan, 'Poet's Revisions: A Consideration of MacNeice's *Blind Fireworks*', *Western Humanities Review*, 23.2 (Spring 1969), 159-71 (p. 161).

> I must apologise to the reader for obscurities both in meaning and prosody; and, as I do not desire a plethora of notes, can only warn him that several of these poems are founded on an esoteric mythology. For instance, Pythagoras is, for me, no the historical Pythagoras, but a grotesque, automatic Man-of-Science, who both explains and supports the universe by counting, having thus an affinity to Thor the Time-God. Like other mythologies, mine is inconsistent. Thor's hammer is in some places represented as sounding all the time, making the world's continuance; in others as being silently held aloft, and only finally falling, as if swung by an auctioneer, to signify the end of all things.[14]

This daring manifesto about his use of mythologies shows the young poet's ambition to create his own poetic world in his poetry based on the vast expanse of history and literature. At the same time, this method of his follows the modernist trend in employing existing mythologies. According to Jon Stallworthy, the images such as 'Adonis', 'Pythagoras', and 'Twilight of the Gods' in MacNeice's poems 'proclaim their modernist descent from Sir James Frazer and Jessie Weston by way of T. S. Eliot', although 'the dark background to the most impressive of MacNeice's *Blind Fireworks* is not a public but a private mythology' as in 'Reminiscences of Infancy'.[15] In 'A Lame Idyll', a poem in *Blind Fireworks*, his mythology is at once private and public in that he seems to depict the turning of history with mythological images at the same time as associating it with the fate of artists. As the title shows, the poem is an 'Idyll', which anticipates the eclogues he is to write in the thirties. What is common with the later

[14] MacNeice, 'Foreword' to *Blind Fireworks*, in Appendix I, in *CP*, p. 613.
[15] Jon Stallworthy, *Louis MacNeice* (London: Faber and Faber, 1995), p. 131.

work in the pastoral tradition is the direct depiction of urban desolation, which is contradictory to the ideal peace the conventional pastoral has offered. The word 'Lame' in the title tells in advance this contradiction. The poem depicts a street where Pythagoras is counting time:

> From the granite window peers Pythagoras,
> Telling his counters, thinking on what was,
> Dropping impartially the minutes from his finger-tips
> While on his bald head the weary rain drips.
> In the street below bob windy bits of paper,
> All poems come this way sooner or later;
> Like a clock's pendulum the stone beard wags,
> And pavement artists scratch sunsets on the flags. (631)

It is revealed at line 4 that Pythagoras suffers from time rather than controls it, in spite of his work as counter of time. Pythagoras's 'bald head' implies his age and his vulnerability to time, and the word 'weary' could be a transferred epithet that refers to Pythagoras's weariness. The sense of ending felt from Pythagoras and the rains also spreads over the street. We could interpret the scene as metaphorical if the 'windy bits of paper' there are not mere dust but denote the 'poems' mentioned in the following line.[16] That the pages of poems physically whirl on the street may imply that 'All poems come' and pass the road of the literary history. The image of 'pavement artists' is another self-referential image that should be related to this

[16] In Shakespeare's *Sonnet* 17, 'papers' refer to poems. 'So should my papers (yellowed with their age) / Be scorned' (ll. 9-10). Colin Burrow adds the note to the word that 'poetic compositions are regularly referred to as "papers" c. 1600, especially those which were written for manuscript circulation in a small coterie'. It is of course too distant from the twentieth century, but MacNeice must have known this meaning. William Shakespeare, *The Complete Sonnets and Poems*, ed. by Colin Burrow, *The Oxford Shakespeare* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), pp. 414-5. *OED* also indicates that 'paper' can mean 'written notes, memoranda, letters, official documents, etc' or 'written documents collectively', but does not specifically mention poetry. 'paper, n. and adj.', *OED Online*.

reference to poetry. Considering that their scratching of the 'sunsets on the flags' is to delete the reflections of the sunsets, it is assumed that both Pythagoras and the pavement artists try to defy the inevitable passing of time that the sun symbolises.

However, their endeavour is revealed to be vain:

> Stranded Tritons on their backs blare on factory horns.
> And cold, old gods whistle most forlorn
> Through fingers like wet bracken, scraggy with coarse hair,
> And the future walks slowly; I hear him limp far. (631)

The word 'stranded', used again after 'Child's Terror' and 'Child's Unhappiness', shows that the Gods, who should be immortal, are now debilitated, and their end announces the end of the time they belong to. Their physical weariness reminds us of Pythagoras, and their 'fingers' produce the 'forlorn' sounds as the fingers of Pythagoras that drop the marks of the minutes. The association of Tritons and Pythagoras, both tired, may be inspired by Yeats's 'Men Improve with the Years', which starts with 'I am worn out with dreams; / A weather-worn, marble triton / Among the streams'.[17] MacNeice may also allude to Yeats's symbolism when he illustrates the vision of regeneration:

> First from cloudbursts white swans came,
> And crawling mud flowered into flame;
> Then man came and caught at its feathers,
> He and the fire strode arm in arm together. (632)

[17] W. B. Yeats, *The Variorum Edition of the Poems of W. B. Yeats*, ed. by Peter Allt and Russel K. Alspach (New York: Macmillan Publishing, 1973), p. 329.

The union of man and the fire, which is a transformation of swans (they become 'flame'), could have various implications; first of all, there is the Greek motif, on which Yeats's poem, 'Leda and Swan', is also based. Later, MacNeice explains this poem by Yeats: 'Yeats's obsession during this period with the myth of Leda also signifies his belief that, in defiance of Aristotle, history has its roots in philosophy, that the eternal (Zeus) requires the temporal (Leda), further (for the myth is complex) that the human being (Leda) requires the animal (the swan), that God and Nature in fact require each other and that the world will only make sense in terms of an incarnation'.[18] MacNeice seems to follow his own interpretation of Yeats in 'A Lame Idyll', in that the union consummated between the male and the swans is more an inter-complementary fusion between a human and a non-human than a sexual surrender of one side.

Another plausible interpretation is that the swans are phoenix, a symbol of regeneration. MacNeice's interest in phoenix in this period is recorded in his letter to Basil Barr; he quotes from Shakespeare's 'The Phoenix and Turtle', 'Phoenix & The turtle Fled / In a Mutual Flame from Hence', noting that 'I have only just found that that is a really good poem. I should like to see the Phoenix and its resurrection. [. . .] The union of two flames is the completest of unions; their wedding bed is also the altar of cremation and in smoke they are not divided'.[19] The self-burning of the united man and birds in 'A Lame Idyll' causes the appearance of another, who is 'coming with a comely measure' and 'carrying a star-dipt laver' (632). This female figure seems to be a moon-goddess, whose 'sublime' presence clears the corrupted, dark, street. The moon itself is one of the dominant images in *Blind Fireworks*. MacNeice in this period recurrently refers to the cyclicality of the sun and the moon. We could recall that earlier in 'A Lame Idyll' the pavement artists try to 'scratch the sunsets', which could be the attempt to stop the setting of the sun and the consequent coming of the

[18] MacNeice, *PWBY*, p. 129.
[19] MacNeice, To Basil Barr, 12 January 1927, in *Letters*, pp. 146-7.

night. In ‘Sunset’, the replacement of the sunset by the moon is regarded as a threat. The beaming sunset is the ‘galleons’ loaded with the treasury, but ‘far to east, but drawing near, / The crippled hunchback moon, I fear, / Overhauls, overtakes’ (624). In ‘Homo Sum’, MacNeice depicts ‘humanity’ as fish that is to be ‘Hooked by the moon’ (629). The only way to evade the ‘milky alleys’ where ‘all goes out’ is by leading a quotidian life:

> But we – we never stop to feel or think,
> We break the meshes of the lunar net –
> Give me another drink, give me a drink,
> Give me a cigarette, another cigarette. (629)

It reads as a strong manifesto to resist the moon, who tries to deprive humanity of time. In ‘Adonis’, the moon is a thief of the ‘flowers of memory’, and ‘Glimpsing the moon’s theft through a chequer of cast-iron, / Adonis thinks of the hour when he too shall be flowerless’ (639).

At the end of ‘A Lame Idyll’, the progression of time announced by the moon is similarly impossible to overcome. ‘Charon’ sentences Pythagoras that ‘“Your time is finished and the seal is set, / Gather up, gather up, gather up yet.”’:

> Your bout is finished and your well-padded hopes,
> The seven spheres sink, you are knocked through the ropes,
> The universe fades in the upper distance;
> It is no more, though it was once. (632)

Charon highlights the difference between Pythagoras, a counter of time, and time itself by

emphasising, with the double meaning of 'once', the onetime-ness of Pythagoras's life. There was surely a world for Pythagoras but it is disappearing and not to come again. What is notable is that Pythagoras is also asked to 'once more let your freighted wain / Bear wan Adonis and Proserpine' (632). Adonis is a boy loved by goddess Venus (Aphrodite), but he dies of the attack of a boar.[20] 'Proserpine' (Persephone in Greek) is known for her marriage to Pluto (Hades) in the underworld. She is eventually made to live there for seven months a year.[21] Their rather tragic destinies make them belong to the side of the mortal Pythagoras, and Pythagoras is given a mission to carry them with himself away from the world. In his autobiography, MacNeice recollects that his own eclectic mythology in his poems in youth is 'Peopled with the Disappointed', including 'Orpheus and Persephone and Lancelot and Picasso's earlier harlequins'.[22] In 'A Lame Idyll', he seems to symbolically illustrate the end of an idyll rather than creating one, and the sense of uncontrollability is increased by the references to the replacement of the 'Disappointed' mythological figures. Whether or not he implies the transition of poetry as well as that of time, what is clear is that he is more interested in the dissolving side instead of standing as an arising new generation.

The use of mythological images is especially appropriate when a work wants to express the universal principle of the world. This is what MacNeice seems to learn from his predecessors and intentionally do in this period. T. S. Eliot focuses on the use of myth in James Joyce's *Ulysses*:

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[20] In some versions of the myth, Proserpine is entitled to be the nurse to Adonis by Venus (Aphrodite). 'Aphrodite [Venus]' 'in secret from gods, hid him [Adonis] in a chest while he was still a little child, and entrusted him to Persephone [Proserpine]. But when Persephone caught sight of him, she refused to give him back', and then Zeus 'decreed that Adonis should spend a third of the year by himself, a third with Persephone, and the remaining third with Aphrodite (but Adonis assigned his own share also to Aphrodite)'. Apollodorus, *The Library of Greek Mythology*, trans. by Robin Hard (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), pp. 131-2. In the Orphic Hymns, Adonis is sung as 'sun of Aphrodite and Eros, / born on the bed / of lovely-tressed Persephone'. '56. To Adonis', in *The Orphic Hymns*, trans., intro., and notes by Apostolos N. Athanassakis and Benjamin M. Wolkow (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2013), p. 46.

[21] Robert Graves, *Greek Gods and Heroes* (New York: Laurel-Leaf Books, 1960), pp. 17-20.

[22] MacNeice, *SAF*, p. 109.

> In using the myth, in manipulating a continuous parallel between contemporaneity and antiquity, Mr. Joyce is pursuing a method which others must pursue after him. [. . .] It is simply a way of controlling, of ordering, of giving a shape and a significance to the immense panorama of futility and anarchy which is contemporary history. It is a method already adumbrated by Mr. Yeats, and of the need for which I believe Mr. Yeats to have been the first contemporary to be conscious. It is a method for which the horoscope is auspicious. [. . .] It is, I seriously believe, a step forward making the modern world possible in art.[23]

Eliot decisively concludes that 'Instead of narrative method, we may now use the mythical method. It is, I seriously believe, a step towards making the modern world possible for art toward that order and form'.[24] Eliot here expects the myth to counter the chaos of the modern society. Edmund Wilson also argues that 'the Homeric parallel in "Ulysses" [. . .] does help to give the story a universal significance and it enables Joyce to show us in the actions and the relations of his characters meanings which he perhaps could not easily have indicated in any other way'.[25] It should be noted here that the modernists' method is the adaptation, rather than the retelling, of the myth, purporting to make their art understood. As Margaret Dalziel points out, Eliot's use of the Grail legend in *The Waste Land* is also not 'the invention of a new tale of the same kind'.[26] Dalziel then maintains that 'the great myths express, far more

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[23] T. S. Eliot, 'Ulysses, Order, and Myth' (November 1923), in *Selected Prose of T. S. Eliot*, ed. by Frank Kermode (San Diego, New York, London: A Harvest Book·Harcourt; New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1975), pp. 175-8 (pp. 177-8).
[24] Ibid., p. 178.
[25] Edmund Wilson, *Axel's Castle: A Study in the Imaginative Literature of 1870-1930* (Glasgow: William Collins, Sons, 1931; repr. 1974), p. 171. Wilson, however, continues to note that this Homeric backgrounds are 'obstacles' for the reader and 'Joyce elaborated "Ulysses" too much'. Ibid., p. 172.
[26] Margaret Dalziel, 'Myth in Modern English Literature', in *Myth and the Modern Imagination: Six Lectures*, ed. by Margaret Dalziel (Dunedin: University of Otago Press, 1967), pp. 27-50 (p. 43).

successfully than rational discourse, permanent truths of human experience. A myth is a great metaphor, and, specially if it has been used again and again in literature (and in other arts), is far better able than logical argument to satisfy man in his search to understand himself and his society', since 'the myth communicates not only before it is understood, but without being understood, so fundamental is that within us which responds to it'.[27] In his reading of Eliot's *The Waste Land*, Peter Childs also notes that 'one of the poem's dominant modernist techniques is to contain the chaos of the present through mythology, a system of belief which is generally held to be antithetical to historical understanding'.[28] It is plausible that MacNeice, who started his career as a poet in the time of modernism, adopted the use of the myth so that his poetry could attain a kind of universality that explains the world, as the work of his immediate predecessors do.

'Adam's Legacy' and 'Twilight of the Gods', the longest poems at the end of *Blind Fireworks*, are even more daring attempts to relate the making of history in the mythological imagery. Peter McDonald states that those poems are the 'most ambitious' works in the collection; according to McDonald, the 'poems attempt to delineate mythic beginnings and endings of time'.[29] This is true, but the issue common to these two poems is the expected repetitiveness of the burden and comfort that cyclical history causes. MacNeice's idea of cyclicality may also be inherited from the modernist poets. Although mainly in relation to his unique system, Yeats shows the cyclicality of time in his works such as 'The Second Coming'. MacNeice later maintains that 'The Second Coming' is 'based upon his [Yeats's] cyclic philosophy of gyres and reincarnation but which, allowance being made for this parable convention, can be taken as a direct prophecy of imminent disaster', and what differs from other prophetic poets is that Yeats 'implies that even the coming anarchy has its place in a

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[27] Ibid., pp. 44-5.
[28] Peter Childs, *The Twentieth Century in Poetry: A Critical Survey* (London and New York: Routledge, 1999), p. 77.
[29] Peter McDonald, *Louis MacNeice: The Poet in His Contexts* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991), p. 55.

pattern'.[30]

In 'Adam's Legacy', MacNeice seems to see the very beginning of such a pattern in the sin that the first man, Adam, has committed. Adam is the image of history that not only repeats itself but also persists:

> Old Adam, having threaded his cocoon
> Amid the oblivion of velvet leaves,
> Rips a wheel from his mind's torn chariot
> And scuds it down the rainbow – rolling on
> While Adam sleeps in history's farthest groves
> Encircled by the mouthing ocean's moat. (646)

Adam, being described as sleeping in total seclusion, seems to represent the sin he commits rather than the maker of the sin, for the wheel he releases from 'his mind's torn chariot' keeps moving even after the chariot, of which the wheel was a part, dies. The expression of him as 'Old Adam' also supports this interpretation; it denotes the sinful Adam, who is different from the Adam after the salvation by Christ.[31] Although Adam here is sleeping, he remains an influence on the present, in which 'we' live:

> The wheel cuts into our dreams like a random moon
> Hanging like forbidden fruit before us.
> It rolls along the tiles and aisles of the church,
> And opens gates which clang again too soon.

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[30] MacNeice, *PWBY*, p. 119.
[31] 'The biblical Adam as a representative of the sinful and unregenerate character of human nature, which in traditional Western Christian theology is overcome by a person's acceptance of Christ'. 'old Adam, n.', *OED Online*.

We thrust and splutter at the gates until
We have forgotten what we batter at,
Like a sparrow on an empty window-sill. (646)

The double similes ('like a random moon / Hanging like forbidden fruit') eventually link the 'wheel', a part of Adam, with 'forbidden fruit', so that they both symbolise Adam's legacy, i.e. the original sin. It is complicated because the wheel, a part of Adam, who was seduced, is now moving as if to seduce 'us'. This chain that connects the first seduction with another possible seduction embodies the invisible thread of history. Adam's ever moving wheel also has the direct impact: 'his pain-spoked legacy / Pierces our marrow' (646). Not only trampled down by the wheel, 'we / Are bundled over roads like dagger-points' and passively 'tost on the whale-spout of the firmaments / As waterbalancing balls one shoots at a fair' (646). The physical pain and helplessness enforce the sense of propinquity between the past and the present, and the images of the objects on the water also denote stasis in movement as the wheel, by which the speaker self-mockingly shows our inevitability in keeping living regardless of what 'we' have unknowingly inherited.

Similarly, the wheel, the persistent sin, which represents time itself, is what each individual must manage:

I straddle my wheel, and we move steadily onward,
And as I grow the fettering pain grows more
And the reeling wheel spins out a wake of history,
An abandon'd galaxy that simmers and sobs
And laughs behind in the night, but the wheel moves steadily onward.
(646)

It seems that ‘my’ wheel is the same wheel as Adam’s and others’; here the wheel is each individual’s as well as the wheel on which all of us move. By making ‘I’ stand out of the collective ‘we’ as the active agent of moving the wheel, MacNeice reveals the function of individuals in a whole system: each action and life may affect and interpenetrate others’ fates and thereby construct a whole of history. The wheel spinning out ‘a wake of history’ visualises time’s progress and explains that the history is an outcome of all the accumulated events. By the word ‘wake’, which means a beginning, MacNeice connotes that history makes itself by discarding other courses of history that were not eventually taken. Another meaning of ‘wake’, the Irish ritual for the dead, implies that history even entombs what it has passed and makes itself by perpetually moving and experiencing the new.

However, the ending of the poem remains uncertain if a new age is coming:

> A cock crew harshly out of the sepulchre.
> Adam in his sleep turned and saw the wall of the cave
> Where shadows writhed from the mimicking hands without –
> The shadows on the wall creep when all sleep or fall asleep,
> And the deep sleeping corpses turn over in the grave,
> But the shadows creep and crawl over all the cavern wall,
> And one can hear the pendulum go to and fro till cockcrow,
> And life and death flash black and white in the bursting of the wave.
> But have you heard the cock crow or the sea crow or the mocking-bird?
> The trump of doom is still deferred, and the roll-call and the drum-roll,
> And we wait in vain, expecting a door that never opens,
> But have you heard the mocking-bird, the mocking-bird, the mocking-bird? (647)

The cockcrow seems to announce the coming of a new generation, but since the cry is from the grave, it seems to suggest more a return of the old than the birth of the new. The allusion to Plato's cave also questions if the cock really announces a new beginning. As in the original allegory, the shadows here are the reflection of reality. In contrast, the 'cockcrow' that can distinguish 'life and death' seems to clarify the distinction of the reality and its reflection. However, the speaker suspects that even the crow is, like the shadows that are only the image of the real figures, 'the mocking bird'. If the cry is a mere copy of the real cockcrow, the beginning has not come yet. The artless repetition of the name of the mimicking object at the end suggests that the speaker cannot help but involve himself in a cycle of the perpetual act of hoping for a new age without burdens, which is not certain to come. 'Adam's Legacy' not only reveals that history is a pattern of intricate acts and movements but also regards the sin as less a part of the pattern than something that always remains beneath the pattern. Adam's sin is not only referred to as it is but also a metaphor of all the burdens of history.

It should be worth noting that the image of cockcrow works as a prophetic announcement in some poems in *Blind Fireworks*. In 'A Cataract Conceived as a March of Corpses', MacNeice describes the cry of the dead as cockcrow. The corpses whose coffins are laved away by the flood of the river and they 'crow' just before their second death by drowning:

> The corpses blink in the rush of the river, and out of the water their chins they tip
> And quaff the gush and lip the draught and crook their heads and crow,
> Drowned and drunk with the cataract that carries them and buries them
> And silts them over and covers them and lilts and chuckles over their bones;
> (623)

Despite the fact that they are already dead, the corpses move the parts of their body; they blink in order to secure their sight in water and tip the chins to let their mouth get above the surface of water and breathe, all of which are the typical actions for a drowning man struggling to survive. To 'crow' is also a sign of life. It can be inferred that they try to mark the last moment before their death. In terms of rhythm in the line, the word 'crow' breaks the regular order that has been sustained by the sets of the transitive verbs and their objects—'quaff the gush', 'lip the draught', 'crook their heads'—equally connected by the conjunction 'and'. Although the iambic rhythm is kept till the end, the regularity is somewhat disturbed and stopped by the intransitive 'crow'. This change reinforces, with the comma after 'crow', a suspension of the line as well as the end of the corpses' lives. Furthermore, there are some plausible sources of the cockcrow. It may allude to that in 'The Denial of Peter' in the *Gospels*: 'I tell thee, Peter, the cock shall not crow this day, before that thou shalt thrice deny that thou knowest me' (Luke 22:34).[32] After Jesus is arrested, Peter actually denies three times that he knows Jesus, and after that he remembers the Jesus's word and 'wept bitterly' (Luke 22:62).[33] As the cockcrow signifies not only the verity of the prophecy but also Peter's renewed decision to spread Jesus's word after his betrayal, the corpses' imitating the cock in 'A Cataract' may announce a new beginning after their death. The renewal by destruction is also suggested by a possible allusion of the cataract to the Flood in *Genesis*.[34]

In 'Twilight of the Gods', the final poem of the volume, MacNeice deals with the

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[32] *The New Cambridge Paragraph Bible With the Apocrypha: King James Version*, ed. by David Norton (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), p. 1653.

[33] Ibid., p. 1654. Other Gospels also refer to these episodes. For instance: 'Jesus said unto him, "Verily I say unto thee, that this night, before the cock crow, thou shalt deny me thrice"' (Matthew 26:34), p. 1584; 'Then began he to curse and to swear, saying, "I know not the man". And immediately the cock crew. And Peter remembered the words of Jesus, which said unto him, "Before the cock crow, thou shalt deny me thrice". And he went out, and wept bitterly' (Matthew 27.74-75), p. 1585; Mark 13.30, p. 1609; Mark 14.72, pp. 1611-2; John 13.38, p. 1680; John 18.27, p. 1685.

[34] The Flood in the Genesis becomes a mythical story of cycle rather than end: 'There has been destruction, but it ends in regeneration'. Robert Couffignal, 'The Flood', *Companion to Literary Myths, Heroes and Archetypes*, ed. by Pierre Brunel, trans. by Wendy Allatson, Judith Hayward, and Trista Selous (London and New York: Routledge, 1992), pp. 450-4 (p. 451).

same topic, focusing more on the symbolical visualisation of the renewal:

> The steel wheels reel in a clangorous carillon,
> Time on his camel passes down steppes of sand
> Past each factory kennelled like a mastodon,
> Baying at the moon like a sad brass band,
> The Man in the Moon is long years dead and gone. (647)

The first line includes the internal rhyme of 'steel', 'wheels', and 'reel' and an alliteration in 'clangorous' and 'carillon'. Yet the similarity in sound can also confuse the distinction between parts of speech; it may not be difficult to see that 'the steel wheels' are the subject and 'reel' is the verb, but 'wheels' could be regarded as a transitive verb for the subject 'the steel' as if the steel could rotate like a wheel. The sonic and grammatical blurring is the embodiment of the chaotic confusion of the components of the world. This method may derive from another poem, 'The Universe (*An Excerpt*)', which MacNeice writes two years earlier:

> A million whirling spinning-wheels of flowing gossamer,
> A million hammers jangling on the anvils of the sky,
> The crisp chip of chisels and the murmuring of saws
> And the flowing ripple of water from a million taps,
> With the champ of griffin-horses with their heads in sacks of hay
> And sawdust flitting to and fro in new-born fragrancy.
> But not the same for all – flooding over weedy rocks
> A green sea singing like a dream, and on the shore

> Fair round pebbles with eggy speckles half transparent,
>
> And brown sodden tangles of odorous wrack. (620)

The gerunds increase the sense of chaos, suggesting that the universe consists of the numerous particular things that are exercising their actions in no relation with each other. Here, the 'spinning-wheels' are working as a part of the universe with the 'hammers', 'chisels', and 'saws'. MacNeice repeatedly uses images of the wheel in *Blind Fireworks* to symbolise the ceaseless cycle that explains the principle of the world. Along with the myth, the image of the wheel may also be used by MacNeice due to the influence of modernist writers. By his birthday in 1925 ('before I was 18'), he had 'become interested in being fashionably modern' and started reading the Sitwells and Eliot.[35] He states that 'In the midst of this, at the age of 18, I met the poems of Eliot, which I found repellent' but 'After a time I was able to squeeze him into my fantasy world'.[36] As for the wheel image, the 'spinning-wheels' may especially allude to the spinning-wheel in Edith Sitwell's *The Sleeping Beauty*, a poem MacNeice favourably mentions.[37] The 'wheel' is also mentioned in Eliot's *The Waste Land*.[38] B. C. Southam makes a note that 'the wheel of fortune, figuring the reversals of fortune in life. Also, in many systems of ancient mythology, the wheel is the symbol of eternity, either of the divine or, as in Hinduism, the eternal human round of birth,

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[35] MacNeice, *MP*, p. 51.
[36] Ibid., pp. 56-7.
[37] See Edith Sitwell, 'The Sleeping Beauty', in *Collected Poems* (London: Macmillan, 1958), pp. 51-109. MacNeice suggests that 'The Sleeping Beauty is [. . .] a very fine jazz fairy story; she has filled in all the corners with twirls and iterations and the whole is pervaded with a kind of sentimentality (she has a country-house sympathy with such types as housemaids and spinsters)'. 'Poetry To-day' (6 Sept. 1935), in *SLC*, pp. 10-44 (p. 20). Sitwell edited an anthology called *Wheels* from 1916 to 1921. John Press notes that '*Wheels* was intended to be an act of defiance, a deliberate rebellion against the stuffy canons of respectable, conservative society' but most of the poems collected in it have the 'poor quality'. Still, it can be a 'document in the history of modern verse'. John Press, *A Map of Modern English Verse* (London; Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 1969), pp. 156, 157.
[38] 'Here is the man with three staves, and here the Wheel, / And here is the one-eyed merchant, and this card, / Which is blank, is something he carries on his back, / Which I am forbidden to see' (I. The Burial of the Dead', ll. 51-4); 'Gentile or Jew / O you who turn the wheel and look to windward, Consider Phlebas, who was once handsome and tall as you' (IV. Death by Water, ll. 319-21). T. S. Eliot, *The Waste Land*, in *The Complete Poems and Plays* (London: Faber and Faber, 1969; repr. 2004), pp. 62, 71.

death and re-birth'.[39] Yeats, who invents the symbol of the gyre for explaining his mystical system, writes about life and death in 'The Wheel'; although 'we' always long for the next season, 'what disturbs our blood / Is but its longing for the tomb'.[40] It seems to be highly plausible that MacNeice employs the images his predecessors use for cyclicality in order to present himself as a poet who is eligible to interpret history.

In the world in 'Twilight of the Gods', the sleeping child and Pythagoras reappear. The child is in the same state as Adam in 'Adam's Legacy', being intact 'beneath the patchwork quilt' that also covers his dreams as 'myths of red and green and gilt'. Like the sleeping beauty, the child and Adam are in suspended animation, and although they symbolise cyclicality, they are not part of transition. While the child keeps sleeping, the phoenix and the moon experience a transition: 'Come and see, [. . .] come just this once, / This world's god, the very last appearance; / The phoenix is dissolving but the old moon's surfeit, / The new moon in swaddling will whelm down to Tophet' (648). In depicting the dissolution of the present world, the poet not only re-employs Pythagoras as an old man but also makes him join in the world of Norse mythology. MacNeice repeats his explanation in the foreword to *Blind Fireworks* in his autobiography by stating that 'I equated Pythagoras with Thor, the Norse time-god, the hammer-bearing lord of the thunder'.[41] As in 'A Lame Idyll', however, Pythagoras in 'Twilight of the Gods' is losing power, and the order of the world itself seems to be dissolved to chaos:

> Sways upon his camel Time in his dotage,
> He is tired of year on year, he is tired of age on age;
> The chorus of valkyries crack the skies with laughter,

[39] B. C. Southam, *A Student's Guide to the Selected Poems of T. S. Eliot* (London and Boston: Faber and Faber, 1968; repr. 1994), p. 150.
[40] Yeats, 'The Wheel', in *Variorum*, p. 434.
[41] MacNeice, *SAF*, pp. 109-10.

> Tin from the sage's hand clicks the last counter.
> The wheels begin to grind alone, the weathercock begins to crow
> Round the booming chimney the dead gods go,
> Round and round the mulberry-tree, a seared and groaning Ygdrasil,
> Men as trees go dancing while the stars blink chill. (648-9)

The 'valkyries' are, in Norse mythology, 'choosers of the slain'.[42] The chosen soldiers join Odin for the fight at 'Ragnarök', which is 'a designation of the end of the gods' day on earth', the origin of 'Twilight of the Gods'.[43] MacNeice has earlier attempted to create a poem out of the same tale in 1924 in 'The Dissolution of Valhalla'. The heroes enjoyed the 'last feast of all their feasts' (653), knowing of their approaching ending; the heroes, already dead, waited for 'the hero last to fall' (654). As the 'mighty laughter rolled / Up to the roof-tops tall' (653) in 'The Dissolution of Valhalla', the valkyries' laugh in 'Twilight of the Gods', and their laughter resonates with the crowing of the weathercock. While a renewal after the dissolution is not depicted in 'The Dissolution of Valhalla', 'Twilight of the Gods' expects a new coming by referring to 'Yggdrasil' ('Ygdrasil' in the poem), which is the ash-tree that is 'the world tree, located at the center of the universe and uniting it' and 'the symbol of the new world', which survives the Ragnarök.[44] As Adam's 'pain-spoked legacy / Pierces our marrow' in 'Adam's Legacy', the sleeping child pierces Pythagoras's heart and ends his time: 'White he

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[42] *The Elder Edda: A Book of Viking Lore*, trans. by Andy Orchard (London: Penguin Books, 2011), p. 270 (note to *Völuspá* 30).
[43] John Lindow, 'RAGNARÖK (JUDGMNT-OF-THE-POWERS)', in *Norse Mythology: A Guide to Gods, Heroes, Rituals, and Beliefs* (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2001; repr. 2002), p. 254.
[44] Lindow, 'YGGDRASIL (YGG'S-STEED)', in Ibid., pp. 319, 322. MacNeice's expression in 'Twilight of the Gods', 'a seared and groaning Ygdrasil', directly alludes to the lines that illustrate the world in destruction in *Völuspá*:

> 47. The standing ash of Yggdrasil shudders,
> the aged tree groans, and the giant breaks free.
> All are afraid on the paths of Hel,
> before Surt's kin swallows it up. (*The Elder Edda*, p. 12)

rises from his bed, a phantom from his fleshly tomb, / Up lifts the marble lid, up he flies an arrow-head, / Strikes into a sage's heart; his blood, pale-red, / Drops from Pythagoras knelling out his doom' (649). Pythagoras is given a voice before the end of his life, the world, and the poem:

> My fault, my child, my abacus is broken,
> I can count no more nor keep the world going,
> This is our twilight, the eternal phoenix dying,
> The fingers of my mind are far too stiff to reckon.
> Stay calm, my child; the dark shapes are fading,
> Down the stony vista the shadows are receding,
> The snowflakes of Nirvana drop about my being,
> Covering the nightingales that can no longer sing,
> Covering the corpses of renowned musicians,
> Covering the lutes and the drums and the kettle-drums,
> Covering the bleár sád éyes of the sages,
> Covering this and that and the other thing,
> Ánything, éverything, áll things covering. (649)

After the *abba* rhyme, we encounter four words with 'ing' ('fading'/'receding'/'being'/'sing'). They are consonant with the insistent repetition of 'Covering' that starts in the following line. Once the repetition starts, there come three unrhymed lines ('musicians'/'kettle-drums'/'sages'), as if the anaphora replaced the rhyme at the line-end. Yet the penultimate line ends this repetition with 'thing', which itself rhymes 'Covering', and the word 'covering' moves to the very end of the poem to rhyme at the line-end. The

clangorous reverberation of 'ing' and the self-enclosure between 'Covering' and 'covering' help Pythagoras's ritualistic verbal covering of all the symbolical figures of his age. As we have already noted, McDonald considers that 'Adam's Legacy' and 'Twilight of the Gods' depict the 'mythic beginnings and endings of time', and he also states that 'Twilight of the Gods' is the poem that 'provides an ending for such cycles' as we have seen in 'Adam's Legacy'.[45] However, the poem's ending is again obscure like 'Adam's Legacy', since the 'snowflakes of Nirvana' leave us an ambivalence of the snow between its function of covering and its nature of melting. While 'Anything, everything, all things' are hidden under the snow, they might be revealed again when the snow disappears. The poem still holds a possibility of returning behind its depiction of destruction and receding of the old.

We have seen in this section MacNeice's poems using various mythological images and found that he attempts to give an explanation of the principle of global cyclicality. Both the method and the topic of these works in the twenties may reflect not only MacNeice's aesthetic interests in them but also his aspiration to make himself a poet by emulating the existing literary tradition, most notably the modernist writers, his immediate predecessors. Nevertheless, it is true that MacNeice's poems in *Blind Fireworks* are somewhat cerebral. McDonald points out that 'Twilight of the Gods' depicts the end of history 'purely in the terms of an amalgam of myth which has few points of contact with ideas outside the motifs themselves'.[46] MacNeice recollects later that the re-arranged images are 'mythological tags, half-digested new ideas and conceits put in for the hell of it' and he was just 'only too happy mixing up Greek, Biblical and Nordic'.[47] It is as if to admit that these early poems are a playful exploration of the poet's imagination, which is different from the use of myth by Eliot and Yeats. Denis Donoghue argues that while Eliot regards myth as 'source of discipline, illumination, and order', Yeats uses myth to 'gain for one's feelings a certain social bearing

[45] McDonald, pp. 55-6.
[46] Ibid., p. 56.
[47] MacNeice, 'Experiences with Images', p. 160.

and latitude'.[48] Namely, myth provides Yeats's poems with 'forces and energies which will give themselves to no form but their own'.[49] In his poems, MacNeice follows both of their methods to some extent, but what Longley calls the 'hothouse solipsism in *Blind Fireworks*' may be true in that he is mostly satisfied in the purely imaginary and private realm even in his apocalyptic poems.[50] We can then value in two opposite ways the appearance of 'I' in 'A Lame Idyll' and 'Adam's Legacy' and Pythagoras in 'Twilight of the Gods', who makes a soliloquy in the end; while those voices seem to let the universal cyclicality of history be recognised as a personal matter, we can say that MacNeice tries to formulate his explanation of the world by placing his own existence in it.

If we take the latter, positive evaluation of the personal element's involvement in the universal, we may even be able to associate his mythical poems with his poems concerning the child's unstable perception and identity we read earlier in the chapter. Those poems are more or less autobiographical, reflecting the fear experienced in his childhood and the present anxiety of growing up. As McDonald notes, MacNeice's 'own early life provides him with a series of recurring and compelling images that may suggest a lifelong preoccupation with the self'.[51] At the time of writing the poems in *Blind Fireworks*, he feels the end of his own Golden Age of youth, and not only does he write about it, but he also refers to a large cycle of the universe, which has had its own Golden Age. It helps him cultivate his immature vision as a poet before he finds his voice in the next decade.

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[48] Denis Donoghue, 'Yeats, Eliot, and the Mythical Method', *The Sewanee Review*, 105.2 (Spring 1997), 206-26 (p. 211).
[49] Ibid., p. 213.
[50] Longley, p. 44.
[51] Peter McDonald, 'Louis MacNeice: Irony and Responsibility', in *The Cambridge Companion to Contemporary Irish Poetry*, ed. by Matthew Campbell (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), pp. 59-75 (p. 60).

Chapter 2.

The Art that 'deadens and endures':

The Self-Referential Poems in the Early Thirties

This chapter focuses on MacNeice's use of traditional forms in the early nineteen thirties. This revival is important in that it coincides with his increasing awareness of society. Edna Longley argues that 'The collective thirties tendency was towards a renewal of traditional forms', which was not irrelevant to the mood of society: 'the pressure of subject-matter paradoxically encouraged shape. A message required a more clear-cut medium than free-verse could usually provide. Hence the revival of set modes – verse-epistle, ode, eclogue, ballad, song – as well as of set stanzas'.[1] In *Poems*, however, the use of traditional forms marks a transition from a mainly aesthetical viewpoint to a recognition of the limits of this perspective.

It is after he graduated from Oxford and started working in Birmingham in 1930 that MacNeice experienced great changes both in his life and concept of art. He got married to Mary, whom he had met in Oxford.[2] When he recalls those years later in his criticism 'Experiences with Images', he admits that his interest in the world around him was aroused because of the job and the marriage.[3] MacNeice then becomes productive, especially in 1933, writing twelve out of thirty poems in *Poems*. In the first section of this chapter, I discuss the poems in the sonnet form and the poems about art written that year. MacNeice wishes to achieve timelessness in art and tries to fulfill this wish in the formal arrangement of the poems

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[1] Edna Longley, 'Louis MacNeice: Aspects of His Aesthetic Theory and Practice', in *Studies on Louis MacNeice*, ed. by Jacqueline Genet and Wynne Hellegouarc'h (Caen: Centre de Publications de l'Université de Caen, 1988), pp. 51-62 (p. 58).

[2] MacNeice met Giovanna Marie Thérèse Babette Ezra in Oxford in 1927 and married her on 21 June 1930. See Jon Stallworthy, *Louis MacNeice* (London: Faber and Faber, 1995), pp. 116-7, 142-3, 158.

[3] The imagery of some poems in *Poems* is 'mainly occasional or descriptive', for 'when I wrote these poems I was for the first time (a) working for a salary, (b) living in a large city, (c) married, and (d), in any proper sense, grown up'. MacNeice, 'Experiences with Images' (1949), in *SLC*, pp. 153-64 (p. 161).

but at once recognises its impossibility. The eclogues I read in the second section are similarly self-referential, for they implicitly converse with the conventions of their own genre, through which they disclose the limit and function of art.

I

The sonnet may have been an appropriate form for MacNeice to explore his ideas about poetry, since the regulations it imposes upon itself could both limit and expand the possibilities of expression. It is also important for us the reader to read his sonnets in order to discuss his self-consciousness as poet, since by the time MacNeice writes in the sonnet form, 'every modern sonnet becomes partly a sonnet about sonnets'.[4] The two sonnets published in *Poems*, 'Spring Voices' and 'Sunday Morning', both written in 1933, are distinguished from traditional sonnet form in terms of the use of rhyming couplets at the line-ends. Yet it is not unusual for 'the modernists', who seem to consider that 'the sonnet represented the worst of the previous generation'.[5] MacNeice in youth may be one of the poets who see more limit than freedom in the form; he 'liked choosing an intricate traditional form such as the sonnet' until he encountered Eliot's works and attempted to write in free verse.[6] At the same time, we cannot decisively say that the beginning of the twentieth century is the age of free verse. Chris Baldick argues that the form practised by the modernists is the 'form of extensions and variations upon traditional regularity, not of "rejections" or "abandonments" of it', and the characteristic arrangement in modern verse is made through rhyme, as seen in the use of half-rhyme and pararhyme.[7]

MacNeice's sonnets can also be conceived as a re-arrangement of the traditional

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[4] A. D. Cousins and Peter Howarth, Introduction to *The Cambridge Companion to The Sonnet*, ed. by A. D. Cousins and Peter Howarth (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011; repr. 2012), pp. 1-5 (p. 3).
[5] Peter Howarth, 'The Modern Sonnet', in Ibid., pp. 225-44 (p. 225).
[6] MacNeice, *MP*, p. 50.
[7] Chris Baldick, *The Oxford English Literary History: Volume 10. 1910-1940: The Modern Movement* (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2014; repr. 2015), p. 77.

metre and rhyme scheme rather than a total subversion of them. The metres are diverse because of the relatively long lines. Longley points out that MacNeice 'is strikingly fond of the long couplet' in this period.[8] The couplets, being long, are at the same time regulated by the rhymes at each line-end. In 'Spring Voices', the meaning and arrangement of the rhymes seem to react against what is said in the poem. The poem presents a universally known fact that the spring is joyful but excessive indulgence in it is not desirable. It begins with the contrasted images of the coward 'small householder' and of the bright sunshine:

> The small householder comes out warily
> Afraid of the barrage of sun that shouts cheerily,
> Spring is massing forces, birds wink in air,
> The battlemented chestnuts volley green fire,
> The pigeons banking on the wind, the hoots of cars,
> Stir him to run wild, gamble on horses, buy cigars;
> Joy lies before him to be ladled and lapped from his hand – (29)

The poem shows how distant we have become since the Romantic poets where the poet is an enthusiastic and often uncritical admirer of the power of nature. Here the vivacious nature felt in the Sun and the season is noted for its excess rather than approvingly praised. The identical suffix in the first rhyme 'warily'/'cheerily' rather stresses the opposition between the meaning of the words, which is also the opposition between the troubled householder and the shining beams from the sun. Before this rhyme, the assonance of 'out'/'shouts' also marks the difference between the householder's coming 'out' and the sun's emitting its light 'out'. In spite of the vast contrast, the man is allured to act boldly as if to wear the fearlessness of the

[8] Edna Longley, *Louis MacNeice: A Study* (London: Faber and Faber, 1988), p. 108.

sun. After the exemplifications of the imaginable indulgences, the smoothness felt from the alliteration in 'ladled and lapped' in line 7 indicates that the 'joy', like water in the fountain that could feed the man, is to be obtained easily.

The pleasant atmosphere, however, is denied in the next line without space or any adversative:

> Only that behind him, in the shade of his villa, memories stand
> Breathing on his neck and muttering that all this has happened before,
> Keep the wind out, cast no clout, try no unwarranted jaunts untried before,
> But let the spring slide by nor think to board its car
> For it rides West to where the tangles of scrap-iron are;
> Do not walk, these voices say, between the bucking clouds alone
> Or you may loiter into a suddenly howling crater, or fall, jerked back, garrotted
> by the sun. (29)

The 'memories' behind the man persuade him not to devote himself to temporary enjoyment. This warning in the latter half of the poem can be taken as the antithesis to the statement in the first half that apparently claims the vividness and freedom of the spring. In spite of this contrast, 'stand' in line 8 and 'hand' in line 7 rhyme, connecting rather than dividing the poem. MacNeice later claims that the lyric should be '*dramatic*' and a lyric voice is always conscious of 'the Opposition' and that all poems 'contain an internal conflict, cross-talk, backwash, come-back or pay off. This is often conveyed by sleight-of-hand—the slightest change of tone, a heightening or lowering of diction, a rhythmical shift or a jump of ideas'.[9] Notably, 'Spring Voices' is 'dramatic' because the rhymes work independently from the

[9] MacNeice, 'Experiences with Images', p. 155.

logical structure of the content. While the rhyme at lines 1 and 2 highlights the contrast (‘warily’/‘cheerily’) between the man and the sun, the identical word in lines 9 and 10 (‘before’/‘before’) juxtaposes the experienced thing (‘all this has happened before’) and the yet to be experienced thing (‘unwarranted jaunts untried before’), which are opposite but equally condemned by the memories. In the warning by the memories, the rhyming words implicitly convey the fear that they intend to tell to the householder. The transition from ‘car’ to ‘are’ traces the course of the journey of the spring’s car, which ‘rides West to where the tangles of scrap-iron are’. The sense of finality is paradoxically intensified by the verb ‘are’, since it signifies the destiny of the car to become one of the ‘tangles of scrap-iron’ and permanently stay in a state of being dead. Lastly, this menacing anticipation seems to be confirmed by the very absence of a rhyme in the last two lines of the poem. Set free from the confinement of regularity, the man may walk ‘alone’, but the voices of the memories imaginatively practise an execution on him, ‘garrotted by the sun’. The poem shows an ominous aspect of spring by presenting the fact that the experience of a new season will also become the past and make one feel the passage of time, which is itself not desirable. It seems that the temporal and spatial limits of the sonnet form reinforce the sense of the limits of time for man.

At the same time, MacNeice aspires to expand the sense of limit within the sonnet. ‘Sunday Morning’, a sonnet written a month after ‘Spring Voices’, is a self-reflexive poem whose practice and content both challenge and recognise formal and temporal limits:

> Down the road someone is practising scales,
> The notes like little fishes vanish with a wink of tails,
> Man’s heart expands to tinker with his car
> For this is Sunday morning, Fate’s great bazaar [. . .] (21)

The description of the scene is impressionistic, though seemingly descriptive, for the poet's first specification of the direction from which he hears the music ('Down the road') is accompanied by the vague word 'someone', which implies not only his ignorance of but also his indifference to the player of the music. This unclear perception of the speaker may be linked with the evanescence of the music, which is visualised in the next line; the image of 'little fishes' that dive into the water and leave a trace on the surface perfectly conveys how the music spreads and lingers, though briefly, in the air. The bathetic effect is introduced in the next line where the highly poetic expression, 'heart expands', is reduced to an ordinary activity in 'tinker'. In addition, the internal rhyme of 'tinker' and 'wink' in the previous line works to include both the playing of the music and the fixing of the car in an ordinary scene on the Sunday morning. Yet this scene as a whole is then exaggeratedly described as 'Fate's great bazaar'. With help of the exoticism implied in the word 'bazaar', the speaker seems to be revaluing the variety and value in an ordinary Sunday morning, though he cannot entirely discard his self-mockery.

The speaker then addresses someone ('you') and persuades 'you' to make use of this pleasant moment:

> Regard these means as ends, concentrate on this Now,
> And you may grow to music or drive beyond Hindhead anyhow,
> Take corners on two wheels until you get so fast
> That you can clutch a fringe or two of the windy past,
> That you can abstract this day and make it to the week of time
> A small eternity, a sonnet self-contained in rhyme. (21)

What should be noted here is that the past is what is pursued rather than what is left behind. Yet the metaphor is not wrong if we focus on the ceaseless flow of time, in which each moment leaves us one after another. The speaker desires to keep the present by detaining and abstracting time in the poem, an imaginary place where time can ever be 'now'. However, it seems that the concept of abstraction itself opposes what MacNeice takes sides with. In his letter to Blunt, MacNeice confesses that 'I'm tired of theories. It will be some time before I read another "aesthetic". Theories are the combination of abstractions & an abstraction is the rough & ready term that covers a lot of individual concretes. [. . .] I don't believe in pure form. I don't believe in pure anything. Anything pure is an abstraction. All concretes are adulterated'.[10] In 'Sunday Morning', it seems that to 'abstract' is more for the preservation than for the conceptualisation or blurring of the particulars. The self-reference to 'sonnet' betrays the fact that the sonnet's 'self-contained' nature is apt for this intention. Reading Yeats's 'The Phases of the Moon', Helen Vendler notes that his idea that 'All thought becomes an image' is 'reminding us that poetry abstracts "reality"—including the reality of human thinking—into symbolic forms'.[11] This definition seems to be applicable to MacNeice's attempt in 'Sunday Morning' that abstracts reality for the eternal protection of it in a work of art, but what differs from Yeats's poetry is that rather than creating 'symbolic forms', a new meaning, out of the reality, MacNeice's poem tries to hold the reality in the sonnet, making use of the existing form's tradition and structure, both of which are fit for preservation. In this respect, it seems that the frequent and regular rhyming of couplets contributes to the poem becoming 'self-contained in rhyme' and the rhyme at the end of lines 9-10, 'time'/ 'rhyme', reflects the wish these lines express: the wish to preserve time in rhyme. However, MacNeice acknowledges the ideal and limit of the 'self-contained' state. In 'Poetry To-day' in 1935, he comments on Stephen Spender's poems, stating that they 'have not got

[10] MacNeice, To Anthony Blunt, 25 September 1926, in *Letters*, p. 122.
[11] Helen Vendler, *Poets Thinking: Pope, Whitman, Dickinson, Yeats* (Cambridge, Massachusetts; London: Harvard University Press, 2004), p. 9.

that crystal self-contained perfection which is so glibly attributed to the ideal lyric'.[12] MacNeice recognises the value of the integrity of self-contained poetry, but he then expresses his admiration for Spender's poems precisely because they have a different value from the self-containedness. According to MacNeice, Spender 'presses his confused world of emotional clichés into a harmony which is, fittingly, incomplete', and this incompleteness is characteristic of 'most "emotional" poets': 'Spender is an individual poet; individuality [. . .] is always in the making; Spender works hard at his job; that is why his poetry at first sight is incomplete but at second sight necessarily so'.[13] Although he admits the theoretical ideal of the 'self-contained' lyric, MacNeice here evaluates Spender's struggling with unorganised, self-contradictory, chaotic emotions, thinking it the core of lyrics. Similarly, he insists that self-containedness is impossible for poets to attain due to their relationship to life: 'Homer, Aeschylus, Bunyan, Dante, did not live in literary self-containedness'.[14] The self-contained state is acknowledged as ideal both for poetry and poets, but they cannot help but relate to things outside of themselves.

In the rest of 'Sunday Morning', MacNeice shows that both the poem and people cannot attain self-containedness:

> But listen, up the road, something gulps, the church spire
> Opens its eight bells out, skulls' mouths which will not tire
> To tell how there is no music or movement which secures
> Escape from the weekday time. Which deadens and endures. (21)

These last four lines are separated from the preceding ten lines with a line space, and this line space indicates a *volta* both in the structure and content. The latter part can be read as the

[12] MacNeice, 'Poetry To-day' (6 Sept. 1935), in *SLC*, pp. 10-44 (p. 38).
[13] Ibid., pp. 38-9.
[14] MacNeice, 'Subject in Modern Poetry' ([Dec.] 1936 [1937]), in *SLC*, pp. 57- 74 (p. 58).

anti-statement as in 'Spring Voices', and echoes the same language or images as those used in the former one; the church bells 'up the road' contrast with the music heard 'down the road', and their tireless noises, which seem to be equivalent to the fluid musical notes and the noise of the speeding car, disclose the ineffectiveness and ephemerality of the joy gained from the music and the car. John Pikoulis, interpreting 'a small eternity' as 'a reality that has survived its origin in the unstable element and grows like roses', maintains that 'in this, it contrasts with the succession of moments which constitute the working week and also with the defunct sabbath, with its view of the temporal as the reflection of a larger abstract truth'.[15] He distinguishes the precious present from 'the succession of moments', i.e. the monotonous repetition of everyday, and reveals the contradiction that 'the temporal', which should represent the particular, becomes a part of the abstract monotony. Indeed, it is true that the couplets in the poem, which seem to realise the self-containedness within their repetition, may have another function, that of underlining this inevitable but undesirable flow of time. If we see the couplet at the end of 'Sunday Morning' in terms of this latter function, the sustained regularity of couplet seems decisively to confirm art's impossibility of eternalising time. The last line leads to this disappointing conclusion not only with the regular rhymes but also with the meaning multiplied by the broken syntax. The unusual caesura in the last line leaves it uncertain if the phrase 'Which deadens and endures' is the antecedent to 'the week day time' or 'music or movement' in the previous line. If the 'weekday time' is what 'deadens and endures', both of the verbs emphasise the state of monotony; the weekday 'endures' because of its routine and 'deadens' for the monotony of the routine. This is the most plausible reading of the last phrase. On the other hand, if 'there is no music or movement', which 'deadens and endures', those verbs may potentially connote the opposite of each other. In this reading, 'deaden', which seems to include the negative implication, may suggest the continuity of

[15] John Pikoulis, 'Louis MacNeice in the Thirties: The Minute after the Minute after the Minute after', *Irish University Review*, 21.1 (Spring-Summer 1991), 130-46 (p. 134).

music and movement of the Sunday Morning ('no music or movement [. . .] deadens'), while if no music or movement 'endures', it supports what is said in the preceding relative clause: music and movement will not last, although time itself continuously moves and brings us to weekdays. Even if there is 'no' action that can help, the deliberately obscured ending of the poem may still keep some hope, implying that as the weekdays come again, the music and movement of the Sunday morning will be experienced again. Time is in a sense repeated but it cannot be the same. That the poem ends with the very suggestive verb, 'endures', shows that MacNeice is still undecided if he should believe or discredit the power of art to 'endure' as an imaginary frame that accommodates a precious moment. Unlike the unrhymed ending of 'Spring Voices', the rhyme of 'secures' and 'endures' ends 'Sunday Morning'; we may assume that the poem tries to achieve self-containedness, relying on the meanings of the verbs themselves.

It is indeed important to focus on implications that MacNeice's couplets may carry in this period in order to consider the problems regarding time that are explored both in the form and the content of those sonnets. Since the couplet is not only regular and conventional but comprised of the rhyme of successive line-ends, it can represent the opposite senses of progress and stagnation. This is similar to the paradox of time that MacNeice reveals in his poems. 'The Glacier' is another poem about the fear of and resistance to time. By expressing his 'fear of becoming stone' (28), MacNeice highlights the necessity to keep moving to evade the death, which time brings. Peter McDonald points out that the 'petrifaction of a time that seems rather to nullify than bring about change recurs throughout *Poems*'.[16] We can perhaps add that the progress of time can also 'nullify' everything, since all in the world is directed towards its end as time proceeds. In 'The Glacier', the varying patterns of couplets seem to sway along with this paradox of time. Although the poem consists of couplets, very strictly

[16] Peter McDonald, *Louis MacNeice: The Poet in His Contexts* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991), p. 27.

speaking, every other couplet fails to rhyme perfectly; the second pair in the poem, 'slot'/'thought' at lines 3 and 4, is a near rhyme and the pair after the next, 'day'/'headway', cannot precisely be counted as a perfect rhyme because the accented syllable in 'headway' is in 'head' rather than 'way'. However, the last couplet, which is not supposed to rhyme according to the pattern so far, has a perfect rhyme ('pains'/'veins') (28). The poet betrays the reader's expectation twice. Since the irregularity of non-rhyme becomes a pattern as the poem goes, the last rhyme is at once a deviation from an established pattern and a return to the originally expected regularity. Considering the attempt to 'turn away to seemingly slower things' (28), to defy the ceaseless time in the poem, it can be assumed that MacNeice tries to save the poem from becoming stone in a monotonous pattern by breaking the original pattern and then another pattern. As any regularity can be a pattern, any irregularity can become a pattern by being itself a regularity. However, concerning the repetition in 'Homage to Clichés', Neil Corcoran refers to the contradiction implied in MacNeice's praise of 'delightful world of cliché and refrain' (68). He analyses the last line 'What will you have, my dear? The same again?' (68), words spoken by the one who is drinking and afraid of the approaching end of the time, and says: 'having the same again seems both an avoidance of the knowledge of death, and an inevitable confrontation with it: both at once, the same again. Woven into the very fabric of cliché and refrain is the knowledge of termination'.[17] What I have pointed out is that in 'The Glacier', this paradox of repetition is also represented by its rhyme scheme.

While the couplet, as a framework of a poem, is closely linked to the poem's own purpose to challenge time, the visual arts are considered to have a similar function in 'August' and 'Nature Morte'. In 'August', the poet knows from the beginning the inevitable speed of time:

[17] Neil Corcoran, 'The Same Again? MacNeice's Repetitions', in *Incorrigibly Plural: Louis MacNeice and his Legacy*, ed. by Fran Brearton and Edna Longley (Manchester: Carcanet Press, 2012), pp. 257-73 (p. 262).

> The shutter of time darkening ceaselessly
> Has whisked away the foam of may and elder
> And I realise how now, as every year before,
> Once again the gay months have eluded me. (27)

Robyn Marsack points out that the 'end-stopped quatrains [. . .] secure each image' in this poem.[18] Yet the poet reveals here that he failed to secure time, having passed the 'gay months of may and elder'. The accumulated words denoting temporality, 'now, as every year before, / Once again', accentuate how even his attempt and its failure become a pattern. Though the lines are 'end-stopped' as Marsack notes, the words regarding time and its repetition run on across two lines, which may represent the elusive moments. The poet articulates that even visual art cannot fulfill his desire: 'We jump from picture to picture and cannot follow / The living curve that is breathlessly the same' (27). The 'living curve that is breathlessly the same' points to the contradiction that once confined eternally in an artwork, the things alive in reality can become breathless, dead. Alan Gillis argues that the 'living curve' is a 'kind of cosmic totality beyond the remit of human apprehension' and MacNeice considers 'how to approach the "living curve" without delimiting it, and thus turning it and oneself to stone'.[19] Tom Walker distinguishes between the movement of jumping and the determination to 'follow the living curve' in the paintings, claiming that the poem is 'emphasising the essential deceit of attempting to "jump from picture to picture" rather than trying to "follow / The living curve that is breathlessly the same"'.[20] I interpret the act of jumping as less a deceit than an act that highlights the contradiction in artwork I pointed out above; although both our movement and the living curve belong to life, we cannot follow the living curve in art if we

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[18] Robyn Marsack, *Cave of Making: Poetry of Louis MacNeice* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1982; repr. 1985), p. 16.
[19] Alan Gillis, *Irish Poetry of the 1930s* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), p. 40.
[20] Tom Walker, '"Even a still life is alive": Visual Art and Bloomsbury Aesthetics in the Early Poetry of Louis MacNeice', *The Cambridge Quarterly*, 38.3 (2009), 196-213 (pp. 210-11).

keep moving, since it is, as Gillis notes, something different in the real living curve that the actual objects have. In any interpretation, what is clear is that the fact that we can hold the living curve in art is, somewhat paradoxically, welcomed by the poet: 'I, like Poussin, make a still-bound fête of us / Suspending every noise, of insect or machine' (27).

Yet eventually, the poet, awakening from his own fancy, rejects the ideal:

> 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. (27)

The recognition of the impossibility of stopping time in art generates a wish 'to have time die'. MacNeice, however, complicates the poem again in the last two lines. He employs physical action to 'catch hold of things' as metaphor as he does in 'Sunday Morning' ('you can clutch a fringe or two of the windy past') (21) and 'The Glacier' ('bus succeeds bus so identically sliding through / That you cannot catch the fraction of a chink between the two') (28). The imaginary materialisation of time appears to make the action sound easy and the last lines in 'August' seem to claim that 'we' cannot catch time just because 'we' are dead. However, it is odd to claim that 'we' are dead when 'we' are not; these obscure lines are suggestive of a paradoxical fact that 'we' cannot truly overcome the fear of time that brings them death unless imagining that 'we' are dead. Our being ghosts also implies that if time itself dies, it would automatically mean our death too and that we would not be bothered with the fear of time if we were dead; hence, the only available way to wish for the death of time is actually invalid and illogical. It sounds like the final verdict on the challenge of art against time.

'Nature Morte' seems to be more approving of this truth than other poems. It firstly

admits the ability of words to preserve moments. Husbands read the results of sports matches in the newspaper, which enable them to play the sports ‘vicariously’ in their imagination. It is ‘a multiplication of their lives’ (23) rather than a replacement of their selves. The poet has a wish to use the ‘pretentious word’ that ‘stabilises the light on the sun-fondled trees / And, by photographing our ghosts, claims to put us at our ease’ (23). He then draws his eye to Chardin, whose still lives can be a model of art:

> Yet even so, no matter how solid and staid we contrive
> Our reconstructions, 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. (23)

While the poet admits some difficulty in imaginatively reconstructing the objects of the world in art, Chardin’s paintings are exceptional in that they eloquently speak for the ‘appalling unrest of the soul’ even in the seemingly static canvas of a ‘still life’ painting.

MacNeice in the poems discussed so far considers the fundamental aesthetic ideal in relation to the time-bound reality that always hinders the realisation of the ideal. Yet, for MacNeice, nothing is ever truly good or bad. His position remains unstable between the pro-aesthetic and realistic attitudes. The seemingly clear structure of statement and anti-statement does not necessarily accord with the development of the poet’s thoughts, while his use of and references to a form of poetry and a form of art are expected to have a dual function of expressing and representing the ideal. Unlike some modern poets who have doubts about conventional forms, MacNeice examines the possibility of such forms accommodating un-confinable mortal lives. What differentiates his poems from a simple aestheticism is that such pursuits in poetic form lead to an appreciation of living as well as the perfection of art

itself. This is also clear from his choice of scenes from daily lives, which are so ordinary and momentary that we might otherwise dismiss them or let them pass. His re-confrontation with apparent limitations in form (including rhyme) therefore enhances not only his technical ability but also the perspective he brings to life through poetry.

II

This section discusses two eclogues, 'An Eclogue for Christmas' and 'Eclogue by a Five-Barred Gate' in *Poems*. The reason why I focus on the two eclogues in question is that although they seem to be different in theme, the influences of and allusions to the works of the genre's major founders, Theocritus and Virgil, are more visible. The analyses of these poems will therefore focus on MacNeice's use and idea of traditional poetic form and its contribution to the formation of his social awareness and his identity as a poet.

Before analysing MacNeice's eclogues, it is worth exploring some definitions of traditional pastoral literature. According to *The New Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics*, an eclogue is a poem that disguises under the 'rural, idyllic, serene' settings some serious topics such as 'praise of a person, beloved, worthy, or dead, or disquisition on the nature of poetry or the state of contemp[orary]. poetry, or criticism of political or religious corruption', and 'Elevation of rustic life implied denigration of urban'.[21] Indeed, George Puttenham argues that the pastoral is purported 'under the veil of homely persons and in rude speeches to insinuate and glance at greater matters, and such as perchance had not been safe to have been disclosed in any other sort'.[22] As William Empson famously says, 'you can say

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[21] J. E. Congleton and T. V. F. Brogan, 'Eclogue', in *The New Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics*, ed. by Alex Preminger and T. V. F. Brogan (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1993), pp. 317-8 (p. 317).

[22] George Puttenham, Chapter 18: 'Of the shepherds' or pastoral poesy called eclogue, and to what purpose it was first invented and used', in *The Art of English Poesy* (1589), in *Sidney's 'The Defence of Poesy' and Selected Renaissance Literary Criticism*, ed. by Gavin Alexander (London: Penguin Books, 2004), pp. 88-9 (p. 89).

everything about complex people by a complete consideration of simple people'.[23] At the same time, W. W. Greg, at the beginning of his book *Pastoral Poetry and Pastoral Drama*, stresses the artificiality of the pastoral form. He asserts that the well-known notion of pastoral, 'the realistic or at least recognizably "natural" presentation of actual shepherd', does not fit most works that are claimed to be pastoral, since the writers' motives for using the form were inevitably inconsistent and 'to live at all the ideal appeared to require an atmosphere of paradox and incongruity'.[24] Yet these 'contradictions and inconsistencies', Greg articulates, give the form a unique strength.[25] Peter V. Marinelli, like Greg, points out the broadness and the comprehensiveness of a mode of pastoral, and he also finds its significant feature in what he calls 'the art of the backward glance': a point of view, which looks back on 'an ideal or at least more innocent world' that 'is felt to be lost, but not so wholly as to destroy the memory of it or to make some imaginative intercourse between present reality and past perfection impossible'.[26] Frank Kermode similarly notes that in the pastoral there is the idea that 'at a remote period in history nature gave forth her fruits without the aid of man's labour and worship. Perhaps, somewhere, she still does so'.[27]

These characteristics of the pastoral—the contradiction between the ideal and the reality and 'the backward glance'—are also useful in modern literature. According to Valentine Cunningham, it was a form favoured by leftist writers in the thirties, in spite of the general tendency to think that rural life, which the privileged class of people such as landowners represents, can be 'a right-wing thing'.[28] Cunningham further indicates that the pastoral ideal was applied to the socialists' ideal in literature: 'The bourgeois poet must,

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[23] William Empson, *Some Versions of Pastoral* (Hammondsworth: Penguin Books, 1935; repr. 1995), p. 113.
[24] Walter W. Greg, *Pastoral Poetry and Pastoral Drama: A Literary Inquiry, with Special Reference to the Pre-Restoration Stage in England* (New York: Russell and Russell, 1959), p. 1.
[25] Ibid., p. 2.
[26] Peter V. Marinelli, *Pastoral* (London: Methuen, 1971), p. 9.
[27] *English Pastoral Poetry: From the Beginnings to Marvell*, ed. by Frank Kermode (London: George G. Harrap, 1952), p. 14.
[28] Valentine Cunningham, 'MacNeice and Thirties (Classical) Pastoralism', in *Incorrigibly Plural: Louis MacNeice and his Legacy*, ed. by Fran Brearton and Edna Longley (Manchester: Carcanet Press, 2012), pp. 85-100 (p. 86).

according to the common leftist cry, "go over" to the side of the working class, taking along his/her artistic practices in an act of personal and aesthetic conversion. Going into the country, moving out of town, living rurally, was a practical expression of that political-aesthetic imperative'.[29] However, as we will see in 'An Eclogue for Christmas', MacNeice rejects such an idealisation of the rustic or rural and even the supposedly idyllic scenes are not truly idealistic in his eclogues.

The eclogue form did also have a particular value for MacNeice, especially in this period. Jon Stallworthy argues that the form helped MacNeice to meet 'the request for longer poems, while giving scope to his developing interest in dramatic writing, and enabling him to extend the tradition of Virgil and Spencer into the twentieth century'.[30] Marsack points out that the 'eclogues allowed debate without requiring a resolution, while their statement and counter-statement helped improve the construction of his poetry'.[31] Similarly, A. T. Tolley states that 'the dialogue form permits the poet to play off contrary points of view, while remaining in uncertainty himself. It is the ideal form for MacNeice's deliberately inconclusive honesty'[32]. We should, however, note that neither 'dramatic', 'debate', nor 'contrary points of view' is synonymous with 'dialectic'. McDonald states that 'It is perhaps necessary to stress that "dialectic", from Plato onwards, cannot be without direction' and, therefore, 'if there is a sense in which the eclogues embody only a very slight progression of ideas, and seem to be without specific conclusions, then criticizing them in terms of "dialectic", a word whose Marxist associations MacNeice distrusted, may be inappropriate'.[33] I would like to focus on the fact that MacNeice ponders on the possibilities and limitations of poetry and allows these opposite aspects collide with each other but remain unresolved in his eclogues. The long tradition of the genre itself makes the poems at once conscious of and suspicious of their own

[29] Ibid., p. 87.
[30] Stallworthy, p. 164.
[31] Marsack, p. 25.
[32] A. T. Tolley, *The Poetry of the Thirties* (London: Victor Gollancz, 1975), p. 184.
[33] McDonald, p. 21.

presupposed eternity, the eternity of poetry, of their society, and of time itself.

As MacNeice himself recollects in his autobiography, he composed 'An Eclogue for Christmas' at Christmas in 1933, urged to write about 'the Decline of the West'.[34] The poem's sketches of city and country by personas 'A' and 'B', respectively, diagnose the ills of modern society. The inclusion of contemporary issues recalls Virgil, since the first eclogue in his *Eclogues*, according to Paul Alpers, reflects the real circumstance of the time of Virgil's composition of it.[35] Placed at the beginning of *Poems*, MacNeice's first collection in the thirties, 'An Eclogue for Christmas' can be regarded as his manifesto of how he relates himself to the decade as a poet.

It is true that the poet's consciousness about the contemporary problem is apparent from the beginning of the poem, when 'A' says that 'I meet you in an evil time' (3). At the same time, these words seemingly follow the conventions of the eclogue, since, according to Seamus Heaney, they are 'the conventional utterance, the unapologetically literary arc'.[36] 'B' implicitly agrees with 'A' by referring to the 'evil bells' that deprive them of 'the thought of everything else' (3). The loss of 'thought' is repeatedly mentioned as the phenomenon that represents the 'evil' of modern society. It is caused, 'A' reveals, by the condition that the machines never cease in spite of their worn-out status. Paradoxically, the lack is also caused by the 'The excess sugar of a diabetic culture / Rotting the nerve of life and literature' (3). While the inhuman objects move, the human beings are diseased and unproductive. Edna Longley indicates that 'An Eclogue for Christmas' 'owes something both to T. S. Eliot and to Karl Marx – a hybridisation common in the early 1930s', yet 'in replacing Eliot's elusive voices with spokesmen for town and country, for social contexts, MacNeice breaks with the

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[34] MacNeice, *SAF*, p. 146.

[35] Alpers explains that the poem consists of a dialogue between Meliboues, who suffers from the confiscation of land, and Tityrus, whose property evaded the deprivation. As a reward for the battle of Philippi in 42 B. C., Octavian and Antony distributed among their veterans the land, which had been owned by the people, whom Meliboeus represents in the poem. Paul Alpers, *The Singer of the Eclogues: A Study of Virgilian Pastoral* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1979), p. 68.

[36] Seamus Heaney, '"In Extremis": On the Staying Power of Pastoral', *Proceedings of the Royal Irish Academy. Section C: Archaeology, Celtic Studies, History, Linguistics, Literature*, 103C.1 (2003), 1-12 (p. 9).

mode of *The Waste Land*. [. . .] its vision approximates more to Auden's metaphors for a neurotic society than to Eliot's symbolic spiritual desert'.[37] Furthermore, the juxtaposition of 'life and literature' reflects MacNeice's belief in their interrelation, which follows Matthew Arnold's dictum that poetry is 'a criticism of life'.[38] The 'excess sugar' may also suggest the smell from the chocolate factory in Birmingham, which MacNeice actually sensed when he lived there.[39] It is not a random reference either, since the factory labour for MacNeice is associated with monotony. 'A', dismissing the mechanical work, considers that a hope only remains in the life of 'B', 'whom a morose routine / Saves from the mad vertigo of being what has been' (3). Yet 'B' calls 'A' an 'Analogue of me' and pronounces that 'My country will not yield you any sanctuary' (3). 'B' embraces the note of an unwilling resignation, for the monotony of 'a morose routine' in the country is also an evil. Here what is similar to the paradox of repetition is seen: that both stasis and movement can be monotony.

As monotony makes men lose consciousness of their acts and thoughts, contemporary art results in disregarding the lives of individuals:

> I who was Harlequin in the childhood of the century,
> Posed by Picasso beside an endless opaque sea,
> Have seen myself sifted and splintered in broken facets,
> Tentative pencillings, endless liabilities, no assets,
> Abstractions scalpelled with a palette-knife

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[37] Edna Longley, 'Louis MacNeice: Aspect of His Aesthetic Theory and Practice', in *Studies on Louis MacNeice*, p. 54.

[38] 'It is important, therefore, to hold fast this: that poetry is at bottom a criticism of life; that the greatness of a poet lies in his powerful and beautiful application of ideas to life, —to the question: How to live'. Matthew Arnold, 'Wordsworth' (1879), in *Poetry and Criticism of Matthew Arnold*, ed. by A. Dwight Culler (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1961), pp. 331-46 (p. 339). For MacNeice's references to Arnold in the early thirties, see 'Poetry To-day', p. 14; 'Subject in Modern Poetry', p. 58.

[39] 'When the wind blew from the south the air would thicken with chocolate; we were only a mile from the Cadbury Works'. And talking of the workers' mass-producing endlessness, he recalls the 'girls in their white aprons each with her own little monotony, flicking a pink bauble accurately on to a bonbon, for ever and ever and ever'. MacNeice, *SAF*, p. 132.

Without reference to this particular life.
And so it has gone on; I have not been allowed to be
Myself in flesh or face, but abstracting and dissecting me
They have made of me pure form, a symbol or a pastiche,
Stylised profile, anything but soul and flesh:
And that is why I turn this jaded music on
To forswear thought and become an automaton. (3-4)

These lines may speak for MacNeice's slight regret for his absorption in modern art. In *Modern Poetry*, he recollects that 'knowing nothing about painting, I began my acquaintance with it at the wrong end. Misled by a theory about progress, I assumed that the modernist painters were in every sense an advance on their predecessors. Conventionalism meant death'.[40] In 'An Eclogue for Christmas', the modern painting is accused of its 'abstracting' of a self. The 'pure form' is here considered as unreal, like a self without its most important components, 'soul and flesh'. As we have seen in the last section, he concedes to some point that what art aims for is available by abstraction and justifies the artistic formalisation of otherwise chaotic, elusive fragments. However, when the human self becomes an object of abstraction, it is found to be a threat to individuality. A similar dissolution of a self to what we have seen in 'Child's Unhappiness' occurs when 'A' has seen himself 'sifted and splintered in broken facets'. That 'A' observes the parts of what should be its own self means that 'A' has no authority with regard to its own being.

'A's decision to be an 'automaton' sounds like the acceptance of this state in which it has no control over itself, i.e. the renunciation of individual autonomy. This is somewhat odd, considering the expressed pain and dissatisfaction of the abstraction. It is found in the

[40] MacNeice, *MP*, p. 51.

lines that follows that ‘A’s resignation derives from yet another issue concerning individuality, that is, the ‘pretence of individuality’ (5). It refers to the people’s ignorance of their incontrollable fate. Their boasting of their peculiarity and their belief in the total possession of their own will are mere illusion. ‘A’ and ‘B’ agree with each other at this point:

B. But everywhere the pretence of individuality recurs –
A. Old faces frosted with powder and choked in furs,
B. The jutlipped farmer gazing over the humpbacked wall.
A. The commercial traveller joking in the urinal.
B. I think things draws to an end, the soil is stale. (5)

This is a crucial moment in the poem in the structural sense too; each statement by ‘A’ and ‘B’ becomes shorter and fragmentary, as if ‘A’ and ‘B’, in total agreement and understanding, supplemented each other’s unfinished statement. Gillis believes that this growing integration of their speech ‘undermines their autonomy’, but I consider that this process of fusing themselves reflects a necessary and inevitable compromise that they have to reach by the end of the poem.[41]

The compromise should be made because neither of them can answer to the question, ‘What will happen’. Instead of finding a solution, ‘B’ proposes that ‘Let us lie once more, say “What we think, we can” / The old idealist lie –’ (7). Recognising their own hypocrisy, they give acceptance to what they were denouncing in the earlier part of the poem, things that represent either city or country, by repeating ‘let’. ‘A’ accepts going ‘the round of the garish glare’ (7) of the city, while ‘B’ yields his body to nature (‘the turf’, ‘the wind’, ‘the sheep’) (7).

[41] Gillis, p. 36.

However, the use of 'let' contains the contradictory senses of resignation and wish. The subtlety of their feeling is reflected in the gradual alienation of themselves from the things that they let go; first, they say 'let us' and 'let me', but then they 'let the balls of my feet, [. . .] my face [. . .] My eyelashes', and finally let go 'the sheep', 'the saxophones and the xylophones / And the cult of every technical excellence, the miles of canvas in the galleries / And the canvas of the rich man's yacht snapping and tacking on the seas / And the perfection of a grilled steak' (7). By releasing everything, including the products not related to their own bodies, the personas seem to reconfirm their own ability to affect the present situation as limited. 'A', who was not as realistic as 'B', becomes a critical speaker at the end by ringing with the proposal of 'B' to believe in the 'old idealist lie'.

Yet the fact that 'let' is imperative suggests that there still remains the autonomy to wish. The last words of 'B' can then be read as showing a kind of optimism:

> B. Let all these so ephemeral things
> Be somehow permanent like the swallow's tangent wings:
> Goodbye to you, this day remember is Christmas, this morn
> They say, interpret it your own way, Christ is born. (7)

Alpers calls the line that wishes for eternalisation a 'signature statement of MacNeice's lyric aesthetic'.[42] As in his sonnets and self-referential poems, MacNeice, through the lyrical force of poetry, attempts to make things permanent. On the other hand, his scepticism can be seen in the seemingly unnecessary 'somehow', which attenuates the sense of 'permanent', and the irresponsibility on the speaker's side may be felt in 'They say, interpret it your own way'. Those slight insertions may make us question if their wishes will be realised in the future.

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[42] Paul Alpers, 'Modern Eclogues', *Triquarterly*, 116 (Summer 2003), 20-47 (p. 37).

Michael O'Neill and Gareth Reeves observe that those last lines by 'B' have a 'wry note'.[43] Another plausible reason to doubt the pure optimism lies partly in the inadequacy of the 'swallow's tangent wings' as an image of permanence; although the swallow's wings look like a tangent curve that endlessly extends, it is only so when they spread their wings during flying, and above all, swallows themselves are ephemeral existence. William T. McKinnon reads the emendations of the lines in MacNeice's manuscript. According to McKinnon, the adjective 'tangent' has gone through the alteration from 'flash of', and the word 'permanent' was once replaced by 'immortal'; and after these, he changes the phrase 'Be somehow immortal' to 'Be somehow *mortal*'. McKinnon notes:

> The version he adopted is undoubtedly the better, but the rejected version appears to be a logical development from the thought of the opening lines of the poem, which becomes a nagging worry through it, and an obsession later: that the particulars are not universals. [. . .] Therefore, however exciting the metaphysical concept of their permanence and universality might be, pragmatic common sense would more naturally suggest their mortality than their immortality.[44]

It is true that the wish for immortality is overwhelmed in this poem by the awareness of mortality, but what is more important in his choice of 'mortal' in the process is that 'A' and 'B' rather wish for ephemeral things to be mortal, since the things they mention here are what they should accept when any improvement or change is impossible. We can remember that

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[43] Michael O'Neill and Gareth Reeves, *Auden, MacNeice, Spender: The Thirties Poetry* (Basingstoke and London: Macmillan Education, 1992), p. 65.
[44] William T. McKinnon, *Apollo's Blended Dream: A Study of the Poetry of Louis MacNeice* (London, New York, Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1971), p. 99.

unlike the conventional eclogue, the absence of the ideal from the outset denies a possibility of immortality either in life or in art. What the tentative integrity of the personas' words actually shows is not the idealistic hope to attain permanence but the acceptance, if not synthesis, of living in the imperfect and mortal world.

In 'Eclogue by a Five-Barred Gate', MacNeice adheres to the pastoral convention of the shepherds/poets' singing match more faithfully and deals with the issues that remained uncertain in 'An Eclogue for Christmas', the issues that include the right recognition of one's own individuality and the unsatisfactory reality, through checking the self-identification of shepherds/poets. The poem consists of a conversation between the personified Death and two shepherds. Unlike the seeming equality between 'A' and 'B' in 'An Eclogue for Christmas', Death has the initiative from the beginning, while the difference between two shepherds is not really identified. Yet, as in the earlier eclogue, the beginning is ominous; Death's first words to stop the shepherds are a death sentence: 'There is no way here, shepherds, read the wooden sign, / Your road is a blind road, all this land is mine' (10). The 'blind' road reads, if taken literally, as a cul-de-sac for the shepherds. At the same time, the adjective can be considered as a transferred epithet that implies the blindness of the shepherds to the truth concerning them, which will be contrasted with the omniscience of Death in the poem.

Death's verbal preeminence is revealed when Death repeats the shepherds' words. Taking over the language of shepherd 1 on Death's sheep 'half dead', Death says 'More than half, shepherds, they are more than half dead' (10), as if to pleasantly play with the shepherds' innocence and fear. Death even repeats the wrong grammar in the words of shepherd 2:

D. More than half, shepherds, they are more than half dead.
But where are your own flocks you have been so talking of?

1. Right here at out elbow –

2. Or they *was* so just now.

D. That's right, shepherd, they was so just now.
Your sheep are gone, they can't speak for you,
I must have your credentials, sing me who you are. (10-11)

There is no decisive rhyme scheme unlike the couplet in 'An Eclogue for Christmas'; though many lines are unrhymed, it is notable that, when a rhyme does appear, it is mostly a repeated word or a pararhyme; of these, the rhymes tend to be separated by an unrhymed line (i.e. *aba*), whereas the pararhymes always appear in consecutive lines. In most cases, Death repeats the shepherds' words, repetition intended as ironic. In his seemingly accommodating attitude, Death mocks not only the wrong grammar but also the disappearance of the shepherds' sheep. The schoolmasterly tone in Death's affirmation suggests that Death already knows the sheep's absence and deliberately asks the shepherds about it. It can be assumed from Death's words, 'Your sheep are gone, they can't speak for you', that for the shepherds, the sheep is the only property that can prove their identity as shepherds and also, as poets. This assumption is plausible, considering the traditional association between poets and shepherds. Bruce Arnold notes that 'grazing sheep are more distinctively part of the bucolic tradition, in which tending herds (*pascere*) is an important collateral activity to singing pastoral song. [. . .] singing and herding are virtually inseparable activities', and argues that in Virgil's *Eclogue* 'grazing an animal can be metaphorically equivalent to poetic production'.[45] The loss of sheep therefore indicates their inadequacy as poets and even signifies that this poem is the pastoral without any pastoral poet.

[45] Bruce Arnold, 'The Literary Experience of Vergil's Fourth "Eclogue"', *The Classical Journal*, 90.2 (Dec., 1994 – Jan., 1995), 143-60 (p. 149). The referred lines are of Damoetas's words saying that 'Pollio loves our Muse, bucolic though she be. / Fatten a heifer for your reader, Pierians' and Menalcas replies that 'Pollio makes new songs himself. Fatten a bull, / One old enough to toss his horns and paw the sand'. Virgil, *The Eclogues*, the Latin Text with a Verse Translation and Brief Notes by Guy Lee (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1980; repr. 1984), p. 51.

In spite of the poem's self-denial as a proper eclogue from the beginning, Death, following the pastoral convention, asks the shepherds to sing. Yet they reveal their 'pretence of individuality' as pastoral poets; they emphasise what they inherit from the past: 'I am a shepherd of the Theocritean breed, / Been pasturing my songs, man and boy, this thirty year –'; 'And for me too my pedigree acceptances / Have multiplied beside the approved streams' (11). This effortless dependence upon the past asset is akin to a kind of country people's passive attitude that 'B' laments in 'An Eclogue for Christmas'.

The shepherds continue speaking under the frivolous disguise, even when Death asks about 'death'. They react with pedantic answers ('Thanatos in Greek, the accent proparoxytone') or pseudo-rustic speech ('the thing behind the word / Same as took Alice White the time her had her third – ') (11), neither of which results from their own experiences or thoughts. McKinnon points out that 'As Death questions them more closely, their idiom veers away even more grotesquely from any language of ordinary men'.[46] The shepherds' too keen consciousness as pastoral singers goes to the wrong end of individuality as poet. What their words represent is merely 'one aspect of their literary affectation', as Longley considers, and it is 'affectation which represents distance from the reality personified by the third contributor to the dialogue, Death'.[47]

It is worth noting that Death shows a disposition like a poet, weaving various metaphors and rhetoric in his speech, despite the reluctance expressed later in the poem: 'It is not my nature to talk' (13). Death includes his definition of poet in the criticism he directs at the shepherds: 'I thought he [a shepherd] was a poet and could quote the prices / Of significant living and decent dying, could lay the rails level on the sleepers / To carry the powerful train of abstruse thought' (11). Death claims that the poet should be a deliverer of thought, making 'abstruse thought' comprehensible to others, whose understanding, like the

[46] McKinnon, p. 198.
[47] Longley, *A Study*, p. 101.

sleeper, waits to be roused. Yet shepherd 2, misinterpreting the 'sleepers' as the image of poet, states that 'But certainly poets are sleepers, / The sleeping beauty behind the many-coloured hedge' (11). The 'sleeping beauty' is here attributed to poets, who are distant from the reality they live, and may implicitly serve as a self-criticism of MacNeice whose earlier poetics aims for aesthetic purity.

Death then condemns the superficial views of poetry, which are assumingly held by the shepherds:

D. All you do is burke the other and terrible beauty, all you do is hedge
And shrink the inevitable issue, all you do
Is shear your sheep to stop your ears.
Poetry you think is only the surface vanity,
The painted nails, the hips narrowed by fashion,
The hooks and eyes of words; but it is not that only,
And it is not only the curer sitting by the wayside,
Phials on his trestle, his palms grown thin as wafers
With blessing the anonymous heads;
And poetry is not only the bridging of two-banked rivers. (11-12)

Death alludes to the important refrain in W. B. Yeats's 'Easter 1916', 'terrible beauty', to indicate the necessity that poetry should be conscious of the world that is outside its own imaginary space.[48] In the rhetoric of Death, the repetition of 'all you do' is to renounce the shepherds, while the other repetition, repetition of 'not only', is to defend poetry; they reflect and stress the contrast between the shallowness of shepherds' understanding and the

[48] 'A terrible beauty is born' is repeated three times in 'Easter 1916'. W. B. Yeats, *The Variorum Edition of the Poems of W. B. Yeats*, ed. by Peter Allt and Russel K. Alspach (New York: Macmillan Publishing, 1973), pp. 391-4.

unfathomable force of poetry.

The firm belief in poetry makes Death incline once more to test the shepherds' ability as poets. For Death's question 'Don't you ever feel old?' (12), inspired by sensing the coming of Spring, shepherd 1 sentimentally describes his encounter with nature ('when I smell the beans or hear the thrush / I feel a wave intensely bitter-sweet and topped with silver') (12). This again gets on Death's nerves. MacNeice in his essay written in 1935, 'Poetry To-day', criticises the 'English poets of the 'nineties', among whom 'A suburban individualism prevailed, the penalty for the bumptious anarchism of the Romantic Revival'; he then accuses them and the 'Georgians who succeeded them' because of their 'bogey of hypocrisy'.[49] He insists that these literary trends at the turn of the century 'began with æstheticism and ended with a castrated nature-poetry and occasional pieces'.[50] Death's dislike of the shepherd's pretentious earth-cult may therefore be the implicit accusation of the natural and rural setting wrongly employed by those poets in the beginning of the century that MacNeice criticises.

Nonetheless, it is not a complete rejection of pastoral poetry. We should remember that the pastoral is often written in recognition of undesirable reality. Andrew V. Ettin points out that 'Pastoral literature has flourished in times when intellectual sophistication and artistic experimentation have given rise to concerns over the functions of art. [. . .] Pastoral literature expressively embodies the resulting cultural and moral tensions'.[51] The pastoral is not the imaginary space simply possessing monistic, idealised value, but a form with depth where intellectual meditation and argument with aesthetic and social awareness is encouraged to develop. MacNeice, seemingly intentionally, invokes nature poetry in the image of shepherds, and thereby distinguishing the pastoral from a kind of poetry that resorts to the rural or rustic merely as an escape from reality.

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[49] MacNeice, 'Poetry To-day', pp. 14-15.
[50] Ibid., p. 15.
[51] Andrew V. Ettin, *Literature and the Pastoral* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1984), p. 105.

When Death finally reaches the actual practice of the singing match, he asks the shepherds to sing 'what dream you had last night' (12) and announces that if it 'rings true' (12), the winner will get a prize. It seems that the shepherds' stories of their dreams satisfy Death, who admits that they are 'Better than your daytime madrigals' (14). However, the question remains why the shepherds are sent to death in spite of their seeming success. We could simply assume that the shepherds' dreams are inadequate and therefore Death's prize is punishment, or that they have to enter Death's land regardless of their slight progress as poets. Appropriately for pastoral poets, the shepherds allude to the work of their great predecessor, John Milton, at the very end of their life: 'We will go together to these pastures new . . .' (14). This allusion, however, is half-right and half-wrong; in the original poem, *Lycidas*, the consolation by song enables the 'uncouth swain', who was singing, to enter the 'pastures new', while Death's land the shepherds are entering does not give any consolation and is no more than the utter end.[52] In Death's last words, 'So; they are gone; life in my land . . . / There is no life as there is no land. / They are gone and I am alone / With a gate the façade of mirage' (14), the internal rhymes ('gone'/'alone', 'façade'/'mirage') sound acutely ironic and reinforce a sense of nullity. That even the gate itself is insubstantial 'mirage' confirms the failure of the enlightenment that the shepherds seem to have achieved. McDonald considers that this all denying ending 'is closely linked with the poem's self-regarding ironies of form', and 'MacNeice's poem keeps turning in on itself, whether by stressing the artificiality of the pastoral conventions themselves [. . .] or by Death's self-conscious orchestration of the proceedings, constantly pointing out the limitation of the genre and, in particular, of the kind of "poetry" it embodies.[53] Yet as already assumed above, the limitation seems to be less of the genre itself than of the shepherds' surface mimicry of the pastoral setting. The 'pastures

[52] At the end of *Lycidas*, the 'uncouth swain' 'rose, and twitched his mantle blue: / Tomorrow to fresh woods, and pastures new'. John Milton, *Lycidas*, in *Complete Shorter Poems*, ed. by John Carey, 2nd edn, *Longman Annotated English Poets* (Harlow: Pearson Education, 1997; revised 2007), pp. 243-56 (p. 256).
[53] McDonald, p. 22.

new' themselves are not unrealisable, but they are unavailable for the shepherds.

One of a few ideas that the two eclogues have in common is that no synthesis is attainable in the disordered world. While the personas in 'An Eclogue for Christmas' reach a very unreliable compromise to stay in the present position, Death in 'Eclogue by a Five-Barred Gate' sends the wrong-headed shepherds away forever. The latter ending can be seen as a happy ending in terms of expulsion of the fake poets from the pastoral field. Yet it also means that the individuality that the shepherds are about to acquire is negated in the end, and in addition that the shepherds are unsatisfactory as poets, Death cannot offer an alternative poem either.

The poetic forms MacNeice uses—the sonnet and the eclogue—and the paintings, which he refers to as representative of art, can have their own autonomy while maintaining a connection to the reality in which they are created. This characteristic contributes, in their respective ways, to the unfolding of the aesthetic conflicts or social concerns of MacNeice in the early thirties. His poems seem to verify the continuity of art as an effective form of engagement with the world, but MacNeice also discloses the contradiction that the arts that consciously face the world rather arouse anxieties than attenuate or solve them. We have seen that for MacNeice, poetry and painting have similar spatial and temporal limitations that make the poet aware of and challenge the progressive, excessive force of time, while the conversations among personas in the eclogues lead to the same conclusion that the recognition of problems (concerning modern civilisation, individuality, and poets) is not enough to solve them. MacNeice relies on the traditional function of art to aestheticise reality, not for escaping or answering dilemmas but for accommodating and drawing even nearer to his own thinking about those dilemmas in his poems. We will see in the next chapter that in like manner he, by employing the existing popular forms of manifestation or communication, ruminates and clarifies his position.

Chapter 3.

MacNeice's Poetic Engagement with the Society in the Thirties

In the previous chapter, we have seen in his use of the sonnet and the eclogue the awakening of MacNeice's consciousness about the irresolvable dilemmas of art. This chapter will look at poems that reveal MacNeice's thoughts about how he can be political as poet. He recollects in *The Strings Are False* that in 1928 when he met a 'follower of Hitler', 'we knew almost nothing of Hitler. Political ideas were those which concerned us least'.[1] The generalisation that 'Where the twenties had been indifferent to political or religious commitments, the thirties were obsessed with them' is applicable to MacNeice, since many of his poems in the nineteen thirties show the kind of concerns that were not seen in his poems in the twenties.[2] In the poems we will read in this chapter, MacNeice shows his recognition of the present situation, but the direction he tends to take when he expresses it is different from what we might expect of typical 'political poetry' in the dogmatic sense.

I

In 'The Individualist Speaks', published in *Poems*, the speaker first talks of an event in the community he belongs to, using the collective noun 'we', but once he detects the coming of danger, he declares an escape: 'I will escape, with my dog, on the far side of the Fair' (16). This change, from communal being to deceptive individual, may not merely be of the speaker, but it is rather the illustration of the individual's detachment from society. As Malcolm Bradbury notes, people in modern society came to 'feel that society's reality is not theirs, and hence the social process can become phantasmagoric, unreal, an impersonal social contract,

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[1] MacNeice, *SAF*, p. 120.
[2] W. W. Robson, *Modern English Literature* (London, Oxford, and New York: Oxford University Press, 1970), p. 125.

while satisfaction is sought within terms of personal consciousness, personal life, intense and immediate satisfactions'.[3] They therefore cease to think that they are responsible for what happens in society. MacNeice's 'Wolves' seems at first to be a poem that also avows an escapist attitude, but it shows the speaker's communal sense, with which he seems to suggest an escape together with others. Furthermore, however the escape is assumed, what is clear is the poet's own recognition of limit of any existing way of writing. Richard Danson Brown states that 'Wolves' 'not only rejects the by now familiar targets of individualism and communism but also MacNeice's own poetic identity, either as a fallen aesthete or the neo-Heraclitan of "Snow"'.[4] Indeed, 'Wolves' is less about politics than it is about MacNeice's position as a poet in relation to politics. Adrian Caesar includes 'Wolves' in the group of poems whose 'concern is predominantly aesthetic, rather than overtly political'.[5] Indeed, what MacNeice declares in 'Wolves' regards his aesthetic perspective:

> The tide comes in and goes out again, I do not want
> To be always stressing either its flux or its permanence,
> I do not want to be tragic or philosophic chorus
> But to keep my eye only on the nearer future
> And after that let the sea flow over us. (27)

MacNeice's treatment of images also reflects his intention to imaginatively contemplate present anxieties instead of directly mentioning them. It should be noted that the 'wolves' in 'Wolves' are not an image of actual wolves but an image of 'water'. Even before the direct

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[3] Malcolm Bradbury, *The Social Context of Modern English Literature* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1971), p. 11.
[4] Richard Danson Brown, '"Your Thoughts Make Shape like Snow": Louis MacNeice on Stephen Spender', *Twentieth Century Literature*, 48.3 (Autumn 2002), 292-323 (pp. 312-3).
[5] Caesar compares 'To a Communist' with 'Wolves', 'Train to Dublin', 'Cuckoo', 'Snow', 'August' and 'Nature Morte'. Adrian Caesar, *Dividing Lines: Poetry, Class and Ideology in the 1930s* (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 1991), p. 94.

reference to the 'wolves', the sea is mentioned repeatedly as a nullifying force in the poem. The structural arrangement of this stanza seems to reconstruct the pushing and retarding force of the waves. 'I do not want', when repeated in the beginning of the third line, starts in the middle of the line, rather than the line-end, as if it were pushed back as the tide recedes. This may also reflect the speaker's own passive attitude in which he wants neither of the opposites. Edna Longley maintains that poems such as 'Wolves' and 'Train to Dublin' 'fend off the hazards of dogma' and 'Wolves' 'even disowns the categories of flux and permanence'.[6] The poet's abnegation, however, sounds inevitable rather than intentional. Danson Brown asserts that rather than expressing a 'temporary derogation of habitual modes of thinking', the stanza 'suggests that the poetics of flux trailed in *Poems* is as inherently problematic as the nostalgist reflections of *Blind Fireworks*. The stanza asserts that all poetic categories are vulnerable in the face of the incoming sea'.[7] It is indeed plausible that MacNeice here depicts poetry as powerless and ineffective, compared to the enormous force like the approaching sea waves.

It seems that MacNeice ends the poem with a suggestion that immediately denies its own validity:

> Come then, all of you, come closer, form a circle,
> Join hands and make believe that joined
> Hands will keep away the wolves of water
> Who howl along our coast. And be it assumed
> That no one hears them among the talk and laughter. (27)

The consolidation of people is a reasonable action to avoid the enemy, but the suggestions of 'make believe' and 'be it assumed' imply that it is not a real solution. According to Longley,

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[6] Edna Longley, *Louis MacNeice: A Study* (London: Faber and Faber, 1988), p. 143.
[7] Danson Brown, 'Louis MacNeice on Stephen Spender', p. 313.

'Wolves' 'is partly an attack on the thirties illusion that any conceptualization or shared ideology can avert "the wolves of water / Who howl along our coast"'.[8] Indeed, collective action is implicitly anticipated to fail, but at the same time, by encouraging the people to ignore the wolves, to make their own 'talk and laughter', the speaker may imagine a consolidation of all those people close to him, which is contrary to any political 'ideology' that is out of touch with the common man. In addition, although the entertaining aspect of 'talk and laughter' seems to suggest the speaker's escapism, the poem itself cannot be read as manifesting defeatism. To prove this point, it is worth considering the image of 'wolves' itself. The fact that 'wolves' are animals and the 'talk and laughter' are human activities may be significant. In his quasi-guidebook to the London Zoo, MacNeice expresses his view on the difference between human being and the animals:

> I am more proud of what distinguishes man from the animals than of what he has in common with them. [. . .] I do not envy animal, though I envy many of their capacities. I should like to be able to jump like a leopard or swim like a sea-lion or—needless to say—fly like a bird, but, if given a chance of transmigration, I should always say it wasn't worth it. Better a quarter of an hour of gossip than all their fins and pinions'.[9]

He repeats later in the same book that he is the sort of person who escapes to the animals from human beings not because they are like human beings but because they 'are not human and never can be'.[10] He appreciates the animals because of their difference from himself. It is worth noting that MacNeice refers to the 'gossip', which might be a mere example of man's

[8] Longley, *A Study*, p. 144.
[9] MacNeice, *Zoo* (London: Faber and Faber, 1938; repr. 2013), p. 33.
[10] Ibid., p. 64.

trivial activity but at the same time is a very human, and verbal, activity. This idea about gossiping as an important activity of human beings is included a few years later in MacNeice's statement about the poet in *Modern Poetry*: '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 politics, susceptible to physical impressions'.[11] MacNeice also mentions the difference between humans and animals when he insists that words about an event show one's 'judgement' on it, and the event together with the judgement by the one who experiences it is 'more satisfactory than pure event': 'A twist in human nature, not found in lower animals, makes people look to thoughts for the vindication of their experiences'.[12] Thus MacNeice considers the human ability to command words to be unique and essential. In this sense, the talk and laughter may be promising and perhaps the only available action that the enemy cannot use.

It should also be noted that the 'wolves' are not an unusual image of threat and violence. The 'wolves of water' are said to imply the threat of Fascism; in 1933 when the poem was written, Hitler became Chancellor of Germany.[13] In *Spain and Us*, a pamphlet published for the support of the Republican side in the Spanish Civil War, Ethel Mannin maintains that 'If the European Powers persist in maintaining the arms embargo against the Spanish Government the Fascist wolves will devour Spain as mercilessly as they devoured Abyssinia'.[14] Moreover, Richard Overy notes that from 'the very first moments of the Third Reich, Hitler and his movement were pilloried in much of the literature, lectures and public forums in Britain as the new barbarism which threatened the very survival of civilization'.[15]

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[11] MacNeice, *MP*, p. 198.
[12] Ibid., p. 199.
[13] Hitler was appointed as Chancellor on 30 January 1933. Piers Brendon, *The Dark Valley: A Panorama of the 1930s* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2000), p. 124.
[14] Ethel Mannin, 'The Crime of the Arms Embargo', in J. B. Priestley and others, *Spain and Us*, a pamphlet issued by the Holborn and West Central London Committee for Spanish Medical Aid (Nottingham: W. H. Knapp, November 1936), pp. 4-6 (p. 6).
[15] Richard Overy, *The Twilight Years: The Paradox of Britain Between the Wars* (London: Viking, Penguin Books, 2009), p. 272.

The brutality in the nature of Nazism may be associated with wolves. Overy further states that the 'language deliberately played with the idea of the fall of the ancient world and it suggested by implication that, just like the Roman Empire, there was something rotten in civilization itself; the arrival of a barbarous Hitler was regarded as not just a temporary anomaly but an unwelcome historical re-enactment'.[16] Stephen Spender also uses the image of 'wolves' as a threatening force in 'Rolled over on Europe: the sharp dew frozen to stars' in *Poems* published in 1933. Though ostensibly regarding human body as passive ('What cross draws out our arms / Heaves up our bodies towards the wind / And hammers us between the mirrored lights?'), the speaker declares the following:

> Only my body is real: which wolves
> Are free to oppress and gnaw. Only this rose
> My friend laid on my breast, and these few lines
> Written from home, are real.[17]

The speaker assures himself that his own physical existence is the trustable reality. It is assumed that the 'rose' and the poems are 'real' because of their relations or attachment to his body. The 'wolves', which 'Are free to oppress and gnaw' his body, suggest that pain and suffering can prove the undeniable materiality of the body. Michael O'Neill and Gareth Reeves argue that 'Though the "wolves" and "rose" strike immature symbolist postures, there is a quiet force here: clear and terse, the last line and a half in particular impress as being "Written from home", from the centre of the poet's being, a centre under threat in the first part of the poem'.[18] Certainly, the poem may also be self-referential, and the poet's body, by

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[16] Ibid., p. 273.
[17] Stephen Spender, *New Collected poems*, ed. by Michael Brett (London: Faber and Faber, 2004), p. 3.
[18] Michael O'Neill and Gareth Reeves, *Auden, MacNeice, Spender: The Thirties Poetry* (Basingstoke and London: Macmillan Education, 1992), pp. 43-4.

its act of creation, secures his sense of being and living in reality. Knowing that we should live with unavoidable suffering, MacNeice proposes the 'talk and laughter' in 'Wolves' not to ignore the howling of the wolves, but rather to confront it. Geoffrey H. Hartman states that in 'Homage to Clichés' and 'Wolves', 'daily talk and laughter drown out "howling" prophets like Yeats'.[19] Although it is not certain whether 'howling' is attributed to 'prophets', Hartman endorses the suggestion that the poet takes the 'talk and laughter' as powerful and effective force. In 'Wolves', MacNeice subtly takes a middle way between escapist and aesthete. While he does not hesitate to reveal his reluctance and frustration concerning things outside of his purely poetical interest, he tries to make his art a way to more comprehensively tackle political and social issues rather than the expression and means of escape.

Just as 'Wolves' appears to be narrowly political, so too, seems 'An April Manifesto', due to its title. The title mocks the serious, and genuinely political 'manifesto' that should have been familiar in the thirties. As John Whitehead notes, the poem 'glances mockingly at the *Communist Manifesto*'.[20] Yet 'An April Manifesto' betrays the reader's expectation by expressing the beauty of things. Hugh Underhill notices that 'An April Manifesto' is something different from the normal manifestos, stating that the poem is 'audaciously imparting a lyrical glamour to the decade's vogue for manifestos promising instant action and sure remedy'.[21]

The poem begins with a decisive statement that should be typical of a manifesto:

> Our April must replenish the delightful wells,
>
> Bucket's lip dipping, light on the sleeping cells,

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[19] Geoffrey H. Hartman, 'The Maze of Modernism: Reflections on Louis MacNeice, Robert Graves, A. D. Hope, Robert Lowell, and Others', in *Beyond Formalism: Literary Essays 1958-1970* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1970), pp. 258-80 (p. 259).

[20] John Whitehead, *A Commentary of the Poetry of W. H. Auden, C. Day Lewis, Louis MacNeice, and Stephen Spender* (Lewiston, New York; Queenston, Ontario; Lampeter, Wales: The Edwin Mellen Press, 1992), p. 49.

[21] Hugh Underhill, *The Problem of Consciousness in Modern Poetry* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), p. 221.

Man from his vigil in the wintry chapel
Will card his skin with accurate strigil.
O frivolous and astringent spring
We never come full circle, never remember
Self behind self years without number,
A series of dwindling mirrors, but take a tangent line
And start again. Our April must replenish
Our bank-account of vanity and give our doors a coat of varnish.
Leave the tedium of audits and of finding correct
For the gaiety of places where people collect
For the paper rosettes of the stadium and the plaudits. (25-6)

The first thing to be noticed is that 'Our April', rather than we, is the subject of the main slogan. This seems to show the speaker's distancing himself from action, but the possessive noun reflects the assumption that there are other Aprils such as 'their' April and 'we' are licensed to talk of the ideal in so far as we believe that this is 'our' April. There is a certain idealisation of time here, in that 'we' secure the intact, pleasant moment of our own.

However, the powerful avowal itself has a tinge of threat that forces the speaker to speak it out. Although the speaker here seems to deny the possibility of coming 'full circle', which is proposed in 'Wolves' (written a month later), he offers an alternative to a circle, the curve that takes a 'tangent line'. While the 'swallow's tangent wings' in 'An Eclogue for Christmas' are the dubious symbol of eternity, in 'An April Manifesto', a poem written earlier than the eclogue, the 'tangent line' more certainly promises eternity. At the same time, however, the speaker's reference to the 'bank account of vanity' implies the fleeting indulgence that the voices in 'Spring Voices' warn of, along with 'vanity' and 'varnish', both

of which represent superficiality. Although the speaker acknowledges the need of 'audits' and 'finding correct', he ostentatiously pretends to be anti-intellectual and hedonistic. This attitude is maintained, leading to the main manifesto expressed at the end of the poem: 'Before the leaves grow heavy and the good days vanish / Hold out your glasses which our April must replenish' (26). This declaration is not entirely epicurean but rather desperate with sentimentality. By the very fact that his 'manifesto' differs greatly from a political one, we infer that MacNeice's celebration of the ephemeral is to show that he anticipates their passing. In 'An Enquiry' issue of *New Verse* in October 1934, MacNeice answers the question 'Do you take your stand with any political or politico-economic party or creed?', 'No. In weaker moments I wish I could', and to the question 'As a poet what distinguishes you, do you think, from an ordinary man?', his answer is 'Dissatisfaction with accepted formulas'.[22] This is significant as manifesting what he practises in his poetry. One of the common themes in *Poems* is a suspicion of clique or ideology; it seems as if MacNeice felt it more urgent to check enthusiasm for the Communist movement than to denounce Fascism. The way he employs the first person plural 'we', which denotes society in general rather than a specific group, displays how he seeks to disentangle his language from established formulae or expectation, stressing that collectivism pertains to humanity as a whole, rather than a specific political movement. Reviewing Spender's *The Destructive Element*, MacNeice asserts that 'Communism in the truer sense is an effort to think, and think into action, human society as an organism (*not* a machine, which is too static a metaphor)'.[23] Although MacNeice never fully accepts Communism, he concedes that the movement for realising a community of individuals is itself potentially good. The deliberate use of the terms and forms of reference to the political matters in his poems crystalises MacNeice's ideal way of involvement as poet.

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[22] MacNeice, 'Reply to "An Enquiry" in *New Verse*' (Oct. 1934), in *SLC*, pp. 3-4 (p. 4).
[23] MacNeice, 'Modern Writers and Beliefs' (8 May 1935), in *SLC*, pp. 4-7 (p. 6).

II

In MacNeice's next collection, *The Earth Compels*, published in 1938, there is an apparent disparity between the extremely private mode of speech and his expressed propensity for action. Although his fundamental faith in the importance of poetry is unaffected, MacNeice is increasingly engaged by the turbulent politics of contemporary Europe. Just before he started for the trip to Iceland in the summer of 1936 for *Letters from Iceland*, the book co-authored with Auden, MacNeice confesses to Anthony Blunt that the trip 'will be the end of an epoch'. This is 'an epoch in which I did nothing at all: no go getting, no great works, no development, no self-education, no altruism, no daily grind even'.[24] In a letter to his ex-wife, with whom divorce has just been completed, MacNeice also writes about his change of attitude towards political activism:

> I don't think I shall become actively political but I do tend now to sympathise with the communists. (Even old Anthony has gone Marxist!) Only I don't believe in bloody revolutions. There is a kind of fascist movement even in the Irish Free State now. I just have a slight awakening of conscience that one ought to do something to try & stem all these bloody things happening in the world & not just lead a pretty little private life like any old Bloomsbury pansy.[25]

His recognition of the public world is clearly seen in his writing, prose or poems, in 1936 onwards. Peter McDonald argues that 'MacNeice's writing of 1936-9, and in particular *Autumn Journal*, was his most obviously "political" work of the decade, at a time when Auden, Spender, and even Day-Lewis were edging away from the public contexts of their

[24] MacNeice, To Anthony Blunt, Postmark 3 August 1936, in *Letters*, p. 269.
[25] MacNeice, To Mary MacNeice, 10 November [1936] ['second letter'], in *Letters*, p. 284.

poetry'.[26] Conforming to his change is his physical movement: his trips to Spain with Blunt in March in 1936, to Iceland with Auden in the summer in the same year, his move to London, and the trips to the Hebrides in April and July in 1937. None of them was done for a political motive, but his frequent going outwards gives him opportunities to think of himself and the world he belongs to, as he claims in 'Letter to Graham and Anna': 'We are not changing ground to escape from facts / But rather to find them' (50). An important characteristic in many of his poems in *The Earth Compels* (including some poems first published in *Letters from Iceland*) is the mode of private conversation with imaginary addressee(s). In these poems, communication is more closed, despite the fact that the poet shows a consciousness of public affairs. I will argue this seemingly reverse way is effective in deepening and expressing his thoughts in poetry.

'Eclogue from Iceland' manifestly reflects MacNeice's own voice by employing the eclogue form and by introducing the context of the actual trip made by himself and Auden. It is a conversation among the personas of themselves, 'thin masks' as Longley calls, and the ghost of Grettir Asmundson, a figure of the Icelandic saga.[27] In another essay, Longley states that 'Eclogue from Iceland' includes some influence from Yeats, who has 'heroic role-models to counteract the temptation to escape and to despair'. According to Longley, Grettir is a 'man of action', who 'articulates MacNeice's self-critical instincts' without being 'authoritarian leader' nor having 'proto-fascist tendencies'.[28] At the same time, even if Grettir reflects MacNeice's own realisation of the attitude he should take, the poem is more dramatic than confessional, compared to the eclogues we have seen in the last chapter. McDonald considers 'Eclogue from Iceland' to be 'quite different in both form and effect from the eclogues of

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[26] Peter McDonald, *Louis MacNeice: The Poet in His Contexts* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991), p. 65.
[27] Longley, *A Study*, p. 53.
[28] Edna Longley, 'Louis MacNeice: Aspect of His Aesthetic Theory and Practice', *Studies on Louis MacNeice*, ed. by Jacqueline Genet and Wynne Hellegouarc'h (Caen: Centre de Publications de l'Université de Caen, 1988), pp. 51-62 (p. 56).

Poems, being much closer now to dramatic dialogue'.[29] In addition, we should focus on the similarity and difference between Grettir and the travellers (MacNeice and Auden). Unlike 'Death' in 'Eclogue by a Five-Barred Gate', Grettir encourages the poets to live and write, but as a hero who failed. One of the important facts in the difference between the poets and Grettir, the living and the dead, is that the poets can still revise their decision. Grettir therefore serves as an agent to correct the poets' negative notion about their action in their own country. When the 'VOICE' from Europe, which Longley calls 'the voice of post-war hedonism, of moral inertia', allures the poets to have an 'I don't care' attitude, Grettir insists on the necessity of believing in the substantial, however difficult it seems, and denying the attractive but insubstantial:[30]

> G. No.
>
> You cannot argue with the eyes or voice;
> Argument will frustrate you till you die
> But go your own way, give the voice the lie,
> Outstare the inhuman eyes. That is the way.
> Go back to where you came from and do not keep
> Crossing the road to escape them, do not avoid the ambush,
> Take sly detours, but ride the pass direct. (80)

What Grettir reveals is that the confrontation with the fake forces is unavoidable. It is plausible that the metaphors of journeying implicitly encourage the poet's return to England, but also more directly refer to their horse rides. This interpretation is made plausible by the contemporary and historical implications in the word 'ambush'. In 'Iceland', another poem in

[29] McDonald, p. 70.
[30] Longley, *A Study*, p. 54.

Letters from Iceland, MacNeice says that ‘Men have forgotten / Anger and ambush’ (60). Here he depicts the apathy and indifference of the people in the modern, post-saga Iceland. On the other hand, in ‘Letters to Graham and Anna’, another Iceland poem, MacNeice expresses the purpose of the trip as an escape from the ‘ambushes of sex’, one of the examples of the incessant movement in city life that forces him to ‘keep moving’ (51). It might therefore be likely that Grettir’s advice not to ‘avoid the ambush’ is a guide for both their journey and life. Rather contradictive imperatives, ‘Take sly detours, but ride the pass direct’, reveal that even if they divert, they must eventually return to the main road, and once they return, they have to run on it, knowing that ‘the open road is hard with frost and dark’ (80).

Yet after this decisive advice above and another imperative, ‘Go back to where you belong’ by Grettir, Craven and Ryan are still undetermined and continue diverting in the poem as in their journey, expressing their weakness:

C. But we have not his strength

R. Could only abase ourselves before the wall
Of shouting flesh

C. Could only offer our humble
Death to the unknown god, unknown but worshipped,
Whose voice calls in the sirens of destroyers. (81)

They anticipate that their confrontation with problems at home will merely lead to inaction. The ‘shouting flesh’ and the ‘sirens of destroyers’ can be the noises that the Fascists make,

among which the voice of Hitler, worshipped like god, is heard. Seamus Heaney considers that the 'wall of shouting flesh' may be the 'ranked armies of Fascist' that 'awaits them [the poets] at home'.[31] It is a plausible reading, since MacNeice is to represent the approaching threat of Hitler as his voice from the wireless in *Autumn Journal*: 'Hitler yells on the wireless, / The night is damp and still / And I hear dull blows on wood outside my window' (115). In 'Eclogue from Iceland', the threats of Ryan and Craven, including the 'Voice from Europe', are perceived aurally, which insinuates that the personas are still distanced from those threats. Yet Grettir, at the end of the poem, asserts that they must act now, even if they cannot ensure the efficaciousness of this action:

G. Minute your gesture but it must be made –
Your hazard, your act of defiance and hymn of hate,
Hatred of hatred, assertion of human values,
Which is now your only duty.

C. Is it our only duty?

G. Yes, my friends.
What did you say? The night falls now and I
Must beat the dales to chase my remembered acts.
Yes, my friends, it is your only duty.
And, it may be added, it is your only chance. (81-2)

Heaney positively values the ending of 'Eclogue from Iceland', stating that it 'marks

[31] Seamus Heaney, '"In Extremis": On the Staying Power of Pastoral', *Proceedings of the Royal Irish Academy. Section C: Archaeology, Celtic Studies, History, Linguistics, Literature*, 103C.1 (2003), 1-12 (p. 11).

MacNeice's exit from the pastoral mode and as an exit line, it is considerably more vigorous than the last line of Virgil's tenth eclogue'.[32] In MacNeice's poem, a return home is a departure from a secured peace and the reentry in to the real world. Furthermore, the returning to 'where you belong', a normal consequence after going somewhere, is especially felt to be challenging because, as MacNeice in 'Passage Steamer', another poem, says through the voices of the gulls, 'nothing we pass is past, / That all our beginnings were long since begun' (62). Rather than beginning something again themselves, they have to join in involving with something that has already begun without their acknowledgement but begun as their own. In 'Eclogue from Iceland', MacNeice exhibits, somewhat paradoxically, that the trip itself induces the necessity of returning. The going seems to be easy and escapist, but it gives the poets more demanding tasks of thinking and returning. Tom Paulin points out that the 'escapist and solipsistic' attitude of Auden and MacNeice in *Letters from Iceland* is deliberate 'in order to insist on their political subject' and that 'They are not writing a travel book—they are writing about European culture by focusing on a democratic community which works under the physical shadow of its landscape and the spiritual shadow of its heroic past'.[33] Iceland and Grettir represent the essential Other to the poets and their world. Beth Ellen Roberts considers that Ryan and Craven first perceive Grettir as 'an archetype of the Romantic hero, the epitome of the mode in which they imagine themselves', but Grettir denies this illusion.[34] Roberts here uses the epithet 'Romantic' to a kind of person who can influence the world by distancing from it. MacNeice's ideal poet is indeed contrary to such an isolated figure. Grettir's instruction is, therefore, based not on his success, but his failure, a trap that Ryan and Craven might also fall into if they kept trying to escape from the problems

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[32] Heaney quotes the last line of Virgil's tenth eclogue, '*Ite domum saturae, venit Hesperus, ite capellae*', which he translates as 'Go on home now with your bellies full, my goats, the evening star is rising, go on, go on'. Ibid., p. 11.

[33] Tom Paulin, 'Letters from Iceland: Going North', *Renaissance and Modern Studies*, 20.1 (1976), 65-80 (p. 74).

[34] Beth Ellen Roberts, *One Voice and Many: Modern Poets in Dialogue* (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2006), p. 157.

in Europe.

In this respect, the use of a dialogue form may seem to be for attenuating a propagandistic tinge in the unusually direct clarification of the social involvement, but it is also likely that MacNeice is sympathetic to such a communal role of poetry as the more Communism-inclined poets would claim. Cecil Day Lewis, in *A Hope for Poetry* published in 1936, the same year as the Iceland trip, argues that there is a kind of 'irresponsibility' behind lyric poetry: 'the lyric is the form of poetry, more than any other, within which the poet is answerable to nothing but its own laws and the experience of his senses'. Yet in modern society, in which poets should express their ideas about the times, the 'irresponsibility' of the lyric is difficult to achieve.[35] The increasing hesitation in having the poet's voice as sole and valuable seems to derive from the declined reliance on 'I' in both literary criticism and poetry, as Alick West, a Marxist critic, notes at the very beginning of his influential literary criticism in 1937. West, showing that whom 'we' represent changes in Eliot's *The Waste Land*, claims that the bourgeois society and the literary criticism in that society no longer identify themselves as stable and 'When I do not know any longer who are the "we" to whom I belong, I do not know any longer who "I" am either. "I" can no longer be projected into a poem as the source of the creative energy felt in it'.[36] Although MacNeice does not entirely dismiss the lyric, the employment of multiple poetic voices, rather than a single one, is characteristic of his thirties' poems, indicating his suspicion of singular perspectives. Moreover, it is often an external voice that tells the truth even in his apparently lyrical poems. O'Neill and Reeves point out that 'Verbal automatism, letting the voices of others compose the poet's own, is integral to MacNeice's poetic method'.[37] In his case, the indefinability of 'I' and 'we' allows him to decentralise his authority as the poetic voice.

In 'Postscript to Iceland', MacNeice focuses on his personal feelings without

[35] Cecil Day Lewis, *A Hope for Poetry* (Oxford: Basil Brackwell, 1936), p. 67.
[36] Alick West, *Crisis and Criticism and Selected Literary Essays* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1975), p. 19.
[37] O'Neill and Reeves, p. 184.

placing himself in one place. He talks to Auden, who went to Iceland with him but is absent in the poem, and this imaginary address to his friend is complicated by the changing notion of inside and outside. Iceland, which he now talks about in his room in England, sometimes becomes an inside in which he is allowed to contemplate what is normally his inside: England, home, and his emotion. In *Modern Poetry*, MacNeice points out that contemporary poets, including Auden and Spender, 'are interested in a subject outside themselves—or at any rate in a subject which is not merely a subject for their poetry' and that 'being poets, and not propagandists or journalists, they approach their subject, though an outside subject, through themselves'.[38] His recollection in 'Postscript to Iceland' starts when 'Lonely comfort walls me in' (96), which suggests that although Iceland is no longer the inside from which he watches the outside (Europe), he stays in his room, which is another inside that is seemingly secluded from the outside. The image of walls is frequently mentioned throughout the poem to highlight such spatial sense of the poet: the 'walls of shale', the 'long sea-wall' (97) in Iceland, 'Rows of books' (97) and the 'walls' that produce the 'litany of doubt' (98) in the poet's room. The 'walls' in both Iceland of his memory and in his room at present are at once protection and imprisonment, and he notices that they should or will be broken down soon. He calls the trip 'a fancy turn [. . .] / Sandwiched in a graver show' (96). The word 'fancy' implies the shortness of the interlude, being 'capricious' or 'whimsical'. At the same time, the adjective 'fancy' means decorative, which is 'in opposition to "plain"', so it might also imply at once the unusual situation a trip can give in general and their trip's purpose as diversion.[39] The pretended light-heartedness and indifference is also felt in his calling the world merely 'show'. The speaker, however, knows the fall of Seville, which refers to the Spanish Civil War that broke out when he was leaving for Iceland in the summer of 1936. He then illustrates the growth of Fascism felt in this conflict as follows: 'Nations germinating hell, /

[38] MacNeice, *MP*, pp. 17, 18.
[39] 'fancy, n. and adj.', *OED Online*.

The Olympic games were run – / Spots upon the Aryan sun' (96). As Madeleine Callaghan argues, the flat tone in writing about facts such as the Berlin Olympics in 1936 'does not rouse or demand a high-pitched emotional response', and the line 'Spots upon the Aryan sun', which alludes to Jesse Owen, an African-American medalist, 'do no more than suggest the political tensions in Europe'.[40] The factual and seemingly emotionless tone of these lines may appear to show MacNeice as an outsider to the problems in Europe.

MacNeice, however, reveals his anxiety rather than indifference; even the self-justifying assertion, 'Holidays should be like this', is overwhelmed by the anticipatory lines that follow:

> Holidays should be like this,
> Free from over-emphasis,
> Time for soul to stretch and spit
> Before the world comes back on it,
>
> Before the chimneys row on row
> Sneer in smoke, 'We told you so'
> And the fog-bound sirens call
> Ruin to the long sea-wall. (97)

The fast moving succession of 'soul [. . .] stretch [. . .] spit' reinforces the suggestion that their time as travellers is not permanently to be enjoyed. Indeed, the poet recognises that the danger will come quickly. Richard Danson Brown finds MacNeice's outstanding ability to accommodate 'celebration of the trip as a holiday from responsibility' and 'the insistent sense

[40] Madeleine Callaghan, 'Louis MacNeice and the Struggle for Romantic Identity', in *Legacies of Romanticism: Literature, Culture, Aesthetics*, ed. by Carmen Casaliggi and Paul March-Russell (New York and London: Routledge, 2012), pp. 149-64 (p. 154).

of calamity' in a single couplet: 'Times for soul to stretch and spit / Before the world comes back on it'.[41] The enumeration of the imagined crises to come impresses us as precipitation rather than postponement; the fact that the poet can imagine them in such detail indicates that they are close and real. By the deriding words of the chimneys, MacNeice even discloses his ominous anxiety during the trip that they may be too late.

In spite of this keen awareness, Europe and its war become again the outside for the poet and another enclosure is revealed:

> Rows of books around me stand,
> Fence me round on either hand;
> Through that forest of dead words
> I would hunt the living birds – (97)

The redundancy in 'around me stand' and 'Fence me round' literally enacts the walls around the poet in his room. It should be noted, however, that the word 'through' implies less to escape than to freely move around in the forest; here MacNeice shows his will to interact with 'dead words', the tradition of past literature, to create something new. This seems to be his resolution as poet, but the subsequent stanzas reveal that the will to go 'through' the walls of books derived from the growing sense of solitude at night 'which no one shares'. He calls his room 'this desert in disguise' and confesses his fear:

> With the fear of loneliness
> And uncommunicableness;
> All the wires are cut, my friends

[41] Richard Danson Brown, *Louis MacNeice and the Poetry of the 1930s* (Tavistock: Northcote House Publishers, 2009), p. 67.

Live beyond the severed ends. (98)

The long word, 'uncommunicableness', fills the line, so that there is no avoidance of the separation and isolation that the word denotes. In *The Earth Compels*, MacNeice often uses the images associated with the telephone. Ryan in 'Eclogue from Iceland' associates 'Runes and runes which no one could decode' with 'Wrong numbers on the 'phone – ' (79), both representing 'uncommunicableness', while the speaker in 'Sand in the Air', a poem about a broken love, describes the room where he is left alone as the 'desert of darkness' and laments that 'Dial her number, / None will reply; In the shrivelled world / There is only I' (91). Quite contradictorily, the phone that enables us to be 'talked to by people we cannot see' is, for MacNeice, neither the means of communication nor a symbol of connection. Rather it makes the wire and the person at its end imaginably visible, and if no one answers, it reinforces his sense of loneliness.[42] On the other hand, the more traditional way of communication, letter, arouses less anxiety in spite of its slowness and one-way nature. It seems that by the act of writing a letter, the addresser's desire to communicate is half realised. In 'Eclogue Between the Motherless', the conversation between the personas 'A' and 'B' gradually reveals that 'A' wrote a letter to propose to a woman, who may be the former wife of 'B'. Notably, the letter is posted but it has not been received ('she can't have yet received it') (86) and probably not yet even been collected from the post. 'A' explains the process of his writing and going to post the letter, somewhat unnecessarily in detail. This may imply that the proposal itself has significance for 'A'. The attempt to have a close connection with 'Someone immutably alien' (86), complete opposite to the family bond, may be the first step for 'A' to be spiritually released from his obsession with the memories of his dead mother.[43] The intention and practice of writing are included in the act of communication, which is also true in the creation

[42] Hugh Kenner, *The Mechanic Muse* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987), p. 34.
[43] MacNeice, *CP*, pp. 82-7.

of art. Auden begins his introduction to *The Oxford Book of Light Verse* by raising 'three principal wishes' of the artist: the 'wish to make something; the wish to perceive something, either in the external world of sense or the internal world of feeling; and the wish to communicate these perceptions to others'.[44] According to MacNeice's letter, he and Auden were determined to write their book in the form of letters in advance of their travel.[45] Paulin regards the letter as a 'social form', stating that the 'commitment is felt throughout *Letters* because in choosing to organize it as a series of letters to friends and relatives in England, Auden and MacNeice selected a pre-eminently *social* form'.[46] The letter poem can be a socially engaged form, in that it discloses to the public the supposedly most private message. Auden later in his career explains as follows:

> The characteristic style of 'Modern' poetry is an intimate tone of voice, the speech of one person addressing one person, not a large audience; whenever a modern poet raises his voice he sounds phony. And its characteristic hero is neither the 'Great Man' nor the romantic rebel, both doers of extraordinary deeds, but the man or woman in any walk of life who, despite all the impersonal pressures of modern society, manages to acquire and preserve a face of his own.[47]

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[44] W. H. Auden, 'Light Verse' [Introduction to *The Oxford Book of Light Verse*, ed. by Auden, 1938], in *The English Auden: Poems, Essays and Dramatic Writings 1927-1939*, ed. by Edward Mendelson (London and Boston: Faber and Faber, 1977; repr. 1986), pp. 363-8 (p. 363).

[45] In a letter postmarked 24 May 1936, MacNeice reveals the plan to Blunt: 'I hope to start for Iceland with Wystan Auden before the end of June (we are going to do a book about it for Cape full of verse epistles – Would you like an epistle?)'. Quoted in Jon Stallworthy, *Louis MacNeice* (London: Faber and Faber, 1995), p. 185.

[46] Paulin, p. 77.

[47] W. H. Auden, 'The Poet and the City', in *The Dyer's Hand and Other Essays* (London: Faber and Faber, 1963), p. 84.

Taking the risk of sounding 'phoney', the poets in the modern period write as ordinary people, who are neither entirely confident nor great. As the original title of 'Postscript to Iceland', 'Epilogue For W. H. Auden', overtly shows, MacNeice talks to Auden as a man to his friend, who shares most with him, including experience in Iceland, poetry, and the fear of the coming war. The last stanza of the poem reflects this strong sense of sharing:

> Our prerogatives as men
> Will be cancelled who knows when;
> Still I drink your health before
> The gun-butt raps upon the door. (98)

Samuel Hynes notes that the last line does not depict 'poetical posturing or melodrama', but the fact that is happening in Europe; and it is the 'possible reality that had not existed for earlier English writers'.[48] Indeed, in MacNeice's earlier poems, the image of being shot is merely imaginary. At the end of 'Homage to Clichés', time is personified as a 'counter / A timekeeper with a watch and a pistol / Ready to shoot and with his shot destroy / This whole delightful world of cliché and refrain' (68), which reflects the fear of time inherent in MacNeice. This imaginary fear becomes the concrete, physical fear of being actually shot at the end of 'Postscript'. In 'Postscript', the poet intentionally postpones moments by repeating 'before' ('before the memory slip', 'Before the world comes back on it, // Before the chimneys row on row / Sneer in smoke') (96, 97), but 'before' in the last stanza, placed at line-end, reveals itself no longer so effective to secure the time 'before' the fear.

Although not in letter form, 'The Sunlight on the Garden', written in 1937, also addresses someone specific and intimate in order to announce the end of peace. Longley

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[48] Samuel Hynes, *The Auden Generation: Literature and Politics in England in the 1930s* (London and Boston: Faber and Faber, 1976; repr. 1979), p. 292.

argues that 'MacNeice's poems from late 1936 to 1938 had already been saturated with valediction and dark anticipation'.[49] At the same time, as Danson Brown shows, 'MacNeice's central interest was with poetry itself: he never puts politics on an equal footing with poetry, nor does he try to adapt his faith in poetry to the exigencies of any competing ideology'.[50] MacNeice in 'The Sunlight on the Garden' reveals his alertness to the danger while keeping poetry central. Its peculiarity lies in the intricate structure of metre and rhyme. The interwoven pattern of sounds, however, contradicts what it says:

> The sunlight on the garden
> Hardens and grows cold,
> We cannot cage the minute
> Within its nets of gold,
> When all is told
> We cannot beg for pardon. (57)

The warmth and light felt from the visual image given in the first line immediately ceases in the first word of the second line, which rhymes with the last word of the first line. This beginning announces the poem's basic pattern in which the sound association does not confirm the unity of the world but rather highlights the destruction that it tries to stop. The following statement, 'We cannot cage the minute / Within its nets of gold', may similarly be self-referential. Although the 'minute' is described as what should be caught like a bird or insect, the 'its' denotes that the 'nets' belong to the minute from the beginning. This indicates that the speaker does not talk of time in general but a particular 'minute' that he wants to detain. As Robin Skelton points out, the poem 'utilizes internal consonance and assonance to

[49] Longley, *A Study*, p. 58.
[50] Danson Brown, *Louis MacNeice*, p. 42.

good effect, and a small group of words are repeated several times during the poem, sometimes within the lines (*Epanorthosis*) and sometimes at the beginning of them (*Epanaphora*). These patterns are so organized as to give the poem musical coherence and progression'.[51] Indeed, the heavy reverberations including the 'w' sound repeated at the beginning of lines 3-6 show MacNeice's dexterity in managing various patterns in one poem. The regularities, however, can be seen as an enforced attempt to 'cage the minute', which is impossible in reality.

The gradual dissolution of the world is anticipated with that of the 'self-contained' world of poetry in the second stanza:

> Our freedom as free lances
> Advances towards its end;
> The earth compels, upon it
> Sonnets and birds descend;
> And soon, my friend,
> We shall have no time for dances. (57)

The 'free lances' must imply 'freelance', which refers to an independent worker, while according to *OED*, the word 'freelance' used to mean 'a type of military adventurer, typically of knightly rank, who offered his services to states or individuals for payment, or with a view to plunder; a mercenary soldier'.[52] The advancement of the lances is a realistic vision not only of a battlefield but also of the situation where the poets, who have been freelance, may have to contribute to the war by their writing too. The rhyme across the lines, 'lances / Advances', and the preposition 'towards' both reinforce the sense of progression. It almost

[51] Robin Skelton, 'Celt and Classicist: The Versecraft of Louis MacNeice', in *Time Was Away: The World of Louis MacNeice*, ed. by Terence Brown and Alec Reid (Dublin: The Dolmen Press, 1974), pp. 43-53 (p. 48).
[52] 'freelance, n., adj., and adv.', *OED Online*.

sounds sardonic, since ‘Our freedom’ keeps progressing further and further just to reach the end, in which it cannot progress forever. We can be sure that this poem refers to the situation of poetry when we encounter the ‘descend’ of ‘sonnets and birds’, which must be suggestive of the change of the situation regarding poetry. While ‘sonnet’, as in ‘Sunday Morning’, can be the symbol of a ‘self-contained’ unity, the ‘bird’ is, perhaps alluding to Romantic poetry, an ideal poet that can freely sing. Their descent must signify their fall from a privileged and intact state.

In the third stanza, it is revealed that their position in the air used to secure them from the anxieties on the earth such as the progress of time and the danger it brings:

> The sky was good for flying
> Defying the church bells
> And every evil iron
> Siren and what it tells:
> The earth compels,
> We are dying, Egypt, dying. (57-8)

It is noticeable from the past tense that the ‘sky’ where the poet as bird was flying is not ‘good for flying’ any longer, and the ‘church bells / And every evil iron / Siren and what it tells’ are not ignoble now. The contrast of sky and earth is also applied to the distance between Iceland and Europe in ‘Letter to Graham and Anna’: ‘please remember us / So high up here in this vertiginous / Crow’s-nest of the earth. Perhaps you’ll let us know / If anything happens in the world below?’ (52). Being ‘vertiginous’, the poets are unable to see the state of Europe. Likewise, the sonnets’ and birds’ being in the sky must be a metaphor for MacNeice’s poetry and its attempt to defy ‘reality’, which was, to a certain extent, successful.

Descending to earth, he cannot be ignorant of what time has brought to Europe. Furthermore, the sense of inevitable involvement is implied in the allusion to Shakespeare's *Antony and Cleopatra*. Longley thinks it an 'apt quotation' that 'powerfully realizes the threat to the world of personal emotion from the world of war'.[53] In addition to the exoticism and scale of the issue the allusion can tell, it should not be overlooked that the original words in *Antony and Cleopatra* are spoken by Antony in the first-person singular, 'I am dying, Egypt, dying' (IV. xv. 41).[54] Along with the repeated 'we' and the personal address to 'my friend', the cry 'We are dying, Egypt, dying' forcedly includes everyone on the 'earth' in her doom.

In the last stanza, the speaker seems to start addressing a specific person:

> And not expecting pardon,
> Hardened in heart anew,
> But glad to have sat under
> Thunder and rain with you,
> And grateful too
> For sunlight on the garden. (58)

Some words and phrases in the first stanza are repeated, by which the speaker shows his resignation to pursue 'pardon', but another repeated word, 'harden', is different both in use and meaning. In the first stanza, the sunlight 'Hardens', while in the last stanza, something, which seems to be the speaker's own mind, is passively 'hardened'. The adverb 'anew' further 'hardens' his mind in two senses. If it implies that the speaker has already had an experience that hardens his mind, the fear he is facing now is another challenge to him. The

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[53] Longley, *A Study*, p. 59.
[54] William Shakespeare, *Antony and Cleopatra*, in *The Riverside Shakespeare: The Complete Works*, ed. by G. Blakemore Evans, J. J. M. Tobin and others, 2nd edn (Boston, MA: Wadsworth Cengage Learning, 1997), pp. 1391-439 (p. 1428).

word can also refer to something totally new. In this case, to be 'hardened in heart' is a newly made decision after giving up 'pardon'. The poet suspends his emotion, in expectation of having to face his fear. His enjoyment of the sudden change of weather with the addressee of the poem ('you') was the last moment when he could engage his emotions. Although it is grammatically proper to use the past perfect tense, 'to have sat', this stresses the sense of last-ness. The poem's circularity emphasises the poet's appreciation of the last sunlight, but the endlessness of this circularity itself equally reminds of the initial problem: the end is nigh. Moreover, the manifestation of thankfulness at the very end of the poem is under the recognition of both sides of the speaker and the reader that it never solves the anxiety. Expressing the appreciation for a momentary value itself can even mean that the speaker has lost or is going to lose a chance to have it. It is a reasonable interpretation, considering that this poem is also a love poem. The experience of spending time with 'you' is appreciated as a memory, which suggests that love ends with the world. This interpretation does not contradict the following views, which evaluate the poem's self-contained structure. O'Neill and Reeves assert that the poem 'is itself a net of gold, an intricately patterned cage of sound', and the deliberate artificialities as a poem, such as rhyming and the utterance of 'We are dying, Egypt, dying' itself, prolongs the coming of the undesirable time: 'despair can be kept at bay by the almost self-indulgent ability to express it extremely well'.[55] Peter McDonald also points out that the 'intricate construction of the poem is in fact a way of trying to "cage the minute" by acknowledging the dangers posed by the minutes to come. [. . .] Effectively, MacNeice uses the structure of his poem to supply the closure against which, in fact, the argument runs'.[56] Through poetry, MacNeice attempts to preserve passing moments which, in reality, can never be recovered, though, as previously outlined, the notion of the impossibility of this venture is recognised. The absence of 'the' in the last reference to 'sunlight on the garden' possibly

[55] O'Neill and Reeves, p. 69.
[56] McDonald, p. 75.

rejects the perfect return to the beginning. It is even plausible that in the end, MacNeice deliberately makes the last words break the circular structure of the poem, just as the minute eludes the 'nets of gold'.

In the poems we have read so far, the address to a specific person is not a manifestation of escape from reality but rather a form that stresses it. Geoffrey H. Hartman praises MacNeice as a 'pioneer' who aims to 'revive the long conversational poem', and states that for Auden and MacNeice a 'journey to Iceland in 1936 strengthened the poets' attraction to oral tradition'.[57] As critics including Hartman and Longley argue, the epistle form prepares MacNeice's creative development of the conversational poem for *Autumn Journal*.[58] Declan Kiberd considers that in *Autumn Journal*, MacNeice 'began with the personal and proceeded to read public events in terms of his autobiography, lamenting a lost, neglected love as a version of the irrecoverable and yet culpable innocence of the decade', which effectively shows that 'MacNeice defended the primacy of private experience by submitting the public world to its challenges and interrogations'.[59] In the next chapter, we examine how MacNeice, in *Autumn Journal*, utilises a private mode of talking to confront the controversy regarding 'didactic' poetry, asserting the capacity for writing to be a broader social engagement than conceived by a Communist mode of thought.

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[57] Hartman, p. 260.
[58] Hartman states that 'Auden wrote his "Letter to Lord Byron," adapting the stanza of that master of gossip, and MacNeice followed with *Autumn Journal* (1938) and the radio poem *Autumn Sequel* (1953)'. Hartman, p. 261; Longley claims that 'Postscript' 'acts as a prologue to *Autumn Journal*'. Longley, *A Study*, p. 53.
[59] Declan Kiberd, 'Incorrigibly Plural: Louis MacNeice', in *Irish Classics* (London: Granta Publications, 2000), pp. 543-55 (p. 552).

Chapter 4.

'What the wind scatters the wind saves':

The Modes of Disseminating Ideas in *Autumn Journal*

In this chapter, we will read *Autumn Journal*, the poem MacNeice wrote in 1938, from two critical perspectives: his way of showing his individualist standpoint and his use of images, both of which concern the articulation of his engagement with society as a poet in the pre-war world. These perspectives should reveal how the poem represents itself as an action by showing how the poet thinks out and expresses his thoughts. The first section of the chapter will show how MacNeice's references seem to invite political action. He is distinguished from the so-called left-wing poets in that he unabashedly values his individualism with an awareness of its need to be transformed. Peter McDonald points out that 'to tackle the subject of individualism at all was to engage in ideological debate in the 1930s'.[1] *Autumn Journal* indeed becomes 'political' because of its deep engagement with the contemplation of individualism. The second section is about the recurrent images in *Autumn Journal*. They often blur any distinction between life and death, beginning and ending, and thereby allow MacNeice to ensure and extend his sense of hope in a time of crisis.

I

In the 'Note' to *Autumn Journal*, MacNeice claims that the poem is 'something half-way between the lyric and the didactic poem' and that in its didactic aspect, 'it contains some "criticism of life" or implies some standards which are not merely personal'.[2] Non-personal standards he adopts in *Autumn Journal* duly reflect the trends in the public. During the nineteen thirties, Communism gained a wide support from intellectuals as the only force that

[1] Peter McDonald, *Louis MacNeice: The Poet in His Contexts* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991), p. 18.
[2] MacNeice, '"Note" to *Autumn Journal*', in *CP*, p. 791.

could counter Fascism. Yet as we have seen in the previous chapter, MacNeice is sceptical of any dogma, including Communism. Philip Henderson regards Communism for the people in England as a force desperately and inevitably taken rather than positively chosen.[3] MacNeice critically analyses in his autobiography the attraction of Communism among young people: 'The strongest appeal of the Communist Party was that it demanded sacrifice; you had to sink your ego. [. . .] Young men were swallowing Marx with the same naïve enthusiasm that made Shelley swallow Rousseau'.[4] MacNeice also detects a certain comfort in the renunciation of 'ego':

> [. . .] like early Christianity, [the Marxian purpose] promised self-fulfilment through self-abnegation, freedom through discipline. Young men flocked to this new creed just because it made demands on them and because, while it attacked human individualism, it simultaneously made the cosmos once more anthropocentric; it exploded the idea of purpose in Nature (Nature was blind) but asserted purpose in the world. Because the world was *ours*. Marx was to the poets of the thirties what Rousseau was to the poets of the Romantic Revival.[5]

The Communist belief in 'self-fulfilment through self-abnegation', the somewhat contradictory idea that a large organisation, Communism, can give people a satisfaction as an individual, is propagated by left-wing artists in this period. Cecil Day Lewis in the essay for the People's Front raises the advantages that he believes an artist can attain through belonging

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[3] '[Communism] counteracted that sense of helplessness and futility that can so easily eat the heart out of life and gave people a purpose, a sense of social significance, combining the advantages of faith and reason'. Philip Henderson, *The Poet and Society* (London: Secker &Warburg, 1939), p. 46.
[4] MacNeice, *SAF*, p. 146.
[5] Ibid., p. 169.

to the organisation: according to him, an artist 'needs peace to write in: well, he must be prepared to work for that peace; and the most effective anti-war organisation in which he can work is a People's Front. He needs not only peace but a wide and intelligent public. A People's Front should indirectly increase the social effectiveness of writing, by putting into power a progressive government which will pay greater attention to education'.[6] In addition to the peace for writing and the good reader, an artist 'will not only be playing the most effective possible part in the struggle to defend culture' but also 'be brought into contact with a diversity of men and women, a variety of opinion, aspiration and experience which cannot fail to enrich his own work'. An artist who joins a People's Front will gain 'the sense of community which alone can enable him to re-establish the social function of his art'.[7]

Randall Swingler, a more radical leftist, even claims that 'The truly free man is not the man who is free to choose but the man who is free from the necessity of choice' and 'There can be no such thing as individual freedom without social freedom. Freedom is unification.[8] This sounds rather like anti-freedom, but Christopher Caudwell similarly believes that 'a new and higher realisation' of individuality is possible by returning 'to the collectivism and integrity of a society without coercion, where consciousness and freedom are equally shared by all'; Caudwell further notes that 'By becoming collective, therefore, poetry in the era of communism will not become less individual but more so. This individuation will be artistic, carried out by the change of the social ego, not personal and dream-like, carried out by the reduction of the social ego to unconsciousness'.[9] Caudwell here suggests that the communist society can not only improve the social construction but also promote an art with

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[6] Cecil Day Lewis, 'English Writers and a People's Front', *The Left Review*, 2.13 (October 1936), 671-4 (p. 672).
[7] Ibid., p. 674.
[8] Randall Swingler, 'Spender's Approach to Communism' [review of *Forward from Liberalism* by Stephen Spender], *The Left Review*, 3.2 (March 1937), 110-3 (pp. 111-2).
[9] Christopher Caudwell, *Illusion and Reality: A Study of the Sources of Poetry* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1937; repr. 1946), pp. 293, 294. I should note that MacNeice admires Caudwell's criticism and quotes it in his criticism, which Edna Longley also points out in *Poetry and Posterity* (Tarset, Northumberland: Bloodaxe Books, 2000), pp. 149-51.

more distinct individuality. Those leftist writers try to redefine 'freedom' and 'individualism', since the individualism they have known is found to be the freedom for a few. In *Forward From Liberalism*, Stephen Spender argues that 'the idea of individualism is so attached to the interests of the ruling classes, that to many people a classless society means a society without individualists. Thus, English intellectuals who regard themselves as individualists often oppose bitterly the classless society, on the ground that it would sweep away their individualism'.[10] MacNeice shows his self-critical meditation on himself as one of those individualists in section III of *Autumn Journal*. A voice of the 'tempter' talks to him, whispering that 'you also / Have the slave-owner's mind, / Would like to sleep on a mattress of easy profits' and 'What you want is not a world of the free in function / But a niche at the top, the skimmings of the cream' (105-6). MacNeice admits that he has been bred to believe in the system of inequality among men:

> And I answer that that is largely so for habit makes me
>
> Think victory for one implies another's defeat,
>
> That freedom means the power to order, and that in order
>
> To preserve the values dear to the élite
>
> The élite must remain a few. It is so hard to imagine
>
> A world where the many would have their chance without
>
> A fall in the standard of intellectual living
>
> And nothing left that the highbrow cared about.
>
> Which fears must be suppressed. (106)

Here it is revealed that freedom for the traditional individualist is prejudiced. While freedom

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[10] Stephen Spender, *Forward From Liberalism* (London: Victor Gollancz, 1937), p. 60.

for the Communist is the sacrifice of the individual will, freedom for the individualist disregards collective happiness. The last line in the quotation is the relative clause that is separated from the main clause, which, along with the word 'must', stresses that the poet still has 'fears' of losing his own freedom. In 'When I Was Twenty-One: 1928', he recollects that 'There were many undergraduates like myself who theoretically conceded that all men were equal, but who, in practice, while only too willing to converse, or attempt to, with say Normandy peasants or shopkeepers, would wince away in their own college halls from those old grammar school boys who with impure vowels kept admiring Bernard Shaw or Noël Coward while grabbing their knives and forks like dumb-bells'.[11]

Autumn Journal includes MacNeice's tracing back this history of bourgeois individualism by tracing back his own. He discloses that a vice in public school education is strangely similar to that in the present society:

> The weak must go to the wall
>
> But strength implies the system;
>
> You must lose your soul to be strong, you cannot stand
>
> Alone on your own legs or your own ideas [. . .] (124)

The helpless individual should follow the 'system'. According to MacNeice, 'From the British public schools come the British ruling classes. Or came till very lately. It was from the public schools that our Governments caught the trick of infallibility. The public-school boy, after a few years of discomfort, has all the answers at his fingertips; he does not have to bother with the questions'.[12] It means that the public school students learn from the unfair yet firm power structure in their schools that will benefit them once they are out in the society. At

[11] MacNeice, 'When I Was Twenty-One: 1928' (1961), in *SP*, pp. 222-35 (p. 228).
[12] MacNeice, *SAF*, p. 85.

the same time, the paradoxical demand to 'lose your soul to be strong' reminds us of the Communist assertion to 'sink your ego' to preserve its freedom. It implies that both individualism and Communism can fall into the same fallacy to ignore individuals. MacNeice recognises this possibility: 'the individual, powerless, has to exert the / Power of will and choice / And choose between enormous evils, either / Of which depends on somebody else's voice' (110). The sense of arbitrary will in the act of choosing is denied by the choice itself because there is no choice one is willing to choose.

In section XIV, which is about the by-election at Oxford that provided an opportunity to express public opinion about Chamberlain's foreign policy, MacNeice stresses again the lack of choice. He ask himself a question, 'what am I doing it for?', and answers as follows:

> Mainly for fun, partly for a half-believed-in
> Principle, a core
> Of fact in a pulp of verbiage,
> Remembering that this crude and so-called obsolete
> Top-heavy tedious parliamentary system
> Is our only ready weapon to defeat
> The legions' eagles and the lictors' axes;
> And remembering that those who by their habit hate
> Politics can no longer keep their private
> Values unless they open the public gate
> To a better political system. (133-4)

He denies the seriousness in his devotion to this political event; the words of limitation,

'partly', and 'half', stress the grudging attitude of the poet. Edna Longley, discussing this passage, maintains that 'These conclusions are perhaps less significant for adhering to democracy as a defence against totalitarianism (symbolized by the neo-Roman insignia of Fascism) than for insisting that the current crisis *de facto* has politicized everyone'.[13] Longley is right to point out that the inevitability of the condition that 'politicized everyone' is most noticeable in the passage. MacNeice, by deploying epithets such as 'crude', 'obsolete', 'Top-heavy', and 'tedious', also shows his critical stance to the force he has to depend upon.

In spite of individual powerlessness and helplessness, however, there arises another, more positive, necessity. MacNeice, who dared to disclose his reluctance to discard individualist claims in the early thirties, suggests stepping forward from inaction to action:

> But the final cure is not in his ['the analyst'] past-dissecting fingers
>
> But in a future of action, the will and fist
>
> Of those who abjure the luxury of self-pity
>
> And prefer to risk a movement without being sure
>
> If movement would be better or worse in a hundred
>
> Years or a thousand when their heart is pure.
>
> None of our hearts are pure, we always have mixed motives,
>
> Are self deceivers, but the worst of all
>
> Deceits is to murmur 'Lord, I am not worthy'
>
> And, lying easy, turn your face to the wall.
>
> 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

[13] Edna Longley, *Louis MacNeice: A Study* (London: Faber and Faber, 1988), p. 67.

And in the end – with time and luck – to dance. (106-7)

MacNeice contrasts the ‘will and fist’ with the merely observing ‘fingers’. The transformation of the ‘fingers’ to ‘fist’, both associated with the hand, implies that we should make a ‘movement’ of our own body. MacNeice also represents the gradual progress in numerous internal rhymes and repetitions. The assonance in ‘will and fist’ shows the conformity between mind and body in motivation for movement, while the unwillingness of individualist-escapist is reflected in the echoing assonances among ‘worst’, ‘murmur’, and ‘worthy’ or ‘Lord’, ‘your’, and ‘wall’. Another reverberation in ‘worthy’ and ‘easy’, along with pauses that sandwich ‘lying easy’, may also connote slyness in the escapist’s conscious neglect. In the last four lines, the resonance gets even heavier, as if to pace along with the hesitating manner of the élite. The assonance, consonance and alliteration in ‘that habit’, ‘may I [. . .] may my feet follow my wider glance’, and ‘then to walk with the others’ at once hold and assist the advancement. Indeed, the imagined movement is gradual. The visual perception precedes the actual movement of the body, ‘my feet’, which is suggestive of the fact that one cannot immediately put what one sees or thinks in practice. MacNeice makes the line ‘stumble’ with caesura after the word ‘stumble’, but the learning of walking should soon be followed by the acquisition of the ‘others’ as company, and the last phase of the movement, to ‘dance’ (the verb appropriately in the rhyme position), symbolises the real integration with the others. That only the last line, though still being slow with dashes, keeps a fairly regular iambic rhythm confirms the poet’s decision to move.

The action proposed here may still sound vague and inadequate. Reed Way Dasenbrock in his article ‘Poetry and Politics’ accuses the ‘pink’ writers of their politically impractical art: ‘I can’t say, however, that their work represented any solution to the problems posed by the dominant economism of Marxism. [. . .] they did not successfully imagine a

productive role for a Marxist poetry in the absence of a role for poetry in Marxism'.[14] Elton Edward Smith groups *Autumn Journal* with Shakespeare's *Othello* and T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*; according to Smith, these works 'explore dilemmas without suggesting solutions, and therefore leave both artist and audience with a 'certain frustration and sense of incompletion'.[15] Smith borrows this analogy from John Peale Bishop's review of *Autumn Journal*. Bishop finds what is similar to the 'self-accusation' of Hamlet in MacNeice: 'He [MacNeice] is as irresolute as Shakespeare's prince, but it is impossible to imagine him, even in the rashness of a moment, stabbing Mr. Chamberlain'.[16] Smith, although he favourably remarks that MacNeice is a 'honest man', considers the poem's 'indecision' as inaction: 'he [MacNeice] is kept from doing anything constructive about the political threat, first because he feels helpless before the vastness of the problem, and second because he is hopeless about building a better future'. For Smith, MacNeice merely confesses his 'helplessness' to the question, '"What can my kind of person be expected to do, in this kind of a world, at this terrifying moment?"', and 'The obvious fact that the *Journal* fails to make sense of the world and therefore resolve the particular problems raised makes the answer unavoidable: nothing'.[17] R. G. Cox, in his overall critical review of MacNeice's *Collected Poems, 1925-1948*, also asserts that MacNeice 'so clearly has no new light to throw upon the problems, either by propounding a course of action or by stating the issues with more clarity and precision'.[18]

A common point made by these critics is that the poet must be decisive and clear. It seems that the poet is expected to have some solution and answer once he raises problems in

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[14] Reed Way Dasenbrock, 'Poetry and Politics', in *A Companion to Twentieth Century Poetry*, ed. by Neil Roberts (Malden, MA; Oxford; Melbourne; Berlin: Blackwell Publishing, 2001; repr. 2003), pp. 51-63 (p. 61).
[15] Elton Edward Smith, *The Angry Young Men of the Thirties* (Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press; London and Amsterdam: Feffer & Simons, 1975), p. 85.
[16] John Peale Bishop, 'The Hamlet of L. MacNeice (*Autumn Journal* by Louis MacNeice)', in *The Collected Essays of John Peale Bishop*, ed. by Edmund Wilson (New York: Octagon Books, 1948; repr. 1975), pp. 310-3 (p. 312).
[17] Smith, p. 89.
[18] R. G. Cox, 'A Poet of Our Time' [review of *Collected Poems, 1925-1948* by Louis MacNeice], *Times Literary Supplement*, 28 October 1949, p. 696.

his poems. Nevertheless, this opinion itself is biased and even outmoded in the thirties. In *Poetry and Politics*, C. M. Bowra articulates that 'The essence of this poetry [political poetry] is that it deals with events which concern a large number of people and can be grasped not as immediate, personal experience but as matters known largely from hearsay and presented in simplified and often abstract forms'.[19] However, this principle had to be changed after the Great War. The poets after 'the shocks of war and revolution' 'determined not to be deceived by discredited catchwords, set down their feelings exactly as they observed them' and they now 'follow his own instinct and speak from his own insight'.[20] MacNeice and his contemporaries are in this new trend. To be 'political' for them does not narrowly mean to be explicit and coherent by depending upon someone else's words, but to be conscious about and expressive of their own feelings for incidents in the world as a person. It is therefore natural that they sometimes disclose their contradiction and instability rather than their confidence and constancy.

MacNeice, knowing of a kind of utilitarian view imposed on the poet, also claims that 'I can't have an attitude' in *I Crossed the Minch*, his travelogue of the Hebrides.[21] At the time when he started writing *Autumn Journal*, he makes the following statement:

> The poet at the moment will tend to be moralist rather than aesthete. But his morality must be honest; he must not merely retail other people's dogma. The world no doubt needs propaganda, but propaganda (unless you use the term, as many do, very loosely indeed) is not the poet's job. He is not the loudspeaker of society, but something much more like its sill, small voice. [. . .] The world to-day consists of specialists and intransigents. The poet, by contrast,

[19] C. M. Bowra, *Poetry and Politics 1900-1960* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1966), p. 2.
[20] Ibid., p. 33.
[21] MacNeice, *ICM*, p. 129.

should be synoptic and elastic in his sympathies.[22]

MacNeice here explains an 'attitude': that of the poet relating himself to society. Henderson praises MacNeice's attitude, stating that 'His great value for us is that he is not ashamed to lead his own life, nor does he pretend to be something other than he is. [. . .] You can feel at ease with him because he is not concerned with telling you what you ought to feel and think'.[23] Indeed, MacNeice is resolute just enough to admit his irresoluteness. Richard Danson Brown considers that '*Autumn Journal* is best understood as a form of poetic conversation, in which the speaker offers consciously provisional conclusions'.[24]

The act of communication MacNeice practises and promotes is therefore different from the collectivism of Communism we have seen earlier. He asserts that 'A world society must be a federation of differentiated communities, not a long line of robots doing the goose-step. In the same way the community itself must be a community of individuals. Only they must not be fake individuals—archaizers and dilettantes—any more than the community must be a fake community, a totalitarian state strutting in the museum robes of Caesardom'.[25] His personal addressing the reader through his poetry intends itself to explore how a community can be formed without losing each human's individuality. In section XIII, MacNeice reveals that the idealism taught at Oxford, in which 'the actual was not real and the real was not with us / And all that mattered was the One', can lead to the neglect of reality and each particular person:

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[22] MacNeice, 'A Statement' (1938), in *SLC*, p. 98.
[23] Henderson, p. 227. MacNeice believes that although the 'poet does not give you a full and accurate picture of the world nor a full and accurate picture of himself', 'he gives you an amalgam which, if successful, represents truthfully his own relation to the world. This is a valuable function, for we are all concerned with our relation to our worlds, and the odds are that we have much in common with the poet and our world with his'. *MP*, pp. 197-8.
[24] Richard Danson Brown, *Louis MacNeice and the Poetry of the 1930s* (Tavistock: Northcote House Publishers, 2009), p. 78.
[25] MacNeice, *ICM*, p. 16.

And they said ‘The man in the street is so naïve, he never
    Can see the wood for the trees;
He thinks he knows he sees a thing but cannot
    Tell you how he knows the thing he thinks he sees.’
And oh how much I liked the Concrete Universal,
    I never thought that I should
Be telling them vice-versa
    That they can’t see the trees for the wood. (131)

While the ‘wood’ represents the abstracted, metaphysical truth of the world, the trees are the individuals the philosophers tend to dismiss. Although they mock an ordinary man’s ignorance of his ignorance, MacNeice reveals that it is these idealists that are ignorant of the fact that even a generalisation consists of particular things. His philosophical argument resumes in section XVII where he applies pluralism to the contemporary issue of solidarity with selves different from one’s own:

Why not admit that other people are always
    Organic to the self, that a monologue
Is the death of language and that a single lion
    Is less himself, or alive, than a dog and another dog?
Virtue going out of us always; the eyes grow weary
    With vision but it is vision builds the eye;
And in a sense the children kill their parents
    But do the parents die?
[. . .]

A point here and a point there: the current
Jumps the gaps, the ego cannot live
Without becoming other for the Other
Has got yourself to give. (142)

It is impossible for the self to attain complete independence. The word 'organic' shows the inseparable and natural connection between 'other people' and the 'self'. These two entities are also not merely juxtaposed. Although the indispensability should be mutual, MacNeice seems to deliberately set 'other people' as the subject; it should not be the other way round, 'the self is organic to other people'. The original line stresses the fact that others are needed to render each self recognisable and particular. Similarly, the following statement, 'monologue is a death of language and that a single lion / Is less himself', sounds powerful because of its very illogicality. Logically speaking, 'monologue' is a 'language' and there is no 'less' or more about the material existence of 'lion'. Yet each existence cannot prove its uniqueness unless there are others. Peter McDonald argues that for MacNeice 'the political good resides in individuals rather than in *the* individual. [. . .] MacNeice's individual, then, exists by virtue of difference as well as by his own integrity to the self. The self relies upon otherness, and the blueprint for a just society is an enlargement of this openness, a socialized dialogue of self and soul in which one individual is incomplete without others'.[26] MacNeice adds emphasis to the interdependence among individuals with several metaphors. First, 'Virtue' does not remain inward but expresses itself in our behaviour or action. Similarly, the eyes' function of seeing cannot be proven unless there is nothing to see. The parents-children relation exemplifies the truth that anyone has both a connection with others and one's own particularity. Michael O'Neill and Gareth Reeves point out that throughout *Autumn Journal*,

[26] McDonald, p. 83.

'self is discovered in other'.[27] McDonald similarly interprets the lines 'The ego cannot live / Without becoming other for the Other / Has got yourself to give' (142) as showing 'the self being realized in the other, the other in the self'.[28] However, Peter Robinson argues that the enjambments in *Autumn Journal* show the lines as both independent and constituent of the whole and MacNeice dramatises by such formal arrangements 'a belief in the virtue of autonomy, of lines having their own rhythmic coherence and integrity, but that this virtue is only valuable when brought into relation with other such autonomous entities'. Robinson then disagrees with McDonald's statement about 'the self being realized in the other, the other in the self', 'for just as I cannot presume upon another's self-realization in me, so too I can't presume to lodge my self-realization in another. The two selves have to be realizing in themselves, each in the situation of its relation with the other'.[29] It seems that Robinson, emphasising the independence of individuals, considers what McDonald expresses to be more the interpenetration of the self and the other than the interrelation of them. Indeed, one's own self-realisation will never be completed in another. Yet MacNeice's own expression in the poem, 'the ego cannot live / Without becoming other for the Other / Has got yourself to give', seems to imply that the ego can live by being other. I consider that 'becoming other' refers to the different positions one can stand in different relations. Everyone respectively has his or her own 'ego', and this very fact suggests that each cannot always be 'I' but must be 'other' for other people. It can be assumed that the capitalised 'Other' denotes this state of being 'other'. One's self cannot be fully known unless one recognises oneself in relation to others. At the end of section XVII, he states again that 'Nothing is self-sufficient' (143).

In *Autumn Journal*, MacNeice discloses his individualist attitude not for the self-justification but for the dramatisation of his physical and psychological move towards the

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[27] Michael O'Neill and Gareth Reeves, *Auden, MacNeice, Spender: The Thirties Poetry* (Basingstoke and London: Macmillan Education, 1992), p. 183.
[28] McDonald, p. 89.
[29] Peter Robinson, *Twentieth Century Poetry: Selves and Situations* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), p. 62.

solidarity in the community. This poetic manifestation is strong enough to prove the remaining hope MacNeice claims at the end of section XVIII: 'Still there are still the seeds of energy and choice / Still alive even if forbidden, hidden, / And while a man has voice / He may recover music' (147). *Autumn Journal*, although it neither offers nor becomes the direct 'action' itself, defends itself against the above quoted criticism that demands practical answers from poetry. We can assume that MacNeice's standpoint in his attempt in *Autumn Journal* is similar to W. H. Auden's; O'Neill argues that 'For Auden, poetry's work has a design on its reader, even if that design is to liberate the reader from the designs of others' and quoting from Auden's poem the line 'Make action urgent and its nature clear', he continues that 'This does not quite commit itself to a specific programme of "action", and if in many Auden poems of the period there is a "clear" sense that "action" is "urgent", it coexists with a refusal to preach'.[30] MacNeice would also agree with Cleanth Brooks, who asserts that poetry can 'give diagnoses rather than remedies' and 'there may be more than one remedy, and in any case a remedy involves an overt action whereas a diagnosis is still close to pure contemplation, which is the proper realm of art'.[31] It also endorses Spender's claim that 'poetry is concerned not with action but with the vital sources from which the necessity of action springs'.[32] *Autumn Journal* is potentially a source of 'action' by exemplifying a kind of action: the action to contemplate and speak out in MacNeice's own individual 'voice'.

II

In keeping with MacNeice's poetic aim of seeking to 'recover music' in the period when all hope seems to be gone, imagery takes on important functions. Because of the poem's nature

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[30] Michael O'Neill, 'Yeats', in *W. H. Auden in Context*, ed. by Tony Sharpe (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013), pp. 276-85 (pp. 280-1). Auden's poem mentioned here is 'August for the people and their favourite islands' to Christopher Isherwood. See W. H. Auden, *The English Auden: Poems, Essays and Dramatic Writings 1927-1939*, ed. by Edward Mendelson (London and Boston: Faber and Faber, 1977; repr. 1986), pp. 155-7.
[31] Cleanth Brooks, 'Implications of an Organic Theory of Poetry', in *Literature and Belief*, ed. by M. H. Abrams (New York and London: Columbia University Press, 1958; repr. 1965), pp. 53-79 (p. 75).
[32] Stephen Spender, 'Poetry', *Fact*, 4 (July 1937), 18-30 (pp. 20-1).

as 'journal', which seems to mean the detailed record of reality, the images in the poem might appear to be merely actual and occasional. Desmond Hawkins stresses the improvisatory aspect of the poem by stating that 'It is a Fleet Street document, a chatty account of thoughts and feelings during the Crisis, a parade of personality for the benefit of the curious', and regards it as 'a good news-reel, vivid, on the spot, hectic in parts, hastily assembled and imperfectly digested'.[33] Hawkins here seems to consider that the freshness of perception can be at once a virtue and defect of *Autumn Journal*. However, the poem is a product of careful and intentional patterning. John Whitehead explains that there are some characteristic patterns such as the combination of rhymed and unrhymed words or the internal rhymes, and 'The reader may not be aware of these devices as he reads the poem, but such art-concealing art has the effect of preventing monotony and giving each canto its own individuality'.[34] I would like to argue that in addition to versification, the images also contribute to the structural design of *Autumn Journal*. Some of the images emerge again and again throughout the poem. Whitehead points out that 'he [MacNeice] achieved coherence of imagery by repeating, with variations, in later cantos images that he had used in earlier ones, a process of which many examples both trivial and structural might be cited'.[35] In addition, it should be noted that the recurring images not only serve as the unifying force of the poem but also defy the sense of an ending: the end of life, the world, and the art of poetry itself. Edna Longley argues that '*Autumn Journal* offers a Keatsian region, if a little straggly round the edges, inside which the reader partly believes he makes his own profuse chains of words and images'.[36] Longley's remark is suggestive in that the verbal and visual 'chains' throughout the poem are influential to the reader as well as the structure of the poem. This endorses MacNeice's confidence in his

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[33] Desmond Hawkins, 'Autumnal Palinode' [review of *Autumn Journal* by Louis MacNeice, *Elegy on Spain*, *Poems* by Anne Ridler, *Beating Shoes* by W. H. Coates], *The Spectator*, 30 June 1939, p. 1140.
[34] John Whitehead, *A Commentary of the Poetry of W. H. Auden, C. Day Lewis, Louis MacNeice, and Stephen Spender* (Lewiston, New York; Queenston, Ontario; Lampeter, Wales: The Edwin Mellen Press, 1992), p. 85.
[35] Ibid., p. 86.
[36] Edna Longley, *Poetry in the Wars* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Bloodaxe Books, 1986), p. 92.

poem's potential of being shared, which is shown in his statement in a letter that 'anyone could understand it'.[37]

The poem consists of twenty-four sections, written between August and December 1938. Yet the content is not chronological, going backwards and forwards in his personal history as well as in the public history. The first section of the poem is about the present, but the people depicted belong to the past. It starts with the line connoting an ending: 'Close and slow, summer is ending in Hampshire' (101).[38] The assonance in 'close' and 'slow' introduces us to the drowsy, changeless upper-middle class life in the English countryside, 'Ebbing away down ramps of shaven lawn where close-clipped yew / Insulates the lives of retired generals and admirals' (101). The speaker's observation continues, yet at 'night which knows no passion / No assault of hands or tongue / For all is old as flint or chalk or pine-needles' (101), he turns his eyes to the 'rebels and the young', who indeed 'rebel' against the 'old' air:

> And the rebels and the young
> Have taken the train to town or the two-seater
> Unravelling rails or road,
> Losing the thread deliberately behind them –
> Autumnal palinode. (101)

Their act of 'unravelling' connotes challenge in their journey; rather than following the path prepared by their ancestors and taken now by their elder in countryside with 'all the inherited assets of bodily ease / And all the inherited worries' (101), they are going the untrodden way without leaving any connection for future return. The poet joins these 'rebels and the young':

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[37] MacNeice, To T. S. Eliot, [29?] November 1938, in *Letters*, p. 312.
[38] MacNeice visited his stepmother's elder sister, Aunt Helena, at Wickham, in Hampshire. See 'Appendix I: Persons Referred to in the Letters', in *Letters*, p. 713.

And I am in the train too now and summer is going
South as I go north
Bound for the dead leaves falling, the burning bonfire,
The dying that brings forth
The harder life, revealing the trees' girders,
The frost that kills the germs of *laissez-faire* [. . .] (102)

It is assumed that this poem itself and the act of writing it are for MacNeice tantamount to the challenging journey of the young people. While the summer is going south to end itself, the poet is directing himself to the opposite direction, knowing of the 'harder life'. Here the 'dead leaves', in spite of the state of being dead, are described in the progressive form of the present tense: the 'dead leaves' are 'falling' and the 'bonfire' is 'burning'. These movements suggest that the lives of the leaves have not entirely ended but they are near death. Then MacNeice associates the seasonal changes of the natural objects with the social disturbance. The cold threat of winter is expected to eliminate a potentially irresponsible human freedom described by the Keynesian term '*laissez-faire*'. The poet anticipates the war that jeopardises man's freedom as well as winter.

It may be common in poetry to let the objects speak for the emotions of the perceiver of them or for the world in which such a perception was possible. In the chapter on 'Imagery' in *Modern Poetry*, MacNeice calls actual things 'the properties', i.e. 'the objects which enter a poem by their own right, as flowers enter a poem about a garden, whereas the images enter a poem by the right of analogy, as flowers entered Plato's descriptions of his mystical and abstract Heaven', but he adds that the 'properties themselves may be, in the ultimate analysis, only symbols. Was, for example, Wordsworth's celandine really all

celandine and nothing but celandine?'[39] MacNeice mentions again Wordsworth at the end of his argument; in the present trend, the poets 'reduce images in proportion to properties' for their interest in 'subject', 'a subject from the concrete objective world'.[40] Those poets, according to MacNeice, 'philosophize' in poetry in the 'manner of Wordsworth', for whom 'the objective world of nature is an embodiment, not a concealment, of something like the Platonic Forms. He does not therefore require many images because his properties carry their own message'.[41] In *Autumn Journal*, the distinction between properties and images is blurred. The 'dead leaves' remain the 'properties' in that they refer to the real leaves in autumn but also are the image of the state of the poet and the world. In 'Experiences with Images', he admits his tendency to mingle these two types in his poetry. He explains that 'my basic conception of life being dialectical (in the philosophic, not in the political sense), I have tended to swing to and fro between descriptive or physical images (which are 'correct' so far as they go) and *faute de mieux* metaphysical, mythical or mystical images (which can never go far enough)'.[42] It is therefore reasonable and beneficial to consider the connotations in the seemingly descriptive images in *Autumn Journal*.

Most notably, the image of 'dead leaves' is variously employed throughout the poem and includes within itself a contradiction, or more precisely, an in-betweenness. The leaves are dead because once they are fallen from trees they are motionless on the ground unless an agent, wind, moves them. The 'dead leaves' are mentioned again in section I:

> And the train's rhythm becomes the *ad nauseam* repetition
>
> Of every tired aubade and maudlin madrigal,
>
> The faded airs of sexual attraction

[39] MacNeice, *MP*, p. 91.
[40] Ibid., p. 112.
[41] Ibid., p. 113.
[42] MacNeice, 'Experiences with Images' (1949), in *SLC*, pp. 153-64 (p. 156).

Wandering like dead leaves along a warehouse wall [. . .] (102)

Before this quoted passage, the poet met a woman in the train, whose eyes show a total indifference to anything, 'Inured for ever to surprise' (102). The poet finds an affinity between a mood of apathy that the woman embodies and the monotony of the train's movement. The 'faded airs of sexual attraction' probably contain the interest the poet at first has in the woman, 'airs' which are diminishing as he observes her. The image of 'dead leaves along a warehouse wall' is an effective simile for this inertia; the leaves have ended their lives as leaves, but they are still there, meaninglessly and uselessly 'wandering'. Their kind of afterlives as residue, purposeless but lingering existence, exactly conveys the mood in the train; although the woman's 'sexual attraction' is acknowledged and still felt in the compartment of the train, it is not so strong enough to keep the poet's attention. The image of 'dead leaves', which includes both life and death, thus captures ambivalence.

If the image of 'dead leaves' places itself between one state and another, it can represent beginnings as well as ends, and a wind that can move them is an agent that puts them in such status. MacNeice seems to allude to Shelley's 'Ode to the West Wind', in which the poet addresses the 'wild West Wind', 'Destroyer and Preserver', 'from whose unseen presence the leaves dead / Are driven, like ghosts from an enchanter fleeing'.[43] According to John Hollander, Shelley alludes to Milton's *Paradise Lost*, and the dead leaves are 'full of Homeric, Virgilian, and Dantesque associations' and 'bring together tropes of death, multitudinousness, falling and scattered generational and Sybilline leaves, and so forth'.[44] The helplessness of the leaves does not necessarily imply depression in *Autumn Journal*. As Michael O'Neill and Madeleine Callaghan consider, there are 'moments of joy as much as

[43] Percy Bysshe Shelley, 'Ode to the West Wind', in *Percy Bysshe Shelley: The Major Works*, ed. by Zachary Leader and Michael O'Neill, *Oxford World Classics* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2003; repr. 2009), p. 412.
[44] John Hollander, *The Figure of Echo: A Mode of Allusion in Milton and After* (Berkeley; Los Angeles; London: University of California Press, 1981), p. 121.

melancholic meditation' in *Autumn Journal*, and 'Shelley's west wind wanders, all blown out, through this down-at-heel but not wholly dispirited modern setting, a setting which provides MacNeice with his own forms of inspiration'.[45] Later in the poem, MacNeice states that 'What the wind scatters the wind saves, / A sapling springs in a new country' (162). These lines can mean that the wind has contradictory roles as 'Destroyer and Preserver', spreading seeds on the ground and saving the plants that developed from these seeds by bringing pollens for fertilisation. Both of the acts actually help seeds/plants to reproduce themselves, which suggests that the poem is filled with encouragement to relive.

It is true that most of the recurrent images in *Autumn Journal* are something recurrent in the real world. The sun in section VIII is one of several such images. MacNeice writes about his visit to Birmingham where he used to have his married life ('We lived in Birmingham through the slump') (118), and at the same time as the sun shows its indifferent, unchangeable force of lightening the earth, it exposes what the poet in the past turned his back upon. 'Sun shines easy, sun shines gay' (117) on the landmarks in Birmingham, which, as the present tense indicates, is unaltered regardless of the changes in the poet's personal life or in the world. In contrast, when the same repetitive syntax is adopted when he recollects his past there, it tells the happy but isolated life of the married couple: 'Life was comfortable, life was fine' (117). Another reference to the sunshine works to highlight their indifference to the world:

> And sun shone easy, sun shone hard
>
> On quickly dropping pear-tree blossom
>
> And pigeons courting in the cobbled yard
>
> With flashing necks and notes of thunder.

[45] Michael O'Neill and Madeleine Callaghan, ed.. *Twentieth-Century British and Irish Poetry: Hardy to Mahon* (Malden, MA; Oxford; Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011), pp. 111-2.

We slept in linen, we cooked with wine,
We paid in cash and took no notice
Of how the train ran down the line
Into the sun against the signal. (117-8)

While the sunshine commonly represents momentary happiness, the sun here shines on the beautiful but evanescent scenes: the blossoms are 'quickly' dropping, the pigeons' necks are 'flashing', and the sun is to be replaced by 'thunder'. The life of 'we' was also bright but the insistent articulation of 'we' implies the poet's present knowledge that their happiness at that time was a privilege rather than a birthright. Here the verbs show the affluence that they took for granted and stress the fact that even this fortunate situation resulted in dissolution. Their life is also contrasted with the train accident that happened under the same sun. The sun that equally shines on everyone turns out to be a cruel discloser of inequality. In the lines that follow, the sunshine is 'dancing on the rubbish dump, / On the queues of men and the hungry chimneys' (118), which mercilessly exposes the men in need of work. Longley believes that the image of sun here is 'ritualised into a mocking refrain', and 'Associated with his first wife', who is often depicted with light and sunshine in his earlier poems such as 'Mayfly', 'now connects what was wrong beneath the surface of their marriage with what was wrong beneath the surface of the time'.[46] In section XVIII, MacNeice also discloses the disparity between the sun's stability and the instability of the human world: 'The sun may shine no doubt but how many people / Will see it with their eyes in Nineteen-Thirty-Nine?' (147). Samuel Hynes argues that 'MacNeice's achievement in his poem was to interweave the constituent parts of his life, and to show how those parts acted upon each other', which includes 'how the past affected his responses to the present, and how the present forced him

[46] Longley, *Poetry in the Wars*, p. 86; in 'Mayfly', the poet addresses 'Daughter of the South' and asks her to 'call the sunbeams home / To nest between your breasts'. *CP*, p. 31.

to judge the past; how the public world invaded private life, and how private losses coloured his attitude toward public crisis'.[47] Indeed, the divide between the private and the public in the past is reviewed and corrected by the poet at present, who notices that he should not be deluded by the unchangeable, pleasing sunshine: 'Sun shines easy but I no longer / Docket a place in the sun' (118-9).[48] MacNeice stops the reassuring repetition regarding sun in order to discard the isolated and ignorant 'we'. As Hynes states, the 'autobiographical passages' read as 'judgments of the past imposed by the disastrous present'.[49] O'Neill and Reeves also claim that 'Throughout *Autumn Journal* the acute sense of present events plays off against a continual awareness of the past that is being unearthed, brought into the light of the present'.[50] The sun connects all, the past and the present, the self and others, and becomes a witness of MacNeice's self-renewing process of involving in society.

The correction of the poet's own attitude in the past is enabled not only by the sense of necessity to change but also by the conviction that we still have time to do it. Fire is one of the recurrent images in the poem that often work as positively indicating the 'chance' human beings still possess. It is characterised with its ability to regenerate itself, which encourages the poet to restart. In section XI, which is about his lost love, MacNeice meditates upon the cycle of time, which encourages him to overcome his loss and start again:

> I see the future glinting with your presence
>
> Like moon on a slate roof,
>
> And my spirits rise again. It is October,
>
> The year-god dying on the destined pyre inevitable
>
> With all the colours of a scrambled sunset

[47] Samuel Hynes, *The Auden Generation: Literature and Politics in England in the 1930s* (London and Boston: Faber and Faber, 1976; repr. 1979), p. 368.
[48] MacNeice, *CP*, p. 119.
[49] Hynes, p. 369.
[50] O'Neill and Reeves, p. 186.

And all the funeral elegance of fire
In the grey world to lie cocooned but shaping
His gradual return;
No one can stop the cycle;
The grate is full of ash but fire will always burn.
Therefore, listening to the taxis
(In which you never come) so regularly pass,
I wait content, banking on the spring and watching
The dead leaves canter over the dowdy grass. (127-8)

The 'year-god' of October is apparently associated with the phoenix, the bird that dies and is reborn in fire; MacNeice anticipates a new beginning as well as the end of the day, the season, and the poet's love. He reworks images such as the phoenix and 'cocoon' that he used in his earlier poems in *Blind Fireworks* where the vision of the renewal of the world is conceptual and mystical. The images in the passage above embrace the moments that are more immediate and personal. That 'No one can stop the cycle' offers him comfort in contemplating a new life, a life without 'you'. The rhyme of 'return' and 'burn' fortifies this implication, suggesting that a life is at once a continuance of the life so far and a one-time experience. Here are again the 'dead leaves', which actively run like a horse, possibly with the aid of wind 'unseen' as in Shelley's poem. Passively sitting and waiting for their escape from his sight, the poet hopes that his depression will also go away. It can be presumed that the belief in renewal is a latent central theme in *Autumn Journal*.

While the fire in section XI seems to embody a kind of immortality, the fire is addressed as a model of mortal life in section XXI where the poet speculates about the 'value' of life. Although he admits that 'Life would be (as it often seems) flat / If it were merely a

matter of not dying' (153), he attempts to assert that living should be more than a mere routine or a postponement of death. What is to be aimed at is a 'life beyond the self but self-completing', which is embodied by the fire that is 'Consuming fuel, self-consuming' (153). This description of the fire, perhaps an echo of Shakespeare's sonnet 73, presents the fire as a model of life with an autonomy that we, as humans, should also attain.[51] The chiasmus in the line 'Consuming fuel, self-consuming' subtly corresponds to the self-sufficiency of the fire's burning. That life should also be 'beyond the self' and a 'collective creation' is learned from the two extreme natures of the 'flames': the clearest cut / Of shapes and the most transient' (154). Although the flames have the 'clearest' outline, they are 'transient', unable to hold the same shape. Their definiteness and changeability deny any simple interpretation of existence, and the fire is recognised as a figure that paradoxically affects the world outside of itself:

> O fire, my spendthrift,
> May I spend like you, as reckless but
> Giving as good return – burn the silent
> Into running sound, deride the dark
> And jump to glory from a single spark
> And purge the world and warm it. (154)

The fire's contradictory influence on the world as destroyer and preserver, its purging and warming of the world, is applied to a human life, suggesting that there is more than one way, for the self, of relating to the world. This also reverberates with MacNeice's cry in another

[51] 'In me thou seest the glowing of such fire / That on the ashes of his youth doth lie, / As the death-bed where on it must expire, / Consumed with that which it was nourished by'. William Shakespeare, *The Complete Sonnets and Poems*, ed. by Colin Burrow, *The Oxford Shakespeare* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), p. 527.

section that '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' (129). As Patrick Deane points out, this desire to be 'human' is not a modest one at that time, since its 'nonidelogical nature' demands us to 'abjure all forms of idealistic discourse'.[52] In the decade of ideologies, MacNeice dares to think of life without inclining towards any established theory or unrealistic ideal. Furthermore, it is important to note that the society in his mind allows the people to enjoy their physical easiness, as the fire's incessant movement and the added statement, 'the body is not distrusted', indicate. When MacNeice refers again to 'fire' at the end of section XXI, he warns that 'We shan't have another chance to dance and shout / Once the flames are silent' (155). Here the dance, another physical movement, symbolises, as we have seen in the last section, an act involving others, and MacNeice may even implicate the fate of poetry as well as that of human beings. In *Modern Poetry*, referring to Nijinsky, who, according to MacNeice, said 'I am going to dance the War', MacNeice claims that 'the poet dances his experiences in words'.[53] The analogy may confirm that he is concerned with poetry as well as death when he fears losing a 'chance' to dance. Likewise, to 'shout' can also be regarded as raising a voice that should become poetry. Sebastian D. G. Knowles, who considers the present in *Autumn Journal* to be a purgatory between the past and the future worlds, insists that the fire that can 'burn the silent / Into running sound' is 'more the flame of his poetry' than the actual flames of war and conflicts.[54] The danger of poetry resides with that of the world, and through the fire's self-completing yet influential way of living, MacNeice determines to keep life and poetry, both of which represent the unrepeatable chance that can too easily end.

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[52] Patrick Deane, '"Building the Just City Now": Exchanges between English Literature, Socialism, and Christianity in the 1930s', in *And in Our Time: Vision, Revision, and British Writing of the 1930s*, ed. by Antony Shuttleworth (Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press; London: Associated University Press, 2003), p. 21.
[53] MacNeice, *MP*, p. 199.
[54] Sebastian D. G. Knowles, *A Purgatorial Flame: Seven British Writers in the Second World War* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1990), pp. 97, 98.

The image of fire in sections XI and XXI offers opposition within itself, between repeatability and unrepeatability, and between autonomy and a relationship with others. Those aspects of the fire also tell the complex truth of history in section IX. MacNeice, who knows that the 'days grow worse, the dice are loaded / Against the living man who pays in tears for breath' (120), seeks for an answer to the question, 'What is life' (120), in the classics, which he studied and taught, since the people in the ancient world also 'plotted out their life with truism and humour / Between the jealous heaven and the callous sea' (120). He thinks that it may be beneficial to adapt the learning of ancient Greece to the present situation, but he immediately denies this fancy, for 'These dead are dead' (121) and 'It was all so unimaginably different / And all so long ago' (122). At the same time as expecting regeneration, MacNeice recognises that history is linear: a kind of cyclicality in time that he believes is found in everyday life.

The images and references regarding 'sleep' in *Autumn Journal* exemplify the cyclicality, which provides both an end and a renewal. While MacNeice uses the conventional association of sleep with death in his earlier poems, the sleep in *Autumn Journal* is a comforter in the endless process of time, since it always brings you back to the state before it, that of being awake. Reflecting the actual habit of MacNeice, who was a night person, several sections in *Autumn Journal* end with the coming of morning and his declaration of going to bed. In section II, the poet concludes his metaphysical meditation by deciding to focus on 'to-morrow', which is a particular day that is surely to come, unlike Platonic 'Being':

> Spider, spider, spin
>
> Your register and let me sleep a little,
>
> Not now in order to end but to begin
>
> The task begun so often. (104)

That sleeping is not ‘to end but to begin’ gives the poet the emotional support and assurance of the world’s stability. Though the spider’s ‘register’ implies the incessant routine of life he must soon join, it also assures the poet that life will continue. In addition, other sections that end with a reference to the morning also reflect the poet’s prospect for the future. At the end of section V, the poet assumes that his anxiety over ‘zero hour’ is aroused by the noises that announce the morning, yet, somewhat paradoxically, he declares that he will sleep because of these noises: ‘I wonder what the morning / Paper will say, / And decide to go quickly to sleep for the morning already / Is with us, the day is to-day’ (111). He should sleep in order to catch up with others, who are already having their ‘today’ and facing reality. His going to sleep when the day begins might also be an intentional avoidance of bringing an end to the world and the poem itself.

Sleeping as an image of continuity is used most effectively in the final section of *Autumn Journal*. It is distinctive from other sections in that the poet asks all sorts of things of sleep, expecting that the sleeping of the old will lead to a new birth:

> Sleep, my body, sleep, my ghost,
>
> Sleep, my parents and grand-parents,
>
> And all those I have loved most:
>
> One man’s coffin is another’s cradle.
>
> Sleep, my past and all my sins,
>
> In distant snow or dried roses
>
> Under the moon for night’s cocoon will open
>
> When day begins. (161)

MacNeice here discloses his expectation that life never ceases as long as another life begins; death cannot be avoided but will be compensated by the birth of another life. Longley points out that the section 'quite successfully blends within its lullaby-format the future tense and the optative/imperative moods'.[55] At the same time, the imperative is also used to take his 'past' and 'sins' to the eternal sleep; the 'distant snow' transforms everything into oblivion, and the 'dried roses / Under the moon', already being dried, are not likely to be reinvigorated by the sun.

Some might think that MacNeice uses sleep as *deus ex machina*, a provisional solution to everything insoluble. His attitude might appear to be escapist, especially when immediate political action is required. Yet the 'sleep' in *Autumn Journal* is for renewal, a way of enabling action for and in the future. The poet suggests that we should 'dream' the ideal world, but the sleep should be 'only for a little' because 'Your hope must wake / While the choice is yours to make' (163-4). The last lines of the poem should also be read as a positive poetical suspension:

> 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 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. (164)

[55] Longley, *Poetry in the Wars*, p. 91.

Here MacNeice reveals that the river is 'to be crossed'. O'Neill and Reeves, discussing the water imagery in detail, suggest that the river here is the river 'of time future as opposed to time past', and that 'the task of *Autumn Journal* has been to review the past in order to cross the frontier into the future, appropriately conjured up by the Rubicon, suggestive not only of the irrevocable but also of the threshold of war'.[56] It is indeed the future that awaits on the other side of the river, but the contrast between the present tense and the future tense in those lines seems to reveal the unknowability of the future. While the 'sunlight' is suggestive of the dawn of tomorrow, which is uncontrollable but surely to come, the metaphor of calculation shows that an answer to the problems that remain unsolved at present will probably be found in the future. MacNeice may here expect to have the 'equation' as a kind of solution, but, 'MacNeice found', as Hugh Underhill points out, it 'did not come out'.[57] The 'equation' may also refer to that of the poem. We can remember MacNeice's 'Note' to the poem in which he claims that he is not 'attempting to offer what so many people now demand from poets – a final verdict or a balanced judgment. It is the nature of this poem to be neither final nor balanced'.[58] McDonald defends MacNeice's lack of 'depth' by regarding it as 'a part of the incoherence of contemporary history' and assumes that 'A feeling that *Autumn Journal* does not fully cohere, that the equation does not, in fact, "come out at last", is also perhaps foreseen in MacNeice's design'.[59] Even if the equation is neither positive nor convincing, the last lines are far from the mere postponement of facing the problem. The word 'last' may imply an inevitable ending of the peace unsurely kept in 1938. As he decisively says, 'The New Year comes with bombs' (164), the poem draws an end to the year along with its peace. At the same time, the future tense sounds soothing and ensuring, implying that the sleep will not let us miss the ending but rather wake us to experience it. Whitehead also reads the last

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[56] O'Neill and Reeves, p. 193.
[57] Hugh Underhill, *The Problem of Consciousness in Modern Poetry* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), pp. 227-8.
[58] MacNeice, 'Note' to *Autumn Journal*, in Appendix 7, in *CP*, p. 791.
[59] McDonald, p. 87.

lines as a hopeful expression of the future, stating that they remind us of 'how far his position had advanced from the elegiac mood in which, only the previous year, he had written his lyric "The Sunlight on the Garden"'.[60]

In *Autumn Journal*, its interwoven images, a seemingly negligible poetic device, contribute to MacNeice's attempt to show and embody the role of poetry, the role of exploring and proposing a possible way of living at a time of crisis. The possibility of reviewing and renewing cannot be held when things are really gone past and lost. O'Neill and Reeves argue that like the spider in section II, which is 'spinning out his reams / Of colourless thread' (104), 'the poet spins the web of his journal to keep despair at bay':

> And implicit in the poet's recognition of life's continuum is the need to go on writing, his continual act of circumlocution. The whole of *Autumn Journal* can be heard as a series of new beginnings as the poet repeatedly performs a verbal act of pulling himself together, even as the poem captures the sense of an ending.[61]

Teresa Bruś also maintains that 'Writing a journal is his way of not stopping to write in the face of fear'.[62] This attempt at 'not stopping' is indeed a daring enough for a poet. Spender writes just after the breakout of the war that 'I am going to keep a journal because I cannot accept the fact that I feel so shattered that I cannot write at all'.[63] The serious shock can silence the poets, as MacNeice expects at the very end of *Modern Poetry*: 'When the crisis comes, poetry may for the time be degraded or even silenced'. Nevertheless, he claims, 'it

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[60] Whitehead, p. 87.
[61] O'Neill and Reeves, p. 185.
[62] Teresa Bruś, 'Louis MacNeice's *Autumn Journal* as a Place of Asylum in Space and an Archive in Time', in *Crossroads in Literature and Culture*, ed. by Jacek Fabiszak and others (Berlin and Heidelberg: Springer-Verlag, 2013), pp. 223-33 (p. 229).
[63] Stephen Spender, the journal entry on 3 September 1939, in *Journals, 1939-1983*, ed. by John Goldsmith (London: Faber and Faber, 1985), p. 23.

will reappear, as one of the chief embodiments of human dignity, when people once more have time for play and criticism'.[64] MacNeice in *Autumn Journal* demonstrates that he has 'time for play and criticism'. Moving discursively like a wind among the past, the present, and the future and between personal and collective history, he reconstructs his thoughts, memories, and imagination to make *Autumn Journal* a self-reflexive music of the irretraceable, unrepeatable present for the coming future.

[64] MacNeice, *MP*, p. 205.

Chapter 5.

The 'Re-orchestration' of MacNeice's Poetry and Poetics in *Plant and Phantom*

Although his creativity seems to have been sustained after *Autumn Journal*, the outbreak of the war on 1 September 1939 prompted a change in MacNeice's poetics as well as in the world. Some letters indicate that MacNeice in this period struggled to revise his way of writing. In particular, his growing suspicion of what he believes in the nineteen thirties drives him to formal experiment. MacNeice later recollects that his poems in the thirties emphasise more topical themes, and 'since *Autumn Journal* I have been eschewing the news-reel and attempting a stricter kind of drama which largely depends upon structure'.[1] He then refers to his new method as 'structural tightening-up'. The first section of this chapter considers how this 'structural tightening-up' is attempted in the poems making use of refrain. I will also discuss his poems concerning philosophical themes in the second section, which seems to show slight changes in MacNeice's metaphysical standpoint.

I

As the previous chapters have demonstrated, MacNeice effectively uses repetition in his poems. In some of the earliest examples in *Blind Fireworks*, such as 'the minute after and the minute after the minute after' (623) in 'A Cataract Conceived as the March of Corpses' or 'have you heard the mocking-bird, the mocking bird, the mocking-bird?' (647) in 'Adam's Legacy', the act of repeating enforces the sense of a haunting annunciation. The elaborate chaining and internal rhymes in 'The Sunlight on the Garden' in *The Earth Compels* show MacNeice's ability to make formal circularity serve as the poetical fulfilment of the will to stay in a peaceful moment, which the speaker in 'Homage to Clichés' also wants to achieve

[1] Louis MacNeice, 'Experiences with Images' (1949), in *SLC*, pp. 153-64 (pp. 161-2).

by repeatedly asking 'What will you have' (67, 68). His frequent use of repetition can be considered as the emphatic attempt to make a poem in a certain form. According to MacNeice, the fashion of free verse is replaced in the thirties by the return to form: 'Most of our younger poets, thanks largely to Eliot himself, find themselves not needing even Eliot's technical freedom [. . .]. Most of the younger generation have returned to more regular forms while trying to be their masters, not their slaves'.[2] Later again, MacNeice claims that the limitation of form is an essential element in poetry: '*Free Verse* had to be tried but now — with rare exceptions — ought to be dropped. [. . .] In the arts bars can be cross-bars and limitations an asset. Verse is a precision instrument and owes its precision very largely to the many and subtle differences which an ordinary word can acquire from its place in a rhythmical scheme'.[3]

In *Plant and Phantom*, regularity is seen in more various forms and more clearly reflecting the concern of time than in the poems in the thirties. It should be noted that MacNeice's desire to recollect the past is heightened especially in this period. In addition to the poem 'Autobiography', the poem sequence 'Novelettes' in *Plant and Phantom* is largely inspired by his own experiences in childhood, which are retold in his autobiography, *The Strings Are False*.[4] In 'III THE GARDENER' in 'Novelettes', the gardener, who was 'Always in the third person; / And would level his stick like a gun / (With a glint in his eye) / Saying "Now I'm a Frenchman"' (188-9), is not entirely a creation but the reconstruction of a real person, 'Archie', who worked for the MacNeices when the poet was a child. The change in the treatment of fact is striking here; the character of the gardener is not described in explanatory words, but represented by the Yeats-like, pseudo-refrains ('*For he was not quite all there*'; '*He was not quite right in the head*'; '*He was not quite up to the job*') (188, 189), and several sets of anaphora:

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[2] MacNeice, 'The Traditional Aspect of Modern English Poetry' (Dec. 1946), in *SLC*, pp. 135-41 (p. 141).
[3] MacNeice, 'An Alphabet of Literary Prejudices' (March 1948), in *SLC*, pp. 141-8 (p. 143).
[4] MacNeice, *SAF*, pp. 47-8.

With the smile of a saint,

With the pride of a feudal chief,

[. . .]

A clay pipe in his teeth,

A tiny flag in his cap,

A white cat behind him,

[. . .]

And between the clack of the shears

Or the honing of the scythe

Or the rattle of the rake on the gravel

He would talk to amuse the children,

He would talk to himself or the cat

Or the robin waiting for worms

Perched on the handle of the spade [. . .] (188)

These repetitions are at once factual and poetical; while they highlight the habitual actions of the gardener, their rhythms seem to intensify the sense of unreality. Although reality is always made into a poetic truth once it is expressed in a poem, the very artificiality of the repetitions seems to fictionalise the gardener and distance the poet from the past reality.

Another notable repetition in *Plant and Phantom* is the refrain. In 'IV Galway' in 'The Closing Album', the refrain 'The war came down on us here' (182) at the end of each stanza conveys both the dreamy atmosphere of Galway and the poet's recognition of reality. It is assumed that the function of the refrain is, with its difference from the rest of the poem, to highlight the disparity between the reality and the imagination or desire of the poet.

'Autobiography' adopts the ballad form, of which the refrain functions by disclosing the undesirable.[5] The formal regularity is significant not only for its own sake but also for its function of conveying the emotional intensity of the poet in a different way from a direct personal expression. As is obvious from its title, it is a subjective poem, based upon MacNeice's own experience of being deserted by his mother when he was five years old.[6] The poem begins with a seemingly happy recollection of his childhood surroundings:

> In my childhood trees were green
> And there was plenty to be seen.
>
> *Come back early or never come*. (200)

The factual tone in which the speaker recollects 'trees were green' and 'there was plenty to be seen' is employed to recreate the child's passive attitude that takes his gifted surroundings for granted. In reality, 'trees were green' and 'there was plenty to be seen' because the child's sensory perception was vivid. In the entire poem, the centrality of 'I' is alternately denied and confirmed. Firstly his emotional alienation is shown with a slight aloofness. There are three couplets beginning with 'when'; the first and second ones where 'I' appears—'When I was five' (200); 'When I woke' (200)—merely depict the factual states of the child. In the third couplet, 'When my silent terror cried' (201), the speaker personalises 'terror' rather than having 'I' as the subject. It is oxymoronic that a 'silent' terror could cry. This tells at once that the terror was serious enough to cry out and that its very intensity deprived the child of his

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[5] MacNeice calls 'Autobiography' 'a naïve-seeming kind of little ballad with refrain'. To Eleanor Clark, 3 September [1940], in *Letters*, p. 404.

[6] Edna Longley states that the poem 'uses a deceptively simple nursery-rhyme format to lay out this trauma. The poem is saturated in loss of the mother. And it indirectly accuses the father, or God the father, of failing to provide any consolation'. Edna Longley, 'Out of Ulster I: Louis MacNeice and His Influence', in *Irish Poetry since Kavanagh*, ed. by Theo Dorgan (Dublin and Portland: Four Courts Press, 1996), pp. 52-9 (p. 57).

own voice to make an actual cry. By letting his emotion cry, MacNeice shows the child's shock of being alone and how it made him attempt to distance himself from fear and loneliness.

The refrain of the poem, '*Come back early or never come*', has enigmatic obscurity, but it also attaches an apparently personal sentiment to the poem. Considering the biographical background, we can assume that the refrain is the child's words addressed to his leaving mother. Peter McDonald states that 'the wakeful child makes a song out of his own abandonment in the night' and regards the refrain as 'not one of reassurance, but of wounded ultimatum'.[7] Neil Corcoran also considers that the refrain is uttered by the child, yet from another perspective; referring to Freud's *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, he maintains that 'the (temporary) disappearance of the mother is assuaged by the control or revenge of the *fort* / *da* game in which the child's inevitable passivity in the face of loss is combated by the game's repetitions'.[8] The game, according to Freud, includes the repetition of the child throwing away and then regaining a toy, and he could have an 'active' role 'by repeating it as a game, even though it had been unpleasurable' and 'take revenge on his mother for having gone away from him'.[9] Corcoran's interpretation therefore suggests that the refrain's repetition is a form of consolation to attenuate the child's sorrow, anger, and loneliness. Yet, as John Kerrigan points out, the intensity of the meaning of the refrain increases as the poem proceeds, and paradoxically the repetition of 'early' 'gets closer to meaning its opposite', which in the end becomes 'internalised as habit, a block against change'; although a change should be made upon the pattern, Kerrigan believes that the passivity in the last lines of the main stanza, 'the chilly sun / Saw me walk away alone' (201), shows that 'the pattern is not

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[7] Peter McDonald, 'The Pity of It All', in *Incorrigibly Plural: Louis MacNeice and his Legacy*, ed. by Fran Brearton and Edna Longley (Manchester: Carcanet Press, 2012), pp. 1-24 (pp. 12, 13).
[8] Neil Corcoran, 'The Same Again? MacNeice's Repetitions', in *Incorrigibly Plural*, pp. 257-73 (p. 261).
[9] Sigmund Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle and Other Writings*, trans. by John Reddick with an Introduction by Mark Edmundson, *The New Penguin Freud* (London: Penguin Books, 2003), p. 54.

broken'.[10] I agree with Kerrigan that the repetition, as it is repeated, makes clearer the impossibility of having the addressed come back, but a person addressed by the refrain may also change as the refrain changes its meaning. It is plausible that the last refrain is addressed to the speaker/child himself. This interpretation may be supported by the fact that in the last couplet, it is the speaker who is leaving the house. That the speaker is not 'I' who acts but 'me' who is seen by the sun in the last line shows the self-alienation of 'I' from the torturing experience. Although the ending with the refrain may signify that the child's departure is only an attempt, the fact that the rhyme of the last couplet is broken ('sun'/'alone') seems to realise the state in which the child will 'never come' again. In this sense, the last refrain sounds like the speaker's self-confirmation of his transformation from an object left alone to a subject that stands alone. As Michael O'Neill argues, the poem 'evokes and bids farewell to a childhood' and the refrain, 'as though it were a mode of (possibly Platonic) self-address', promotes the establishment of the speaker as an independent human being.[11] The poem shows itself as a poem of becoming by ending with the speaker's own departure from the scene.

The refrain in 'Autobiography' is thus integral both to the speaker's sorrow and his resolution to overcome it. That MacNeice rarely used such a regular refrain in his earlier poems makes this effective use of refrain more notable. We can consider it as a part of his 'structural tightening-up' after *Autumn Journal*, but it is also motivated by his renewed conception of reality. In the thirties, writing about reality is the foremost duty of poetry. MacNeice, however, knows that 'realism' risks being 'propaganda': 'Various poets who had formerly written personal – i.e. unrealistic – poetry of a sophisticated somewhat symbolist type, had now gone realistic, trumpeting ready-made slogans and asserting over and over their

[10] John Kerrigan, 'The Ticking Fear' [review of *CP*, *Louis MacNeice: Selected Poems*, edited by Michael Longley, *ICM* and *SAF*], *London Review of Books*, 30.3 (7 February 2008), 15-18 (p. 17).
[11] O'Neill regards the meaning of the refrain as 'Reincarnate yourself as a pre-experiential being or never return'. 'Poetry and Autobiography in the 1930s: Auden, Isherwood, MacNeice, Spender', in *A History of English Autobiography*, ed. by Adam Smyth (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2016), pp. 331-44 (p. 342).

conviction that the Right (equals the Left) would triumph'.[12] In *Modern Poetry*, he claims that the poem is not the mere 'record' of fact, but every experience written in the poem is 'modified' by the poet's own feeling or thought: 'Poetic truth therefore is distinct from scientific truth'.[13] The 'poetic truth' is therefore the subjectively determined truth, while the 'scientific truth' is absolute. Stephen Spender also recollects that the 'truth' as a subject for poetry was problematic in the thirties, partly due to the Communist belief that 'in stating what he thinks to be the truth the individual is often representing the interest and point of view of the class to which he belongs.[14] It could ultimately lead to a 'falsification', which 'is of the kind that occurs in all "war" situations: that a truth which gives comfort to the enemy is a kind of lie, and that a lie which serves your own side is a kind of truth'.[15] Furthermore, Spender writes about the role of poetry in 1939:

> Poetry does not state truth, it states the conditions within which something felt is true. Even while he is writing about the little portion of reality which is part of his experience, the poet may be conscious of a different reality outside. His problem is to relate the small truth to the sense of a wider, perhaps theoretically known, truth outside his experience. Poems exist within their own limits, they do not exclude the possibility of other things, which might also be subjects of poetry, being different. They remain true to experience and they establish the proportions of that experience.[16]

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[12] MacNeice, *SAF*, p. 166.
[13] MacNeice, *MP*, p. 197.
[14] Stephen Spender, *The Thirties and After: Poetry, Politics, People (1933-75)* (Glasgow: William Collins Sons, 1978), p. 30.
[15] Ibid., p. 31.
[16] Stephen Spender, 'Foreword' to *The Still Centre* (London: Faber and Faber, 1939), p. 10.

Like MacNeice, Spender does not regard 'reality' in poetry as absolute as truth but as something determined by the poet's perception. He claims here that the poet should be sincere at least in expressing his own experiences, conceding that there are other realities or other ways of viewing the same reality.

MacNeice, who acknowledges this subjectivity of seeing reality in poetry, feels the need of redefining reality itself when the war begins. He was commissioned to write a book on Yeats by Oxford University Press after he gave a paper on Yeats for the Association of Writers for Intellectual Library on 1 March 1939.[17] He took almost a year to finish writing.[18] In the 'Introductory' chapter of the book, MacNeice recalls his experience during his writing of the book: 'As soon as I heard on the wireless of the outbreak of war, Galway [where MacNeice was staying then] became unreal. And Yeats and his poetry became unreal also'; this sense of 'unreality', he says, was also felt for other things he had been familiar with: 'modern London, modernist art, and Left Wing politics'.[19] Likewise, not only 'escapist' poetry but also what had been thought as the 'realist' poetry became unreal:

> I gradually inferred, as I recovered from the shock of war, that both these kinds of poetry stand or fall together. War does not prove that one is better or worse than the other; it attempts to disprove both. But poetry must not be disproved. If war is the test of reality, then all poetry is unreal; but in that case unreality is a virtue. If, on the other hand, war is a great enemy of reality, although an incontestable fact, then reality is something which is not exactly commensurable with

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[17] Jon Stallworthy, *Louis MacNeice* (London: Faber and Faber, 1995), p. 253.

[18] His letters suggest that he is struggling with the writing; on 8 May [1939], he confesses that 'I have done nothing about Yeats yet'. Although he tells E. R. Dodds on 2 November [1939] that he 'shall have finished Yeats' by the New Year and that he is 'getting near the end of the Yeats book (1ST version) which is at last coming to life' on 22 November [1939], it is in the letter to Mrs. E. R. Dodds on 22 March 1940 that he says that his 'Yeats book is practically (truly, this time) finished'. MacNeice, *Letters*, pp. 330, 367, 369, 381.

[19] MacNeice, *PWBY*, p. 17.

facts.[20]

MacNeice here stresses that if the destructive war is a part of reality, poetry's distance from reality as artifact is valuable for seeing the reality. What is more notable is his second assumption that 'war is a great enemy of reality, although an incontestable fact'. That the 'war' is the 'enemy of reality' seems to mean that the all-denying force of war destroys what has been considered 'reality'. As we have seen, MacNeice already differentiates 'reality' in poetry from 'fact', but here he also claims that realism is not enough for probing what Howard calls 'an "inner reality"—the thinghood of an object or event, the spiritual condition of a decade'.[21] Here MacNeice ensures that poetry can secure reality against the war that is an undeniable fact by showing its own version of reality.

At the same time, however, MacNeice feels that the thirties' way of treating reality in poetry is inadequate; as is clear from MacNeice and Spender's remarks above, they rely on the poet's own subjectivity to perceive reality and write about it. Edna Longley considers that until MacNeice writes the book on Yeats, 'To establish any cultural, political or aesthetic position, he requires the first person singular'.[22] McDonald also states that while the instability and uncertainty of the 'self' was made central in *Autumn Journal*, 'with the events of 1939, such strategies began to seem inadequate as a way of containing the tensions building up in MacNeice's work between external disruption and internal coherence'.[23] In relation to the subjectivity, the way to choose and express the subject matter of poetry is also reconsidered. Although he still finds significance in the 'relationship of poetry to life', MacNeice confesses in *The Poetry of W. B. Yeats* that 'in my book, *Modern Poetry*, I

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[20] Ibid., p. 18.
[21] Ben Howard, 'In the Shadow of the Gasworks: Louis MacNeice and the Critical Office', *The Sewanee Review*, 99.1 (Winter 1991), 61-76 (p. 70).
[22] Edna Longley, 'Louis MacNeice: "The Walls are Flowing"', in *Across a Roaring Hill: The Protestant Imagination in Modern Ireland. Essays in Honour of John Hewitt*, ed. by Gerald Dawe and Edna Longley (Belfast and Dover, New Hampshire: The Blackstaff Press, 1985), pp. 99-123 (p. 104).
[23] Peter McDonald, *Louis MacNeice: The Poet in His Contexts* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991), p. 96.

overstressed the half-truth that poetry is *about* something, is communication'.[24] It is true that he seems to weigh 'communication' when he claims that [a poet should be] 'presenting something which is (*a*) communication, a record, but is also (*b*) a creation—having a new unity of its own, something in its shape which makes it poetry'.[25] The critics who think that MacNeice's poetry since *Autumn Journal* 'shows no startling differences from his earlier work' dismiss the important changes he experiences after *Autumn Journal*.[26] According to MacNeice, the pursuit of realism in the thirties was a 'reaction against Pure Form, against Art for Art's sake': 'It was quite right that a poet like W. H. Auden should reassert that a poem must be about something. It was right to go further and maintain that great poetry cannot be made out of subject matter, as some of the "realists" seemed to, as the sole, or even the chief, criterion of poetry', but they failed to emphasise enough the important fact that 'A poem does not exist in a vacuum, but a poem at the same time *is* a unity, a creation'.[27] Subject matter is undeniably significant, but MacNeice now acknowledges that its expression should be more varied. The increase of clearly artificial poetic elements, including refrain, in his poems can be seen as a result of MacNeice's exploration of another way to touch upon reality.

It is assumed that this new attempt is encouraged by the rediscovery of the value of Yeats's use of refrain, even though Corcoran believes that 'MacNeice's refrains never sound at all like Yeats'.[28] In *The Poetry of W. B. Yeats,* MacNeice explains that 'refrain in the twentieth century was in many circles for a long time under taboo', continuing that the 'twentieth century suspected most poetic repetition-devices on the ground that repetition saves thinking or excuses the lack of thought' and 'My generation was afraid of other forms of repetition as well as of refrain — of regular rhyme, for example, or of the "red, red

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[24] MacNeice, *PWBY*, p. 15.
[25] MacNeice, *MP*, p. 30.
[26] R. G. Cox, 'A Poet of Our Time' [review of *Collected Poems, 1925-1948* by Louis MacNeice], *The Times Literary Supplement*, 28 October 1949, p. 696.
[27] MacNeice, *PWBY*, p. 18.
[28] Corcoran, p. 271.

rose"'.[29] Interestingly, Yeats himself reveals that his generation 'disliked Victorian rhetorical moral fervour' and 'came to dislike all rhetoric' and 'People began to imitate old ballads because an old ballad is never rhetorical'.[30] In the 'Introduction' to *The Oxford Book of Modern Verse*, however, Yeats admits that 'the reaction from rhetoric, from all that was pretense and artificial, has forced upon my own early work, a facile charm, a too soft simplicity'.[31] The dislike of facility in MacNeice's generation may therefore succeed Yeats's later counter-reaction to the reaction of his generation to the Victorian. According to MacNeice, the belief that the '*rigid* refrain [. . .] is facile' and 'is only to be used by a poet of the folk-musician type whose thoughts and emotions — whose world, in fact — are essentially simple, even naïve' is 'based on the assumption that a complex, unmusical world demands — in all cases — complex, unmusical poetry — an assumption which Yeats never made'.[32] For Yeats, therefore, the refrain is not to be discarded for the sake of a complex world or complex thought. Rather he considers that 'the poet is entitled, if he wishes, to eliminate some of the chaos, to select and systematize. Treatment of form and subject here went hand in hand. Yeats's formalizing activity began when he *thought* about the world; as he thought it into a regular pattern, he naturally cast his verse in regular patterns also'.[33] MacNeice finds in Yeats that formal regularity can contain thought and express the chaos. Tom Walker, considering Corcoran's opinion about MacNeice's refrain as an overstatement, maintains that 'his refrains are clearly Yeats-like in the manner in which they are not a substitute for thought but a part of its means' as in 'Autobiography'.[34] Indeed, the refrain in

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[29] MacNeice, *PWBY*, p. 145. MacNeice alludes to 'A red red Rose' by Robert Burns: 'O MY Luve's like a red, red rose, / That's newly sprung in June'. *Burns: Poems and Songs*, ed. by James Kinsley (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1969; repr. 1971), p. 582.

[30] W. B. Yeats, 'Modern Poetry: A Broadcast' (1936), in *Essays and Introductions* (London: Macmillan, 1961), pp. 491-508 (p. 497).

[31] W. B. Yeats, Introduction to *The Oxford Book of Modern Verse: 1892-1935*, ed. by W. B. Yeats (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1936), p. xiii.

[32] MacNeice, *PWBY*, pp. 145-6.

[33] Ibid., pp. 156-7.

[34] Tom Walker, *Louis MacNeice and the Irish Poetry of his Time* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), p.186. Walker also states that the refrain, 'The war came down on us here' (182), in 'Galway', is a 'distinctly

'Autobiography', for its minimalised form, implicates both solitariness and independence in its repetition. It also conforms to his own definition of refrain: that intellectual content and structural elaboration are not always necessary. MacNeice, admiring the simplicity in Yeats's poems especially in *Words for Music Perhaps*, argues that Yeats's poetry gets closer to Shakespeare's songs and Blake's *Songs of Innocence* and *Songs of Experience*: 'In Blake we find an easy music, an apparent naïveté, and — inside his pictures — a kernel of intense thought or feeling. When the thought is ironic, the irony is enhanced by the simplicity of the form—'.[35] MacNeice here asserts that Yeats's poems after his revived interest in ballad acquire a depth in simplicity.

In 'Meeting Point', MacNeice also attempts to include intense emotion in simple and seemingly indirect expressions. He employs the musicality of refrain to realise his claim that time, which always haunts us, can be overcome in certain circumstances. The poem is said to be a love poem for Eleanor Clark, with whom MacNeice fell in love in America.[36] MacNeice was especially productive during his stay in America in 1940, which is prolonged due to his sudden illness. As Maria Johnston argues, America for MacNeice is 'a place out of time' where 'he is momentarily freed from the constraints of time, the process of war and history, and finds himself "timelessly happy" in a new relationship'.[37]

'Meeting Point' takes the objectification of the self much further than 'Autobiography' in which MacNeice syntactically and semantically diverts himself from 'I'. There is no 'I' that is involved in the relationship described in the poem, but the speaker's pleasure of being with 'her' is obvious because of the in-stanza refrains. Corcoran states that 'In verse after verse of "Meeting Point" the repeated lines meet pointedly, enclosing an

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Yeatsian refrain'. Ibid., p. 58.

[35] MacNeice, *PWBY*, p. 141.

[36] MacNeice writes to Eleanor that 'it is a kind of love poem in the third person'. To Eleanor Clark, Friday [21 April 1939], in *Letters*, p. 320. Later he also states that 'Novelettes' is 'very bleak, very simple, very objective, all in the 3rd person'. To Eleanor Clark, 2 July [1939], in *Letters*, p. 349.

[37] Maria Johnston, '"This Endless Land": Louis MacNeice and the USA', *Irish University Review*, 38.2 (Autumn-Winter 2008), 243-62 (pp. 253, 254).

ecstasy'.[38] Not only the happiness but also the time of experiencing it are preserved in the poem with the help of repetition. As Michael D. Hurley and Michael O'Neill argue, the refrain at the first and last line of each stanza is in the 'circling pattern [. . .] to celebrate the possibility that the co-presence of two lovers can annul the passage of time'.[39] Robyn Marsack affirms that each stanza of the poem is 'enclosing the moment, creating its immobility'.[40] The escape from time realised in 'Meeting Point' is innovative. Rather paradoxically, the repetition which secures pleasant moments in the poem breaks a familiar occurrence that has haunted MacNeice's poems like 'The Sunlight of the Garden', a kind of pattern in which the poet's expression of love resides with his concern about the progression of time.

What should also be pointed out regarding the refrain in 'Meeting Point' is that it is organic to the main body of the poem, comprising a sentence with the following or preceding lines, though the refrains differ from each other. It seems that the refrains, while realising the intact stability within the stanza, refuse to be a mere repetition. Indeed, the refrain in the first stanza indicates the speaker's indifference to time itself:

> Time was away and somewhere else,
> There were two glasses and two chairs
> And two people with the one pulse
> (Somebody stopped the moving stairs):
> Time was away and somewhere else. (183)

Notably, in the refrain, time is said to be absent rather than stopped. This reflects the extent of

[38] Corcoran, p. 262.
[39] Michael D. Hurley and Michael O'Neill, *Poetic Form: An Introduction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), p. 66.
[40] Robyn Marsack, *The Cave of Making: The Poetry of Louis MacNeice* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1982; repr. 1985), p. 60.

the speaker's rapture in the meeting. Similarly, the fairly stable syntax in the main body of the stanza, which seems to hide emotional exultation, actually discloses it. The speaker first mentions 'two glasses and two chairs', which precede or even serve as metonymy for 'two people' referred in the next line. We can presume this way of reference disregards the couple's dominance in the scene. However, after the enumeration of the various pairs, the connection of 'two people' is suggested as sole and special, since they are not merely juxtaposed, but two 'with the one pulse', which are in an indestructible relation.

The emotion of the speaker is thus shown very subtly. In the penultimate stanza, the passionate feeling is expressed in the seemingly detached lines:

> God or whatever means the Good
> Be praised that time can stop like this,
> That what the heart understood
> Can verify in the body's peace
> God or whatever means the Good. (184)

The speaker attributes the success of controlling time to 'God or whatever means the Good'. Having the quasi-alliterative sound of 'God' and 'Good', the phrasal refrain sounds more rhythmical and irrational compared to the more self-contained refrains of the other stanzas. The refrain in the first line of the stanza can be interpreted in at least two ways: it works either as the subject of the sentence with an omitted auxiliary verb ('God or whatever means the Good / [should] Be praised') or as addressee of the exclamatory sentence ('God or whatever means Good [!] / Be praised'). The celebratory tone is apparent, and it is true, as Hurley and O'Neill argue, that 'the peak of feeling in the poem' is in the first two lines of this stanza because the speaker directly refers to the halt of time. Nevertheless, the strangely detached,

obscure lines that follow also reveal the emotion in a very peculiar way. 'God or whatever means the Good' should be praised also for the fact that 'what the heart has understood / Can verify in the body's peace'. Here, the verb 'verify' can be read as intransitive, whose meaning might be the closest to the now obsolete, reflexive use: 'To demonstrate or prove (oneself) to be of a certain character'.[41] What the speaker seems to point out is that the mental satisfaction becomes the physical comfort. The function of this sentence, especially compared to the direct and simple sentence before that ('time can stop like this'), is to hide the intimacy of the feeling. The speaker here deliberately complicates his emotional state of 'love' as 'what the heart understood', something recognised by a rational act of the personified organ of himself. It is one of the characteristics of MacNeice's poems that he shows his love without using the word 'love'. In 'Meeting Point', the speaker's love exudes from the seemingly unemotional words or phrases. As MacNeice later explains, the method of 'Meeting Point' is 'that of direct lyric'.[42] We can conclude that the seemingly detached mode of speaking contributes to the poem's emotional intensity as a love lyric.

When MacNeice announces his desire for 'structural tightening-up', he raises four aspects that should be involved in it: '(1) the selection of – or perhaps the being selected by – a single theme which itself is a strong symbol, (2) a rhythmical pattern which holds that theme together, (3) syntax (a more careful ordering of sentences, especially in relation to the verse pattern), and (4) a more structural use of imagery'.[43] In a letter to Nancy Coldstream that he wrote when he set out to America for the second time, MacNeice also claims that 'God or Gandhi maybe more important but I can't deal with them if I don't feel in contact with them', and referring to the 'snippety poems' he has recently been writing, he states that he wants to 'give *one* impression or *one* idea – sometimes rhetorically, sometimes

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[41] 'verify, v.', *OED Online*.
[42] MacNeice, Carbon Typescript of 'Notes for Argo' [Louis MacNeice on his own poetry], c.1961, Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS. 10641/22.
[43] MacNeice, 'Experiences with Images', p. 162.

impressionistically, sometimes frivolously'; he continues that 'Modern Poetry on the whole is concerned with a *complex* of ideas and impressions. [. . .] It was a nice change for me to do the opposite'.[44] The powerful rhythms enabled by repetition and the intentionally objectified sentences successfully foreground the most important message, the poet's emotion.

II

In *Plant and Phantom*, there are some poems that seem to illustrate MacNeice's philosophical concerns. 'Plant and Phantom', the title poem, is indirect and enigmatic in its way of presenting his assertions. It offers definitions of man, which are full of contradictions:

> Man: a flutter of pages,
> Leaves in the Sibyl's cave,
> Shadow changing from dawn to twilight,
> Murmuration of corn in the wind,
> A shaking of hands with hallucinations,
> Hobnobbing with ghosts, a pump of blood,
> Mirage, a spider dangling
> Over chaos and man a chaos.
>
> Who cheats the pawky Fates
> By what he does, not is,
> By what he makes, imposing
> On flux an architectonic –

[44] MacNeice, a letter to Nancy Coldstream, dated 20 January 1940, in *Folder 2: Letters from Nancy Coldstream, Jul 1937-May 1940*, Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS. 10641/3. In a letter to Eliot, MacNeice confesses that he has written only the short lyrics that are 'almost Greek Anthologyism'. MacNeice, To T. S. Eliot, 6 October [1939], in *Letters*, p. 359. They are probably a collection of short poems in 'Octets', a part of which McDonald included in Appendix 5 in *CP*, pp. 773-5.

Cone of marble, calyx of ice,

Spandrel and buttress, iron

Loops across the void,

Stepping stones in the random. (169-70)

Seemingly irrelevant to each other, the images mentioned in the first stanza have ephemerality in common. An image may even invoke the next one, since the 'flutter of pages', an image of book, has similarity with the 'leaves' in the second image, which might also be regarded as 'pages' of books.[45] More directly, the leaves have words of prophesy by Sibyl in classical literature.[46] The poem's obscurity lies in the fact that man seems to be defined as things associated with words rather than as the user of words. Similarly, man is the inaudible talk of corn, 'murmuration', which is also associated with words. Like the fluttering pages and the words of Sybil on leaves, the verbally uttered words are uncatchable. Two images that follow, 'A shaking of hands with hallucinations' and 'Hobnobbing with ghosts', also represent a kind of indefinite contact. As 'Mirage' similarly indicates, MacNeice seems to show man as an uncertain entity. In the last phrase of the first stanza, 'a spider dangling / Over chaos and man a chaos', an omission of the verb allows various interpretations. We can perhaps read the lines as follows: a spider [is] dangling / Over chaos and man [has] a chaos [that is dangling]'. This shows man as subject of a chaos and a spider as the observer. It is also plausible that 'man [is] a chaos' itself. The last interpretation seems to be most appropriate in that it shows the

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[45] *OED* raises this use in the entry of 'leaf': 'A sheet of paper, parchment, etc., *esp.* as part of a book or document where each side of the sheet is a page; a folio. Also: the material written or printed on such a leaf'. 'leaf, n.1.', *OED Online*.

[46] Sybil is mentioned in the Book VI of Virgil's *The Aeneid* as having an important role of leading Aeneid to the underworld. The leaves indeed represent ephemerality, since Aeneid asks Sybil not to write her prophesy on leaves: 'But do not commit your saying to leaves, / Lest they become the sport of whisking winds and are scattered: Speak them aloud, I pray'. Virgil, *The Aeneid of Virgil*, trans. by Cecil Day Lewis (London: The Hogarth Press, 1952), p. 120. T. S. Eliot adopts a reference to 'the Sibyl at Cumae' by Trimalchio in *Satyricon* by Petronius in the epigraph of *The Waste Land*. The quotation concerns more of Sybil's death-wish rather than her prophesy on leaves. See *The Poems of T. S. Eliot*. Volume I: Collected and Uncollected Poems, ed. by Christopher Ricks and Jim McCue (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2015), pp. 593-4.

multifariousness of man's nature that the stanza tries to present.

While the first stanza thus shows the ephemeral and chaotic nature of man, the second stanza seems to describe 'man' as a betrayer of the existing order. The cunningness of man is indicated, and the introduction of the 'architectonic' to 'flux' by man sounds undesirable. However, the images mentioned as 'architectonic'—'Corn of marble, calyx of ice, / Spandrel and buttress, iron / Loops across the void, Stepping stones in the random'—all consist of firm materials and they try to make a change on the ceaseless flux of time. In 'London Rain', a poem written a few months before the outbreak of the war, MacNeice already claims that 'what we make' can change fate:

> Whether the living river
> Began in bog or lake,
> The world is what was given,
> The world is what we make
> And we only can discover
> Life in the life we make. (174)

Here MacNeice implicates that the world is like the 'living river', flux, but at the same time 'we' have the possibility of changing it. The anaphora in the middle of the stanza does not juxtapose the contrasting concepts of the world but highlights the distinction between the world before our birth, which was made without our influence, and the world after that, which is in our charge. The ostensible indifference emanating from the lines convinces us that, in the latter world, we are the active agents of our own lives. Rather complicatedly, in 'Plant and Phantom', the fate of flux represents a kind of stasis, a pattern, which should be broken 'By what he does' and 'By what he makes'.

In the fourth stanza, MacNeice further notes with admiration and hate this ability of man as giver and changer of principle in his world:

> Whose life is a bluff, professing
> To follow the laws of Nature,
> In fact a revolt, a mad
> Conspiracy and usurpation,
> Smuggling over the frontier
> Of fact a sense of value,
> Metabolism of death,
> Re-orchestration of world. (170)

In spite of the harsh tone in words like 'bluff' and a 'mad / Conspiracy and usurpation', it is acknowledged that man introduces a 'sense of value, / Metabolism of death, / Re-orchestration of world', which respectively hint at man's power to reorganise otherwise unchanging order. 'Metabolism' is the term normally used for the physical function of a body, which reminds us of one of the images enumerated in the first stanza, 'a pump of blood'. The image seems to suggest a heart that works as a pump to circulate blood throughout a body. Yet circulating activity, a common feature of both images, makes the 'Metabolism of death' all the more obscure, for it refers to death instead of a living body. We can assume that the 'Metabolism of death' concerns the fact that death will come to any living existence, a fact forever sustained as truth, or the fact that a death of an individual is not really an end but a part of human generations as a whole that consists of the births and death of individuals.[47] The omission of articles endorses the latter interpretation, suggesting that 'death' is not a

[47] The idea that each individual is a part of the world is manifestly said in MacNeice's play, *Out of the Picture*, in 1937: 'The cycle of life demands to be repeated. / You were made by your parents, you must make in return, / You must make children for Death'. MacNeice, 'Venus' Speech', in *CP*, p. 727.

particular death. As we have seen in the previous chapter on *Autumn Journal*, this recognition of the cyclicality, the succession of lives, supports MacNeice's affirmative view of living in the face of lethal danger. 'Re-orchestration of world' can similarly be taken as a positive image of man. If the life of 'man' causes the 're-orchestration of world', it suggests that man, mere 'plant and phantom', can reorganise the world that has already been orchestrated before. On the other hand, the poet claims that man's life is itself the 're-orchestration of world', hinting at the chaotic and complex self within each individual. In either interpretation, what is clear is that MacNeice daringly recognises 'man' as a challenger to Being, which is the unchangeable absolute, and implicitly counters Nietzsche's phrase for man, 'a disharmony and hybrid of plant and phantom' by offering another definition of man. The use of a word associated with music, 'Re-orchestration', is not accidental. Rather than being himself 'a disharmony', man can restore a harmony in chaos.

In the last stanza, 'Man' is defined by what he aims for in his life:

> Who felt with his hands in empty
> Air for the Word and did not
> Find it but felt the aura,
> Dew on the skin, could not forget it.
> Ever since has fumbled, intrigued,
> Clambered behind and beyond, and learnt
> Words of blessing and cursing, hoping
> To find in the end the Word Itself. (170-1)

The enjambment across the first and second lines ('empty / Air') visually reconstructs the vain but continuing fumbling of his hands that move in the air. 'The Word' is ungraspable but

not totally so, since its 'aura' and 'Words of blessing and cursing' can be detected. 'Dew on the skin' is also a subtle image that hints at the palpability of the Word. One does not continually feel its presence while it motionlessly stays on the skin. It is sensed most keenly at the moment when he gets it or loses it. Man's search for the Word is thorough, as suggested by the enumerated verbs, yet its result is unknown. The fact that 'hoping' at the penultimate line is a kind of internal rhyme with 'blessing and cursing' seems to show that the words of this poem themselves are 'blessing and cursing' man, wishing for his success. What should be noted here is the choice of metaphors concerning words. 'The Word', the symbol of the absolute, is obviously an allusion to the very first words of John's Gospel, 'In the beginning was the Word'. By suggesting that in the end was also the Word, MacNeice seems to stress the significance of the Word of God. Moreover, the verbs in the first half of the last stanza are in the past tense ('felt with his hands in empty / Air for the Word and did not / Find it but felt the aura, / Dew on the skin, could not forget it'). It suggests that the quest for the Word is started by the first Christian and has been taken over as the mission of the Christians ever since. At the same time, the reference to words and the Word may suggest that MacNeice finds an affinity between the principle of man's life and that of the writing of poetry. Terence Brown, discussing 'Plant and Phantom', notes that 'Paradoxically MacNeice frequently viewed life's imperfections and limitations as being creative of value. The fact that a thing (a person, an object, a scene, a work of art, a life) is limited and in that sense imperfect, that it is always changing and therefore never reaching the stasis of perfection, in a sense gives it value'.[48] Longley also comments that '"Plant and Phantom" emphasizes the impossibility of getting the hang of it entirely by posing the riddle of man in cryptic syntax which anticipates the later poetry'.[49] As a life is an imperfect but desperate hankering after the perfection, writing poetry is to find 'the Word', the ideal expression. In the course of this pursuit, a poet

[48] Terence Brown, *Louis MacNeice: Sceptical Vision* (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan; New York: Harper and Row Publishers, 1975), p. 83.
[49] Edna Longley, *Louis MacNeice: A Study* (London: Faber and Faber, 1988), p. 146.

may acquire the 'words of blessing and cursing', which become his poems. The idea that life and poetry are both predicated upon limitations, and thereby have a value, seems to affect MacNeice's notion of poetic form. According to him, the poet has a 'disadvantage' in lacking what the conversationalist normally has: 'the help of tone of voice or facial expression' and the shared context with the hearers.[50] He then continues to note that the poet can turn this 'disadvantage into advantage' because 'The absence of the spoken voice, of the face, of the particular place and time, must be compensated by a far greater precision of diction, by greater architectonic'.[51] The 'architectonic' here is a valuable limitation of the poetic form. MacNeice, around the same time as he wrote 'Plant and Phantom', reflects again on this subject:

> Style remained more important than subject. The magic words – Relativity and the Unconscious – were always on our lips and we were pathetically eager to be realist (which meant the mimesis of flux), but we always fell back upon Form. This paradox came out in our admiration for contemporary novelists – Joyce, D. H. Lawrence, Virginia Woolf – who give you the flux but serve it on golden platters. We considered them good because they were the acolytes of Flux, but it was the gold and the ritual that fetched us. [. . .] The flux is the reality, so has to be recognised, but you can make this recognition with style.[52]

MacNeice reveals the paradox in the relationship between flux (reality) and formal limitation (style). The novelists he praises here prove in their works that a grasp of the flux of reality is

[50] MacNeice, *MP*, p. 32.
[51] Ibid., p. 33.
[52] MacNeice, *SAF*, pp. 118-9.

enabled by style. In Chapters 2 and 5, the limitations of form are found to give more freedom and variety to expression, and we infer that MacNeice's reevaluation of poetic form during the war goes hand in hand with his affirmation of life, which, indeed, derives its value from its very imperfection.

'Plurality', a poem written a month earlier, concerns the same contradiction of man esoterically expressed in 'Plant and Phantom'. The longer, prose-like form offers MacNeice a ground where he fully develops his argument, while sustaining regularity through couplets.[53] It begins with the straightforward manifestation of the speaker's position as anti-monist: 'It is patent to the eye that cannot face the sun / The smug philosophers lie who say the world is one' (204). The world of monists such as 'Parmenides' is 'Precluding birth and death', since there is 'No movement and no breath, no progress nor mistakes, / Nothing begins or ends, no one loves or fights, / All your foes are friends and all your days are nights / And the soul is muscle-bound, the world a wooden ball' (204). By mentioning pairs existing in the real world, MacNeice explains how these natural and precious binary oppositions would be nullified in the world of the One. The denial of pluralism likewise denies the existence of the world itself, where the very discussion of monism is possible. Although the main argument, the rejection of monism, is familiar for the reader of MacNeice's works, in 'Plurality', he discloses a paradoxical fact that pluralism, in which each existence is 'An absolute and so defiant of the One / Absolute' (204-5), generates and supports the desire for the 'One Absolute'. In *The Strings Are False*, MacNeice recollects that at Oxford he 'wanted the world to be One, to be permanent, the incarnation of an absolute Idea [. . .]. At the same time any typical monistic system appeared hopelessly static, discounting Becoming as mere illusion and hamstringing human action'.[54] He approaches this dilemma again in 'Plurality', standing with the side of Becoming:

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[53] MacNeice mentions that in 'Plurality' the 'difficulty of content balanced by an easy, almost-slick, metre & rhyme-scheme'. To Eleanor Clark, 3 September [1940], in *Letters*, p. 404.
[54] MacNeice, *SAF*, pp. 124-5.

You talk of Ultimate Value, Universal Form –
Visions, let me tell you, that ride upon the storm
And must be made and sought but cannot be maintained,
Lost as soon as caught, always to be regained,
Mainspring of our striving towards perfection, yet
Would not be worth achieving if the world were set
Fair, if error and choice did not exist, if dumb
World should find its voice for good and God become
Incarnate once for all. (205)

The speaker agrees with the monist to the extent that there are unattainable visions, but paradoxically, if the monists' concept of the One were valid, those visions would not exist at all. The awareness of the 'One Absolute' is, as Steven Matthew argues, 'itself part of plurality', and it is also in the recognition that 'for the individual, time will stop'.[55] 'Time's revolving hand that never can be still', and 'you and I / Can only live by strife in that the living die' (205). Therefore pluralism consequently allows us to fancy that there is the One.

The poem ends with descriptions of man's continuous quest, noting that man must be conscious of this paradoxical interdependence between pluralism and monism:

[. . .] conscious of things amiss,
Conscious of guilt and vast inadequacy and the sick
Ego and the broken past and the clock that goes too quick,
Conscious of waste of labour, conscious of spite and hate,

[55] Steven Matthews, *Yeats as Precursor: Reading in Irish, British and American Poetry* (Basingstoke and London: Macmillan Press; New York: St. Martin's Press, 2000), p. 47.

Of dissension with his neighbour, of beggars at the gate,
But conscious also of love and the joy of things and the power
Of going beyond and above the limits of the lagging hour,
Conscious of sunlight, conscious of death's inveigling touch,
Not completely conscious but partly – and that is much. (206)

Insistently repeated, the phrase 'Conscious of' boasts of man's resolution to keep living, acknowledging the brutal reality, in which limits are inevitable. Matthews claims that MacNeice 'sets death as a equivocal limit to "plurality"' and the last word, 'much', 'in its fullness resonates back across, and paradoxically empties out, plurality's former plenitude'.[56] Here, Matthews seems to regard 'that is much' as referring to 'death'. Although men are, indeed, conscious of the unavoidability of death, I read this concluding line as the poet's acknowledgement of the inadequacy of his argument. That which he announces, he implies, is just the ending of the poem; though he clarifies 'much', there remains, in spite of this, a great deal which he has not, cannot explain, going well beyond the limits of the poem. 'Plurality', thus, proves itself in showing the very impossibility in accommodating everything in life. In 'Entirely', the poem suggestively placed after 'Plant and Phantom' in the volume, though written a half-year before, MacNeice describes the same impossibility:

If we could get the hang of it entirely
  It would take too long;
All we know is the splash of words in passing
  And falling twigs of song,
And when we try to eavesdrop on the great

[56] Matthews, p. 47.

Presences it is rarely
That by a stroke of luck we can appropriate
Even a phrase entirely. (171)

Understanding something 'entirely' is practically impossible. Here again, it is stated that 'the splash of words in passing', ephemeral but surely existent, is our possession while 'the great / Presences', which is perhaps something similar to the 'Word', is not graspable. Ringing as the rhyme at the beginning and end of the stanza, 'entirely' confirms the inability of realising what it means. However, as implied at the end of 'Plurality', the impossibility of having things 'entirely' is rather a virtue than a defect. MacNeice knows that 'in brute reality there is no / Road that is right entirely' (171).

MacNeice's poetic contemplation in *Plant and Phantom* is on man and life, both of which are transient and therefore beyond understanding. Notably, it is in a complex relationship with his concerns about the war. The epigraph of *Plant and Phantom* is from Friedrich Nietzsche's *Also Sprach Zarathustra*: 'ein Zweispat und Zwitter von Pflanze und von Gespenst', which reads 'a disharmony and hybrid of plant and phantom'.[57] Not only a German epigraph itself may implicitly refer to the ongoing war, but also MacNeice seems to claim human dignity in a time of war by challenging Nietzsche's metaphor of human beings that stresses their ordinariness and triviality compared to 'the Superhuman'. At the same time, MacNeice may direct his criticism less at Nietzsche and his philosophy than at the Nazis and their distortion of Nietzsche's thoughts during wartime. In the review of a biography of Richard Wagner, T. W. Adorno comments on Nietzsche's relationship with Wagner and admits that the '[Nietzsche's] positive doctrines may have fallen prey to ideology themselves, and the Fascist implications of his spiteful cult of power, his contempt of the masses, his *deus*

[57] MacNeice, *CP*, p. 166; Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spake Zarathustra: A Book for All and None*, trans. by Thomas Common (Edinburgh and London: T.N. Foulis, 1914), pp. 6-7.

ex machina religion of the Superman are only too manifest'.[58] It is highly plausible that MacNeice and his contemporaries in England were aware of the misuse of the Nietzschean terms and philosophy by the Nazis.[59] Taking this historical background into consideration, it should not be wrong to consider that *Plant and Phantom* also includes some reflection regarding MacNeice's political stance. Indeed, Longley, grouping 'Entirely', 'Plant and Phantom', 'London Rain', and 'Plurality' as poems about 'metaphysical issues', maintains that 'MacNeice has thus felt impelled to reopen the old question of the universe – "Plant and Phantom" tackles the question head on – a universe which war is now helping to churn into worse than flux'.[60] McDonald also states that 'the War can be felt behind the poet's abstractions in the long series of definitions of man' in 'Plant and Phantom', and in the image of the 'Metabolism of death' there is 'the packed feeling of a riddle, in common with the rest of this (rather too mysterious) poem, but it conveys in part MacNeice's sense of his own life as something either preparing for or in league with its own death, and the deaths of many others, in the near future'.[61] Indeed, the reference to death in this period naturally implicates the immediate death of men, including MacNeice. Yet somewhat paradoxically, both the attempt at defining man and its impossibility serve as a claim of strength of man, for it suggests that the courage and resistance of man are also incalculable.

We can then presume that MacNeice's assertion of the self-ness of a self is also an implicit resistance. MacNeice in 'Plurality' clarifies the point:

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[58] T. W. Adorno, 'Wagner, Nietzsche and Hitler' [review of *Life of Richard Wagner. Vol. IV* by Ernest Newman], *The Kenyon Review*, 9.1 (1947), 155-62 (pp. 160-1).

[59] According to Richard J. Evans, before 1914, Nietzschean philosophy was used by the movements that were quite opposite to Fascism; read as 'a call for personal emancipation', it influenced 'a variety of liberal and radical groups, including, for example, the feminist movement'. Richard J. Evans, *The Coming of the Third Reich* (London: Penguin Books, 2003), p. 39. When MacNeice recollects his absorption in Nietzsche's works at Oxford, he expresses his recognition that from *Thus Spake Zarathustra*, 'anyone can extract almost anything he wants'. 'When I Was Twenty-One: 1928' (1961), in *SP*, pp. 222-35 (p. 224).

[60] Longley, *A Study*, p. 80.

[61] Peter McDonald, 'Louis MacNeice's War', in *The Oxford Handbook of British and Irish War Poetry*, ed. by Tim Kendall (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007; repr. 2009), pp. 377-97 (p. 384).

That only change prevails, that the seasons make the year,
That a thing, a beast, a man is what it is because
It is something that began and is not what it was,
Yet is itself throughout, fluttering and unfurled,
Not to be cancelled out, not to be merged in world,
Its entity a denial of all that is not it (204)

In addition to the suggestion that difference creates a self, each self includes differences within itself. MacNeice here notes that one can have contradictory dispositions, while remaining him or herself. This is the theme of 'Plain Speaking', which is placed after 'Plurality' in *Plant and Phantom*:

In the beginning and in the end the only decent
Definition is tautology: man is man,
Woman woman, and tree tree, and world world,
Slippery, self-contained; catch as catch can. (206)

The poem not only attempts to define self metaphysically but also plays with its way of expression. He employs the syntax—A is A—which makes the oneness of self visually obvious. The first A is at once same and different from the second A, just as my past self is different from my present self but both of these are I. MacNeice then exemplifies the experiences that can affect and change each object, yet in the last stanza he concludes that the identity is unchanged:

But dream was dream and love was love and what

Happened happened – even if the judge said
It should have been otherwise – and glitter glitters
And I am I although the dead are dead. (206)

'I am I' in the last line may reflect the expression of the original title of the poem, 'I Am That I Am', which alludes to *Exodus*.[62] In conversation with God, Moses asked how to explain other people about the identity of God. 'And God said unto Moses, "I AM THAT I AM": and he said, "Thus shalt thou say unto the children of Israel, 'I AM hath sent me unto you'".' (Exodus 3.14).[63] MacNeice uses the same expression in a letter to Eleanor Clark: 'The war seems to have invested me with an odd blend of humility & arrogance – I am that I am (meaning out of touch with reality. So, admitting it may be my funeral to be out of touch with 'the facts,' it is equally the funeral of anyone who thinks these facts are everything)'.[64] Here he seems to reevaluate being 'out of touch with reality', which is what MacNeice tried to discard as a wrong kind of aestheticism or individualism. He now admits that the 'self-contained' state may sometimes be beneficial. This is clearly different from his assertion in the thirties that stresses the limit of such a state and the importance of relating self to the reality outside. In 'Plain Speaking', MacNeice seems to make use of the expression with rich implication to explain his philosophical argument concerning the integrity of each thing or person. The lines, 'a tree becomes / A talking tower, and a woman becomes world', metaphorically refer to the changes that can occur on tree and a woman. A tree may make sounds when it contacts with a wind or a woman may think herself as world when she is influenced by others. By using these metaphors, MacNeice also suggests the diverse ways in

[62] When the poem is published in *Poetry*, the title is 'I Am That I Am', *Poetry*, 56.2 (May 1940), p. 65. McDonald notes that the poem is entitled 'The Undeniable Fact' in *Poems 1925-1940*, published in 1941. *CP*, p. 804.
[63] *The New Cambridge Paragraph Bible With the Apocrypha: King James Version*, ed. by David Norton (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), p. 69.
[64] MacNeice, To Eleanor Clark, 24 September [1939], in *Letters*, p. 358.

which things are recognised. We may hear a tree talking or our love for a woman can make us think of her as ‘world’. The last line of the poem, however, ‘I am I although the dead are dead’, indicates that it is the privilege of the living to appreciate the rich variety of ways of seeing objects. Although ‘the dead are dead’ appears at first to be in the same syntax as ‘I am I’, the beginning and the end are not exactly the same, the second ‘dead’ being the adjective. This implicitly confirms that the death is complete and unchangeable, while a circular, self-contained structure of ‘I am I’ connotes the possibility and freedom of experiencing and changing as long as one is alive.

MacNeice, by re-probing his beliefs on poetry, life, and man, attempts to realise the art that can contest the totalitarianism or the destructive nature of the war that might deny the lives of individuals. Even the seemingly metaphysical poems are more ‘physical’ in their active construction of thought within poetry, and MacNeice’s revised view of the limitations in life and poetry empowers the living individuals rather than depressing them. The next chapter will show how MacNeice’s practice of reevaluating life is increasingly performed by writing about individuals other than himself in his wartime poems.

Chapter 6.

MacNeice's Verbal Defiance during the Second World War

This chapter examines MacNeice's poems in *Springboard*, published in 1944. The volume seems to have disappointed the public who expected 'war poetry'. Peter McDonald explains that MacNeice, who 'had by 1941 long distanced himself from "propaganda" poetry' never wrote the poems that were 'likely to be examples of any officially minded or approved "war poetry"'.[1] Jon Stallworthy attributes the failure of attracting the reader to MacNeice's change of treatment of the contemporary subject: 'The poems of *Springboard* are much more public than private, more concerned with a reality external to the speaker'.[2] The increasing 'public' aspect in MacNeice's poems is regarded as separation from what is considered to be a main charm in the nineteen thirties. However, as we have already discussed in Chapter 5, the tendency of self-alienation after *Autumn Journal* is based upon his broadened perspective on the role of poetry in a time of crisis. The first section of this chapter looks at the poems concerning the Blitz, while the second section is concerned with what we might call 'case-study poems'. The chapter proposes that MacNeice in wartime offers his poetry as a verbal defiance against the negation of life.

I

MacNeice begins to live in London again after coming back from America in December 1940. It is especially after that time that he confronts the war directly, mostly through the Blitz, the bomb attacks to cities in the UK. He writes about his experiences of the Blitz in some of his

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[1] Peter McDonald, 'Louis MacNeice's War', in *The Oxford Handbook of British and Irish War Poetry*, ed. by Tim Kendall (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007; repr. 2009), pp. 377-97 (p. 388).
[2] Jon Stallworthy, *Louis MacNeice* (London: Faber and Faber, 1995), p. 329.

poems as well as in the feature programmes for the BBC where he started working in 1941.[3] Written in 1944, 'Prayer before Birth' is implicitly a war poem because the seemingly most explicit aspect is its form of a prayer, apparently preceded by George Herbert's shape poems. The poem seems to be modelled upon 'Sighs and Grones' by Herbert, as Robyn Marsack and John Goodby point out.[4] MacNeice praises Herbert's '*construction*' and 'the sureness of his music and the purity of his diction which, of course, are part and parcel of construction', and also his 'gift of *muitum in parvo*, his pregnant "simplicity", the organic structure of his poems, their blend of conversation and music, their balance of feeling and wit'.[5] MacNeice therefore admires Herbert's poems in terms not only of theme but also of form. Indeed, the shape of each stanza of 'Prayer before Birth', which is created by the indentation that starts from the third line and increases by line, is similar to that of 'The Starre' by Herbert.[6] Herbert's poems are a good example for MacNeice, in that they successfully fuse the form of prayer with the form of poetry.

The prayer is not an uncommon material in modern poetry. For instance, John Betjeman writes 'In Westminster Abbey' in prayer form to mock the vulgarity of the woman,

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[3] The series called *The Stones Cry Out* 'took as its theme old buildings in London symbolizing traditional values and Anglo-American heritage under threat of bombardment'. Simon Workman, '"To be Tired of this is to Tire of Life": Louis MacNeice's London', in *Irish Writing London: Volume I. Revival to the Second World War*, ed. by Tom Herron (London and New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013), pp. 127-43 (p. 133).

[4] Robyn Marsack, *The Cave of Making: The Poetry of Louis MacNeice* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1982; repr. 1985), p. 113; John Goodby, '"Bulbous Taliesin": MacNeice and Dylan Thomas', in *Incorrigibly Plural: Louis MacNeice and his Legacy*, ed. by Fran Brearton and Edna Longley (Manchester: Carcanet Press, 2012), pp. 204-23 (p. 213). In 'Sighs and Grones', the speaker cries his requests: 'O do not use me / After my sinnes!'; 'but O my God, / My God, relieve me!' George Herbert, *The English Poems of George Herbert*, ed. by Helen Wilcox (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007; repr. 2011), pp. 297, 298.

[5] MacNeice, '*A Reading of George Herbert*. By Rosamond Tuve' (13 Sept. 1952), in *SLC*, pp. 175-80 (p. 177); 'Book Reviews (Book Review)' [review of *George Herbert* by Margaret Bottrall and *George Herbert* by Joseph H. Summers in], *London Magazine,* 1 August 1954, pp. 74-76 (p. 74); In *Varieties of Parable*, MacNeice also states that the novelists and playwrights whom he discusses 'and also, among my poets, George Herbert, go in for a plain style'. *VP*, p. 23.

[6] In the poem, a line starts one word after the place where the previous line begins:

> Bright spark, shot from a brighter place,
> Where beams surround my Saviours face,
> Canst thou be any where
> So well as there?

As in 'Prayer before Birth', the shape is like an inverted staircase rather than a triangle, since the line-endings are not uniform. Herbert, p. 267.

who at first seems to pray for the happiness and safety of herself and her kind during the war but ends her prayer, 'And now, dear Lord, I cannot wait / Because I have a luncheon date'.[7] T. S. Eliot, who uses the prayer form in many of his poems, adopts in *The Rock* a form that is similar to that of MacNeice's 'Prayer before Birth'.[8] Yeats's prayer poems may also be in MacNeice's mind. William T. McKinnon suggests that 'Prayer before Birth' is MacNeice's version of 'A Prayer for my Daughter' for his daughter.[9] John Whitehead also considers that the voice of the poem is of MacNeice's unborn daughter'.[10] We cannot be sure if he really intends this association because MacNeice's daughter, Corinna MacNeice, was born on 5 July in 1943.[11] Having an unborn baby as the speaker is largely a rhetorical device. Although Edna Longley thinks that the poem is 'overrated', 'too routinely chosen by anthologies to represent the darker MacNeice', she also notes that 'perhaps its somewhat melodramatic rhetoric should be understood as a product of 1944, and as a series of headlines for the poems that follow'.[12] Indeed, the poem, placed at the beginning, displays the central concern in the volume, a claim to the basic human right to live, by showing the unborn speaker's fear about the harms that can be inflicted by others.[13] The child's unborn state may be appropriate for the poem's placement in the volume. Marsack assumes that the poem is 'in the fashion of

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[7] John Betjeman, *John Betjeman's Collected Poems*, compiled and with an introduction by The Earl of Birkenhead (London: John Murray, 1958; repr. 1970), p. 92.

[8] 'O Lord, deliver me from the man of excellent intention and impure / heart: for the heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked. [. . .] Preserve me from the enemy who has something to gain: and from the friend who has something to lose'. T. S. Eliot, Choruses from 'The Rock' 1934, V, in *The Complete Poems and Plays* (London: Faber and Faber, 1969; repr. 2004), p. 158.

[9] William T. McKinnon, *Apollo's Blended Dream: A Study of the Poetry of Louis MacNeice* (London, New York, Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1971), pp. 101-2.

[10] John Whitehead, *A Commentary of the Poetry of W. H. Auden, C. Day Lewis, Louis MacNeice, and Stephen Spender* (Lewiston, New York; Queenston, Ontario; Lampeter, Wales: The Edwin Mellen Press, 1992), p. 142.

[11] Stallworthy, p. 318.

[12] Edna Longley, *Louis MacNeice: A Study* (London: Faber and Faber, 1988), p. 86.

[13] Interestingly, W. H. Auden in 'Part Two: The Seven Ages' in *The Age of Anxiety: A Baroque Eclogue* (1944-1946) lets a persona speak about the 'infant', who is 'helpless in cradle and / Righteous still, yet already there is / Dread in his dreams at the deed of which / He knows nothing but knows he can do'. The deed is to violate the 'gulf before him with guilt beyond', and once the baby crosses the boundary, 'he joins mankind, / The fallen families, freedom lost, / Love become Law'. It seems that the doom the 'infant' sees as its own is that of the sinned man, whom Herbert describes at the end of 'Miserie' as '*A sick toss'd vessel, dashing on each thing; / Nay, his own shelf: / My God, I mean myself*'. These are the lines adopted for the epigraph for 'The Seven Ages' in *The Age of Anxiety*. The reference to Herbert is another coincidence with MacNeice's poem. W. H. Auden, *Collected Poems*, ed. by Edward Mendelson (London: Faber and Faber, 1976; repr. 1994), p. 465; Herbert, p. 361.

ancient superstition about the effect on the child in the womb of things seen by its mother'.[14] On the other hand, the poem was written relatively late in wartime, when MacNeice was writing a script of the feature programme for D-Day. The attacks of the German V-1 on the day when the adopted script was broadcast (MacNeice's was rejected), 28 June 1944, 'brought back memories of the Blitz and were, if anything, worse for civilian morale than the more predictable raids of 1941-2'.[15] Furthermore, it is suggested that the child already anticipates the fate it must encounter once it is born. The poem even highlights a contradiction that the unborn child can speak by its own repeating 'I am not yet born'. Longley's interpretation that 'Prayer before Birth' presents a kind of parable with 'an archetypal view of contemporary struggles' may point to this strange knowingness of the speaker.[16] MacNeice himself comments that although the poem is often considered as a 'very gloomy and defeatist poem', he does not agree because 'it is so like many traditional prayers. It is recognizing many evils that are in a world and praying to be safe from them'.[17]

The unborn baby's recognition of its fate is also expressed in the formal elements of the poem. In the structure of each stanza that always begins with 'I' and ends with 'me', it is obvious that the speaker reaches for self-confinement in the text as well as in the womb. The fear of contact with others that is evident in the first palpable request, 'Let not the bloodsucking bat or the rat or the stoat or the / club-footed ghoul come near me' (213), confirms that the unborn baby's obsession with itself is the means of self-protection. Although the wishes may be unpromising, the speaker's control over the poem's structure seems to be the only resistance available to the helplessness that allows nothing but to pray:

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[14] Marsack, p. 114.
[15] Stallworthy, p. 324.
[16] Longley, *A Study*, p. 87.
[17] MacNeice, a reading of 'Prayer before Birth' in 'Louis MacNeice reading his poetry' [audio recording, TDK AV-D90 cassette: side one labelled 'MacNeice: Undated masters'], Contr. Louis MacNeice. Poetry Room, Lamont Library, Harvard University, USA [?], date unknown but deduced to be early to mid-1950s at the earliest from comments made by the poet. 2mins 34secs. British Library, C392.

I am not yet born; forgive me
For the sins that in me the world shall commit, my words
when they speak me, my thoughts when they think me,
my treason engendered by traitors beyond me,
my life when they murder by means of my
hands, my death when they live me. (213)

It is reasonable to assume that the culpability of the 'sins' (in the plural) is attributed to the 'world', rather than the child's inheritance of 'original sin'. Similarly in the lines that follow, the child suggests that all things that should belong to 'me' are done by others, that is, everything that we think is our own is either predetermined or given. Even the 'treason', 'life' and 'death' of oneself are in the secret control of others. On the other hand, the lines may also mean the opposite, suggesting the idea we have already seen in the poems such as 'London Rain': a man, consciously or unconsciously, has the responsibility for all incidents occurring in this world. The conspicuous use of a direct object with intransitive verbs, 'they speak me', 'they think me', and 'they live me', indicates that 'they' do not supplant, but merely practise the speech and thought of 'me'. Not articulating who is murdered, the speaker leaves two possible interpretations of the murder: it could be the suicide of the first-person speaker, or the murder of the other, both of which 'they' do with 'my hands'. In either case, what is clear is that the autonomy, others' or mine, is an illusion. The speaker continues to express this lack of the will of the mortal body with an allusion to a familiar Shakespearian metaphor: 'rehearse me / In the parts I must play and the cues I must take' (213).[18]

In the penultimate and longest stanza, the baby further imagines what it will be like

[18] 'All the world's a stage, / And all the men and women merely players' (II. vii. 139-40). William Shakespeare, *As You Like It,* in *The Riverside Shakespeare: The Complete Works*, ed. by G. Blakemore Evans, J. J. M. Tobin and others, 2nd edn (Boston, MA: Wadsworth Cengage Learning, 1997), pp. 399-436 (p. 415).

when someone robs it of its autonomy:

> I am not yet born; O fill me
> With strength against those who would freeze my
> humanity, would dragoon me into a lethal automaton,
> would make me a cog in a machine, a thing with
> one face, a thing, and against all those
> who would dissipate my entirety, would
> blow me like thistledown hither and
> thither or hither and thither
> like water held in the
> hands would spill me. (214)

What is mainly focused on here is the mental death, which may eventually be accompanied by the material death.[19] The hardness or stasis implied in 'freeze' is associated with the inhumanness or lifelessness of an 'automaton' and 'a cog'. Those images and the fear of being dissipated are already illustrated in 'An Eclogue for Christmas'.[20] In an unfinished article written around 1941-2, MacNeice uses the image of a 'cog' to mention the disregard of individuality in Marxism: 'The Marxist obsession encouraged us to crawl, to pretend ourselves cogs in a machine or part of the pattern in the lino'.[21] This is the problem of sinking ego by involvement in a group, which we have seen in Chapter 4. Yet in 'Prayer before Birth', the deprivation of the autonomy is treated more seriously as a total annihilation of a self. To

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[19] McDonald states that the voice of the poem 'knows that the death of the self is only one—and perhaps the least—of the mortal risks of living in time of war'. McDonald, 'Louis MacNeice's War', p. 394.
[20] 'I who was Harlequin in the childhood of the century' 'Have seen myself sifted and splintered in broken facets' and become 'Abstraction scalpelled with a palate-knife / Without reference to this particular life', which means that he will eventually be an 'automaton'. MacNeice, *CP*, pp. 3-4.
[21] MacNeice, 'Broken Windows or Thinking Aloud' (written *c*. 1941-2), in *SP*, pp. 137-42 (p. 137).

'dissipate' can mean not only to scatter but also to eliminate life and resonates with 'spill', which can mean 'destroy by depriving of life; to put (or bring) to death; to slay or kill'.[22] The unborn child declares in the last lines its preference for physical death over spiritual death:

> Let them not make me a stone and let them not spill me.
> Otherwise kill me. (214)

It is significant that two lines end the poem; remembering that the indent begins from the third line in the previous stanzas in the poem, we can assume that to end before the third line suggests a refusal to begin; for an unborn child, it is a refusal to be born. Even if the indents in the previous stanzas may represent, as Terence Brown argues, the 'gestation and the coming to term of a pregnancy', the birth does not come to full in the final stanza.[23] If we presume that the use of 'yet' and 'born' (rather than 'unborn') in the refrain 'I am not yet born' implies the unborn child's expectation of being born anyway, the absence of the refrain in the last stanza can be seen as the evasion of its own birth. The utter negativity at the end of the poem at once shows the pain of living and the autonomy to pray that the speaker at least holds still. In addition to the structural intricacy of 'Prayer before Birth' being a homage to Herbert's poems, the poem's abandonment of its own structure in the last lines seems to show that the unborn speaker has to end its own prayer to realise what it prays for.

At the same time, we are not sure if the addressee is God in 'Prayer before Birth' as in the Christian prayers and the poems by Herbert. Likewise, the epigraph of the first part of *Springboard*, '*Even poisons praise thee*' (213), reads differently from the original in Herbert's

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[22] 'To dispel by dispersion or minute diffusion (mist, clouds, etc.); to cause to disappear; to disperse or "discuss" (humours, etc.)', or 'To disintegrate and reduce to atoms, dust, smoke, or impalpable form; to destroy or dissolve completely, undo, annul (material or immaterial objects)'. 'dissipate, v.', *OED Online*.

[23] Terence Brown, 'The Irish Dylan Thomas: Versions and Influences', *Irish Studies Review*, 17.1 (February 2009), 45-54 (p. 49).

'Providence'.[24] While Herbert directs it to God as a celebration of his power, it may sound ironical if it is read without context, since the praise by poisons, which can cause harm, may imply the potential evilness in the praised.[25] In 'Prayer in Mid-Passage', another poem in the form of prayer in *Springboard*, the addressee seems to be the poet himself, who is in the 'mid-passage' of his life.[26] Jahan Ramazani argues that prayer 'is addressed to the divine and often secondarily to oneself', and 'in both poetry and prayer, address isn't directed only outward. Both genres frequently take the form of internal dialogue, the speaker self-dividing in two'.[27] In MacNeice's prayer poems, the faith in the addressee is a disguise of the addresser's own desire to wield the absolute power over his own life and death. The praise and irony of 'thee' in the epigraph of *Springboard* may then be directed at 'me' in 'Prayer before Birth', who, in the world after birth it imagines, can be both a victim of and contributor to the harms it may incur.

Even though the prayer can thus be seen as a self-address, the use of the Christian songs should not be disregarded. McDonald considers that in *Springboard* 'religious elements should make themselves felt more strongly in the context of doubt and self-accusation than that of transcendence and affirmation'.[28] This is indeed sensed in the pessimistic cry in 'Prayer before Birth', but as Marsack argues, while 'MacNeice used the Bible or Christianity in his earlier work [. . .] in a needling or satirical fashion, as one very familiar but uncomfortable with them, sometimes outright defiant', in the forties MacNeice takes a 'more

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[24] According to Marsack, the epigraph that is for the first section of *Springboard* is attached to 'Prayer before Birth' in a manuscript fair copy of the poem. Marsack, p. 114.
[25] Helen Wilcox glosses this line in 'Providence' as follows: 'Through the thrifty husbandry of providence, nothing, not even poison, is without use – in this case as medicine'. Herbert, p. 425.
[26] Terence Brown states that it 'links the trope of a sea voyage, the Atlantic Tunnel, with the Dantesque moment of mid-life crisis' and MacNeice 'addresses his own death as the source of the faith which allows him to break silence with meaningful song in the midst of war'. 'Louis MacNeice and the Second World War', in *The Literature of Ireland: Criticism and Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010; repr. 2011), pp. 142-55 (p. 153).
[27] Jahan Ramazani, *Poetry and Its Others: News, Prayer, Song, and the Dialogue of Genres* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2014), pp. 126, 129.
[28] McDonald, *Louis MacNeice: The Poet in His Contexts* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991), p. 126.

tolerant, genuinely puzzled, and inquiring attitude'.[29] In 'Whit Monday', MacNeice admits to some extent the importance of human faith, while retaining his scepticism towards Christianity:

> *The Lord's my shepherd* – familiar words of myth
> Stand up better to bombs than a granite monolith,
> Perhaps there is something in them. *I'll not want* –
> Not when I'm dead. *He makes me down to lie* –
> Death my christening and fire my font –
> *The quiet* (Thames, or Don's or Salween's) *waters by*. (222)

Here the 'myth' is the Christian belief and the italicised quotations from Psalm 23 seem to show the provisional acceptance of the power of their words. However, the speaker mocks the declaration that '*I'll not want*' by adding 'Not when I'm dead', which suggests that one 'will not want' or cannot want once dead and lack of all volition. MacNeice here discloses the contradiction between the validity of having a belief and the invalidity of the Christian religion itself.

MacNeice also makes use of the people's religious mindset to appeal to the wider population in his radio works. Peter Golphin discusses some of MacNeice's early feature programmes that aim to encourage the Americans to join the war; in the script of *Westminster Abbey*, the references to the Bible are juxtaposed with those pertaining to the recent events in London, and in the climax he 'alludes to The Revelation of St John the Divine, providing a vision of hell for its American audience, London visited by the Day of Judgement'.[30] The Christian images are more cultural than religious in the countries including America and

[29] Marsack, p. 71.
[30] Peter Golphin, 'Encouraging America: Louis MacNeice and BBC Propaganda in 1941', *Symbiosis: A Journal of Anglo-American Literary Relations*, 15.2 (2011), 205-18 (p. 214).

Britain. MacNeice, in his review of critical studies of Herbert in 1954, answers the old question whether or not those poems with religious connotations like Herbert's can appeal to the non-Christian reader: 'The obvious answer seems to be that emotionally we in this country are nearly all of us Christian'.[31] The religion can therefore be a common knowledge in the wider community. Furthermore, he acknowledges the return to a 'religious sense' in this period, though stating that 'the revival of religion (with its ordinary connotations) is something that I neither expect nor desire'.[32] McDonald maintains that this sense 'entailed a growing awareness of the importance of wartime experience as a trial with more than just individual significance'.[33] More specifically, MacNeice conceives the 'religious sense' affirmatively for its basic potentiality to make the people refocus on 'a sense of value, i.e.: of the value of people and things in themselves, of ends as distinct from means'.[34]

In this respect, 'The Trolls (*Written after an air-raid, April* 1941)' and 'Troll's Courtship' offer this 'sense of value', but, for this very reason, they are unconventional war poems; rather than lamenting and highlighting the damage of the war, MacNeice, in these poems, utilises physically threatening creatures, trolls, as the symbol of the enemy, establishing a kind of faith in the value of human life. The trolls are 'humming to themselves like morons', and their incompetence is contrasted with the poet's verbal ability:

> Than which not any could be found other
> And outside which is less than nothing –
> This, as they call it, life. (218)

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[31] MacNeice, 'Book Reviews (Book Review)', p. 75.
[32] MacNeice, 'London Letter [5]: Reflections from the Dome of St Paul's' (July 1941), in *SP*, pp. 131-6 (p. 136).
[33] McDonald, *His Contexts*, p. 125.
[34] MacNeice, 'The English Literary Scene Today: A Return to Responsibility Features Its Approach in the Present Crisis', *The New York Times Book Review*, in *The New York Times*, 28 September 1947, pp. 1, 34 (p. 34).

Golphin claims that MacNeice complicates the syntax 'to recreate the absurdity of the bombers' purpose' and it 'captures the dislocation and disorientation experienced by victims of the blitz raids. The breaking of conventional linguistic logic mimics the anarchic physical destruction, with a command which the trolls themselves do not possess, being strangers to coherent language'.[35] I agree with Golphin's reading that the trolls do not have control over their language and deed, but rather than representing 'the anarchic physical destruction' by the trolls, the lines seem to reflect the poet's claim that we, humans, can understand, handle, and even play with words. This interpretation becomes more plausible if we read the lines above alongside the syntactically similar lines in 'The Casualty (*in memoriam G.H.S*)', an elegy for MacNeice's friend, Graham Shepherd, which appears in the same volume. He starts a stanza with these lines: 'Than whom I do not expect ever again / To find a more accordant friend, with whom / I could be silent knowledgeably' (237). By placing 'Than' at the beginning, MacNeice seems quick to emphasise that the dead person is better 'than' anyone else. These lines are among the most direct, emotional expressions in the poem. Likewise, in the above lines in 'The Trolls', MacNeice adopts a peculiar syntax in order to introduce the most peculiar thing, which is 'life'.

The trolls' inability to understand the complex human language is made clear by the contrast between their violence and the act of reading:

> This, as they call it, life.
> But such as it is, gurgling and tramping, licking their thumbs
> before they
> Turn the pages over, tear them out, they
> Wish it away, they

[35] Golphin, p. 217.

Puff with enormous cheeks, put paid to

Hours and minutes – thistledown in the void. (218)

Although the destruction is damaging, the trolls do not know the real use of what they are destroying and therefore their action is meaningless and ineffective. It seems that the speaker depicts the trolls' treatment of the book in detail just to dismiss it as 'thistledown in the void' in the end. The trolls do not seem to know how to read. It is likely that the 'pages' are the metaphor of the things that have only material value. MacNeice recollects that in the 'morning after the Blitz', an inner voice that encouraged the destruction, like the one in 'Brother Fire' ('Destroy! Destroy!') (217), cried 'Tear all the blotted old pages out of the book; there are more books in the mind than ever have got upon paper'.[36] The ruined buildings are like the pages already written, and the pages to be written in the future of the living are intact. Adam Piette believes that MacNeice shows the fascination of the 'left-wing intelligentsia of the early 1940s, delighting in the destruction of the City and of the petty capitalism of London shops'.[37] What is certain is that he sees meaning behind the physical destruction. In 'The Trolls', even if the trolls can destroy the pages, their intention to kill 'it', life, is implied to be unrealisable in the real sense.

The trolls' killing of human beings is a fake victory. With a logic similar to 'Plurality', MacNeice claims that death, which 'has a look of finality', makes life valuable: 'the value / Of every organism, act and moment / Is, thanks to death, unique' (218-9):

[. . .] The trolls can occasion

Our death but they are not able

To use it as we can use it.

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[36] MacNeice, *CP*, p. 217; 'The Morning after the Blitz' (3 May 1941), in *SP*, pp. 117-22 (p. 118).
[37] Adam Piette, *Imagination at War: British Fiction and Poetry 1939-1945* (London and Basingstoke: Papermac, 1995), p. 39.

Fumbling and mumbling they try to
Spell out Death correctly; they are not able. (218)

The ignorance of the trolls is exhibited through their clumsiness with words; not only are they unable to understand ('spell out') the meaning of death, they are literally unable to 'spell' it, either. Similarly, in 'Troll's Courtship', a troll, the speaker of the poem, confesses its own failed verbal activity: 'My curses and my boasts are merely a waste of breath' (220):

And therefore [I] cry to Her with the voice of broken bells
To come, visibly, palpably, to come,
Gluing my ear to gutted walls but walls are dumb,
All I can catch is a gurgle as of the sea in shells
But not Her voice – for She is always somewhere else. (220)

In addition that the troll's voice, 'broken' and unintelligible, won't be heard by 'Her', it is unable to hear 'Her voice'. The communication is totally impossible. It is admitted by the troll earlier in the poem that 'if I had even a human brain / I might have reached' 'Her' (219). Hence the human beings are superior in that they can think, understand, and use words. The destruction of the trolls is only physically threatening.

We can assume that 'Death' in 'The Trolls' is 'Her' that the troll looks for in 'Troll's Courtship'. McDonald points out that 'the determination to be affirmative on the subject of death is seriously declared, and it shapes MacNeice's war poetry in a decisive way'.[38] Indeed, MacNeice suggests that facing death is an opportunity opened to us:

[38] McDonald, 'Louis MacNeice's War', p. 391.

> Death in its own right—as War does incidentally—sets our lives in perspective. Every man's funeral is his own, just as people are lonely in their lives, but Death as a leveller also writes us in life. &Death not only levels but differentiates—it crystallizes our deeds.
>
> We did not need a war to teach us this but war has taught us it. Before the war we wore blinkers. [. . .] Death is the opposite of decay; a stimulus, a necessary horizon.[39]

In addition to the fact that 'Death' is a revelation that highlights the common value of human life, it is also not to be feared because it cannot deprive us of our 'voice':

> (V)
>
> This then is our answer under
> The crawl of lava, a last
> Shake of the fist at the vanishing sky, at the hulking
> Halfwit demons who rape and slobber, who assume
> That when we are killed no more will be heard of us –
> Silence of men and trolls' triumph.
> A wrong – in the end –assumption.
> Barging and lunging out of the clouds, a daft
> Descent of no-good gods, they think to
> Be rid for ever of the voice of men but they happen
> To be trying what even trolls
> Can never accomplish, they happen

[39] MacNeice, 'Broken Windows or Thinking Aloud', p. 142.

To be – for all their kudos –

Wrong, wrong in the end. (219)

The rich variety of verbs and metaphors that describe the trolls' attacks showcases not their achievement but a man's ability to verbalise his perception of the attack. Men's fight against the trolls is also represented in the arrangement of the line break and diction in 'a last / Shake of the fist at the vanishing sky'. The shaking of a 'fist' is a physical gesture, which displays the resolution to fight, the will never to yield, and being 'a last' rather than *the* last seems to include the poet's hope—almost the conviction—that human beings can continue their fight and eventually win over the trolls even after their material death. Placing the word 'last' at the end of the line with enjambment could be considered to save the 'last' action of human beings from ending.

It might even be possible that an ending is announced to the trolls; we might be confused by the phrase 'what even trolls / Can never accomplish', since trolls have been mentioned as 'they' so far in the poem. We infer from the title that 'they' are the 'trolls', and from the sub-title ('*Written after an air-raid, April* 1941') that the trolls' attacks are the metaphors of the air raid. At the very end of the poem, however, the speaker seems to discard the metaphorical disguise that he created himself for the enemy and talk of them as they are. The actual 'they' are even stupider than their image; 'what even trolls / Can never accomplish' sounds at first complimentary because of the words 'even' and 'accomplish', but their accomplishment is to be 'wrong in the end'. The phrase, 'in the end', being synonymous with 'eventually', implies that 'they' cannot be more than being 'wrong' because they dismiss the immortality of the 'voice of men'. Hence, the 'end' at the end of the poem actually sentences their 'end'.

This triumph of the human beings vindicated in the troll poems seems to be the

power of poetry itself. Kate McLoughlin discusses the common 'inadequacy' of literature in finding words for war, so that 'silence' is the best way to describe war. While it is an 'ethical-aesthetic' reaction, there is a 'psycho-physiological silence', which denotes the impossibility of uttering words, 'as though words themselves have been blasted to smithereens or else suffer from combat fatigue'.[40] The former silence seems to be applicable to MacNeice's reaction to the damage of the Blitz: 'Here and there we walked through a mess. Grandiose phrases or metaphors cannot cover it; it was just a —— mess'.[41] Writing about the experience as a fire-watcher on St Paul's Cathedral, he also confides his inability to describe how 'the tawny clouds of smoke [. . .] had hidden the river completely and there we were on the dome': 'It was far and away the most astonishing spectacle I have ever seen but I cannot describe it'.[42] On the other hand, MacNeice's practice seems to contradict these resignations. The poems we have read so far are conscious of their own eloquence and regard it as power. By claiming the verbal superiority of men in a verbal craft, i.e. poetry, MacNeice opposes to the fears of the war, instead of lament or accusation, the belief in the strength of man, the belief that the value intrinsic to human lives is indestructible, the belief available and true to anyone. Indeed, Leo Mellor maintains that the trolls 'are ultimately less interesting as forms conjured from flames than as interlocutors for those around them' and these interlocutors 'question and demand what might be the meaning of their presence in the city'.[43] Making the attacks into an imaginary monster highlights the value that is exclusive to human beings. For MacNeice, 'life can't be dissociated from value' and 'the pig's paradise is only open to pigs. Man *is* a political animal, unfortunately, and one can't live either in a sty or a 'plane for

[40] Kate McLoughlin, 'War and Words', in *The Cambridge Companion to War Writing*, ed. by Kate McLoughlin (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), pp. 15-24 (p. 17).
[41] MacNeice, 'The Morning after the Blitz', p. 119.
[42] MacNeice, 'London Letter [5]', p. 133.
[43] Leo Mellor, *Reading the Ruins: Modernism, Bombsites and British Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), p. 60.

ever'.[44] In his Blitz poems, MacNeice attempts what Auden calls 'the search for the true and the unconditional' and finds them in the unsurpassable superiority of the ability and courage of men.[45]

II

To emphasise a positive message in his war poems may risk showing MacNeice as a 'patriotic' poet. According to Helen Goethals, in the Second World War, 'for the first time, patriotism placed "England" above criticism, for to criticize the sacred was to commit sacrilege. God was on the Allied Side'.[46] It is true that MacNeice was involved in producing propaganda works for the BBC to support the cause of the Allies during wartime. *Christopher Columbus*, the radio play made for the 450th anniversary of Columbus's discovery of America, concerns America's joining the Allies in the war, but Ian Whittington maintains that the play fuses the 'political message with modernist symphonic and dramatic form'; it is 'propaganda of considerable aesthetic depth and difficulty' and '"highbrow" propaganda'.[47] MacNeice's insistent artistic consciousness was such that his works would never be at ease with conventional ideas of patriotism. Considering 'patriotism' as 'superannuated', he states that 'This war, we assume, is not being fought—not by most of us—for any merely national end; we are fighting it, primarily and clearly, for our lives, and secondarily, and, alas! vaguely, for a new international order'.[48] Angus Calder, who unravels 'the Myth' formulated during the period of the Blitz, the discourse that enabled the people to believe in the power of Britain, considers that MacNeice's poems do not support the Myth: 'MacNeice, himself a British

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[44] MacNeice, 'American Letter' (July 1940), in *SP*, pp. 74-7 (p. 77).
[45] Auden, 'W.H. Auden Speaks of Poetry and Total War' (1942), in *Prose*, Volume II: 1939-1948, *The Complete Works of W. H. Auden*, ed. by Edward Mendelson (London: Faber and Faber, 2002), pp. 152-3 (p. 153).
[46] Helen Goethals, 'The Muse that Failed: Poetry and Patriotism during the Second World War', in *The Oxford Handbook of British & Irish War Poetry*, ed. by Tim Kendall (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007; repr. 2009), pp. 362-76 (p. 372).
[47] Ian Whittington, 'Archaeologies of Sound: Reconstructing Louis MacNeice's Wartime Radio Publics', *Modernist Cultures*, 10.1 (2015), 44–61 (p. 53).
[48] MacNeice, 'Traveller's Return' (Feb. 1941), in *SP*, pp. 83-91 (p. 85).

propagandist during the war, clearly wasn't convinced that the rapid and largely spontaneous creation of Myth had done the job for good and all' and his Blitz poems 'stand up better than any others on the subject precisely because they work outside the Myth's paradigm'.[49]

MacNeice's patriotism, if any, lies in the individuality of each human being. It seems that even though he never uses poetry for blatant propaganda, he is willing to express this belief in the value of individuals in his poems. We can find a number of poems about certain types of individuals in *Springboard*, which might be called 'case-study' poems. McDonald argues that one of the impulses of MacNeice 'is towards "the lives of others" [. . .] in which some meaning for the life of the individual might now be found'.[50] While many poets, including Cecil Day Lewis, become disinclined to write, thinking that there is 'No subject for immortal verse', the war offers MacNeice a new perspective on human beings and prompts him to write about it.[51] He realises that the bombings clarify the individuality of people: 'Most individuals in and after an air-raid are not less individual but, if anything, more individual than they were in peace-time. This atmosphere of danger may coarsen you in some ways but it makes you more perceptive in other ways and it concentrates, rather than disperses, people's essential personality'.[52] At the same time, the individuation becomes possible because of a new sense of unity in a special occasion such as war. Writing about the sleepers in the Tube stations in London, MacNeice cites someone's remark to him that 'this was really Back to the Village, a revival of the archaic communal life in which the Tube station takes the place of the Village Hall'.[53] The intimacy created by crisis, a somewhat unexpected consequence of the war, is immediately employed for a discourse to 'present the British as one people, united by a common sense of identity and purpose'; the term 'people's war' 'not

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[49] Angus Calder, *The Myth of the Blitz* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1991), p. 144.
[50] McDonald, 'Louis MacNeice's War', p. 387.
[51] Cecil Day Lewis, 'Where are the War Poets?', in *Poems of C. Day Lewis: 1925-1972*, chosen and with an introduction by Ian Parsons (London: Jonathan Cape and The Hogarth Press, 1977), p. 138.
[52] MacNeice, 'London Letter [5]', p. 135.
[53] MacNeice, 'London Letter [1]: Blackouts, Bureaucracy & Courage' (Feb. 1941), in *SP*, pp. 99-105 (p. 101).

only blurred the distinction between soldiers and civilians, but also distinctions between the classes and the sexes'.[54] MacNeice, while hailing the sense of togetherness and the dissolution of differences, also claims the uniqueness of each of the individuals in the union:

> A world view? All right, we need a world view (we can't be mere empiricists for ever) but the world is made of human beings. Any ideology which ignores the individual human being is ripe for the scrap-heap. For the sake of Man we must have an economic programme—but only for the sake of Man and that means men and that means not Citizens 7601, 7602, etc., but Tom, Dick, and Harry. When we come out of the tunnel we must still have faces—not masks.[55]

MacNeice rather feels the need of reclaiming his faith in plurality. In spite of Stallworthy's comment on the increasing public element of MacNeice's poems in wartime, he becomes in a sense even more private by being attentive to others. He explains his way of treating individuals in his poems in the introduction to *Springboard*:

> Many of my titles in this book have the definite article, e.g. 'The Satirist', 'The Conscript'. The reader must not think that I am offering him a set of Theophrastean characters. I am not generalising; 'The Conscript' does not stand for all conscripts but for an imagined individual; any such individual seems to me to have an

[54] Paul Addison, 'The Impact of the Second World War', in *A Companion to Contemporary Britain 1939-2000*, ed. by Paul Addison and Harriet Jones (Malden, MA; Oxford; Carlton, Victoria: Blackwell Publishing, 2005), pp. 3-22 (p. 4).
[55] MacNeice, 'The Way We Live Now' (April 1941), in *SP*, pp. 78-82 (p. 82).

> absolute quality which the definite article recognizes. Compare the popular use of 'the Wife', 'The Old Man', 'the Baby'.[56]

By depicting types, MacNeice sheds light on the dispositions of individuals that likely exist and so, paradoxically, distinguishes individuals, rather than abstracting them.

In 'The Conscript', the man's decision to take action is made by accepting a cause imposed from outside: 'Being so young he feels the weight of history / Like clay around his boots' (224). Youth, because of the very fact of young-ness, represents non-history and is contrasted with the heavy, important 'history'. The simile properly illustrates how accidental but inevitable the necessity of action is; the 'clay' is not what he means to have but happens to stick to his boots when he steps into (is born in) and walks (lives in) the field of history. Nevertheless, for all this unfairness and uncontrollability, he feels it as 'his own Necessity', being 'Choiceless' himself (224), and his 'inward stalk / Vertically aspires and makes him his own master' (225). The metaphor shows that the man internalises the given necessity as his own responsibility. MacNeice here suggests, as he does in 'Prayer before Birth', that one's decision and action are his own at the same time as being predetermined by the history of which he has been a part since his birth. The 'dignity' of the conscript, the 'dignity which far above him burns / In stars that yet are his and which below / Stands rooted like a dolmen in his spine' (225), is also the value inherited, not created within himself. The fact that the star-lights travel thousands of years to reach our sight on the earth, the astrological knowledge that MacNeice is to mention in 'Star-gazer' ('what / Light was leaving some of them at least then, / Forty-two years ago, will never arrive / In time for me to catch it') (607-8), denotes that even the 'dignity' is and is not the conscript's. Similarly the pre-historic monument of a 'dolmen' symbolises the length of the line of history that the conscript joins. His forced

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[56] MacNeice, *Springboard: poems 1941-1944* (London: Faber and Faber, 1944), p. 7.

movement from place to place as a conscript is an epitome of the doom of all the human beings.

Richard Danson Brown avows that although 'MacNeice draws on Yeats's interest in the psychology of violence', 'Where Yeats presents violence heroically, MacNeice sees nothing heroic'.[57] Yet the absence of heroes and heroism in MacNeice's poems also reflects the particular circumstances of the Second World War, which are different from those of the Great War. Although there were the 'celebrants of the virtues of patriotism and self-sacrifice, on the model of Rupert Brooke in the previous war', 'Unlike the eager patriots of 1914, few men sought the adventure of war in 1939'.[58] 'The Springboard', the title poem of the collection, also deals with the necessity for a sacrifice to a larger cause. As MacNeice explains later, the poem 'though rational in its working out, begins with two irrational premisses — the dream picture of a naked man standing on a springboard in the middle of the air over London and the irrational assumption that it is his duty to throw himself down from there as a sort of ritual sacrifice'.[59] Yet it is not so irrational, in that the man knows that his 'dive' from a springboard is a sacrifice. The poem is a 'parable of choice', as Edna Longley calls it.[60] He chooses the only remaining option without any belief:

> If it would mend the world, that would be worth while
> But he, quite rightly, long had ceased to believe
> In any Utopia or in Peace-upon-Earth;
> His friends would find in his death neither ransom nor reprieve
> But only a grain of faith – for what it was worth.

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[57] Richard Danson Brown, 'Neutrality and Commitment: MacNeice, Yeats, Ireland and the Second World War', *Journal of Modern Literature*, 28.3 (Spring 2005), 109-29 (p. 123).
[58] Bernard Bergonzi, *Wartime and Aftermath: English Literature and its Background: 1939-1960* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), p. 70; Linda M. Shires, *British Poetry of the Second World War* (London and Basingstoke: The Macmillan Press, 1985), p. 54.
[59] MacNeice, 'Experiences with Images' (1949), in *SLC*, pp. 153-64 (p. 163).
[60] Longley, *A Study*, p. 82.

> And yet we know he knows what he must do.
> There above London where the gargoyles grin
> He will dive like a bomber past the broken steeple,
> One man wiping out his own original sin
> And, like ten million others, dying for the people. (235-6)

Unlike the self-sacrifice of Christ, to whom the man must implicitly be compared, his action has no promising consequences. It is after noting this that the speaker concludes that the man's death is for 'wiping out his own original sin' and 'for the people'. He cannot believe in the worth of his action precisely because it is something that will be defined by others after the action is done. However, his influence on those others is not much either; his death is for 'his own original sin' and 'the people' but not for 'wiping out' the people's original sin: hence no 'ransom or reprieve' to the bereaved. The idea of self-sacrifice seems to be often attributed to combatants in the war, but in the case of the man on the springboard, his death can only cancel out his own sinful being. He is also different from Yeats's 'Irish Airman', who had a 'lonely impulse of delight', in spite of the apparent allusion to the airman. At first, it seems that the independence of the man in 'The Springboard' embraces a similar kind of loneliness to that of Yeats's airman, a loneliness based on the utter lack of emotions towards others ('Those that I fight I do not hate, / Those that I guard I do not love') and the complete recognition of his irrelevance even to his people ('No likely end could bring them loss / Or leave them happier than before').[61] However, the man in 'The Springboard' belongs neither to the extreme egotism of the airman nor to altruism. His suicidal attempt to jump from the springboard is the ultimate violence to his own life, but has no immediate value in the true

[61] W. B. Yeats, 'An Irish Airman foresees his Death', in *The Variorum Edition of the Poems of W. B. Yeats*, ed. by Peter Allt and Russell K. Alspach (New York: Macmillan Publishing, 1973), p. 328.

sense of self-sacrifice. A 'grain of faith' he offers by his death is not his faith but a faith that can possibly be others' faith in the end. Only in this sense, 'we' and 'he' are 'interdependent'.[62] This idea of MacNeice is a little more complex and less critical than what Day Lewis clarifies in 'War Poem': 'All that enforced activity of death / Did answer and compensate / Some voluntary inaction, soft option, dream retreat. / Each man died for the sins of a whole world'.[63] While Day Lewis seems to have no doubt about the sacrifice and focuses on the responsibility of others, for whom the dead people sacrificed themselves, MacNeice doubts if the sacrifice can 'answer and compensate'. In spite of the references to the people at the end of 'The Springboard', MacNeice carefully illustrates the man's relationship with them as feeble but existent. 'The Springboard', exemplifying the man's decision to sacrifice himself by jumping from the springboard, distills the elemental dilemma for all individuals, namely that any decision we make is both independent and socially-dependent.

MacNeice does not merely lament for the situations where each individual should suffer from his or her own 'absolute quality'. In 'The Kingdom', the longest poem in *Springboard*, MacNeice shows the examples of individuals whose labels become the faiths in their strength. The poem consists of eight sections, and the first section is MacNeice's manifestation of his imagined 'Kingdom of individuals'. It is partly due to his too apparently idealistic expressions that the poem has generally been underrated as an unsuccessful attempt. Interestingly, two critics, Sheila Shannon and Stephen Spender, both criticise 'The Kingdom', admitting in the same word that it is MacNeice's most 'ambitious' poem in the volume.[64] I consider that his ambition is not so unrequited as they seem to think. It should be worth noting that even in the most 'ambitious' moment, that moment when he offers the description

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[62] McDonald, 'Louis MacNeice's War', p. 396.
[63] Cecil Day Lewis, 'War Poem', *Horizon*, 2.8 (August 1940), p. 19.
[64] Sheila Shannon, 'A Quartet of Poets' [review of *Four Quartets* by T. S. Eliot, *Shells by a Stream* by Edmund Blunden, *Springboard, poems 1941-1944* by Louis MacNeice, and *Eros in Dogma* by George Barker], *The Spectator*, 2 February 1945, pp. 108, 110 (p. 110). Stephen Spender, 'The Brilliant Mr. MacNeice' [review of *SAF*], *The New Republic*, 28 January 1967, pp. 32-4 (p. 34).

of the Kingdom, the speaker uses rhetoric more reserved than confident. ‘The candid scholar, the unselfish priest, the uncomplaining mothers of many, / The active men who are kind, the contemplative who give, / The happy-go-lucky saint and the peace-loving buccaneer’ (241) are the citizens of the Kingdom, but the very use of the epithets seems to suggest that the dispositions indicated by those words contradict the normal definition of each, as if it were unusual for a scholar to be candid, for a priest to be unselfish. Another example of reserved rhetoric is found in the enumeration of the types *not* of the Kingdom: ‘these [people of the Kingdom] are / Apart from those who drift and those who force / Apart from partisan order and egotistical anarchy, / Apart from the easy religion of him who would find in God / A boss, a ponce, an alibi’ (242). Through the repetition of ‘apart from’, the speaker defines the individuals of the Kingdom, which may conversely admit that there are those who have these kinds of dispositions that are not acceptable in the Kingdom.

The Kingdom of individuals is therefore rare but surely exists. This subtlety is indeed the nature of the Kingdom of individuals, like a secret society working behind the authoritative forces on surface: ‘Under the surface of flux and of fear there is an underground movement, / Under the crust of bureaucracy, quiet behind the posters, / Unconscious but palpably there – the Kingdom of individuals’ (241). ‘Unconscious’ is an important keyword. Most of the individuals who are defined by their suffering in the shorter poems are conscious about their position in the unresolvable conflicts, but the individuals of this kingdom do not seem to notice their virtue of having their own world where they have the initiative. In the third section of the poem, the speaker talks of a woman who is ‘the mother’, the role she and others recognise as hers. Her family is, however, ignorant of the fact that her very efforts as mother make her the centre of their ‘home’. ‘When she had her stroke’, other family members could not properly expect what was to come after their loss of her. Although ‘They propped her up’ when she collapsed, it is she who has actually propped them up:

They did not see that the only cable was broken
That held them together, self-respecting and sane,
And that chaos was now on the move. For they did not know,
Except at times by inklings, that their home
Remained a rebel island in the sea
Of authorised disgust only because their mother
Who thought herself resigned, was a born rebel
Against the times and loyal to a different
Order, being enfranchised of the Kingdom. (244)

Employing the metaphor, 'rebel', the harshness of which would normally be unfit for the image of a mother, the speaker shows how the domestic figure, who is 'resigned' from the so-called society outside home, has stood as the only person who with her own conscience rightly judges things in the world filled with the 'authorised disgust', the collectivism of the mass. The figuration of the mother as a 'rebel' articulates her spiritual independence against the uncritically accepted public norms. MacNeice shows how the mother's strength can subvert the wrong assumption that society always gives people common sense. The role of a mother, whether or not imposed, becomes and works as her individuality rather than annulling it.

This is also true in the preacher, whose death is commemorated in section VII of 'The Kingdom'. It is MacNeice's father, who died on 14 April 1942.[65] His death may influence MacNeice not only in the reconsideration of the father-son relationship but also in the revising of MacNeice's attitude towards the Christian religion during wartime, which we

[65] Stallworthy, p. 309.

have seen above. This section is distinct from other sections in that it is also an elegy. It is revealed that a preacher who is first mentioned in the poem is a friend of the preacher who 'was dead in daffodil time / Before it had come to Easter' (247).[66] McDonald, who seems to consider 'The Kingdom' as a failure as a poem, calls section VII 'the only powerful section of "The Kingdom"'.[67] Other critics also praise this section. Tom Walker mentions the seventh section as 'the exception' in the poem.[68] Marsack asserts that 'in the poem he does not specify the belief by which his characters live (except in section VII)'.[69] Although I disagree with Marsack's comment that the belief is not specified in other sections, it is true that section VII is outstanding in its fusion of mourning and celebration under the Christian terms and imagery:

> [. . .] All is well with
> One who believed and practised and whose life
> Presumed the Resurrection. What that means
> He may have felt he knew; this much is certain –
> The meaning filled his actions, made him courteous
> And lyrical and strong and kind and truthful,
> A generous puritan. (247-8)

The enumerations here work well to show the man's devotional absorption in his religion and the spiritual virtues he possessed in his lifetime. His sureness of what he did may refer to his supportive attitude towards Home Rule in Ireland, in spite of his position as a clergyman of

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[66] According to Stallworthy, the preacher who soothes the dead at the beginning of the poem is probably the Roman Catholic Bishop of Belfast. In the funeral and a memorial service for MacNeice's father, he 'said prayers for him in St Anne's Cathedral porch'. Stallworthy, p. 309.
[67] McDonald, 'Louis MacNeice's War', p. 394.
[68] Tom Walker, *Louis MacNeice and the Irish Poetry of his Time* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), p. 65.
[69] Marsack, p. 84.

the Church of Ireland. 'A generous puritan', a seemingly oxymoronic phrase that contrasts his intrinsic kindness and strict moral sense, also sums up his decision and action that follow his own belief rather than the regional or denominational majority.[70]

The section is also significant in that it extends the poet's celebration of a man's life to that of all the lives that come after his death. According to McDonald, '"The Kingdom" absorbs Bishop MacNeice in a series of fulsome celebratory epitaphs aspiring to a representative status for the poet's conceptions of individuality and value'.[71] When the speaker assumes that the 'spendthrift plants / Will toss their trumpets heralding a life / That shows itself in time but remains timeless / As in the heart of music' (248), 'a life' refers to anyone's as well as the preacher's. The section therefore not only serves as a personal elegy but also meets the design of the whole poem: the appreciation of life by way of the presentations of the individuals who are faithful in their independence:

> [. . .] So today
> These yellow fanfares in the trench re-echo,
> Before the spades get busy, the same phrase
> The preacher lost his voice on. All is well,
> The flowers say, with the child; and so it must be
> For, it is said, the children are of the Kingdom. (248)

The end of the section can be read as the consolation that is at once personal and universal. It

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[70] David Fitzpatrick, however, challenges the general view of John Frederick MacNeice as a Home-Ruler, the view that may largely be formed by his son's works. According to Fitzpatrick, he even had the idea of 'the gradual conversion of lay Catholics to the advantages of the union' and therefore 'Home Rule, like war, was only justifiable as a last resort to avert a greater evil'. It is rather the poet's need to present his father as 'a southern Home Ruler who was never at home in unionist Ulster', when in reality Frederick was not 'an outsider in Ulster', being 'thoroughly at home in Carrickfergus and dismissive of many aspects of southern life'. David Fitzpatrick, *'Solitary and Wild': Frederick MacNeice and the Salvation of Ireland* (Dublin: The Lilliput Press, 2012), pp. 137, 284-5.

[71] McDonald, *His Contexts*, p. 126.

seems that the 'yellow fanfares' refer back to the daffodils that were flowering at the preacher's death, but associated with the 'trench', they are also the trumpets that announce the beginning of a war. It suggests that people will die and be buried underground in the present war, just as they were in the previous one. Yet the tone is not ominous but consolatory. The voice of the flowers soothes the dead by announcing that happiness is secured for the living, the 'child', whom the dead will leave behind. The 'child' can also refer specifically to MacNeice himself, who is a child of the dead father, which confirms that the poem is also a personal correspondence with the dead. 'The Kingdom' has its climactic moment in this section, since the preacher's unique personality and his trust in his religious belief transcend his doomed situation and his death, offering a model for living.

For the people who confront immediate danger in the war, a series of the snapshots of individuals in 'The Kingdom' may not have been encouraging. As is obvious in his Blitz poems, MacNeice's poems during wartime are not overtly indicative of the bloods and sufferings caused by the war. Tim Kendall seems to be critical of writers who were 'excusing or disguising their aesthetic indulgence' by including others in their discourse, as MacNeice does in his prose and poems.[72] Kendall states that the use of first person plural in 'Brother Fire', in which the poet considers 'our brother Fire' (216) to be 'enemy and image of ourselves' (217), is 'a safety device', by which 'MacNeice spreads responsibility for this delight in the violent spectacle of the Blitz across an imaginative community which includes his readership'.[73] MacNeice may appear to aestheticise the war when he reconfigures the violence of the air bombs as a dog or the mythical, walking figure like trolls. During the Second World War, the dissatisfaction with poets, which is simply described as a question, 'Where Are the War Poets?', becomes a subject of discussion among poets. There is a common understanding that the present war does not have as good war poems as the Great

[72] Tim Kendall, *Modern English War Poetry* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), p. 136.
[73] Ibid., p. 137.

War had. Geoffrey Grigson states that 'The greatest intensities of suffering or evil are always being endured somewhere by somebody in peace or war. So a man open to feeling needs no war to tell him the facts of life and to make him write some particular thing called "war poetry", which is distinct from peace poetry.[74] Keith Douglas similarly considers that one of the reasons of the absence of war poetry in the present war is that 'hell cannot be let loose twice: it was let loose in the Great War and it is the same old hell now. [. . .] Almost all that a modern poet on active service is inspired to write, would be tautological'.[75] Neil Corcoran shows a yet another view to the scarcity of war poetry. Rather than offering the same kind of suffering, the Second World War limits the creation of poetry by making the home front another battle ground: 'Unlike the poets of the First World War, they had no scope for the kind of ambition which sustained Wilfred Owen: to "educate" civilians to "the actualities of war". The danger of being burnt alive in a tank in the desert was equalled by the danger of being burnt alive in the streets of London or Sheffield'.[76] Indeed, for instance, Owen in 'Insensibility' seems to accuse the people's insensibility to the combatants' sufferings when he says 'Happy the soldier home, with not a notion / How somewhere, every dawn, some men attack, / And many sighs are drained'. The insensible men on the home front choose to be 'immune / To pity'.[77] Yet in the Second World War, they equally suffer from the air raids and, as we have seen in MacNeice's poems about the conscript, there is no enthusiastic feeling among soldiers for the fighting for the nation. Having those backgrounds, the poets in the Second World War are 'Anti-heroic and anti-rhetorical' and naturally take 'a bleak approach to war'.[78] What we have found, however, is that as well as showing the bleak

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[74] Geoffrey Grigson (Geoffrey Grigson, Vernon Watkins, and Herbert Palmer), 'War Poetry', *The Listener*, 6 November 1941, p. 635.
[75] Keith Douglas, 'Poets in This War', in *Keith Douglas: A Prose Miscellany*, ed. by Desmond Graham (Manchester: Carcanet Press, 1985), pp. 117-20 (pp. 119, 120).
[76] Neil Corcoran, *English Poetry Since 1940* (London: Longman; New York: Longman Publishing, 1993), p. 59.
[77] Wilfred Owen, 'Insensibility', in *The Complete Poems and Fragments*, ed. by Jon Stallworthy, 2 vols (London: Chatto & Windus·The Hogarth Press and Oxford University Press, 1983), Volume I: The Poems, pp. 145-6.
[78] Shires, p. 55.

situations of the present war, MacNeice makes use of the tautology of war to observe and uncover the faults and virtues of human beings, which become especially visible in the specific moment like war. In his article for *The Listener*, Spender insists that 'Poetry must express the triumph of man's mind and spirit, not contemplate his defeat' and 'What we need today is a strongly developed poetic idealism hardened by contact with actual experience; an imaginatively realised picture of the kind of life for which we are fighting, and a vision of the society of the future'.[79] MacNeice must side with Spender, since the affirmative attitude we have seen in 'The Trolls' and 'The Kingdom' seems to derive from a similar kind of 'poetic idealism'. T. S. Eliot distinguishes 'his duty as a man and his duty as a poet' and claims that 'His first duty as a poet is towards his native language, to preserve and to develop that language. As a man, he has the same duties as his fellow-citizens; as a poet, his duty is to write the best poetry he can, and thereby incidentally create something in which his people can take pride'.[80] The duty as a poet Eliot mentions here is accomplished by MacNeice's indirect involvement in empowering the people in his wartime poems. The fundamental and strongest motivation that underlies all his poems is to be proud of human difficulties and complexities. In his wartime poems, MacNeice's treatment of individuals effectively sublimates his personal belief as a poetic assertion addressed to all human beings. In addition, it anticipates what he attempts in *Autumn Sequel*. It is significant that he already has his plan of this 'long poem' by the time he publishes *Springboard*, a poem in which 'the main characters will be imagined contemporary individuals, but will exist on two planes, i.e. the symbolic as well as the naturalistic'.[81] The increasing imaginary elements in the poems therefore reflect MacNeice's further refinement of his poetics renewed after the thirties. In the next chapter, we will read the poems in *Holes in the Sky*, in which MacNeice prepares for talking about and through others, while confronting post-war disillusionment.

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[79] Stephen Spender, 'War Poetry in this War', *The Listener*, 16 October 1941, pp. 539-40 (p. 539).
[80] T. S. Eliot, 'T. S. Eliot on Poetry in Wartime', *Common Sense*, XI.10 (October 1942), p. 351.
[81] MacNeice, To T. S. Eliot, 7 April 1944, in *Letters*, p. 449.

Chapter 7.

The Period of Re-visioning and Returning: The Post-War MacNeice

This chapter mainly discusses MacNeice's poems in *Holes in the Sky*, published in 1948. Although the collection does not invite enthusiastic reviews or criticism, it is indispensable for discussing MacNeice's self-consciousness as poet. As a first post-war collection, *Holes in the Sky* shows the sense of disillusionment that dominated England after the war. MacNeice's disillusionment is not only with society but also with his own poetic imagination. In 'To Hedli', the epigraph poem in *Springboard*, he already confesses that 'the velvet image' and 'the lilting measure, / No more convey my meaning' (212). This is MacNeice's first lament for the loss of image and music in his poetry. 'Epitaph for Liberal Poets' in the same collection is also about a painful confrontation with the fact that the generation to which the speaker belongs is to replaced. In the nineteen forties, MacNeice experiences the transition from a young poet, who had to claim the validity of a new kind of poetry of his own generation in the previous decade, to a poet who is to be reviewed and replaced by younger poets. Yet at the same time as he recognises this inevitable transition, he seems to still have a confidence that his words will be understood; at the end of 'Epitaph', he claims that 'we shall vanish first, / Yet leave behind us certain frozen words / Which some day, though not certainly, may melt / And, for a moment or two, accentuate a thirst' (232). The last three words betray our expectation that the melted ice will soothe a thirst. However, MacNeice does not mean that the poems of his generation will dissatisfy the reader in the future but rather drive their interest. The employment of the image of melting as a metaphor suggests that a poetic influence should be a natural consequence rather than a forceful arrangement. Referring back to the title of the poem, we can also assume that it is not only an elegy that memorialises and validates the value of the dying, it is a poem that claims their survival. An

epitaph, by its very nature, is a refusal of oblivion. Like Yeats's epitaph that asks the horse riders to 'pass by', MacNeice's poem titled 'Epitaph' can be read more as a perpetual reminder of the dead.[1]

According to Eric Smith, the dead sung by major poets such as Milton and Tennyson are also individuals with artistic talent, and therefore the 'death of the poet cannot but bring to mind the poetic purpose and the future death of that other poet who is now writing'.[2] Along with 'Epitaph for Liberal Poets', 'Elegy for Minor Poets' in *Holes in the Sky* is a self-referring elegy with the anticipation of the death of the poet who mourns. MacNeice is more ironic towards the poets whom he elegises, the poets 'Who were lost in many ways' (273). On the other hand, the minor poets are depicted as if their being minor were a consequence of 'chance', since 'For them as for us / Chance was a coryphaeus who could be either / An angel or an *ignis fatuus*' and 'now their chance is gone' (273). It is more about the general truth of the creation of art than the implication of the 'guilt of those who did not serve in war, but ran the magazines in London, which led them to devalue the war prose and poetry which they printed'.[3] Though not entirely sympathetic, MacNeice's lament for the minor poets seems to justify their potentials to be artist. He admits that they 'were the world's best talkers, in tone and rhythm / Superb' and 'knew all the words but failed to achieve the Word – ' (273). Stephen Regan argues that MacNeice implicitly reacts to Auden's elegy for Yeats; 'Elegy for Minor Poets' is 'so obviously an ironic displacement of the labour of writing the expected elegiac tribute to Yeats, both in its unconvincing encomium, "I would praise these in company with the Great", and in its liberal disavowal of Yeatsian "scorn" (recalling the

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[1] '*Cast a cold eye* / *On life, on death.* / *Horseman, pass by!*' in Yeats's 'Under Ben Bulben'. MacNeice calls the poem 'Yeats's poetic last will and testament'. W. B. Yeats, *The Variorum Edition of the Poems of W. B. Yeats*, ed. by Peter Allt and Russell K. Alspach (New York: Macmillan Publishing, 1973), p. 640; *PWBY*, p. 154.
[2] Eric Smith, *By Mourning Tongues: Studies in English Elegy* (Rowman and Littlefield, Totowa: The Boydell Press, 1977; repr. 1978), p. 11.
[3] Andrew Sinclair, *War Like a Wasp: The Lost Decade of the 'Forties* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1989), p. 289.

address to Irish poets in "Under Ben Bulben" to "Scorn the sort now growing up")'.[4] Certainly, MacNeice's writing of an elegy for 'minor' poets slightly deviates from the conventional commemoration of the well-known and famous. In his clarification of the reason of minor poets' failure to be 'the Great', MacNeice implies that it is not a matter of what they have but a matter of how they make use of what they have: [they were] 'too happy or sad, too soon or late', 'thought too little, too much', and 'were too carefree or careful, who were too many / Though always few and alone' (273).[5] MacNeice has asserted since the thirties that the poet should take the middle way.[6] The lecture notes for the South African tour in 1959 prove that his opinion remains unchanged in his late years.[7] He considers that it is fatal if the poet is either excessive or deficient, since the imbalance hinders him from making use of their passion or knowledge for creation. Rather than idealising the dead and dismissing their defects, MacNeice celebrates them with admission of their being inadequate as poets and even reveals the possibility that 'we', the posterity, become like them:

> In spite of and because of which, we later
>
> Suitors to their mistress (who, unlike them, stays young)

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[4] Stephen Regan, 'Irish Elegy after Yeats', in *The Oxford Handbook of Modern Irish Poetry*, ed. by Fran Brearton and Allan Gills (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), pp. 588-606 (p. 590).

[5] According to Paul Muldoon, Robert Frost's poem 'The Lesson for Today' 'surely influenced MacNeice's 'Elegy for Minor Poets': 'With the poets who could calmly take the fate / Of being born at once *too early and late*, And for those reasons kept from being great'. See Paul Muldoon, 'The Perning Birch: Yeats, Frost, MacNeice', in *Incorrigibly Plural: Louis MacNeice and his Legacy*, ed. by Fran Brearton and Edna Longley (Manchester: Carcanet Press, 2012), pp. 139-55 (p. 155).

[6] In 'Preface' to *MP*, he states that 'Poetry to-day should steer a middle course between pure entertainment ("escape poetry") and propaganda', though it is a remark largely in the context of the political commitment of the thirties. *MP*, n. p.

[7] He defines that the poet should be in 'Middle Way' and

> 1) Must be conscious of cmts [commitments?] but not [subservient?] to it.
> 2) Must exercise discipline – but discipline developed from within
> 3) Must neither fly up into intense in one nor get bogged down under solar plexus.
> 4) Must combine – see these – common sense and imagination.
> 5) Must be critical & selfcritical - but in [a corner?] sees world.

Louis MacNeice, 'Yes Men' in *Notes for lectures on English literature, drama and poetry, given at the University of Cape Town, South Africa, 1959. Also includes a report on MacNeice's lecturing and teaching activities at the University of Cape Town, Aug 1959.* Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS. 10641/37.

> Do right to hang on the grave of each a trophy
> Such as, if solvent, he would himself have hung
> Above himself; these debtors preclude our scorn –
> Did we not underwrite them when we were born? (274)

All poets have the Muse as 'their mistress', who inspires their poetic creativity. The word 'suitors' suggests that they are not only the confessors of their love to her but also the ones who sue her for her betrayal. They are 'debtors' to her, but they would want to cancel their debts if what the Muse lent them, poetic inspiration, was not good enough for them to produce money, i.e. poetry. Calling 'we' the later 'suitors' suggests that the living poets including himself will possibly be minor poets, whose works will be 'learnt in school' but 'rarely read' and become 'Mere source-books' (274). The question at the end of the poem clarifies MacNeice's idea that the poet is born with the inherited debt, which is the failure of the predecessors. According to Robyn Marsack, in a manuscript, MacNeice once put 'inheritors of their debts' and 'gamblers with their dice'.[8] These metaphors, along with 'Suitors to their mistress', the metaphor which is eventually chosen, disclose the fact that what all poets have is not so much the potential to success as the possibility of failure, and it depends upon the chance of each if he could pay back the debt or accumulate it. Eric Smith, noting that the 'pastoral represents, or at least suggests, what is missing', points out that 'elegy is a particular sort of pastoral, for elegy is specifically about what is missing and also about what is more certainly known to have been formerly possessed'.[9] Along with 'Epitaph for Liberal Poets', 'Elegy for Minor Poets' can be called a pre-elegy for himself in that it laments for what can be lost, his reputation as poet, as well as for what has already been lost.

The poems about the post-war period in *Holes in the Sky* can also be regarded as

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[8] Robyn Marsack, *The Cave of Making: The Poetry of Louis MacNeice* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1982; repr. 1985), p. 80.
[9] Smith, p. 2.

elegy in a broad sense, for they miss the pre-war state. MacNeice reflects in his poems an idea prevalent in society that wartime is a void. He depicts in poems such as 'Hiatus', 'Aftermath', and 'Bluebells' how the people try to nullify the change or a sense of waste brought by the war. John Whitehead, whose overall review of *Holes in the Sky* is not really sympathetic, praises these 'post-war' poems, for their 'expressing better than any other poet had done the sense of deflation many people felt' after the six years of war.[10] As we have already seen in the previous chapter, the war was found to have some positive effects. Even the Blitz had an aspect of illuminating the unknown sides of cities. Mark Rawlinson explains that 'Air raids had another satisfying by-product in the revelation of normally hidden details of a building's structure and fabrication: ruin is not loss but rediscovery'.[11] MacNeice considers that the air raids disclose the formerly invisible sides of London, including her people: 'London since the Blitz has become more comprehensible. [. . .] this great dirty, slovenly sprawling city is a visible and tangible symbol of freedom; it has not been centralized, organized, rationalized, dehumanized into a streamlined ad for the cult of the State'.[12] Indeed, the war seemed to unite the people: 'The war is widely regarded as perhaps the only period in the whole of British history during which the British people came together as a metaphysical entity: an entity which transcend the divisions of class, sect, self-interest and libertarian individualism that normally constitute the highly pluralistic and fragmented structure of British society'.[13] However, the end of the war reveals that the union is an illusion. In Peter McDonald's words, 'peace was proving an anticlimax'.[14] Moreover, while social divisions return, the people cannot return to the state before the war. MacNeice discloses the shocking realisation that time has indeed passed and aged everyone in spite of the shared impression that 'The years

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[10] John Whitehead, *A Commentary of the Poetry of W. H. Auden, C. Day Lewis, Louis MacNeice, and Stephen Spender* (Lewiston, New York; Queenston, Ontario; Lampeter, Wales: The Edwin Mellen Press, 1992), p. 181.
[11] Mark Rawlinson, *British Writing of the Second World War* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2000; repr. 2005), p. 86.
[12] MacNeice, 'The Way We Live Now' (April 1941), in *SP*, pp. 78-82 (p. 82).
[13] Jose Harris, 'War and Social History: Britain and the Home Front during the Second World War', *Contemporary European History*, 1.1 (March 1992), 17-35 (p. 17).
[14] Peter McDonald, *Louis MacNeice: The Poet in His Contexts* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991), p. 132.

that did not count – Civilians in the towns / Remained at the same age as in Nineteen-Thirty-Nine' (254). In the poem that introduces this notion, 'Hiatus', the poet goes on to reveal the fact that the people's minds have been unchanged, 'Yet eyes began to pucker, mouth to crease' (254). These physical changes impress us that the war incurs the loss within each individual in addition to the losses of the dead, the properties, and the other material things. In 'East Coker' in *Four Quartets*, first published in 1940, Eliot regards the last twenty years, 'the years of *l'entre deux guerres*', as wasted.[15] If this disillusionment is common to the people in England at the end of the thirties, MacNeice's poem shows that another six years are added to this feeling. As noted in the previous chapter, the sufferings of the war are not a new experience but repeated after the Great War. So is the disillusionment after the war. MacNeice unintentionally anticipates this repetition when he discusses in the thirties the poets whose poetry changed because of the war:

> The brutality and humanity demanded by Synge both came into poetry at once—with the War. The War blew the back out of the Georgian corner. Wilfred Owen, who would otherwise have written aesthete's verse in the Keats tradition, was enabled to write instead about living Man or men under conditions which made real his own communion with them. But when the War was over and the soldiers demobilized, the feeling of communion dissolved and there only remained feelings of defeat and disillusion or a little spurious joy; and Owen bedsides was dead.[16]

Although the Great War caused Wilfred Owen to find his original poetic voice, a sense of

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[15] T. S. Eliot, *The Complete Poems and Plays* (London: Faber and Faber, 1969; repr. 2004), p. 182.
[16] MacNeice, *MP*, pp. 10-11.

union that he depicted and allowed his poems to be appreciated became a disillusion with the ending of the War. Returning to the pre-war state is impossible both for poetry and society in any complete sense.

MacNeice's 'Bluebells' describes the unpromising but willing attempt to restore a lost spiritual connection between a man and a woman after the war. The difference in the ways and places in which each of them experienced the war (the man seems to have been in the 'Desert', while she was at the home front) set them apart. What is ironical is that the war becomes the object of nostalgia in the face of the disillusionment and solitariness felt after the war: 'This Easter has no peace to be waiting for' (256). Now that the man, who seems to be the woman's lover or husband, has been returned, they live together again, but their togetherness is only kept through a common nostalgia:

> So both wake early, listen without words
> To the now foreign badinage of birds,
> And in the twilight when only the bats fly
> They miss those engines overbrimming the sky,
> For all green Nature has gone out of gear
> Since they were apart and hoping, since last year. (256-7)

They do not have their own 'words' to talk with each other and can only listen to the birds' words. Yet even the 'badinage' of the birds is 'now foreign'. Although the birds' words are normally undecipherable for human, they are more like a metaphor of the couple's mutual understanding, and therefore their inability to grasp the meaning of the birds' chat reinforces the distance between the couple. What they now miss in the sky as flying object, however, is ironically the same: neither the natural birds nor 'bats' but the German aircraft. A similar

contradiction in the longing for the harsh war life is mentioned in ‘Aftermath’: ‘Oh / Where is the Fear that warmed us to the gun, / That moved the cock to tousle the night and crow / In the gaps between the bombs?’ (255). The ‘Fear’ has the effect of warming us, effect that it should not normally bring out, and the cock’s crow is missed because of its association with the lethal danger that it would highlight. In the couple’s mind in ‘Bluebells’, the material violence of the war replaces nature even on the level of language; the word ‘gear’, which relates more obviously to ‘engines’ and aircrafts, is used to explain nature’s loss of function. The woman, realising that the typical pleasure in nature, such as the beaming of ‘Sun’ or the growth of ‘wheat’, no longer provides her and her lover with comfort, tries to find out an alternative place with wilderness that suits her mood and situation. She goes to the wood where ‘as a glacial stream / Meeting the sea inlays and weaves a milky gleam / Through the dark waste, so here the bluebells flow / Athwart the undergrowth, a merger of blue snow’ (257). The bluebells are preceded by the image of them, the water of the half melted ice that joins the sea and appears to be blue in darkness. This procedure stresses the restorative function expected of the place with the bluebells representing her recovery from the stagnated situation with her partner:

> ‘Oh in this dark beneathness where he and I
> Live, let a delta of flowers atone for the sky
> Which we cannot face and from my ice-cap, oh,
> Let one river at least unfreeze and flow
> And through that brine so deep and yet so dim
> Let my cold gentleness irradiate him.’ (257)

MacNeice uses an inarticulate lyric expression of longing. The woman imagines that she and

her lover live in the darkness where the bluebells are the substitute for the sky, despite that it is the earth that the flowers are seen. A quasi-up-side-down world may be what they need now, when they can only remember the bombing planes in the real sky. The 'glacial stream' that is the metaphor for the bluebells in the previous stanza is re-invoked in her mind as the frozen rivers, which she wishes will melt to renew her feeling for her lover. By the oxymoron, 'cold gentleness', the poet seems to reveal that estrangement between them 'so deep and yet so dim' is unsolvable and only partially relieved with the help of some change. It is a necessary change the people must make in order to overcome the change imposed by the war.

In MacNeice's case, the lament for the loss is often followed by his endeavour to restore it in renewed form. *Holes in the Sky* is characterised with many returns. The returns sometimes overlap under the same motive. For instance, his return to Ireland just before V-Day in 1945 intends to be a return to his poetry. In his letter to Laurence Gilliam, a colleague at the BBC, MacNeice insists that he is taking a temporary leave from radio work to stay in Ireland partly due to 'my present allergy to England', and Jonathan Allison notes that MacNeice eventually left without permission, claiming that 'I am (1) Irish & have not been in my own country for 3 years – & not for so long then – & (2) and (for lack of a better word) artist – which means that I can do some hackwork all of the time & all hackwork some of the time but no all hackwork all time'.[17]

MacNeice in this period re-visions the intimate others—his father and Ireland—that have troubled rather than stabilised his identity. As McDonald explains, 'MacNeice's attitudes to Ireland are in some senses analogous to his attitudes towards his own family and past'.[18] 'Carrick Revisited', a poem of returning to the North, contains, needless to say, the double return: return to Carrickfergus and to 'Carrickfergus', his own earlier poem about the

[17] MacNeice, To Laurence Gilliam, 4 July [1945], in *Letters*, pp. 455-6. The reasons of leave quoted above are a part of what Jonathan Allison quotes from a letter from MacNeice to Gilliam, 14 July 1945 *Ms BBC*, in footnote 1, in *Letters*, p. 456.
[18] McDonald, p. 220.

place. Although both poems are based on the impressions and experiences MacNeice gained in his childhood, 'Carrick Revisited' presents the home coming as the on-going exploration of the 'meaning' of his unalterable past. The speaker confuses the past and present selves to denote that he is still in the process of understanding 'the child's astonishment not yet cured' (261). He was and is still in the passive state, being the object that is always framed: 'Who was – and am – dumbfounded to find myself / In a topographical frame – here, not there – / The channels of my dreams determined largely / By random chemistry of soil and air; / Memories I had shelved peer at me from the shelf' (261-2). The image of shelved memories is used in his earlier poem in *Blind Fireworks*, 'Child's Unhappiness', in which the speaker goes to search for his self while 'They posited me on the topmost shelf' (617). Although the memories in 'Carrick Revisited' are part of the self, they are separated from and waiting to be integrated. Yet the speaker finds a difficulty: 'Our past we know / But not its meaning' (262). He cannot incorporates his past into his own identification unless he grasps 'its meaning'. Rather than becoming an active explorer of the 'meaning' of his past, however, he chooses the pose of acquiescence, admitting that 'what chance misspelt / May never now be righted by my choice' (262).

What his passivity here suggests is, however, not so much a defeat as his affirmative view of the complexity of his fate. McDonald notes that 'After the war, paradox in the matter of Ireland became for the poet a source of strength'.[19] Indeed, the matter is neither simple nor straightforward, and therefore MacNeice's post-war poems about Ireland do not conform to Brown's remark: 'It was always a place to reject'.[20] While 'Carrick Revisited' shows his inclination towards acceptance from rejection, 'Western Landscape' is a tribute to the west of Ireland, which is written with MacNeice's strong consciousness of identity as an Irish man and a poet. The poem starts with the self-mocking comment: 'In doggerel and stout

[19] Ibid., p. 213.
[20] Terence Brown, 'Louis MacNeice's Ireland', in *Tradition and Influence in Anglo-Irish Poetry*, ed. by Terence Brown and Nicholas Grene (Basingstoke and London: The Macmillan Press, 1989), pp. 79-96 (p. 79).

let me honour this country' (265). As if to endorse his humiliation, the descriptions of the nature of the West are so vacillating that the poet seems to disclose his inability to grasp its power: 'the ocean [. . .] Proves and disproves what it wants', 'There are affirmation and abnegation together', 'Webs [that] will last and will not' (265). Yet this displays more the indefinability of the nature than the poet's deficiency. Brown refers to this poem as one of the poems in MacNeice's 'middle years' that show 'Romantic predilections'.[21] It is especially true in his cry for 'the affinity with / Ourselves of such a light and line' in the landscape, which may remind us of Percy Bysshe Shelley's 'Ode to the West Wind':

> How do we find continuance
> Of our too human skeins of wish
> In this inhuman effluence?
> O relevance of cloud and rock –
> If such could be our permanence! (265)

The speaker here seems to aspire to be a part of nature, as Shelley does ('If I were a dead leaf thou mightest bear; / If I were a swift cloud to fly with thee').[22] Yet unlike the Romantic apostrophe with hopeful prospect of realisation, the speaker in 'Western Landscape' articulates the unsurpassable difference between humanity and nature. The human is unable to fuse with nature nor to become a part of nature, and the human failure is especially felt in the organic connections among natural things: 'The flock of mountain sheep belong / To tumbled screes, to tumbling seas / The ribboned wrack, and moor to mist' (266). They are so closely attached that they are seen as one as well as each being distinctive, and these natural fusions

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[21] Terence Brown, *Louis MacNeice: Sceptical Vision* (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan; New York: Harper and Row Publishers, 1975), p. 31.

[22] Percy Bysshe Shelley, 'Ode to the West Wind', in *Percy Bysshe Shelley: The Major Works*, ed. by Zachary Leader and Michael O'Neill, *Oxford World Classics* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2003; repr. 2009), pp. 412-4 (p. 413).

achieve and represent permanence: hence 'we who savour longingly / This plenitude of solitude / Have lost the right to residence, / Can only glean ephemeral / Ears of our once beatitude' (266). The impermanence and rootlessness of the human derives from their inability to harmonise with nature; as a solitary existence, the human cannot help but perceive and pass the ephemeral, being himself ephemeral. Even so, the Irish Saint Brandan, a great voyager of the sea, seems to be exempt from these limits, transcending the boundary between him and nature ('to / Knot the horizon round your waist, / Distill that distance and undo / Time in quintessential West') (266) and 'Feeling' by himself the borderless nature ('Sea met sky, he had neither floor nor ceiling, / The rising blue of turf-smoke and mountain were left behind, / Blue neither upped nor downed, there was blue all round the mind') (266-7). By embracing the West through his body and mind in his sea voyage, Brandan could attain a kind of permanence as a unique human being—'the lonely was the only [. . .] Best' (267), but at the same time this way is unavailable 'for us now' because 'we', though not organically uniting with land, are still on land and want to be there rather than going 'beyond' like Brandan. This is rather a denial of general impression we get from MacNeice as an active traveller; as Liam Harte notes, 'displacement and self-division' in his rootlessness 'were powerfully creative elements in his poetic sensibility', and 'MacNeice was caught in a perpetual vagrancy, continually in search of a displaced and dispersed authenticity'.[23] Indeed, as Longley aptly notes, 'MacNeice's dislocations' are 'personally and artistically fruitful'.[24] At the end of the poem, MacNeice abnegates the attempt to be one with nature but praises it as his other:

> Let me at least in token that my mother

[23] Liam Harte, 'Louis MacNeice: An Irish Nomad' [review of *Louis MacNeice* by Jon Stallworthy], *Irish Studies Review*, 10 (Spring 1995), 38-40 (pp. 39, 40).
[24] Edna Longley, 'Out of Ulster I: Louis MacNeice and His Influence', in *Irish Poetry Since Kavanagh*, ed. by Theo Dorgan (Dublin and Portland: Four Courts Press, 1996), pp. 52-9 (p. 56).

Earth was a rocky earth with breasts uncovered
To suckle solitary intellects
And limber instincts, let me, if a bastard
Out of the West by urban civilization
(Which unwished father claims me – so I must take
What I can before I go) let me who am neither Brandan
Free of all roots nor yet a rooted peasant
Here add one stone to the indifferent cairn . . .
With a stone on the cairn, with a word on the wind, with a prayer
in the flesh let me honour this country. (267)

A seemingly self-degrading word, 'a bastard', which refers to the fact that the poet's parents have their origins in the West but he was raised in an 'urban civilization', exemplifies the confidence behind his decision; the word reminds us of a famous scene in Shakespeare's *The Winter's Tale* where the flowers in the garden are called 'nature's bastard'.[25] Here using the term for self-humiliation, MacNeice shows his acceptance rather than rejection of his imposed, artificially complex background, and even boasts of his grafted identity. Although he feels a certain admiration to Brandan, who gained a connection with nature as a whole by choicelessly abandoning his land, MacNeice denies that he is neither a born traveller nor 'a rooted peasant'. After rejecting both of the two opposite models of the Irish, he resolves to connect himself with the West by poetry, the art that makes celebration permanent. Still, his hesitation persists until the end, as the retardation of the verb for 'let me' shows; he identifies

[25] Perdita states that 'Sir, the year growing ancient, / Nor yet on summer's death, nor on the birth / Of trembling winter, the fairest flow'rs o' th' season / Are our carnations and streak'd gillyvors, / (Which some call nature's bastards). Of that kind / Our rustic garden's barren, and I care not / To get slips of them' (IV. iv. 79-85). William Shakespeare, *The Winter's Tale*, in *The Riverside Shakespeare: The Complete Works*, ed. by G. Blakemore Evans, J. J. M. Tobin and others, 2nd edn (Boston, MA: Wadsworth Cengage Learning, 1997), pp. 1612-55 (p. 1637).

the act of putting a stone on the cairn with that of the verbal activities of writing poetry and uttering prayer, both of which might be just ephemeral and meaningless. Yet he knows that the very indifference of the cairn that resembles that of Dublin, which 'will not / Have me alive or dead' accommodates both the insignificance and freedom of the poet who wants to relate himself to its place and history.[26] His choice to sing for the country is realised by accepting the very irrelevance of himself to it. This is not necessarily a negative result but can be seen as the second initiation for MacNeice to locate his identity.

The post-war poems about Ireland therefore function as the work through which MacNeice rediscovers his uniqueness as a person. In 'Woods', he has another speculation on his background, referring to another set of two models, the Irish and the English landscapes, both of whose attractions and values he admits. While he expressively describes the English landscape in association with his love of the chivalric adventures in Malory's King Arthur, his avowal of the beauty of England is made with a sense of detachment: 'this other, this English, choice' is 'what yet is foreign' (272). Yet, as Tom Walker argues, this choice 'also opens alternate modes of thought: a terrain of moral complications, "half-truths and not-quites", in contrast to his father's capitalized absolutes, "True and Good". His imaginative and intellectual resources are strengthened rather than weakened; to be alienated, MacNeice implies, is not to be poetically disempowered'.[27] Indeed, MacNeice implicitly counters his father's opinion that the English woods are 'tame' by muddling the impressions of two landscapes. At the end of the poem, he describes the English woods as follows:

> And always we walk out again. The patch
> Of sky at the end of the path grows and discloses

[26] In 'Dublin' in 'The Closing Album', MacNeice refers to Dublin as follows: 'This was never my town [. . .] and she will not / Have me alive or dead'. *CP*, p. 179.
[27] Tom Walker, *Louis MacNeice and the Irish Poetry of his Time* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), pp. 89-90.

> An ordered open air long ruled by dyke and fence,
> With geese whose form and gait proclaim their consequence,
> Pargetted outposts, windows browed with thatch,
> And cow pats – and inconsequent wild roses. (272)

The fact that 'always we walk out again' signifies that the woods have their end. To emphasise the un-wild formulation of the English woods, the speaker writes as if nature could be dissected and oppressed there, when in truth it is just a vision of the speaker that conceives the sky and air as limited. Likewise, the reference to the geese's self-importance is funny but suggestive of the loss of freedom that they might have experienced before, 'consequence' also meaning outcome: rather than boasting, the geese may show themselves as domesticated animals. Richard York claims that by rhyming 'roses' with 'discloses', the poet makes the roses 'appear as an apt culmination, an apt revelation of the ordinary'.[28] However, the 'inconsequent wild roses' at the very end of the poem leaves a different impression. MacNeice may be conscious of the present participle of '*consequī*' in Latin that means 'to follow closely, attend upon' in 'consequence'.[29] Accordingly, the word 'inconsequent' can signify the rejection of the English 'wild roses' to 'follow' others. They may be 'inconsequent' because their wilderness is not the result of domestication but intrinsic, and therefore they do not resonate with the 'tame' surroundings of them. We should note that in the previous stanza, the 'wild' is applied to the landscape of the west of Ireland and the poet admits that 'They [the English woods] are not like the wilds of Mayo' (272). With the 'wild' roses in England and the word play between 'consequence' and 'inconsequent', MacNeice seems to resist the easy comparison of the Irish and the English. When he stays on Achill Island, he confesses to E. R. Dodds in a letter that 'I wish one could either <u>live</u> in Ireland or <u>feel oneself</u> in England. It

[28] Richard York, 'Louis MacNeice and Derek Mahon', in *Louis MacNeice and His Influence*, ed. by Kathleen Devine and Alan J. Peacock (Gerrards Cross: Colin Smythe, 1998), pp. 85-98 (p. 94).
[29] 'consequent, adj.', *OED Online*.

must be one of them ould antinomies'.[30] By concluding the poem with the 'wild roses', MacNeice, rather than solving the 'ould antinomies', projects his own conflicting identities on them and rejects any simple labelling.

In addition to the return to Ireland and the pre-war state, I consider that MacNeice returns to his predecessors with a changed approach. MacNeice often refers to the 'Old Masters' of paintings in his earlier poems, notably in section XX of *Autumn Journal*. The visit to the National Gallery for the paintings by the Old Masters is considered more as imposition of the burden of the past than a simple joy: 'Like airmen doing their stunts / Over our private garden; these arrogant Old Masters / Swoop and loop and lance us with a quick / Shadow; we only want to cultivate our garden'; 'Movement, movement, can we never forget / The movement of the past which should be dead?' (150-1). The biggest paradox is that we can feel the past's incessant 'movement', when the passed moments should not move any more. MacNeice associates this anxiety of influence in art with other historical assets that still 'move' and keep influencing the present: 'The mind of Socrates still clicks like scissors / And Christ who should lie quiet in the garden / Flowered in flame instead' (151). Philosophy and religion, being inheritance from the past, are alive in terms of their continuous influence and fathomless potential for interpretation. The movement, the nature of which is 'time-bound', is a metaphor of the stability of their value in 'The National Gallery', a post-war poem. The poet considers the art of the past to be the saviour for the present 'time-bound' state. Alluding to the images depicted in the works of the 'Old Masters', he shows their return from Wales to the National Gallery after the war as a triumphant, imaginary procession. The act of opening the windows of the museum, which the poet repeatedly mentions throughout the poem, is not so much to let in the fresh air of outside as to emit the air of the ever-moving past to the outside:

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[30] MacNeice, To E. R. Dodds, 31 July [1945], in *Letters*, p. 459.

> So fling wide the windows, this windows and that, let the air
> Blowing from times unconfined to Then, from places further and
> fuller than There,
> Purge our particular time-bound unliving lives, rekindle a
> pentecost in Trafalgar Square. (259)

While in 'The British Museum Reading Room', a wartime poem, the poet depicts the museum as a 'world which is safe and silent' (172), the National Gallery after the war is expected to open to and move the otherwise unmoving world outside it. Charles I. Armstrong asserts that 'Where the earlier poem evoked an institutionalisation of the past as an absolute space that was closed and repressive, "The National Gallery" opens up an institutional space to movement and transcendence'.[31] More precisely, taking MacNeice's view of the Old Masters presented in *Autumn Journal* into consideration, it can be argued that he transforms what can be thought as the burden of the past into support for the unstable present.

This seemingly optimistic view of art is contrasted with the post-war disillusionment we have discussed above and with the self-elegiac mode in 'Epitaph for Liberal Poets' and 'Elegy for Minor Poets'. It seems that at the same time as sensing the decline both in society and his poetry, MacNeice comes to entrust his renewal as a poet to the revaluation of the legacy of the past. 'Autolycus' is, as is assumable from the title, about William Shakespeare, the 'Master' of poetry. It is unusual for MacNeice, unlike Auden, who writes poems about specific poets, to treat a specific poet so avowedly as a subject of his poem. Shakespeare's works are, needless to say, as for most of the poets writing in English, a major influence on MacNeice's works, but relatively little attention has been given to his debt

[31] Charles I. Armstrong, 'Out of the Museum: MacNeice and the Confines of Aesthetic Space, *Nordic Irish Studies*, 8 (2009), 29-41 (p. 35).

to Shakespeare, except for the allusion to *Antony and Cleopatra* in 'The Sunlight on the Garden'. As some critics have noticed, MacNeice is especially attracted by the historical plays of Shakespeare; some of the figures in the Greek and Roman myths MacNeice uses in his poems also gave inspiration to Shakespeare.[32] It should also be noted that as we have seen in Chapter 4, the figure of Hamlet is often associated with the young poets in the thirties in terms of their political indecisiveness.[33]

MacNeice seems to be interested in Shakespeare's later plays, which are often called Romance plays or tragicomedy. He had already written a poem titled from a character in *The Winter's Tale*, 'Perdita', in 1940. The woman addressed in 'Perdita' is, unlike the original Perdita in *The Winter's Tale*, permanently lost and 'The time is over- / Due' (207) for her, whereas 'Autolycus' is more faithful to the original in recognising Autolycus as a pedlar and thief. The most peculiar characteristic of 'Autolycus', however, is that MacNeice associates Autolycus with his creator, Shakespeare, celebrating both as the model of poet. As Neil Corcoran notes, Autolycus is 'a liar, a pedlar and a thief, and also a poet of a kind, since he is a singer, and presumably a writer, of ballads'.[34] MacNeice's return to *The Winter's Tale* is an interesting contrast with W. H. Auden, who writes about another, more major tragicomedy by Shakespeare in *The Sea and the Mirror: A Commentary on Shakespeare's The Tempest*.[35] According to Stephen Regan, Auden seems to have recourse to *The Tempest*

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[32] For instance, 'Thyestes' in *Springboard* (233) is based on the Greek myth about Thyestes, who ate his son provided by his brother as revenge to his adultery. The same myth inspires Shakespeare to write *Titus Andronicus*.

[33] Christopher Caudwell also refers to Hamlet as a typical figure of the bourgeois poet:

> [. . .] the bourgeois poet sees himself as an individualist striving to realise what is most essentially himself by an expansive outward movement of the energy of his heart, by a release of internal forces which outward forms are crippling. This is the bourgeois dream, the dream of the one man alone producing the phenomena of the world. He is Faust, Hamlet, Robinson Crusoe, Satan and Prufrock.

Christopher Caudwell, *Illusion and Reality: A Study of the Sources of Poetry* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1937; repr. 1946), p. 60.

[34] Neil Corcoran, *Shakespeare and Modern Poet* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010), p. 157.

[35] After 'Postscript *(*Ariel to *Caliban. Echo by the* Prompter*)*' to *The Sea and The Mirror: A Commentary on*

when he faces the problems concerning his position as a man and a poet, as MacNeice does in the post-war period: '"The Sea and the Mirror" is a powerful imaginative synthesis of the existential dilemmas and aesthetic ideals that had preoccupied Auden since his emigration to the United States in 1939 and his renewed embrace of Christianity soon after. [. . .] The more immediate and urgent context of the poem [. . .] is the Second World War and the assault on democracy and political liberalism'.[36] Auden also writes 'Forty Years On' in 1968, a poem in which he speaks as Autolycus. Corcoran considers that the poem is a 'tribute' to MacNeice along with his elegy for MacNeice, 'The Cave of Making', and that the assimilation of Autolycus and Shakespeare in MacNeice's 'Autolycus' may have inspired Auden to write his poem in the 'dramatic monologue' of Autolycus.[37]

'Autolycus' is written when MacNeice's critical interest in Shakespeare also increases. MacNeice returns to his familiar topic about tradition in the modern poetry in 1946. It can be read as a sequel to his earlier writings, including 'Poetry To-day', 'Subject in Modern Poetry', and *Modern Poetry* in the thirties. His basic stance is unchanged in that he, following T. S. Eliot, insists that the modern poetry is conscious of, and a true successor of the English poetic tradition. What seems to be new in his argument is that he refers to Shakespeare's works as representative of the poetic tradition. This is an obvious fact in English Literature but MacNeice has never treated it so overtly and exclusively. According to MacNeice, the 'poetic tradition of the Nineteenth century', i.e. Romantic poetry, is wrongly considered to be 'the' poetic tradition, in spite of the fact that 'the bulk of the world's poetry is not, in the Victorian sense, "Romantic"'.[38] He then enumerates the poetic characteristics, all seen in Shakespeare's works, that the 'nineteenth century "traditionalists"' regarded as

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Shakespeare's The Tempest, Auden adds '*August 1942-February 1944*'. W. H. Auden, *Collected Poems*, ed. by Edward Mendelson (London: Faber and Faber, 1976; repr. 1994), p. 445.

[36] Stephen Regan, 'Auden and Shakespeare', in *W. H. Auden in Context*, ed. by Tony Sharpe (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013), pp. 266-75 (p. 268).

[37] Corcoran, *Shakespeare and Modern Poet*, p. 158.

[38] MacNeice, 'The Traditional Aspect of Modern English Poetry' (Dec. 1946), in *SLC*, pp. 135-41 (p. 136).

'unpoetic': 'irregular or broken metre', '"flatness" of matter and diction', 'cerebration' that includes 'an intellectual expression of love', 'cynicism about sex', reference to 'anything that can be called ugly', 'images which make the imagination jump', and '"difficulty" or "obscurity"' as well as 'a simplicity which they [the 'traditionalists' in the nineteenth century] think unworthy of its subject'.[39] In this article, MacNeice implicitly claims that he is in the line of Shakespeare.

It seems that MacNeice's attempt to emulate Shakespeare is not as successful as he hopes, considering that G. S. Fraser criticises *Holes in the Sky* for the increasing 'unpoetic' tendency of MacNeice's poems. Quoting the first stanza of 'Autolycus', Fraser states that writing about Shakespeare is not 'worth doing in verse' and the poem is about 'something cultivated people know already'.[40] However, what MacNeice intends to do in 'Autolycus' is not to discover and present a new view of Shakespeare but to explore in the already recognised facts of Shakespeare's art a way of renewing his poetry. For this purpose, MacNeice sticks to his position as a commentator. He finds attraction in Shakespeare's shift from 'taut plots and complex characters / To tapestried romances' (274) in the later phase of his career. Shakespeare is 'Eclectic always, now extravagant' (274) in his Romance plays. The praise of his balance reminds us of the extremity of minor poets, which MacNeice points out in 'Elegy for Minor Poets'.

Having a good balance means that he can control mixture. MacNeice admires the fact that Shakespeare challenges a consistent presentation of time by conspicuously introducing anachronistic events and situations. His extravagancy is seen when 'He ranged his classical bric-à-brac in grottos / Where knights of Ancient Greece had Latin mottoes / And fishermen their flapjack' (274). These are the examples of a kind of anachronism found in

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[39] Ibid., pp. 136-7.
[40] G. S. Fraser, 'A Poet in a Changing World' [review of *Holes in the Sky* by Louis MacNeice], *The Times Literary Supplement*, 5 June 1948, p. 315.

Pericles, Prince of Tyre, another Romance play by Shakespeare.[41] The lines that follow, 'none should want / Colour for lack of an anachronism' (274), can be interpreted variously. If we read them without context, these lines can mean that characters have colour even without an anachronism, or 'colour' itself is not necessary for characters. Yet in another sense, MacNeice seems to justify Shakespeare's anachronism: if characters do not have 'colour', Shakespeare will invent an anachronism to give it to them. Although the latter interpretation is less a literal reading, it is more conforming to MacNeice's admiration for Shakespeare. Indeed, MacNeice also experiments a kind of anachronism, notably in his radio drama. As Ian Whittington points out, *Christopher Columbus*, a wartime radio drama by MacNeice, lets the 'Onlooker' who has a voice 'of a radio or newsreel commentator' speaks about Columbus's return as if it were happening at present. This anachronism 'invites the listener to read the events of the play as analogous to events in the world beyond the broadcast, lending the play a parabolic intensity'.[42] Although Shakespeare may employ anachronism for different effects, it is significant that MacNeice draws his attention to Shakespeare's anachronism as an attractive mixing procedure in literature.

Another kind of mixture in Shakespeare's romances is the fusion of the familiar and the new: 'a fresh world though / Its mainsprings were old gags – babies exposed, / Identities confused and queens to be restored' (274). Here MacNeice touches upon the basic plot common to *The Winter's Tale* and *Pericles*. The familiarity of 'an old tale' coexists with the voice of the 'stock-type virgin' like Marina and Perdita, which refers to the mixture of

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[41] Pericles, a king of Tyre, is drowned and arrives at the shore of Pentapolis where he joins the tournament of winning Thaisa, the daughter of King Simonides. Thaisa explains each of the knights and the words on their shields when they appear. In spite of the fact that Pentapolis is set in Greece, the words of the shields are (except the second one) in Latin. For instance, Pericles' shield has '*Il hac spe vivo*' (II. ii. 44). The 'flapjacks' are also mentioned in *Pericles*; when the Fisherman 1 finds Pericles, he hastily speaks of what he can offer: 'Now, afore me, a handsome fellow! Come, thou so shalt go home, and we'll have flesh for [holidays], fish for fasting days, and, moreo'er, puddings and flapjacks, and thou shalt be welcome.' (II. i. 80-83). The 'puddings and flapjacks' are the English food the Greek must not have had. Shakespeare, *Pericles, Prince of Tyre*, in *The Riverside Shakespeare*, pp. 1526-1564 (pp.1540, 1538).

[42] Ian Whittington, 'Archaeologies of Sound: Reconstructing Louis MacNeice's Wartime Radio Publics', *Modernist Cultures*, 10.1 (2015), 44–61 (p. 56).

different modes of speaking in Shakespeare's plays:

> Thus crystal learned to talk. But Shakespeare balanced it
> With what we knew already, gabbing earth
> Hot from Eastcheap – Watch your pockets when
> That rogue comes round the corner, he can slit
> Purse-strings as quickly as his maker's pen
> Will try your heartstrings in the name of mirth. (275)

By referring to 'Eastcheap' in *Henry IV*, MacNeice notes that 'crystal', which may be the virginal voices of the heroines, is balanced with the 'gabbing' voice of Falstaff. Terence Brown comments that 'the hotch-potch diction in *Autolycus* seems to capture the mixture of styles and forms which makes Shakespeare's last plays so enchanting'.[43] Indeed, the poet suddenly changes the mode of speech, addressing us as if to emulate Autolycus's swift skill of robbery, which is associated with the great creativity of Shakespeare himself.

However, in the last stanza, MacNeice shows Shakespeare's struggle behind his excellent work, which is far from 'mirth':

> O master pedlar with your confidence tricks,
> Brooches, pomanders, broadsheets and what-have-you,
> Who hawk such entertainment but rook your client
> And leave him brooding, why should we forgive you
> Did we not know that, though more self-reliant
> Than we, you too were born and grew up in a fix? (275)

[43] Terence Brown, *Sceptical Vision*, p. 174.

In addressing ‘master pedlar’, the poet finally assimilates Autolycus with Shakespeare. As Autolycus entertains the people by selling things but depresses them later by his theft, Shakespeare’s ‘client’ feels hopeless after enjoying his masterful art that he can never achieve. Yet ‘we’, the reader and emulator of Shakespeare including MacNeice, show sympathy rather than jealousy to the master. The last question is more an answer, unlike the question at the end of ‘Elegy for Minor Poets’. MacNeice suggests that there is the debt Shakespeare and ‘we’ have in common from our births: it is the fate—environment, background, and contemporary social affairs—each poet is born into. To place ‘Elegy for Minor Poets’ before ‘Autolycus’ in *Holes in the Sky* is probably intentional in order to contrast the difference in reputation between minor and major, but also to highlight their similarity in their formative days. Indirectly referring to the great poet’s biographical background that is not particularly gifted, MacNeice here seems to show that a poet should make a chance his own choice. As he admits in ‘Carrick Revisited’, a poem about his own background, the chance itself is not changeable, but it does not mean the unchangeability of what the chance can give. The seemingly ‘brooding’ ending of ‘Autolycus’ is sudden but implicitly follows the great synthesis of the tragic and the comic in *The Winter’s Tale* whose happy ending is preceded by some tragic losses including Mamillius’s death. In ‘Autolycus’, MacNeice tries to restore his poetic imagination by praising and emulating Shakespeare’s art, and by understanding Shakespeare’s life itself as a tragicomedy, he resolves not to abandon his act of creation.

We have discussed in this chapter a number of poems about returning in the post-war period. Acknowledging the apparent disillusionment and loss brought by the war, MacNeice does not adhere to mourning but struggles to overcome it. In the poems of his returns—the re-consideration of Ireland and his childhood and the re-reading of one of the greatest predecessors—, he shows his willing choice to keep writing and renewing his poetic

art, cutting off a possible retreat into his fate/chance.

This appetite for renewal is also seen in the formal arrangement in those poems. It is worth noting that six-line stanza has become prominent since *Springboard*. While the quatrain is most frequently seen and there are only four poems (and one section of 'Trilogy for X') that consist of six-line stanzas in *Plant and Phantom*, about a third of the poems in *Springboard* and *Holes in the Sky* have the six-line stanzas. The merit of six lines compared to the quatrain or five lines, which MacNeice used to adopt most, is the variation of the rhyming patterns; even if the first three lines are unrhymed (*abc*), the stanza still holds a possibility of having three rhymes, and MacNeice enjoys varying the patterns in the latter three lines. Six lines can also be two sets of tercets or three sets of couplets, each of which MacNeice is interested in. 'Elegy of Minor Poets' has the pattern of *abcbdd*, and a couplet at the end of each stanza can serve as concluding part like that in the Shakespearian sonnet. In the second and forth stanzas of 'Autolycus', there is a couplet in the middle of six lines: *abccab* and *abccba*. Especially in the forth stanza, the couplet in the middle accords with the meaning:

> Between acts three and four there was something born
> Which made the stock-type virgin dance like corn (275)

The enjambment occurs with a birth and the transition from act three to four, at once representing the change and holding connection in the time-lapse. What is ordinary, 'the stock-type virgin', becomes special in the course of these two lines as well as in the play.

MacNeice's brilliant use of a couplet within a six-line stanza as in this example makes it plausible that he tries to acquire something that is similar to *ottava rima* for Yeats. This presumption is also supported by Helen Vendler's statement that *ottava rima* consists of 'expansive sixain and conclusive couplet' and provides 'a sustained six-line description or

speculation followed by an epigrammatic couplet'.[44] When MacNeice is exploring his form, Yeats's mastery of arranging six lines and a couplet within his *ottava rima* may have inspired him. It can also be assumed that MacNeice's endeavour to have his own form of verse may result in his writing *Autumn Sequel*, which is in *terza rima*. For this formal experiment, too, we can conclude that *Holes in the Sky* shows MacNeice's renewal of his poetic art after the war.

[44] Helen Vendler, *Our Secret Discipline: Yeats and Lyric Form* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), p. 263.

Chapter 8.

The Poet 'always must begin from the beginnings':

Autumn Sequel as the Never Stopping Art

This chapter discusses *Autumn Sequel*, written in 1953 and published in 1954. Along with *Ten Burnt Offerings*, published in 1952, the poem has been exposed to some criticism. W. H. Auden does not include any line from those poems in his selection of MacNeice's poems because 'I do find them a bit dull'.[1] To some extent, MacNeice himself admits that his poems in the post-war years do not reach a satisfying quality; as many critics note, he admits that 'This middle stretch / Of life is bad for poets' (349) in 'Day of Renewal' in *Ten Burnt Offerings*. Peter McDonald, stating that 'MacNeice's public voice is at its most effective when least self-conscious', maintains that 'some of the longer pieces in the later 1940s and the 1950s are both laboured and lacking in colour, while the poet's commitment to some virtues, especially those of plain-speaking and defence of liberal democracy, led to instances of bathos and dullness in work like *Autumn Sequel*'.[2] However, *Autumn Sequel* is one of the most important poems for the discussion of his self-consciousness as poet. The first section of this chapter attempts a defence of his use of *terza rima* in *Autumn Sequel*. Most critics disapprove of it, but I will argue that MacNeice successfully fuses the rhyme scheme with the lines in which he affirms life's continuity and its irrecoverable value. In the second section, I will focus on his consciousness of the poem's position in the tradition of the great long poems of the past. What he seems to learn most from the works he mentions is how to treat reality imaginatively. I analyse his attempt to achieve a function that is peculiar to parable in the

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[1] W. H. Auden, Introduction to *Selected Poems of Louis MacNeice*, ed. by W. H. Auden, qtd. in *Thirties Poets: 'The Auden Group'. A Casebook*, ed. by Ronald Carter (London and Basingstoke: Macmillan Publishers, 1984), pp. 56-7 (p. 56).

[2] Peter McDonald, 'Louis MacNeice: Irony and Responsibility', in *The Cambridge Companion to Contemporary Irish Poetry*, ed. by Matthew Campbell (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), pp. 59-75 (p. 65).

cantos of the Quest. The third section is on MacNeice's reconstruction of his thoughts on poets and poetry through Dylan Thomas, who was his friend and who died during the time of MacNeice's writing *Autumn Sequel*. McDonald asserts that 'celebration and elegy' are the key modes in the poem.[3] Both of these modes are seen in the very intensified form in the cantos about Thomas. I will propose that the process of mourning Thomas's death and praising his art in *terza rima* aids MacNeice to revive his own poetic vigour.

I

Autumn Sequel tends to be seen as a work that fails to achieve its ambitious purpose. The unfavourable criticism on the poem often compares it with *Autumn Journal*. Edna Longley, normally a defender of MacNeice's poetry, states that '*Terza rima* (pentameter triplets ABA, BCB, etc.) is a notoriously difficult scheme in English, and it specifically rules out the rhythmical and tonal relations that construct the dramatic poise of *Autumn Journal*. It may be a metre for narrative and flux, but not for argument and climax'.[4] She seems to suggest that MacNeice's thinking within poem and its dramatic development cannot aptly be accommodated by *terza rima*. Alan Gillis maintains that *Autumn Sequel* lacks the 'adequate style' and 'the hubris of clambering on in a humdrum *terza rima* at such length is amply matched by the conceit of mythologizing actuality by means of dressing up friends and acquaintances in bizarrely inane pseudonyms, then assuming they have the gravitas of communal consequence'.[5] Gillis is harsh on MacNeice's *terza rima* and his closed, fictive world with his friends in false names. A reviewer of *The Times* is also critical of those characteristics: 'the brightly coloured pub-talk, the Epicurean devotion to individual

[3] Peter McDonald, *Louis MacNeice: The Poet in His Contexts* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991), p. 149.
[4] Edna Longley, *Louis MacNeice: A Study* (London: Faber and Faber, 1988), p. 116.
[5] Alan Gillis, '"Any Dark Saying": Louis MacNeice in the Nineteen Fifties', *Irish University Review*, 42.1 (2012), 105-23 (pp. 107, 108).

friendships, the nostalgic pictures of childhood or Oxford days'.[6] Stephen Spender fluctuates between praise and suspicion when he reviews the poem: 'It seems very extraordinary that he should have chosen to write *Autumn Sequel* in *terza rima*: the form which, ever since Dante, poets have used when they wished to draw conclusions, and the one perhaps least suited to poetic journalising'.[7] Spender seems to presuppose that *Autumn Sequel* is a 'poetic journalising', for which *terza rima* is unfit. G. S. Fraser, perhaps suggesting this 'journalising' feature of the poem, alleges that 'the very difficulties of *terza rima*, and its apparent unsuitability for a sustained conversational use, enable Mr. MacNeice to keep us waiting eagerly for the next rhyme, the next glide at a tangent to a new topic', but 'Everything, here, is on the surface. [. . .] It lacks the deep beauty of necessity'.[8] A. Alvarez states that '*Autumn Sequel* has no style' and results in having 'staleness' that shows itself being 'weary and knowing and bored'.[9] A point of assertion common to all those critics is that *terza rima* is not handled well enough by MacNeice, which even causes a kind of monotony and a disharmony with his discursive lines. That the rhyming of *Autumn Sequel* is fairy regular, unusually for MacNeice's poem, may partly draw this criticism. T. S. Eliot, discussing Dante's *terza rima*, reveals that it is difficult to imitate or translate it in English, for the rhyming words in English 'call too much attention to themselves'.[10] Especially to the 'modern ear', which is 'accustomed to much greater exercise in the possibilities of unrhymed verse', 'a modern long poem in a set rhymed form is more likely to sound monotonous as well as artificial, than it did to the ear of a hundred years ago'.[11] MacNeice must have known this risk of being 'monotonous' and 'artificial' in using *terza rima*.

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[6] Anonymous, 'Mr. MacNeice's New Poetry', *The Times*, 20 November 1954, p. 8.
[7] Stephen Spender, 'The Brilliant Mr. MacNeice' [review of *SAF*], *The New Republic*, 28 January 1967, pp. 32-4 (p. 33).
[8] G. S. Fraser, 'The Poetry of Consciousness' [review of *Autumn Sequel*], *The Times Literary Supplement*, 26 November 1954, p. 754.
[9] A. Alvarez, 'Lament for a Maker' [review of *Autumn Sequel*], *The New Statesman and Nation*, 11 December 1954, p. 794.
[10] T. S. Eliot, 'What Dante Means to Me' (A talk given at the Italian Institute, London, on July 4th, 1950), in *To Criticize the Critic and Other Writings* (London: Faber and Faber, 1965), pp. 125-35 (p. 128).
[11] Ibid., pp. 129-30.

However, we can find that in *Autumn Sequel* the structural arrangements, including rhyme scheme, implicitly back up the expressions of the poet's shifting thoughts that eventually reach affirmative resolution. In Canto VI, MacNeice is on the way back from Wales to London. Although he is reluctant to go back to work, the fact that it is the 'work not of machines but men' serves as 'our one encouragement' (399). He carries on his thinking to a metaphysical argument; according to him, 'one duty' for everyone is to 'keep lit' 'One light', which symbolises the belief in life that always exists regardless of situation:

> It is and must be there. What it can give
> To us or we to it we can only guess
>
> But still must act upon that guess to live.
> To burn the fingers keeping warm the heart
> Is every man's own risk; and own prerogative. (399)

The rhyme of 'give' and 'live' chimes with another affirmative word, 'prerogative', but between 'give' and 'live' there is 'guess', as if to reflect the uncertainty the speaker expresses. Yet he throws away this slight anxiety by continuing without comma or full stop to insist that '[we] still must act upon that guess to live'. The stanza-crossing of the *terza rima* from 'give' to 'live' via 'guess' thus accords with the development of his mind from vacillation to decision, and it is consummated by repeating 'guess' again not at the end of the line but in a line that ends with 'live'. We can see here that the lines prove not only MacNeice's skill in commanding the *terza rima* but also the perfect harmony of the rhyme scheme with his quick movement of thought.

In Canto XX, the rhythms and rhymes articulate the poet's emotions that change along

with time from night to day:

> Then on to Swansea for the night, benighted
> In black and barren rain. But night must end,
> And ending banishes the rain. Delighted
>
> Morning erupts to bless all Wales and send
> Us west once more our sad but sunlit way
> Through hills of ruddy bracken where each bend
>
> In the road is another smile on the face of day. (462)

The poet is on the way to Wales for the funeral of Dylan Thomas. In the first stanza quoted above, the heavily reverberated internal rhyme of 'night' and 'benighted', the 'b' sound of 'black' and 'barren', and the partially chiming sound in 'barren rain' seem to reflect the depth and density of the poet's depression and sense of loss in the haunting darkness of the rainy night. However, the mood changes with the surprisingly simple sentence after a caesura, 'But night must end'. He repeats the word 'night' just to 'end' it. Although it is not the poet who can actually make night end, the decisive tone suggests that he is at least able to end the 'night' in text. The word 'end', here meaning the coming of morning, does not 'end' there but rhymes 'send', which is linked with 'end' semantically too; both of the verbs describe the driving power of morning. Encouraged by the light of morning, they advance on the road; the next rhyme also seems to accompany the poet on the 'way' to a 'day'. The darkness, fortified by the repetition of 'b', is also dispelled by another word with the same sound: 'banishes'. On the other hand, the rhyme of 'benighted' and 'Delighted' shows both the difference and

similarity between night and light (morning). The contrast of 'be' and 'De' is probably intentional; as eye rhyme, the capital 'D' might suggest the now stronger power of the light of the morning that overwhelms the dark night and the 'benighted' emotion of the poet. The transition from night to morning, and from sorrow to delight, is thus gradual as well as quick, and the metre of the last line of the quotation, 'In the road is another smile on the face of day', may also indicate the bewilderment at and acceptance of change. While the preceding few lines are in relatively regular iambic pentameter, it seems to include an anapaest. The slight change of metre announces that of the poet's mood after that. The poet and his companions 'stop at random for a morning drink / In a thatched inn' and 'find, as at a play, // The bar already loud with chatter and clink / Of glasses' (462) of Thomas's friends. A casual insertion, 'as at a play', carries a number of meanings; it precedes the description of what is really dramatic, the gathering 'In honour of one golden mouth' (462). The likening of it to a play is also appropriate for this situation where the change of scene from the road to the bar accords with a change in the poet's feeling. He becomes ready to join in the drinking and chatting in defiance of 'the silence and the cold / Attached to death' (462). In spite of Longley's definition of *terza rima* as the rhyme scheme for 'narrative and flux' rather than 'argument and climax', the rhymes contribute to the retracing of MacNeice's journey, physically from the road to the bar and spiritually from the emotion debilitating him to the place filled with warmth and firm love for the dead: hence a certain development is presented with the help of *terza rima*. James Reeves states that 'For all their *terza rima* and Dantesque shape, these cantos ramble on as inconsequentially as ever, following the haphazard direction of an unorganised train of thought'.[12] I agree with Reeves in a more positive sense than he means. The examples we have seen so far show that the leaping vitality of *terza rima* is not necessarily incongruous with the casual and the discursive, and the resilience that it can

[12] James Reeves, 'A Rhetorical Poem' [review of *Autumn Sequel*], *The Listener*, 2 December 1954, p. 981.

represent rather supports MacNeice's poetic rambling.

Furthermore, the critics' presupposed definitions of *terza rima* are actually varied. Longley's idea that it is for 'flux' seems to contradict Spender's opinion that it is not fit for 'journalising'. This disparity between the views of two major readers of MacNeice's poems shows that the *terza rima* is more accommodating than it is often considered. We should look at the different effects of *terza rima* in the poems that may inspire MacNeice. W. B. Yeats writes 'Cuchulain Comforted' in *terza rima*. Though coincidentally, Yeats uses the word 'sequel' in his letter about the writing of the poem: 'I am making a prose sketch for a poem—a kind of sequel—strange too, something new'.[13] Helen Vendler, quoting this statement, discusses the poem in relation to *The Death of Cuchulain*, the play that the poem is a 'sequel' to. She reveals how little the poem depends upon the original play. According to Vendler, the 'prose's aura of dilatory Irish folk-tale' is no longer seen in the poem, for 'Yeats chooses Dante's *terza rima* not only because the poem recounts an encounter with shades, but also because the form itself confers a religious dignity on "Cuchulain Comforted."'[14] Indeed, the poem is more distilled and full of solemnity; in addition to the alliteration Vendler picks up in 'our character: / Convicted cowards all, by kindred slain', some inversions in the words spoken by 'Shrouds' ('"We thread the needles' eyes, and all we do / All must together do."'; 'Now must we sing and sing the best we can') seem to contribute to the 'religious dignity'.[15] We can assume that the *terza rima* in 'Cuchulain Comforted' is part of the poetical devices that make an intensified version of the play.

On the other hand, Percy Bysshe Shelley's *terza rima* in *The Triumph of Life* seems to promote the progressive flow of lines rather than granting a ritualistic gravity. Madeleine Callaghan, comparing 'Cuchulain Comforted' and *The Triumph of Life*, considers that Shelley

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[13] W. B. Yeats, *The Letters of W. B. Yeats*, ed. by Allan Wade (London: Rupert Hart-Davis, 1954), p. 922.
[14] Helen Vendler, *Our Secret Discipline: Yeats and Lyric Form* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), p. 374.
[15] W. B. Yeats, *The Variorum Edition of the Poems of W. B. Yeats*, ed. by Peter Allt and Russel K. Alspach (New York: Macmillan Publishing, 1973), pp. 634-5.

'transforms the form in a fleet of foot poem that moves': 'Keeping the rhyme relatively unobtrusive, Shelley refuses to obstruct the poem's flow'.[16] Yeats, in spite of his creative debt to Shelley, 'deliberately deadens the swiftness that Shelley makes signature effect', having a half rhyme at the beginning—'man' and 'gone'— that sounds 'heavy' and 'prophetic of the narrative to be unveiled'.[17] Callaghan finds the same texture of the rhyme that Vendler detects in 'Cuchulain Comforted' as 'religious dignity'. We can suppose that MacNeice's *terza rima* is closer to Shelley's than to Yeats's in that it is used to promote the 'flow' of the lines, working along with other phonetic devices such as repetition and internal rhymes.

Although with a different effect from Yeats's, MacNeice also employs some half rhymes in *Autumn Sequel*:

> It is the time when someone we know dies
> That life becomes important; it is the same
> Time that the leaves fall and the trees rise
>
> In their own right, articulate as flame,
> It is the same time that time is crime
> And virtue all in one, when pride and shame
>
> In their own time blend and transcend their time. (461)

There are only regular rhymes, but the lines are complicatedly woven with identical sounds.

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[16] Madeleine Callaghan, '"Chosen Comrades": Yeats's Romantic Rhymes', *Romanticism*, 23.2 (2017), 155-65 (p. 158).

[17] Callaghan, p. 159; 'A man that had six mortal wounds, a man / Violent and famous, strode among the dead; / Eyes stared out of the branches and were gone'. Yeats, *Variorum*, p. 634.

The rhyme of 'crime' and time' (/ʌɪm/) can be regarded as a half rhyme with the previous set of rhyme of 'same / flame / shame' (/eɪm/) because of the identical sound (/ɪm/). It is further complicated by the fact that a rhyme of 'dies' and 'rise' (/ʌɪz/) partly chimes with that of 'crime' and 'time', and that 'time' is not only a rhyming word but also repeated five times in the quoted lines. It means that all of the seven line-ends above partially or fully rhyme with each other, plus resonating with 'time'. This intricate net of sounds represents at once a variety of events and the indifference of the movement of time itself. Here an idea familiar with MacNeice, that of 'The time being what we make it' (405) is reflected, but the flow of lines accelerated by the reverberation impresses us more for its relentless progress, trampling on all kinds of differences and variety. The half internal rhyme (/ʌɪ/ and /eɪ/) of the repeated phrase, 'same time', and of 'pride and shame' also stresses the all-embracing capacity of time.

It seems that the variation of musical patterns available in *terza rima* is very compatible with MacNeice's metaphysical meditation in poetry. The 'lack of pressure and lifeless rhythm' that Gillis finds in MacNeice's *terza rima* is not really applicable to the various and dynamic sound patterns we have seen in the examples so far.[18] Also, what Gillis thinks is 'lifeless', the seemingly monotonous sounds of the rhymes, may actually serve as the device to prove and invigorate life. Throughout the poem, MacNeice mentions death repeatedly just to mark and confirm the fact that he and his world are still alive. He lets his friend Gavin, the dead Graham Shepard, say that 'to be dead // Is really no alternative' (377-8). Clair Wills points out that MacNeice 'recycles the language he hears' and does not avoid 'cliché and colloquialism, the hackneyed phrases' and 'seems to make no effort not to sound bored as he runs through the urban-suburban cycle again'.[19] The very necessity to repeat means that he has a life to live. At the end of his journey to Wales in Canto III, his speech becomes like a dramatic monologue, in which he shows Wales to someone: 'this is

[18] Gillis, p. 108.
[19] Clair Wills, '"The Parrot's Lie": *Autumn Sequel* and the BBC', in *Incorrigibly Plural: Louis MacNeice and his Legacy*, ed. by Fran Brearton and Edna Longley (Manchester: Carcanet Press, 2012), pp. 190-203 (p. 195).

still land, not sea, / Still life, not death' (396), 'This is Wales, / A matter of flesh and rock. This is a room / Of living people. Nothing perhaps avails // Against the sea like rock, like doomed men against doom' (397). Repeating a demonstrative pronoun, MacNeice shows off not only the landscape but also the lives it represents. Although these lives are 'doomed', the fact that the 'living people' are still alive can be, at least for now, a resistance to the doom they will confront in the end. Immediately after this ending, Canto IV starts with the poet's remark that 'Everydayness is good; particular-dayness / Is better, a holiday thrives on single days' (397). He admits that variation in life, such as a trip, can be precious just because of a quotidian life every day. While he writes of the pressure of time, his desperate wish to mark life needs a kind of 'staleness' that Alvarez detects as a negative element in *Autumn Sequel*. It is therefore plausible that the relentless rhythm of *terza rima* embodies and assures the poet's repetitive work and life. This way of using *terza rima* is also defensible by Erich Auerbach's argument about Dante's *terza rima*. Auerbach reveals that 'Except where an unusual meaning calls for a special kind of expression, the sentences are simple, clear and firm, seldom departing from a natural structure for the sake of rhyme or metre; they lie embedded in the intricate *terza rima* as though it were the natural rhythm of human speech' and Dante shows that 'the highest knowledge must be set before every man, and only by drawing on the everyday language and the everyday lives of men could he fashion a sublime style capable of universal expression'.[20] In spite of its long and overwhelming tradition, *terza rima* is in nature accommodating to the 'Everydayness' MacNeice depicts and practices in his writing.

II

As well as having a very 'poetic' rhyme scheme, *Autumn Sequel* is highly conscious of its complex genre. In a letter, MacNeice asks the publisher how to advertise the poem: 'I would

[20] Erich Auerbach, *Dante: Poet of the Secular World* [*Dante als Dichter der irdischen Welt*], trans. by Ralph Manheim (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1961; repr. 1974), p. 98.

like you somehow to bring out that, while in one way this long poem has affinities with Byron's Don Juan, in another way it has affinities with quite different works, say, Goethe's Faust or The Faerie Queene'.[21] It is unusual for MacNeice to refer to specific works to describe his poem. He, again in his letter to T. S. Eliot, states that 'while A.S. [*Autumn Sequel*] may have affinities with Don Juan it also may have some with The Faerie Queene'.[22] His bold alignment of his work with the major poetic achievements of his predecessors shows his strong desire to establish himself as a poet through *Autumn Sequel*. Considering the types of literature he mentions, we can even assume that he regards *Autumn Sequel* as a kind of epic, epic made not of the transcendental heroes but of the normal people including himself, which embodies a certain consummation of his poetic art.

Among those works, we should especially focus on *The Faerie Queene* by Edmund Spenser. MacNeice frequently mentions Spenser as his favourite poet since his childhood. *The Faerie Queene* is one of the major long poems he read before he entered public school.[23] Richard Danson Brown discusses Spenser's influence on MacNeice as rare for the poets in the early twentieth century; he maintains that 'along with Herbert', Spenser is 'a touchstone for the kind of poetry MacNeice wants to writes' in the late years.[24] Importantly, it is a year before MacNeice writes *Autumn Sequel* when he re-encounters *The Faerie Queene* for a radio production. Around this period, MacNeice actively engages in the project of the reading of long poems on radio. In his overall friendly review of Tillyard's book on epic, he points out that 'lamenting that "the long poem itself is out of favour" he [Tillyard] seems not to have noticed the renewed interest in long poems indicated by the successful recent broadcasts of

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[21] MacNeice, To Philip Vaudrin, 18 February 1954, in *Letters*, p. 572.
[22] MacNeice, To T. S. Eliot, 30 March [1954], in *Letters*, p. 573.
[23] 'I read before leaving my preparatory school "Endymion", "Hyperion", and most of "Paradise Lost", and "The Faerie Queene"'. MacNeice, *MP*, p. 46.
[24] Richard Danson Brown, 'MacNeice in Fairy Land', in *Edmund Spenser: New and Renewed Directions*, ed. by J. B. Lethbridge (Madison: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2006), pp. 352-69 (p. 354).

such works as *Paradise Lost*, the *Aeneid*, *The Canterbury Tales*, and *The Faerie Queene*'.[25] MacNeice believes in a potential compatibility between a long poem and an oral reading of it, which is the truth known in the poetic tradition since the age of epic: 'after all / Homer liked words aloud' (388). *Faust*, another work which he associates *Autumn Sequel* with, is also one of the works he chose for radio production.[26]

Autumn Sequel has an aspect of *The Faerie Queene,* in that although, as McDonald explains, 'the poem sustains one voice throughout its twenty-six cantos, centred on the poet himself', the multiple voices of MacNeice's friends called under pseudonyms are indirectly heard in the poem.[27] Depicting individuals in an objective and friendly way is what he has already attempted in his 'case-studies poems', especially 'The Kingdom' in *Springboard*.[28] When he outlines *Autumn Sequel* in comparison with *Autumn Journal*, MacNeice claims that there is 'a good deal less of sheer topicality in it, but on the other hand, there are a good many more characters, these being mainly people I know, but throughout represented under pseudonyms' and 'the balance I have tried to achieve between the realistic and the contemporary on the one hand and the mystical or historical on the other'.[29] Gillis also criticises these, stating that MacNeice employs 'the conceit of mythologizing actuality by means of dressing up friends and acquaintances in bizarrely inane pseudonyms' and the 'balance between the contemporary and mythical is sorely misjudged'.[30] Nevertheless, MacNeice's introducing the real people with the imaginary names accords with the purpose of

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[25] MacNeice, 'In the Grand Manner' [review of *The English Epic and its Background* by E. M. W. Tillyard], *The New Statesman and Nation*, 19 June 1954, p. 804.
[26] MacNeice translated *Faust* with the help of his friend, Ernest Stahl. Jon Stallworthy, *Louis MacNeice* (London: Faber and Faber, 1995), p. 373. As for the radio programme, 'Part I (in two instalments) was first broadcast on 30th October and 31st October 1949, and Part II (in four instalments) on 10th, 13th, 17th and 21st November 1949'. MacNeice, Introduction to *Goethe's Faust:* Parts I and II, *An Abridged Version*, trans. by Louis MacNeice (New York: Oxford University Press, 1952; repr. 1979), p. 9.
[27] McDonald, *His Contexts*, p. 148.
[28] The affinity with 'The Kingdom' is already pointed out by critics such as Barbara Coulton; she states that 'the celebration of friends is a continuation and extension of the theme of "The Kingdom"'. *Louis MacNeice in the BBC* (London: Faber and Faber, 1980), p. 135.
[29] MacNeice, To Philip Vaudrin, 18 February 1954, in *Letters*, p. 572.
[30] Gillis, p. 108.

Autumn Sequel, which is to be filled with 'human voices' and 'Further the drive of life with voice on voice' before the Parrot can open its 'Senseless beaks' (374). John Goodby maintains that Thomas and other friends in the poem are 'opposed to the mechanistic drabness of postwar administered society, and its empty, unoriginal repetitive culture, represented by Parrot'.[31] Furthermore, MacNeice mentions the mythical and religious figures, 'Thor and Krishna, Isis, Ariel, Pan' and 'Puck and Lear' before he enumerates the nicknames of his friends, which lets them join in the imaginary attempt in his poem. This fictionalisation of real people is also a necessary procedure to make the dead friends present again. Only the imagination, poetry, can realise 'a choir / That never were all together' (374), a choir that includes both the living and the dead. To hear the voices of the humans who are close to the poet, including the dead, is obviously inspired by Dante, as Steve Ellis points out: 'The presence of friends, both dead and alive, is indeed a major departure from the matter of *Autumn Journal*; the later poem describes a series of meetings with such friends, or records them in a number of portraits, and the *Commedia* obviously suggested itself to MacNeice as a way of structuring such a series'.[32] Yet what is important is that unlike Dante's journey to visit his acquaintances in the *post-mortem* worlds, MacNeice, staying himself in the living world, invites the dead to his poem rather than visits them. The poem is therefore more than the imaginary ground where the mythical and the dead can be re-envisioned; it can also make reality as a place where the dead and the living meet.

The firm foundation of *Autumn Sequel* lies in the real world. This seems to be just a typical MacNeicean aspect, but it also explains his interests in what he tentatively calls 'parable'; it includes aspects of 'Symbolism', 'allegory' and so forth, but he defines it as 'a kind of double-level writing'.[33] In the 'Introduction' to *Varieties of Parable*, he accounts for

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[31] John Goodby, '"Bulbous Taliesin": MacNeice and Dylan Thomas', in *Incorrigibly Plural*, pp. 204-23 (p. 218).
[32] Ellis, p. 130.
[33] MacNeice, *VP*, p. 3.

what he means by 'double-level writing' when he refers to a common feature of the parable writers of his choice. According to MacNeice, each of these writers 'creates a special world, and what is interesting in each case is to look for the relationship between that and the ordinary world, or in other words to examine the amount—or the kind—of realism they exhibit'.[34] MacNeice insists that 'reality at its deeper levels can be probed in literature only by something in the nature of what I am calling "parable"'.[35] These definitions suggest that parable is always conscious of the reality out of which it is created. Furthermore, a 'special world' that is created in parable writing is 'very true to life, but to the inner life of man rather than to his life in an objective context'.[36] When he reviews Graham Hough's book on *The Faerie Queene*, he asserts that 'Spenser is not a mere dreamer or decorator, he is not overridingly a preacher, he is not continuously or narrowly allegorical, above all he is not monotonous. *The Faerie Queene* is an image of the world — "but" says Mr Hough, and it is an important "but" — "an image of the interior world"'.[37] Parable is therefore not a simple reflection of reality but a means of exploring the spiritual truth of the people in the real world. Although written ten years earlier than *Varieties of Parable*, there are parable-like sections in *Autumn Sequel*. Cantos XIV to XVI depict the Quest of a 'young man', in which MacNeice seems to allegorise the mental development from suffering to compromise in one's mind. Some voices, perhaps the man's inner voices, speak of the meaninglessness of life and lure him to live in inertia, giving up all the physical strengths and pleasure. Yet the young man eventually decides to 'Choose to grow and decay, to weep and rejoice, // To be what I was and shall be' (443). What is more important than his decision itself is the fact that the revelation of the youth that leads him to the decision to live does not assure us any meaning in life. Steve Ellis finds an influence from Dante's *Commedia* in those cantos but argues that the

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[34] MacNeice, *VP*, p. 6.
[35] Ibid., p. 27
[36] Ibid., p. 76.
[37] MacNeice, 'A Preface to "The Faerie Queene" by Graham Hough'. *The Listener*, 31 January 1963, p. 213.

voice the young man rejects is the voice of 'absolutism' and 'the poem's pursuit is not towards some authoritative Dantesque 'truth' or vision but rather away from such finalization'.[38] Indeed, a kind of postscript the speaker adds to the quest anticipates that the young man's decision brings no change to his life. Even after his return, the 'dead leaves' are 'yet sticking to his shoes' and his life is 'still the Fall' (443). Although he 'regained the sky / And the give and take of humanity', 'The Quest goes on and we must still ask why // We are alive, though no one man has met / A full or lucid answer; all we can do / Is answer it by living and pay the debt // That none can prove we owe' (443). Here MacNeice implies his intent not to make his parable a mere moral instruction or an idealisation of living. This disillusioning ending of the story is not incongruous with his definition of parable as a conscious probing into 'reality' at deeper level. Although MacNeice does not entirely agree with C. S. Lewis's distinction between 'allegory' and 'symbolism', what Lewis says about 'allegory' can be applied to MacNeice's definition of parable.[39] According to Lewis, allegory is the 'material inventions' of something 'confessedly less real' to express the 'state of mind', which is itself 'immaterial'.[40] Allegorists, therefore, are conscious of their artificiality. When MacNeice puts the subtitle to *Autumn Sequel*, *A Rhetorical Poem*, the word 'rhetorical' must refer not only to the procedure of fictionalising his friends, experiences, and thoughts but also to the intention behind this procedure. Moreover, his parable in this poem that discloses the reality as filled with contradictions and uncertainties also introduces the poem's whole design. The epigraph for *Autumn Sequel*, lines from Walt Whitman's 'Song of Myself', makes it plain that MacNeice is consciously making something new that is possibly contradictory: '*Do I*

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[38] Ellis, p. 131.
[39] MacNeice expresses his disagreement with Lewis's interpretation that 'Symbolism is a mode of thought, but allegory is a mode of expression', since he considers that 'Allegory, except at its most naïve or banal, is such a strong mode of expression that I would expect any thought expressed by it to be modified by it'. MacNeice, *VP*, p. 4; C. S. Lewis, *The Allegory of Love: A Study in Medieval Tradition* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1936), p. 48.
[40] Lewis, p. 45.

contradict myself? / Very Well then I contradict myself' (372).[41] It can directly read as MacNeice's bold pronouncement that 'I' is at once different from and identical with 'myself', self in different situations and times. MacNeice was once critical of the inclusiveness of Whitman's poetry that even embraces contradiction.[42] His justification of self-contradiction may refer to the change of attitude to Whitman's lines and to the poem's capacity that Whitman claims and may also speak for contradictions between *Autumn Journal* and *Autumn Sequel* or contradictions within *Autumn Sequel*. In the conscious employment of highly imaginative modes, such as of parable and multiple voices, MacNeice discovers a way to accommodate the incompatible and contradictory within poetry and, thereby, to depict reality even more accurately than realistic descriptions might.

III

As Peter McDonald points out, '*Autumn Sequel* is not a poem "about" Louis MacNeice: rather, it is a poem in which the self is approached mythopoeically in the context of its surroundings' of 'environment' and 'characters'.[43] This tendency of exploring the self through seeing others around him is most prominent in the cantos on the death of Dylan Thomas. I consider that those cantos are outstanding not only as an elegy but also a part of the reestablishment of the poet who writes it. The excellence of those cantos is even admitted by critical readers of the poem; Longley reminds us of the association between Autolycus and Shakespeare in 'Autolycus' and points out that Thomas ('Gwilym') represents the poet: 'MacNeice relishes

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[41] See Walt Whitman, section 51 in *Song of Myself*, in *The Complete Poems*, edited with and an introduction and notes by Francis Murphy (London: Penguin Books, 1975; repr. 2004), p. 123.

[42] MacNeice recollects what he wrote in a paper, 'We are the Old', at Oxford. He quotes his criticism on Whitman's lines in 'Song of Myself' ('To elaborate is no avail, learn'd and unlearn'd feel that it is so'; 'Clear and sweet is my soul'): 'This is "democracy" in the worst sense. Poetry is essentially oligarchic, even snobbish. To put the unlearned on the same level as the learned, i.e. to reduce both to the level of mere feeling where no elaboration is required, is to assert the vague profundity which is their identity and to neglect their essential surface distinctions'. MacNeice, *MP*, p. 72; Whitman, p. 65.

[43] McDonald, *His Contexts*, p. 148.

"Gwilym" as a "maker", an Autolycus, a verbal fantasist'.[44] Indeed, Thomas is depicted as a model poet and therefore his death is fatal, a 'Lament for the Makers' (452). Terence Brown states that 'in *Autumn Sequel* Dylan Thomas's death is treated as if it represented the death of all poetry'.[45] MacNeice depicts how Thomas's death brings sorrow not only to him and other people close to Thomas but also to all kinds of poetic subjects and characters:

> Now all our childhoods weep and all our early
> Loves, the deep-bosomed goddesses of corn,
>
> The Celtic heroes playing chess or hurley,
> The dancers in the nursery fire, the fauns
> And satyrs at their ancient hurley-burley
>
> Among the woods of Wales. A grey day dawns
> For all of them, and for us. The Singing Tree has shed
> Its leaves and once again the enamelled lawns
>
> Of old Damoetas miss the measured tread
> Of Lycidas. (452-3)

By personalising the concepts and the mythical images that would be the subjects of poetry, MacNeice laments not only for the loss of Thomas but also for that of the poems that he might have created if he had kept living. Earlier in the poem, in Canto II, MacNeice writes about Thomas's extraordinary ability of talking:

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[44] Longley, p. 116.
[45] Terence Brown, 'The Irish Dylan Thomas: Versions and Influences', *Irish Studies Review*, 17.1 (February 2009), 45-54 (p. 47).

Gwilym begins: with the first pint a tall
Story froths over, demons from the hills
Concacchinate in the toilet, a silver ball

Jumps up and down in his beer till laughter spills
Us out to another bar followed by frogs
And auks and porpentines and armadills.

For Gwilym is a poet; analogues
And double meanings crawl behind his ears
And his brown eyes were scooped out of the bogs,

A jester and a bard. Archaic fears
Dog him with handcuffs but this rogue's too quick,
They grab and he turns a cartwheel and disappears. (380)

The flow of lines illustrates a burst of the attractions of Gwilym's verbal power that come out once he starts talking. While the meaning of 'tall' here, exaggerated, implies his extraordinary ability, the enjambment of 'a tall / Story' embodies in advance the 'Jumps' and 'spills' that his story can cause. MacNeice writes as if the imaginary figures like 'demons', 'frogs / And auks and porpentines and armadills' appeared in reality. This shows that Thomas could vision them vividly, although they are 'his own inventions' (381). At the same time, we should also note that while the imaginary things are made to look like real by him, he is depicted as if he were an imaginary character himself. It can be endorsed by reading the lines above along with

the prose where MacNeice praises Thomas's talent for being the centre of the group:

> When he entered any company there was always a re-grouping and Dylan became the centre. Once in the centre, he began to twinkle and sparkle, talking through a cigarette that grew from the corner of his mouth until, since he had no time to knock the ash off, it became one pure stream of ash sustained in the air by a miracle. His eyes (gooseberry and bogwater) would roll with a warm-hearted mischief, his bulbous body and face would seem light and gay as a balloon at a children's party, and his words would caper. He warmed any room that he entered; which is why since his death certain places seem unnaturally chilly to his friends.[46]

The 'twinkle and sparkle' may be the visualisation of the wit and attraction in his talk and described as a 'silver ball' in the poem. We can also find that MacNeice retells the same scene of Thomas he describes in the poem: 'his cigarette / Became one stream of ash sustained in air // Through which he puffed his talk' (453-4). The very unlikeliness of the phenomenon shows Thomas himself as a 'miracle'. Moreover, he seems physically to be close to nature from which he takes the source of his creation, since his eyes are described, as in the poem, as having the colour of 'bogwater'. Thomas, as a person and a poet, stands across nature and humanity and the reality and the imagination; he is a force that integrates and everything around him. Indeed, the quoted stanzas above, the animals 'follow' him as if they had their own autonomy and willingly pursue their creator. They are said to be the 'friends' for him against the 'Archaic fears', the fears of artists lacking 'money' and the means of earning it.

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[46] MacNeice, 'I Remember Dylan Thomas' (Dec. 1954), in *SLC*, pp. 194-9 (p. 197).

The close union of Thomas with his creation means in another sense that he can live only upon the belief in his art. In Canto XX, dealing with Thomas's funeral, MacNeice feels that the village where Thomas lived says in 'an attitude of host to guest' 'Come share my grief' (463). The place and Thomas are closely united under Thomas's words: 'What he took / From this small corner of Wales survives in what he gave' (463). This suggests that while Wales is immortalised in Thomas's poetry, Thomas's words are also immortalised by what he writes about. MacNeice hears the 'birds / To which he gave renown reflect renown // On him' and 'their cries resolve in to his words' (463). The mutual dependence becomes mutual enhancement.

As a mourner, MacNeice possesses two wishes, a wish to mourn Thomas as a bard and to mourn him as a friend. When he mentions that 'once again the enamelled lawns // Of old Damoetas miss the measured tread / Of Lycidas' (452-3), he shows his lament in the form of an artificial pastoral elegy but then continues with a shift of tone: 'And we? Simply, we find it hard / To accept that it is Gwilym who is dead' (453). Its simple, conversational tone is pregnant with personal grief. To say 'it is Gwilym who is dead' makes his death sound more particular than in the expression 'Gwilym died', since it implies the speaker's hopeless belief that if there were any dead, Gwilym would not be the one. Calling Gwilym again 'A jester and a Quester and a bard' (453), MacNeice states that 'One who would always throw the Parrot's lie / Back in its beak, who knew some mountains must be climbed / Because they are there – and also because they are high' (453). Alluding to the words of George Mallory, MacNeice shows Gwilym's natural motives of writing and talking, which, unlike the mechanistic Parrot's repetition, derive from his own will. The 'high' mountains may refer to the plights Gwilym had to face as poet, which could serve as a source of creation as well as a burden.

Contrary to Gwilym's verbal strength, the speaker himself confesses his

incapability in finding words:

> Tuesday the Tenth: we find it hard to speak
> As yet without a catch; when we begin,
> The mind is willing but the words are weak,
>
> A pain of sorrow runs from throat to chin –
> And then the wave recedes. Was it really I
> Who felt like that just now? I cannot pin
>
> It down, whatever it was, and am wondering why,
> When in a wink whatever it was comes back
> Like thunder out of a clear and placid sky
>
> Stretching our nerves and notions on the rack
> And scattering forth what long ago we hid,
> The curtains rustle and the world grows black,
>
> Brakes begin to squeal and wheels to skid –
> Where were we? What was it you meant to ask?
> And did we once see Gwilym plain? We did. (454)

When the speaker finds the difficultly of 'we' in verbalising the loss, he starts speaking as 'I'. This change of subject reflects his troubled mind, which cannot even believe his perception. The enjambment ('Was it really I / Who') seems to separate 'I', the subject of perceiving,

from his perception, and the clause across the stanzas ('I cannot pin // It down') displays the difficulty of 'pinning it down'. In addition, the back and forth movement of *terza rima* lets him wander about his imaginary field where the 'pain of sorrow' stimulates the poet's emotions and thoughts, including those of the past. In the third stanza quoted above, this return of painful memories is supported by the word 'back' cunningly placed at the end of the second line, whose sound literally 'comes back' in the next stanza. Yet the vehicle of imagination suddenly stops its move, and the speaker restores 'We' as the main subject. The allusion to Robert Browning's poem 'Memorabilia', in which the speaker asks 'did you once see Shelley plain', sustains the sense of awe in the original, awe at the fact that the dead was indeed alive once.[47] After a torrent of questions that reflect the speaker's anxieties, his declaration that 'We did' stands firmly to prove the fact that the dead existed and the bond formed between 'we' and him unchangeably remains even after death.

The process of overcoming Gwilym's death and restoring a voice continues and MacNeice seems even to consecrate Thomas's death. It is confirmed by the fact that Gwilym's death is juxtaposed with the deaths of the imaginary figures in previous literary works, such as 'Sir Patrick Spens' and King 'Arthur', since 'in Gwilym's death / We feel all theirs and ours' (456). The deaths of Sir Patrick Spens and King Arthur are tragic themselves but repeatable in that their lives can be re-experienced through reading.[48] MacNeice attempts to immortalise Thomas in his imagination so that his presence can emerge.

However, MacNeice is made to realise by Gwilym that his life itself is not repeatable:

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[47] Robert Browning, 'Memorabilia', in *The Poems of Browning*, ed. by John Woolford, Daniel Karlin, and Joseph Phelan, *Longman Annotated English Poets* (Harlow: Pearson Education, 2007), Volume III: 1847-1861, pp. 598-600 (p. 599). According to the note to the poem, Browning met two people in total who had seen Shelley. Ibid., p. 598.

[48] MacNeice recollects that he had an anthology that contained 'Sir Patrick Spens' and the poem gave him a 'pleasant terror'. *MP*, p. 38. He read Malory's *Morte d' Arthur* when he was at the school in Sherborne. *SAF*, p. 77.

[. . .] – But Gwilym from his lone
Pulpit calls back: I see no emptiness
But fullness of all fulnesses my own

And everyone else's too. Deidre plays chess
With Naisi, neither caring which will win,
For both of them are doomed and yet their doom may bless

Posterity, who always must begin
From the beginnings; Gwilym knew that well
And never stopped beginning; sink or sin,

Double or quits, he dared the passing bell
To pass him and it did. The Ass his brother
Now at long last can crop the asphodel,

Whose recent loads had made him limp and smother.
But, when you can risk a pound, why save a penny?
'After the first death there is no other.'

More power to the Makers. Of whom, he made as well as any. (456)

MacNeice here shows that each has his/her own 'beginnings' in life and should fulfill his/her life with them. Deidre and Naisi in the Irish legend are here mentioned as an example of those who, knowing 'their doom', i.e. the future, fully enjoy the time that they are alive. The doom

of 'Posterity' cannot be the same as theirs, but their doom may become a guide to others, for whom it is the past. MacNeice implicates that by not stopping beginning, Gwilym attains 'fullness' of his life while he lived. By living like a fearless gambler, Gwilym even disregards the symbol of time that has been haunting MacNeice, 'the passing bell'. We can assume that because of this triumph over time refers to the fact that Thomas lived out as a poet; knowing that anyone comes to an end where no beginning is possible, he kept making in his lifetime, and therefore he gives 'More power to the Makers'.

MacNeice seems to stress oneness of a life when he quotes from Thomas's own elegy, 'A Refusal to Mourn the Death, by Fire, of a Child in London': '"After the first death there is no other"'.[49] This line can be interpreted in several senses. In the original context, Thomas seems to console the dead child, assuring that there is no more suffering. Namely, death only comes once for each person. Yet this unrepeatability of death can also sound cruel, confirming the child's death. Paul Ferris, reading the poem in the context of Thomas's work and life, assumes that 'Thomas was declaring that death was final; he was affirming the present, not the future'.[50] In contrast, it can also be inferred from Thomas's rejection to write 'any further / Elegy of innocence and youth' that he makes the death of the child at once unique and universal.[51] Linda M. Shires argues that 'The interest and special beauty of this poem lie in its treatment of the finality of death in terms of eternity'.[52] The death of the child is unique, 'as important as all the dead', but exactly because of that, all deaths, including hers, 'are equal in a realm outside time, drenched in silence'.[53] Although Thomas acknowledges the impossibility of restoring life by his art, he attempts for a kind of eternalisation that art can realise. MacNeice's commemoration of Thomas takes a similar procedure. As well as he

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[49] The line is at the end of the original poem. Dylan Thomas, *Collected Poems: 1934-1953*, ed. by Walford Davies and Ralph Maud (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1998; repr. 2000), p. 86.
[50] Paul Ferris, *Dylan Thomas* (London, Sydney, Auckland, Toronto: Hodder and Stoughton, 1977), p. 198.
[51] Thomas, *Collected Poems*, p. 86.
[52] Linda M. Shires, *British Poetry of the Second World War* (London and Basingstoke: The Macmillan Press, 1985), p. 46.
[53] Ibid., p. 47.

praises and mourns for Thomas's incomparable personality and creativity, by the very act of quoting Thomas's lines, MacNeice suggests that Thomas's poetry is unable to be reproduced though it can be recited; likewise, his life is unrecoverable but remembered with the help of art. It can be asserted that reviewing Thomas's life and poetry makes MacNeice not only elegise the dead but also revive his trust and impulse on writing.

The contemplation of Thomas's life as a maker also seems to avail MacNeice to tackle an issue concerning the creation of art. On one hand, MacNeice emphasises the aspect of craft, which is a conscious making. As early as the nineteen thirties, MacNeice insists that the 'poet is a maker'.[54] It is partly a criticism of the surrealists, who depend on the Unconscious for their creation. In 'Traditional Aspect of Modern English Poetry' in 1946, MacNeice criticises 'a deliberate surrender to the Unconscious' seen in the Surrealist and asserts that this surrender is not appropriate for poet: 'The Surrealist poet describes himself as a "modest registering machine" but the word "poet" means *maker* and in Europe they have usually known what they were making'. He then mentions the 'English "Apocalytics"', a group of young poets that derives from 'the Surrealists'.[55] In his essay written in 1953, he criticises the group of 'the New Apocalypse' again for its claim that 'the poet's concern is only "himself and the Universe."' Its wrong theory 'would not have mattered very much (Yeats held some nonsensical theories) if the Apocalytics had produced good work but, with a very few exceptions, their work was vapid and also (an interesting give-away) frequently derivative from poets whom they had denounced in their manifestoes'.[56] MacNeice's disagreement with the poets who dismiss the social connections of poetry verifies his

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[54] MacNeice, 'Preface', *MP*, n. p.
[55] MacNeice, 'Traditional Aspect of Modern English Poetry' (Dec. 1946), in *SLC*, pp. 135-41 (p. 139). He quotes 'modest registering machine' from the first *Manifeste du surréalisme* published by André Breton in 1924. Breton states that 'We [Surrealists] [. . .], who have not given ourselves to processes of filtering, who through the medium of our work have been content to be the silent receptacle of many echoes, modest *registering machines* that are not hypnotised by the pattern they [those who are 'not always Surrealists'] trace, we are perhaps yet serving a much nobler cause'. Quoted and translated by David Gascoyne, *A Short Survey of Surrealism*, preface by Dawn Ades and introduction by Michel Remy (1935; London: Enitharmon Press, 2000; repr. 2003), p. 58.
[56] MacNeice, 'Poetry Needs to Be Subtle and Tough', *The New York Times Book Review*, in *The New York Times*, 9 August 1953, pp. 7, 17 (p. 17).

unchanged poetics. The rise of the group is especially unacceptable for MacNeice because of its inclusion of Thomas. Thomas tends to be classified with the poets of the New Apocalypse even in the recent criticism. Neil Corcoran explains that 'The Thirties Auden ego – analytic, diagnostic, judgemental (and public-school, Oxford English upper-middle-class) – is replaced by the Thomas id: dionysian, permissive, self-entraced (and non-university, Welsh lower-middle-class)', and this 'movement' is a 'combination of Surrealism and early [Dylan] Thomas' and known as the poetry of 'Apocalypse', and eventually merged in the 'New Romanticism'.[57] Corcoran continues that 'Rejecting the Auden model, it [the 'New Romantic' poetry] was also rejecting a model of rational control and enlightenment'.[58] MacNeice actively engages in correcting such a definition, clarifying the difference of Thomas from the 'Unconscious' school: 'Thomas would never have subscribed to the surrealist doctrine that the poet "is a modest registering machine". He knew that the poet is a maker rather than a piece of litmus paper; he knew that poetry is organic and not mechanical'.[59] In *Modern Poetry*, he already explains why Thomas is 'not a typical surrealist': according to him, Thomas 'allows a technical interest—the sound of the lines—to condition what he writes, whereas the surrealists disown all conscious artistry'.[60] MacNeice refers to the surrealist again, stating that 'His conscious mind is not allowed (in theory, at least) either to supervise or to select' and therefore 'Technique means nothing to him'.[61]

MacNeice also warns against the mystification of Thomas that makes him a poet of 'inspiration': 'One glance at a Thomas manuscript will show the almost incredible trouble he took over those elaborate arabesques that could yet emerge as fresh as any of the "woodnotes wild" expected from the born lyric poet. In fact, he *was* a born lyric poet but it was a

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[57] Neil Corcoran, *English Poetry Since 1940* (London: Longman; New York: Longman Publishing, 1993), p. 40.
[58] Ibid., p. 42.
[59] MacNeice, 'Sometimes the Poet Spoke in Prose' [review of *Quite Early One Morning* by Dylan Thomas] (19 Dec. 1954), in *SLC*, pp. 199-202 (p. 202).
[60] MacNeice, *MP*, p. 105.
[61] Ibid., p. 156.

birthright he worked and worked to secure'.[62] MacNeice deals with the same problem in another article on Thomas:

> Too many critics (and there will be many more!) have approached Thomas's works either as if they were Holy Writ and could only be ascribed to 'inspiration' or as if they were the hard-born offspring of innumerable esoteric 'influences'. The answer to the 'Holy Writ' critics is that Thomas did not write 'as the bird sings'; he was a most painstaking craftsman.[63]

MacNeice is a desperate spokesman of Thomas's conscious efforts as a poet. He even seems to imply that praise of Thomas's 'inspiration' can be a denial or an insult rather than a compliment. It should be noted that MacNeice similarly defines Yeats in *The Poetry of W. B. Yeats*. Yeats, according to MacNeice, 'was never one of those who write as the bird sings. Both his themes and his images were selected rather than spontaneous. [. . .] His writing was not, in the narrower sense, "inspired"; Inspiration for him was a sort of First Cause which had set him on a road where he had to look after himself'.[64]

It may seem as if MacNeice tried to frame his favourite poets in his conception of poet as craftsman. However, his assertion on Thomas's evaluation is not at all biased. A. T. Tolley clarifies that although Thomas contributed an anthology, *The New Apocalypse*, produced by Henry Treece and J. F. Hendry in 1939, he was a 'reluctant passenger' and 'unwilling [. . .] to be hooked' to the movement.[65] Moreover, what is more important is that as his remark on Yeats shows, MacNeice does not necessarily deny 'inspiration' itself.

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[62] MacNeice, 'Dylan Thomas: Memories and Appreciations' (Jan. 1954), in *SLC*, pp. 183-5 (p. 184).
[63] MacNeice, 'Round and About Milk Wood' [review of *Under Milk Wood* and *The Doctor and the Devils* by Dylan Thomas] (April 1954), in *SLC*, pp. 185-9 (p. 187).
[64] MacNeice, *PWBY*, p. 113.
[65] A. T. Tolley, *The Poetry of the Forties* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1985), p. 102.

Reviewing a book by Tillyard, he claims that the 'His [Tillyard's] whole book, as he says himself, is a protest against "the extraordinary fallacy that inspiration and the exercise of the conscious will are incompatible." Hear! Hear!'[66] He articulates in an essay that Eliot and Auden can become unconscious in a different way from the surrealist: Eliot 'not only practises deliberate ambiguity (the Symbolist technique of *Suggestion*) but is on occasion suggestive without knowing how he does it. And Eliot in an essay has referred to an experience, which he found, *without knowing why*, extremely significant'.[67] This is different from the Surrealist's unconsciousness, since he makes use of the given source for his poem. Those poets 'do retain conscious control, do remain makers—or shapers'.[68] In 'An Alphabet of Literary Prejudices' in 1948, he talks of inspiration as follows: '*Inspiration* does, I believe, stand for something real; most writers, even the most prosaic, are conscious at times of having something "given" to them. [. . .] Hardly any poets in the world's history have written "as the bird sings". And birds don't sing for publication; think what bores they are when broadcast'.[69] What he seems to assert is that a poem cannot be written only with inspiration; each poet's conscious effort to work on it is original and valuable. In Canto V in *Autumn Sequel*, he reveals that after the war, he can 'no longer speak / So confidently' and 'the Muse [. . .] left me an apparatus, rivet and link, / With nothing to link or rivet, and I lament / The maker I might have been' (392). MacNeice admits that there is something outside of him that helps his creation but it is his own duty to make an artwork by linking and riveting all material.

Reviewing C. M. Bowra's *Inspiration and Poetry*, MacNeice states that 'Back in the Nineteen-Thirties "inspiration" was a word which many of us wanted to scrap. But, luckily for all of us, the thing behind the word is something completely unscrappable'; then dissatisfied with Bowra's explanation, he quotes from Randall Jarrell's *Poetry and the Age*,

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[66] MacNeice, 'In the Grand Manner', *The New Statesman and Nation*, p. 804.
[67] MacNeice, 'Traditional Aspect of Modern English Poetry', p. 139.
[68] Ibid., p. 139.
[69] MacNeice, 'An Alphabet of Literary Prejudices' (March 1948), in *SLC*, pp. 141-8 (p. 144).

which he agreeably reviews in the same article: 'A good poet is someone who manages, in a life-time of standing out in thunderstorms, to be struck by lightening five or six times; a dozen or two dozen times and he is great'.[70] Here referring to Jarrell's view, MacNeice admits the poet's conscious striving to get inspiration, even though inspiration is something that unexpectedly comes. This exemplifies MacNeice's notion of inspiration as linked with the conscious creative activity. When he states that 'Gwilym and Gorman' are 'poets whose words inspire / Their vision' (401) in Canto VI, MacNeice even asserts that words precede the poetic vision, which is normally given to the poet as 'inspiration', not the vision inspiring the poet to write about it in words.[71] Words are not mere vehicles but the foundation of the poet's imagination. Hence Thomas's seemingly visionary poems also have their root in his mastery of words both in talk and poetry. His distinguished use of words is at once his gift and the ability he persistently tries to improve. Inspiration for MacNeice stands neither at the beginning nor at the end but in the middle of the process of creation.

MacNeice seems to elucidate the nature of inspiration in the creative process when he compares art with sport in Canto XXIII. First, he writes about an attraction of sport, rugby, to involve and shuffle everyone's identity:

> [. . .] the joy of sport
> Identifies oneself with X or Y
> Or even with that ball, which one minute gives short
>
> Change with its bounce and at the next will fly

[70] MacNeice, '*Poetry and the Age / Inspiration and Poetry*', in *SLC*, pp. 203-6 (p. 206); Randall Jarrell, *Poetry and the Age* (London: Faber and Faber, 1955), p. 136.

[71] Gorman is W. R. Rogers, another poet-friend of MacNeice. MacNeice's wife, Hedli MacNeice, writes in her tribute to him, 'The Story of the House that Louis Built', that in the imaginary house of Louis 'there was a very small one [room], just space for two: himself and a Welsh poet Dylan Thomas or an Irish W. R. Rodgers. With them he would, manuscripts in hand, discuss the making of poetry, but only with them'. Qtd. in Stallworthy, pp. 481-2 (p. 482).

Madly beyond and over; while this crowd
Also is something to identify

Oneself with, lose oneself in, on one loud
Raise beach one pebble in fifty thousand, tinted
Pink by the sinking sun; those muddy but unbowed

Players are me, this crowd is me, that undinted
And indestructible mischievous ball is me,
And all the gold medallions ever minted

By sinking suns are mine. (478)

One's identity can be confused with the identities not only of the audience and the players but also of a rugby ball. We can assume that the poet's arranging of lines to have them make sense may be akin to the changing formation of players and the unforeseeable movement of a ball among them on a field. Indeed, a flashing change of identities is embodied by a quick movement of enjambment across the stanzas ('one minute gives short // Change'), and the rhyme of 'Y', 'fly', and 'identify' implicitly traces one's transition from anonymity to a self who is specified by the internally reverberated 'one' ('Oneself with, lose oneself in, on one loud / Raise beach one pebble'). 'One' is a part of the countless many but can always stand out. A problem of identity, a major metaphysical thesis, is easily solved or temporarily forgotten before a rugby match that enables oneself to both rise and sink in the crowd.[72] Here

[72] MacNeice writes again about this phenomenon regarding one's identity in 'Scrums and Dreams', his radio drama for the BBC Home Service from Wales transmitted on 3 April 1959. The main male characters—Dai, Eric, Willie—who are watching the match respectively think in their mind that they are playing the game, shouting 'That's me!'. When Wales wins and the star player, Dewi Bebb, is on the shoulders of the other players, Dai

the incessant, chaotic movement of identity is equivalent to the movement of the 'indestructible mischievous ball' of rugby and well represented by *terza rima*.

In the chapter 'Rhythm and Rhyme' in *Modern Poetry*, MacNeice already finds an analogy between rugby and verse:

> The mere arranging of verse in lines serves the same purpose as the offside rule in rugger and the rule against forward passes; instead of the meaning being passed vertically down the field as it is in prose, each line in verse when it comes to an end passes back to the beginning of the next (and I am not only thinking of typography). This method, as in rugger, gives a sweeping movement, an impression of controlled speed and power—an impression which is enhanced when the verse is on a recognizable rhythmical pattern.[73]

Here MacNeice refers to a movement that always goes back to the beginning, a movement characteristic of lines of poetry. The case MacNeice mentions at the end of the quotation exactly speaks for *Autumn Sequel*; the continuity of *terza rima* that connects stanzas and refers back as well as forward adds to such a movement of lines of verse a further unity. As the seemingly free movement of players on the field intends to attain a certain formation, MacNeice's lines in *terza rima*, including enjambments, irregular metrical patterns, and the transition of identity, take control.

Nonetheless, MacNeice finds 'craft' and 'chance' in both art and sport but have values sport because of the higher proportion of 'chance' it possesses:

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thinks that 'I'm on everybody's shoulders. Sixty thousand people and most of them Welsh – that's me'. MacNeice, 'Scrums and Dreams, 1959', typescript, Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS. 10641/47.

[73] MacNeice, *MP*, p. 116.

> [. . .] Is it absurd
> To have preferred at times a sport to works of art?
> Where both show craft, at times I have preferred
>
> The greater measure of chance, that thrill which sport impart
> Because they are not foregone, move in more fluid borders.
> Statues and even plays are finished before they start,
>
> But in a game, as in life, we are under Starter's Orders. (479)

MacNeice here associates 'chance' that happens in sport with the unexpected elements in works of art. In the creation of artwork, 'chance' includes 'inspiration', which comes to an artist and drives him/her to create, and the artwork itself. Although MacNeice disapproves of the 'psychological approach to poetry' in Robert Graves's *Poetic Unreason*, he would agree with Graves at least in asserting the unknowingness in a result of creation.[74] Graves explains the relationship between a process and its result:

> Action does not directly proceed from thought, nor knowledge from action, nor thought from knowledge, but these phases of consciousness are each derived from moments of non-conscious activity, a sort of invisible property-shifting between each phase. When we say that two experiences are continuous, we mean no more than this, that we do not know what the new experience is going to

[74] MacNeice recollects that in 1930 when he was at Oxford he criticised Graves in his paper 'We are the Old'. *MP*, p. 73. In 'Subject in Modern Poetry', he refers to Graves in *Poetic Unreason* as an example of the 'intellectual critic', who 'very often denies that distinction in subject-matter affect the values of the work'. 'Subject in Modern Poetry', in *SLC*, pp. 57-74 (pp. 61-2).

> be, but that when it has come, we have to say that it is continuous with its predecessor. The nature of the particular continuity can only be given after the event.[75]

He continues: 'In the same way a poem will never be a copy of the poet's past life. It will be a new experience, but it will be continuous with his past life in the sense that but for this, it could itself never have come into existence. The precise form the poem will take cannot be known until it has taken that form'.[76] MacNeice similarly states that 'As I understood Croce, he was maintaining that the artistic activity lies almost completely in the vision, the work of art itself being merely an epiphenomenon, a sop to the public. This I considered a blasphemy; the artist does not see the thing completely till he has made it. Otherwise why make it?'[77] We can therefore assume that MacNeice admits some unknowable aspects in the creation of art and regards an artwork itself as a 'chance'.

However, in Canto XXIII, MacNeice suggests that even if we recognise in theory that every artwork is a product of accumulated conscious activities and unconscious gains, we cannot know if or how the chance elements affect the work itself. On the other hand, in sport, we can witness a match being made and therefore immediately experience things that happen by chance. When MacNeice says that 'we are under Starter's Orders' in a sport game, he seems to stress this common experience a sport can equally offer us. Nevertheless, the ending of the canto sounds somewhat ominous because of the casual insertion of 'as in life'. What the poet intends to tell more is the fact concerning life, fact that life is inevitable and ungovernable: though the race is our own, we do not control either its beginning or ending. The usual ending of a canto with a line rather than with three lines in the poem appears here to hold two opposite meanings. While it may imply that even *terza rima* is hard to sustain in

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[75] Robert Graves, *Poetic Unreason and Other Studies* (London: C. Palmer, 1925), p. 50.
[76] Ibid., p. 51.
[77] MacNeice, *SAF*, pp. 114-5.

front of the imposed ending, its keeping the rule of the poem may prove a certain control we can exercise over our life. In either interpretation, we can assume that an analogy between sport and life is implicitly applied to poetry, and by referring to the manageable and the unpredictable, MacNeice in the end may slightly revise what he says in the poem, that artwork is a finished product. Indeed, he only mentions 'Statues and play' as representative of art. He tries to make his lines appear as unfinished and elusive as possible with the help of the controlled but interactive movement of *terza rima*. We can also refer back to the influence of Thomas, who 'never stopped beginning'. *Autumn Sequel* marks a moment when MacNeice renews his resolution that as a poet he should keep going back to stand under 'Starter's Orders' again and again.

In *Autumn Sequel*, the themes concerning MacNeice's personal and poetic life, such as Dylan Thomas's death and the conflict between the conscious and the unexpected aspects in life and art, are not only discussed but also represented in its form. Thomas's knowledge of the necessity to keep beginning becomes a creed and practiced throughout the poem with a never-ending rhyme scheme. We can assert that *Autumn Sequel* shows itself as MacNeice's own 'Quest' in progress.

Coda

The thesis has been concerned with MacNeice's poems from the nineteen twenties to the early nineteen fifties. This is the period when he establishes an idea of the poet that is independent not only from the philosophical and aesthetic idealism he learned in his teens but also from the political collectivism that flourished in the thirties. What has been clarified in the thesis is that MacNeice considers the role of the poet in his experiment with forms of expression as well as in his contemplation about the relation of art to society. My close reading of his poems often deals with an entire poem rather than concentrating on a line or a stanza, mainly due to the fact that what he attempts to show cannot be understood unless we read the whole poem. Many of his lines are meaningfully elusive in terms of both form and content; as enjambment, omission, or disruption of syntax prevents the meaning from being fixed, his position also changes within a poem from affirmation to negation or the other way round.

In Chapter 1, we have found that the innocent child perspective is deliberately confused with the vision of the grown-up poet, by which MacNeice reconstructs his experience of the intellectual revelation that accompanies the inevitable growth from child to adult. Learning from the far-sighted modernist poets, he also employs the universal imagery of mythology to illustrate the fearful doom of man in the cyclicality of civilisations. Already in those early poems in *Blind Fireworks*, the repetition is used effectively, which anticipates MacNeice's life-long probing into the potentiality of formal elements as conveyors of meaning in poetry. Chapter 2 has examined how MacNeice discloses and confronts the threats that concern him both as poet and man, including the progression of time and the loss of individuality. Although he desires to combat them with the transcendental power of art, he recognises the impossibility of it. This conflict between the ideal and the reality finds an appropriate place to collide and offer itself for investigation in the peculiar structures and

traditions of the sonnet and the eclogue or the regular rhyme scheme, including the couplet. If not creating a new form, MacNeice also utilises different modes of speaking for the poems we have read in Chapter 3—the quasi-political poems in the early thirties and the poems addressing someone specific in the late thirties—which help him to position himself in a world that demands he acts as spokesman. In Chapter 4, I have discussed *Autumn Journal* as a decisive point for MacNeice's thinking of the aesthetic and social issues during the thirties. It is another poem that examines and professes his individualist standpoint, but what I focused on is the way in which poetic devices such as rhyme, rhythm, and imagery articulate MacNeice's resolution to communicate with others and keep living through writing. This affirmative attitude towards life is to be held closely throughout the time of war. At the same time, I have pointed out in Chapter 5 that there are subtle yet notable changes in MacNeice's poetics after *Autumn Journal*, largely influenced by Yeats and the war. One of them is the increased emphasis on poetic form. Even though the formal elements are already significant, MacNeice becomes more adept at introducing and shaping poetic structures such as repetition, relying on them for expressing his emotional sensitivity. He begins to complicate poetic subjectivity by representing viewpoints other than his own. This is accompanied by the revision of MacNeice's philosophical viewpoint, which comes to concede the human desire for the ideal, which saves him from being intolerant of any kind of idealism and enables him to appreciate the essential value of human existence. The belief in life underlies the poems about the Blitz and the case-study poems we have read in Chapter 6. In spite of the alleged lack of the war poetry during the Second World War, those poems serve as a powerful encouragement for people in turmoil to regard individual virtue as a faith that can counter the fear of death. It could also be assumed that MacNeice's interest in the form of parable in the post-war period may originate from his imagining of types of individuals during wartime. Paradoxically, war persuades MacNeice to be more indirect in illustrating reality, which does

not lead to an escape but to a deeper confrontation of the real. The post-war poems in *Holes in the Sky* have been discussed in Chapter 7 as representing MacNeice's various returnings. This phase of his work involves not only the common recognition that the war aged everyone without any gain but also the personal disillusionment and loss that caused him to review the pre-war era. Rather than just looking back, MacNeice attempts to empower his poetic creativity with recourse to Shakespeare and a new stanzaic structure that may be a precedent to the *terza rima* in *Autumn Sequel*. In Chapter 8, I have considered *Autumn Sequel* as an achievement of MacNeice's exploration of the function of poetry. The adoption of *terza rima* and parable is examined with the examples of the preceding poets' works that MacNeice must have been conscious of. In addition, the commemoration of Dylan Thomas helps him draw a provisional answer to a question about the role of the poet: that is, the poet should never stop beginning.

With this conclusion, we seem to return to MacNeice's statement in the title of this thesis; if writing poetry is a 'road' the poet treads upon for his journey, one of the most important qualifications of the poet for MacNeice is to be always on the way. Discussing MacNeice's implicit conversation with Dante's *Commedia* in *Autumn Sequel*, Steve Ellis finds 'A strong sense of existence as process rather than arrival' in the poem, although he also states that 'consummation is more apparent in *Autumn Sequel* than in the *Journal*'.[1] As the very last line of *Autumn Sequel*, 'This train approaches London. Quickly. Slowly' (492), subtly implicates, he has not arrived yet. Therefore, a further study might well read the later poems of MacNeice as a sequel to the poetic pursuit in *Autumn Sequel*.

As we have seen in 'Epitaph for Liberal Poets' and 'Elegy for Minor Poets' written in the forties, MacNeice, detecting the end of the era of the poets that seem to include him, directs his eye to the future generation from the perspective of an established poet. In a letter

[1] Steve Ellis, 'Dante and Louis MacNeice: A Sequel to the *Commedia*', in *Dante's Modern Afterlife: Reception and Response from Blake to Heaney*, ed. by Nick Havely (Basingstoke: Macmillan Press; New York: St. Martin's Press, 1998), pp. 128-39 (p. 132).

to Ellen Borden Stevenson, the American agent of the joint tour of the MacNeices in America in 1953, MacNeice gives a detailed ('Professional & Personal') account of himself and his wife for the coming recitals. At the start of his own introduction, he writes as follows:

> (c) Myself. I remain, though I say it (!) one of the best known – & best selling – poets in the U.K. This 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 & as yet successful writers (who also, I think, tend to be jealous of me in particular because I have the kind of job which they pretend to look down on but in fact would be delighted to have!)[2]

Although he may too sensitively feel the hostility of younger writers, it is the case that the evaluation changes depending upon who evaluates. The remark above indicates that MacNeice, who has established himself as a poet and a writer of radio script, feels that he has become the subject of evaluation and envy. In 'To the Public' in *Visitations*, which is published in 1957, MacNeice refers to the public images of poets he often used to mention in his prose criticism. The declaration to 'continue / Throwing our dreams and guts in people's faces' (495) at the end of the poem makes use of the fabricated, 'lawless' figure of the poets, by which he means that the poets' original motivation for writing is intrinsic and does not necessarily expect reaction from others. It does not mean, however, that they do not intend to communicate. A seemingly violent, one-way action to cast poems in people's faces denotes the poets' desperate impulse to impart the result of their creative contemplations. Indeed, the

[2] MacNeice, To Ellen Borden Stevenson, 21 March [1953], in *Letters*, p. 561.

style shown by the title, speaking ‘to the public’, contradicts the seeming indifference to public opinion proclaimed in the poem. In this respect, we should also note that although he addresses ‘you’ in the poem, MacNeice claims at the end that poets address ‘people’; if ‘you’ are identical with or part of the ‘public’, the ‘people’ to whom the poet writes should also be ‘you’. It seems that he deliberately avoids throwing his words at ‘you’ to imply that although poets talk to all in the public, some could be like ‘you’, who misunderstand or devalue the poets and their work. It is therefore not a simple poem of declaration about the poets’ unyielding position, but a poem that unveils their anxiety about the reception (not the reputation) of their art.

‘To Posterity’, which is placed after ‘To the Public’ in *Visitations*, treats the same anxiety, extending the scope to the future:

> When books have all seized up like the books in graveyards
> And reading and even speaking have been replaced
> By other, less difficult, media, we wonder if you
> Will find in flowers and fruit the same colour and taste
> They held for us for whom they were framed in words,
> And will your grass be green, your sky be blue,
> Or will your birds be always wingless birds? (495)

MacNeice here imagines a dystopia where language is no longer a valid means of communication. According to Peter McDonald, who discusses MacNeice’s conception of ‘responsibilities’ as poet, it is insisted in ‘To Posterity’ that ‘words themselves need to live, and life for the poet is always a life of words, and in words’ and the poet ‘is responsible for the future, in this sense at least, and the integrity of language is not separable from other kinds

of integrity'.[3] This may be similar to what T. S. Eliot claims when he talks of Dante: 'The whole study and practice of Dante seems to me to teach that the poet should be the servant of his language, rather than the master of it. [. . .] To pass on to posterity one's own language, more highly developed, more refined, and more precise than it was before one wrote it, that is the highest possible achievement of the poet as poet'.[4] MacNeice, whose contemplation of the role of poet is often concerned with his own role as poet, thinks in 'To Posterity' about the whole literary tradition. As McDonald notes, we can also say that MacNeice takes the responsibility of preserving, developing, and handing over language as more than something that ends in itself; there is a premise in 'To Posterity' that the properties of things—greenness of grass, blueness of sky—are created rather than being intrinsic to them. In another essay, McDonald mentions the impossibility of finding an answer to the open question at the end of 'To Posterity' partly because 'MacNeice's sights are fixed on more distant futures than anything which our own present time might constitute'.[5] While it is true that neither MacNeice nor we have an answer yet, the reference to the unfamiliar image of birds without wings shocks us especially after the clichés of green grass and blue sky. It seems that the very question about the continuance of the present destroys the possibility we desire and becomes an ominous prediction. In addition, a 'less difficult' media may be television, which gave rise in the late fifties. MacNeice was asked to attend a course to learn television from April to October in 1958, which he took 'with no great enthusiasm' but 'intellectually responded' to.[6] Since television relies on visual perception, it may threaten the radio or literature, both of which depend upon words. This recognition might have driven MacNeice to rethink his engagement with media and art. Derek Mahon sees a distress in MacNeice after *Autumn*

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[3] Peter McDonald, 'Louis MacNeice: Irony and Responsibility', in *The Cambridge Companion to Contemporary Irish Poetry*, ed. by Matthew Campbell (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), pp. 59-75 (p. 66).

[4] T. S. Eliot, 'What Dante Means to Me' (A talk given at the Italian Institute, London, on July 4th, 1950), in *To Criticize the Critic and Other Writings* (London: Faber and Faber, 1965), pp. 125-35 (p. 133).

[5] Peter McDonald, *Serious Poetry: Form and Authority from Yeats to Hill* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2002), p. 168.

[6] Jon Stallworthy, *Louis MacNeice* (London: Faber and Faber, 1995), p. 429.

Sequel: 'it must be said that during the '50s, when he was busiest at Features, there was a certain falling-off in the poetry itself, although this was to be rectified towards the end. After *Autumn Sequel* his verse grows tired and laconic, as if he doubted the value of the enterprise'.[7] Indeed, MacNeice in 'Donegal Triptych' in *Visitations* avows that 'the thread / Is broken and the phoenix fled, / Youth and poetry departed' (499). The thread and phoenix are the familiar images that respectively represent continuity and revival in his earlier poems. As we have seen in poems like 'Twilight of the Gods' in *Blind Fireworks* and *Autumn Journal*, the death of the phoenix, which seems at first to signify finality, is not really the end but the sign of renewal. Its departure in 'The Donegal Triptych' therefore brings about a more serious situation. Yet MacNeice immediately checks this vision, stating that it is the lies told by 'Acid and ignorant voice' (499), and claims that he needs 'Once more having entered solitude once more to find communion / With other solitary beings, with the whole race of men' (501). In the second section of another poem, 'Visitations', this imaginary communion with others that ease his solitude is said to be realisable if we detect the timeless value of things:

> When the indefinable
> Moment apprises
> Man of Its presence,
> Shorn of disguises
> Himself in his essence
> Combines and comprises
> The uncombinable.

[7] Derek Mahon, 'MacNeice, the War and the BBC', in *Journalism: Selected Prose 1970-1995*, ed. by Terence Brown (Oldcastle: The Gallery Press, 1996), pp. 30-42 (p. 40).

With cabbage-whites white

And blue sky blue

And the world made one

Since two make two,

This moment only

Yet eras through

He walks in the sun

No longer lonely. (518-9)

The solitude of 'Man' ends when he understands that the 'essence' of things in the world, including the whiteness of 'cabbage-white' and the blueness of 'blue sky', is sustainable beyond time, although the life of each thing is ephemeral. Terence Brown, discussing the similarity of philosophical outlook shared by Walter Pater and MacNeice, points out that MacNeice in these stanzas depicts the moments when the 'self lost in the midst of apparent flux can apprehend its own relationship with an invigorating process which is the world's life', as Pater does in his poems.[8] Namely, MacNeice believes that we can imagine the 'uncombinable'—the momentary and the eternal—in the same plain. What should be noted in the quotation above is that the 'essence', which is seemingly a transcendental concept, is found in the concrete things in the concrete world. MacNeice clarifies again the position that he avows in poems like 'Plurality', that pluralism and monism are interdependent, in that while the world in plurality makes monism possible to be desired, the hankering after the One is the fundamental and ultimate goal for all, however vain the attempt might be.

The form of those lines also combines the uncombinable. MacNeice, writing about *Visitations*, announces that 'the lyrical impulse did return' and 'my latest short poems are on

[8] Terence Brown, 'Walter Pater, Louis MacNeice and the Privileged Moment', *Hermathena*, 114 (Winter 1972), pp. 31-42 (p. 39).

the whole more concentrated and better organized than my earlier ones, relying more on syntax and bony feature than on bloom or frill or the floating image'.[9] In the lines quoted above, the shortest line, 'Yet eras through', which only has four syllables, denotes the length of time that is beyond the reach of our life and imagination. We can infer from the economy and quick motion of the short lines that the seemingly confined stanza structure at once promotes and detains the flux of time. MacNeice gets even more inclined to try to find such a compromise between the opposites and capture it in his poems in the later years. In an article published in 1953, he asserts that 'all human beings have a hankering for pattern and order; [. . .] 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 a good order. And when I say duty I mean duty; I think it is the turn of enjoyment, I believe that life is worth while *and* I believe that I have to do something *for* life'.[10] Here it seems to be claimed that a human being can join the formalising process of the world's order by offering a 'pattern' elicited from his/her own life, which may be synonymous with what he calls the 'essence' in 'Visitations'. This may also be an analogy of a duty of the poet. In 'Rites of War' in *Solstices*, MacNeice, as in 'Autolycus', seems to address at once Shakespeare and his character ('Fortinbras' in *Hamlet*); alluding to war and prosody in Shakespeare's work, he is explicit about the limit of words as reflection of reality: 'Your dying soldiers cry though not in iambics, not / In any manner of speech to reach the future's ear' (537). Fortinbras's soldiers, if they were real in battleground, would not cry poetically, but paradoxically, the violent and otherwise undramatic reality can be preserved and remembered through the artificial music of words. A relatively regular iambic rhythm throughout the poem may resist the suspicion MacNeice raises himself, the suspicion that art is 'a waste', asserting that art's function of making 'patterns' is useful and valuable.

Considering thus the increasing importance of form in his conception of poetry, it is

[9] MacNeice, 'Louis MacNeice Writes . . . [on *Visitations*]' (May 1957), in *SLC*, pp. 211-2 (p. 211).
[10] MacNeice, 'Statement on Belief' (1953), in *SP*, pp. 187-8 (p. 188).

well worth dedicating future research to the structures of his poems in later years. When MacNeice reviews *The Poetry of Robert Frost* by Reuben Brower in 1963, he mentions again the importance of syntax: 'I have often been surprised that reviewers of verse pay so little attention to syntax. A sentence in prose is struck forward like a golf ball; a sentence in verse can be treated like a ball in a squash court'.[11] The similes used here remind us of MacNeice's references to a rugby ball in *Autumn Sequel* and his prose; while a rugby ball symbolises the unpredictability in sport that is also necessary in art, MacNeice, when using a 'ball in a squash court' to explain a sentence in verse, focuses more on the role of formal regulations with which syntax works. The arrangement of syntax can affect rhyme, metre, line-end, and stanza, and the sentences in verse are reorganised as lines with those elements. Tom Walker, discussing MacNeice's late work, maintains that MacNeice believes in 'the ability of poetic form not only to provide a forum for thought, but also a means for his poems to keep on causing thought'.[12] In 'The Taxis' in *The Burning Perch*, repetition, one of the important poetic devices we have seen in MacNeice's poems, becomes more complicated and suggestive by being incorporated in the arrangement of syntax. McDonald argues that a 'great many of the late poems show how the properties of poetry – its rhythms and shapes – can be made to absorb and refigure the less reflective aspects of language – its clichés and dead-ends – and so become charged with a strange and unsettling energy'.[13] The poem is like a strange story about an unnamed man; in a taxi 'he was alone tra-la', but an invisible 'someone' accompanies him, its number increasing every time he takes a taxi. The repeated 'tra-la', by its very meaninglessness, seems to deny that 'he was alone'. It may even be plausible that 'tra-la', always following 'alone' in the sentence, represents his companions, whose identities are similarly unclear like the word 'tra-la'. On the other hand, when the taxi driver utters

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[11] MacNeice, 'Frost' [review of *The Poetry of Robert Frost* by Reuben Brower] (12 July 1963), in *SLC*, pp. 244-7 (p. 245).
[12] Tom Walker, *Louis MacNeice and the Irish Poetry of his Time* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), p. 187.
[13] McDonald, 'Irony and Responsibility', p. 70.

'tra-la', it intrudes into the normal syntax of his words: 'Make sure / Your have left nothing behind tra-la between you'; 'I can't tra-la well take / So many people, not to speak of the dog' (584). Along with the illogicality of the word itself, the seemingly random insertion of the word foregrounds the unbelievable situation the driver reveals. By breaking the rule of the speaker's own repetition of 'tra-la', the 'tra-la' of the driver intensifies the sense of unexpectedness and uncontrollability in what happens to the man. 'The Taxis' reveals that repetition and the arrangement of the repetition can not only create the music and mood of poetry but also represent and even deepen the meaning of it.

Many critics praise MacNeice's late poems, emphasising their newness. Dividing MacNeice's career into three phases, Bernard O'Donoghue states that the last phase (from *Visitations* to *The Burning Perch*) is 'universally admired'.[14] Julian Gitzen notes that 'his [MacNeice's] subjects in the last ten years changed remarkably', although he admits that there are persistent themes from the earlier years.[15] McDonald also argues that 'MacNeice's last years [. . .] saw the development of a new style and tone in his writing, in which his poetic voice gained a new, and sometimes startling, resonance and originality'.[16] However, there is also scope for developing my discussion in Chapter 8 about the allegorical aspects of *Autumn Sequel* in the reading of MacNeice's later poems. Richard Danson Brown has written about the influence of Bunyan on MacNeice, stating that in *Autumn Sequel* 'the economical evocation of the crucifixion recalls the similarly terse description of the passion in *The Pilgrim's Progress*'.[17] He also discusses the impact of Spenser on MacNeice, although he considers that '*Autumn Sequel* failed either as a sequel to *Autumn Journal* or as the

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[14] Bernard O'Donoghue, 'MacNeice as a Whole' [review of *Louis MacNeice: The Poet in His Contexts* by Peter McDonald], *Essays in Criticism*, XLIII.2 (April 1993), 172-180 (p. 176).
[15] Julian Gitzen, 'Louis MacNeice: The Last Decade', *Twentieth Century Literature*, 14.3 (October 1968), 133-41 (p. 133).
[16] McDonald, 'Irony and Responsibility', p. 63.
[17] Richard Danson Brown, 'Everyman's Progresses: Louis MacNeice's Dialogues with Bunyan', in *Reception, Appropriation, Recollection: Bunyan's Pilgrim Progress*, ed. by W. R. Owens and Stuart Sim (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2007), pp. 147-63 (p. 154).

Spenserian poem'.[18] MacNeice's relationship with those writers can be analysed more thoroughly, focusing on their technical and thematic influence on his poems. In addition, the theme of quest in *Autumn Sequel* might be examined further, not only in relation to his predecessors' works but also in comparison with his own later works. Jonathan Allison argues that MacNeice 'was interested at various stages of his life in quest poems, Celtic immram and the Norse saga, although few of his later poems, while occasionally using travel as a poetic trope, betray great interest in those forms' and that 'in the later lyrics a tendency to view memory itself as a kind of journey imagined in spatial terms' becomes prominent.[19] This tendency in the later works may reflect his self-consciousness about his own life, which is itself a process, as a subject of poetry. MacNeice remains a poet on the road in his late years, believing that 'The poems themselves (as always) are an attempt to find out'.[20]

[18] Richard Danson Brown, 'MacNeice in Fairy Land', in *Edmund Spenser: New and Renewed Directions*, ed. by J. B. Lethbridge (Madison: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2006), pp. 352-69 (p. 360).
[19] Jonathan Allison, 'Memory and Starlight in Late MacNeice', in *The Oxford Handbook of Modern Irish Poetry*, ed. by Fran Brearton and Alan Gillis (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), pp. 240-8 (p. 247).
[20] MacNeice, Carbon Typescript of 'Notes for Argo' [Louis MacNeice on his own poetry], c.1961, Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS. 10641/22.

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