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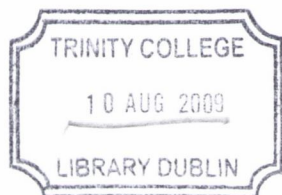
**Giving “those angry ghosts their due”:
Louis MacNeice’s intertextual dialogue
with W.B. Yeats**

This dissertation is submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for a PhD in English.

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April 2009

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DECLARATIONS

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SUMMARY

This thesis examines the nature and significance of Louis MacNeice's engagement with W.B. Yeats. Throughout the 1930s, and the early years of the 1940s, MacNeice sought to evaluate Yeats's legacy. His preoccupation with Yeats was partly attributable to the fact that during many of these years his concerns and work overlapped with those of Yeats. However, this thesis will also take into account some of the effects of that relationship on MacNeice's later writings. This thesis will devote a great deal of attention to MacNeice's prose writings, through which his relationship with Yeats was largely constructed, and in particular his full-length study The Poetry of W.B. Yeats. It will also examine the ways in which Yeats's influence is manifest in MacNeice's poetic art in the context of that prose engagement.

In many ways MacNeice's distinction from his contemporaries is best explained and demonstrated by his engagement with Yeats. There were obstacles in accepting Yeats as a poetic role model, MacNeice admitted. Nonetheless, his writing never allowed the problems of Yeats's political beliefs, which so preoccupied his contemporaries, to deny the importance of Yeats as a poetic precursor, as Chapter I will demonstrate. MacNeice's prose writings provide little support for Bloomian models of a young male poet dwarfed by the looming shadow of the elder poet. Rather, Yeats functions as an enabling presence for MacNeice. Chapter II focuses on MacNeice's turning to Yeats for an authoritative model of poetry at precisely the times in which he was most concerned in his own work with the issues of the poet's responsibility to the social, political and public life around him. In this respect, MacNeice's relationship with the elder Anglo-Irish poet is at least as significant for his own creative art as the influence of his contemporary English poets.

MacNeice's poetry was determined to mediate between the private space of the individual and the political or public realm. His poetry during the 1930s, as evinced in its depictions of private interludes and interregnums to the West of Ireland or islands depicted in similar terms as the West, was structured to disrupt any apparent antithesis between these two choices. This was a device Yeats in the 1920s and 1930s had made his own but which MacNeice adapted to suit his own needs. Chapter III will consider MacNeice's poem "Neutrality" in the context of these Yeatsian intertexts. MacNeice's dialogue with Yeats in the form of the poets' intertextual allusions to Yeatsian tragic aesthetics and Yeats's finding in the Shakespearean characters a mirror for these beliefs will be examined in Chapter IV. In turning to Yeats for an authoritative model of poetry as evinced in his own work and his readings of Shakespeare, MacNeice determined to define the validity of poetry in an era in which its effectiveness and usefulness was questioned explicitly. MacNeice's absorption of Yeatsian aesthetics centres upon his ability to foreground the issues most pertinent to him, as a writer, and to overcome the conflicts between his own work and that of Yeats. In turning to Yeats as an authoritative figure, MacNeice suggests that Yeats's is not a presence that chokes his own poetic authority.

This thesis will conclude by examining some of the ways in which MacNeice's relationship and engagement with Yeats has helped a succeeding generation of Northern Irish poets – particularly, Michael Longley, Seamus Heaney and Derek Mahon – to contend with the figure of Yeats. There is a sense in which it is appropriate to conclude this thesis with an examination of a line of poetry stemming from Yeats through MacNeice to these three particular poets who have consciously reclaimed MacNeice as a poetic precursor.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I wish to sincerely thank Prof. Terence Brown for inspiring my interest, as an undergraduate, in a poet named Louis MacNeice.

I express my thanks and appreciation to my supervisor, Dr. Paul Delaney, for his guidance, support and advice over the last number of years.

Research for this thesis has been made possible by a two-year IRCHSS award and a one-year Trinity Postgraduate Award.

Parts of Chapters I, II and IV have appeared in altered forms in my essay "Intertextuality in the poetry of W.B. Yeats and Louis MacNeice" in New Voices in Irish Literary Criticism: Ireland in Theory, ed. Cathy McGlynn & Paula Murphy (London: Edwin Mellen Press, 2007). This book arose from papers delivered at the 2005 New Voices Conference, held at Mary Immaculate College, Limerick.

Preliminary drafts of some of the arguments of Chapters I and IV have also been presented at the Iasil Conference, Prague (2005) and the Shakespeare and the Irish Writer Conference, Maynooth (2006). Certain views expressed in Chapter V were aired at the Contemporary British and Irish Poetry Conference, Oxford (2006). I am grateful for Trinity Travel funds which assisted me to participate in some of these conferences.

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Introduction

MacNeice's quarrel is not only with minor writing of the period 1890-1910, but more profoundly with Eliot and Yeats. I feel it is not yet appreciated how MacNeice and Auden absorbed and redirected the aesthetics of those predecessors.¹

"This game of pigeonholing generations has gone too far", Louis MacNeice insisted in 1957, decrying the critical tendency to position and discuss poets within artificial literary decades.² His view was prefigured by W.H. Auden in his 1948 essay "Yeats as an Example". "All generations overlap", Auden asserted, "and the young poet naturally looks for and finds the greatest help in the work of those whose poetic problems are similar to his because they have experiences in common".³ Spender also reverted to the most influential poetic figures of the 1920s – Yeats, Eliot, Pound and Lawrence – in assessing his own generation's work in The Thirties and After (1978), maintaining that "in their end-games were our game-beginnings".⁴ Throughout the thirties MacNeice and his contemporary English poets contested the significance of the figure and works of W.B. Yeats. A vast array of critical work has attended to the cross-generational influence of Yeats during these years. Valentine Cunningham's British Poetry of the 1930s (1988), Samuel Hynes's The Auden Generation (1976) and perhaps most specifically, Hynes's article "Yeats and the Poets of the 1930s" (1972) all ultimately

¹ Edna Longley, "Louis MacNeice: Aspects of his Aesthetic Theory and Practice", Studies on Louis MacNeice, ed. Jacqueline Genet and Wynne Hellegouarc'h (Caen: Universite de Caen, 1988) 52.

² Louis MacNeice, "Lost Generations", rev. of Poetry Now, ed. G.S. Fraser, London Magazine 4.4 (April 1957): 52. Rpt. Selected Literary Criticism of Louis MacNeice, ed. Alan Heuser (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1987) 207-8. MacNeice was writing on this occasion of critical distinctions between the poetry of his English contemporaries and the Romantic school of poetry which was seen to follow in the 1940s.

³ W.H. Auden, "Yeats as an Example", Prose: Vol. 2, 1939-1948, ed. Edward Mendelson (London: Faber and Faber, 2002) 384.

⁴ Stephen Spender, The Thirties and After (London: Macmillan, 1978) 203.

resort to the figure of Yeats in discussing the young English poets of the decade.⁵ In all of these critical works, however, there is a tendency to endorse the view that Yeats's presence was significantly felt by these writers, with little heed to the nuances and uniqueness of MacNeice's particular engagement with Yeats.

Auden considered in his essay on Yeats that the young poet begins "with an excessive admiration for one or more of the mature poets of his time". "As he grows older", however, "he becomes more and more conscious of belonging to a different generation faced with problems that his heroes cannot help him to solve, and his former hero-worship, as in other spheres of life, is all too apt to turn into an equally excessive hostility and contempt".⁶ Quite whether MacNeice's attitudes to Yeats followed the model laid down by Auden is another matter, and is one which this thesis sets out to explore. In his assertion, however, that "the duty of the present is neither to copy nor to deny the past but to resurrect it", Auden expressed his generation's concern to utilise as well as contain the examples of their immediate precursors.⁷ "The history of recent poetry" could be seen, MacNeice wrote in "Poetry To-Day" (1935), as "a history of various reactions against dead weights". While "the common factor in these reactions appeared to be a revolt against tradition", this was not so. "All the experimenting poets turned their backs on a mummified and theorized tradition, but the more intelligent realized that living tradition is essential to all art, is one of the poles. A poem, to be

⁵ Valentine Cunningham, *British Writers of the Thirties* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), Samuel Hynes, *The Auden Generation* (1976; London: Bodley Head, 1979), Hynes, "Yeats and the Poets of the Thirties", *Modern Irish Literature: Essays in Honour of William York Tindall*, ed. Raymond J. Porter and James D. Brophy (New York: Iona College Press, 1972).

⁶ Auden, "Yeats as an Example" 384.

⁷ *Ibid* 384.

recognizable, must be traditional; but to be worth recognizing, it must be something new”.⁸

Valentine Cunningham has argued that the decade consisted of “a set of anxieties writers and writing must respond to”. These anxieties included the “question of which tradition and traditions” the writer would “work in or against, variously promoting, revivifying, demolishing”. These were questions which in one form or another all writers have asked but which, Cunningham points out, Eliot had most recently asked:

What, in other words, in the formula Eliot issued in the immediate aftermath of the First World War, should be the nature of the individual writing talent in the thirties in relation to the many possible literary ways and means and models the tradition supplies? Is any of that bourgeois past worth saving? Should any of those dry bones be made to live again? Could any of them go on living? How much of the literary past should be blown up, blasted to smithereens, how much blessed and continued?⁹

Cunningham suggests that nobody in the thirties could “be in any doubt that the very nature of being modern was a raising of the question of what to do with and about the past”.¹⁰ During the decade MacNeice had asked “How are we to do justice, not to the segregated Past or Present, but to their concrete antinomy?” The problem he felt was “especially difficult” for his generation because “we have so many Pasts and Presents to choose from. We have too much choice and not enough brute limitations”.¹¹ Echoing MacNeice’s own resistance of literary-historical categorisations, Cunningham argues that “no hard and fast divide existed in the thirties along the lines conventional literary-

⁸ MacNeice, “Poetry To-Day”, The Arts To-Day, ed. Geoffrey Grigson (6 Sept. 1935): 28. Rpt. Selected Literary Criticism 12.

⁹ Cunningham, “The Age of Anxiety and Influence; or, Tradition and the Thirties Talent”, Rewriting the Thirties: Modernism and After, ed. Keith Williams and Steven Matthews (London: Longman, 1997) 11.

¹⁰ Ibid 12.

¹¹ MacNeice, “Poetry To-Day” 30. Rpt. Selected Literary Criticism 14.

historical storytelling is prone to suggest”. “Our readings of the thirties cannot shut out modernism and the modernists”.¹²

Yeats’s relevance is a central preoccupation in MacNeice’s prose and poetry during the years of the 1930s and the Second World War. Yeats’s death in January 1939 ensured that he would not live to witness the outbreak of war, yet like MacNeice, he shared a perception of imminent war, an intuitive sense of apocalypse, and a discernment of the crisis surrounding the questions of the public responsibilities and the political effectiveness of individual artists. MacNeicean criticism and biography has tended to dwell more intensively on his output in the 1930s than on his later works, and significantly more than on his “middle stretch”. This thesis will focus in large part on MacNeice’s questioning of Yeats’s example during the decade, given that it was in these years that the two poets’ concerns and work overlapped. However, the impact of Yeats’s legacy on MacNeice’s later work will at other times be taken into account.

While it is by now a critical commonplace to associate Yeats and MacNeice, the relationship between the two poets, as the opening quotation from Edna Longley suggests, deserves a more detailed critical analysis than it has received to date. Longley in Louis MacNeice: A Study (1988) observes that “MacNeice’s stress on drama relates him to W.B. Yeats: a relationship written all over his pioneering study”.¹³ She asserts that “MacNeice’s poetry (like Yeats’) was founded on contraries, upon a ‘basic conception of life [as dialectical]’”. Her phrase borrows its quotation from MacNeice’s own observations about his work in “Experiences with Images” (1949).¹⁴ She also points out that “MacNeice’s consciousness of Yeats, indeed, bridges his own double

¹² Cunningham, “The Age of Anxiety” 12, 21.

¹³ Longley, Introduction, Louis MacNeice: A Study (London: Faber and Faber, 1988) 12.

¹⁴ Longley, Louis MacNeice 11. See MacNeice, “Experiences with Images”, Orpheus 2 (1949): 125-6. Rpt. Selected Literary Criticism 155.

context: not only Yeats's significance for twentieth-century poetry in general, but for Irish poetry in particular, and for MacNeice's own relation to both traditions".¹⁵ Peter McDonald notes that "MacNeice's relation to Yeats is the most direct of any Irish poet of his generation" and that if an anxiety of influence is "present at all", it "would be misleadingly described as an inhibition on development".¹⁶ This thesis situates itself within a critical position that sees that influence as enabling. For McDonald, who writes of "the inevitable connection between MacNeice's and Yeats's poetry", not least in his final chapter of Louis MacNeice: The Poet in his Contexts (1991), the question of MacNeice's "debt to Yeats" "finally involves his feelings towards Ireland as a whole".¹⁷ "Ireland represented for MacNeice" "a vitally contradictory concentration of impulses", McDonald writes.¹⁸ These impulses were nowhere more clearly evinced than in "Valediction" from Poems (1935). Though critical of many of the political attitudes in his native land, MacNeice, lured by his affection for the West of Ireland, found it difficult to dissociate himself from that country. His depictions of Ireland can thus be seen to "complicate and qualify" Yeats's "myth of 'Ireland'". Yet, McDonald insists that while "MacNeice's Ireland, as simultaneously private and public as that of Yeats, undercuts any stable 'vision'", it is "still an 'answer' to Yeats, one of the most formidable to have come from Ireland since his death, the implications of which continue to make themselves felt".¹⁹

MacNeice's engagement with Yeats has other reverberations than the poets' depictions of their native land. His relationship with Yeats, though perhaps coloured by

¹⁵ Longley, Louis MacNeice 27-8.

¹⁶ Peter McDonald, The Poet in his Contexts (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991) 223.

¹⁷ *Ibid* 203, 207.

¹⁸ *Ibid* 205.

¹⁹ *Ibid* 227-9.

a shared (though dissimilar) Irish background, takes place primarily within an altogether different context – that of the political and social circumstances of the English 1930s. Insisting that MacNeice’s engagement with Yeats “was different in kind and intensity from that of Auden”, and that “it went beyond its immediate 1930s political context”, McDonald suggests that MacNeice’s Irishness might have affected the ways in which Yeats figures as an influence precisely within the context of MacNeice’s English generation. “As a twentieth-century poet, and the more so, as an Irish poet”, McDonald asserts:

MacNeice is indebted in profound ways to the example of Yeats; additionally, and just as inevitably, he engaged with Modernism as a poetic tendency. In a way, MacNeice negotiates the influences of Yeats and T.S. Eliot, but he does this less in terms of ideas or positions than of matters of writing: the register, genres and techniques of poetry; the long poem and the lyric; the personal and the impersonal voice, and the resonance of complexes of images and sounds.²⁰

This thesis, however, will engage further with MacNeice’s engagement with Yeatsian aesthetics by examining the ways in which he turns to that poet in the context of his own poetic concerns.

Such critical confidence in the existence of a relationship has been voiced by Paul Muldoon who recently suggested at a centenary celebration of MacNeice that we are by now familiar with Yeats’s influence on MacNeice.²¹ There is a tendency to presume in critical commentary that MacNeice’s dialogue with the elder poet has been explained simply because the acknowledgement of some engagement has become a critical commonplace. Yet the influence of Yeats did not merely happen. It was born of much contentious questioning and it is precisely such questioning on the part of MacNeice that requires a more sustained analysis. In her essay “Louis MacNeice:

²⁰ McDonald, “Louis MacNeice: Irony and Responsibility”, *The Cambridge Companion to Contemporary Irish Poetry*, ed. Matthew Campbell (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003) 64.

²¹ Paul Muldoon, “The Perring Berch: Yeats, Frost, MacNeice”, Paper presented at the Louis MacNeice Centenary Conference, Queen’s University, Belfast 13th-15th September 2007.

Between Two Wars”, Fran Brearton is attuned to MacNeice’s vigorous questioning of his predecessors. She points out that MacNeice, during the thirties, revised his generation’s early views of Eliot. By the end of the decade in MacNeice’s writings, Yeats came out “on top as the poet whose work is, regardless of his politics, relevant to the dilemmas of the 1930s in a way Eliot’s is not. He does so because war and its relation to poetry, is the overriding concern of The Poetry of W.B. Yeats”.²² Brearton suggests that “the consequences of MacNeice’s study – not least of which is that Yeats’s poetry and politics become separable for MacNeice in a way they would not be without a war-dominated context – are, for the thirties generation and for war poetry in general, far-reaching”. In what ways, however, did MacNeice’s reading of Yeats in that book correspond to those of his generation? In what ways did Yeats become a “usable influence”? If the consequences of this relationship are “far-reaching”, as the present writer suggests they are, then surely there is a need for a greater analysis of MacNeice’s most explicit writings on Eliot and Yeats. To this extent, this thesis will comprise the first full-length study of MacNeice’s engagement with Yeats. Two essays have been published on MacNeice and Yeats – Adolphe Haberer’s “Yeats and MacNeice: From Context to Intertext” (1997) and Richard Danson Brown’s “Neutrality and Commitment: MacNeice, Yeats, Ireland and the Second World War” (2005). Haberer charts some biographical and critical links between the poets and points to occasions of “simple references or allusions to Yeats” to be found in MacNeice’s poetry.²³ Richard Danson Brown focuses on “Neutrality” and certain of MacNeice’s war poems. (Chapter III will have occasion to engage with these critical arguments put forward here and

²² Fran Brearton, “Louis MacNeice: Between Two Wars”, The Great War in Irish Poetry: W.B. Yeats to Michael Longley (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000) 144.

²³ Adolphe Haberer, “Yeats and MacNeice: From Context to Intertext”, Irish University Review 27.2 (Autumn/ Winter 1997): 229.

elsewhere by other critics).²⁴ While drawing on earlier critical accounts of Yeats's significance for 1930s writing, and for MacNeice, this thesis will foreground aspects of that dialogue that have been overlooked or underestimated in critical commentary.

The “mutual misunderstanding of the literary generations”, MacNeice felt, had been “one of the evils of our times”. His generation, he thought, had “often been unjust to its immediate predecessors”.²⁵ MacNeice was critical of the extreme viewpoints of Yeats's “more naïve enemies” who regarded “him as brave or fool all through – at best a ‘silly old thing’”; he was also scathing of his “more naïve admirers” who regarded him “as God-intoxicated and therefore impeccable”. It was “high time”, he thought, “for us to abandon this sloppy method of assessment”. If poetry was important, it deserved “more from us than irresponsible gibes on the one hand or zany gush on the other”.²⁶ MacNeice was determined to contend more fully with Yeats's poetic influence. Situated against the backdrop of the growing political unease of the 1930s and the outbreak of the Second World War, MacNeice's writings display an increasing concern to negotiate Yeats's example. His preoccupation with his precursor fulfils what Christopher Ricks in *Allusion to the Poets* (2002) defines as the “familiar triangle” of poetic allusion: literary references to a poetic predecessor, references to the nature of allusion itself, and historical references to the life and times of that predecessor.²⁷ Allusions to and quotations from the writings of Yeats were extended in MacNeice's work until finally, in 1941, MacNeice produced a full-length study of Yeats's poetry in which he endeavoured to situate the elder poet within his social and literary contexts. It

²⁴ Richard Danson Brown, “Neutrality and Commitment: MacNeice, Yeats, Ireland and the Second World War”, *Journal of Modern Literature* 28.3 (2005): 109-129.

²⁵ MacNeice, “The Tower that Once”, *Folios of New Writing* 3 (Spring 1941): 37. Rpt. *Selected Literary Criticism* 120.

²⁶ MacNeice, “Yeats's Epitaph”, rev. of *Last Poems and Plays* by W.B. Yeats, *New Republic* 102.26 (24 June 1940): 862-3. Rpt. *Selected Literary Criticism* 116-7.

²⁷ Christopher Ricks, *Allusion to the Poets* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002) 122.

was through his engagement with Yeats that MacNeice sought to resolve the poetic and political issues which he faced as a writer. It was through this lens that Yeats's legacy came into focus for him.

Quotations, MacNeice felt, "are too often used either to save thought or to show off". One might admire the use of "abrupt quotation" which he considered had been introduced into modern poetry by The Waste Land. He did not, however, deem the habit one to be imitated.²⁸ MacNeice's poetry follows his own critical advice. His poems in general resist Eliot's tendency to rely on unassimilated borrowings from poetic precursors. While quotations from Yeats surface regularly in MacNeice's prose, direct allusions intrude very rarely in his poetic work. Where they do occur, they can be seen to be of huge critical importance in altering our interpretations of MacNeice's poetry. Yeats's presence within MacNeice's poetry is more often made manifest in the repeated intrusion of images, diction and concepts. These Yeatsian intertexts are utilised by MacNeice to engage with the poetic concerns of the decade. In this thesis I wish to examine the critical consequences of these intertextual references and allusions to Yeatsian terminology, symbology and poetic form. This thesis is intended to provoke a re-reading of MacNeice's (and implicitly Yeats's) poetry and to examine the re-writing of Yeatsian aesthetics in MacNeice's work.

The use of the term "intertextuality" in this thesis perhaps requires some definition. "Works of literature", Graham Allen writes in his introduction to Intertextuality (2000), "are built from systems, codes and traditions established by previous works of literature". "To interpret a text, to discover its meaning, or meanings, is to trace those relations".²⁹ The post-structuralist work of Julia Kristeva and Roland

²⁸ MacNeice, "An Alphabet of Literary Prejudices", Windmill 3.9 (March 1948): 41. Rpt. Selected Literary Criticism 146.

²⁹ Graham Allen, introduction, Intertextuality (2000; London: Routledge, 2006) 1.

Barthes has advocated the reading of a text in terms of its permeation by codes and themes of former literary works which disrupt any attempt at deciphering a text's meaning, given that the possible interpretations which these prior texts suggest are theoretically infinite. Laurent Jenny likens this reading of intertextuality to "an antirhetoric bomb with effects that are more or less disastrous according to the boldness of the user".³⁰ These theorists have drawn on M.M. Bahktin's definitions of all utterances as dialogic, "their meaning and logic dependent upon what has previously been said and on how they will be received by others".³¹ "In reality [...] any utterance, in addition to its own theme, always responds (in the broad sense of the word) in one form or another to others' utterances that precede it".³² Barthes, accordingly, defined the text as "a multi-dimensional space in which a variety of writings, none of them original, clash and blend".³³ In Barthes' view, "to try to find the 'sources', the 'influences' of a work, is to fall in with the myth of filiation; the citations which go to make up a text are anonymous, untraceable, and yet *already read*".³⁴ Kristeva has described texts as "a mosaic of quotations" and "an *intersection of textual surfaces* rather than a *point* (fixed meaning)".³⁵ The literary word can be thought of in terms of its horizontal and vertical dimensions. In the horizontal dimension, "the word in the text

³⁰ Laurent Jenny, "The Strategy of Form", French Literary Theory Today: A Reader, ed. Tzvetan Todorov, trans. R. Carter (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982) 50.

³¹ Allen, Intertextuality 19. By "utterance" we imply the ways in which language is used in specific social contexts. Bahktin argues that "all language responds to previous utterances and to pre-existent patterns of meaning and evaluation, but also promotes and seeks to promote further responses. One cannot understand an utterance or even a written work as if it were singular in meaning, unconnected to previous and future utterances or works".

³² *Ibid* 19.

³³ Roland Barthes, "The Death of the Author", Image, Music, Text, ed. and trans. Stephen Heath (London: Fontana, 1977) 146.

³⁴ Barthes, "From Work to Text", Image, Music, Text 160. (original emphasis)

³⁵ Julia Kristeva, "Word, Dialogue and Novel", Desire in Language: A Semiotic Approach to Literature and Art, trans. Thomas Gora, Alice Jardine and Leon S. Roudiez (Oxford: Blackwell, 1980) 65-6. (original emphasis)

belongs to both writing subject and addressee". In the vertical dimension, "the word in the text is orientated toward an anterior or synchronic literary corpus".³⁶ According to Allen, "communication and that which breaks communication apart – what Kristeva calls *signifiance* – are in a constantly antagonistic relationship with each other. The text is the site of this struggle".³⁷ Kristeva and Barthes see the subject suffering a loss when entering into writing, and the text as a plurality of voices and utterances, which allows no sense of a unified authorial consciousness.³⁸ Barthes and Kristeva imply that we "cannot find the text's intertexts and then view them as the signified of the text's signifiers. The inter-texts, other works of literature, other kinds of texts, are themselves intertextual constructs, are themselves able to offer us nothing more than signifiers". Thus their view of the intertextual, as Allen points out, "has less to do with specific inter-texts than with the entire cultural code, comprised as it is, of discourses, stereotypes, clichés, ways of saying".³⁹

In opposition to Barthes and Kristeva, the structuralist analyses of Gerard Genette, Laurent Jenny and Michael Riffaterre assert our ability to determine precise intertexts that define the significance of a poem. Riffaterre's theories revolve around what he terms the "referential fallacy". Texts refer, Riffaterre argues, not to objects outside themselves, but to intertexts. A series of so-called "ungrammaticalities" forces the reader to move from a mimetic level to a semiotic level in the interpretation of a

³⁶ Ibid 66. "Each word (text) is an intersection of words (texts) where at least one other word (text) can be read". "Any text is constructed as a mosaic of quotations".

³⁷ Allen, *Intertextuality* 35. (original emphasis)

³⁸ Michael Riffaterre does not present the view as Harold Bloom does of the poet as sole agent but rather focuses on textual production and the role of the reader. He does allow, however, that uncovering the intertextuality of the poem may ultimately lead to what can be thought of as authorial intention. See Riffaterre, "Interpretation and Undecidability", *New Literary History* 12.2 (1980): 227. Such a view is very different to Kristeva's loss of subject in writing. See Kristeva, "Word, Dialogue and Novel" 74. Kristeva's view is preceded by Barthes. See Barthes, "Death of the Author" 142.

³⁹ Allen, *Intertextuality* 73-4.

text. These “ungrammaticalities” are ambiguous words and phrases which cannot be explained on a referential level. Rather, they are resolved when “we read the text in term of its underlying sign structures”. The reader begins to recognize a series of connections on what Riffaterre calls the semiotic level:

For Riffaterre, texts produce their significance out of transformations of socially normative discourse, which he calls the ‘sociolect’. A text’s significance, we might say, depends on an ‘idiolect’ which transforms a recognizable element of the sociolect by means of inversion, conversion, expansion or juxtaposition. The way the reader recognizes this transformation, and so recognizes the text’s semiotic unity, is to discover what Riffaterre calls the poem’s ‘matrix’, a word, phrase or sentence unit which does not necessarily exist in the text itself but which represents the kernel upon which the text’s semiotic system is based.⁴⁰

For Riffaterre, specific prior texts need only be located if ones exist which “sufficiently characterize the aspect of the sociolect which is being transformed by the text in question”.⁴¹ All that is needed, Riffaterre argues, is the presupposition of an intertext. Riffaterre’s theories with their dogged emphasis on a correct and determined meaning and his tenacious belief in the importance of the structure or unified significance of texts have been subject to much criticism. In what ways must a reader know this prior intertext for instance?⁴² How can readers share a single sociolect?

Theoretical debates on the question of intertextuality problematise the issue of determining a text’s meaning and the question of authorial intent. On that basis, this thesis follows the distinction made by Laurent Jenny between postmodern or post-structuralist texts which give up any unifying framework and those texts in which the framework is maintained. Jenny maintains that most commonly “the multiplicity of discourses is accommodated in a narrative framework, which is coherent, if not

⁴⁰ Ibid 119.

⁴¹ Ibid 121. Riffaterre thus distinguishes between aleatory and determinate intertextuality.

⁴² See Riffaterre, “Compulsory Reader Response: The Intertextual Drive”, *Intertextual Theories and Practices*, ed. Judith Still and Michael Worton (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1990) 56-7. Riffaterre does allow for intertexts which may not be locatable, arguing that “in such cases, the reader’s sense that a latent intertext exists suffices to indicate the location where this intertext will eventually become manifest”.

traditional, and this keeps the work from following the borrowed forms in an aimless proliferation”.⁴³ Jenny’s definitions of this latter kind of intertextuality obviously prove more fruitful in an examination of MacNeice’s work. Barthes and Kristeva’s definitions prove more problematic in practical attempts at criticism, and as Allen points out, their theories have in fact been used in precisely the ways in which they were not intended. Indeed, for Rachel Buxton in her study Robert Frost and Northern Irish Poetry (2004) there is much overlapping between the terms intertextuality, allusion and influence.⁴⁴ For Rachel Wetzsteon in Influential Ghosts: A Study of Auden’s Sources (2007), the definition of a source is expanded “to include not only individual authors, but literary techniques and genres as well”.⁴⁵ For Longley, intertextuality – a term she suggests is useful in discussing poetry from Northern Ireland – is used in its “older sense, which brings it closer to ‘tradition’, though tradition as metamorphic rather than monolithic”. Intertextuality “denotes a range of ways in which poems talk to one another, criticise one another, revise one another’s perspectives, structures, language and images”.⁴⁶

Yet Barthes and Kristeva rule out simple allusion and quotation or source hunting in their definitions of intertextuality. As Allen points out, Kristeva insists that:

texts cannot be separated from the larger cultural or social textuality out of which they are constructed. All texts, therefore, contain within them the ideological structures and struggles expressed in society through discourse. This means, for Kristeva, that the intertextual dimensions of a text cannot be studied as mere ‘sources’ or ‘influences’ stemming from what traditionally has been styled ‘background’ or ‘context’.⁴⁷

⁴³ Jenny, “The Strategy of Form” 46-8.

⁴⁴ Rachel Buxton, Robert Frost and Northern Irish Poetry (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2004).

⁴⁵ Rachel Wetzsteon, introduction, Influential Ghosts: A Study of Auden’s Sources (New York: Routledge, 2007) xiv.

⁴⁶ Longley, “Northern Ireland: Poetry and Peace”, Ireland: Towards New Identities? ed. Karl-Heinz Westarp and Michael Boss. The Dolphin Series 29, ed. Tim Caudery (Aarhus: Aarhus University Press, 1998) 103.

⁴⁷ Allen, Intertextuality 36. Riffaterre distinguishes unequivocally between intertextuality in general and that of the intertext, asserting that “the ability to connect or to collocate texts does not, however, result from merely superficial similarities of wording or topic: two or more literary passages are collocable and comparable as text and intertext only if they are variants of the same structure”. See Riffaterre,

Differentiation between allusion and intertextuality has been the subject of William Irwin's essays "What is An Allusion?" (2001) and "Against Intertextuality" (2004). Irwin has argued that authorial intent is "at least a necessary condition for allusion".⁴⁸ For Irwin, in the instance of allusion, which goes beyond simple reference, "the reader must call to mind what the author intended for him or her to call to mind". (Irwin does allow that these intentions need not be strictly defined. They "may be broad enough to encompass the reader's specific associations".⁴⁹) Intertextuality, on the other hand, allows for connections which "readers make independent of authorial intent". A text may suggest many things that the author did not intend, but which a capable reader might notice. For Irwin, this aspect of criticism should not "incorrectly attribute" these readings to the "author or his or her text". "They are, properly speaking, our reading, which in fact may be a misreading".⁵⁰ Thus there are occasions in MacNeice's work where the poet's direct allusions to Yeatsian texts and imagery allow at least for a measure of authorial intent, given, as Irwin argues, that allusions suggest that a writer means for us to make certain connections or associations. In other instances, and more commonly in MacNeice's work, particular Yeatsian intertexts are made manifest in his poetry in the form of echoes and adaptations of imagery and structure, which allow for

"Syllepsis", *Critical Inquiry* 6.4 (1980): 626-7. Riffaterre, in the same article, defines such general intertextuality or influence as "aleatory" intertextuality. See also Jenny, "The Strategy of Form" 40: "we propose to speak of intertextuality only when there can be found in a text elements exhibiting a structure created previous to the text, above the level of the lexeme, of course, but independently of that structure. We distinguish this phenomenon from the presence in a text of a simple allusion or reminiscence".

⁴⁸ William Irwin, "What Is An Allusion", *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 59.3 (Summer 2001): 290. See also Ricks, *Allusion to the Poets* 4: "The question of intention bears upon allusion as it bears upon everything not only in literature but in every form of communication: suffice it (not) to say here that the present writer believes that it is not only proper but often obligatory to invoke authorial intention, while maintaining that there is (as Wittgenstein proposed) nothing self-contradictory or sly about positing the existence of unconscious or subconscious intentions – as in the case of the Freudian slip, where some part of you may wish to intimate something that another part of you would disavow".

⁴⁹ Ibid 293.

⁵⁰ Ibid 295. Cf. Irwin, "Against Intertextuality", *Philosophy and Literature* 28 (2004): 234-5: Here Irwin uses E.D. Hirsch Jr.'s differentiation in *Validity in Interpretation* (1967) between "meaning" (what an author intends) and a text's significance as it relates to the interests of the reader). A text can have meaning x and significance $\sim x$ at the same time".

a post-structuralist understanding of the role of the reader in producing a text. The term is used in this thesis in its looser form as a method of engaging with the ways in which MacNeice's texts embody the themes, codes, structures, diction and imagery of previous Yeatsian texts. These echoes in turn bear significance in our reading of MacNeice's work. Clearly, there are other intertexts on which other readers might choose to focus. This study suggests deliberate occasions on which MacNeice turned to Yeats as a poetic model at particular times in his career, as well as allowing for multiple echoes and fragments of Yeats's work in MacNeice's writings which reverberate for readers.

The focus on MacNeice's use of Yeats engages with the body of criticism which has pointed to the difficulties of attempting to synchronise MacNeice's work with that of an "Auden generation". Undoubtedly, MacNeice's peers, sharing similar aesthetic problems, exert an influence on his work. The inclusion of MacNeice in studies such as Hynes's The Auden Generation, is not as Brearton declares "in question, since his work is not separable from English literary or political history in the 1930s". Neither, however, is his work "safely or unequivocally ensconced within it". Attuned to MacNeice's uneasy placement, Hynes had explained the elements of MacNeice's poetry which rested uneasily with the work of his contemporaries – "his 'melancholy', his apparently 'apolitical' position during the 1930s" – to his Irish roots.⁵¹ Hynes's tendency to resort to MacNeice's Irishness as an attempt to explain these differences was mirrored in other contemporary responses to the poet, as this thesis will have occasion to note. In a different way, a later generation of Northern Irish poets has also resorted to MacNeice's Irish background in an attempt to emphasise aspects of his work which they feel have been ignored by English critics, and this has formed a major

⁵¹ Brearton, "Louis MacNeice: Between Two Wars" 121.

strand in recent MacNeicean criticism.⁵² McDonald's 1991 study of the poet was also premised on the need for a re-evaluation of MacNeice's transcendence of literary canons. This does not mean that the two principal canons within which critical work on the poet has taken place – that of the so-called 'Auden group' of 1930s poets, and that of Anglo-Irish literature – hold no validity, McDonald argues. It means, however, that "their status and conditioning have to be examined", that "their apparently discrete areas of 'context' have to be critically related to each other".⁵³ It could be legitimately argued, McDonald continues, that "the difficulties from which MacNeice's reputation has always suffered have their origin in his poetic violation of certain canonical (and contextual) norms: a 1930s poet who insisted on his Irishness; an Irish-born poet who lived most of his life in England".⁵⁴ The need for a study of MacNeice which is attuned to his multiple identities, backgrounds and literary relations has been emphasised by Terence Brown. Reviewing Jon Stallworthy's biography of MacNeice, Brown lamented the missed opportunity for "a more searchingly contextualised portrait". While the biography, Brown notes, attends to the "emotional baggage" of MacNeice's childhood, Stallworthy's work "does not really address the complexity of the poems as they exist as artifacts produced in a highly eventful period of the twentieth century in Britain and Ireland". Nor does it provide "any close analysis of MacNeice as critic, either in the 1930s when he issued extensive, closely argued essays and studies", or indeed his literary journalism of the 1950s:

MacNeice was a distinguished critic/ poet (the book on Yeats, as Stallworthy records, won the respect of Richard Ellmann); Louis MacNeice gives us little sense of this nor,

⁵² See for example Edna Longley, "Out of Ulster I: Louis MacNeice and his Influence", Irish Poetry Since Kavanagh, ed. Theo Dorgan (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 1996) 52-59; Kathleen Devine & Alan J. Peacock (eds.), Louis MacNeice and His Influence (Gerrards Cross, Colin Smythe, 1998); Heather Clark, "Revising MacNeice", The Cambridge Quarterly 30.1 (2002) 77-92.

⁵³ McDonald, introduction, Poet in his Contexts 1.

⁵⁴ *Ibid* 1.

indeed, of the taut, alert, highly informed intelligence which the poet brought to an always engaged, sometimes anguished, contemplation of an involvement in his world.⁵⁵

This thesis focuses on the ways in which MacNeice's dialogue with Yeats crosses and transcends the canons of Irish, English or Northern Irish literature.

Chapter I examines the ways in which MacNeice's engagement with Yeats differed sharply from his English contemporaries, and argues that MacNeice's enlisting of the elder poet as a poetic model was one cause of his ambiguous relationship with his peers. Orwell's summation of the 1930s as a period in which a group of young English left-wing poets gradually became disillusioned with the political effectiveness of poetry has undergone some amount of revision in later criticism. Even at the time Auden questioned critical notions of a distinct group. MacNeice, however, was perhaps most overtly cautious at including himself within such coteries. In many ways, MacNeice's distinction from his contemporaries is best explained and demonstrated by his engagement with Yeats. There were obstacles in accepting Yeats as a poetic role model, MacNeice admitted. Yet crucially, MacNeice's writing never allowed the problems of Yeats's poetic and political beliefs to detract from Yeats's importance. His prose writings, through which his relationship with Yeats was largely constructed, demonstrated an astonishing ability to overcome the difficulties of Yeats's political beliefs which often amounted to stumbling blocks for other writers.

Chapter II focuses on MacNeice's turning to Yeats for an authoritative model of poetry at precisely the time when he was most concerned with the question of the poet's responsibility to the social, political and public life around him. MacNeice's engagement with Yeats focused his mind on the dominant issues of the decade. It was through his questioning of Yeats's poetic example that MacNeice debated the value of

⁵⁵ Terence Brown, "Out of Context", rev. of *The Strings are False: An Unfinished Autobiography* by Louis MacNeice and *Louis MacNeice* by Jon Stallworthy, *The Irish Review* no. 20 (Spring/ Summer 1997): 148-149.

poetry. In this respect, MacNeice's relationship with the elder Anglo-Irish poet is at least as significant for his own art as the influence of his English contemporaries. In turning to a precursor who had also felt the imperatives of political realities, MacNeice's readings of Yeats were determined to rescue the elder poet from his generation's rejection of Yeats's early "escapist" work. MacNeice's readings of Yeats take place in terms of his own persistent concern to undo the simplistic binaries of poetry based in life and poetry of escape. MacNeice's prose writings provide little support for Bloomian models of anxiety, or of a young male poet dwarfed by the looming shadow of an elder. Rather, Yeats functions as an enabling presence for MacNeice. By the end of the decade, largely in response to Auden's definitions of the role of poetry and his questioning of Yeats's legacy, it was to Yeatsian definitions of poetry that MacNeice resorted.

The focus on MacNeice's poem "Neutrality" (1944) in Chapter III begins by situating the analysis within current critical research on the poem. The poem has held a significant place in the work of MacNeicean scholars – including Terence Brown, Edna Longley, Peter McDonald and Adolphe Haberer – as well as most recently providing the title for and occupying much space in Clair Wills's book That Neutral Island (2007). While engaging with much valuable critical work published on the poem, I wish to alter the focus of attention by examining the poem in the context of MacNeice's determination to mediate between the private space of the individual and the pressures of a public role or political duty with which his generation were burdened. His poetry during the 1930s, as is evinced in its depictions of private interludes and interregnums to the West of Ireland, or to islands depicted in similar terms as the West, was structured in order to disrupt any apparent antithesis between these two choices. This was, of course, a device which Yeats had made his own in the 1920s and 1930s but

which MacNeice adapted to suit his needs. Chapter III will therefore consider MacNeice's poem "Neutrality" in the context of these Yeatsian intertexts. I shall argue against some common readings of this poem, and hope to validate a re-reading of this work by examining the guilt or self-incrimination which is disguised in the ellipses, semantic ambiguities and poetic references which are present in his work.

Chapter IV will be concerned with the intrusion of Yeatsian intertexts in MacNeice's work in the form of allusions to Yeatsian tragic aesthetics and Yeats's finding in certain Shakespearean characters a mirror for these beliefs. In turning to Yeats for an authoritative model of poetry as evinced in his own work and his readings of Shakespeare, MacNeice determined to define the validity of poetry in an era in which its effectiveness and usefulness was questioned explicitly. MacNeice's readings of Yeats were thus largely constructed so as to determine and validate his own poetic concerns. Again, MacNeice's absorption of Yeatsian aesthetics centred upon his ability to foreground the issues most pertinent to him, as a writer, and to overcome the conflicts between his own work and that of Yeats. In turning to Yeats as a model, MacNeice suggested that Yeats's was not a presence that choked his own poetic authority. Rather, his use of allusion enabled him to cope with his immediate predecessor. Instead of inhibiting the younger poet, as Ricks suggests, allusion actually makes room for him by providing the "advantage of a certain distance" and mediation.⁵⁶ Through the use of allusion, poets can demonstrate "their right to that true succession". For Buxton in her study Robert Frost and Northern Irish Poetry, the use of quotation and allusion is a means by which poets "can establish and assert their identity as a poet alongside and against their peers and precursors." "It is a way both of building a literary community – with the intertextual associations serving to forge links between

⁵⁶ Ricks, Allusion to the Poets 33.

the members of that community” and “of asserting independence of voice: the knowing departure and subversions announce control over the material rather than dependence on it”.⁵⁷ In The Poetry of W.B. Yeats, MacNeice situated his generation as Yeats’s heirs by maintaining that in their work Yeats’s tragic aesthetics were assimilated. This chapter will direct attention to the ways in which Yeats’s poetic stances provided a model for MacNeice’s own poetry.

In Chapter V, which in many ways forms a conclusion to this thesis, I shall examine how MacNeice’s relationship and engagement with Yeats has been absorbed and transformed in the writings of a succeeding generation of Northern Irish poets – particularly, Seamus Heaney, Michael Longley and Derek Mahon. There is a sense in which it is appropriate to conclude this thesis with an examination of a line of poetry stemming from Yeats through MacNeice to these three poets who have so consciously reclaimed MacNeice as a poetic predecessor. The readings of Yeats undertaken by these poets are in their different ways indebted to MacNeice’s own reclamation of Yeats as an enabling poetic influence during the 1930s.

⁵⁷ Buxton, Robert Frost and Northern Irish Poetry 15.

Chapter I

Reading Yeats

The Poetry of W.B. Yeats (1941) “has its uses”, declared a review in Scrutiny, but “it is hardly about the poetry of W.B. Yeats”.¹ Although this early review might have too readily overlooked Louis MacNeice’s critical capabilities, his full-length study was largely concerned with determining his own views on contemporary poetry and eliciting his relationship with his poetic precursor. That MacNeice himself was a significant subject in the book was hardly surprising. Much of his prose can be contextualised by the flourishing of autobiographies, travelogues and writings otherwise concerned with an exploration of the self in the 1930s and early 1940s. His own work, Modern Poetry, appeared in 1938, and its chapters were divided between his personal history and literary tastes and his musings on the dominant trends of contemporary poetry. The same year witnessed the publication of MacNeice’s travel book, I Crossed the Minch, detailing his trips to the Hebridean Islands, and the gathering of his miscellaneous thoughts in the coffee table work Zoo. MacNeice described in the first of these works his liking for “autobiographic conversationalists”, and his firm belief that “people who won’t talk about themselves are such bores”.² In order “to make good conversation”, he felt, “one has got to speak about what one knows something about, and there are very few people who aren’t better up in

¹ Rev. of The Poetry of W.B. Yeats, Scrutiny 9.4 (March 1941): 381.

² Louis MacNeice, I Crossed the Minch (1938; London: Longmans, Green and Co., 2007): 97-8. The comment occurs upon MacNeice’s introduction of Mr. Mackenzie, one of the characters met in the Hebrides.

themselves than in international affairs, or in the private lives of the great”.³ MacNeice spent the years 1939 and 1940 drafting an autobiography that was eventually published posthumously, in an incomplete form, by E.R. Dodds, MacNeice’s friend and Professor of Greek at Birmingham and later Oxford University.

MacNeice, in many of his prose pieces published during the 1930s, had been concerned with resolving his own response to Yeats’s legacy. In his study, The Poetry of W.B. Yeats, MacNeice determined to set out finally the significance for him of his predecessor. The direction of MacNeice’s work was firmly established from the opening of the book:

If I were making a general anthology of shorter English poems, I should want to include some sixty by W.B. Yeats. There is no other poet in the language from whom I should choose so many. [...] The poets who interest me are the poets whom I like re-reading. I like re-reading Yeats more than I like re-reading most English poets. This is why I undertook to write a book about his poetry; *I wished to find out why Yeats appealed to me so much and I hoped also to present Yeats sympathetically to others.*⁴

“Absolute fairness”, MacNeice felt, “was unachievable when a work of art is being judged either by a theory of art or by reference to other works of art”. Yet, he insisted in his introduction to his study of Yeats, these are “the only ways in which a work of art can be judged, judgement being less direct than experience”.⁵ It was by way of comparison with his own work and the work of his contemporaries that MacNeice endeavoured to rationalise Yeats’s appeal for him. A substantial amount of The Poetry of W.B. Yeats consists of MacNeice’s interpretation of the relationship he was confident existed between Yeats’s art and his own work, as well as between Yeats and a younger generation of English poets. It is a tendency that has often been overlooked

³ MacNeice, “In Defence of Vulgarity”, Listener 18.46 (29 Dec. 1937): 1408. Rpt. Selected Prose of Louis MacNeice, ed. Alan Heuser (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990) 44.

⁴ MacNeice, The Poetry of W.B. Yeats (London: Oxford University Press, 1941) 1. (emphasis added)

⁵ *Ibid* 13.

by critics who have tended to read MacNeice's prose in the context of the more outspoken criticisms of Yeats which were expressed by his English contemporaries.

There is a profound sense in MacNeice's book of the ways in which he questioned his suitability for the role of judging Yeats. He might, he suggested, be overly concerned with the issues of his own poetry and be tempted to read his "questions into another artist's complex of question-and-answer". Yet, MacNeice insisted, putting aside his own artistic dilemmas in an attempt to come to terms with the legacy of Yeats was no answer either, for the "question-answers" which evolve in Yeats's poetry "are the same kind of organism, and result from the same kind of activity, as my own question-answers".⁶ MacNeice decided in his introduction, therefore, that Yeats's poetry must be judged in the context of his own experiences:

As the only artist whom I know from the inside is myself, I shall be able to approach another artist more sympathetically in the light of my own experience *provided* I do not assume that his experience is merely a reflection of my own.⁷

MacNeice's study was written during the years in which the topics that that had dominated the decade – the nature in which poetry might include the political life, and the ways in which a poet's political beliefs might determine his art – were most heavily contested. Harold Bloom, in his reading of Yeats, warns that "when a poet is also a gifted critic, we rightly do not expect him to know or describe accurately what his relation to his precursors is". The "poet-critic's portraits of his precursors [...] necessarily show us not what the precursors were, but what the poet-critic needed them to have been".⁸ It was precisely within the framework of his own poetic concerns that MacNeice attempted to determine the usefulness of Yeats as a poetic influence.

⁶ Ibid 15.

⁷ Ibid 14. (original emphasis)

⁸ Harold Bloom, *Yeats* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1970) 3.

MacNeice, in his introduction, was content that his own situation as poet *vis-à-vis* Yeats would allow him to evaluate Yeats's significance. Yeats was not so similar that he was unable to judge him, but crucially, neither was the elder poet so distant that it might have impeded his evaluation of him. MacNeice felt that in Yeats he had met "a poet who is strange enough to excite my interest but is near enough to me myself to preclude my misrepresenting him too grossly".⁹ He hoped to show those who might consider him unqualified for writing on Yeats that the "discrepancy between our views is not of cardinal importance".¹⁰ MacNeice's point is an important one, for his prose, through which his relationship with Yeats is largely constructed, demonstrates an ability to overcome the disjunction between the two poets' political beliefs in a manner that surpassed any of his English contemporaries.

A common motif in the memoirs of MacNeice and his contemporaries is the depiction of the absurdities of their contacts with Yeats during the decade. Stephen Spender recounted a dinner party at which Yeats quizzed the bewildered younger poet on detective novels and "The Sayers" (a "troupe of speakers who recited poetry in chorus"), regarding neither of which the young Spender had any knowledge nor inclination to learn. Spender's inability to hold a conversation with the famous poet placed his hostess in the unenviable position of resorting to telephoning Virginia Woolf to come round immediately and rescue the situation.¹¹ In 1935 Auden was summoned to lunch at The Ivy with Yeats "to settle a point about his play" [The Dance of Death]. R.F. Foster suggests that this may have been the only occasion on which the two poets met. In later years, Auden commented that he had 'known' three great poets (Brecht,

⁹ MacNeice, The Poetry of W.B. Yeats 14-15.

¹⁰ *Ibid* 15.

¹¹ Stephen Spender, World Within World: The Autobiography of Stephen Spender (1951; London: Faber and Faber, 1977) 159.

Frost and Yeats) and that they “were all shits”.¹² MacNeice’s 1934 encounter with his precursor, detailed in his autobiography, The Strings are False (1965), was little more successful. MacNeice had been hoping that Yeats would discuss poetry. Instead he had to make do with Yeats’s descriptions of the spirits and his fending off of Dodds’s questions as to whether he had ever actually seen them:

No, he said grudgingly, he had never actually seen them...but – with a flash of triumph – he had often *smelt* them. [As he saw us out the gate he was urging Dodds to remember that Julius Caesar was killed at full moon].¹³

However, MacNeice’s study of Yeats set out to do more than simply relay Yeats’s idiosyncrasies. The Poetry of W.B. Yeats determinedly offset any dismissals of the elder poet which those eccentricities had induced in the prose of MacNeice’s contemporaries. It is precisely MacNeice’s ultimately positive engagement with his predecessor that sparks Dillon Johnston’s calls for a critical reassessment of that study. In The Poetic Economies of England and Ireland (2001), Johnston takes issue with Richard Ellmann’s preface to a second edition published in 1967:

What appears, in the balance of the book, as critical scrutiny, ‘rigorous, ... offering Yeats no quarter, no deference’, in the words of Richard Ellmann’s foreword to a 1967 reissue, amounts actually to a skilful concessive argument.¹⁴

MacNeice is rather concerned in his study on Yeats to “distance himself from Yeats’ English detractors” and “to situate himself in relation to English and Irish poetries”.¹⁵ It is a characteristic of MacNeice’s book which is deserving of further critical analysis. In that study his questioning of Yeats’s importance focused his mind on the dominant

¹² R.F. Foster, W.B. Yeats: A Life, II: The Arch-Poet 1915-1939 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003) 516, 747.

¹³ MacNeice, The Strings are False: An Unfinished Autobiography, ed. E.R. Dodds (1965; London: Faber and Faber, 2007) 148. (original emphasis)

¹⁴ Dillon Johnston, The Poetic Economies of England and Ireland (Hampshire: Palgrave, 2001) 114.

¹⁵ *Ibid* 114.

issues of the decade and the ways in which his precursor might in fact function as an enabling presence for him. The Poetry of W.B. Yeats is the summation of a long period in which MacNeice increasingly found himself considering the relevance that the elder Anglo-Irish poet might have for his own work. Perhaps the most obvious site with which to begin an analysis of MacNeice's engagement with Yeats is the former poet's writings as a Yeatsian critic, and in particular his full length study on Yeats.

i. The Poetry of W.B. Yeats

The defeat of Republican Spain, the rise of Fascism in Europe, the signing of the Nazi-Soviet Pact and the outbreak of the Second World War focused the writing at the end of the thirties on the nature of the relationship between poetry and the political beliefs of its authors. The deep unease of writers of this generation with regard to the reactionary political beliefs pervading the poetry of their modernist precursors – Pound, Eliot and Yeats – was confirmed in Auden's and George Orwell's lengthy analyses of the importance of Yeats in a series of articles and essays published in 1939 and 1940.

It was the political purpose of poetry, or “a writer's tendency”, that preoccupied Orwell in 1940, and that most clearly alienated him from Yeats's work. For Orwell, the merits of a writer rested on the endorsement of that writer's political tendencies by his or her reader, a means of judgement inevitable given that “no book is ever truly neutral”. “Some or other tendency”, Orwell insisted, “is always discernible, in verse as much as in prose, even if it does no more than determine the form and the choice of imagery”.¹⁶ In an article published in Horizon in January 1943, Orwell focused his

¹⁶ George Orwell, Inside the Whale and other Essays (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1975) 24.

arguments on Yeats, declaring that “there must be some kind of connection between his wayward, even tortured style of writing and his rather sinister vision of life”. He unequivocally pronounced the impossibility of following Yeats’s example, given the ways in which the poet’s reactionary attitudes informed his works:

Translated into political terms, Yeats’s tendency is Fascist. Throughout most of his life, and long before Fascism was ever heard of, he had had the outlook of those who reach Fascism by the aristocratic route. He is a great hater of democracy, of the modern world, science, machinery, the concept of progress – above all, of the idea of human equality. Much of the imagery of his work is feudal, and it is clear that he was not altogether free from ordinary snobbishness. Later these tendencies took clearer shape and led him to “the exultant acceptance of authoritarianism as the only solution”.¹⁷

MacNeice was obviously familiar with Orwell’s contentions. Indeed, Orwell’s interpretation of Yeats remained in his mind, and in 1954, reviewing Yeats’s Collected Letters, MacNeice returned again to the sense in which Yeats was “sometimes a suspect figure” to his politically conscious generation. “At first sight”, MacNeice thought, Yeats might have seemed to Orwell the obvious starting point for an investigation of the relationship between “Fascism and the literary intelligentsia”. MacNeice, however, distanced himself from Orwell’s interpretations. Yeats may have used the term ‘Fascism’ himself in 1933 when he wrote that he was “trying to work out a social theory which can be used against Communism in Ireland – what looks like emerging is Fascism modified by religion”, but MacNeice insisted, any detailed knowledge of Yeats could only lead to the conclusion that Orwell’s use of the term “Fascism” in connection with Yeats had been a “red herring”.¹⁸ Any kind of dalliance with right-wing political beliefs on Yeats’s part, MacNeice proposed, was to be explained by his particular Irish circumstances – an explanation of Yeats’s contexts fostered perhaps by MacNeice’s own Irish background and one which set MacNeice apart from his contemporaries.

¹⁷ Ibid 69.

¹⁸ MacNeice, “Endless Old Things”, rev. of The Letters of W.B. Yeats, ed. Allan Wade, New Statesman and Nation 48.1230 (2 Oct. 1954): 398. Rpt. Selected Literary Criticism of Louis MacNeice, ed. Alan Heuser (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1987) 190.

Orwell's essay, he remonstrated, had shown "little perception either of the simple peculiarities of Ireland as a whole or the more complex peculiarities of that Protestant minority to which Yeats, like many another ardent nationalist belonged".¹⁹ As will be seen, both of these qualifications were adopted by MacNeice in his study of the elder poet in an attempt to overcome his generation's antipathy to Yeats's political beliefs and to resist casting any aspersions on the importance of Yeats as a poetic predecessor.

Auden's article "Against Romanticism", published in The New Republic on 5th February 1940, echoed Orwell's concerns about Yeats's example. Yeats's tendencies had little connection with those of his readers, and for the literary critic, in Auden's mind, "the validity of a poet's belief depends upon their power to coordinate this experience and the general experience of his time". Yeats "had to leave a great deal out".²⁰ Similar sentiments had been uttered by Auden's Prosecutor in "The Public v. the late Mr. W.B. Yeats", published in the Partisan Review of Spring 1939:

A great poet. To deserve such an epithet, a poet is commonly required to convince us of these things: firstly a gift of a very high order for memorable language, secondly a profound understanding of the age in which he lived, and thirdly a working knowledge of and sympathetic attitude towards the most progressive thought of his time.

Did the deceased possess these? I am afraid, gentlemen, that the answer is, no.²¹

Auden's Prosecutor drew a clear link between Yeats's rejection of "social justice and reason" and the backdrop of rising fascist powers: "Am I mistaken in imagining that somewhat similar sentiments are expressed by a certain foreign political movement

¹⁹ Ibid 398. Rpt. Selected Literary Criticism 190-1.

²⁰ W.H. Auden, "Against Romanticism", Prose: Vol. 2, 1939-1948, ed. Edward Mendelson (London: Faber and Faber, 2002) 2: 55.

²¹ Auden, "The Public v. the late Mr. W.B. Yeats", The English Auden: Poems, Essays and Dramatic Writings 1927-1939, ed. Edward Mendelson (1977; London: Faber and Faber, 1986) 389. Cf. Auden, "Yeats as an Example", Prose: Vol. 2 385: "When a major writer influences a beginner, that influence extends to his matter, to his opinions as well as to his manner – think of Hardy, or Eliot, or D.H. Lawrence; yet though there is scarcely a lyric written to-day in which the influence of his style and rhythm is not detectable, one whole side of Yeats, the side summed up in the Vision, has left virtually no trace".

which every lover of literature and liberty acknowledges to be the enemy of mankind?"²² While the issue at stake for Auden's Prosecutor was whether or not Yeats was a "great poet", MacNeice resisted debating Yeats's legacy in such terms. "I am not interested in ranking poets", he insisted, "and I am not even very much interested in greatness *per se*".²³

Auden's own attitude towards Yeats in these years wavered between the outright condemnation of his Prosecutor and an occasional ability to see past Yeats's more unfavourable political beliefs. In "Yeats: Master of Diction", published in The Saturday Review of Literature on 8th June 1940, Auden commented that "the universal admiration which his later poems have commanded is all the more surprising when one remembers how antagonistic were both his general opinions and his conception of his art to those current in recent literary movements".²⁴ Yeats had exhorted young Irish poets in "Under Ben Bulbin" to:

Sing the Peasantry, and then
Hard-riding gentlemen,
The holiness of monks, and after
Porter-drinkers' randy laughter;
Sing the lords and ladies gay
That were beaten into clay
Through seven heroic centuries;
Cast your mind on other days.²⁵

These imperatives might have shown "scant sympathy with the Social Consciousness of the Thirties". Nevertheless, Auden found it encouraging that, "despite this, Yeats

²² Auden, "The Public v. the late Mr. W.B. Yeats" 391.

²³ MacNeice, The Poetry of W.B. Yeats 1.

²⁴ Auden, "Yeats: Master of Diction", Prose 2: 60. Auden's essay ends with an assertion of these opposing views of Yeats: "Much of his best work [...] is concerned with the relation of Life an Art. In this relation he had, like Thomas Mann and Valery, a profound sense of what Kierkegaard called the Dialectic, but his vision of other kinds of relations was two-dimensional. Hence his one sided determinist and "musical" view of history [...] Yet how little we care. For it is the lyrics we read. In lyric writing what matters more than anything else, more than subject-matter or wisdom, is diction, and of diction, 'simple, sensuous and passionate', Yeats is a consummate master".

²⁵ W.B. Yeats, Last Poems and Two Plays (Dublin: Cuala Press, 1939) 4.

was recognized as a great poet”, for it indicated that “readers are less bigoted, less insistent upon the identity of the poet’s beliefs with their own, and, when they can find some that is not completely trivial in subject, more appreciative of poetry that sounds well, that *sings*, than they sometimes appear.”²⁶ Auden’s Counsel for the Defence in “The Public v. the Late Mr. W.B. Yeats”, to whom Auden gave “slightly more space” as Rachel Wetzsteon points out, similarly rebutted the argument of the Prosecution by asserting:

We have been treated to an analysis of the character of the deceased which, for all I know, may be as true as it is destructive. Whether it proves anything about the value of his poetry is another matter. [...] Take away the frills, and the argument of the prosecution is reduced to this: ‘A great poet must give the right answers to the problems which perplex his generation. The deceased gave the wrong answers. Therefore the deceased was not a great poet.’ Poetry in such a view is the filling up of a social quiz; to pass with honours the poet must score not less than 75%. With all due respect to my learned friend, this is nonsense.²⁷

Yet the summations by Auden’s Counsel for the Defence are problematic in a way that MacNeice’s prose is not. The Counsel’s final endorsement of Yeats as a model rested on a hazily defined “democratic style”:

However false or undemocratic his ideas, his diction shows a continuous evolution towards what one might call the true democratic style. The social virtues of a real democracy are brotherhood and intelligence, and the parallel linguistic virtues are strength and clarity, virtues which appear ever more clearly through successive volumes by the deceased.²⁸

Perhaps most tellingly, Auden’s problems with Yeats were explained in a letter he wrote to Spender in 1964. In that letter, Auden wrote of his fear that the very weaknesses which he identified in Yeats’s work were liable to enter his own poetry: “[H]e has become for me a symbol of my own devil of inauthenticity, of everything

²⁶ Auden, “Yeats: Master of Diction” 62. (original emphasis)

²⁷ Rachel Wetzsteon, *Influential Ghosts: A Study of Auden’s Sources* (New York: Routledge, 2007) 60; Auden, “The Public v. the late Mr. W.B. Yeats” 391.

²⁸ Auden, “The Public v. the late Mr. W.B. Yeats” 393.

which I must try to eliminate from my own poetry, false emotions, inflated rhetoric, empty sonorities".²⁹

MacNeice, from the outset of his study on Yeats, noted that he would "have several occasions to discuss the difficult question" of Yeats's sincerity.³⁰ It was precisely against the backdrop of the rise of Fascism, and the concern of his generation with the political tendencies of writers, that MacNeice sought to explain his own relationship with Yeats:

In a world, however, where the vast bulk of criticism is destructive, I feel that to express and, if possible, to explain one's admiration for a particular poet is something worth doing.

It is perhaps especially worth doing at this moment when external circumstances are making such a strong assault on our sense of values.³¹

The Poetry of W.B. Yeats aimed to set out through a discussion of "Yeats's subject matter during various periods of his life", his "dominating ideas, his prevalent likes and dislikes", to make Yeats's poetry "*more intelligible and more sympathetic*" to the reader.³² Whatever admissions MacNeice made in that book regarding Yeats's flamboyant tendencies and his earlier poetry's exclusion of much social or public life, the book did not go far enough for Spender who felt the need to insist:

Yet, as great as Yeats's poetry was, there is something which prevents it from having the universal appeal of the greatest poetry. In spite of its fine music, it is bleak and cold. It stands up magnificently like a bare mountain, with a few ruins on it, perhaps covered with such vegetation and inhabited with such life as can endure an icy, though passionate, climate. Modern as the form of the poetry is, the emotions and ideas have a rigid aloofness from modern life. Yeats wrote by saving himself from the mud of Flanders and the mud of the common mind of his time.³³

²⁹ Cited in Richard Davenport-Hines, Auden (London: Heinemann, 1995) 76.

³⁰ MacNeice, The Poetry of W.B. Yeats 13.

³¹ *Ibid* 1.

³² *Ibid* 3. (emphasis added)

³³ Stephen Spender, "Books and the War III: Some Modern Poetry", Penguin New Writing 4 (March 1941): 144-50. Rpt. W.B. Yeats: Critical Assessments Vol. 4, ed. David Pierce (Mountfield: Helm Information, 2000) 312.

Spender asserted unequivocally the impossibility of adopting Yeats's example: "He is an isolated figure who achieved greatness. Other poets may admire him, but they cannot follow him, because he does not wrestle with the problem of interpreting the surrounding life of his time into poetry. He is only himself".³⁴ "Obsessional" was the word that came to mind in Spender's summation of the late Yeats, in a review of On the Boiler which appeared in the New Statesman and Nation on 11 November 1939. One might admire Yeats's "single-minded gesture of the ranting, raging old man", Spender felt, but he warned:

One admires, but at the same time if late Yeats verges on great poetry, it also makes one humble about the claims of great poetry to be intelligent. Yeats shows clear intellectual power in organising a limited number of perceptions and ideas, but his range is not wide or sensitive enough to be intelligent. [...] And so with all Yeats's ideas there is a vigorous one-sidedness, at times trailing off into gibberish.³⁵

Contemporary responses to MacNeice's study took account of the more positive endorsements of his precursor's significance that the book contained. Edwin Muir's review noted that the author "rarely sees one aspect of Yeats without seeing a number more, and he states all of them with an admirable sense of their relative importance".³⁶ Helen Fletcher considered that MacNeice dealt "gallantly" with the fascist and other allegations directed at Yeats. He was, Fletcher suggested, "the perfect champion, witty, imaginative, just. [...] His treatment of Yeats is an ideal mixture of scholarship, hero-worship and filial impudence".³⁷ For that matter, MacNeice's dual English and Irish

³⁴ Ibid 312.

³⁵ Spender, "Honey-Bubbings of the Boilers", rev. of On the Boiler by W.B. Yeats and The Arrow by the Abbey Theatre, New Statesman and Nation 18.455 (Nov. 1939): 687. See also "The Egotistical Sublime in W.B. Yeats", The Listener 21.527 (16 Feb. 1939): 377.

³⁶ Edwin Muir, "Yeats", rev. of The Poetry of W.B. Yeats, New Statesman and Nation 21.531 (26 Apr. 1941): 440.

³⁷ Helen Fletcher, "The Perfect Champion", rev. of The Poetry of W.B. Yeats, Time and Tide 22.20 (17 May 1941): 414. Cf. Maurice James Craig, Rev. of The Poetry of W.B. Yeats, Life and Letters Today 29.46 (April 1941): 85: "He deals sanely with Yeats's political role and doctrines, and is free from the itch to attach derogatory labels like 'reactionary' and 'crypto-fascist'. "He avoids the temptation both of

heritage ensured that he was more adept at seeing the significance of Yeats's later work than some of his Irish contemporaries whose own struggle with the poetic figure of Yeats centred on Yeats's importance for the Irish Literary Revival. For MacNeice, as for other Irish poets, Yeats's was an influence that must ultimately be contested, one which they "must absorb, reject, re-create or ignore as best they can".³⁸ MacNeice's contesting of Yeats's example, however, was dramatically different in kind to Austin Clarke's struggle for artistic space with his poetic precursor. Writing in The Dublin Magazine following Yeats's death, Clarke asserted of the elder poet:

In Ireland, his first reputation as the leader of the Celtic Twilight school was so firmly established for several generations that it is particularly difficult to see the relative significance of his later work. We cannot escape our own surprise.³⁹

Patrick Kavanagh was quick to express a similar preoccupation with Yeats's poetic example as evinced in the years of the Revival. Yeats, he felt, "had the misfortune to come at a bad time, in the wake of Victorianism. His material was a weary parochial thing, Irish nationalism".⁴⁰ Yeats had had a "bad influence on Irish writers because he advanced Ireland as a spiritual entity".⁴¹ In no ways can MacNeice's questioning of his predecessor be thought of in terms of his reactions to Yeats's literature of the Revival. Firmly ensconced within the English 1930s context of writing, MacNeice admitted to none of Clarke's specifically Irish hesitations in assessing his predecessor. Clarke makes statements of a kind that would be difficult to find in The Poetry of W.B. Yeats.

trying to prove that Yeats wasn't reactionary, and of admitting that he was and saying that it was irrelevant".

³⁸ Terence Brown and Nicholas Grene (eds.), introduction, Tradition and Influence in Anglo-Irish Poetry (London: Macmillan, 1989) 11.

³⁹ Austin Clarke, "W.B. Yeats", The Dublin Magazine 14.2 (Apr-Jun 1939): 6.

⁴⁰ Patrick Kavanagh, "Auden and the Creative Mind", A Poet's Country: Selected Prose, ed. Antoinette Quinn (Dublin: Lilliput Press, 2003): 223.

⁴¹ Kavanagh, "George Moore's Yeats", A Poet's Country: 185.

On Yeats's death, Clarke felt that it was "difficult as yet to see either his extraordinary career or his poetry in real perspective".⁴² It was precisely this that MacNeice's study attempted.

Straddling multiple literary contexts and traditions, there is a marked contrast between MacNeice's analyses of Yeats and those of both his English and Irish contemporaries. Nowhere in MacNeice's prose (and this is especially evident in his study of the poet) do Yeats's political beliefs ever finally detract from MacNeice's sense of the importance of the elder poet. If Yeats was to be found wanting as a model, due to his adoption of conservative political beliefs, in MacNeice's view the easy embrace of Communism by many intellectuals in the 1930s was equally to be resisted. In his study of Yeats MacNeice asserted: "Whether it is true or not that Yeats was reactionary and communism is progressive, there are comparatively few communists who are in a position to accuse Yeats of a mumbo-jumbo idealism".⁴³ MacNeice's use of the term "mumbo-jumbo" was a firm rebuttal of the comments made by Auden's Prosecutor who had described Yeats's preoccupation with magic and mysticism in such terms and had insisted that it detracted from external realities being incorporated into the poet's work. Yeats, in MacNeice's writings, was not the fascist supporter who is decried in Orwell's criticism. Rather, he was more moderately described as a man "who nearly became a fascist".⁴⁴ MacNeice may or may not have been correct in his appraisal of Yeats's later political beliefs. That in itself is perhaps of less consequence than what MacNeice's evaluations tell us about his relationship with Yeats. In his study of Yeats,

⁴² Clarke, "W.B. Yeats" 6.

⁴³ MacNeice, *The Poetry of W.B. Yeats* 216. Cf. Auden's Prosecutor in "The Public v. the late Mr. W.B. Yeats" 391: "In 1900 he believed in fairies; that was bad enough; but in 1930 we are confronted with the pitiful, the deplorable spectacle of a grown man occupied with the mumbo-jumbo of magic and the nonsense of India. Whether he seriously believed such stuff to be true, or merely thought it pretty, or imagined it would impress the public, is immaterial. The plain fact remains that he made it the centre of his work".

⁴⁴ MacNeice, *The Poetry of W.B. Yeats* 174.

MacNeice took issue with Spender's reading of a poem like "The Second Coming" as directly concerned with Fascism, and softened the impact of Yeats's reactionary beliefs:

This has been taken by Mr. Spender (in The Destructive Element) to refer to the coming of fascism. It is doubtful whether Yeats meant his prophecy so precisely, but "the blood-dimmed tide" does represent that upsurge of instinctive violence which, other outlets being barred, finds a natural outlet in fascist mob-mania. That the rise of this is heralded with a certain relish is attributable to the fact that Yeats had a budding fascist inside himself. With a fatalism parallel to that of the Marxists he felt that the world was ripe for the rule of "the worst". Paradoxically, perhaps, he felt that this would give the individual freedom as prison has been known to give it to prisoners and the Roman Catholic Church to Catholics; he never made the idea of freedom contingent on democracy.⁴⁵

This stance is one that MacNeice had been increasingly approaching through the course of the 1930s. As early as 1935, in "Modern Writers and Beliefs" (1935), a review of Spender's The Destructive Element, MacNeice had taken issue with Spender for his readings of Yeats's work in terms of its right-wing attitudes. Discussing Spender's commentary on Yeats's "esoteric blend of aristocracy and magic" and his systems outlined in A Vision (1925), MacNeice objected: "On Yeats he is inadequate; perhaps takes his algebra too seriously. Yeats is predominantly aristocratic, but there is an anti-Yeats in him which would repay study".⁴⁶ MacNeice's throwaway comment in the second half of that statement is never expanded upon. In the context of The Poetry of W.B. Yeats one can perhaps take it to mean the less than serious nature of Yeats's pronouncements.

Though MacNeice readily conceded that Yeats's political solutions to the decade were to "put the clock back, not forward", at other times in The Poetry of W.B.

⁴⁵ Ibid 132-133. Similarly Yeats's connections with O'Duffy's Blueshirts is expressed merely in the following terms: "It was Yeats's predilection for oligarchy, his belief that in politics vigour is more important than honesty and order than justice, that led him into his misguided support of that vulgar crusader, General O'Duffy, and allowed him to write, like any fascist suffering from mob-frenzy, "a good strong cause and blows are delight". See page 152.

⁴⁶ MacNeice, "Modern Writers and Beliefs", a review of The Destructive Element by Stephen Spender, Listener 13.330 (8 May 1935): suppl. xiv. Rpt. Selected Literary Criticism 6.

Yeats the elder poet's tendencies are excused in the light of Yeats's admissions of a less than fully serious attitude towards his own pronouncements. It is Yeats's own acknowledgements of such that are quoted by MacNeice when emphasising this point.⁴⁷

"Just as there was a grain of salt in his early enthusiasms – 'Part of me looked on mischievous and mocking,' – so his latter-day bitterness, cynicism, disgust, weariness, are qualified, never final".⁴⁸ MacNeice easily deconstructed Yeats's prose into its superficial knowledge and generalizations: "While his prose is fascinating, we should remember that he sometimes used it rather meretriciously to make the reader accept statements which were unsound or prejudiced or merely careless. Thus he was not a good literary critic (if criticism means the scientific assessment of literary values) but he passed himself off as one by mastery of cadence".⁴⁹ MacNeice astutely observed that there is "often a crafty alteration of vagueness and precision" in Yeats's writings:

Yeats is addicted to indefinite pronouns which excuse a bad memory or a lack of knowledge, and to parentheses which, like Pater's, beguile the reader from the point. He often – deliberately – exhibits the charm of inconsequence. He sometimes makes a parade of learning which he did not possess [...] He uses the same similes over and over again; he is fond of rhetorical questions and of self-quotation. He has a trick of writing a paragraph that is dry and matter of fact, the voice apparently of common sense, and then ending it off with an extravagant but beautifully phrased generalization; this is a confidence trick.⁵⁰

Yet, as he did so, MacNeice actually seemed to take pleasure in the elder poet's confident and lively prose: "In a period where the best prose writing – with a few exceptions such as Joyce and Virginia Woolf – was bleakly functional, Yeats stood out as a writer with style".⁵¹ While his prose might be "the product of elaborate and

⁴⁷ MacNeice, *The Poetry of W.B. Yeats*. See also page 55.

⁴⁸ *Ibid* 155. See also page 82. "There was always a sceptic in Yeats; even at the height of his enthusiasm for Young Ireland he confesses that 'one part of me looked on, mischievous and mocking'".

⁴⁹ *Ibid* 197.

⁵⁰ *Ibid* 199.

⁵¹ *Ibid* 197.

sometimes underhand craftsmanship”, it was “nearly always enjoyable”. “His generalizations are excellent if they are taken not, as they were uttered, absolutely but are related to his own peculiar world-outlook”.⁵²

MacNeice was at the very least taken by the energy and liveliness of the elder poet’s work, commenting that in The Winding Stair and Other Poems (1933) Yeats “actually seems to revel in his own old age”.⁵³ There is a clear sense also of MacNeice’s enjoyment of Yeats’s ability to mock some of his own more extravagant pronouncements, even on “subjects which might have been sacrosanct to him”. For instance, in his review of the publication of Yeats’s letters, he happily quoted Yeats’s witticism regarding the theosophical societies he attended:

A sad accident happened at Madame Blavatsky’s lately, I hear. A big materialist sat on the astral double of a poor young Indian. It was sitting on the sofa and he was too material to be able to see it.⁵⁴

MacNeice pointed out Yeats’s belief in “the creativeness of violence”, as depicted in poems such as “Blood and the Moon”, and acknowledged that in his “very last poems he is still harping on this theme”:

You that Mitchel’s prayer have heard
“Send war in our time, O lord!”
Know that when all words are said
And a man is fighting mad,
Something drops from eyes long blind,
He completes his partial mind...⁵⁵

However, MacNeice’s description of Yeats’s “own elegant brand of fascism” in “On the Boiler” again seems more coloured by the fact that he found Yeats’s prose full of

⁵² Ibid 199.

⁵³ Ibid 155.

⁵⁴ MacNeice, “Endless Old Things” 398. Rpt. Selected Literary Criticism 192.

⁵⁵ Qtd. MacNeice, The Poetry of W.B. Yeats 42-3.

sweeping comments that should not be taken too seriously. Yeats's explanations for his right wing views, MacNeice noted, might not have rested on any logical premises:

His last prose writing On the Boiler, reveals the reactionary ideals which he would have liked to see embodied in his nation: "The formation of military families should be encouraged," for human violence must be embodied in our institutions. And Ireland must have a caste system, taking warning from modern democracies: "the newly-formed democratic parliaments of India will doubtless destroy, if they can, *the caste system that has saved Indian intellect*".⁵⁶

Yet particularly interesting is the fact that MacNeice attributed these dramatic and extravagant tendencies to Yeats's Irish roots, something which suggests that MacNeice's careful analysis of Yeatsian art and attitudes was coloured by a shared Anglo-Irish background. Certainly, in a review for Life and Letters Today, Maurice James Craig considered MacNeice's Irish roots a credible reason for his attitude towards the problem of Yeats's political beliefs. "No estimate of Yeats is just", he considered, "that has not allowed itself to be taken in a bit". There "the Irish writer is at an advantage, coming as he does from a country where the 'character' and the 'figure' have always been given their due".⁵⁷ Commenting on "On the Boiler", MacNeice wrote that "it shows the same salt and vigour and the same pig-headed extravagance that enliven his later poetry. One might not take literally, or seriously, what Yeats said, but "like other Irishmen on platforms or boilers, he is a joy to watch".⁵⁸

MacNeice's attitudes towards Yeats, in perhaps another guise, firmly put to bed the literary-historical mythicisation of an Auden-led 1930s. In some respects examining MacNeice's relationship with his contemporaries in terms of their readings of Yeats merely corroborates what these poets had themselves insisted upon. In his article on MacNeice published in Encounter in November 1963, Auden insisted that while from a

⁵⁶ MacNeice, The Poetry of W.B. Yeats 41. (original emphasis)

⁵⁷ Craig, rev. of The Poetry of W.B. Yeats 84.

⁵⁸ MacNeice, The Poetry of W.B. Yeats 202.

personal point of view, the customary journalistic linkage of the names Auden, Day Lewis, MacNeice, Spender made some sense, from a literary point of view, it “is, and always was absurd”. Even when they had seemed to share similar political or social concerns, their approaches to it, their “sensibilities and techniques” had always been different.⁵⁹ The response of MacNeice’s Irish colleagues during the decade had, however, neglected such differences. During the decade, Clarke had cast MacNeice’s attitudes as synonymous with those of his English generation, describing the young English poets as “Mr. Yeats’s adolescent admirers in Oxford”.⁶⁰ Clarke’s view can be somewhat explained by his concern that MacNeice’s example in embracing English literary contexts would attract many young Irish poets “to the predominant school of English contemporary verse”, undoing perhaps much of the success of the Literary Revival’s attempts to create a specifically Irish literary tradition. Irish writers, he felt, were “faced once more with the provincialism and fashions at second hand”.⁶¹ So, MacNeice came in for criticism for his participation in a group of “young English poets”, a group which had found expressed in Yeats’s later work “their own spiritual problems” and had, according to Clarke, ignored “the Irish quality in it as something foreign to their mentality and of no possible interest to them”.⁶² While later criticism has drawn attention to the ways in which much of MacNeice’s poetry has problematically been included in any distinct group of English left-wing writers, not enough critical attention has been paid to the ways in which MacNeice’s dialogue with

⁵⁹ Auden, “Louis MacNeice”, Encounter 21.5 (Nov. 1963): 48.

⁶⁰ Clarke, rev. of A Memoir of A.E.: George William Russell by John Eglington and The Living Torch by A.E. ed. Monk Gibbon, The Dublin Magazine 13.1 (Jan-Mar 1938): 61-2.

⁶¹ Clarke, “Irish Poetry To-Day”, The Dublin Magazine 10.1 (Jan-Mar 1935): 26.

⁶² *Ibid* 28.

and reading of Yeats provides some of the most striking examples of his distance from both his English and Irish contemporaries.

ii. Communism

Yet whatever stooge and pundit think they think,
You know, as I know, that their catchwords mean
Far less than what in time the timeless vagrant finds.⁶³

“Let us pay homage to Mr. Yeats and his mask”, MacNeice wrote in “*Dramatis Personae*” (1936). “In our world almost the only coherence is that of squads which march in step; how refreshing to meet someone who is coherent within himself”.⁶⁴ MacNeice’s imperative is significant for two reasons. Firstly, though MacNeice could not have been aware of the intertextual echo, the words produce an uncanny reminder of Yeats’s comments in a letter to Dorothy Wellesley on 6 July 1935: “I think that the true poetic movement of our time is towards some heroic discipline. [...] ‘Bitter and gay’, that is the heroic mood”. Yeats set this poetic movement in direct opposition to that of the English poets of the 1930s. In times of despair, people “look for strength within or without”. Auden, Spender and “all that seem the new movement, look for strength in Marxian Socialism, or in Major Douglas; they want marching feet”. Yeats, however, disagreed: “The lasting expression of our time is not this obvious choice but in a sense of something steel-like and cold within the will, something passionate and cold”.⁶⁵ Secondly, the reference to Yeats denotes MacNeice’s embracement of Yeats’s emphasis on the importance of the individual over any political movements, whatever

⁶³ MacNeice, “To Hedli”, *Visitations* (London: Faber and Faber, 1957)

⁶⁴ MacNeice, rev. of *Dramatis Personae* by W.B. Yeats, *Criterion* 16.62 (Oct. 1936): 122.

⁶⁵ Yeats, *The Letters of W.B. Yeats*, ed. Allan Wade (London: Rupert Hart-Davis, 1984) 836-7.

the problematic ways in which this focus was manifested in Yeats's later poetry. In 1941, in his study on Yeats, MacNeice remarked that "what horrified Yeats in politics was the disregard of human individuality".⁶⁶ The same refusal to submerge personal identity in the belief system of Communism provided the greatest stumbling block for MacNeice in his acceptance of the creed:

I had a certain hankering to sink my ego, but was repelled by the priggishness of the Comrades and suspected that their positive programme was vitiated by wishful thinking and over-simplification. I joined them however in their hatred of the status quo, I wanted to smash the aquarium.⁶⁷

Dodds maintains that MacNeice was never prepared to accept any "-ism", religious or political. MacNeice had a "deep distrust of mass emotion: the only place where he allowed himself the luxury of sharing it was at a football match (he had a passion for watching rugby, which gave him not only aesthetic pleasure but the rare experience of community)".⁶⁸

In The Poetry of W.B. Yeats the case against Communism was argued at least as staunchly, if not more caustically, than the criticism of Yeats's fascist tendencies:

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.⁶⁹

The opinion formulated here cannot simply be attributed to the defeat of left-wing ideals by the late 1930s. In 1935 MacNeice had written that this preoccupation with

⁶⁶ MacNeice, The Poetry of W.B. Yeats 104.

⁶⁷ MacNeice, The Strings are False 146. MacNeice's views seem to be corroborated in a review published by Auden in The New Statesman and Nation on 15 October 1932. Auden wrote that communism's "increasing attraction for the bourgeois" "lies in the demand for self-surrender for those individuals who, isolated, feel themselves emotionally at sea." Cited in Edward Mendelson, Early Auden (1981; London: Faber and Faber, 1999) 18-19.

⁶⁸ Dodds E.R., Missing Persons: An Autobiography (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1977) 118.

⁶⁹ MacNeice, The Poetry of W.B. Yeats 82.

politics, this “intoxication with creed”, was “a good antidote to defeatist individualism; poets could not be expected to go on writing “Prufrocks and Mauberleys”. Nonetheless, he also wrote that the poets of New Signatures (1932) – Auden, Spender and Day Lewis – were “implied communists and often propagandists” in their poetry; “Like all propagandists (cp. Shelley) they sometimes made themselves ridiculous”.⁷⁰ At the end of the decade, defending these poets in a discussion of modern Irish and English poetry with F.R. Higgins, MacNeice was adamant that “the poets of the Auden-Spender school” were “attempting something legitimate” in their poetry’s rootedness in a social awareness.⁷¹ Elsewhere, however, MacNeice stressed his scepticism of the manner in which this attempt resulted in the extolment of communist principles in these works. MacNeice criticised Auden and Day Lewis in “Poetry To-Day” (1935) for the propagandist tendencies he saw in their work. The inclusion of political doctrines in their poetry was, to his mind, akin to the lauding of empire in imperialist verse (though such imperialist policies were precisely what his contemporaries were reacting against in their adoption of left-wing beliefs). Both Auden and Day Lewis, MacNeice asserted, “suffer from an inverted jingoism reminiscent of Kipling or Newbolt”.⁷²

I do not wish to overstate Auden’s communist tendencies, and am mindful of later critical analyses which have endeavoured to elucidate Auden’s own political hesitations.⁷³ Auden himself wrote to a friend in 1932, insisting “No. I am a

⁷⁰ MacNeice, “Poetry To-Day”, The Arts To-Day, ed. Geoffrey Grigson (6 Sept. 1935): 44. Rpt. Selected Literary Criticism 25.

⁷¹ MacNeice, “Tendencies in Modern Poetry: Discussion between F.R. Higgins and Louis MacNeice”, broadcast from Northern Ireland, The Listener 22.550 (27 July 1939): 186.

⁷² MacNeice, “Poetry To-Day” 45. Rpt. Selected Literary Criticism 26.

⁷³ See Mendelson, Early Auden 181: “Yet the familiar journalistic account, so reassuringly symmetrical and naïve, of the young Auden setting out to conquer the twin nemeses of fascism and neurosis is much simpler than the truth. Like many young men of radical sympathies in not quite revolutionary times, he was not so much engagé as anxious to become engagé, and he was searching as much for the will to act as for actions to perform. Communism and psychoanalysis, he wrote, used the same basic method of

bourgeois”, and decreed “I shall not join the C.P.”.⁷⁴ Spender wrote of Auden, following the International Writer’s Congress:

His attitude was perfectly clear. He stated emphatically that political exigence was never a justification for lies. I had the impression that he was less drawn to Communism than his contemporaries. He had offered his services in Spain as a stretcher bearer in an ambulance unit. Yet he returned home after a very short visit of which he never spoke.⁷⁵

Spender, likewise, was later to insist (although this cannot but be coloured by hindsight) that though he “was impressed by the overwhelming accusation made by Communism against bourgeois society”, he “failed to find [himself] convinced by Communism”.⁷⁶ And Orwell admitted before the end of the Spanish Civil War, and even before the Munich Crisis, “some of the better of the left-wing writers were beginning to squirm. Neither Auden nor, on the whole, Spender wrote about the Spanish war in quite the vein that was expected of them”.⁷⁷ Whatever MacNeice’s stress on the importance of his generation’s engagement with the public and political external reality in their work, his interpretation of the dangers towards propagandising in the work of Auden, Spender and Day Lewis is of consequence in that it consciously distances his own art from that of his contemporaries. If Modern Poetry takes as an assumption that a new departure in modern poetry began with the work of Auden,

‘unmasking hidden conflicts’. For a year or two after 1933 he hoped that something – he was not sure what – that combined aspects of both might succeed in joining divided purposes in a single direction and ‘Make action urgent and its nature clear’. But his hopes focused less on the practice than on the theory of each, theories he knew that had not yet been realized and feared never could be realized. Even his hopes in the theories could not sustain him for long. The tone of his propaganda texts for public places in the 1930s seldom had the assured complexity of his writings for private ones”.

⁷⁴ Ibid 19.

⁷⁵ Spender, World Within World 247. In that autobiography, Spender also insisted on Auden’s complex relationship with Communism. Cf. Spender, “The Importance of W.H. Auden”, London Mercury 39.234 (April 1939): 616, 617: “He is not a Communist”; “A philosophy which is politically liberal and, ultimately, religious, emerges from Auden’s work”.

⁷⁶ Spender, World Within World 135.

⁷⁷ Orwell, Inside the Whale and Other Essays 39.

Spender and Day Lewis, MacNeice's inclusion of himself in that grouping is much less certain. MacNeice wrote in "Poetry To-Day":

As for the revolutionary, or communist, attitude, it was often so facile as to appear a mere nostrum. We are now in danger of a poetry which will be judged by its party colours. Bourgeois poetry is assumed to be found wanting; the only alternative is communist poetry. This seems to be an over-simplification. I doubt whether communist and bourgeois are exclusive alternatives in the arts and, if they are, I suspect these would-be communist poets of playing to the bourgeoisie. And I have no patience with those who think that poetry for the rest of the history of mankind will be merely a handmaid of communism.⁷⁸

John Lehmann, reviewing MacNeice's Modern Poetry in April 1939, felt that the book suffered from a "kind of slovenliness of thought and method". While MacNeice had "admirable things to say on many of the newer technical devices that poets like Auden have developed", again and again Lehmann felt "he might have said much more". MacNeice gave "very little idea of the richness and variety of Spender's lyric gift, and none at all of the qualities that make Day Lewis' wit-packed verses at their best so satisfying", Lehmann suggested. "And in spite of a long opening chapter on "A Change of Attitude", he does not convince one that he is sure what the change implies, or what factors are determining the direction poetry is going to take".⁷⁹ I would suggest that MacNeice's uncertainties about the direction of these poets are attributable to the uneasy grouping of MacNeice within such coteries.

Nonetheless, MacNeice's own attempts to distance himself from these political beliefs, and the attempts of some later MacNeicean critics to do likewise, have failed to free him from inclusion in that grouping. The following excerpt from Michael Brett's introduction to Spender's New Collected Poems (2004) is one example of the ways in which this reading still continues:

⁷⁸ MacNeice, "Poetry To-Day" 44. Rpt. Selected Literary Criticism 25.

⁷⁹ John Lehmann, "Poet on his Circle", rev. of Modern Poetry, New Statesman and Nation 17.423 (Apr. 1 1939): 508.

Much has been written about the young ‘Thirties Poets’. Spender, W.H. Auden, Louis MacNeice, Cecil Day Lewis and others were part of a generation of individualists who shared aesthetic and political tendencies which have become synonymous with 1930s literature – most significantly an enthusiasm for socialist thought and a fascination with industrial modernity. They came to attention in the Hogarth Press anthologies New Signatures (1932) and New Country (1933), where they challenged the Georgians’ vision of a Little England. Spender, like his peers, revered the work of modernist T.S. Eliot, and the sober moral imperatives of the poets of the First World War.⁸⁰

MacNeice did not appear with those poets in publications like New Signatures or New Country (1933). Nor is the issue of MacNeice’s engagement with Eliot and the First World War poets as simplistic as Brett maintains. MacNeice’s relationship with Eliot gave way to one with Yeats in the later years of the 1930s. These relationships will be discussed in detail in Chapter IV. While MacNeice did indeed challenge Georgian poetry (as will be discussed in the following chapter), this thesis is situated within a body of critical work that questions the ways in which he might be said to have shared the “aesthetic and political tendencies” of his generation. This thesis does so, however, through an analysis of MacNeice’s readings of Yeats.

MacNeice at all times in his prose writings of the 1930s refrained from those kind of sweeping generalizations made by Spender – “to be modern meant in the thirties to interpret the poet’s individual experience of lived history in the light of some kind of Marxist analysis”, for example.⁸¹ As for Spender himself, MacNeice remarked that he was a “naïf who uses communism as a frame for his personal thrills”.⁸² Richard Danson Brown is probably correct in detecting in MacNeice’s writings on Spender some degree of rivalry. (“MacNeice was two years older than Spender, yet Spender achieved literary celebrity ahead of MacNeice”. MacNeice’s Blind Fireworks (1929) was not a “significant success”, yet Spender’s Poems (1933) “received wildly

⁸⁰ Michael Brett, introduction, New Collected Poems of Stephen Spender (London: Faber and Faber, 2004) xvii.

⁸¹ Spender, “Background to the Thirties”, The Thirties and After (London: Macmillan, 1978) 25.

⁸² MacNeice, “Poetry To-Day” 45. Rpt. Selected Literary Criticism 26.

enthusiastic notices". While MacNeice worked in "relative obscurity" at Birmingham University, Spender was "lionized by literary London".⁸³) One might cite for instance MacNeice's biting criticism of Spender in "Poetry To-Day":

His poems have a fragmentary appearance as it is. I sometimes think that this is vicious but prefer to conclude that it is their virtue. His poems have not got that crystal self-contained perfection which is so glibly attributed to the ideal lyric. Nor do they impress one with the approved shock at a first reading. Their machinery is creakingly evident; the last line of a poem tends to be an especially telling one, while the personal or propagandist (and in either case not very unusual) subject matter is enlivened with 'poetical' images (roses, stars, suns) or with save-work epithets like 'beautiful' and 'lovely'. As for the cultural background, Spender has swallowed D.H. Lawrence whole and mixed him up with Shelley, Nakt-Kultur and Communist Evangelism. *Yet if you read Spender's one volume of Poems (published 1933) through several times, you will probably decide that he is an interesting and valuable poet.*⁸⁴

Yet MacNeice's assessment of Spender's example carries more weight than mere rivalry allows. Such comments form part of a real concern on MacNeice's part to create some artistic space. MacNeice's wish for his own son in "Ode", published in Poems (1935), was that the "blasphemy/ Of dusty words" may not "deceive him".⁸⁵ Recognizing MacNeice's political scepticism, Day Lewis considered Poems the best book of verse to have appeared in the past two years. According to Day Lewis, MacNeice's book was valuable, quite "apart from its poetic merit", in that it formed "a salutary corrective to the sometimes facile optimism and mass-hypnotized rhetoric of

⁸³ Richard Danson Brown, "'Your Thoughts Make Shape Like Snow': Louis MacNeice on Stephen Spender", Twentieth Century Literature 48.3 (Autumn 2002): 293.

⁸⁴ MacNeice, "Poetry To-Day" 60. Rpt. Selected Literary Criticism 38. (emphasis added) Cf. Spender, "Mr. MacNeice's Poems", New Verse no. 17 (Oct./ Nov. 1935): 18: "Mr. MacNeice's poetry is difficult to 'place', which means that it is impossible for a contemporary to criticise it. Therefore I can only attempt to describe the nature of these poems, and to explain superficial virtues and defects which particularly strike me". Spender's ambiguous review continued, "the fact that Mr. MacNeice so abundantly insists on his double (his poet's and his painter's) eye results in the sacrifice of a single image. He often achieves a brilliant, a dazzling line [...] yet he never achieves a crystalline phrase, nor a hard statement".

⁸⁵ MacNeice, Poems (London: Faber and Faber, 1935) 61.

the revolutionary poems.”⁸⁶ Auden, as did many contemporary reviewers, focused on MacNeice’s hesitant political stance as evinced in that collection:

But me my blood blinds to remember men
More than the birds, not to be delicate with squirrels.
Louis MacNeice expresses the same thought, but he is so doubtful about the outcome of being friends with Communists. He used to have a private religion of travestied classical myth. I do not think he will be comfortable in the party-line.⁸⁷

MacNeice’s “refusal to swallow the Communist potion against despair” was directly attributed in a review for The Dublin Magazine to his Ulster roots.⁸⁸ There, perhaps, MacNeice had witnessed at first hand the effects of hardened political attitudes.

MacNeice was painfully aware of the superficiality of much of the upper middle class’s proclamations of a working class affinity:

Educated people in England, if they consort with members of the working classes, tend to think of them as ‘characters’. You may throw darts with the yokels in the village pub but all the time the yokels are on stage and you are in the stalls. Instead of a bouquet for their performance you give them a pint of bitter.⁸⁹

His honest admission of these social realities meant that he had resisted any easy identification with the working class in his poetry during the decade. Such identification could only be made with an elision of class differences. His encounters with the working class while living in Birmingham in the mid-1930s served to enforce

⁸⁶ Cecil Day Lewis, rpt. with postscript, A Hope for Poetry (1934; Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1936):80; Samuel Hynes, The Auden Generation (1976; London: Bodley Head, 1979) 204.

⁸⁷ W.H. Auden, “Forty-Four Poets”, rev. of This Year’s Poetry 1935, compiled by Gerald Gould, Denys Kilham Roberts, John Lehman, Time and Tide 17.6 (8 Feb. 1936): 191-2. Cf. Dilys Powell, rev. of Poems, London Mercury, 32.1921 (Oct. 1935): 603-4: MacNeice, “strange to say”, has “no political allegiances” and has “no solution to offer”; G.W. Stonier, “Autumn Verse”, rev. of Poems by Archibald MacLeish, Second Hymn to Lenin by Hugh MacDiarmid and Poems by MacNeice, New Statesman and Nation 10.245 (2 Nov. 1935): 649: “Mr. MacNeice shares the Auden view of the world to-day, but does not accept the Communist remedy”. See also “The Arts To-Day”, rev. of The Arts To-Day, ed. Geoffrey Grigson, Times Literary Supplement no. 1756 (26 Sept. 1935): 529: “He is perfectly sceptical of the ideas and criticism with which many modern poets support their work, but does not the less appreciate their poetry when it is sustained by a false theory.” [...] “On the subject of communism as a necessary inspiration for poets he is very amusing”.

⁸⁸ Rev. of Poems, The Dublin Magazine 11.2 (Apr-Jun 1936): 79.

⁸⁹ MacNeice, The Strings are False 140.

his sense of the real difficulties of any such attempt. Recounting an outing to the pub with the brother of a girl employed by his wife and himself, MacNeice remarked: "I felt a barrier between us. He was affable, very polite, but he minded his p's and q's. One day he told me that he voted Labour but if he were me he would vote Tory. This kind of realism precluded intimacy".⁹⁰

MacNeice's job lecturing in Classics at Birmingham University from 1930 to 1936 also helped rid him of any facile communist notions that might have been fostered in Oxford. Coming "from the proletariat themselves", the students "were conscious of the weaknesses of the Prolet-Cult". MacNeice ironically noted that "some of them in fact were trying to achieve the old Oxford manner just at a time when the Oxford undergraduates were trying to declass themselves".⁹¹ In his autobiography, he denigrated the prevalence of communist beliefs amongst university intellectuals in the 1930s, commenting that in those years "Cambridge was still full of Peter Pans but all the Peter Pans were now talking Marx".⁹² In one form or another, the vast majority of criticism on MacNeice has recognised the poet's political scepticism in these years. MacNeice's work can be easily contrasted with Auden's declaration in "Brothers, who when the sirens roar" that "We cannot put on airs with you/ The fears that hurt you hurt us too". MacNeice's poems contain none of Auden's assertions of Marxist change:

On you our interests are set
Your sorrow we shall not forget
While we consider
Those who in ever county town
For centuries have done you brown,
But you shall see them tumble down
Both horse and rider.⁹³

⁹⁰ Ibid 142.

⁹¹ Ibid 154.

⁹² Ibid 156.

⁹³ Auden, The English Auden 121.

Auden's poem, as John Fuller notes, is pervaded with the language of public schools, and seems to corroborate, despite Auden's intentions, the gulf separating the classes.⁹⁴

In "To a Communist", MacNeice rebuked the facile embracing of Communism by the younger generation of poets. Although the poem might, at first glance, appear to fit neatly alongside other poems promoting Communism in the 1930s, it is drastically different in tone to Spender's "Oh young men oh young comrades" or "After they have tired of the brilliance of cities", both of which were published in Poems (1933).⁹⁵ Where Spender attempts to embrace the working class in such works, MacNeice sees any hopes for Communism changed by, and therefore defeated by, a continual flux:

But before you proclaim the millennium, my dear,
Consult the barometer –
This poise is perfect but maintained
For one day only.⁹⁶

"To a Communist" is not even ostensibly addressed to the working classes, as Spender's poems are. It seems, in fact, to be directly addressed to Auden, Spender and colleagues – witness the repetition of "my dear" in "Letter to W.H. Auden" (1937), for example, as well as MacNeice's comments in his autobiography regarding the common usage of this phrase in these circles at Oxford.⁹⁷

"To a Communist" can be seen as some kind of palinode to Spender's "After they have tired of the brilliance of cities". In Spender's poem, this imagery had formed a motif whereby the inequalities and differences of people could be erased. Death, in that poem, "stalks through life/ Grinning white through all faces/ Clean and equal like

⁹⁴ John Fuller, W.H. Auden: A Commentary (London: Faber and Faber, 1998) 164.

⁹⁵ Spender, New Collected Poems 15-16 and 17-18.

⁹⁶ *Ibid* 37.

⁹⁷ MacNeice, "Letter to W.H. Auden", 21 Oct. 1937, New Verse, nos. 26-7 (Nov. 1937): 13. Rpt. Selected Literary Criticism 86. Cf. MacNeice, The Strings are False 103: "the air was full of the pansy phrase 'my dear'. I discovered that in Oxford homosexuality and 'intelligence', heterosexuality and brawn, were almost inexorably paired. This left me out in the cold and I took to drink".

the shine from snow". Spender's images of revolutionary fervour were etched in the same terms: "And our strength is now the strength of our bones/ Clean and equal like the shine from snow". The new society that would emerge was imagined in terms of "a country/ Where light equal, like the shine from snow, strikes all faces". The new dawn would "explode like a shell/ Around us, dazing us with its light".⁹⁸ MacNeice's "To a Communist" plays on Spender's depiction of Marxist change in images of the natural phenomenon of the shaping of the landscape by snow:

Your thoughts make shape like snow; in one night only
The gawky earth grows breasts,
Snow's unity engrosses
Particular pettiness of stones and grasses.⁹⁹

In these lines, MacNeice refutes Spender's contentions and asserts his own doubts regarding the effectiveness of communist doctrine. Each phrase in this part of the poem is, as Richard Danson Brown points out, "freighted with a crisp resistance to this alleged unity"; the half rhyme of "engrosses" with "grasses", for instance, "undermines this process of absorption it describes".¹⁰⁰ The variation and difference between common things, so lauded in "Snow" in the same collection, is expelled by the blanket of white in "To a Communist", a levelling of differences that in any case is only temporary.

Though MacNeice once commented that Birmingham reconciled him to "ordinary people", the poem "Birmingham", from the same collection, can hardly be read as representing any kind of identification with the working class.¹⁰¹ The Yeatsian eight-line stanza is here dramatically altered with the thirties generation's characteristic

⁹⁸ Spender, New Collected Poems 17-18.

⁹⁹ MacNeice, Poems 37

¹⁰⁰ Danson Brown, "Your Thoughts Make Shape like Snow" 311.

¹⁰¹ MacNeice, The Strings are False 145.

up-to-date imagery, juxtaposing trains, policemen, factories and shops. The poem, in couplets of altering length formed on a variation of six, seven, or eight stresses, conveys the momentum of that aspect of society central to many 1930s poems – the city – and moves between crowded streets to the slums and suburbs. It is filled with the noises and bustle that dominate the landscape – “brakes of cars”, wirelesses, gadgets, “faces behind the triplex screens”, theatres, traffic signals and trams. Dillon Johnston is correct in pointing out that MacNeice speculated in his writings “in terms familiar to that educated common reader”. This was MacNeice’s oft-cited ideal reader. Where Yeats is often a speaker in his poem peering down from his tower, in MacNeice’s poetry, such viewpoints are reserved merely for “dead heroes commemorated in bronze”. MacNeice’s narrator instead “moves with the epochal traffic – on escalators, in cars, on trains, in taxis, and to the rhythm of the windscreen wiper or passing telephones.”¹⁰² Without doubt, MacNeice’s poetry immerses itself in the quotidian life he encounters. What it does not attempt to overcome simplistically, however, is the gulf between MacNeice, the provincial but upper class private school educated boy – acutely aware of his own enjoyment of his privileged lifestyle – and the working classes he encountered. In this recognition of his cushioned lifestyle, he comes closest to Orwell. It was Orwell who considered that this comfortable existence, cut off from harsh social and political realities, and any experience of totalitarian regimes, allowed other poets to dally happily with communist thought:

But there is one thing that undoubtedly contributed to the cult of Russia among the English intelligentsia during these years, and that is the softness and security of life in England itself. With all its injustices, England is still the land of habeas corpus, and the overwhelming majority of English people have no experience of violence or illegality. If you have grown up in that sort of atmosphere it is not at all easy to imagine what a despotic regime is like. Nearly all the dominant writers of the thirties belonged to the soft-boiled emancipated middle class and were too young to have effective memories of the Great War. To people of that kind such things as purges, secret police, summary

¹⁰² Dillon Johnston, *Irish Poetry after Joyce* (Indiana and Portlaoise: University of Notre Dame Press & Dolmen Press, 1985) 211.

executions, imprisonment without trial, etc., etc., are too remote to be terrifying. They can swallow totalitarianism because they have no experience of anything except liberalism.¹⁰³

In “Birmingham”, MacNeice’s interaction with the poorer quarters remains a distant view from the centre:

But beyond this centre the slumward vista thins like a diagram.
There, unvisited are Vulcan’s forges who doesn’t care a tinker’s damn.¹⁰⁴

MacNeice is not deluded by any notions of affinity with the working classes. The inhabitants of such quarters are described with “sleep-stupid faces” that pass “through the daily gate”. These quarters are “unvisited”. It is difficult to read that word “unvisited” as simply a piece of social criticism for the voice in the poem is unclear, and it is possible that the speaker is also guilty. Nor is it clear who “doesn’t care”. The shop girls are not portrayed any more attractively in this poem:

The lunch hour: the shops empty, shopgirls’ faces relax
Diaphanous as green glass, empty as old almanacs
As incoherent with ticketed gewgaws tied behind their heads.¹⁰⁵

The word “empty” is repeated twice. One might ask to whom are the girls incoherent? The answer may well be that they are incoherent – because they are alienated from – the poet himself. When the girls speak, it is of the trivial entertainment that appeases their dreary lives; this criticism is also levelled against the working class in Autumn Journal (1939):

¹⁰³ Orwell, Inside the Whale and Other Essays 36.

¹⁰⁴ MacNeice, Poems 40.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid 41.

The workman gathers his tools
For the eight-hour day but after that the solace
Of films or football pools
Or of the gossip or cuddle, the moments of self-glory
Or self-indulgence, blinkers on the eyes of doubt,
The blue smoke rising and the brown lace sinking
In the empty glass of stout.¹⁰⁶

The speaker's distance from the working class quarters in "Birmingham" is suggestive of MacNeice's own sense of alienation from that class. The Strings are False, while detailing MacNeice's own discomfort amongst the privileged children of his school years in England, also portrays his early awareness of the gulf dividing him from the working class. His autobiography details the ways in which he was kept from the Irish Quarter in his home town, as his nanny, Miss Craig, had warned "you never know what you might catch".¹⁰⁷ There is no sense in "Birmingham" that it is merely the working class that disgust MacNeice. The images of middle class society mirror those of the proletariat. The suburbs are "splayed outwards", a reminder of the "slumward vista". The cheap seductions are materialistic ambitions in fierce competition with neighbours. These too are "fickle norms". The boredom and vacuity of the shop girls is paralleled in the description of the "bleary haws" and "concrete claws".

Whatever social superficialities the upper classes could be accused of, in MacNeice's poems society at large is guilty of similar characteristics. In "Christmas Shopping" from The Earth Compels (1938), the poet adopts the voice of the people to cynically depict a tired and bored society: "What shall we buy for our husbands and sons/ Different from last year?"¹⁰⁸ Christmas imagery of draped stores, decorated windows, boxes of chocolates and swelling crowds of consumers are overshadowed by animal, wild or war-like images. "Foxes hang by their noses behind plate glass". The

¹⁰⁶ MacNeice, Autumn Journal (London: Faber and Faber, 1939) 16.

¹⁰⁷ MacNeice, The Strings are False 45. Cf. "When I Was Twenty-One: 1928", The Saturday Book 21, ed. John Hadfield (1961): 231. Rpt. Selected Prose 223.

¹⁰⁸ MacNeice, The Earth Compels (London: Faber and Faber, 1938) 55.

shops are “draperied jungles”, the “great windows marshal their troops for assault on the purse”. The materialism evinced in Christmas shopping is dismissed in the derisory description of pennies drained “Down to the sewers of money – rats and marshgas – / Bubbling in maundering music under the pavement”. The artificial faces drawn on boxes of chocolate stand in strong contrast to the figures in the public library:

While over the street in the centrally heated public
Library dwindling figures with sloping shoulders
And hands in pockets, weighted in the boots like chessmen.

The few exceptions who escape this deadening, materialist mindset – like a “chocolate-box girl” who “lightly manoeuvres the crowd, trilling with laughter” – are fated “after a couple of years” to “tire like the others”.¹⁰⁹

“Bagpipe Music”, might mock Yeats’s mysticism and occultism (“It’s no go the Yogi-Man, it’s no go Blavatsky”), but in a mixture of realism and surrealism, the poem satirises all aspects of society in its rhyming couplets – the vulgar bourgeoisie, the upper classes, drunken men on “government grants”, cheap sensationalism, money, politics and domesticity.¹¹⁰ The poem, according to Kavanagh, was a delight, preaching “practical politics” as well as being “good poetry”.¹¹¹ The savage imagery that had pervaded “Christmas Shopping” now delves into gothic realms in “Bagpipe Music”:

John MacDonald found a corpse, put it under the sofa,
Waited till it came to life and hit it with a poker,
Sold its eyes for souvenirs, sold its blood for whisky,
Kept its bones for dumb-bells to use when he was fifty.¹¹²

¹⁰⁹ Ibid 56.

¹¹⁰ Ibid 58.

¹¹¹ Kavanagh, rev. of *This Year’s Poetry 1938*, compiled by Denis Kilham Roberts and Geoffrey Grigson, *The Dublin Magazine* 14.2 (Apr-Jun 1939): 95.

¹¹² MacNeice, *The Earth Compels* 58.

It is not merely the upper classes who are accused of lethargy or inaction in this poem, so too are the working class:

It's no go the picture palace, it's no go the stadium,
It's no go the country cot with a pot of pink geraniums,
It's no go the Government grants, it's no go the elections,
Sit on your arse for fifty years and hang your hat on a pension.¹¹³

In Section III of Autumn Journal MacNeice is unflinching in his portrayal of an unequal society but avoids pity or sympathy for the working classes, who are portrayed as contributing to their plight by an indolent acceptance of their lot:

Most are acceptors, born and bred to harness,
And take things as they come,
But some refusing harness and more who are refused it
Would pray that another and a better Kingdom come,
Which now is sketched in the air or travestied in slogans
Written in chalk or tar on stucco or plaster-board
But in time may find its body in men's bodies,
Its law and order in their heart's accord,
Where skill will no longer languish nor energy be trammelled
To competition and graft,
Exploited in subservience but not allegiance
To an utterly lost and daft
System that gives a few at fancy prices
Their fancy lives
While ninety-nine in the hundred who never attend the banquet
Must wash the grease of ages off the knives.¹¹⁴

The views expressed correspond largely to those of the sceptical Orwell, whose criticism of Communism in works like Homage to Catalonia (1938) began earlier and continued more strenuously than any of his contemporaries.¹¹⁵ MacNeice, like Orwell in Animal Farm (1945), worried at power's ability to corrupt:

¹¹³ Ibid 59.

¹¹⁴ MacNeice, Autumn Journal 16.

¹¹⁵ MacNeice, The Strings are False 161. "The great danger of Marxist doctrine is that it allows and even encourages optimism. All their talk about strategy. After a bit the Marxist, who is only human, finds it such fun practising strategy – i.e. hypocrisy, lying, graft, political pimping, tergiversation, allegedly necessary murder – that he forgets the end in the means, the evil of the means drowns the good of the end, power corrupts, the living gospel withers, Siberia fills with ghosts. Fills with the victims of idealists trying to be pragmatic – or of pragmatists pretending to ideals. And the present master of the Kremlin,

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 elite
The elite must remain a few.¹¹⁶

It is interesting that in "The Poet in England To-Day: A Reassessment" (1940), MacNeice's condemnation of the political beliefs of the younger poets echoed Yeats's earlier criticism in his introduction to The Oxford Book of Modern Verse (1936):

The word 'Worker' – and the other word 'Proletariat' – became heavily overcharged with mysticism. It was not recognized that in a corrupt society the Workers are infected with the generally prevailing disease; proletarians, it was assumed, were exempt from original sin. This led to a sentimental self-abasement on the part of many intellectuals [...] The proletariat had become the Deus ex Machina.¹¹⁷

One can assume that this was more than an unconscious echo by MacNeice, who spent the years 1939 to 1941 engrossed in a study on the poet. Certainly, by the end of the 1930s when MacNeice had come to write his study of Yeats, he had gone some way towards understanding and acknowledging the reasons behind Yeats's distaste for Communism:

Yeats, like Eliot, assumes that a world built upon communist principles would imply a mechanical quality, a drab uniformity. It is to be hoped that this is a wrong assumption, though it is supported by many examples so far given of communist intellectual dictatorship, of the wholesale issue of machine-made and trade-marked opinions. Yeats and Eliot again assumed that a democratic world implies a low standard of thinking and taste [...] for this assumption too they can easily find plenty of evidence.¹¹⁸

being infallible, has scrubbed the walls to get rid of the echo of the voice of Lenin who admitted he made mistakes."

¹¹⁶ MacNeice, Autumn Journal 16.

¹¹⁷ MacNeice, "The Poet in England To-Day: A Reassessment", New Republic 102.13 (25 March 1940): 412-3. Rpt. Selected Literary Criticism 111. See Yeats, introduction, The Oxford Book of Modern Verse, ed. Yeats (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1936) 37- 8: "Communism is their Deus ex Machina, their Santa Claus, their happy ending, but speaking as a poet I prefer tragedy to tragic-comedy. [...] No matter how great a reformer's energy a still greater is required to face, all activities expended in vain, the unreformed. 'God', said an old country-woman 'smiles alike when regarding the good and condemning the lost'."

¹¹⁸ MacNeice, The Poetry of W.B. Yeats 103.

MacNeice equated his generation's adoption of Communist beliefs with the very artificiality they had pointed towards in Yeats's own beliefs: "It was possible to suspect that some of the intellectuals took up the cult of the Proletariat in the same way that W.B. Yeats took up the cult of his spirits (who came in their own words, 'to give him metaphors for his poetry')".¹¹⁹ MacNeice's refusal, in The Poetry of W.B. Yeats, to dismiss Yeats for his political beliefs was in large part coloured by his reluctance to participate in his generation's political enthusiasm. Thinking back to his twenty-first year, in 1961, in an article entitled "When I Was Twenty-One: 1928", and drawing perhaps on the title of Yeats's own autobiographical piece "When I Was Four and Twenty", MacNeice considered what his career might have been like had his path followed that of Auden, Spender and Isherwood to Berlin, in the 1920s or early 1930s, and their exposure to Communism: "I often wonder what difference it would have made to me if I had had a Berlin to say goodbye to".¹²⁰

iii. Elegies

I am in a very deplorable position. My sympathies are, I suppose, Left...
 My sympathies are Left. On paper and in the soul. But not in my heart or my guts. On paper – yes.
 I would vote Left any day, sign manifestoes, answer questionnaires. Ditto, my soul. My soul is all for moving towards the classless society. But unlike Plato, what my soul says does not seem to go. There is a lot more to one than soul, you know [...]
 With my heart and guts I lament the passing of class. Of class, property and snobbery.¹²¹

MacNeice's dialogue with his Guardian Angel in I Crossed the Minch bore witness to his struggle between his liberal or leftish social concerns and his recognition of his own

¹¹⁹ MacNeice, "The Poet in England To-day: A Reassessment" 412-3. Rpt. Selected Literary Criticism 112.

¹²⁰ MacNeice, "When I Was Twenty-One: 1928" 231. Rpt. Selected Prose 223.

¹²¹ MacNeice, I Crossed the Minch 130.

snobbish sense of class. MacNeice was conscious, as were his English contemporaries, that their comfortable background, “our bland ancestral ease”, faced a precarious future: “There still is an England which does not know it is dead but it is finding its coffin less and less comfortable. I cannot see that the old caste system can survive this war”.¹²² More so than the rest, however, he was less willing to apologise for his comfortable existence. MacNeice was never to enter into the developed sense of guilt that so often occurs in the writings of Auden or Spender:

Father by son
Lives on and on
Though over date
And motto on the gate
The lichen grows
From year to year.¹²³

For Spender, the communist ideology “became a kind of conscience severely criticizing us in our privileged society.” It had, he thought, “seemed a good conscience”.¹²⁴ In the young MacNeice’s case, there is an awareness of the discrepancy between his own background and those less fortunate, but a sense too of his discomfort at being confronted with that fact. In The Strings are False, for instance, MacNeice describes an encounter with a tramp which happened when he and his friend, Graham Shepherd, were enjoying a day swimming, away from school:

Easy for us, he was saying, it was easy enough for us; how would we like to do a day’s hard work? Graham said that we had to work too. The tramp laughed and spat. Never done a day’s work in your lives, he said. His swarthy male contempt felt like a bludgeon on our puny white bodies. “Books,” Graham said. “Books!” the tramp said and shambled away swearing. Graham and I made an effort to laugh it off, climbed out of the canal, wiped the slime off our legs in the long grasses and danced ourselves among the buttercups. But we could not quite laugh the tramp away. As if in the middle of a harpsichord recital a steamroller came through the wall and ran over the

¹²² MacNeice, “London Letter [2]: Anti-Defeatism of the Man in the Street”, 1 March 1940, Common Sense 10:4, (April 1941): 110-1. Rpt. Selected Prose 108.

¹²³ Auden, “On Sunday Walks”, The English Auden 34.

¹²⁴ Spender, “Background to the Thirties”, The Thirties and After 29.

harpichord, the gavotte dropped dead in its tracks. "Poor old bloke!" said Graham but he had spoiled our afternoon and we knew he was the enemy.¹²⁵

In his article "In Defence of Vulgarly" (1937), MacNeice set out clearly his propensity for the lifestyle he had enjoyed:

[O]n the subject of entertainment, I may say that when I can afford it, I like to go to the theatre in a white tie – and further, if I could afford it I should like to sit in a box, and I should like first to have dined on oysters and champagne. I know that people who write books about wine say that champagne is a vulgar drink, and that many people say that one only likes caviare because it is expensive. There may be quite a lot in this; but I am willing to admit that the extra expense gives me an extra thrill, and one which I am not ashamed of.¹²⁶

"I go to the theatre", he maintained in "The Play and the Audience" (1938), "if I want to cut a dash – to impress myself or my companions". "And so", he felt, "that half of the point of the theatre is lost if I do not sit in the stalls. As with a very grand restaurant, once one gets there one may as well do the job thoroughly".¹²⁷ Edna Longley notes that in Autumn Journal MacNeice "frankly acknowledges his class status" and "often stresses the material 'ease' or 'cushiness' of his life up to now".¹²⁸

Not but what I am glad to have my comforts,
Better authentic mammon than a bogus god,
If it were not for Lit. Hum. I might be climbing
A ladder with a hod.¹²⁹

The same might be said of works such as I Crossed the Minch and The Strings are False.

¹²⁵ MacNeice, The Strings are False 88.

¹²⁶ MacNeice, "In Defence of Vulgarly" 1408. Rpt. Selected Prose 46.

¹²⁷ MacNeice, "The Play and the Audience", Footnotes to the Theatre, ed. Richard Denis Charques (1938) 32. Rpt. Selected Literary Criticism 87.

¹²⁸ Edna Longley, "Louis MacNeice: Autumn Journal", Poetry In the Wars (Newcastle Upon Tyne: Bloodaxe Books Ltd., 1986) 87.

¹²⁹ MacNeice, Autumn Journal 49.

Adrian Caesar notes that “MacNeice did not react against his own class with the same animus and intensity to be found in the work of his English contemporaries”. Caesar asserts that “MacNeice’s vision is deeply individualistic, but he is not ashamed of this, and so I think his poems are less tortured than many of those written by the Auden group”.¹³⁰ Little in MacNeice’s writing corresponds to that predilection of 1930s bourgeois writers for engaging in the plight of the masses in order to assuage a sense of guilt for their own comfortable backgrounds. MacNeice did not ever accept that poetry should be written so as to appeal to a mass audience. In “Letter to W.H. Auden”, he admonished:

But I hope that you will not start writing down to the crowd for, if you write down far enough, you will have to be careful to give them nothing that they don’t know already and then your own end will be defeated. Compromise is necessary here, as always, in poetry.¹³¹

Critics such as Caesar and Stan Smith have attributed the difference between MacNeice’s reactions to the middle classes and those of his generation to a greater sense of insecurity about class position on MacNeice’s part. Smith discriminates between “Auden’s upper middle class assurance and MacNeice’s sense of his own – as he saw it – anxious lower middle class provinciality”.¹³² MacNeice’s uneasy sense of class is born out in The Strings are False:

¹³⁰ Adrian Caesar, Dividing Lines: Poetry, Class and Ideology in the 1930s (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1991) 94.

¹³¹ MacNeice, “Letter to W.H. Auden” 12. Rpt. Selected Literary Criticism 85. See also “An Alphabet of Literary Prejudices”, Windmill 3.9 (March 1948): 42. Rpt. Selected Literary Criticism 147: “Writing down to the presumed masses and writing up a factitious elite are both pusillanimous activities, for in either case the writer is false to his views and to himself. Yet one and the same man can often write honestly and valuably for a small public at one time and for a large one at another; most people after all have lots of different things to say – some esoteric, some ‘popular’. What we should never do is write for any public real or presumed, which is so alien to ourselves that to meet it we have to lie”.

¹³² Stan Smith, Irish Poetry and the Construction of Modern Identity (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 2005) 78. While Auden’s background may have been more secure than MacNeice’s, Auden’s biographers have also pointed to an uneasiness in his father’s profession as a doctor, whose standing was often determined “from the class of his patients”. See Davenport-Hines, Auden 8. See also Humphrey Carpenter, W.H. Auden: A Biography (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1981) 4-5.

During term we wore uniform black but at the end of the term we were allowed to wear ordinary suits to go home in. At the end of term accordingly everyone was jealously competitive and those boys were despised whose clothes were not well cut. As for the boys who went home in their school clothes – of whom I was one, for I was ashamed to ask my family for a decent suit – they were almost pariahs.¹³³

At Oxford, MacNeice's self-imposed exclusion from many parties was determined not only by the fact that he was not homosexual, but also because "I had not the money for those circles".¹³⁴ MacNeice attributed his being on the peripheries in school to the fact that he was not an athlete and was "ill-qualified for social climbing".¹³⁵ Throughout all of the accounts of his education at Sherborne and Marlborough there is also an acute sense of the provincial Irish boy from Ulster attending an English school. In "When I Was Twenty-One", MacNeice admitted that in these years: "I was very snobbish about accents, and the Belfast accent struck me as not only the ugliest but the least aristocratic of the lot".¹³⁶ It is noteworthy that in Modern Poetry it is to Yeats's school-going years in London, where he was "convicted of being both Irish and unathletic", that MacNeice attributes Yeats's sense of being "against the world-or-against the Anglo-Saxon world" – a role Yeats had "proudly sustained ever since".¹³⁷ Despite the social consciousness MacNeice shared with his generation, he readily admitted "unfortunately, nobody

¹³³ MacNeice, The Strings are False 81.

¹³⁴ MacNeice, "Landscapes of Childhood and Youth", pages from an unwritten book, The Strings are False 232-3.

¹³⁵ MacNeice, The Strings are False 81.

¹³⁶ MacNeice, "When I was Twenty-One" 231. Rpt. Selected Prose 223. Cf. page 235. Rpt. Selected Prose 228-9: "Thus I was horrified one day to receive a letter from some Poor Relations – a middle-aged and, I suspected, ungrammatical couple – suggesting they should come to tea with me. Then I remembered I had an "oak". As soon as the dreaded visitors had been corralled in my rooms in my college I explained to them the old Oxford custom of the two doors in one doorway: once the outer one had been "sporting", no one could get in from outside. "The idea", I said, "is to leave one undisturbed to work". "Look!" I said, sporting it quickly and forgetting to open it again. The idea was to protect my snobbery from callers; and so it did, but the bad taste still recurs to me. This fear of being caught with the wrong people was constant, and the world seemed full of the wrong people".

¹³⁷ MacNeice, Modern Poetry: A Personal Essay, (1938; Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1968) 81-2.

wants to admit that he is merely a bit of a crowd: the crowd are always the other people".¹³⁸

We do not come across in MacNeice's work prescriptive comments such as Auden's declaration that "it is impossible to understand modern English literature until one realizes that most English writers are rebels against the way they were educated".¹³⁹ Readers may have doubts about how likely Spender would be to follow the imperatives issued in poems like "Oh young men oh young comrades". MacNeice's poetry resisted these exhortations to rid oneself of upper class mannerisms altogether:

Oh young men oh young comrades
It is too late now to stay in those houses
Your fathers built where they built you to breed
Money on money it is too late
To make or even to count what has been made
Count rather those fabulous possessions
Which begin with your body and your fiery soul.¹⁴⁰

These traits are so tellingly absent in MacNeice's work that Tolley maintains: "it was an aspect of MacNeice's originality that, in an era so suspicious of emotional self-indulgence (though not an era at all free of it), he readily admitted to nostalgia".¹⁴¹ The comment is echoed by Hynes: "he was, he cheerfully admitted, a snob [...] the only difference was that MacNeice accepted his snobbery".¹⁴² The critical viewpoint as we have seen is borne out by MacNeice's own comments. For Yeats, in his introduction to The Oxford Book of Modern Verse (1936), this paradox in MacNeice's attitudes posed a problem. Yeats identified his horror at what would replace the aristocratic class with

¹³⁸ MacNeice, "In Defence of Vulgarity" 1407. Rpt. Selected Prose 43.

¹³⁹ Auden, "How Not to be a Genius", Prose 2: 19.

¹⁴⁰ Spender, New Collected Poems 15-16.

¹⁴¹ A.T. Tolley, The Poetry of the Thirties (London: Gollancz, 1975) 188.

¹⁴² Hynes, The Auden Generation 333.

MacNeice's horror at the political and social situation of the late 1930s and found none of the "recognized communist philosophy" in his work:

MacNeice the anti-communist, expecting some descent of barbarism next turn of the wheel, contemplates the modern world with even greater horror than the communist Day Lewis, although with less lyrical beauty. More often I cannot tell whether the poet is communist or anti-communist.¹⁴³

Yeats's aristocratic attitudes have been well documented. At the heart of Yeats's political thought in the 1930s was a deep-rooted antipathy towards the emerging industrial, democratic, and bourgeois society. In his younger years, Yeats had hoped that unity of culture between this cultural elite and the peasantry would transcend class divisions and foster a sense of national identity. This cultural unity, he believed, would come about through the elite's ability to interpret and make available the traditional folklore and mythology of the people. The intervening years, however, had witnessed a diminishing power in the landlord class. The complex problems of, and reactions to, the National Theatre had convinced Yeats that this unity of culture seemed ever more unlikely, as did the growth of a new Catholic middle class. In 1925, during Yeats's terms as senator, divorce failed to be introduced and in 1929 the Irish Censorship Board was established, controlling the moral standard of literature available in Ireland. In 1934, Yeats was again in conflict over the Abbey Theatre, when some American citizens of Irish descent protested to De Valera that the state should stop the Abbey (a state body) from performing in the US plays which insulted Ireland. It was the same argument that Yeats had faced in his earlier years over Synge's The Playboy of the Western World. As Yeats grew discouraged with the likelihood of national cultural unity, he increasingly turned towards an extolling of the virtues and traditions of the Anglo-Irish class.

¹⁴³ Yeats, introduction, The Oxford Book of Modern Verse 38.

The more social and community-minded MacNeice resisted excusing Yeats's outlandish conservative pronouncements on the benefits of the aristocracy and Anglo-Irish Big Houses. In 1936 he commented that Yeats "looks at the world through the reactionary spectacles of the admirer of heredity aristocracy".¹⁴⁴ In The Poetry of W.B. Yeats, Yeats's aristocratic attitude was similarly satirised:

Villiers de l'Isle Adam anticipated Yeats in many respects, for example in a strong bias towards aristocracy. He always remembered that he was a descendent of the Grand Master of the Knights of St. John of Jerusalem and his hero Axel is a hypersensitive aristocrat too exquisite for this world. The same snobbery appears repeatedly in Yeats, who writes, for instance, in *Dramatis Personae*: "Is not all charm inherited, whether of the intellect, of the manners, of the character, or of literature? A great lady is as simple as a great poet." [...] Yeats has many poems exalting monied leisure; the aristocracy find truth through idleness.¹⁴⁵

Yeats's cult of the Anglo-Irish Big House held no sway for the younger poet and MacNeice continuously asserted his distance from the ways in which in Yeats's work these houses were "correlated with his dislike for democracy, liberalism, the facile concept of progress", a dislike "by no means peculiar to him among twentieth-century poets".¹⁴⁶ Yeats, in MacNeice's view, "wanted to maintain with the barriers of privilege around the aristocracy those other barriers (of illiteracy and penury?) around the peasant".¹⁴⁷ Yeats might have accepted the values of his father, who, as MacNeice notes, wrote of a "mediaeval" country house in County Wicklow that it "stirred the historical sense and made you think of some golden age when no one was in a hurry and so all had time to enjoy themselves, and for the sake of enjoyment to be courteous and witty and pleasant".¹⁴⁸ This "snob idyllicism" was severely undercut by MacNeice.

¹⁴⁴ MacNeice, rev. of "Dramatis Personae" 121.

¹⁴⁵ MacNeice, The Poetry of W.B. Yeats 33.

¹⁴⁶ *Ibid* 102.

¹⁴⁷ *Ibid* 103.

¹⁴⁸ *Ibid* 85-6.

Yeats's belief in beneficial and educated big houses was demythologised by MacNeice, with the latter maintaining that in most cases these houses "maintained no culture worth speaking of – nothing but an obsolete bravado, an insidious bonhomie and a way with horses".¹⁴⁹ MacNeice's position was far from that of "a crusted Tory", as Yeats depicted himself in a Senate speech in 1923, and he refrained from Yeats's triumphant declarations of a belief that "there is no wisdom without leisure".¹⁵⁰

Such views, however, tell only part of the picture. MacNeice's readings of Yeats are informed by his own ambiguous attitude towards his comfortable existence. For this reason, MacNeice did not react to Yeats's aristocratic tendencies in the same manner as his contemporaries. In a review of Yeats entitled "Dramatis Personae", MacNeice rescued Yeats from his contemporaries' accusations. "We should think twice", he suggested, "before calling Yeats a snob". "There are more things in heaven and earth than are dreamt of in the philosophy of The New Statesman and Nation and perhaps the worst snobbery is to be always spotting snobs".¹⁵¹ In any case, MacNeice felt, Yeats's "aristocratic snobbery" had "been balanced, or extended, by his admiration for the Thersites type, the beggarly outcast, the ragged rebel, whom he has taken over from Synge".¹⁵² MacNeice's criticisms of Yeats and his own class should also be contrasted with his comments in the prose work, Zoo (1938):

I still think, however, that the Ulster gentry are an inferior species. They lack the traditions and easy individuality of the southern Anglo-Irish landowners; comparatively new to their class, they have to keep proving they are at home in it.¹⁵³

¹⁴⁹ Ibid 104-5.

¹⁵⁰ Yeats, "Damage to Property Bill", 28 March 1923 in The Senate Speeches of W.B. Yeats, ed. Donald Pearce (1960; London: Prendeville Publishing, 2001) 25-6.

¹⁵¹ MacNeice, rev. of "Dramatis Personae" 121.

¹⁵² MacNeice, Modern Poetry 82.

¹⁵³ MacNeice, Zoo (London: Michael Joseph Ltd., 1938) 80.

Yeats's advocacy of a leisured Anglo-Irish class was not adopted by MacNeice in his depictions of the English upper middle classes, in poems such as Autumn Journal and the earlier "An Eclogue for Christmas" from Poems:

The country gentry cannot change, they will die in their shoes
From angry circumstance and moral self-abuse,
Dying with a paltry fizzle they will prove their lives to be
An ever-diluted drug, a spiritual tautology.
They cannot live once their idols are turned out,
None of them can endure, for how could they, possibly, without
The flotsam of private property, Pekinese and polyanthus,
The good things which in the end turn to poison and pus,
Without the bandy chairs and the sugar in the silver tongs
And the inter-ripple and resonance of years of dinner-gongs?¹⁵⁴

MacNeice's torn relationship with the English upper middle class is evoked in Section I of Autumn Journal. The opening lines of the poem, set in Hampshire, were based on a real scene from MacNeice's own family background, Robyn Marsack argues. According to his sister "MacNeice and his family stayed with Lady Lowry (his step-aunt, widow of an admiral) at Wickham, Hampshire in 1938. All the 'inherited assets of bodily ease' were thus known to him, but as an importation from his stepmother's comfortably established family rather than as part of his early life."¹⁵⁵ In MacNeice's work, the upper classes are indicted for material values and self-concern, the "inherited worries, rheumatism and taxes/ And whether Stella will marry and what to do with Dick". Unlike Yeats's poems which apotheosised the merits of the Anglo-Irish, Autumn Journal satirises the values and concerns of the English upper classes. However, the ironies of the upper middle-classes' ineptitude, which are depicted in the first section, are revised by their position within the poem as a whole. The ironic portrait of a class which has cushioned itself against the inevitabilities of change

¹⁵⁴ MacNeice, Poems 16.

¹⁵⁵ Robyn Marsack, The Cave of Making: The Poetry of Louis MacNeice (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1982) 45.

precedes the poet's recognition of his own guilty propensity to seek an escape from the encroachment of the political world:

It is this we learn after so many failures,
The building of castles in sand, of queens in snow,
That we cannot make any corner in life or in life's beauty,
That no river is a river which does not flow.¹⁵⁶

It is the *autumnal* imagery of flowers and nature that express to the reader the inability of the aristocracy to prevent their own downfall, for all weapons and manners of fighting have been cast aside. The remnants consist of golden flowers that remind the poet of uniform buttons or musical instruments. But these, tellingly, are now only associated with the Salvation Army:

And August going out to the tin trumpets of nasturtiums
And the sunflowers' Salvation Army blare of brass
And the spinster sitting in a deck-chair picking up stitches
Not raising her eyes to the noise of the 'planes that pass.

MacNeice's depictions of a faded class in terms of obsolete military details owe something perhaps to Auden's images of a declining class. In "Here on the cropped grass of the narrow ridge I stand", Auden's retired upper middle classes in Wales have only a mountain to remind of a military existence:

Where on clear evenings the retired and rich
From the french windows of their sheltered mansions
See the Sugarloaf standing, an upright sentinel
Over Abergavenny.¹⁵⁷

In Autumn Journal the encroachment of time on the autumnal garden is directly correlated with deteriorating political circumstances:

Close and slow, summer is ending in Hampshire
Ebbing away down ramps of shaven lawn.¹⁵⁸

¹⁵⁶ MacNeice, Autumn Journal 10.

¹⁵⁷ Auden, The English Auden 141.

John Whitehead sees autumnal imagery in the form of falling leaves as the motif which brings together the various feelings of ending and loss in this lengthy poem.¹⁵⁹ The poem demonstrates an effort to preserve what is dying as a legacy of personal and cultural memory, and is itself part of this attempt at preservation. Throughout Autumn Journal there is a nostalgia that things must change, that “the delights of self-pity must pall”. Mass society, cultured classes and lovers are all inculcated in the attempt to avoid the onslaught of history. For the aristocracy, “summer is ending”; for the poet “summer is going/ South as I go north”, and the “faded airs of sexual attraction” wander “like dead leaves”; for the masses returning from holiday, “August is nearly over”; “Persephone” has “gone down to the dark”. In the love poem in section IV of Autumn Journal, “September has come”; and at the beginning of university term, “October comes with rain whipping around the ankles/ In waves of white at night”. An expectancy of doom pervades all of society. MacNeice’s poem might have resisted the overt elegising that Yeats attempted in his memorable evocations of Anglo-Irish life. MacNeice notes the flaws and failings of the upper classes, yet those criticisms are mitigated by his nostalgia for a comfortable private existence that is now threatened by political circumstances. Writing in a decade of a good deal of animosity towards such leisured and comfortable backgrounds, it is significant that MacNeice’s poetry reluctantly accepts the demise of this private existence, whatever his prose (and even poetic) qualifications about the English upper-middle-classes.

Yeats not only illustrated the ideals and values of the Anglo-Irish Big House in his poems, but often attempted to use his illustration – in the form of the surrounding trees, grounds, woods or lakes – to oppose the denigration of Anglo-Irish culture in the

¹⁵⁸ MacNeice, Autumn Journal 9.

¹⁵⁹ John Whitehead, A Commentary on the Poetry of W.H. Auden, C. Day Lewis, Louis MacNeice and Stephen Spender (New York: Lempeter Mellen, 1992) 86.

Irish Free State in the 1920s and 1930s. Jacqueline Genet maintains that since Yeats, this examination of cultural dislocation and anxiety, this contrast of “past ideal” and “present deprivation”, is “still sometimes expressed overtly in terms of the Big House, or at least in sudden images concomitant with it, and particularly its gardens, an integral part of the theme within the background of the English pastoral tradition”.¹⁶⁰ In the 1930s, Yeats was obliged to confront the imminent demise of the class that had provided such a powerful example of Unity of Being for him, something brought home to him with the death of Lady Gregory in 1932. This was coupled with the election of Fianna Fail to power, a party with little concern for Yeats’s concept of aristocracy.

“Coole Park, 1929”, completed on 7 September 1928, begins by offsetting the estate’s aristocratic traditions against the ravages of nature:¹⁶¹

Great works constructed there in nature’s spite
For scholars and for poets after us,
Thoughts long knitted into a single thought,
A dance-like glory that those walls begot.¹⁶²

The elegiac tone exists in the poet’s recognition of the encroachment of time on the world of Coole Park, depicted in the images of the estate grounds. This is exemplified in the contrast between the first and last stanzas, which highlights the decline of the estate. The “sycamore and lime tree” have become mere saplings, those walls reduced to “broken stone” and the house to a “shapeless mound”. The line “The rooms and passages are gone” prophesies the eventual destruction of the house.

In “Coole and Ballylee, 1931”, written in February 1931, Yeats again conveys his theme through his depiction of the effects of nature on the estate.¹⁶³ Bloom

¹⁶⁰ Jacqueline Genet, *The Big House in Ireland: Reality and Representation* (Brandon: Barnes and Noble, 1991) 289.

¹⁶¹ Norman A. Jeffares, *A Commentary on the Collected Poems of W.B. Yeats* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1968) 339.

¹⁶² Yeats, *The Winding Stair and Other Poems* (London: Macmillan, 1933) 27.

maintains that though still celebratory, “Coole and Ballylee, 1931” celebrates in “high desperation”.¹⁶⁴ In this poem Lady Gregory is near death, so much so that we do not actually see her but only hear the ghostly “sound of a stick upon the floor”. That description is made all the more powerful by the nature imagery, the “dry sticks under a wintry sun” in the second stanza, evoking images of decay and old age. The image of winter is sharply contrasted with the thought of “gardens rich in memory glorified”.¹⁶⁵ Thomas Parkinson is accurate in thinking that “the qualities of the milieu have important resemblances: the season is wintry, the wood is made up of dry sticks, and the scene reflects the psychology of the protagonist”.¹⁶⁶ The descriptions are a reflection of Yeats’s dislocation and discontent and culminate in a bitter conclusion imagining the destruction of the house and decay of the estate. The poem certainly lacks the positive note of poems such as “Lapis Lazuli”, in which consolation is found in the fact that civilisation will rise again. “All things fall and are built again”.¹⁶⁷ There is no reference in “Coole Park and Ballylee, 1931” to the promise of future cycles. Twice in the second stanza the thoughts of the poet veer towards death.

While the thirties confronted Yeats with the demise of the physical estate and its inspiration, he found artistic consolation in the founding of a poetics upon Coole. It was part of Yeats’s mythicising that would free him from the historical cycles of A Vision. Both “Coole Park, 1929” and “Coole and Ballylee, 1931” attempt to overcome the ravages of nature that are initially established in the poems by appropriating power to

¹⁶³ Jeffares, A Commentary on the Poems of W.B. Yeats 345.

¹⁶⁴ Bloom, Yeats 381. Cf. Donald T. Torchiana, Yeats and Georgian Ireland (Washington D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 1992) 327. Torchiana maintains that the later poem is “even more tragic”.

¹⁶⁵ Yeats, The Winding Stair 32.

¹⁶⁶ Thomas Parkinson, W.B. Yeats: The Later Poetry (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1964) 142.

¹⁶⁷ Yeats, New Poems (Dublin: Cuala Press, 1938) 2.

the poet. It is from his isolated position, facing the imminent destruction of a class, that Yeats finds a poetic basis. Affectionate diction is used to oppose the transient nature of the now dying Anglo-Irish aristocratic tradition – “old”, “beloved”, “famous”, “great”, “content”, “joy” – for these apotheosise the tradition of Coole. In “Coole Park, 1929”, the essential rhyming scheme abababcc, coupled with enormous assonantal development (particularly in the first stanza) and repetition, reinforces the sense of inexorable historical transformation. However, breaks in the rhyme occur at the points where Yeats most wants to offset art against nature. The final “thought/begot” half-rhyme is introduced as the poet dwells on the inspiration of Coole. In stanza two, the rhyming scheme is disrupted at “man” and “Lane” where the glorification and celebration of the names forms a type of apotheosis, a rendering into history of this tradition. Yeats is emphatic about the need for pause here. Lines 3, 4 and 5 are broken into two parts, separated by a comma, forcing the reader to slow as the people named are commemorated, with Synge granted a comma both before and after his name. Even in “humility/company” the poetic pace is slowed down. The rhyming scheme of the third stanza breaks at “point” and “withershins”, where Yeats refers to the “cold and passionate” tradition he had found at Coole, and at its “intellectual sweetness” that could “cut through time”. Stanza four consists of the most imperfect rhyming scheme. The first line fails to fit into the scheme for it is here that Yeats urges future artists to “stand” in memory. The final three lines are all off-rhymes where Yeats prepares to oppose history with his foundation of a poetic tradition.

In MacNeice’s work, the encroachment of the political and historical on the world of the personal is also symbolised by the effect of nature, usually in the form of garden imagery. There is no sense in which MacNeice, who had spent so many years in England, uses this to depict an unstable Anglo-Irish position as Yeats had done. Rather

MacNeice transfers this imagery to his particular English context. MacNeice's initial description of his home at Carrickfergus in The Strings are False concentrated specifically upon its "enormously large" garden, "with a long prairie of lawn and virgin shrubberies and fierce red hens among cauliflowers run to seed".¹⁶⁸ The description is a culmination of MacNeice's personal mythologising of gardens in his writings of the 1930s. That childhood garden was nostalgically evoked in his poetry as a longing for a type of golden era:

In my childhood trees were green
And there was plenty to be seen.¹⁶⁹

For MacNeice, the garden counteracted a childhood that consisted of a mother's illness, absence and death, a religious and often seemingly stern father, and a number of severe child-minders:

Our best antidote to these terrors and depressions was the gardener Archie, in whose presence everything was merry [...] for us nothing that Archie could do was wrong and he cast a warm glow upon everything he touched. We would anxiously wait in the morning for him to appear – he rarely turned up before noon because of his rheumatism – and, whenever we could escape from Miss Craig, we would encircle him in the garden and listen to him, as my father called it, romancing.¹⁷⁰

MacNeice's descriptions of the imaginative importance of the childhood garden were corroborated by his sister, Elizabeth Nicholson, who maintained that "Louis's imagination soon took over and a whole host of invisible people came to live in the

¹⁶⁸ MacNeice, The Strings are False 37. See also MacNeice, "Autobiographical Talk: Childhood Memories", pre-recorded for BBC and posthumously broadcast November 1963, Selected Prose 268-9. "[But] in due course, we moved into the rectory; [and I remember we had been taken up several times to see the rectory, or at any rate the garden, before we moved in. And] the first time I ever saw a lot of apple trees in blossom was there, and it made a terrific impact on me. A lot of these things I have woven into poems here and there. [Anyhow, the second house, which is] the rectory, was a red-brick house [with the whole ground on which it stands, garden, the whole lot is about an acre] – not, in fact, architecturally very beautiful; and it was not an old house, but it was [of course, being one's own house,] the centre of a great deal of mythology – private mythology – which still affects me in dreams".

¹⁶⁹ MacNeice, "Autobiography", Plant and Phantom (London: Faber and Faber, 1941) 70.

¹⁷⁰ MacNeice, The Strings are False 47.

trees and bushes and sheds”.¹⁷¹ It is clear, however, that the childhood garden was also associated with the sense of an ending and the loss of their mother, as both siblings recorded their last moments in the garden watching her leave-taking:

My mother became steadily more ill and at last she went away; the last I can remember of her at home was her walking up and down the bottom path of the garden, the path under the hedge that was always in shadow, talking to my sister and weeping. I had no part in this, I did not know what it was all about.¹⁷²

Gardens denoting private lives and personal moments populate MacNeice’s 1930s poetry. In “August”, published as part of MacNeice’s collection Poems, the inevitable encroachment of time is depicted metaphorically through the effects of autumn on the garden:

The shutter of time darkening ceaselessly
Has whisked away the foam of may and elder
And I realise now, as every year before,
Once again the gay months have eluded me.¹⁷³

The imagery is an updated version of Yeats’s in so far as it contains echoes of suburbia and the middle classes rather than the Big House or estate, but the sense of nostalgia for a golden past is unmistakably present as MacNeice attempts to poetically render a particular time and place:

While the lawn-mower sings moving up and down
Spiriting its little fountain of vivid green
I, like Poussin, make a still-bound fete of us
Suspending every noise, of insect or machine.¹⁷⁴

For MacNeice, the month of August becomes a leitmotif for the ending of enjoyable periods of life and spontaneity. This was perhaps in part due to his experiences of

¹⁷¹ Elizabeth Nicholson, “Trees were Green”, Time Was Away: The World of Louis MacNeice, ed. Terence Brown and Alec Reid (Dublin: Dolmen Press, 1974) 19.

¹⁷² MacNeice, The Strings are False 42.

¹⁷³ MacNeice, Poems 50.

¹⁷⁴ Ibid 50.

holidaying as a child just before school began, with “one eye on the calendar”, and in particular his trip as an undergraduate to Achill in 1929:

After walking the road through the bog which is full of stumps of bog oak like bones, we heard a robin singing and someone said, ‘That is its winter song. It is the first time I have heard it this year.’ I left Achill and fled for the South of France. But there night came earlier and summer, in spite of the cicadas, was just as undeniably over. And every year since I have been terrified by the movement of the year. The buoyant months are May and June. Once they are over, I feel defeated.¹⁷⁵

In the opening line of “August”, the advance of time and the ending of summer, both of which are signalled by the use of adverbs such as “ceaselessly”, reinforce the sense that the poet’s wish to escape time is futile. As in Yeats’s poems, the inexorability of the changes brought about by nature is conveyed through the use of full and partial rhyme which enforces the sense of constant movement. The stanzas are heavily dependent on run-on-lines. Stanzas one and two couple this with full rhyme in lines one and four, and partial rhyme in lines two and three. Stanzas three and four use full rhyme in lines two and four. Most important, structurally, the final stanza emphasises this continuous movement in a full abab rhyming scheme:

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.

Indeed, MacNeice resorts to an image from drama to remind us that these moments will be captured in literature only:

For the mind, by nature stagey, welds its frame
Tomb-like around each little world of a day.¹⁷⁶

¹⁷⁵ MacNeice, I Crossed the Minch 159.

¹⁷⁶ MacNeice, Poems 50.

The final stanza reverses this option. We are left at the end of the poem with a ghastly image of those who wish to escape the onslaught of time as already dead (“For we being ghosts”).

“The Sunlight on the Garden”, is an elegy for a love affair that had recently ended. In this poem, however, poetic vision has been widened to include more than just the lovers. The pronoun “We” which opens the poem reads as semantically ambiguous; MacNeice might mean the couple involved (just as Autumn Journal depicts the mistakes of the lovers in attempting to avoid the onslaught of time and the external world), or he may also have in mind society itself, and the comfortable lifestyle in which he has partaken. In Autumn Journal, the poet’s private forebodings are persistent reminders of the fate of society in general:

We cannot cage the minute
Within its nets of gold,
When all is told
We cannot beg for pardon.¹⁷⁷

For Yeats, his elegies were more than just private art, the Anglo-Irish Big House represented “not only the great man who lived there, but a form of social life that becomes strange and romantic as it fades into the distance”.¹⁷⁸

John R. Harrison considers Yeats’s Coole Poems, published in 1933, unusual when “the subject of most poetry was anything but ‘traditional sanctity and loveliness’”.¹⁷⁹ In fact, “The Sunlight on the Garden”, which celebrates a particular moment facing extinction, is strikingly reminiscent of Yeats’s Coole poems. MacNeice might recognise that such privileged existences are now unsustainable, but at base the poem is “a lament for what MacNeice takes to be the impending demise of his own

¹⁷⁷ MacNeice, The Earth Compels 10.

¹⁷⁸ “A Letter from W.B. Yeats”, qtd. Torchiana, Yeats and Georgian Ireland 83.

¹⁷⁹ John R. Harrison, The Reactionaries (London: Victor Gollancz, 1967) 51.

class”.¹⁸⁰ Nowhere in “The Sunlight in the Garden” do we see a poetic wish for the changes of Marxist socialism. The historical transformation pictured here is the natural phenomenon of changing seasons, which are treated allegorically, to convey a sense of finality. It is still, however, a deterministic change and one which the poet seeks to escape. The movement generated by the full abcbba rhyming scheme of the four stanzas in “The Sunlight on the Garden” again emphasises the relentless movement of time. It is coupled with an internal rhyme in each stanza, serving to point towards the ominous signs of nature’s advance (much as in Hardy’s “During Wind and Rain”) – “gardens/ Hardens”, “lances/ Advances”, “pardoned/ Hardened” – as well as examples of concatenated rhyme: “We cannot cage the *minute/Within its* nets of gold”. It was a device MacNeice used to success in “Autobiography”, where the full rhyme and refrain depicted the inevitable progress of time (although in that poem the childhood memories are conveyed with their own sense of entrapment and fear). In “The Sunlight on the Garden” the persistent rhyming scheme propels the reader towards the final line of each stanza, and the insistence on the inevitability of change. The final assonantal line of each stanza tarnishes any hope of repelling the destruction. Each of the poet’s expressions of attempts to refute change – in the active verbs “cage”, “beg”, “defying” – are in turn countered by verbs that leave the reader in no doubt of the spiralling situation – “hardens”, “compels”, “descend”. The sense of threat is unavoidable. Terence Brown comments that even the imagery of the bells is associated with a childish sense of terror and doom, stemming from local church bells.¹⁸¹ It is also true, however, that the imagery of bells and sirens is associated with increasing political

¹⁸⁰ Caesar, Dividing Lines 98.

¹⁸¹ Terence Brown, Louis MacNeice: Sceptical Vision (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1975) 112-3.

crises.¹⁸² During the thirties the notion of war was kept in the public mind through the recent publication of books on the First World War, anti-war activities, and the discussion of war and rearmament.¹⁸³ Nature's onset is so inevitable that D.B. Moore points out that MacNeice "opens with a chilling verse which depicts the sunbeams shining through the branches of the garden and yet, in the same stroke, kills the warmth and colour".¹⁸⁴

Again, in "June Thunder", a personal foreboding at the inescapable passage of time ("the unenduring/ Joys of a season") is presented in terms of ominous nature imagery. The "impending thunder" threatens "the garden hushed except for/ The treetops moving" and the "white flowers fade to nothing". Poetic vision narrows to the curtains in the speaker's room blowing suddenly inward. The depiction of the "clouds like falling masonry" is an echo of Yeats's loosening masonry in "The Stare's Nest by My Window", a poem which had depicted the impingement of political circumstances on the elder poet during the Irish Civil War. Indeed, MacNeice even incorporates the bird imagery of Yeats's earlier poem. MacNeice depicts the transient era as one of "overdate fancies", "sentimentality" and "whimsicality". But his choice of the word "catharsis" is significant for it suggests a redemption, a purging of possible faults and a plea for empathy towards the human placed in a tragic plight. MacNeice was always alert to the poet's responsibility to depict social and public realities. Nonetheless his poetry in these years questioned deeply its ability to create some kind of personal space for the poet. It was the Yeatsian challenge of poetry's reconciliation of these elements which increasingly focused MacNeice's thinking.

¹⁸² See for example MacNeice "An Eclogue for Christmas", *Poems* 13. Here the "evil bells" are explicitly linked to political circumstances.

¹⁸³ Robin Skelton, introduction, *Poetry of the Thirties* (1964; London: Penguin, 2000): 18.

¹⁸⁴ D.B. Moore, *The Poetry of Louis MacNeice* (Leicester: Leicester University Press, 1972) 62.

Chapter 2

“Those public fears which bruise our minds”

When a poet reads a poem written by another, Auden maintained in his article “Yeats as an Example” (1948), he is likely to be less preoccupied with “what the latter actually accomplished by his poem than with the suggestions it throws out upon how he, the reader, may solve the poetic problems which confront him now”.¹ The poet’s evaluations differed all the more from those of the pure critic where his immediate predecessors were concerned.² Auden’s assertions that the poet (mis-)reads his recent precursors by foregrounding the elements most relevant to his own poetic task are corroborated by MacNeice’s objections to literary criticism’s evaluation of poetic influence. The critical tendency to locate literary influences had, MacNeice thought, been “over-rated and over-exploited”. “The fact that I have read A is not what causes me to write α ”, he insisted. “Just as probably it is because I am the sort of person who is inclined to write α that I choose to read A. Unless I live on a desert island, I could easily shut A at the first page and look for something more congenial”.³ This chapter follows MacNeice’s advice for the literary critic and examines the ways in which MacNeice questioned at length the usefulness of Yeats as a model precisely because Yeats had contended with the issues which most engaged MacNeice as a poet in the

¹ W.H. Auden, “Yeats as an Example”, *Prose: Vol. 2, 1939-1948*, ed. Edward Mendelson (London: Faber and Faber, 2002) 384.

² *Ibid* 384.

³ MacNeice, “Subject in Modern Poetry”, Essay 8 in *Essays and Studies* by Members of the English Association, collected by Helen Darbyshire, 22 (Dec. 1937): 144. Rpt. *Selected Literary Criticism of Louis MacNeice*, ed. Alan Heuser (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1987) 58.

thirties and early forties. Yet MacNeice reminds us that “even misreadings can be fertile”.⁴ Through his expressions of Yeats’s significance MacNeice debated the type of relationship poetry might have with social and political realities, and the role that the artist could play in the political and public realm. His readings of Yeats, and his defences of him, were thus coloured by his refusal to provide some kind of simplistic resolution to these issues, and his refusal at the end of the decade to recant his generation’s belief in the value of art. MacNeice’s determination to engage with Yeats’s example might thus be seen as some measure of the crucial position Yeats held as precursor for him; a position of influence arguably as significant as that of any of MacNeice’s contemporaries.

i. Poetry and Politics

The debate in the 1930s over the public responsibilities of poetry was hardly new, but it seemed to rage in a heightened form throughout the decade, as it often does in periods of political and social instability. Much work has been done, most notably perhaps by Peter McDonald, to rescue MacNeice from “the ‘sceptical liberal’ tag” which McDonald suggests “has been used too easily in MacNeice criticism as though it did away with the need to consider the pressure of ‘political’ forces upon the poet’s imagination.”⁵ While MacNeice refused to subscribe to political doctrines, he shared his generation’s social and political anxieties. In his critical writings of the mid-thirties, MacNeice had been quite definite that poetry should include such realities. “Homer,

⁴ MacNeice, rev. of *A Reading of George Herbert* by Rosemond Tuve, *New Statesman and Nation* 44.1123 (13 Sept. 1952): 293-4. Rpt. *Selected Literary Criticism* 177.

⁵ Peter McDonald, “The Falling Castle: MacNeice’s Poetry 1936-1939”, *Studies on Louis MacNeice*, ed. Jacqueline Genet and Wynne Hellehouarc’h (Caen: Universite de Caen, 1988) 39.

Aeschylus, Dante, did not live in literary self-containedness”, he argued in “Subject in Modern Poetry” (1936). “Not only the muck and wind of existence should be faced but also the prose of existence, the utilities, the *sine qua nons*, which are never admitted to the world, or rather the salon, of the Pure Artist”.⁶ MacNeice refuted that esoteric Modernist notion that poetry existed within a closed circle, dismissing the notion that the poet was “a species distinct from the ordinary man” and that poetry could “only flourish in certain places or people, in the highbrow’s den or on the slopes of Helvellyn”.⁷ The doctrines of significant form endorsed by Anthony Blunt during MacNeice’s years in Marlborough were unequivocally discounted in that article: “Literature is made with words, and words are a means of conveying a meaning”, he insisted. “It is no doubt possible to use words for decoration, as the Moors used tags of the Koran to decorate their walls at heights where no one could read them”. However, “to do this in literature seems a perversion”.⁸ According to E.R. Dodds, it was MacNeice’s years in Birmingham, “his first introduction to the workaday world” which “humanized his aestheticism”, but that process took some time.⁹ MacNeice’s recanting of art’s dissociation from external realities informed his poem “An Eclogue for Christmas” published in Poems (1935):

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 scalped with a palette-knife
Without reference to this particular life.

⁶ MacNeice, “Subject in Modern Poetry” 144. Rpt. Selected Literary Criticism 58.

⁷ Ibid 145. Rpt. Selected Literary Criticism 59.

⁸ Ibid 145. Rpt. Selected Literary Criticism 58-9.

⁹ E.R. Dodds, Missing Persons: An Autobiography (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997) 115.

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.¹⁰

MacNeice was now insistent that literature must take as granted its social function. “We must never forget”, he advocated, “that poetry is made with words, that words are primarily for communication”.¹¹ He was unsparing in his criticism of 1890s aestheticism and its deliberate exclusion of the social or political life:

The poets of the ‘nineties and the Georgians who succeeded them were crippled by a reaction from the prophets; they did not dare to be moral, didactic, propagandist or even intellectual; fear of being thought hypocritical precluded them from interest either in God or their neighbour. This bogey of hypocrisy had hamstrung our intellects.¹²

This limitation of subject-matter inevitably affected their form, he thus argued, for their writing was merely “pretty or languid – drawling alexandrines, petite stanzas”.¹³

Both MacNeice’s and Auden’s lack of interest in politics, at school and at Oxford, has been detailed.¹⁴ Auden in these years had maintained that the subject of poems was merely “a peg on which to hang the verbal patterns”.¹⁵ MacNeice’s account of their Oxford years recollected that “neither Auden nor Spender had as yet shown the

¹⁰ MacNeice, *Poems* (London: Faber and Faber, 1935) 14.

¹¹ MacNeice, “Subject in Modern Poetry” 153. Rpt. *Selected Literary Criticism* 70.

¹² MacNeice, “Poetry To-Day”, *The Arts To-Day*, ed. Geoffrey Grigson (6 Sept. 1935): 31. Rpt. *Selected Literary Criticism* 14-15. See also MacNeice, *The Poetry of W.B. Yeats* (London: Oxford University Press, 1941) 16.

¹³ MacNeice, *Modern Poetry: A Personal Essay*, (1938; Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1968) 7-8.

¹⁴ MacNeice’s views at Marlborough were more than likely attributable to this friendship with Anthony Blunt, though Blunt was later to change his views dramatically. See MacNeice, *The Strings are False: An Unfinished Autobiography*, ed. E.R. Dodds (1965; London: Faber and Faber, 2007) 100. See MacNeice, “When I was Twenty-One: 1928” *The Saturday Book* 21, ed. John Hadfield (1961): 234. Rpt. *Selected Prose of Louis MacNeice*, ed. Alan Heuser (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990) 228. “It may be that Auden was already becoming Teutonically left-wing, and he had after all driven a vehicle for the strikers during the General Strike, but I cannot remember him at that time doing any political propaganda; his gospel seemed to be much more the Lawrentian one of spiritual revival through instinct but qualified by the cerebral methods of the ‘clinic’”. See Humphrey Carpenter, *W.H. Auden: A Biography* (London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd., 1981) 66.

¹⁵ Edward Mendelson, *Early Auden* (1981; London: Faber and Faber, 1999) 28.

slightest interest in politics” and, with a few exceptions, “the cult of Soviet Russia was something almost unknown”.¹⁶ “At that time, 1928”, MacNeice wrote, “we knew almost nothing of Hitler. Political ideas were those which concerned us least”.¹⁷ These attitudes had been made redundant in a matter of years, and neither Auden nor MacNeice was ever to return to these sentiments. Yet MacNeice was always careful to qualify the nature of poetry’s engagement with the political realm. In October 1934 New Verse questioned a set of writers as to whether they intended their poetry to be useful to themselves or others. MacNeice responded with a statement that denied these alternatives: “Mainly to myself; but I find it a very helpful detour to try to make my poems intelligible and interesting to others”.¹⁸ Similar sentiments were expressed by MacNeice in a statement on the Spanish Civil War in 1938. MacNeice insisted that though the “world no doubt needs propaganda”, propaganda “is not the poet’s job”. The poet “is not the loud-speaker of society, but something much more like its still, small voice”.¹⁹ In 1935 MacNeice insisted that “poetry to-day” is seen “to have affinities with history”.²⁰ Yet he also admonished that “poetry *qua* poetry is an end and not a means” and that poetry’s “relations to ‘life’ are impossible to define; even when it is professedly ‘didactic’, ‘propagandist’ or ‘satirical’ the external purport is, ultimately, only a conventional property, a kind of perspective which many poets like to think of as essential”.²¹

¹⁶ MacNeice, The Strings are False 114.

¹⁷ *Ibid* 120.

¹⁸ MacNeice, “Reply to ‘An Enquiry’ in New Verse”, New Verse no. 11 (Oct. 1934): 2, 7. Rpt. Selected Literary Criticism 3-4.

¹⁹ MacNeice, “A Statement”, New Verse nos. 31-2 (Autumn 1938): 7. Rpt. Selected Literary Criticism 98.

²⁰ MacNeice, “Poetry To-Day” 58. Rpt. Selected Literary Criticism 36.

²¹ *Ibid* 64. Rpt. Selected Literary Criticism 41.

Qualifying poetry's relationship with politics, MacNeice asserted his own independence from what he considered to be the dangerous tendencies of Auden's work: "The desire to show off your opinions, like all forms of egoism, is useful as yeast; it must not be your main ingredient. Auden, the journalist, runs the danger of merely showing off, of pamphleteering".²² What could not be repeated too often, MacNeice emphasized in a review of Look, Stranger! in December 1936, was that Auden was a poet who had "something to write about". MacNeice, however, resisted defining that subject matter as necessarily political, but rather drew attention to Auden's inclusion in his work of the poet's life:

Mr. Auden is a missionary but, unlike many missionaries, he has an eye. It is the eye which keeps the balance between emotion and intelligence, between Shelley and Eliot. Escapism is extremism. That criticism of life which is the function of major poetry (of what Mr. Auden himself calls parable-art) is the product of writers who, however much they may take sides, or however much they may rationalize, yet manage to remain in contact with what, on the analogy of the concrete universal, we may call the incarnate problem – i.e., human nature. For it is Mr. Auden who has brought back humanity into English poetry.²³

In that review MacNeice might have stressed enthusiastically Auden's inclusion of external realities. His praise was qualified, however, in his "Letter to W.H. Auden", published in the Auden Double Number of New Verse in November of the following year. If Auden was to be credited for his wish for social change and his introduction of subject matter including psycho-analysis, politics and economics, MacNeice balanced his praise by remarking:

You go to extremes, of course, but that is all to the good. There is still a place in the sun for the novels of Virginia Woolf, for still-life painting and for the nature-lover. But these would probably not survive if you and your like, who have no use for them, did not plump entirely for something different.²⁴

²² Ibid 58. Rpt. Selected Literary Criticism 36-7.

²³ MacNeice, "Look, Stranger! Poems. By W.H. Auden", The Listener 16.416 (30 Dec. 1936): 1257. Rpt. Selected Literary Criticism 76-7.

²⁴ MacNeice, "Letter to W.H. Auden", 21 Oct. 1937, New Verse nos. 26-7 (Nov. 1937): 11. Rpt. Selected Literary Criticism 84.

One notices again the distance which is evident in the phrase “you and your like” – something not evident in, for example, the writings of Stephen Spender. MacNeice’s letter to Auden insisted 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”.²⁵ The remark, as Alan Heuser notes, was a correction of MacNeice’s Shelleyan allusion to Auden as poet legislator in his review of Look, Stranger!.²⁶

In his introduction to The Oxford Book of Modern English Verse (1936), Yeats declared his admiration for “Auden, Day Lewis, and their school” despite their main defect which he considered to be a “lack of form and consequent obscurity”.²⁷ Yeats was clear, however, that the “concentration of philosophy and social passion of the school of Day Lewis and in MacNeice” lay “beyond [his] desire”.²⁸ In 1937, in “A General Introduction for My Work”, he laid out his antipathy for these younger poets’ rejection of “dream and personal emotion” and their propensity for “thought out opinions that join them to this or that political party”.²⁹ Yeats’s objections to the work of MacNeice’s generation stemmed from the same concerns expressed in his early prose. His writings on the Irish dramatic movement focused on his indignation with, as he termed it, those “who would muddy what had begun to seem a fountain with the feet of the mob”. (His remark was a similar one to that used in his letter to Dorothy

²⁵ Ibid 11. Rpt. Selected Literary Criticism 83.

²⁶ Alan Heuser, footnote to “Letter to W.H. Auden”, Selected Literary Criticism 83. See MacNeice, “Look, Stranger! Poems by W.H. Auden” 1257. Rpt. Selected Literary Criticism 77. “And if anyone still believes that poets legislate here is a poet who may suit him”. Cf. MacNeice, Modern Poetry 197: “I consider that the poet is a blend of the entertainer and the critic or informer; he is not a legislator, however unacknowledged, not yet, essentially, a prophet”.

²⁷ W.B. Yeats, introduction, The Oxford Book of Modern Verse (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1936) xxv.

²⁸ Ibid xli.

²⁹ Yeats, “A General Introduction for My Work”, Essays and Introductions (London: Macmillan, 1961) 525.

Wellesley regarding the Communist poets cited in the previous chapter.³⁰) In Yeats's view, a community that was "opinion-ridden" was merely "likely to put its creative mind into some sort of prison".³¹ Poetry that attempted to change or strengthen opinion was rhetoric, according to Yeats; it became poetry when "patriotism was transformed into a personal emotion by the events of life". Literature "was always personal, always one man's vision of the world, one man's experience".³² Yeats's own Cathleen ni Houlihan (1902) had developed from such a vision, not from political opinion:

I had a very vivid dream one night, and I made Cathleen ni Houlihan out of this dream. But if some external necessity had forced me to write nothing but drama with an obviously patriotic intention, instead of letting my work shape itself under the casual impulses of dreams and daily thoughts, I would have lost, in a short time, the power to write movingly upon any theme. I could have aroused opinion; but I could not have touched the heart.³³

MacNeice did not underestimate his generation's attempts to broaden the subject matter of poetry, as Yeats did. He would, however, have concurred with the elder poet's rejection of the subjection of poetry to political ends. In later years, MacNeice considered that the critical descriptions of a generation of political poets led by Auden had been vastly overstated. In April 1957, in the review "Lost Generations", MacNeice rebuked the suggestion that poets of the thirties had "tended to limit themselves to the apprehension of social and political realities". Rather MacNeice argued that "it partly depends on how one defines 'social' (language itself is 'social' after all):

Spender's Poems (published 1933) shows at least fifteen out of thirty-three poems that could not be called 'social' or 'political' at all. In Auden's Look Stranger (1936) the figure is at least fifteen out of thirty-one, in my The Earth Compels (1938) at least thirteen out of twenty-four. And in all these books most of the poems I am conceding

³⁰ Yeats, "First Principles" (1904), Plays and Controversies (London: Macmillan, 1923) 100.

³¹ Yeats, "An Irish National Theatre", Plays and Controversies 56.

³² Ibid 56.

³³ Ibid 56-7.

to the social-and-or-political category remain, to my mind, highly personal (sometimes too much so) and often even 'romantic' – in the tradition of that earlier 'social-political' poet, Shelley. As for Day-Lewis's From Feathers to Iron (1931) this whole sequence of twenty-nine poems is concerned with his wife having a baby; true, there are images in it drawn from the social or political – or industrial – spheres, but these are strictly subsidiary.³⁴

It was largely critical reviews of the poets that tended to put forward the claim for the overtly political concerns of 1930s' poetry. Auden's Look, Stranger! (1936), for example, was met with the declaration in Time and Tide that Auden was convinced that "the time has come for poetry to be useful, directly useful in the way that advertisements and traffic signals are useful, not indirectly so, as say, flowers and El Greco's paintings are."³⁵ As much critical work on Auden has demonstrated, the political purpose of his work was not always so straightforward.³⁶ In the introduction to his anthology The Poet's Tongue (1935), Auden himself insisted:

Poetry is not concerned with telling people what to do, but with extending our knowledge of good and evil, perhaps making the necessity for action more urgent and its nature more clear, but only leading us to the point where it is possible for us to make a rational and moral choice.³⁷

Auden's own poetry bore out the conflict between political and private spheres. "Out on the lawn I lie in bed" (June 1933) depicts one particular evening during his time as schoolmaster at Downs school, near Malvern:

Equal with colleagues in a ring
I sit on each calm evening,

³⁴ MacNeice, "Lost Generations", rev. of Poetry Now, ed. G.S. Fraser, London Magazine 4.4 (April 1957): 53. Rpt. Selected Literary Criticism 208-9.

³⁵ Clifford Dymont, rev. of Look! Stranger! By W.H. Auden, Time and Tide 17.49 (5 Dec. 1936): 1726.

³⁶ Cf. A.T. Tolley, The Poetry of the Thirties (London: Gollancz, 1975) 158: "Except for 'Spain' (1937) and the poems in A Journey to War (1939) and the small amount of verse in the pot-boiling On The Frontier (1938), Auden wrote little political poetry after the end of 1934. [...] The very generalised philosophical response of the sonnets in Journey to a War, in the face of the opportunity to write out of first-hand experience of an anti-fascist war, attests to Auden's growing estrangement from the political struggles".

³⁷ Auden, The English Auden: Poems, Essays and Dramatic Writings, 1927-1939, ed. Edward Mendelson (1977; London: Faber and Faber, 1986) 329.

Enchanted as the flowers,
The opening light draws out of hiding
From leaves with all its dove-like pleading
Its logic and its powers.

The poem in its extolment of such a personal moment attempts to rebuke the encroachment of the political world. Such endeavours, however, are severely undercut with the poet's references to Eastern Europe and his doubting of how long English intellectuals might escape the growing political crises:

And, gentle, do not care to know,
Where Poland draws her Eastern bow,
What violence is done;
Nor ask what doubtful act allows
Our freedom in this English house,
Our picnics in the sun.³⁸

Auden's recognition of the interpenetration of political circumstances and private lives was detailed in "August for the people and their favourite islands" (August 1935):

For now the moulding images of growth
That made our interest and us, are gone.
Louder to-day the wireless roars
Its warning and its lies, and it's impossible
Among the well-shaped cosily to flit,
Or longer to desire about our lives
The beautiful loneliness of the banks, or find
The stoves and resignation of the frozen plains.³⁹

That sense of torn loyalties occurs regularly in 1930s' writing. Spender's prose also conveyed a conflict between his private and his public feelings. In The Thirties and After, Spender himself remarked that the poets of his generation "were full of doubts mostly due to the fact that in varying and different ways they distrusted the involvement of art with politics".⁴⁰ They were, he continued, "extremely non-political

³⁸ Ibid 136-7.

³⁹ Ibid 156-7.

⁴⁰ Spender, "Background to the Thirties", The Thirties and After: Poetry, Politics, People (1933-1975) (London: Macmillan, 1978) 27.

with half of themselves and extremely political with the other half”.⁴¹ Analysing the works of MacNeice in retrospect, Spender pointed out how little of his poetry could be thought of as directly expressing political concerns:

MacNeice, for example, even while writing poetry in Autumn Journal, which contained the best political commentary of the decade, would emphasise how little political poetry he had written; and I think that his colleagues if told in an accusing way that they wrote political poetry would have answered defensively that, if so, they had written very little of it.⁴²

Spender’s comments seem endorsed particularly by the collection Poems which was largely concerned with an attempt to create some kind of personal space for the poet. Poems such as “An Eclogue for Christmas”, “Morning Sun”, “Sunday Morning”, and “August” are preoccupied with the encroachment of time on the personal world of the poet: “The evil bells/ Put out of our heads, I think, the thought of everything else”.⁴³ MacNeice’s urges to escape the political world were evoked in “Turf Stacks” and “The Individualist Speaks”. In “Valediction”, MacNeice unambiguously rebuked the hardened political attitudes he had witnessed in his native country:

Park your car in the city of Dublin, see Sackville Street
Without the sandbags in the old photos, meet
The statues of the patriots, history never dies,
At any rate in Ireland, arson and murder are legacies
Like old rings hollow-eyed without their stones
Dumb talismans.⁴⁴

The book was dominated by private concerns – MacNeice’s personal relationships with his wife and his son in “Mayfly” and “Ode”, his relationship with his native country

⁴¹ Ibid 18. See also World Within World: The Autobiography of Stephen Spender (1951; London: Faber and Faber, 1977) 202: “The impulse to act was not mistaken. But the action we took may not have been of the right kind. It was, for the most part, the half-and-half action of people divided between their artistic and their public conscience, and unable to fuse the two. I now think that what I should have done was either throw myself entirely into political action; or refusing to waste my energies on half-politics, made within my solitary creative work an agonized, violent, bitter statement of the anti-Fascist passion”.

⁴² Ibid 17.

⁴³ MacNeice, “An Eclogue for Christmas”, Poems 13.

⁴⁴ MacNeice, The Earth Compels (London: Faber and Faber, 1938) 20.

(“Belfast” and “Valediction”), and his private delight in savoured individual moments like “Snow” and “An April Manifesto”.

The temptation to escape into some kind of private world was always strong for MacNeice. Writing about his newly-married life in Birmingham in the mid-1930s, MacNeice remarked that it had “promised a life where the clocks had been put back or even replaced by sundials”.⁴⁵ He described his five years of marriage as a period of time in which both he and his wife had “ignored [their] Birmingham context as much as possible as though they were living on an island”.⁴⁶ Adopting the rhythm and words of Tennyson’s “The Charge of the Light Brigade”, MacNeice portrayed his evasion of any type of social or public duty. There is no sense of communist thought or affinity with the down-trodden in his descriptions, but rather an awareness of his own private privileges:

Tant que la vie durera Mariette dansera. Tant que la vie – or at least in 1930, the year of the liquidation of the Kulaks. And even in Birmingham, that sprawling ink-blot of nineteenth-century industry. Chimneys to the right of us, chimneys to the left of us, someone had blundered. But *we* were not the keepers of the badgered employees or the badgering unemployed, of the slaves of the assembly-belts, the fodder of the mills. Ours not to reason why and we might as well keep out of it.⁴⁷

This tension between the recognition that poetry must ultimately give voice to political and social complexities, and the consciousness of the lure of a closed-off world of the private self, pervades the poetry of MacNeice. In “Spring Sunshine”, MacNeice wondered:

If it is worth while really
To colonise any more the already populous
Tree of knowledge, to portion and reportion
Bits of broken knowledge, brittle and dead,

⁴⁵ MacNeice, *The Strings are False* 127.

⁴⁶ *Ibid* 133.

⁴⁷ *Ibid* 130.

Whether it would not be better
To hide one's head in the warm sand of sleep
And be embalmed without hustle or bother.⁴⁸

Poems, however, is dominated by the harsh reality that there is no harboured or sheltered world of self. "Morning Sun" begins by evoking a world depicted in terms of constant motion which seems to impact little on the leisurely observing casual speaker:

Shuttles of trains going north, going south, drawing threads of blue,
The shining of the lines of trams like swords.⁴⁹

The first two stanzas are filled with a vision of colour and beauty – the "threads of blue", the "shining" lines of trams, "the beautiful", the "haze of the morning", the "bright/ Chromium yellow" of the "gay sun's light", the "purple mist":

Everything is kissed and reticulated with sun
Scooped-up and cupped in the open fronts of shops
And bouncing on the traffic which never stops.

But the reader is already alert to the recognition that time offers no such escape. The passing traffic signals its movement and the image of death in the butcher's and fishmonger's shops upsets the deceptive depiction of the blissful morning.

In the final stanza, the sun has gone out and the streets are cold. The images are those of decay, "the hanging meat/ And tiers of fish are colourless and merely dead". It has been a superficial view, a world of subterfuge. The moving traffic becomes one of MacNeice's many images of a world of automatons, as do the people who have crowded the first stanza:

And the hoots of cars neurotically repeat and the tiptoed feet
Of women hurry and falter whose faces are dead.

⁴⁸ MacNeice, Poems 55.

⁴⁹ Ibid 29.

The hint of female sensuality suggested by the heels of shoes on the “tiptoed feet” is made redundant by the image of the women’s faces. The final lines extinguish any hope of a world filled with colour and beauty:

And I see in the air but not belonging there
The blown grey powder of the fountain grey as the ash
That forming on a cigarette covers the red.

In “Museums” the world of the intellect offers no escape for the speaker. Dan Davin recalls that MacNeice had always thought “there was something sinister about libraries and museums: however the scholar in him might value them, in his poetry they tended to symbolize *nature morte*, life dead and so susceptible of control, the immortal shrivelled to the immortelle”.⁵⁰ In this poem the “centrally heated refuge” that the museum offers those “running from among the buses” is dismissed as a world of “tall fake porches”, populated by “cases of pots” and “marble lives”. It is a world of the isolated individual who is imagined as “a beetle under a brick that lies, useless, on the ground”. The only heroism is that of ancient Rome and “other people’s martyrdom”, a life of fiction quickly upstaged in a world of reality. The individual:

Makes believe it was he that was the glory that was Rome,
Soft on his cheek the nimbus of other people’s martyrdom,
And then returns to the street, his mind an arena where sprawls
Any number of consumptive Keatses and dying Gauls.⁵¹

It is a picture of wilful isolation that is again developed in “The Individualist Speaks”, which is also included in Poems. In this poem, escapism is presented in no less savoury or successful terms. Escapism, or individualism in its worst form, is depicted as a type of memory loss (“We cannot remember enemies in this valley”) or

⁵⁰ Dan Davin, “In a Green Grave”, Closing Times (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975) 57.

⁵¹ MacNeice, Poems 29.

naivety (“who have not as yet sampled God’s malice”). It is a drunken respite presented as mere cowardice:

We with our Fair pitched among the feathery clover
Are always cowardly and never sober.⁵²

But, despite the poet’s declaration of intent in the final lines that he “will escape, with my dog, on the far side of the Fair”, the world inevitably intrudes in the poem, for even amongst the “feathery clover”, a prophet:

scanning the road on the hither hills
Might utter the old warning of the old sin
– Avenging youth threatening an old war.

The intellectuals who futilely “knock” their “brains together extravagantly” cannot escape the threat, so there is no reason to suppose that the speaker’s assertion of escape should result in any more successful an attempt.

The thirties’ insistence on the necessity for a poetry rooted in external realities manifested itself in MacNeice’s writings on Yeats in these years. Both “Poetry To-Day” (1935) and “Subject in Modern Poetry” (1936) revert to an analysis of Yeats’s poetic example in the context of the questions posed by MacNeice’s generation. MacNeice was careful to point out that a change from the 1890s doctrine did not come about simply because of World War I, when the questions concerning the role of poetry were highlighted to an exceptional degree. The significance of the work of Wilfred Owen for his generation was often expressed by MacNeice’s contemporaries. However, although he recognised that the war “blew the back out of the Georgian corner”, MacNeice also credited modernist writers like Yeats, Pound and T.S. Eliot with their

⁵² Ibid 31.

due. In their work poetry had begun to include much of the external world.⁵³ Before the War had broken out, Yeats “was working to make his verse less ‘poetic’”.⁵⁴ According to MacNeice, Eliot had incorporated life into his poetry. Even though he was “extraordinarily (pathologically?) interested in literature”, he “never fixed a great gulf between the street and the classics; he saw them in inter-relation”.⁵⁵ Eliot’s early poems might have been “studies from a corner”, but at least he “sat in this corner looking outwards, portraying the people nearest to him but seeing the contemporary world (and its implications of history) behind those people as their background”.⁵⁶ In these years, however, both Yeats’s and Eliot’s usefulness as poetic role models came in for some questioning. Eliot might have sat in a corner looking at the contemporary world. “Still”, MacNeice wrote in 1936, “a corner can be more or less screened off”. Yeats and Eliot, he felt, were “still fairly well screened when compared with Wilfred Owen or even with Auden and Spender”.⁵⁷

In “Poetry To-Day” MacNeice questioned the appropriateness of Yeats’s example. Technically, MacNeice felt, Yeats had many affinities with the younger English poets. Spender was “like him in that they both have worked hard to attain the significant statement, avoiding the obvious rhythm and easy blurb”. Auden and Day Lewis “both use epithets in Yeats’s latest manner”. Yet writing from a position firmly entrenched within the context of the English 1930s, MacNeice continued, “when all is said, Yeats is esoteric. He is further away from the ordinary English reader or writer than Eliot is; not only because of his cabalistic symbols, etc., but even more because of

⁵³ Ibid 10.

⁵⁴ MacNeice, “Poetry To-Day” 32. Rpt. Selected Literary Criticism 15.

⁵⁵ MacNeice, “Subject in Modern Poetry” 146. Rpt. Selected Literary Criticism 61.

⁵⁶ MacNeice, Modern Poetry 12.

⁵⁷ MacNeice, “Subject in Modern Poetry” 152. Rpt. Selected Literary Criticism 68.

the dominance in him of the local factor". The "rhythms and the texture of his lines" were "inextricably linked with his peculiar past and even with the Irish landscape. They are, therefore, not to be closely copied".⁵⁸ MacNeice's distance from Yeats's Irishness, and his firm rootedness in the dilemmas peculiar to the English 1930s, are evident in that comment. It was not until the Second World War that MacNeice found himself confronting this aspect of his predecessor's work directly. MacNeice's questioning of Yeats's role as precursor led him to conclude in that article: "If we must copy we should either copy people of our own age and society (wholesome plagiarism) or else people so far removed from us by time or language that our copying will not impose upon anyone".⁵⁹

MacNeice's contestations of Yeats's poetic model were not finalized or fully reconciled in these years. His deliberations were in part attributable to his own attempts to express the importance of poetry's roots in life while denying its subjection to political ends. In "Subject in Modern Poetry", MacNeice distinguished Yeats's poetry from that of his modernist colleagues, maintaining that "in spite of all his preoccupation with style and certain stage-room trappings which he still affects", Yeats "is a salutary influence on modern poetry just because he is *not* too literary (he is less literary than Mr. Eliot and far less literary than Mr. Pound)".⁶⁰ "We must not", MacNeice added, "be discouraged in Yeats by his self-stylization".⁶¹ While in "Poetry To-Day" MacNeice depicted Yeats's "local factor" in his poetry as preventing his young English contemporaries from following Yeats too closely, in "Subject in Modern Poetry", it was

⁵⁸ MacNeice, "Poetry To-Day" 63-4. Rpt. Selected Literary Criticism 40-1. Cf. "Mr. MacNeice on his Contemporaries", Poetry Review vol. 27 (1936): 258-9 for an account of MacNeice's speech to the English Association at Birmingham. There MacNeice also maintained that Yeats and Eliot were more esoteric than Auden and Spender.

⁵⁹ *Ibid* 64. Rpt. Selected Literary Criticism 41.

⁶⁰ MacNeice, "Subject in Modern Poetry" 150. Rpt. Selected Literary Criticism 65. (original emphasis)

⁶¹ *Ibid* 151. Rpt. Selected Literary Criticism 66.

MacNeice's assessment of the relevance and importance of these themes to many Irish people that led him to conclude: "Yeats is therefore nearer the ordinary man (or some ordinary men, i.e. Irishmen) than Eliot was until he too started writing for a group of ordinary men (i.e. English High Church Protestants)".⁶²

"I am not one of those who have nothing to say for his earlier poems and everything to say for his later poems", MacNeice wrote of Yeats in September 1935.⁶³ The challenge of Yeats's assimilation of public and political pressures focused MacNeice's thoughts on poetry and subject matter. While Yeats's later poetry was increasingly immersed in external realities, in "Subject in Modern Poetry" MacNeice established a certain distance from Yeats's early poetic example. Yeats had "started in the nineties as an escapist like the other poets of that time" and had "worked his way, by devious routes of hoodoo and wilful creeds, to a poetry which is concerned with life, a limited life but not so limited as Mr. Eliot's and one which is of value and interest to many". Yeats, MacNeice asserted, "like Mr. Eliot, is not a poet to imitate. He has gone too roundabout to his end".⁶⁴ On the other hand, MacNeice wrote that Yeats had "always recognized the importance of subject", and in so doing, he could be linked with poets like Wordsworth and Auden. MacNeice's embrace of Yeats as a model, however, came with qualifications. It was only in his later poems that Yeats had begun "to treat the *contemporary* subject; witness that magnificent poem 'Easter 1916'". Nonetheless, MacNeice, unlike his contemporaries, did not as readily designate Yeats's early poetry as escapist.⁶⁵ Yeats's "earlier 'Celtic' works must not", MacNeice insisted, "be

⁶² Ibid 152. Rpt. Selected Literary Criticism 67.

⁶³ MacNeice, "Poetry To-Day" 63. Rpt. Selected Literary Criticism 40.

⁶⁴ MacNeice, "Subject in Modern Poetry" 149. Rpt. Selected Literary Criticism 64.

⁶⁵ See for example Spender, The Destructive Element (1935; London: Jonathan Cape, 1938) 23. "Yeats is another artist who has moved from the romantic inventiveness of his youth to the acute observation of his old age". But Spender qualified: "I only wish that he had allowed his interest to extend still further,

regarded as purely decorative”. Yeats’s Cathleen ni Houlihan “may indeed be open to ridicule”, but MacNeice considered, “the mere fact that she has received these taunts proves that she is a live conception which means something to many people”.⁶⁶

MacNeice’s “most obviously ‘political’ work” of the 1930s, McDonald points out, took place in his collections The Earth Compels (1938) and Autumn Journal (1939); at a time when Auden, Spender and “even Day Lewis were edging away from the public contexts of their poetry”.⁶⁷ The increasing intrusion of political circumstances upon MacNeice’s poetry did not reconcile his reluctance to subject poetry to political ends. Throughout Autumn Journal, MacNeice seems to consider any political action futile. Political action in the poem, the issue “involving principle”, has now become bound “to squander principle in panic and self-deception.”⁶⁸ Many of the cantos in Autumn Journal do not concentrate specifically upon politics. Where they do, the “conferences, adjournments, ultimatums” are mockingly dismissed as ineffectual “flights in the air, castles in the air”. Autumn Journal, as Samuel Hynes has noted, is a passive poem and the most active political thing that MacNeice does in it is to work in an Oxford by-election.⁶⁹ The direct intervention of politics in the poem is depicted in terms of its encroachment on the private life of the poet or again, as in “Valediction”, in the poet’s memories of the form politics had taken in Ireland:

And I remember, when I was little, the fear
Banded among the servants
That Casement would land at the pier
With a sword and a horde of rebels;

outside the immediate circle of his friends, into the social life that surrounded him”. “The reader who goes to Yeats hoping to find in his work thought which is as profound as his contemporary awareness, goes away as a hungry sheep unfed”. See pages 120 and 129-130. (original emphasis)

⁶⁶ MacNeice, “Subject in Modern Poetry” 151. Rpt. Selected Literary Criticism 67.

⁶⁷ McDonald, “The Falling Castle: MacNeice’s Poetry 1936-1939” 27.

⁶⁸ MacNeice, Autumn Journal (London: Faber and Faber, 1939) 32.

⁶⁹ Samuel Hynes, The Auden Generation (1976; London: Bodley Head, 1979) 372.

And how we used to expect, at a later date,
When the wind blew from the west, the noise of shooting
Starting in the evening at eight
In Belfast in the York Street district;
And the voodoo of the Orange bands
Drawing an iron net through darkest Ulster,
Flailing the limbo lands –
The linen mills, the long wet grass, the ragged hawthorn.
And one read black where the other read white, his hope
The other man's damnation:
And God save – as you prefer – the King or Ireland.⁷⁰

In Autumn Journal, the poet is conscious of what his private life has excluded, but that consciousness is clouded by a sense of nostalgia for what has since been lost:

But life was comfortable, life was fine
With two in a bed and patchwork cushions
And checks and tassels on the washing-line,
A gramophone, a cat, and the smell of jasmine.
The steaks were tender, the films were fun,
The walls were striped like a Russian ballet,
There were lots of things undone
But nobody cared, for the days were early.
Nobody niggled, nobody cared,
The soul was deaf to the mounting debit.⁷¹

Modern Poetry (1938) opened with the poet's acknowledgement of the decade's contentious debating of the relationship between poetry and external realities in the assertion that "this book is a plea for impure poetry, that is, for poetry conditioned by the poet's life and the world around him".⁷² The main characteristic of his generation of poets, MacNeice felt, was that they were "interested in a subject outside themselves – or at any rate in a subject which is not merely a subject for their poetry".⁷³ Poets were now, he insisted, "working back from luxury-writing and trying once more to become functional". MacNeice also, however, wrote in that work that poetry was "something more than mere communication and that *if* that 'something more' could be abstracted

⁷⁰ MacNeice, Autumn Journal 61-2.

⁷¹ *Ibid* 33-4.

⁷² MacNeice, preface, Modern Poetry i.

⁷³ MacNeice, Modern Poetry 17.

from the whole it might well prove to be that which makes the whole a poem".⁷⁴ He was careful to qualify his comments on poetry's present usefulness, advising that "poetry to-day should steer a middle course between pure entertainment ('escape poetry') and propaganda".⁷⁵ Both Zoo and I Crossed the Minch, published in 1938, express similar concerns. In Zoo, in response to the Reader's rebuke as to whether he could do something more serious than writing, something more useful to the community, the Writer insisted:

The less serious activities, or the less serious branches of serious activities, should continue to be practised. Twenty-four hours a day of whatever is hallmarked as serious – pamphleteering, preaching, praying, goose-stepping, grinding axes – would soon kill off the human race. I am strongly against the abolition of harmless frivolities.⁷⁶

A similar debate was to occur between Head and Foot in MacNeice's I Crossed the Minch, with Foot berating Head:

And those who think don't have to walk,
All they do is talk and talk
And who is any the better for that?
The gutter-sparrow and the alley-cat
Are just as chatty and more expressive.
[...]
What always riles me is the ----
That is talked by intellectuals
With a clipped accent and a market name
They utter clichés just the same.
Now we have reached those blessed islands
What do you say to a little silence?⁷⁷

Modern Poetry is then typical of MacNeice's writings in the mid-thirties which debated the extremities of a private or personal poetry and a poetry subject to political demands, and found both wanting. All of MacNeice's prose during these years provides evidence for McDonald's refutation of the insufficiency of "this kind of division

⁷⁴ Ibid 20. (original emphasis)

⁷⁵ MacNeice, preface, Modern Poetry i.

⁷⁶ MacNeice, Zoo (London: Michael Joseph Ltd., 1938) 19.

⁷⁷ MacNeice, I Crossed the Minch (1938; London: Longman, Greens & Co., 2007) 38.

between art and action, or private and public concerns, which tends to be misapplied in relation to MacNeice's work of the period".⁷⁸ Literature, for MacNeice, could not be defined in terms of its political function; for such an approach contained within it the dangers of mere propagandising. Neither, however, could poetry create a clear and distinct boundary between the public and private spheres. Poetry must take account of political and social circumstances, and by doing so, it could comment on public realities through the lens of the private individual experience.

It was again through his examination of the challenges of Yeats's poetic model that MacNeice attempted to define his own role as poet in these years. MacNeice's contemporaries are situated as the direct poetic successors of Yeats and Eliot in Modern Poetry. This attempt to establish a line of poetic inheritance was seized upon by Geoffrey Walton in a review for Scrutiny, but Walton underestimated the significance of MacNeice's attempts to question and define the usefulness of these poetic father figures: "The treatment given to these subjects is of a kind that one would ordinarily expect from someone who had read nothing more advanced than a school history of literatures, though, as the following pronouncements show, the tone is one of deliberation and authority".⁷⁹ MacNeice's differentiation of the work of his generation from that of their precursors whilst still establishing a line of contemporary poetry can be seen as an attempt to create some artistic independence for his generation. Yeats, MacNeice still felt in 1938, was "a poet of the library" and his world was largely a private one.⁸⁰ Yeats's world-view was "so esoteric" that MacNeice thought he could

⁷⁸ Peter McDonald, Louis MacNeice: The Poet in his Contexts (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991) 16.

⁷⁹ Geoffrey Walton, "The Progress of Poetry", rev. of Modern Poetry and This Year's Poetry, 1938, ed. D. Kilham Roberts and Geoffrey Grigson, Scrutiny 7.4 (March 1939): 437.

⁸⁰ MacNeice, Modern Poetry 168.

“only escape from literature at odd moments”.⁸¹ The poet, for MacNeice, was “man at his most self-conscious” and that meant “consciousness of himself as man, not consciousness of himself as poet”.⁸² His own prejudice, MacNeice wrote, was thus “in favour of poets whose worlds are not too esoteric”.⁸³ Still troubled by the example of Yeats’s poetic career, MacNeice in Modern Poetry chose to focus on the wider inclusion of life in his later poetry:

Yeats is a person of common sense who has taken a not unrealistic part in Irish politics and in the managing of a theatre, a hard-headed controversialist, a wit, a good publicity man, a practical snob. But he is also, of course, a spiritualist, a hankerer for yoga, a malingerer in fairyland. The fairy-lover Yeats was for some time dominant, but the experiences of life, coupled with a change of diet in reading (and also, perhaps a change of diet literally) have for many years now adjusted the balance.⁸⁴

It was in his study of Yeats that MacNeice finally reconciled his thoughts on his precursor’s example. The context of the decade’s questioning of the role art might play in the public or political world informs MacNeice’s study of Yeats from the beginning. “There is not, to my knowledge – nor do I think there can be – any satisfactory definition of the relationship of poetry to life”, MacNeice wrote in his September 1940 preface to the book. He was convinced, however, that “there is such a relationship and that it is of primary importance”. Characteristically of MacNeice, he refuted any facile notions of poetry’s connection to the world around it, adding: “I am also convinced that a poem is a thing in itself, a self-contained organism, a ‘creation’”.⁸⁵ While poetry might “correspond in some indefinable way to life”, it was

⁸¹ Ibid 24.

⁸² Ibid 1.

⁸³ Ibid 198.

⁸⁴ Ibid 81.

⁸⁵ MacNeice, preface, The Poetry of W.B. Yeats vii.

“at the same time an individual, a brand-new thing”.⁸⁶ MacNeice maintained in his preface that in his earlier book, Modern Poetry, he had “over-stressed the half-truth that poetry is about something, is communication”. So it is, he now wrote, “but it is also a separate self”.⁸⁷ MacNeice’s comments perhaps overshadow the extent to which he had resisted any utilitarian notions of the role of art in the earlier work. In fact, in Modern Poetry, poetry’s relationship to “life” had also been qualified. MacNeice had emphasised in that book that “the relationship between life and literature is almost impossible to analyse”; “it should not be degraded into something like the translation of one language into another. For life is not literary, while literature is not, in spite of Plato, essentially second hand”.⁸⁸

One of the early pieces of criticism alert to MacNeice’s ambiguous relationship with his contemporaries was James G. Southworth’s Sowing the Spring (1940). Significantly, once he had asserted the problems of MacNeice’s inclusion within English coteries, Southworth pointed instead to the importance of Yeats. “Easy criticism”, he suggested, had tended to include MacNeice’s work with that of Auden, Spender and Day Lewis. MacNeice, he argued, was distinct because an Irishman, and “frequently reveals traits that link him more closely with Yeats than with his contemporaries”.⁸⁹ As with Samuel Hynes’s later attempts to explain MacNeice’s uneasy position within an Auden-led group, Southworth resorts to MacNeice’s Irishness as reason for his affinity with Yeats.⁹⁰ To a degree, MacNeice’s Irish roots were a significant characteristic in explaining his uneasiness within such a group in the

⁸⁶ Ibid vii.

⁸⁷ Ibid viii.

⁸⁸ MacNeice, Modern Poetry 198.

⁸⁹ James G. Southworth, Sowing the Spring: Studies in British Poets from Hopkins to MacNeice (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1940) 165.

⁹⁰ Hynes, The Auden Generation 380.

eyes of these writers themselves. Spender's poem "Louis MacNeice" had, as Richard Danson Brown notes, uneasily expressed a sense of rivalry between the poets. Spender's poem had depicted MacNeice in terms of a haughty demeanour.⁹¹ It had also conveyed MacNeice's Irishness as one reason for the poets' lack of connection:

Now, reading his poem 'Bagpipe Music', I don't know how to pronounce
C-e-i-l-i-d-h – nor what it means –
He looks down from high heaven
The mocking eyes search-lighting
My ignorance again.⁹²

It is, however, a simplification to explain the importance of Yeats to MacNeice simply by way of their shared origins. As the following sections will argue, MacNeice read, and turned to Yeats as an authoritative figure during the thirties, often precisely against the backdrop of the external pressures of a peculiarly English context.

ii. Yeats and the Question of Escapist Poetry

By the time of writing his study on Yeats, in the context of the outbreak of the Second World War and the contentious questioning of the role and value of poetry, MacNeice surpassed his writings of the decade in his defence of Yeats's significance as poetic predecessor. Early reviews of *The Poetry of W.B. Yeats* (1941) in *The Listener* stressed MacNeice's concern in that book with poetry's relationship with the external world: "Mr. MacNeice is very aware of the difficulties of judging poetry by its subject matter.

⁹¹ Richard Danson Brown, "'Your Thoughts Make Shape Like Snow': Louis MacNeice on Stephen Spender", *Twentieth Century Literature* 48.3 (Autumn 2002): 315-6.

⁹² Stephen Spender, *New Collected Poems*, ed. Michael Brett (London: Faber and Faber, 2004) 322.

He questions the importance of subject matter altogether".⁹³ MacNeice's study on Yeats was determined to rescue the elder poet from the views of a generation who seemed only to find relevance in Yeats's more political poems beginning with "Easter 1916". Seven years after MacNeice's study was published, Auden insisted that Yeats had "effected changes which are of use to every poet". These contributions were, however not "to new subject matter, nor to the ways in which poetic material can be organized". Rather, Yeats's legacies had been his transformation of "a certain kind of poem, the occasional poem, from being either an official performance of impersonal virtuosity or a trivial *vers de societe* into a serious reflective poem of at once personal and public interest" and his release of "regular stanzaic poetry, whether reflective or lyrical, from iambic monotony"⁹⁴ Auden's views on Yeats's relevance echoed those which had been expressed by Spender in 1939. The young writers of his generation, Spender argued, who had "borrowed most from the developed manner" of Yeats's later years, could not draw on "his beliefs, mysticism and aristocratic individualism":

Although he was the poet most respected by young and old; although he lived to influence the young generation of poets more powerfully even than, as a young man, he had influenced his own contemporaries [...] yet no school of poetry is likely to spring from his work. For it is founded on no theory of writing, no coherent philosophy of life, no objective view of humanity which could form the broad basis of a style, a philosophy and a drama on which other poets could live and create.⁹⁵

The difference in tone between the views of MacNeice's peers and The Poetry of W.B. Yeats was noted in at least one contemporary review. "Alas", Helen Fletcher, attuned to the likelihood of heavy contestations of Yeats's significance following his

⁹³ Rev. of The Poetry of W.B. Yeats, The Listener 26.661 (11 Sept. 1941): 383.

⁹⁴ Auden, "Yeats as an Example" 388. See also page 385: "In most cases, when a major writer influences a beginner, that influence extends to his matter, to his opinions as well as to his manner – think of Hardy, or Eliot, or D.H. Lawrence; yet, though there is scarcely a lyric written to-day in which the influence of his style and rhythm is not detectable, one whole side of Yeats, summed up in the Vision, has left virtually no trace".

⁹⁵ Spender, "The 'Egotistical Sublime' in W.B. Yeats", The Listener 21.527 (16 Feb. 1939): 377.

death, wrote in Time and Tide, “it would be libellous to publish the names of the rats, worms and jackals my sardonic vision had pictured having a preliminary nibble at the integrity of Yeats”. However, she was relieved to note that MacNeice had “arisen to safeguard it”.⁹⁶ MacNeice, in his book on the elder poet, challenged his contemporaries’ views on Yeats’s legacy:

Yeats all his life was a professed enemy of facts, and that made my generation suspicious of him. It was a generation that had rediscovered the importance of subject matter: a poem must be *about* something. Further, a poem must be about something *real*, and “real” was often taken to mean contemporary. By these standards much of Yeats’s poetry was vicious. In his later books, however, there was enough contemporary subject matter to permit of the discovery that Yeats had become a “realist”.⁹⁷

In response to this attitude, MacNeice countered that while an improvement in Yeats’s poetry seemed “related to an extension of his subject matter”, this relationship “could not be rigidly formulated”. The value of a poem could not be assessed by “simple reference to the objective importance of its subject matter”.⁹⁸ It was quite right, MacNeice thought, that “a poet like W.H. Auden should reassert that a poem must be about something”. It was even right “to go further and maintain that great poetry cannot be made out of subject matter which is essentially trivial”. But in a tone that was characteristic of MacNeice throughout the 1930s, he warned that it had been a mistake to take subject matter “as the sole, or even the chief, criterion of poetry”.⁹⁹ For MacNeice, “the believers in Art for Art’s Sake had gone too far in asserting that poetry can be judged without any reference to life. But the realist went too far in the other

⁹⁶ Helen Fletcher, “The Perfect Champion”, rev. of The Poetry of W.B. Yeats, Time and Tide 22.20 (17 May 1941): 412.

⁹⁷ MacNeice, introduction The Poetry of W.B. Yeats 2. (original emphasis)

⁹⁸ *Ibid* 2-4.

⁹⁹ *Ibid* 2-3.

direction. A poem does not exist in a vacuum, but a poem at the same time *is* a unity, a creation".¹⁰⁰

MacNeice's questioning of poetry's subject matter focused on Yeats's early poetry. Spender too had tackled the issues of Yeats's early poems in The Destructive Element (1935). Spender had maintained that "beautiful as some of these poems are, they are enervating and contain a weariness of which Yeats seems, in old age, quite incapable". One could not imagine the late Yeats saying: 'I will arise and go now, and go to Innisfree' – a phrase which Spender thought "calls up the image of a young man reclining on a yellow satin sofa". Rather "there would be a roar of thunder, a flash, and he would be off".¹⁰¹ The differences between MacNeice's readings of "The Lake Isle of Innisfree" and Spender's more overt criticisms were noted by reviewers of The Poetry of W.B. Yeats. "The ghost of the early Yeats is hard to kill", Fletcher wrote, "Louis MacNeice is wise rather to cosset it. He is even magnanimous about Innisfree, a poem it is fashionable to despise".¹⁰² Denying as he had done throughout the study, the simply binaries of poetry of escape and poetry based in life, MacNeice defended the poem from Spender's summations in The Destructive Element:

Mr. Spender can write this because he knows that when Yeats wrote Innisfree, he was consorting with the indolent aesthetes of London's fin de siècle. But Innisfree actually was a protest against London. I see no reason to disbelieve Yeats's own statement that at the time when he wrote it, he was longing for a County Sligo. And County Sligo is not a Never-Never Land. The Poem is a mannered poem and, in a sense, escapist, but the escape which Yeats hankers for is not merely a whimsical fiction; it is an escape to a real place in Ireland which represented to him certain Irish realities.¹⁰³

MacNeice's defences of the elder poet were perhaps coloured by his recognition of a similar urge in his own poetry. As the next chapter will show, MacNeice's own

¹⁰⁰ MacNeice, The Poetry of W.B. Yeats 3. (original emphasis)

¹⁰¹ Spender, The Destructive Element 117.

¹⁰² Fletcher, "The Perfect Champion" 412.

¹⁰³ MacNeice, The Poetry of W.B. Yeats 53.

engagement with escapism and Irish places was to become acute during the war years. MacNeice, in his readings of the Yeatsian poem, distanced himself from Yeats's early beliefs that art should eliminate observations of the surface details of life. Yet he also firmly situated his readings of it within the debate on subject matter that had been argued in the early parts of his study and asserted his independence from the interpretations of his generation. In so doing, MacNeice positioned his own poetic approaches as some type of mediation between the poetic example of his precursor and the model supplied by his peers:

His poem, *Innisfree*, was inspired by the sight of a London shop-window where a little ball was dancing on a jet of water. A poet like W.H. Auden (and maybe Shakespeare too) would most probably have included the little ball in the first verse of the poem, which would not necessarily have been better or worse for it but which would then have become a different poem. But Yeats's assumption that it would then have been a less passionate poem is incorrect. Neither observation nor cerebration is necessarily inimical to passion.¹⁰⁴

In Yeats's later wish to revise the archaic language of the poem, he had, MacNeice felt, "meant to meet the man in the street halfway, to break the barrier between poetic and common syntax". Yeats, however, had failed to come as far as MacNeice's own generation's inclusion in their poetry of external life. Yeats, MacNeice thought, "had failed to recognize, however, that other poets might have equally good reasons for meeting the man in the street three-quarters way, for breaking the barrier between poetic and common *material*".¹⁰⁵ Thus, MacNeice's readings of Yeats were constructed around his attempts in his own prose to differentiate between a poetry which was subject to political ends, and a poetry which was rooted in the poet's life and the world around him.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid 80.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid 80. (original emphasis)

MacNeice, however, found multiple ways in which to accommodate Yeats. Yeats's early poetic example could not be expected to be embraced by MacNeice's contemporaries, given that it had been developed in the context of Yeats's circumstances at that time, and "a man is conditioned by his time and place".¹⁰⁶ His early work had been founded upon theories which were "perhaps inevitable in the Nineties but which would hinder, if not finally inhibit, a poet writing in more normal circumstances".¹⁰⁷ Yeats, MacNeice wrote, "was orientated towards Ireland, towards a simplified past, towards certain specialized doctrines. He repudiated general knowledge, world ideals, science, and internationalism". He had "kept his questions comparatively simple as so was less likely to make hopelessly inadequate answers".¹⁰⁸ MacNeice might have overstated Yeats's insular concern with Ireland and Irish literature, speaking in terms of his belief in the possibility of an Irish literature that would match the English tradition, and his hatred of English modernism, in terms of Yeats's hatred of internationalism. While Yeats had envisaged an Irish national consciousness as closely linked to an Irish literature rooted in the landscape and mythology of the country, his earlier work had also focused on Indian spirituality. He had stressed too his belief that Irish mythology and spiritually could match any of the ancient nations or eastern countries. What is important, however, is that MacNeice was willing to make allowances for the specific social and political conditions in which Yeats found himself writing. Yeats's questions, MacNeice insisted, were not, "as assumed by his detractors, comparatively trivial ones", unless it is was argued that no one could "ask a question of importance if he lives in a backward country and finds the

¹⁰⁶ Ibid 20-1.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid 28.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid 19.

thought of other countries uncongenial”.¹⁰⁹ The same criteria for literature might not apply in MacNeice’s own circumstances, but that did not diminish Yeats’s achievement. “Yeats’s limitations may have prevented him writing the greatest kind of poetry”, MacNeice conceded, but he added, “they enabled him to write perhaps the greatest poetry of his time”.¹¹⁰ Coming some way towards reconciling his beliefs with Yeats’s disliking for “journalism” in poetry – that is the surface detail of life – MacNeice commented:

Those who take the whole modern world for their canvas are liable to lapse into mere journalism. It is my opinion, though it was not Yeats’s that the normal poet includes the journalist – but he must not be subservient to him. The normal poet – witness the Elizabethans – should not be afraid of touching pitch. But the pitch is so thick on the world thoroughfares nowadays that a poet needs exceptional strength not to stick in it. Yeats avoided the world thoroughfares. It would be a disaster if all poets were to imitate him. In his own case the great refusal was justified.¹¹¹

MacNeice’s comments also verify his removal from the artistic struggle with the elder poet as engaged in by Clarke or Kavanagh. As with these poets, the example of Yeats’s poetry of the Revival is not a viable model for MacNeice. MacNeice, however, devotes relatively little space to contending with this aspect of his predecessor’s work, relegating it to one chapter entitled “The Irish Background”. Clarke’s review of MacNeice’s book focused on MacNeice’s concern with the pertinence of Yeats as modernist precursor to his English generation and his slighting of Yeats’ legacy for Irish poetic traditions and movements. It did not occur to MacNeice, Clarke wrote, “to wonder why writers in the country felt that they must resist the dominating influence of English literary fashions, recover their own traditions and attempt to express their own

¹⁰⁹ Ibid 19.

¹¹⁰ Ibid 19.

¹¹¹ Ibid 19.

minds in their own way”.¹¹² A degree of artistic competitiveness might be sensed behind Clarke’s criticism, given that his review rebuked MacNeice for dismissing most of his Irish contemporaries, with the exception of Yeats, “in a few lines of ill-disguised contempt”.¹¹³

And finally, if Yeats’s early political beliefs might still be seen to pose a problem for the reader of MacNeice’s generation, MacNeice suggested a policy which had served him in good stead in overcoming the issue of Yeats’s more unflattering political statements – Yeats was not to be taken at his word. “One has to be careful not to accept literally what Yeats says about himself”.¹¹⁴ Indeed, “in spite of himself”, MacNeice wrote of Yeats, “he had looked for *ideas* in Shelley and Blake”; a feature which MacNeice suggested good-humouredly, at least meant that Yeats’s “ban on ideas could be lifted if these ideas were irrational”.¹¹⁵ Yeats’s rules were not so steadfast that when ideas came along that suited his tendency to reject the material and industrial, his poetry could not include them. MacNeice hoped in his book “to prove that Yeats, granted his limitations, was a rich and complex poet, who often succeeded by breaking his own rules and who turned his own liabilities into assets”.¹¹⁶

MacNeice did not accept Yeats’s view in his introduction to The Oxford Book of Modern English Verse that 1890s aestheticism had ended in 1900 when “everybody

¹¹² Austin Clarke, rev. of The Poetry of W.B. Yeats, The Dublin Magazine 16.2 (Apr-Jun 1941): 76. See also Roibeard O Farachain’s review of MacNeice’s book in The Bell 2.2 (May 1941): 93: “Mr. MacNeice has, apparently, accepted, not English but English-cosmopolitan standards, modified by a dash of knowledge and feeling. He writes a chapter on ‘The Irish Background’ when he would, as a product of a more normal country, be writing out of his native background himself”.

¹¹³ Ibid 76.

¹¹⁴ Ibid 20.

¹¹⁵ Ibid 30-1. (original emphasis)

¹¹⁶ Ibid 20.

got down off his stilts”.¹¹⁷ But a change had undoubtedly come about in Yeats’s poetry, namely, MacNeice felt, due to the influence of politically activist women such as Maud Gonne, and Yeats’s financial and political dealings with the National Theatre when he had “to grapple with the outside world”.¹¹⁸ While “most of the poets of the Nineties lost themselves in the sand”, according to MacNeice, Yeats escaped “because he harnessed the aesthetic doctrine to a force outside itself which he found in his own country”.¹¹⁹ The rooting of Yeats’s poetry “in life” had been radically altered, MacNeice considered, by the influence of Synge. Synge had not only strengthened Yeats’s “admiration for the Irish peasantry”, he had “brought home to him the value of their brute vitality”. From the time of meeting Synge, “Yeats’s poetry shows far more recognition of physical man”.¹²⁰ MacNeice thus concurred with his generation that “a study” of Yeats’s development “is a study in rejuvenation”.¹²¹ Yeats’s collection Responsibilities (1914) had, he felt, marked a turning point in his work. The bulk of Yeats’s early poetry had “belonged to the dream world; but that world was essentially irresponsible, implied a reversal or abnegation of the values of the physical world we live in”.¹²² In his later poetry, Yeats had preferred “to treat a different kind of life” and, in MacNeice’s opinion, “a more vital kind”.¹²³

In “A Double Debt to Yeats” (1956), Spender, commenting on the change in Yeats’s subject matter, asserted that as the reader turned to “No Second Troy” in Yeats

¹¹⁷ Yeats, introduction, The Oxford Book of Modern Verse: 1892-1935 xi.

¹¹⁸ MacNeice, The Poetry of W.B. Yeats 81.

¹¹⁹ *Ibid* 38.

¹²⁰ *Ibid* 40.

¹²¹ *Ibid* 55.

¹²² *Ibid* 110.

¹²³ *Ibid* 69.

Collected Poems (1933), reality broke through “the dream of the early poetry” for the first time. “Suddenly the violence belongs to the outside world, the fury and bitterness come hissing back from between the poet’s teeth”.¹²⁴ From then on, Yeats’s problem was no longer that of “converting reality into his own dream and there reconciling himself to it through the artifice of beauty” but that of the “struggle with experience invading his inner life from the outside world” and the attempt to make poetry out of that struggle.¹²⁵ That did not imply, however, that Yeats’s poetry was constructed on “a framework of reality”, rather Yeats’s poetry was “based on the need to extend his unreality in order to deal with his reality” and constructing “a philosophy which would contain the experience pouring in from outside”.¹²⁶

MacNeice was willing to agree with the “realists” of his generation that the inclusion of important events in contemporary history such as the Easter 1916 Rising made a welcome entrance into Yeats’s later poetry. He welcomed such subject matter, however, only because it conferred an advantage on both the poet and reader for the following reasons: on the poet because such an event is “likely to produce in him that emotional tension which can do half the poet’s work for him”; and on the reader because “being himself acquainted with and probably moved by that event, he is already halfway to an understanding of the poet’s reaction to it”.¹²⁷ MacNeice refused to see the contemporary subject matter of poems such as “Easter 1916” as the sole reason for Yeats’s relevance to a younger generation of poets. “We cannot”, he insisted, “infer from this that a poem about such an event is necessarily a better poem or a more

¹²⁴ Spender, “A Double Debt to Yeats”, The Listener 56.1436 (4 Oct. 1956): 513.

¹²⁵ Ibid 513.

¹²⁶ Ibid 513. Cf. Day Lewis, “A Note on W.B. Yeats and the Aristocratic Tradition”, Scattering Branches: Tributes to the Memory of W.B. Yeats, ed. Stephen Gwynn (London: Macmillan, 1940) 176-178 for a more charitable reading of Yeats’s “realism” and “escapism”.

¹²⁷ MacNeice, The Poetry of W.B. Yeats 4-5.

important or even a more realistic poem than a poem about something far less contemporary or far more obscure or private". All that could be said, MacNeice wrote, was that "many poets – including, I think, Yeats – are more likely to write well, that is with clarity, strength, and emotional honesty, when they are writing about something which has moved them *and others* in their own time than when they are writing about something which belongs more exclusively to their own private mythology".¹²⁸ These were the same criteria for poetry that had been applied by MacNeice in writing of his own work and political positions in "A Statement" (1938): "The poet is both critic and entertainer. He should select subjects therefore which (a) he is in a position to criticize, and (b) other people are likely to find interesting".¹²⁹ Thus the features of Yeats's poetry foregrounded in that study are necessarily those highlighted by the context in which the book was written, but are also a measure of how MacNeice's readings of Yeats were constructed so as to endorse his own poetic stances.

Yeats's poetic structures preoccupied MacNeice in his study of the poet. In that book MacNeice remarked that Yeats's "philosophy has become a philosophy of antinomies, a dialogue where he himself does all the talking".¹³⁰ MacNeice's focus on this characteristic of his predecessor's work was governed by his recognition of shared preoccupations and creative strategies. Critiquing the argument that a dramatist speaks in many voices, whereas the lyric poet must speak only as himself, MacNeice insisted:

If you know what my whole self and my only self is, you know a lot more than I do. As far as I can make out, I not only have many different selves but I am often, as they say, not myself at all. Maybe it is just when I am not myself – when I am thrown out of gear by circumstances or emotion – that I feel like writing poetry.¹³¹

¹²⁸ Ibid 4-5. (original emphasis)

¹²⁹ MacNeice, "A Statement" 7. Rpt. Selected Literary Criticism 98.

¹³⁰ MacNeice, The Poetry of W.B. Yeats 140-1.

¹³¹ Ibid 166.

MacNeice later made clear in “Experiences with Images” (1949) that this interpretation of the lyric poem, founded upon a dialectical structure, was one appropriate to his own body of art:

The word ‘lyric’ has always been a terrible red herring. [...] In fact all lyric poems, though in varying degrees, are dramatic – and that in two ways. (I) The voice and mood, though they may pretend to be spontaneous, are yet in even the most ‘personal’ of poets such as Catullus and Burns a chosen voice and mood, set defiantly in opposition to what they must still co-exist with; there may be only one actor on the stage but the Opposition are on their toes in the wings – and crowding the auditorium; your lyric in fact is a monodrama. (II) Even in what is said (apart from the important things unsaid) all poems, though again in varying degrees, 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.¹³²

“Literary criticism’s great vice”, he felt, was that “it will take any individual poet as a pure specimen of any one tendency or attitude”. Instead, MacNeice suggested, it would be more appropriate to discuss poetry in terms of a kind of Hegelian dialectic of opposites, remembering “to stress the fusion of these opposites rather than their opposition”.¹³³ MacNeice’s use of the term suggests, however, rather than any emergence of a third position to synthesise these opposing views, a doubleness already existent in these opposing positions. This disruption of apparent antitheses is carried out in three principal ways in his poetry – the eventual likeness of the worlds depicted, the encroachment of one choice or life upon the other, and the irrevocable alienation of the poet from such worlds. MacNeice’s own “basic conception of life”, he insisted, was “dialectical (in the philosophic, not in the political sense)”, and this vision of the world had been employed in the *structure* of his poetry that followed Autumn Journal.¹³⁴

¹³² MacNeice, “Experiences With Images”, Orpheus II (1949): 125. Rpt. Selected Literary Criticism 154-5.

¹³³ MacNeice, Modern Poetry 78.

¹³⁴ MacNeice, “Experiences with Images” 125-6. Rpt. Selected Literary Criticism 156.

In Yeats's work, MacNeice found a ready example of this dialectical structure. In "An Acre of Grass", written in November 1936 and published in London Mercury in April 1938, for example, the first stanza may appear to suggest that Yeats yearns for a detached life.¹³⁵ Yet the first line of the second stanza, "My temptation is quiet", creates a deliberate ambivalence as A.E. Dyson notes.¹³⁶ Does Yeats imply that he is tempted towards a poetic art that is free of political pressure, or does he mean that his temptations for dissociation from the political world have now been resolved?

"The Circus Animals' Desertion", composed between November 1937 and September 1939, and published in London Mercury in January 1939, witnesses the same dialectic between political reality and poetic art.¹³⁷ Yeats seems to suggest that his work has been escapist in the final lines of many of the stanzas, and that art rather than reality had assumed a primary place in his work: "This dream itself had all my thought and love", "Players and painted stage took all my love/ And not those things that they were emblems of".¹³⁸ Yet, as Dyson points out, the very examples that Yeats chooses are those that were most closely related to his life.¹³⁹ The image supplied by the title and first stanza of the poem – the image of the fantastical and unreal world of the circus – appears to be carried through the poem in the use of the word "dream". Yet, the end of the second section of the poem introduces the much more positive word "emblem". Dyson, however, is correct in maintaining that this second theme has existed throughout the poem, for the word "emblem" appears in three of the first four stanzas in

¹³⁵ Norman A. Jeffares, A Commentary on the Collected Poems of W.B. Yeats (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1968) 456; Yeats, New Poems (Dublin: Cuala Press, 1938) 12.

¹³⁶ A.E. Dyson, Yeats, Eliot and R.S. Thomas: Riding the Echo (London: Macmillan, 1981) 170.

¹³⁷ Jeffares, A Commentary on the Collected Poems of W.B. Yeats 508.

¹³⁸ Yeats, Last Poems and Two Plays (Dublin: Cuala Press, 1939) 30.

¹³⁹ Dyson, Yeats, Eliot and R.S. Thomas 170.

a key position.¹⁴⁰ Yeats recognises that these images grew out of something other than 'pure mind'. They in fact grew out of:

A mound of refuse or the sweeping of a street,
Old kettles, old bottles, and a broken can,
Old iron, old bones, old rags, that raving slut
Who keeps the till.¹⁴¹

Yeats proposes some kind of reconciliation between the world of the imagination and the "rag and bone shop of the heart".

The refusal to resolve or simplify competing world views was a poetic device that MacNeice learned well from Yeats's work, particularly from poems such as "Sailing to Byzantium", "Byzantium", "Vacillation" and "A Dialogue between Self and Soul". In "Sailing to Byzantium", written in the autumn of 1926, an apparent antithesis between the physical and spiritual or artistic world is established.¹⁴² "That" country has its binary opposite in the "holy city", the "old men" in "the young", and the monuments of unageing intellect in "that sensual music".¹⁴³ The emphatic tone of the line "That is no country for old men" seems to establish the world of Byzantium as the new hierarchy. But this antithesis is deconstructed in the final stanza of the poem. This stanza, as does the first stanza, refuses the separation of body and nature from art and permanence. "Whatever is begotten, born, and dies" is echoed in "what is past, passing, or to come." This final state is no less free from the concerns of time, age or decay. The song of the golden bird designed "To keep a drowsy Emperor awake" seems no more relevant than the old men displaced in the world of the young lovers. Yeats's qualification that the bird sings only to "lords and ladies of Byzantium", thus repudiates

¹⁴⁰ Ibid 171-2.

¹⁴¹ Yeats, *Last Poems and Two Plays* 30-1.

¹⁴² Jeffares, *A Commentary on the Collected Poems of W.B. Yeats* 251.

¹⁴³ Yeats, *The Tower* (London: Macmillan, 1928) 1-2.

Yeats's attempts at Unity of Being, the very trait he had been attracted to in Byzantium.¹⁴⁴ The ending of the poem, therefore, cannot be taken as Yeats's acceptance of this other world. The words "drowsy", "past", "passing" are vague reminders of the ageing body and the sense of decay that is so abhorred in stanza I.

In "Byzantium", written in September 1930, binary opposites are again established between the earthy characteristics – "unpurged images", "night resonance", "mere complexities", "the fury and the mire of human veins" – and the city of Byzantium – "A starlit or a moonlit dome" disdaining "all that man is".¹⁴⁵ The opposition is quickly undone. The bird that can "scorn aloud" the "complexities of mire or blood" merely echoes those very furies for he is also "by the moon embittered". By the final stanza, this antithesis has been deconstructed through the poet's recognition that these worlds are dependent upon each other. The sea is dolphin-torn and, therefore, associated with the physical world of nature, as the poem tells us that dolphins are of "mire and blood".¹⁴⁶ The sea, however, is also "gong-tormented", a reminder of the cathedral gong in stanza I whose chiming begins the recession of the world of body, of nature.

This dialectical form was one increasingly utilised and adapted in MacNeice's own poetry in the form of the tension between the personal and the public or political spheres, and particularly so, during the war years. "Meeting Point", composed in April 1939 and published in Plant and Phantom (1941), depicts the experience of suspended

¹⁴⁴ See Yeats, A Vision (1925; London: Macmillan, 1962) 279: "I think if I could be give a month of Antiquity and leave to spend it where I chose, I would spend it in Byzantium [...] I think that in early Byzantium, maybe never before or since in recorded history, religious, aesthetic and practical life were one, that architect and artificers – though not, it may be, poets, for language had been the instrument of controversy and must have grown abstract – spoke to the multitude and the few alike".

¹⁴⁵ Yeats, The Winding Stair and Other Poems (London: Macmillan, 1933) 42-3; Jeffares, A Commentary on the Collected Poems of W.B. Yeats 352.

¹⁴⁶ Yeats, The Winding Stair 44.

time as it is felt by two lovers, “Time was away and somewhere else”.¹⁴⁷ It is a unified harmonious world where the two people involved seem to share “the one pulse”. The description of the moment is that of a delicate balancing act before time crashes in upon the couple – the “bell was silent”, “holding its inverted poise – Between the clang”. But the poem is written throughout in the past tense. There is no expectation that the experience of the private world is more than a moment where everything is frozen or in slow motion. In “Meeting Point” time has in fact always continued. Though the clock has forgotten the couple, it has not stopped. Nor has the stream’s music been arrested. The image of the suspended moment as a personal desert is denied by the thought of the movement of camels across miles of sand. The final line (and in particular the last three monosyllables) is as much nostalgic in tone for a past moment as it is deeply appreciative of the experience of stilled time, “Time was away and she was here.”¹⁴⁸

Many of MacNeice’s poems in Plant and Phantom and Springboard (1944) problematise the world of the private self in terms of its denial of the vitality of life. In “Alcohol”, MacNeice makes clear the fictitious reality, the golden “self-deception”, of the world of alcohol-induced stupor:

Those Haves who cannot bear making a choice,
Those Have-nots who are bored with having nothing to choose,
Call for their drinks in the same tone of voice,
Find a factitious popular front in booze.¹⁴⁹

For MacNeice, “coming of a temperance family”, drunkenness had been for him “a symbol of freedom. It was a kicking overboard of the lumber of puritan ethics; it was a quick road to fantasy; it achieved a communion among those whom sobriety

¹⁴⁷ MacNeice, Plant and Phantom (London: Faber and Faber, 1941) 40.

¹⁴⁸ Ibid 41.

¹⁴⁹ MacNeice, Springboard: Poems 1941-1944 (London: Faber and Faber, 1944) 32.

divided”.¹⁵⁰ Whatever camaraderie is found in this poem, however, is merely that of the abnegation of all responsibility:

This is the only road for the self-betrayed to follow –
The last way out that leads not out but in.

In “The Libertine”, the character’s sexual adventures have provided no more real an escape from the social world:

He ran through women like a child through growing hay
Looking for a lost toy whose capture might atone
For his own guilt and the cosmic disarray:
O leave me easy, leave me alone.¹⁵¹

“Stylite”, composed in March 1940, begins with a description of a saint standing on a pillar in the middle of the desert, a reminder of Shelley’s statue in “Ozymandias”:

The pillar is alone,
He has stood so long
That he himself is stone.¹⁵²

The “apocalyptic significance” of the desert in MacNeice’s work of these years was also, as McDonald notes, one way in which Yeats’s legacy was made manifest, and “The Second Coming” can be detected behind many of the poems of these years.¹⁵³ Already in the first stanza any suggestions of a self-contained world have been disrupted in MacNeice’s poem. Though “no-one ever comes/ And the world is banned”, why then do his “eyes/ Range across the sand”? The isolation of this world is denied in the second stanza. While the saint “stands in his sleep”, “Round his neck there comes/

¹⁵⁰ MacNeice, The Strings are False 103.

¹⁵¹ MacNeice, Springboard 33.

¹⁵² MacNeice, Plant and Phantom 15.

¹⁵³ McDonald, Poet in his Contexts 106.

The conscience of a rope". It is clear that the saint (like MacNeice himself) is susceptible to the guilty reminders of a world denied. By the final stanza, the world of private escapism and the physical world are pitched opposite each other:

The saint on the pillar stands,
The pillars are two,
A young man opposite
Stands in the blue,
A white Greek god.¹⁵⁴

In "The Ear", written in April 1940, the intrusion of the external world is a decision already taken and one over which the ear has no control:

... The choice
Of callers is not ours. Behind the hedge
Of night they wait to pounce.¹⁵⁵

The ear is continuously susceptible to sounds it wishes to ignore, "sounds which are neither music nor voice", but a train passing, "The thin and audible end of a wedge". Once again the poem ends with images taken from nightmares of MacNeice's childhood coupled with the sounds of war (see, for example, "The Sunlight on the Garden"), and the poet's recognition that there can be no private world free of the external:

We should like to lie alone in a deaf hollow
Cocoon of self where no person or thing would speak;
In fact we lie and listen as a man might follow
A will o'the wisp in an endless eyeless bog,
Follow the terrible drone of a cock chafer, or the bleak
Oracle of a barking dog.

¹⁵⁴ MacNeice, Plant and Phantom 15.

¹⁵⁵ *Ibid* 72.

iii. The 1940s Debate

The artist to-day occupies amid the surrounding dilapidation, a corner even more dilapidated, sitting with his begging bowl in the shadow of the volcano. What can be done to help him?¹⁵⁶

“Poetry nowadays appears to need defending”, MacNeice asserted at an early stage in The Poetry of W.B. Yeats.¹⁵⁷ By the end of the 1930s, as Malcolm Muggeridge noted in his review of the decade, the lot of the left-wing or communist writer had become a hard one; the rise of both communist and fascist dictatorships had resulted in these opposing political systems bearing “a marked and increasing resemblance to one another”. It was a point made painfully evident by the signing of the German-Soviet pact.¹⁵⁸ The sense of a waning of literary ideals and the ending of a definite literary period also seemed prevalent. The year had witnessed the suspension of publication of numerous periodicals which had dominated the decade; New Verse closed at the beginning of 1939, London Mercury in April of that year, the Criterion in January and Twentieth-Century Verse and Fact in June 1939. 1939 also witnessed the departure of two of the decade’s major literary figures – Auden and Isherwood – for America. This event, according to Cyril Connolly, the editor of the newly-founded Horizon, comprised “the most important literary event since the outbreak of the Spanish War”.¹⁵⁹ The questioning of the kind of relationship poetry might have with the external political reality had occurred throughout the decade. With the waning of earlier hopes and ideals for the effectiveness of the individual writer came a contentious debating of these

¹⁵⁶ Cyril Connolly, Horizon 1.4 (April 1940): 229.

¹⁵⁷ MacNeice, The Poetry of W.B. Yeats 1.

¹⁵⁸ Malcolm Muggeridge, The Thirties 1930 – 1940 in Great Britain (1940; London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1989) 23.

¹⁵⁹ Cyril Connolly, Horizon 1.2 (Feb. 1940): 68.

issues. "Poets in England lately", MacNeice noted in "Not Tabloided in Slogans", published in Common Sense in April 1940, "have been changing their position, recent events having suggested that their position was unsound. The poet has become at the same time more humble and more arrogant, being less ready now to take up the role of crusader but ready once more to put his own conscience above any external dogma".¹⁶⁰ That acute debating of the role and value of art haunts MacNeice's full-length study of Yeats. In that work, MacNeice's contestation of the role of poetry was conducted as he turned towards Yeats as an authoritative figure.

Auden's ruminations on the legacy of Yeats, following the poet's death in January 1939, produced his famous recantations regarding the political role of poetry in "The Public v. the Late Mr. William Butler Yeats":

For art is a product of history, not a cause. Unlike some other products, technical inventions for example, it does not re-enter history as an effective agent, so that the question whether art should or should not be propaganda is unreal. The case for the prosecution rests on the fallacious belief that art ever makes anything happen, whereas the honest truth, gentlemen, is that, if not a poem had been written, not a picture painted, not a bar of music composed, the history of man would be materially unchanged.¹⁶¹

Auden's poems of that time "about the great men of the past", Spender wrote in Horizon in February 1941, indicated "the isolation of the poet searching for spiritual equals and forefathers".¹⁶² Auden's questioning of the role of poetry was furthered in his elegy for the poet, "In Memory of W.B. Yeats", published in The New Republic on 8th March of that year, and in a longer version in The London Mercury in April. In the poem, Yeats's death is depicted as having no effect; the world of nature, as Rachel

¹⁶⁰ MacNeice, "Not Tabloided in Slogans", rev. of Another Time by Auden, Common Sense 9.4 (April 1940): 24-5. Rpt. Selected Literary Criticism 114.

¹⁶¹ Auden, "The Public v. the Late Mr. W.B. Yeats", The English Auden 393.

¹⁶² Spender, "This Year's Poetry, 1940", Horizon 3.14 (Feb. 1941): 141.

Wetzsteon points out, “neither delighted nor dismayed, simply goes about its usual business”:¹⁶³

He disappeared in the dead of winter
The brooks were frozen; the air-ports almost deserted,
And snow disfigured the public statues;
The mercury sank in the mouth of the dying day.
O all the instruments agree
The day of his death was a dark cold day.

Far from his illness
The wolves ran on through the evergreen forests,
The peasant river was untempted by the fashionable quays;
By mourning tongues
The death of the poet was kept from his poems.¹⁶⁴

The death of the poet is downplayed to the extent that only “a few thousand will think of this day/ As one thinks of a day when one did something slightly unusual”. The poet has no control over his posterity; he has “become his admirers”:

Now he is scattered among a hundred cities
And wholly given over to unfamiliar affections;
To find his happiness in another kind of wood
And be punished under a foreign code of conscience.
The words of a dead man
Are modified in the guts of the living.

In the second section, the speaker addresses Yeats directly. Auden’s wavering attitude to Yeats’s beliefs surfaces again in that Yeats’s distinguishing characteristic has been his silliness but his “gift survived it all”. It is his engagement with his precursor that leads to one of Auden’s infamous statements on the role of poetry at the end of the decade:

Now Ireland has her madness and her weather still,
For poetry makes nothing happen: it survives
In the valley of its saying where executives
Would never want to tamper; it flows south
From ranches of isolation and the busy griefs,
Raw towns that we believe and die in; it survives,
A way of happening, a mouth.

¹⁶³ Rachel Wetzsteon, *Influential Ghosts: A Study of Auden’s Sources*, *Studies in Major Literary Authors*, ed. William E. Cain (New York: Routledge, 2007) 64.

¹⁶⁴ Auden, *The English Auden* 241.

Stan Smith reads Auden's statement (which had been added to the version published in The London Mercury) as a "direct response" to Yeats's questioning in "The Man and the Echo" which had been published in The London Mercury in January 1939 as to whether his play Cathleen ni Houlihan had contributed to the political uprising of 1916:

Did that play of mine send out
Certain men the English shot?¹⁶⁵

The views expressed in Auden's questioning of Yeats' influence were put forward elsewhere in Auden's work. In a retrospect of the decade drafted soon after he emigrated to America, Auden insisted:

If one reviews the political activity of the world's intellectuals during the past eight years, if one counts up all the letters to the papers which they have signed, all the platforms on which they have spoken, all the congresses which they have attended, one is compelled to admit that their combined effort, apart from the money they have helped to raise for humanitarian purposes (and one must not belittle the value of that) has been nil. [...] If the criterion of art were its power to incite to action, Goebbels would be one of the greatest artists of all time. [...] Art makes nothing happen.¹⁶⁶

"For the past ten years", Auden wrote in a letter to Dodds at the end of the thirties, "we have all been talking about the isolation of the artist from the community, the dangers of ivory-towerism, the importance of roots. I am now quite certain that 90% of what we said was bosh".¹⁶⁷

This sense of the ending of earlier literary ideals was signified in Orwell's mythologizing of this 1930s generation of poets as a distinct group of Left-wing writers whose political and artistic aims had been defeated. His prose consisted of multiple forebodings regarding the political effectiveness of artists:

¹⁶⁵ Stan Smith, "Persuasions to Rejoice: Auden's Oedipal Dialogues with W.B. Yeats", W.H. Auden: "The Language of Learning and the Language of Love", Uncollected Writings, New Interpretations, Auden Studies 2, ed. Katherine Bucknell and Nicholas Jenkins (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994) 156.

¹⁶⁶ Qtd. Richard Davenport-Hines, Auden (London: Heinemann, 1995) 177-8.

¹⁶⁷ Qtd. Carpenter, W.H. Auden 288.

But from now onwards the all-important fact for the creative writer is going to be that this is not a writer's world. That does not mean that he cannot help to bring the new society into being, but he can take no part in the process *as a writer*. For *as a writer* he is a liberal, and what is happening is the destruction of liberalism. [...] As for the writer, he is sitting on a melting iceberg; he is merely an anachronism, a hangover from the bourgeois age, as surely doomed as the hippopotamus.¹⁶⁸

Spender too evinced the same withdrawal from the earlier ideals of the role of the individual in the public sphere, commenting that with the ending of the Spanish Civil War "it became clear that the thirties was being wound up like a company going into bankruptcy". The "abandonment of effective discussion", Spender felt could be dated from September 1938. Prior to this writers had been drawn into protests about China, Spain, Austria and Czechoslovakia.¹⁶⁹ From that time on, Spender felt "people did not join anti-fascism as individuals who might influence history. They joined armies in which they were expected to forget that they were individuals".¹⁷⁰ Auden's departure for America in 1939, "considered as a public act only underlined what most of his colleagues already felt: that the individualist phase was over."

Cyril Connolly, in an article entitled "The Ivory Shelter" which appeared in the New Statesman and Nation on 7th October 1939 summarised that many of the writers "with the deepest sense of humanity" had "expanded and often wasted that sense in the hopeless struggle for Manchurians, Abyssinians, Austrians, Spaniards, Chinese and Czechs". What these writers "could say, they have said, what they could feel, they have felt, and no historical change has resulted".¹⁷¹ Their endeavours had merely culminated in a precipitation of a war that was inevitable anyway. Similar sentiments were voiced by G.W. Stonier in his review of MacNeice's Plant and Phantom: "The war poetry of

¹⁶⁸ George Orwell, Inside the Whale and Other Essays (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1975) 48. (original emphasis)

¹⁶⁹ Spender, "How Shall We Be Saved", Horizon 1.1 (Jan. 1940): 51.

¹⁷⁰ Spender, "Background to the Forties", The Thirties and After 85.

¹⁷¹ Connolly, "The Ivory Shelter", New Statesman and Nation, 18.450 (7 Oct. 1939): 482.

the present was being written five, ten years by Auden and others, and if some of these poets write less now about the war than they did, it is because that phase of their writing is already ending”.¹⁷²

This issue was to become the premise of MacNeice’s poem “Epitaph for Liberal Poets” in his collection Springboard. The poem begins by depicting the defeat of the 1930s generation of poets:

If the latter
End – which is fairly soon – or way of life goes west.¹⁷³

The poet asks though some will say “So what” and others “what matter”:

What, though better unsaid, would we have history say
Of us who walked in our sleep and died on our Quest?

Behind those lines can perhaps be sensed Yeats’s own questioning of his achievements in 1936 in a poem entitled “What Then?”.¹⁷⁴ Though the poem depicts MacNeice’s generation as a group of sleepwalkers and tells us that those who will supersede them “cannot need” them, MacNeice resorts to a sweeping view of history, situating this defeat within a wider context:

The individual has died before; Catullus
Went down young, gave place to those who were born old
And more adaptable and were not even jealous
Of his wild life and lyrics.¹⁷⁵

¹⁷² G.W. Stonier, “Poetry Can be Written in Wartime”, New Statesman and Nation 21.533 (10 May 1941): 492.

¹⁷³ MacNeice, Springboard 34.

¹⁷⁴ Jeffares, A Commentary on the Collected Poems of W.B. Yeats 458; Yeats, New Poems 13:

‘The work is done’, grown old he thought,
‘According to my boyish plan;
Let the fools rage, I swerved in naught,
Something to perfection brought’;
But louder sang that ghost, ‘What then?’ (original emphasis)

¹⁷⁵ MacNeice, Springboard 34.

Yeats had adopted much the same strategy in “Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen” in contextualising the turbulence of the Irish Civil War:

Many ingenious lovely things are gone
That seemed sheer miracle to the multitude,
Protected from the circle of the moon
That pitches common things about. There stood
Amid the ornamental bronze and stone
An ancient image made of olive wood –
And gone are Phidias’ famous ivories
And all the golden grasshoppers and bees.¹⁷⁶

War has brought a sense of finality for MacNeice’s generation: “our fate is no less cold”. The poets “pinned against the wall” are in the position of Prufrock. Their words are incommunicable to many and destined to be misunderstood by the poets who succeed them. MacNeice, however, does offer a vision in which their artistic achievements might be continued in moments of relevance for the next generations. It is a far cry from Yeats’s authoritative imperative to the younger poets in “Under Ben Bulbin”:

Why need we whine? There is not way out, the birds
Will tell us nothing more; 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.¹⁷⁷

What MacNeice leaves unclear is whether the thirst will be for artistic endeavours or a belief in the role of art in the political or social sphere.

MacNeice’s poems of the early 1940s depict his own difficulties at this time in accepting political or social responsibilities. “The Springboard”, the title poem of MacNeice’s 1944 collection, is witness to MacNeice’s difficulty in reconciling the world of the private self with the world of social or political duty. If MacNeice’s other poems begin with the fictitious reality of a private escapist world, this poem begins by

¹⁷⁶ Yeats, The Tower 32.

¹⁷⁷ MacNeice, Springboard 34.

resisting the impulse to duty. The poem, as MacNeice states in “Experiences with Images”, begins with two premises: “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”.¹⁷⁸ The poem again bears witness to MacNeice’s hesitation at the subjection of the individual to political ends and his lack of belief in any political system. It is the man’s doubts surrounding the futility of his own sacrifice that prevents the dive:

If it would mend the world, that would be worth while
But he, quire rightly, long had ceased to believe
In any utopia or 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.¹⁷⁹

But the world of self is defeated in the poem, whatever MacNeice’s reservations:

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.

It is a resolution destined from the start. The world of private self which is maintained in the first line (“He never made the dive”) is always provisional. It has only been “while” “the poet watched”. The sacrifice of the private world within political duty has been preordained.

The Second World War polarised for MacNeice the question of the role and effect of art. MacNeice refused to indulge in a world of the private self:

Non-intervention in the ethical sphere must defeat even its own end – which is private salvation. One thing the war is doing in this country – it is stopping people tinkering with their souls. Lay off your soul and give the poor thing its head.
And why not shelve your private salvation and see what you can do with the world?
Without bothering too much about life – you own – or Life with a capital L.¹⁸⁰

¹⁷⁸ MacNeice, “Experiences with Images” 131. Rpt. Selected Literary Criticism 163.

¹⁷⁹ MacNeice, Springboard 40.

The outbreak of war and the defeat of many of the ideals of the 1930s did not “mean a retreat to the Ivory Tower or to purely private poetry”, he insisted.¹⁸¹ Defending Auden’s recantations, MacNeice wrote that although Auden, in previous years, might have advocated directly political writing, he now regarded politics “as only too likely to corrupt a poet’s integrity”. This did not mean, however, that Auden had retreated to the Ivory Tower. “To cease to be politically propagandist”, MacNeice insisted, did not mean one had to “cease to be socially conscious”. Auden “knows as well as any one that the individual in a vacuum is a deficient individual.”¹⁸² In fact Auden’s self-questioning at the end of the decade had resulted in veritable improvements in his works Another Time and The Double Man. In them, Auden had “purged his world-view of certain ready-made, second-hand, over-simplifications and is now attempting a new synthesis of his material”. This was, MacNeice continued, “an attempt for which we should all be grateful”.¹⁸³ MacNeice’s readings of Auden’s pronouncements on politics concur with the views of Auden’s later biographers who have also insisted upon the inaccuracy of seeing some kind of complete alienation from political responsibilities in his writings of these years. Carpenter maintains that Auden’s feelings of detachment from the war seem only to have been experienced in “certain moods or contexts”. At other times Auden was “quite prepared to commit himself”. Auden, Carpenter suggests, was as uncertain about these matters as he had been about his

¹⁸⁰ MacNeice, “Broken Windows or Thinking Aloud”, signed manuscript c. 1941-2 according to Heuser, Poetry Review 78.2 (Summer 1988): 5. Rpt. Selected Prose 141-2.

¹⁸¹ MacNeice, “The Poet in England To-Day: A Reassessment”, New Republic 102.13 (25 March 1940): 412-3. Rpt. Selected Literary Criticism 113.

¹⁸² MacNeice, “Not Tabloided in Slogans” 24-5. Rpt. Selected Literary Criticism 114-5.

¹⁸³ MacNeice, “Traveller’s Return”, Horizon 3.14 (Feb. 1941): 116. Rpt. Selected Prose 90.

political involvements during the 1930s. The only difference was that he had now “abandoned all attempts to advocate a political creed in his poetry”.¹⁸⁴

In “Broken Windows or Thinking Aloud”, MacNeice made clear that he was not “going in for self-flagellation, for washing my own dirty linen in public. Some of my colleagues have gone all humble; I consider that a mistake. There is a time for writers to be humble; this is *their time to be arrogant*”.¹⁸⁵ “Now, with a war on”, he insisted, “we need not be so anxious for self-effacement, we can leave that job to the bombs. This is our time to be arrogant”.¹⁸⁶ The same standpoint informed MacNeice’s response to Virginia Woolf’s criticism of the thirties writers in “The Leaning Tower”. For Woolf the writer sat upon a raised tower, built of his parents’ station and money. The young thirties writers had seen that security unsettled by change and revolution. As that tower leaned, those writers had become acutely conscious of it, resulting first in self-pity and then anger against society for making them uncomfortable, scapegoating retired admirals and spinsters. These writers thought they could come down, but they could not; their education and upbringing were stamped upon them. Their writings were full of compromise and confusion, Woolf asserted; and here she marked out Autumn Journal for special criticism. She pointed out the violence and half-heartedness in these poets’ attack upon society, and criticized them for having nothing to put in its place.¹⁸⁷ MacNeice’s responded by insisting that he had “no intention of recanting [his] past”. “Recantation is becoming too fashionable; I am sorry to see so much self-flagellation, so many Peccavis, going on on the literary Left. We may not have done all we could in

¹⁸⁴ Carpenter, W.H. Auden 309.

¹⁸⁵ MacNeice, “Broken Windows or Thinking Aloud” 4. Rpt. Selected Prose 137. (original emphasis)

¹⁸⁶ Ibid 4. Rpt. Selected Prose 137.

¹⁸⁷ Virginia Woolf, “The Leaning Tower”, Folios of New Writing 2 (Autumn 1940): 11-33.

the Thirties, but we did do something”.¹⁸⁸ MacNeice, perhaps, had fewer naïve political pronouncements to recant than other members of his generation, and was perhaps better able to retain a conviction that poetry should be informed by political and social realities. The issue for MacNeice then by the end of the decade was not to withdraw the ideals of the political effectiveness of poetry but to question, as he had done throughout the 1930s, the placing of inappropriate political demands upon poetry.

What MacNeice advocated at that time was an assessment of the role of intellectuals and a greater fluidity in options than the narrow alternatives of “the Ivory Tower and the political Tub”.¹⁸⁹ “The poet is once more to be a mouth instead of a megaphone”, MacNeice insisted.¹⁹⁰ The wording chosen echoed what he had earlier stressed in the context of the Spanish Civil War in “A Statement” in 1938. In his “American Letter”, MacNeice insisted: “I don’t think for a moment that we should go all private”. What he did think was that “we have been much too naïve about politics. Perhaps we all need a dose of the desert, and perhaps that is just what we shall get, whether we want it or not”.¹⁹¹

Such contentious questioning by his generation of the effectiveness of poetry informed MacNeice’s readings of Yeats at the end of the decade. In The Poetry of W.B. Yeats, MacNeice commented:

¹⁸⁸ MacNeice, “The Tower that Once”, Folios of New Writing 3 (Spring 1941): 41. Rpt. Selected Literary Criticism 123-4.

¹⁸⁹ MacNeice, “American Letter”, Horizon 1.7 (July 1940): 464. Rpt. Selected Prose 76.

¹⁹⁰ MacNeice, “The Poet in England To-Day: A Reassessment” 412-3. Rpt. Selected Literary Criticism 114.

¹⁹¹ MacNeice, “American Letter” 464. Rpt. Selected Prose 76-7. MacNeice similarly subverted the distinction between these polarities in “Broken Windows or Thinking Aloud” 5. Rpt. Selected Prose 140:

So we’ve shrunk back into individuals with an airy fairy conception of freedom – a long flirtation with a will ‘the wisp, a chronic parthenogenesis. You can see this in some of our younger poets whose slogan is ‘Back to the Astral Plane’.

But isn’t it a pity if you have to choose between the Astral Plane and High-Mindedness? Aren’t there other choices?

As soon as I heard on the wireless of the outbreak of war, Galway became unreal. And Yeats and his poetry became unreal also. This was not merely because Galway and Yeats belong in a sense to a past order of things. The unreality which now overtook them was also overtaking in my mind modern London, modernist art, and Left Wing politics. If the war made nonsense of Yeats's poetry and of all works that are called 'escapist', it also made nonsense of the poetry that professes to be 'realist'.¹⁹²

Indeed, an early review of the book commented on the fact that MacNeice's defence of poetry as insisted upon at the opening of his book suggested as much about his concern with his own aesthetic issues as his readings of Yeats: "This is a curious opening for a book on the one poet who has been acclaimed – even too much acclaimed for his Apostolic successors – and one feels that it is less Yeats than himself that MacNeice wishes to defend".¹⁹³ It was in response to Auden's comments on the Yeatsian legacy that MacNeice resorted to Yeatsian definitions of poetry in 1941. Chapter X of The Poetry of W.B. Yeats entitled "Some Comparisons" endeavoured to judge Yeats within the context of MacNeice's contemporary writers. As Chapter IV of this thesis will demonstrate, the chapter contained some of MacNeice's most staunch expressions of the significance of Yeats for his generation. MacNeice's chapter opened with an epitaph from Auden's "In Memory of W.B. Yeats": "You were silly like us, your gift survived it all". It is precisely within the context, then, of his generation's grappling with the demands placed upon his own poetry, that MacNeice attempts to evaluate the legacy of Yeats. MacNeice positioned himself in direct opposition to the Defence in Auden's "The Public v. the late Mr. W.B. Yeats". MacNeice, distancing himself from the more overt expressions of discomfort at Yeats's political beliefs made by Auden, Spender and Orwell, wrote that "it is fashionable in some circles in England to-day to dismiss Yeats as a mere reactionary, a man who wrote elegantly in an outmoded manner and preached a gospel which was not only obsolete but vicious". This "very

¹⁹² MacNeice, The Poetry of W.B. Yeats 2.

¹⁹³ K.J. Raine, rev. of The Poetry of W.B. Yeats, Horizon 4.19 (July 1941): 69-70.

superficial” view had been “well combated” in Auden’s article “The Public v. the later Mr. W.B. Yeats”. In it, he felt, The Defence had “argued – quite rightly – that a work of art cannot be assessed merely by its political reference”. Auden, however, “as was natural in a poet who had abruptly abandoned the conception of art as handmaid of politics for the conception of art as autotelic” had overstated his case. The Poetry of W.B. Yeats was unequivocal in denying the subjection of poetry to political ends. “The Marxist historical”, “having proved that poetry in any period is *conditioned* by the social and economic background”, MacNeice thought, was employing bad logic “to assume that either the *cause* or the function or the end of poetry can be assessed in sociological or economic terms”.¹⁹⁴ “Even if the poet believes in the end of the propagandist”, MacNeice insisted, “he can have legitimate doubts whether that end will be in the long run usefully served by a prostitution of poetry”.¹⁹⁵ In revoking earlier expressions of the usefulness of poetry, Auden’s Defence had argued that the case for the prosecution rests on the fallacy that art ever makes anything happen. MacNeice, however, countered these retractions: “The case for the prosecution does rest on a fallacy but it is not this. The fallacy lies in thinking that it is the *function* of art to make things happen and that the effect of art upon actions is something either direct or calculable. It is an historical fact that art *can* make things happen and Auden in his reaction from a rigid Marxism seems in this article to have been straying towards the Ivory Tower”.¹⁹⁶ In his debating in The Poetry of W.B. Yeats of Auden’s recantations, it was to his precursor that MacNeice turned:

¹⁹⁴ MacNeice, The Poetry of W.B. Yeats 214. (original emphasis)

¹⁹⁵ Ibid 215.

¹⁹⁶ Ibid 225. (original emphasis)

Yeats did not write primarily in order to influence men's action but he knew that art can alter a man's outlook and so indirectly affect his actions. He also recognized that art can, sometimes intentionally, more often perhaps unintentionally, precipitate violence. He was not sentimentalizing when he wrote, thinking of Cathleen ni Houlihan:

Did that play of mine send out
Certain men the English shot?¹⁹⁷

Dillon Johnston suggests that MacNeice “may be overlooking the indirection that Auden himself may intend by this overstatement” but that “MacNeice’s correction helps us to locate his own poetry more accurately than it does Auden’s”.¹⁹⁸ By the time MacNeice wrote The Poetry of W.B. Yeats it was his precursor who provided a model for the value and effectiveness of poetry. It is his turning to Yeats for an authoritative poetic model at a time when MacNeice was most concerned to define his own poetic task which suggests that his precursor’s influence was as significant for MacNeice’s creative art as that of his English contemporaries. MacNeice’s study of Yeats, his most significant evaluation of the elder poet’s legacy, can thus be seen, as McDonald observes, as “in part at least a way of distancing himself from the public image of the ‘Auden generation’”.¹⁹⁹

¹⁹⁷ MacNeice, The Poetry of W.B. Yeats 225. See Edna Longley, Louis MacNeice: A Study (London: Faber and Faber, 1988) 41: “significantly, it was Yeats who focused” MacNeice’s disagreement with Auden.

¹⁹⁸ Dillon Johnston, The Poetic Economies of England and Ireland (Hampshire: Palgrave, 2001) 116.

¹⁹⁹ McDonald, Poet in his Contexts 99.

Chapter 3

“Island truancies”

Time for soul to stretch and spit
Before the world comes back on it.¹

“Neutrality” from Springboard (1944) has traditionally been read as MacNeice’s overt denunciation of the Irish Free State’s neutral status and thus its apparent repudiation of responsibilities during the Second World War. Terence Brown, in his 1975 study of the poet, considered the poem “a savage indictment” of what MacNeice “saw as the country’s callous self-absorption at a time of international crisis”.² In Edna Longley’s view, the poem takes “a political and hostile view of this policy as a further instance of the round tower standing aloof, of navel-gazing into the past at the expense of the present”.³ Peter McDonald argues that the poem is “unsparing” in its criticism of “Irish insularity as reflected in wartime neutrality”.⁴ The death of MacNeice’s close friend Graham Shepard has been proffered as the catalyst for MacNeice’s increasing alienation from, and rejection of, the foreign policy of the Free State. It is a critical tendency that has been aided by MacNeice’s poem for Shepard, entitled “Casualty” and published in the same collection. According to Derek Mahon, MacNeice “had, as it

¹ MacNeice, “Epilogue”, for W.H. Auden, The Earth Compels (London: Faber and Faber, 1938) 63.

² Terence Brown, Louis MacNeice: Sceptical Vision (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1975) 12. See also Brown, “Louis MacNeice’s Ireland”, Tradition and Influence in Anglo-Irish Poetry, ed. Brown and Nicholas Grene (London: Macmillan, 1989) 86: In the poem “insularity is a form of primal, aboriginal guilt, the charms of the Irish landscape now not merely archaic and escapist but symbols of amoral complicity with evil”.

³ Edna Longley, Louis MacNeice: A Study (London: Faber and Faber, 1988) 25. Longley does allow that “the earlier ‘Dublin’ should perhaps be regarded as MacNeice’s ‘balanced’ version of where his poetry stands in relation to Irish national culture and politics”. See page 26.

⁴ Peter McDonald, Louis MacNeice: The Poet in his Contexts (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991) 217.

happens, particular reason to be bitter. His friend Graham Shepard, temporarily with the British Navy, was torpedoed and drowned in 1942, an event which gave rise to one of MacNeice's finest poems, 'The Casualty'.⁵ For Clair Wills, too, in her recent study of Irish neutrality, *That Neutral Island* (2007), which borrows its title from a line in the poem, "Neutrality" demonstrates MacNeice's antipathy towards the patriotic propaganda of Ireland which was espoused at the expense of responsibility towards international events. "Deceived by self-serving declarations of principle Ireland had, in MacNeice's account, lapsed into culpability".⁶ MacNeice, then, is to be grouped, for Wills, amongst those middle-class Irish writers living amongst British cultural opinion and propaganda who saw "themselves as the – often angry – voice of the nation's conscience".⁷ Heather Clark maintains in "Revising MacNeice" (2002) that the poet "was particularly aggrieved by Ireland's wartime neutrality". This bitterness was apparent in the poem "in which he admonishes Ireland for doing nothing while her Irish American Allied kin are drowned in U-boat attacks". Clark goes further than previous critics in proposing that "Ireland's neutrality may have further intensified his loyalty to the British cause – in any case he would decide to remain in London during the worst years of the Blitz".⁸

However, a small strand of critical thinking has begun to reappraise MacNeice's accusatory tone in this poem. In his essay "Louis MacNeice and the Second World War" (1999), Brown has suggested that MacNeice's vehemence towards Ireland in that

⁵ Derek Mahon, "MacNeice, the War and the BBC", *Journalism: Selected Prose 1970-1995*, ed. Terence Brown (Oldcastle: Gallery Books, 1996) 35. See also Brown, "Louis MacNeice's Ireland" 87: Shepard's death may have "stimulated" the "cold fury" of the poem.

⁶ Clair Wills, *That Neutral Island* (London: Faber and Faber, 2007) 128-9.

⁷ *Ibid* 12.

⁸ Heather Clark, "Revising MacNeice", *The Cambridge Quarterly* 30.1 (2002): 82-3.

poem can in fact be overstated.⁹ Adolphe Haberer has also questioned the use of the pronoun “you” in MacNeice’s poem, proposing that it might refer to “both speaker and addressee”. Haberer has suggested that “as far as MacNeice is concerned, the landscape of death and indifference of that metaphorical County Sligo is also to be found in his own heart”.¹⁰ While Haberer’s comments offer new scope for readings of “Neutrality”, his evaluations of MacNeice’s use of the topographical location are made without much sustained analysis of its repercussions for the poem or its place within the poet’s body of work. It would also appear in view of the most recent publications on the poem (Wills (2007) and Clark (2002)) that earlier critical interpretations seem difficult to resist. I wish to demonstrate in this chapter how the poem’s allusion to Yeatsian landscapes and poetry might usefully be read in the context of MacNeice’s concern to define his own poetic role and the relation of his poetic and private self to political and historical circumstances. The tension in MacNeice’s poetry between his acknowledgement of political responsibility and his attempt to create some kind of personal space for the individual had been evinced in his poems on the West of Ireland, or islands depicted in similar terms, throughout the 1930s. It is in the context of such poetic strategies that I shall examine “Neutrality” and its problematising of MacNeice’s apportioning of blame in the poem. Rather than reading the poem as a distant and aloof disavowal of Yeatsian poetics and the Free State’s political status, I wish to demonstrate the ways in which MacNeice’s adaption of Yeatsian intertexts in the poem’s imagery and structure points towards MacNeice’s own poetic dilemmas.

⁹ Terence Brown, “Louis MacNeice and the Second World War”, *Modern Irish Writers and the Wars*, ed. Kathleen Devine (Gerrards Cross: Colin Smythe, 1999) 168.

i. Interludes

I hanker after the Atlantic
With a frivolous nostalgia.¹¹

In The Poetry of W.B. Yeats, MacNeice argued that Yeats's early work, which was typically associated with escape into a mythicised West, was "very much more adulterated with life" than his contemporaries allowed. "Many people exaggerate Yeats's escapism", he insisted. He was "neither so simple-minded nor so esoteric nor so dilettante a poet as he is often represented".¹² MacNeice's comments might usefully be borne in mind before accepting at face value any dismissal out of hand of a Yeatsian West in "Neutrality".

The possibility of "interregnums" preoccupied MacNeice – as they preoccupied Yeats in poems such as "Politics" and "The Statesman's Holiday". The West of Ireland, the Hebrides and Iceland may have provided tempting places for escape, but in his heart MacNeice knew that this "is self-deception of course;/ There is no immunity in this island either".¹³ This dialectic is perceptible throughout MacNeice's works of the late 1930s – in "Eclogue from Iceland" and "Iceland" collected in The Earth Compels (1938) and in "The Coming of War" published in The Last Ditch (1940). While MacNeice might "hanker" for the Atlantic in his poems, it is the lost ideals of a Western escape that are often acknowledged in his prose writing. MacNeice's poems are carefully structured to resist any simplified conclusions. "Turf Stacks", published in Poems (1935), evaluates the antithesis of the city and country often offered by Yeats,

¹⁰ Adolphe Haberer, "Yeats and MacNeice: From Context to Intertext", Irish University Review 27.2 (Autumn/ Winter 1997): 231-2.

¹¹ MacNeice, "Ode", Poems (London: Faber and Faber, 1935) 60.

¹² MacNeice, The Poetry of W.B. Yeats (London: Oxford University Press, 1941) 19.

¹³ MacNeice, Autumn Journal (London: Faber and Faber, 1939) 63.

and thereby might be considered an implicit dialogue with the older poet. Robyn Marsack considers that “in such a poem, MacNeice comes closest to the stereotype of the thirties, praising and prophesying the millennium”.¹⁴ MacNeice, due to his own background, praises, however, not the factory-worker, but the peasant. That the poem is “an idealisation, perhaps a reaction against life in Birmingham”, Marsack writes, is suggested by the poem’s third stanza where “desperation gives a keener edge to the language than when it is employed in somewhat facile praise or contempt”.¹⁵ Marsack seems not to have recognised MacNeice’s careful disruption of the apparent antithesis of city and countryside. In this poem, two opposing viewpoints are at first introduced; significantly, these viewpoints are not dissimilar on closer analysis. MacNeice initially depicts the material, public life by claiming that in this rural world “graze no iron horses/ Such as stall, such as champ in towns and the soul of crowds”. That world is criticised for its mass production and its inhibition of individuality, and this is apparently contrasted with peasant life: “Here is no mass- production of neat thoughts/ No canvas shrouds for the mind nor any black hearses”.¹⁶ MacNeice’s “theory-vendors” is a wry description of Communist thinkers in the very capitalist terms they repudiated. His “little sardine men crammed in a monster toy/ Who tilt their aggregate beast against our crumbling Troy” is also a reminder of Yeats’s “No Second Troy”, where similar political terms are used to describe the political activists whose motives Yeats questions.

Such a reading leads Marsack to the conclusion that the peasant is introduced in an idealistic-like manner in this poem. However, MacNeice’s peasant is far from that

¹⁴ Robyn Marsack, The Cave of Making: The Poetry of Louis MacNeice (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1982) 7.

¹⁵ Ibid 7.

¹⁶ MacNeice, Poems 30.

represented by the writings of the Revival, and is closer to that of the dreams lost in “a boyhood stumble” of Patrick Kavanagh:

The peasant shambles on his boots like hooves
Without thinking at all or wanting to run in grooves.¹⁷

The peasant of “Turf Stacks” has in actual fact relinquished his sense of individuality. And so it is possible to revise Edna Longley’s comments that in this poem MacNeice “updates Yeats by pitting ‘peasant’ individuality more directly against Marxist mass-production of neat thoughts”.¹⁸ The mention of “hooves” can be nothing other than a direct reference to the “iron horses” of the opening line, and the word “grooves” cannot fail to remind us of the “iron horses” champing in towns and on the spirit of the people. The peasant who works “without thinking at all” is symbolically associated with the “mass production of neat thoughts” in the city. At most, MacNeice’s placing of himself within the peasant community can be seen as a recognition of his own temptation to view the West in opposition to England. He deliberately trivialises this impulse:

For we are obsolete who like the lesser things
Who play in corners with looking-glasses and beads.

“Turf Stacks”, like the later poem “Neutrality” and much of MacNeice’s prose, articulates the poet’s consciousness of the temptation to escape whilst also recording his recognition that he has been irrevocably alienated from any such choice.

The option which MacNeice leaves us at the end of the poem is that of the individualist going “where the world recedes”. MacNeice’s “blind wantons” is a clear allusion to Lear’s wilderness and to his belief in the apathy of the Gods to the causes of men. MacNeice uses this term to refer to the apathy of the individual to political

¹⁷ Ibid 30.

¹⁸ Edna Longley, “Defending Ireland’s Soul” in *The Living Stream: Literature and Revisionism in Ireland* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Bloodaxe Books, 1994) 146.

activism, to “any ideal or dream”. Thus even in MacNeice’s poems which deal with escape to a traditional, instinctive life, we witness, as Hugh Underhill points out, MacNeice’s “urban sensibility irrepressibly expressing itself”. “Pastoral in MacNeice, when it intrudes, is precisely that: a construct of the urban consciousness. He might hanker after the rural, but like Eliot or Baudelaire could never stay out of the city for long”.¹⁹ Here, in the final stanza, is a reminder of the megaphone imagery of the propaganda poet. The final lines of the poem are a far cry from MacNeice’s view that the poet is “not the loud-speaker of society, but something more like its still, small voice”.²⁰

Or turn blind wantons like the gulls who scream
And rip the edge off any ideal or dream.²¹

“An Eclogue for Christmas” begins by allowing no distinction between city and country life, and no possibility of escape from political circumstances. The poem is structured as a dialogue between a city dweller and a country dweller, simply and anonymously entitled A and B. The very notion of the preservation of individuality is called into question in the poem. The country dweller, we are told by the city dweller, is merely an “analogue of me”. The poem consists of rhyming couplets uttered by each speaker. As the poem progresses even the rhymes are shared amongst the two speakers, detracting from any distinctions between the historical circumstances that they might face. No escape is possible, and the city dweller is left under no illusions about this;

¹⁹ Hugh Underhill, The Problem of Consciousness in Modern Poetry (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992) 222.

²⁰ MacNeice, “A Statement”, New Verse nos. 31-2 (Autumn 1938): 7. Rpt. Selected Literary Criticism 98.

²¹ MacNeice, Poems 30.

“My country will not yield you any sanctuary”; “One place is as bad as another”. The best advice that can be mustered in the poem is that offered by the city dweller:

Go back where your instincts call
And listen to the crying of the town-cats and the taxis again,
Or wind your gramophone and eavesdrop on great men.²²

If in “Sailing to Byzantium” the possibility of escape is at least initially entertained in Yeats’s outcry that “That is no country for old men”, in “An Eclogue for Christmas” there is no possibility of this from the beginning. The repudiation of any kind of escape in that imperative “Go back” occurred again in MacNeice’s encounter with Iceland.

I Crossed the Minch (1938) portrays MacNeice’s excursion to the Hebridean Islands in much the same escapist terms as were noted in his descriptions of the West of Ireland. He hoped to “find them like the West of Ireland – a wild landscape and a genial people.”²³ MacNeice admitted that before visiting the islands he had not realised that “nearly all the islands speak Gaelic and that their language is integral to their life”. Owing to the barrier created by his inability to speak Scots Gaelic, he was “unable to become intimate with the lives of the people”. He therefore wrote about them “as a tripper who was disappointed and tantalized by the islands and seduced by them only to be reminded that on that soil he will always be an outsider”. He concluded rather pessimistically: “I doubt if I shall visit the Western Islands again”.²⁴ It is that sense of loss and alienation that ultimately informs his poem “On Those Islands”:

There is still peace though not for me and not
Perhaps for long – still peace on the bevel hills
For those who still can live as their fathers lived
On those islands.²⁵

²² Ibid 13.

²³ MacNeice, I Crossed the Minch (1938; London: Longmans, Green and Co. & Polygon, 2007) 23.

²⁴ Ibid 18-19.

²⁵ MacNeice, The Earth Compels 28.

One review of I Crossed the Minch commented, a little unfairly, that MacNeice in his description of the Hebrides “admires unsentimentally the unsophisticated life of the islanders, but does not enquire too closely into their present economic predicament. He soon tires of the simple life”.²⁶ Critical reception seemed to focus on MacNeice’s lack of real engagement with the island and islanders. “The meagre notes on the Western Isles of Scotland are padded out beyond recognition”, Geoffrey Gorer maintained in Time and Tide in April 1938.²⁷ His scathing review continued:

The informative prose contains items of great interest, such as “During the afternoon I looked at some very odd books of popular religion. On the wall was a picture of a girl...On Monday I felt very weak. I decided to shake off the dust of Lewis and go into Morris. To get from Uig to Morris by bus...”²⁸

“I wonder”, Gorer exclaimed, “if other people are getting as bored as I am with the prose of the 1935 Young Man’s Communist Association of Poets”. They all “write practically the same book, chiefly about themselves, slightly coy and self-revelatory, with a certain number of private jokes, and all about the same small clique”. “Even when the publishers – very understandably – give these young men cheques to go a long way away to write their book”, Gorer continued, they still come home with the same book and might just as well have shaped in St. John’s Wood”. “I Crossed the Minch seems the worst of the travelogues and self-explorations this little group has yet offered us”.²⁹ Geoffrey Walton’s response in Scrutiny was of a similar nature:

He provides the same kind of pointlessly minute descriptions of this trip – he tells the reader when he has a drink, Mr. Auden tells him when he goes to the lavatory – more

²⁶ Desmond Shawe-Taylor, “Alone in the Hebrides”, rev. of I Crossed the Minch, New Statesman and Nation 15.374 (23 Apr. 1938): 696.

²⁷ Geoffrey Gorer, “Deep Depression”, rev. of I Crossed the Minch, Time and Tide 19.15 (9 Apr. 1938): 504.

²⁸ Ibid 504.

²⁹ Ibid 504.

verse interludes, some dull parodies (including a silly one of Lawrence) and a series of inconsequential dialogues between an imaginary tough and an aesthete.³⁰

In a letter placed at the beginning of the book, addressed to Hector MacIver who had helped to draw up the travel itinerary, MacNeice apologised for “the book of an outsider” who “treated frivolously what he could not assess on its merits”.³¹ This initial preface to his work encouraged contemporary critical reception to focus on the book’s lack of any real social detail. Yet MacNeice’s throw-away comments belie the way in which he appropriates Western and island imagery to make serious comments on the social and political context. Although MacNeice’s book confronts the issues of unemployment, emigration, the changing nature of the tweed manufacturing industry and basic housing conditions, all of which contributed to the decline of the Hebridean islands, at no point does he consider himself ‘of’ these people or equipped to make judgements on their island life. It is this consciousness of outsider status that explains MacNeice’s suggestion of the book’s superficiality:

I hope that some native of the Hebrides will soon write a book about them which will do justice to their noble traditions and be at the same time an effective polemic against disintegrating influences. I am not qualified to write either such a polemic or such a eulogy. This is the book of a tripper, a person concerned with the surface.³²

MacNeice was aware of the inherent negative aspects of his role as travel writer, asserting “there are two types of travellers whom I detest – the lovers of the quaint who patronise the natives and the plus-four wits who are facetious about them”. His fear was that he was “almost bound to be one or other at moments in this book”.³³ It is a characteristic of the book that was noticed by Janet Adam Smith in The London

³⁰ Geoffrey Walton, “The Poet and His Readers”, rev. of Letters from Iceland, I Crossed the Minch, The Earth Compels, Memory and Other Poems by Walter de la Mare, Poems by C.H. Peacock, The Carnival by Frederic Prokosch, Scrutiny 7.1 (June 1938): 94.

³¹ MacNeice, I Crossed the Minch 3.

³² Ibid 18.

Mercury, alone of early critical receptions. MacNeice, she realised, “carried with him burdens” that early travellers “did not have to bear – the burden of his own self-consciousness, and the burden of his knowledge of all the sentiment that has been slopped over the Hebrides, all the books that have been written about them, all the guide book gushiness about scenery and romance”.³⁴

MacNeice did not set out to indulge in another form of mass observation. On the contrary, the phenomenon of socially realistic documentation which was commissioned by publishers in the 1930s is satirised in this book:

Messr. Longman and Curtis Brown
Are standing treat to the folks in town.
You have no idea how the cockney public
Is fetched by people who talk in Gaelic.³⁵

I Crossed the Minch demonstrates that regardless of his own desire for escape at times, MacNeice at heart eschewed any naïve mythicising of island life. There was in this travelogue to be “no picture of island Utopias” for he had “gone sparingly with the gilt and the whitewash”.³⁶ MacNeice’s comments on the islands stressed the impossibility of any kind of seclusion from the rest of the world, and he wrote of his unease at the invasion of the island “by the vices of the mainland” in the form of commerce.³⁷

There is a clear sense in which MacNeice related his Hebridean writings to those poems which were written about the West of Ireland. MacNeice is persistent in

³³ Ibid 34.

³⁴ Janet Adam Smith, “Hetty and a Poet”, rev. of I Crossed the Minch, London Mercury 38.223 (May 1938): 85. This reviewer remarked that “Mr. MacNeice gibes at himself for being frivolous and superficial, self-conscious about being self-conscious, a snob, a tripper, a pot-boiler who is contemptuous of the people who ill read his book. But he is also a poet, and he does not gibe at himself for this”. “We have”, the reviewer felt, “the direct impact of the islands on an exceptionally noticing eye and understanding mind”. Cf. pages 85-6.

³⁵ MacNeice, I Crossed the Minch 37.

³⁶ Ibid 18.

³⁷ Ibid 8.

his reminders of the ways in which he expected his trip to the Hebrides to be similar to those to the West of Ireland. He “took it that” when he “went in Scotland north and west” that he “should find the same pleasant changes as when in Ireland going west and south”.³⁸ He imagined his arrival at those islands in images of “a ring of noisy foam, a welter of seals and black-haired noble Celts”, “like the first time I ever went to the west of Ireland”.³⁹ Indeed, given his perceived connections between the Hebrides and Ireland, MacNeice found it irresistible not to print the views of MacKenzie (one of the characters he encounters on the island) on what is needed to stem the decline of the islands:

Some years ago, he said, he could have worked a revolution in Scotland. It was not the blood that he objected to, but one could not put the clock back. The spirit of the people as a whole was dead. It might be a good idea if the Hebrides attached themselves to the Irish Free State.⁴⁰

Much as he was drawn to island life, MacNeice was alienated from it in many respects. Not least of the reasons for this alienation was the problem of language. MacNeice was painfully conscious of the gulf that existed between himself as tourist/travel writer and the inhabitants of the island. The inability to become one of the people was a recognition that overshadowed much of Yeats’s and MacNeice’s work. When John S. Kelly remarks of Yeats that “he seeks in the folk a community; but it is a folk divided from him by religion and growing class awareness”, the comment is equally applicable to MacNeice.⁴¹ MacNeice had gone to the Hebrides “partly hoping to find”

³⁸ Ibid 26. See also Tom Paulin, “Letters from Iceland: Going North”, *Renaissance and Modern Studies*, 20 (Nottingham: University of Nottingham, 1976) 69: The word “basalt” describing Icelandic landscapes was “for MacNeice, inescapably associated with Ireland. It is a stone which dominates Co. Antrim”.

³⁹ MacNeice, *I Crossed the Minch* 26.

⁴⁰ Ibid 99.

⁴¹ John S. Kelly, “The Fifth Bell: Race and Class in Yeats’s Political Thought”, *Irish Writers and Politics: Literary Studies* 36, ed. Okifumi Komesu and Masaru Sekine (Gerrards Cross: Colin Smythe, 1989) 127.

that the Celt in him “would be drawn to the surface by the magnetism of his fellows”. This was, he states unequivocally, “a sentimental and futile hope”.⁴² MacNeice’s feelings of alienation disturb any easy opposition of idyllic escape and the demands of public life:

I was a little depressed to remember that the Scottish islanders speak Gaelic. I am all in favour of their speaking Gaelic but I realised that their English talk would consequently not represent them. Hector MacIver had said that I must mix with the Gaelic-speaking population. But how to mix? I find it difficult enough to mix with the English-speaking population outside the very small clique in which talking and listening come natural to me.⁴³

It is interesting to note that in the chapter “Or One Might Write it so”, the paragraph that MacNeice tells us mimics Yeats’s style, focuses on the ultimate exclusion enforced by language:

In Sorisdale I met an old man who looked like George Mair but without Mair’s vulgar insouciance and he told me some old legends dating from before the Norse Invasion. He spoke in Gaelic with which I was not acquainted and owing perhaps to this or to some other reason I only partly understood him. I have often wondered since whether he was not pulling my leg.⁴⁴

In the summer of 1936 MacNeice had travelled with Auden to Iceland after Faber commissioned a travel book. The resulting publication, Letters from Iceland (1937), came in for much the same criticism as I Crossed the Minch for its light-hearted content. A reviewer for The Listener, for example, felt that there was not much in the book “about Iceland and the Icelanders themselves” apart from “some admirably practical hints to tourists”. “Personal contacts and personal impressions” were lacking. Poets, this reviewer insisted, “never seem to notice anything; it is a pity there was no

⁴² MacNeice, I Crossed the Minch 7-8.

⁴³ Ibid 33-4.

⁴⁴ Ibid 186.

novelist in the party”.⁴⁵ Letters from Iceland was also subjected to much criticism by virtue of the number of private jokes and references contained within it. To this end, a reviewer for Time and Tide, addressing a letter to Auden (although in an aside he felt that he “ought to include Mr. MacNeice too, for his name is on the frontispiece; but he’s not really written much of the book”), remonstrated : “if the writer is in foreign parts I think it better if he deals with the inhabitants of those parts; if he is going to write about himself or his friends or Culture, I can’t see why he doesn’t stop at home. The Tottenham Court Road is, after all, quite as effective a setting as Iceland’s greasy mountains”.⁴⁶

MacNeice’s poems which arose out of this trip also resist any simplistic oppositions. In “Eclogue from Iceland” Ryan and Craven are exiles in the North in an impulse to avoid public life. In the poem, Grettir, a character from Icelandic saga, asks Ryan “Is your island also an island?” It is a question that suggests Ryan’s closeness to MacNeice. Ryan’s answer presents Ireland in precisely the same terms as those in which the peasantry are depicted in “Turf Stacks”:

I come from an island, Ireland, a nation
Built upon violence and morose vendettas.
My diehard countrymen like drayhorses
Drag their ruin behind them.
Shooting straight in the cause of crooked thinking
Their greed is sugared with pretence of public spirit.
From all which I am an exile.⁴⁷

Ryan is exiled from this life and there is no mention of escape to the West of Ireland.

Rather, Ryan moves northwards instead to Iceland.

⁴⁵ Rev. of Letters from Iceland, The Listener 18.448 (11 Aug. 1937): 311. The book did meet with a more favourable review by Michael Roberts: “Mr. Auden and Mr. MacNeice are both honest townees: they do not profess to use landscapes as symbols for a state of mind, as Wordsworth did, but that does not prevent them from writing good descriptive verse that makes a scene the starting-point of meditation about the world in general”. Michael Roberts, “Poets on Holiday”, London Mercury 36.215 (Sept. 1937): 483.

⁴⁶ “Letter to W.H. Auden”, rev. of Letters from Iceland, Time and Tide 18.32 (7 Aug. 1937): 1075.

“Eclogue from Iceland” crushes any expectations of an antithetical world to be found there. Ryan dissolves any idyllic notions, depicting Iceland as a place of “dead craters and angled crags”. This undercutting of any notion of an ideal escape occurs again in I Crossed the Minch:

I still like what is bleak and comparatively desolate, was delighted by the country north-west of Madrid. But I only want the comparatively desolate; a complete lack of vegetable or animal life leads to anaesthesia [...] there should be two names for loneliness, for the kind which is attractive and sentimentally so, and for the kind which approximates to nothingness. The lava-fields of Iceland cured me of the idea that a landscape cannot be too bleak. To appreciate even the stoniness of stones you need something else to set them off. The miles and miles of stones in Iceland had for me none of the rocky charm of the rocks of Connemara which are broken by gorse or cottages.⁴⁸

Iceland, a world of “vignettes”, “dead flowers in an album”, pots of “ivy trained across windows”, is no less stagnant than Craven’s depiction of 1930s political and social life (a world of ennui and surface details):

Outside the delicatessen shop the hero
With his ribbons and his empty pinned-up sleeve
Cades for money while with turned-up collars
His comrades blow through brass the Londonderry Air.⁴⁹

Those exiles, Ryan and Craven, who congratulate themselves on their arrival in Iceland in the poem’s first published version, are in fact admonished by Grettir to “Go back to where you belong”.

MacNeice’s trip to Iceland convinced him of the fallacy of believing in an island escape. In “Eclogue from Iceland”, Grettir proclaims:

There is only hope for people who live upon islands
Where the Lowest Common labels will not stick
And the unpolluted hills will hold your echo.⁵⁰

⁴⁷ MacNeice, Letters from Iceland (London: Faber and Faber, 1937) 126.

⁴⁸ MacNeice, I Crossed the Minch 32-3.

⁴⁹ MacNeice, Letters from Iceland 128.

⁵⁰ Ibid 126.

This is severely undercut not only by the descriptions of Iceland, but by the reminders that the island is also invaded by violence and political life. When Craven cries, “What have we found? More copy, more surface”, it is merely a reminder of the naïve political action they had hoped to leave behind – “all copy – impenetrable surface”.

In “Epilogue to W.H. Auden” (retitled “Postscript to Iceland” in The Earth Compels), MacNeice, Nicholas Allen maintains, “frames his ideas of place and company in a setting whose fearful isolation might be Thoor Ballylee in a time of civil war”.⁵¹ In this poem the initial opposition of “ascetic guts” and “Latin fire” is eventually rendered void. The sinister image of watching “Ravens from their walls of shale/ Cruise around the rotting whale” is mirrored by the terror of “nations germinating hell”:

For the litany of doubt
From these walls comes breathing out
Till the room becomes a pit
Humming with the fear of it.⁵²

The “fog-bound sirens” (always a reminder in MacNeice of fear or impending war) intrude upon the “long sea-wall”, and the life to which the traveller returns becomes a “desert in disguise”.

MacNeice’s light-hearted “Letter to Graham and Anna” questions the poet’s reasons for travelling. The reasons, he jokes, seem “beyond conjecture”:

There are no trees or trains or architecture,
Fruits and greens are insufficient for health,
Culture is limited by lack of wealth,
The tourist sights have nothing like Stonehenge,
The literature is all about revenge.⁵³

⁵¹ Nicholas Allen, “Louis MacNeice and Autumn’s Ghosts”, That Island Never Found: Essays and Poems for Terence Brown, ed. Allen and Eve Patten (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2007) 75.

⁵² MacNeice, Letters from Iceland 261.

⁵³ *Ibid* 31-2.

He comically undercuts the seriousness of his reasons for travelling. Three months beforehand, Auden had said “that he was planning to go/ To Iceland to write a book and would I come too”. MacNeice agreed, having he writes, “nothing better to do”.⁵⁴ Yet there is a reason, MacNeice insists in the poem, “a scarcity of population” and “the silence of the islands”:

In England one forgets – in each performing troupe
Forgets what one has lost, there is no room to stoop
And look along the ground, one cannot see the ground
For the feet of the crowd, and the lost is never found.
I dropped something, I think, but I am not sure what
And cannot say if it mattered much or not.

MacNeice, however, refutes the notion that his travels to Iceland can provide some kind of escape from the world left behind:

We are not changing ground to escape from facts
But rather to find them. This complex world exacts
Hard work of simplifying; to get its focus
You have to stand outside the crowd and caucus.

The letter is predicated on the same structure as his other Western and Northern poems.

MacNeice might insist that he has travelled North in order to find space:

[...] come north, gaily running away
From the grinding gears, the change from day to day,
The creaks of the familiar room, the smile
Of the cruel clock, the bills upon the file,
The excess of books and cushions, the high heels
That walk the street, the news, the newsboys' yells,
The flag-days and the cripple's flapping sleeve.⁵⁵

He might also remark that he has made the journey in order to “practise forgetfulness without/ A sense of guilt”. His final plea, however, is to “please remember us/ So high up here in this vertiginous/ Crow's nest of the earth”, and to “let us know/ If anything

⁵⁴ Ibid 33.

⁵⁵ Ibid 34.

happens in the world below”.⁵⁶ His rejoinder that the travellers not be forgotten by the “world” in some ways anticipates Auden’s reflections rereading the book in 1965. “Though writing in a ‘holiday’ spirit”, Auden insisted, “its authors were all the time conscious of a threatening horizon to their picnic – world-wide unemployment, Hitler growing every day more powerful and a world-war more inevitable. Indeed, the prologue to that war, the Spanish Civil War, broke out while we were there”.⁵⁷ Of his letter to Bryon in that work, Auden also commented:

I suddenly thought I might write him [Bryon] a chatty letter in light verse about anything I could think of, Europe, literature, myself. He’s the right person I think, because he was a townie, a European, and disliked Wordsworth and all that kind of approach to nature, and I find that very sympathetic. This letter in itself will have very little to do with Iceland, but will rather be a description of an effect of travelling in distant places which is to make one reflect on one’s past and one’s culture from the outside.⁵⁸

As Tom Paulin notes, the poets’ commitment to society 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”.⁵⁹

“Idyllic? Maybe. Still there is hardly/ Such a thing as a just idyl” MacNeice wrote in “The Island”, Section VI of Ten Burnt Offerings (1952). In “Day of Returning” (Section VIII), it is MacNeice’s travels to Greece that inspire his ruminations on island escape; and it is to Odysseus’ longings to return home that MacNeice alludes:

He found this bliss a prison and each day
Wept as he watched the changing and unchanging ocean
Beyond which lived his wife and the dog Argus
And real people. Who lived.

⁵⁶ Ibid 35.

⁵⁷ Auden, Foreword, Letters from Iceland (1967: London: Faber, 1985) 10.

⁵⁸ Humphrey Carpenter, W.H. Auden: A Biography (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1981) 199.

It is the sense of artificiality about that existence that troubles MacNeice most:

Hours which are golden
But unreal hours, flowers which forget to fall,
And wine too smooth, no wrinkles to match my own –
Who would be loved by a goddess who cannot appreciate
The joy of solving a problem, who never wept
For friends that she used to laugh with?⁶⁰

This dissolution of any type of binary between the temptations of escape and political imperatives provides the structure of “Cushendun”, which forms the third part of “The Coming of War”. In MacNeice’s poetry, Ireland had as Mahon points out, “increasingly played the windswept role, becoming a warm, slightly mad alternative to the demands of English life”. (Although Mahon also notes, MacNeice was “under no illusions about the country, voiced periodic exasperation with its sectarianism, censorship and introversion”.)⁶¹ Once again, MacNeice is drawn by “forgetfulness to a place where “All night the bay is plashing and the moon/ Masks the break of the waves”. It is, however, a place where visual images are more illusion than reality, for “Cushendun” is “made as it were out of clouds and sea”. Eamon Grennan reads “Cushendun” as evidence that “the outbreak of war crystallizes” MacNeice’s “sense of the landscape as an emancipation from the world of ordinary responsibilities and common sense”.⁶² However, the poem can be seen to conclude (as we shall also see in “Neutrality”) with the recognition that the political world of responsibility is *unavoidable*. It ends once again, with a co-mingling of the temptations of this rural existence and the call for action. The air that resembles a “glove” is in fact little

⁵⁹ Tom Paulin, “Letters from Iceland: Going North” 77. (original emphasis)

⁶⁰ MacNeice, *Ten Burnt Offerings* (London: Faber and Faber, 1952) 77-8.

⁶¹ Mahon, new preface, *The Strings are False: An Unfinished Autobiography* by Louis MacNeice (1965; London: Faber and Faber, 2007) 7.

⁶² Eamon Grennan, “Louis MacNeice”, *Studies* 70.278-9 (Summer/ Autumn 1981): 152.

protection against the incursions for which the poem has prepared us – the waves breaking on the shore, the bird intruding into the walled garden, the trumpet-shaped “convolvulus” in the hedge (the latter being a reminder of war like the tin trumpet nasturtiums in Autumn Journal), or the voice of the BBC radio broadcaster:

Only in the dark green room beside the fire
With the curtains drawn against the wind and waves
There is a little box with a well-bred voice:
What a place to talk of War.⁶³

The sudden intrusion of the radio with its announcements of a Peace Conference to prevent the outbreak of war had also provided the opening for Out of the Picture (1937).⁶⁴

Seamus Heaney’s reminiscences on his Northern Irish childhood during the Second World War, seized upon that same image of an alien voice intruding into a domestic setting:

When a wind stirred in the beeches, it also stirred an aerial wire attached to the topmost branch of the chestnut tree. Down it swept, in through a hole bored in the corner of the kitchen window, right on into the innards of our wireless set where a little pandemonium of bumbles and squeaks would suddenly give way to the voice of a BBC newsreader speaking out of the unexpected like a *deus ex machina*. And that voice too we could hear in our bedroom, transmitting from beyond and behind the voices of the adults in the kitchen; just as we could often hear, behind and beyond every voice, the frantic, piercing signalling of morse code.⁶⁵

Heaney’s account of the war years in Co. Derry, like MacNeice’s description of Cushendun, focuses on the stark contrast between the messages of the BBC presenter and the concerns of a rural world that seemed curiously out of sync:

If there was something ominous in the newscaster’s tones, there was something torpid about our understanding of what was at stake; and if there was something culpable

⁶³ MacNeice, The Last Ditch (Dublin: Cuala Press, 1940) 6.

⁶⁴ MacNeice, Out of the Picture: A Play in Two Acts (London: Faber and Faber, 1937) 9.

⁶⁵ Seamus Heaney, Crediting Poetry (1995; Oldcastle: Gallery Books, 1996) 9-10.

about such political ignorance in that time and place, there was something positive about the security I inhabited as a result of it.⁶⁶

The finality of the refrain in “Galway”, for instance, “The war came down on us here”, repudiates MacNeice’s attempts to create any kind of alternative life. In Part V of “The Coming of War”, MacNeice demonstrates the impact that the outbreak of World War II had on the poet, for the poet finds it unreal that this fantasy of escape could continue. Importantly, however, it is obvious that the poet has nonetheless been implicated in the temptation to indulge in such fantasy. The final section of “The Coming of War” emphasises the impingement of war on the poet’s personal life:

And why, now it has happened
And doom all night is lapping at the door,
Should I remember that I ever met you –
Once in another world?⁶⁷

MacNeice’s decision to retitlle the poem “Closing Album” for publication a year later signifies the sense in which this private life has been disrupted. And indeed, it is the War that crystallises for MacNeice the dialectic between the public or political world and the temptations of escape.

⁶⁶ Ibid 10.

⁶⁷ MacNeice, Plant and Phantom (London: Faber and Faber, 1941) 38.

ii. MacNeice and Wartime

Knowing the temptations inside me to abandon reason because of the failures and follies of rationalists, and because of the political chaos to give up the quest for political or social faith. Or, in other words, to have an interregnum for ever.⁶⁸

Mahon points out in his essay “MacNeice, the War and the BBC” that when war was declared in September 1939, MacNeice, who was in Galway at the time, “seems to have been in no hurry to get involved. While friends and contemporaries were rushing to enlist, he bided his time”.⁶⁹ That sense of reluctance is borne out by MacNeice’s depiction of the news of war in his autobiography:

Ernst and I used to walk across the bay every night; the reflection of Jupiter was a strong stain on the sea. Every morning we drove to Ballycastle to play golf, buying a daily paper before our game. One morning the paper announced the Russo-German pact. ‘Ought we to go back?’ Ernst said. ‘Certainly not,’ I said. We went out on the course, sliced and looked into the river, into the sea, into a ruined abbey, returned home with a crazy appetite, crazy.⁷⁰

It was at this point that MacNeice considered staying in Ireland when he decided on the “spur of the moment” to apply for a vacant Chair of English at Trinity College.⁷¹ (MacNeice, however, was not successful). While acknowledging that this was the time of the Phoney War, which preceded the invasion of France, the London Blitz or the Battle of Britain, Mahon makes a correlation between MacNeice’s own attitudes and Irish policy: “MacNeice was Irish and Ireland was neutral”. Moreover, “at this point”, MacNeice “had a strong emotional tie with America, and America was neutral too, for

⁶⁸ Ibid 20.

⁶⁹ Mahon, “MacNeice, the War and the BBC” 31. See also Clair Wills, That Neutral Island 74. “For a man with so little appetite for a new war of bombs and propaganda, Ireland’s lack of interest in the coming struggle must have had its attractions. In these early days MacNeice was able to appreciate the value of standing outside the new European war.”

⁷⁰ MacNeice, The Strings are False 210-11. “We leant over the bridge and there were the salmon in the Corrib, facing upstream, oscillating slightly but keeping their places. Why they wanted to do that we couldn’t imagine, but it looked very pleasant; let the Corrib do what it likes but you can defy it. Defy it by staying where you are”.

the moment”.⁷² (MacNeice departed for America in January 1940 to resume a relationship with Eleanor Clark.) In a letter to E.R. Dodds in 1939, MacNeice could write: “I dare say this will scandalise you as being a kind of escapism but I can’t really see that I should be doing any more for civilisation by what they say the intellectuals must do – propagand work”.⁷³ “There must be plenty of people to propaganda”, he wrote to Dodds on 24 September 1939, “so I have no feeling of guilt in refusing to mortify my mind”.⁷⁴ MacNeice’s visit to America in January 1940 provided some kind of interval while he resolved his feelings:

For five months I had been tormented by the ethical problems of the war. In Ireland most people said to me ‘What is it to you?’ while many of my friends in England took the line it was just power politics. Why Poland of all places? And then there was India. I had decided, however, that any choice now was a choice of evils and that it was clear which was the lesser. But it is hard to risk your life for a Lesser Evil on the off-chance of some entirely problematical betterment for most likely a mere minority in a dubious and dirty future. I felt that I was not justified in supporting the war verbally unless I were prepared to suffer from it in the way that the unprivileged must suffer. But I was not yet prepared to do this, so I had made use of certain of my privileges to escape for a little to America.⁷⁵

It is perhaps noteworthy that in The Strings are False the reprieve from war which was found in America is likened to the landscape of Ireland that may also have provided some measure of escape at this time: “On some days it looked like Ireland, gave me just enough nostalgia to blend with my mood of abandon”.⁷⁶

Clark maintains that MacNeice’s “anger is thinly veiled” a number of years later in The Strings are False when “he remembers the mood in Dublin the day after

⁷¹ E.R. Dodds, Missing Persons: An Autobiography (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1977) 135.

⁷² Mahon, “MacNeice, the War and the BBC” 31.

⁷³ McDonald, Poet in his Contexts 97.

⁷⁴ Qtd. R.D. Smith, “Castle on the Air”, Time Was Away: The World of Louis MacNeice, ed. Terence Brown and Alec Reid (Dublin: Dolmen Press, 1974) 88.

⁷⁵ MacNeice, The Strings are False 21.

⁷⁶ *Ibid* 26.

Germany invaded Poland”.⁷⁷ MacNeice depicted Dublin’s literati’s virtual ignoring of the war; his views perhaps coloured somewhat by his own ambiguous relationship with Dublin. He had “always found the city a home from home”, as he wrote in “Under the Sugar Loaf” in 1962. “I like it of course more than it likes me”, he qualified, remembering the literati’s popular chant “Let him go back and labour/ For Faber and Faber”.⁷⁸ In that article, however, MacNeice reminisced of the outbreak of war in a manner that refutes Clark’s contentions:

And then at the end of the Thirties I remember that Third of September when England declared war. I went to Croke Park to see the All Ireland Hurling Final. An old woman stood near me selling bananas. Suddenly there came thunder and a deluge: it was like Saint Michael, with All Angels to help him, if they had been producing King Lear, I looked around at the old woman, her bananas had vanished into pulp. Well, I thought, Dublin may keep out of the war (and who would blame her?) but at least she’s ushered it in with her well-known sense of theatre.⁷⁹

In “Dublin”, the first section of “The Coming of War”, the town itself at the outbreak of war provides some reprieve for the poet too:

This was never my town,
I was not born nor bred,
Nor schooled here and she will not
Have me alive or dead
But yet she holds my mind
With her seedy elegance,
With her gentle veils of rain
And all her ghosts that walk
And all that hide behind
Her Georgian facades.
[...]
Augustan capital
Of a Gaelic nation,
Appropriating all
The alien brought,
You give me time for thought
And by a juggler’s trick
You poise the toppling hour.⁸⁰

⁷⁷ Clark, “Revising MacNeice” 82.

⁷⁸ MacNeice, “Under the Sugar Loaf”, *New Statesman and Nation* 63.1633 (29 June 1962): 948-9. Rpt. *Selected Prose of Louis MacNeice*, ed. Alan Heuser (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990) 250-1.

⁷⁹ *Ibid* 251-2.

⁸⁰ MacNeice, *The Last Ditch* 3.

Behind these lines, Allen points out, can be sensed “Easter 1916” with “the Georgian streets and careless talk”.⁸¹ Significantly, that poem had evinced Yeats’s ambiguous attitudes towards the political ideals of the 1916 rebels, and his own attempts as poet to assimilate those events.

Many of the sections published in “The Coming of War”, which were not included as part of “Closing Album” in Plant and Phantom, deal with the poet’s own private concerns. Section IV of the poem includes the following thoughts:

O my darling if only you were with me
And the old rhythms could be made to work
And the new horror that is the old redoubled
Were not there waiting in the dark.
The bulletins and the gladiators beset me
Casting a blight on the Irish day.⁸²

In section V of the poem, the West of Ireland is presented a place of escape from specifically English concerns of war:

Running away from the War
Running away from the red
Pillar-box and the stamps
Bearing George’s head.
[...]
Hoping to hide my head
In the clouds of the West.⁸³

⁸¹ Allen, “Louis MacNeice and Autumn’s Ghosts” 78.

⁸² MacNeice, The Last Ditch 5-6. See also Section II:

But, if I am going to be dead
Within a year,
There is someone I should like
Beside me in this bed
And God damn Hitler
That she is not here.

For MacNeice, in the 1950s, Cushendun was still equated with “war and frustrated/ Love”. See Ten Burnt Offerings 66.

⁸³ Ibid 7-8.

Section VI of the poem, included in both versions, contains cacophonous images which unsettle any mythicising of such places: “turkeys/ Gobbling under sycamore trees” and “pullets pecking the flies from around the eyes of heifers”. MacNeice’s acknowledgement of the impossibility of such attempts at escape does not make his return to the problems of war any easier nor does it resolve his own questions about his duty towards that war: “Eastward again, returning to our so-called posts”.

The Last Ditch was met with criticism in the New Statesman and Nation in May 1940 for its lack of engagement with the war. While MacNeice may have attempted to show by the title of his book that he wished to “communicate something about the war”, the critic felt that the collection had not “anything of the slightest interest to say about it”.⁸⁴ “This book contains the most facile poems Mr. MacNeice has yet written, in which he is a good deal too free with his pessimism and his ‘loves’ and ‘darlings’ handed out left and right”. One might be grateful, the reviewer asserted, “for that modern poetry which attempts to face the immense task of translating industrial civilisation into imaginative and comprehensible terms. Mr. MacNeice evades the problem by offering us instead his attractive personality”.⁸⁵ MacNeice’s war poems were far less superficial than this review proposes. For one thing, the suggestion that MacNeice’s placing of these poems in the West of Ireland evades the issues facing industrial civilisation is simplistic. These poems allow MacNeice much scope to examine the question of the individual’s responsibility towards society. Like the Icelandic poems in which the poems arising from travel northwards had allowed the poets, Auden and MacNeice, to reflect on the contemporary European situation, the

⁸⁴ “Bards”, rev. of The Sober War by George Rostrevor, The Last Ditch, In Time of Suspense by Laurence Whistler, Letter from Ireland by Ewart Milne, The Man Coming Toward You by Oscar Williams, The Gap of Brightness by F.R. Higgins, The New Apocalypse, Poems by Foy Fuller and 38 Poems by Henry Treece, New Statesman and Nation 19.481 (11 May 1940): 620.

⁸⁵ *Ibid* 622.

issues facing society are never far from MacNeice's poems of the 1940s. The review, however, does draw attention to one crucial feature of MacNeice's work of these years – his hesitancy regarding the war aims and his own responsibilities towards that war as a poet and individual.

MacNeice depicted his journey to America in terms which tell of a personality split between a responsibility towards society and a wish to preserve the poetic act from becoming merely a tool of propaganda. "At the time I was tense, nervous, muddled expecting the moon, guilty of the war, so full and so empty of myself".⁸⁶ While teaching at Cornell University during his stay in America, MacNeice records a rebuke by a French lecturer for his lack of political engagement; "Poete, why are you doing nothing? You must show us a course ... Poete, prends ton luth! La fin du monde!"⁸⁷ This incident is noted by Mahon who reads it as a sign of MacNeice's reluctance to commit to the war effort in the early months of the war. Mahon points out that at this time "there was no patriotic war-poetry from MacNeice: his characteristic mode was ironical and anarchic".⁸⁸ An Atlantic crossing, MacNeice himself insisted, "is always an interregnum and this one in January 1940 was more so than most".⁸⁹

In terms of his poetry's refusal to create clear boundaries between the public and private spheres, there was no immediate and dramatic change in MacNeice's work on the outbreak of war. Instead as G.W. Stonier noted, reviewing Plant and Phantom in May 1941, the division between poems written before and after September 1939 "is largely an arbitrary one". "Essentially everywhere it is the same world in which the

⁸⁶ MacNeice, The Strings are False 18.

⁸⁷ Ibid 27. For all this, Mahon still notes this period as a particularly "rich period in MacNeice's creative life", perhaps almost suggesting that something other than political engagement is to be found in MacNeice's work of these years. See Mahon, "MacNeice, the War and the BBC" 32.

⁸⁸ Mahon, "MacNeice, the War and the BBC" 38.

⁸⁹ MacNeice, The Strings are False 20.

poet moves". What MacNeice communicates is "rather a wartime poetry than war-poetry".⁹⁰ A review in The Listener was even more critical: "Mr. MacNeice seems to have taken a step backwards in his development. He also writes a few poems about the war, but his chief feeling seems to be one of quite natural, though not very significant, annoyance at its interfering with his rather complex personal life. In the few poems devoted to this there is a rather sickening atmosphere of self-pity".⁹¹ For Spender, the poetry of both Day Lewis and MacNeice needed to be considered in the light of the poets' Irish roots. Irish poetry had "different standards from the English tradition"; it was "more musical, softer in texture and imagery" and it was "best when it moves without such impediments as difficult processes of thought and over-harsh realities", for it could only deal with these "when it has acquired the strength to do so without losing its singing quality (as in late Yeats)". Spender's ambiguous review of MacNeice's collection continued:

His poetry has great facility, by which I mean he only writes when a subject presents to him a clear run from the beginning to end. He does not have the urge to write about subjects which present difficult problems to be solved in the process of creation. He writes only when these problems have been solved already. His new volume, like Day Lewis's, touches on the war, but I cannot say that it interprets much war experience. (It was published at the beginning of last year.) The war is used as an excuse to write some very 'occasional' love poetry. These poems are pleasant and enjoyable, but they do not add much to MacNeice as a poet.⁹²

MacNeice's Irishness, surfacing in his poems of the war years, was not lost on other English reviewers. "Mr. MacNeice, as Irish as one could wish" had failed, according to a review in The Listener, in poems written some months earlier, to show "any prophetic

⁹⁰ G.W. Stonier, "Poetry Can be Written in Wartime", rev. of Plant and Phantom by Louis MacNeice, New Statesman and Nation 21.533 (10 May 1941): 492.

⁹¹ Rev. of The Poems of W.H. Davies, The Last Ditch, The Sober War and Other Poems of 1939 by George Rostrevor Hamilton, The Listener 24.605 (15 Aug. 1940): 247.

⁹² Stephen Spender, This Year's Poetry (1940), Horizon 3.14 (Feb. 1941): 144.

awareness of this summer of Blitzkrieg”.⁹³ For Clarke, on the other hand, reviewing The Last Ditch in The Dublin Magazine, MacNeice was again rebuked for little demonstration of his Irish roots in that collection:

Mr. MacNeice is a tourist in the Irish mode and spends his time, as tourists will, admiring the obvious, disparaging the hidden, and falling for the temptation of small sham souvenirs. Guileless reactions enough, but distasteful to the Dublin reader who never really enjoys watching the bedevilling effects of our strange climactic conditions upon a decent well-meaning tourist.⁹⁴

It is in upon individuals that much of MacNeice’s wartime poetry focuses. (This issue will be engaged with at length in the following chapter). This focus was not a sudden departure; similar attitudes had been evinced when asked to take sides on the Spanish Civil War. Even then, MacNeice’s concern in his writings had less to do with an enthusiastic embracing of political causes than a concern with individuals in society:

I support the Valencia Government in Spain. Normally I would only support a cause because I hoped to get something out of it. Here the reason is stronger; if this cause is lost, nobody with civilized values may be able to get anything out of anything.⁹⁵

In February 1940 in Horizon, Spender laid out the following views on the responsibilities of the writer in wartime:

Given a war like the present, a pacifist is simply a person who has put himself politically out of action, and who in doing so is probably helping the other side. Possibly helping the other side may sometimes further the course of ultimate peace, but in this war I don’t see how it can. Of course, there is a great deal to be got out of refusing to touch evil, in the way of saving one’s own soul and being an example to future generations. But actually, personal salvation and getting myself into a morally correct position superior to my contemporaries don’t appeal to me.⁹⁶

⁹³ Rev. of The Poems of W.H. Davies, The Last Ditch, The Sober War and Other Poems of 1939, The Listener 24.606 (15 Aug. 1940): 246.

⁹⁴ Clarke, Rev. of The Last Ditch, The Dublin Magazine 15.4 (Oct-Dec 1940): 81.

⁹⁵ MacNeice, “Statement on the Spanish Civil War”, “Authors take sides on the Spanish War”, Left Review (Dec. 1937) unpaginated. Rpt. Selected Prose 42.

⁹⁶ Stephen Spender, “September Journal”, Horizon 1.2 (Feb. 1940) 105-6. Rpt. in The Thirties and After: Poetry, Politics, People (1933-1975) (London: Macmillan, 1978) 114.

During the following year, this issue was debated between MacNeice and Spender. Spender disparaged those writers who removed themselves from England to America, and directed his accusations at Auden, Isherwood and MacNeice, in particular. Spender's criticism was merely one of numerous expressions of unease at the departure of some of England's most significant writers. The Poetry Review carried the following poem addressed to Auden in America:

Is then your muse the precious gem
That to the girdle and the hem
Of Poesy's gown adds radiancy,
To scintillate in brilliancy?

Then priceless must your music be,
Eternal fame the only fee
To compensate desertion's shame
Now Britain knows consuming flame.⁹⁷

On his return to England, MacNeice quickly dismissed the naïve belief in any kind of permanent evasion of political circumstances: "Speaking for myself, I would deny the possibility of such an escape ever occurred to me".⁹⁸ MacNeice's interlude had always been temporary. "I am surprised", he wrote, "to find how many people ask bitterly after those other British writers who are still in America. When people over here talk about these expatriates, more often than not their acrimony equals their ignorance".⁹⁹ No amount of public pressure, MacNeice considered would act as these writers' "ersatz conscience". "They have consciences of their own and the last word must be said by their own instinct as artists".¹⁰⁰ It was his concern with individuals that again informed his defence of Auden. Some of Auden's fans are complaining that he has sold the pass", he noted." If he were merely – as he may think he is – plumping on personal

⁹⁷ The Poetry Review 32.1 (1940) 49.

⁹⁸ MacNeice, "Traveller's Return", Horizon 3.14 (Feb. 1941): 113. Rpt. Selected Prose 87.

⁹⁹ Ibid 110. Rpt. Selected Prose 83.

relationships (in the narrow sense), that might be so". But, MacNeice insisted, "what he is really doing is reorganizing – what the politician forgets – that the world is a world of persons".¹⁰¹

It was clear, too, that MacNeice found Spender's views of escapism simplistic. As MacNeice illustrated in The Strings are False, escapism was not just to be found among those writers who had travelled to America. This was obvious to MacNeice from the time he spent in the British Museum working on his study of Yeats:

The British Museum became a sort of club for us. Ernst and Reggie and Walter Allen and several others and myself were all attending it. When any of us arrived in the reading room he would walk around under the fantastic dome to find someone else and they would go out and have a coffee or a beer. The day was broken up by coffees and beers and I would also go out frequently and sit in the colonnade for a cigarette. Many people came in from the streets to eat their lunch upon the steps and the pigeons pick up the crumbs. There are many refugees already beginning to hibernate.¹⁰²

The same point underscores "The British Museum Reading Room", where the intellectuals have retired to "a world which is safe and silent" and where the "hive-like dome" of the building becomes a type of air raid shelter. It is a world of isolation and exclusion, surrounded by the architecture and literature of years, where the readers are "hanging like bats in a world of inverted values". Their hope that the museum will exclude the cacophony of war, "these walls of books will deaden/ The drumming of the demon in their ears", is seen as a vain ideal and it is refuted soundly in the final stanza where "There seeps from heavily jowled or hawk-like foreign faces/ The guttural sorrow of the refugees".¹⁰³

¹⁰⁰ Ibid 117. Rpt. Selected Prose 91.

¹⁰¹ MacNeice, "Not Tabloided in Slogans", rev. of Another Time, Poems by W.H. Auden, Common Sense 9.4 (April 1940): 24-5. Rpt. Selected Literary Criticism 115-6.

¹⁰² MacNeice, The Strings are False 209.

¹⁰³ MacNeice, Plant and Phantom 22.

Quick to defend his fellow writers, MacNeice resisted any utilitarian definitions of art and highlighted the inadequacy of Spender's debate:

If an expatriate writer happened, say, to be a highly skilled engineer, he might be more useful to Britain as an engineer than he would be to the USA or the world as a writer. But none of the expatriates we are discussing has any such technical qualifications; the only things they can do particularly well is to write. Would they be useful to Britain to-day *qua* writers? Any more use, that is, than they are while they reside in America? It is more than doubtful. A writer in England now can either sink his gifts in some form of propaganda work, at which he is not necessarily better than Tom, Dick, or Harry, or he can continue to survive as a free lance whom no one has time to attend to, or he can give up his profession of writing for the amateurdom of National Service. Usefulness? That is a conception which has never been commensurable with art.¹⁰⁴

For MacNeice, Auden's reasons for departure were simple: "I hear people are still fussing in England about the ethics of his migration to America". But, "Why bother?" MacNeice asked. "The explanation he gave me seems reasonable enough – that an artist ought either to live where he has live roots or where he has no roots at all; that in England to-day the artist feels essentially lonely, twisted in dying roots, always in opposition to a group; that in America he is just as lonely, but so, says Auden, is everybody else." "It is no question of *il gran rifiuto*". "He feels he can work better here than in Europe, and that is all there is to it".¹⁰⁵

MacNeice's doubts about the war were not to be simplistically resolved upon his return from America. "Thus here I am now on a boat going back to war and my feelings are too mixt to disentangle", he wrote in The Strings are False. "The passengers' faces are settled in gloom and I have plenty of reason to be gloomy too, being a mere nomad who has lost his tent".¹⁰⁶ His reasons for return, which were

¹⁰⁴ MacNeice, "Traveller's Return" 110-1. Rpt. Selected Prose 84.

¹⁰⁵ MacNeice, "American Letter", Horizon 1.7 (July 1940): 464. Rpt. Selected Prose 76.

¹⁰⁶ MacNeice, The Strings are False 17. These doubts surrounding return were also expressed in his article "The Way We Live Now", Penguin New Writing 5 (April 1941): 9-14. Rpt. Selected Prose 79-80: "I had been ten months in the USA, during which time England - for me - had become Terra Incognita. The lurid technique of the American radio and press had hidden all Europe in an aura of death; at the same time I could not imagine this death - it was just not compatible with the college students or the New York intellectuals or anyone else I met in America; if this death were real, the Americans before my

outlined in Horizon in 1941, were certainly not couched in any terms of decisive political commitment:

From June on I wished to return, not because I thought I could be more useful in England than in America, but because I wanted to see things for myself. My chief motive thus being vulgar curiosity, my second motive was no less egotistical: I thought that if I stayed another year out of England I should have to stay out for good, having missed so much history, lost touch.¹⁰⁷

That said, MacNeice in the early years of the war battled with his own conscience. In late November 1939, he wrote:

My conscience is troubling me about his fool war. I am beginning to think this may be my war after all [...] if it is my war, I feel I ought to get involved in it in one of the more unpleasant ways. Ignoring the argument that writers are more use writing. No doubt they are. But writers also unfortunately seem to be expected to express opinions on these subjects & if, qua writer, one were to say that he was pro-War, then one ought to be prepared to accept the nastier parts of the war just as much as anyone else. As much as anyone else in my case would mean allowing myself to be, in my proper time, conscripted.¹⁰⁸

MacNeice's conscience, however, still grappled with "things like India or interferences with liberty at home" which he was liable to use "to rationalize my own cowardice".¹⁰⁹

MacNeice's voicing of these concerns perhaps hints at some understanding of the reasons for Irish neutrality, even if he did not agree with such policies. For Brown, MacNeice's agonizing in his letters "as to whether the war was his war" suggests that he could not "completely fail to understand Ireland's neutrality in the conflict."¹¹⁰ This

eyes could not be real too. By autumn I had reached a point where, though England had not regained its reality, my Americans had begun to lose theirs. Therefore to enter the Atlantic tunnel was to leave a growing unreality which I hoped would vanish when I met it; otherwise my return would be – what some of my friends in America considered it anyway – a mere adventure in nihilism".

¹⁰⁷ MacNeice, "Traveller's Return" 110. Rpt. Selected Prose 83.

¹⁰⁸ Qtd. Clark, "Revising MacNeice" 84. Cf. Dodds, Missing Persons 135: MacNeice spent the months after the outbreak of war "in a state of tormenting indecision" but by late November 1939, Dodds maintains, he had made up his mind to get involved but had already committed himself to lecturing for three months at Cornell. On return peritonitis had left him unfit for active service.

¹⁰⁹ Qtd. Longley, Louis MacNeice 78-9.

¹¹⁰ Brown, "Louis MacNeice and the Second World War" 168.

was a real concern for MacNeice given that conscription was not implemented in Northern Ireland. “As an Irish national he had a very real choice in the matter of enlistment and the taking of the King’s shilling”. In “brooding in a letter to Dodds as to whether the war is his war, he was writing to a fellow Irishman who had refused to enlist during the First World War because, after 1916, that war certainly had not been his”.¹¹¹

In That Neutral Island, however, Wills places her documentation of Irish neutrality within the context of the changing nature of the success and defeat of the Allied forces during the years 1941 to 1944.¹¹² She points out the pressures that these changes brought about and the sense of urgency to become involved this may have placed on writers like MacNeice. There is little doubt that as the war progressed, MacNeice felt these pressures more keenly, and especially so, upon his return to England. However, this does not necessarily lead to the conclusion that because MacNeice was undergoing his own struggle with these issues, and because he eventually became involved as a fire watcher and script writer for the BBC, that “Neutrality” is merely some kind of rage against Ireland’s unwillingness to revoke its neutral status. MacNeice’s own descriptions of his work for the BBC were far removed from any suggestion of propaganda. Instead he defined his work as follows in his “London Letter” of April 1941:

I myself am now writing feature-scripts for the Overseas Department of the British Broadcasting Company and can tell you that their short-wave programmes for North America are being greatly developed. Apart from news commentaries and political talks the BBC are now properly conscious of the value of presenting Britain as it is to Americans. It is high time that ordinary individuals on both sides of the Atlantic should realize what their counterparts on the other side are like.¹¹³

¹¹¹ Brown, rev. of Poet in his Contexts, The Review of English Studies 44.176 (Nov. 1993): 620.

¹¹² Wills, That Neutral Island 114ff.

¹¹³ MacNeice, “London Letter [3]: Anti-Defeatism of the Man in the Street”, Common Sense 10.4 (April 1941): 110-11. Rpt. Selected Prose 111.

MacNeice was not prone during his lifetime to sweeping generalisations or changes of mind. He was always cautious in taking up literary or political crusades, and thus unlikely to revoke completely his own personal hesitations, or to rebuke his native country for precisely the same temptations he had himself encountered, without any sense of the ironies implicit in such a turnabout. MacNeice's "London Letter" in May 1941 was alert to the historical and political tensions and complexities that governed the issue of Ireland's neutrality:

I have just returned from three weeks in Ireland. I have no wish now to bring up the undying (though chameleonic) Irish Question but I would ask you to remember that the feeling in Eire is now predominantly pro-British (though still opposed to participation in the War), that the pro-German minority is extremely small and that De Valera's position is agonizingly difficult. Those who propose the application of the strong hand to Eire are forgetting their history but the other kind of extremist can be equally silly; an example is a recent little book by the Irish Republican, Jim Phelan, called *Churchill Can Unite Ireland*. Mr. Phelan's thesis is: End Partition in Ireland by a fiat and the whole country will automatically throw all its energies into the crusade against Hitler. Whereas what would really happen (remember Carson's gun-running in 1914) would be civil war.¹¹⁴

MacNeice's illustration in "The Way We Live Now" of his encounters with his Irish cabin-mate on his return to England demonstrated his sensitivity to this question:

I changed the subject and talked about Ireland but that was equally delicate. 'You know they've got no conscription in the North? You know who they've got to thank for that? Sure, it's Dev. Dev. and none other. And you know, if they brought in conscription, who is it they'd conscript? The Unionists? Not at all. All them fellows been clamouring for years about their loyalty to the Empire, the day they bring in conscription, they'll all turn around and have two left feet.'¹¹⁵

"Flight of the Heart" from Plant and Phantom demonstrates the struggle that waged within MacNeice during the early years of the war. "Heart, my heart, what will you do?" the speaker wonders in the poem. The answer supplied is akin to the temptations MacNeice himself experienced:

¹¹⁴ Ibid 110-1. Rpt. Selected Prose 116.

¹¹⁵ MacNeice, "The Way We Live Now" 9-14. Rpt. Selected Prose 81.

I will build myself a copper tower
With four ways out and no way in
But mine the glory, mine the power.¹¹⁶

The imagery of the tower reminds the reader of “Neutrality” and the poet’s depictions of the West of Ireland in that poem. In reply to the speaker’s persistent questioning in “Flight of the Heart” as to what the heart would do if the “tower should shake and fall”, the heart’s response is of a similar nature to that described in “The Drunkard” published in Holes in the Sky (1948):

I would go in the cellar and drink the dark
With two quick sips and one long pull,
Drunk as a lord and gay as a lark.¹¹⁷

The imagery of the “lord” and the bird that forms MacNeice’s description of this world of escapism is perhaps an echo of Yeats’s “Sailing to Byzantium”. The uneasy conclusion of Yeats’s poem in its descriptions of the actual characteristics of life in Byzantium is mirrored in the imagery of escape in “Flight of the Heart”. When the speaker demands of the Heart what he shall do when the “cellar roof caves in”, the Heart disavows saving his own skin and instead decides:

I will go back where I belong
With one foot first and both eyes blind,
I will go back where I belong
In the fore-being of mankind.¹¹⁸

¹¹⁶ MacNeice, Plant and Phantom 63.

¹¹⁷ MacNeice, Holes in the Sky: Poems 1944-1947 (London: Faber and Faber, 1948) 49.

¹¹⁸ MacNeice Plant and Phantom 63.

iii. “Neutrality”

The neutral island facing the Atlantic.¹¹⁹

“Neutrality” opens with two stanzas which seem, on first appearance, to continue the bitter indictment of his native country’s preoccupation with romantic nationalist history that MacNeice’s poems of the late 1930s, such as “Valediction” and Autumn Journal, had evinced. MacNeice depiction of the West of Ireland in 1944 is etched in reminders of the country’s past:

Look into your heart, you will find a County Sligo,
A Knocknarea, with for navel a cairn of stones,
You will find the shadow and sheen of a moleskin mountain
And a litter of chronicles and bones.¹²⁰

The association of that West with Yeatsian mythicism is referenced through the image of the cairn of stones which draws upon the mythical associations of Emer’s burial place with Knocknarea. The impassioned imperative which begins the second stanza, however, incorporates a semantically ambiguous pronoun; “Look into *your* heart, you will find a County Sligo”.¹²¹ It is tempting to read that pronoun and placename as a dismissive allusion to a Yeatsian insular preoccupation with locality and mythology. But to whom does “*your*” refer? The ambiguity of the pronoun requires the reader to decide whether it suggests the guilty abandonment of political action on the part of the inhabitants of the Irish Free State (thereby excluding the poet himself), or whether it includes MacNeice’s own dilemma as a writer from the North of Ireland living in Britain with strong connections to that West. As with many of his poems and prose writings of the 1930s and early 1940s, MacNeice’s engagement with the artistic or

¹¹⁹ MacNeice, Springboard: Poems 1941-1944 (London: Faber and Faber, 1944) 24.

¹²⁰ Ibid 24.

political perspectives of Yeats led to an examination of his own poetic task. In “Neutrality” it is not simply a Yeatsian West that is decried as a symbol of Irish wartime politics. The West in that poem also stands for the poet’s guilty acknowledgement of his own propensity for such escape, and so continues MacNeice’s use of the West, or imagery associated with it, in the preceding years. It is to be grouped then with MacNeice’s dialectically structured poems and his identification in his prose of a similar poetic method in Yeats’s own work.

The intertextual phraseology in “Neutrality” provides resounding echoes of the poetry of Yeats. The phrases “ducats of dream” and “great doubloons of ceremony” seem intended to conjure up in the reader’s mind particularly Yeatsian terminology. The word “dream” in Yeats’s poetry has been heavily associated with his engagement with the question of art’s relationship to politics as well as his early use of myth and legend in attempting to foster a sense of national identity. The word “ceremony” reminds the reader of Yeats’s celebrations of the Anglo-Irish classes whose leisured way of life, in Yeats’s opinion, helped to develop a literary ability and also to make these myths and legends available. For Fran Brearton then, MacNeice “critiques Irish neutrality in the Second World War partly through a critique of Yeats’s ‘A Prayer for my Daughter’, where to counteract the ‘great gloom’ in his mind, Yeats turns to ‘custom and ceremony’ as the begetters of ‘innocence and beauty’. That kind of activity has become for MacNeice, when it extends outside the scope of Yeats’s poetry, dangerously introspective”.¹²² Without doubt, Yeats’s earlier escapist or dream worlds, as well as his poetic evocation of the ideals of the Big House, are brought to mind. However, read in the context of MacNeice’s dialectical poems of the 1930s and 1940s,

¹²¹ Ibid 24. (emphasis added)

¹²² Fran Brearton, “Louis MacNeice: Between Two Wars”, *The Great War in Irish Poetry: W.B. Yeats to Michael Longley* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000) 142.

the use of the topographical location in “Neutrality” can also be seen as MacNeice’s examination of his own response to political imperatives.

The reference to a Yeatsian West in “Neutrality” is adjusted with MacNeice’s specific choice of Knocknarea as placename. Yeats is implicated by the specific location – the mythical site of Knocknarea had appeared in poems such as “The Ballad of Father O’Hart” published in Crossways (1889), “The Hosting of the Sidhe” in The Wind Among the Reeds (1899) and “Red Hanrahan’s Song about Ireland” in In the Seven Woods (1904). The intertextual placename, however, relates as much to MacNeice’s family origins. Jon Stallworthy in his biography of MacNeice pinpoints Knocknarea as part of the family’s mythology:

A land agent, Anthony MacNeice, made a runaway marriage with Peggy Duke, daughter of a local Anglo-Irish Ascendancy family. Perhaps as a consequence of this advantageous connection, their eldest son Thomas is said to have owned a considerable amount of land between Knocknarea and the sea.¹²³

In any case, the ancestral family home was located in Ballysodare, close to Knocknarea. It is clear from MacNeice’s prose that this region was no less a focus of emotional attachment for him than it was for Yeats. In his autobiography, MacNeice reminisced:

In September I drove with my family to Connemara; my father had not been back there since settling in the North, so that all the time my reactions to the West were half my father’s. That is, I was not seeing the West for the first time; I had been born there sixty years before and this was my home-coming. When we drove over a hill-top and there was the Atlantic gnashing its teeth in the distance, my father rose in his seat and shouted ‘The sea!’ And something rose inside me and shouted ‘The sea!’ Thalassa! Thalassa! To heel with all the bivouacs in the desert; Persia can keep our dead but the endless parasangs have ended.¹²⁴

¹²³ Jon Stallworthy, Louis MacNeice (London: Faber and Faber, 1995) 2.

¹²⁴ MacNeice, The Strings are False 111. The importance of this moment to MacNeice is evident in his multiple references to it. Cf. I Crossed the Minch 22: “The first time I went to the West of Ireland I drove in a saloon car with my father, and as we came over a hill, still some miles from the coast, my father who had not been back there for many years, leaped in his seat under the constricting roof and cried like Xenophon’s troops ‘The Sea! The Sea!’”

MacNeice's mythicising of the West of Ireland or Western islands in his travels and writings of the 1930s can be partly explained, then, by his familial roots in Connemara. "An Irishman of Southern blood and Northern upbringing" was how MacNeice described himself in 1953.¹²⁵ In I Crossed the Minch MacNeice detailed the importance of the West of Ireland to him, commenting that "the South, which I had never visited, had all the virtues of legend". Although he "had the bad luck", he thought, "to live among hybrid Ulster Scots", he consoled himself with the knowledge that he "was autochthonous, descended from an Irish King – the name MacNeice being derived from Conchubhar MacNessa, the villain of the Deirdre saga". (In later years, the poet was told that "the derivation was much more probably from Naoise, the hero of the same saga", and since then he had, "in defiance of natural history, claimed descent from both of them at once and in each case by Deirdre".)¹²⁶ For the young MacNeice, his family's roots in Connemara, coupled with the fact that his father was a supporter of Home Rule, helped to create a very clear polarity between the West of Ireland and England. "At an early age I thought that it was my religious duty to be a rebel and that the best of all terms of reproach was the word 'English'. English meant everything that was flat, dull and unenterprising".¹²⁷ "Landscapes of Childhood and Youth" depicts MacNeice's early reactions to his Ulster environment: "The human elements of this world need not be detailed: guilt, hell, fire, Good Friday, the doctor's cough, hurried lamps in the night, melancholia, mongolism, violent sectarian voices". In response, the young MacNeice "began to long for something different, to construct various dream

¹²⁵ MacNeice, "The Other Island", rev. of Mind You, I've Said Nothing by Honor Tracy and The Silent Traveller in Dublin by Chiang Yee, New Statesman and Nation 46.1183 (7 Nov. 1953): 570, 572. Rpt. Selected Prose 189.

¹²⁶ MacNeice, I Crossed the Minch 30.

¹²⁷ Ibid 30.

worlds". The first of these was the West of Ireland which later still stirred him "if not like a trumpet, like a fiddle half heard through a cattle fair".

My parents came from that West or, more precisely, from Connemara, and it was obvious that both of them vastly preferred it to Ulster. The very name Connemara seemed too rich for any ordinary place. It appeared to be a country of windswept open spaces and mountains blazing with whins and seas that were never quiet, with drowned palaces beneath them, and seals and eagles and turf smoke and cottagers who were always laughing and who gave you milk when you asked for a glass of water. And the people's voices were different there, soft and rich like my father's (who made one syllable of 'heron' or 'orange') and not like the pious woman's or the ferocious mill-girls' whom I always expected to pelt us with rotten eggs.¹²⁸

Such attachments to Connemara, and such feelings of belonging, also surface in MacNeice's sister, Elizabeth Nicholson's writings, for she maintains that "neither our mother nor Louis nor I myself felt that we belonged properly to the Ulster community in which we were living". She explains that owing to their mother's constant talk of the West, it became for the siblings "a 'many-coloured land', a kind of lost Atlantis" where the children felt "that by rights we should be living, and it came to be a point of honour that we did not belong to the North of Ireland. We were in our minds a West of Ireland family exiled from our homeland".¹²⁹ If "the beginnings/ That ended before the end began" can be read as a reminder of MacNeice's roots in the West of Ireland, from which he was distanced by his parents' move to Northern Ireland (or his own residence in England), then the almost paradoxical "bitterly soft" can be read as depicting the

¹²⁸ MacNeice, The Strings are False 216-7.

¹²⁹ Elizabeth Nicholson, "Trees Were Green", in Time Was Away, ed. Terence Brown and Alec Reid (Dublin: Dolmen Press, 1974) 13-14. The importance of the west on MacNeice's identity and poetry has been noted by critics. See Terence Brown, Northern Voices (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1975) 100. "Had MacNeice been tempted by an urge to regional identification it is unlikely that he would have chosen the province of Ulster as his locus of regional attachment. For MacNeice as a young man felt his roots as an Irishman (if he felt them at all) were in the West of Ireland, in Connaught from where his father's people had come". See also "Carrick Revisited", Holes in the Sky 26-7:

Torn before birth from where my father dwelt,
Schooled from the age of ten to a foreign voice,
Yet neither western Ireland nor southern England
Cancels this interlude, what chance misspelt
May never now be righted by my choice.

temptation that remained with him to mythicise the West as a type of Edenic golden era.

MacNeice's association of the West in "Neutrality" with the figure of Yeats but also his own relationship with Ireland appear also in Heaney's writings. In his essay "The Sense of Place", writing of Connemara and the West of Ireland, Heaney chose to focus on the place's heavy associations with Yeats but also his relationship to it, as a Northern Irish poet. For Heaney, the figure of Yeats dominates as one travels south along the coast from Tory to Knocknarea, skirting Lissadell and Innisfree, for these places are all "instinct with the spirit of a poet and his poetry". Significantly the West of Ireland does not merely evoke Yeats's presence but also stands particularly for a nostalgic past as well as the distance now felt by Northern writers from that past. For Heaney, these places "deeply steeped in associations from the elder culture" can only mean something if "the features of the landscape are a mode of communion with something other than themselves, a something to which we ourselves still feel we might belong".¹³⁰

"Neutrality" can be read as implying something other than the poet's dissociation from Yeatsian poetics and Irish neutral policies. Rather a sense of personal guilt and self-reproach finds its way into the poem. It was perhaps, as Wills insists, "almost impossible not to measure life in Ireland against the fate of the rest of Europe". Certainly, in that poem Ireland becomes "a land of fairy-tale peace, far removed from the battle front".¹³¹ The images of the West have a sense of unreality about them – "shadow and sheen", "intricacies of gloom and glint". The phrase "as nobody to-day would mint" places that landscape outside the realm of political and social realities. The

¹³⁰ Seamus Heaney, "The Sense of Place", *Preoccupations* (1980; London: Faber and Faber, 1985) 132.

¹³¹ Wills, *That Neutral Island* 78.

poem, as Wills points out, “constantly hints at circularity and self-enclosedness – in the intertwined beginnings and ends, in the hilltop cairn, the navel-gazing, the ducats and doubloons”.¹³² MacNeice himself resisted any inward-looking isolationist policies. In “Traveller’s Return”, he stressed that “few of us believe the diehards who think you must stick to your own parish, fewer of us than formerly think that it is good for a small country like Ireland to attempt a cultural autarchy”.¹³³ Yet Wills misses much of the nuances of the poem when she insists that it is simply the inhabitants of the West that are “arraigned for their detachment from reality, their isolation and myopia”.¹³⁴ Such wilful isolation is reprehensible in the context of war, but MacNeice himself is not immune from it.

“The Coming of War” depicted Galway and Sligo as MacNeice found them during his holiday with Ernst Stahl at the outbreak of war in September 1939. The Strings are False documents the fact that the locations with which MacNeice was principally concerned in this poem were in fact the places in which he found himself at that time. The poet’s reactions to the coming of war are thus examined in the context of his relationship with the West of Ireland. A reading of “Neutrality” which is concerned with MacNeice’s doubts about – and his struggles with – his own responsibilities towards that war is also convincing. “Neutrality” does not merely allude to a Yeatsian West. It conveys the significance of the place for MacNeice himself, for the location becomes a type of springboard for the poet to examine his individual conscience. In this regard, it is a later example of the ways in which that West had been used in collections like The Earth Compels and Letters to Iceland.

¹³² Ibid 128.

¹³³ MacNeice, “Traveller’s Return” 114. Rpt. Selected Prose 88.

¹³⁴ Wills, That Neutral Island 78.

Grennan maintains that in “Neutrality” “once again Ireland is a counterpoint to the world of history, an attractive antidote to time, a narcotic anachronism from which MacNeice’s own sceptical sense of duty and commitment must rouse himself”.¹³⁵ However, the importance of “Neutrality” lies in the deconstruction of these antitheses, as these are demonstrated to be unstable through the intermingling of political circumstance with private fantasy. It is the recognition of the implausibility of any *permanent* escape, even the futility of such wishful thinking, that informs “Flight of the Heart” and “Neutrality”. As is the case with Yeats’s dialectically structured poems, the final lines of “Neutrality” may in fact render redundant any simplistic choice between the “Intricacies of gloom and glint” and the “eastward” continent “close, dark, as archetypal sin”. This poem does not permit any detachment from encroaching international political events.

The above reading of “Neutrality” is encouraged on re-reading MacNeice’s “Last Before America”. In this poem, written in 1945, MacNeice depicts the inhabitants of the West as “toy-like” and “so purposed you could take/ This for the Middle Ages”.¹³⁶ Yet such illusions of escape in the first stanza are directly refuted throughout the rest of the poem. For “at night the accordion melts in the wind from the sea/ From the bourne of emigrant uncle and son”. Despite the historical separation of the continents and the “divorce” of the sea, both America and Ireland are connected; the journeys “away from death” finally resulted in the same. Despite the poem’s attempted suppression of history, we are left ultimately with the reality of loss, the islets of the West, resembling “cubs that have lost their mother”.¹³⁷

¹³⁵ Grennan, “Louis MacNeice” 53.

¹³⁶ MacNeice, *Holes in the Sky* 30.

¹³⁷ *Ibid* 30.

The last two lines of “Neutrality” resonate with a particularly memorable and harsh description:

While to the west off your own shores the mackerel
Are fat – on the flesh of your kin.¹³⁸

The lines contain echoes of Yeats’s “mackerel-crowded seas” in “Sailing to Byzantium”. Where Yeats’s poem had used that description to convey a sense of life and vitality, in MacNeice’s poem the image is given precisely the opposite connotations. The lines are reminiscent of a disillusioned Hamlet whose mind focuses on grotesque images of death and decay:

We fat all creatures else to fat us, and we fat ourselves for maggots
A man may fish with the worm that hath eat of a king, and eat of the fish that hath fed
of that worm.¹³⁹

As with MacNeice’s earlier references to Yeats and Sligo, however, these lines are semantically ambiguous. If they suggest an Irish betrayal of its responsibilities in the Second World War, MacNeice is clearly not exempted. It is interesting that the echo of Hamlet in the final lines of “Neutrality” is taken from Act Four, Scene Three of the play where Hamlet has consciously avoided direct action in repudiating an opportunity to kill Claudius as he prays. What is perhaps more enlightening is the guilt involved in that decision, for Hamlet’s failure to act at this point specifically causes the unnecessary deaths of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, Gertrude and Laertes, quite apart from Ophelia and Polonius due to earlier procrastination. The reference contains a further significance. The echo of the Shakespearean tragedy is from a scene that occurs after a major point of dramatic irony in the play. For on this occasion, it is not external

¹³⁸ MacNeice, *Springboard* 24.

¹³⁹ William Shakespeare, *Hamlet, The Norton Shakespeare*, ed. Stephen Greenblatt (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1997) Act Four, Scene Three, ll 21-28: 1727.

circumstances which can be deemed responsible for the hero's inaction (we, the audience, know that Claudius's prayers are in effect futile, since he fails to relinquish what he has gained from his ill deed). The explanation for inaction, therefore, lies within the hero (anti-hero?) himself. At this point the action which Hamlet feels a burden to carry through is anathema to him. In "Neutrality", too, as this chapter has attempted to illustrate, our concern should be about MacNeice's own conscience.

In his essay "Eliot and the Adolescent" (1948) MacNeice laid out his generation's preoccupation with the figure of Hamlet – the hero of the play who is torn between intellectual pursuits and the call to action provoked by circumstances in Denmark. For the young poets it was the romantic and intellectual Hamlet who most appealed:

The paradox of my generation, who were aged about eighteen, in 1926, is that while (again like most adolescents?) we were at heart romantics, i.e. anarchic, over-emotional and set on trailing our coats, the date of our birth had deprived us of the stock, i.e. the Nineteenth Century, 'romantic' orientation. A year before I read Eliot my favourite long poem had been Prometheus Unbound but this had already cloyed; Shelley's enthusiasms were beginning to seem naïve to a child of the Twentieth Century, even to a child who had only fleeting contacts with its over-industrialized, over-commercialized, over-urbanized, over-standardized, over-specialized nuclei. What we wanted was 'realism' but – so the paradox goes – we wanted it for romantic reasons. We wanted to play Hamlet in the shadow of the gas-works. And this was the opening we found – or thought we found in Eliot.¹⁴⁰

McDonald notes MacNeice's use of the Hamlet figure in the sections on Spain in MacNeice's Autumn Journal.¹⁴¹ Longley also comments that throughout that poem, Hamlet can be seen as the "prototype of the artist/ liberal facing the problem of constructive action in troubled times".¹⁴² In Autumn Journal, it is to Hamlet that MacNeice looks in depicting his choices of despair or personal escapism and will or

¹⁴⁰ MacNeice, "Eliot and the Adolescent", T.S. Eliot: A Symposium, ed. Tambimuttu and Richard March (Sept. 1948): 146-7. Rpt. Selected Literary Criticism 150-1.

¹⁴¹ McDonald, Poet in his Contexts 219-20.

¹⁴² Longley, Louis MacNeice 82.

action. In Section X, MacNeice alludes to the point at which Hamlet finally begins to take action: “And sometimes a whisper in books/ Would challenge the code, or a censured memory sometimes.” Section XXIV contains echoes of Hamlet’s soliloquy on despair or escapism, where he debates the merits of suicide but also discusses the fears that prevent one from taking such action:

While we sleep, what shall we dream?
Of Tir nan Og or South Sea islands,
Of a land where all the milk is cream
And all the girls are willing?
Or shall our dream be earnest of the real
Future when we wake?¹⁴³

The references to Hamlet’s soliloquies which debate the issue of the intellectual’s duty political responsibilities is a feature that appears more than once in Autumn Journal:

Only there are always
Interlopers, dreams,
Who let no dog die nor death be final.¹⁴⁴

But MacNeice refuses to endorse mere dutiful political action, when in Section XVI he is woken from his dreams by men of action, as Hamlet is from his inaction by Fortinbras. Though at first MacNeice envies these men of action, that initial view is undercut. These men anticipate MacNeice’s Irish countrymen who are depicted in the following section. Given MacNeice’s harsh criticism of the political stagnancy of his native country in that section, the men of action who intrude on his dreams can hardly be read in a positive light. Rather these figures demonstrate how MacNeice refused to give way to political demands:

¹⁴³ MacNeice, Autumn Journal 94-5. See also “To-Day in Barcelona”, Spectator 162.5769 (20 Jan. 1939): 84-5. Rpt. Selected Prose 67: “I have never been anywhere where these values were so patent. It would have been difficult to be a Hamlet in Barcelona”.

¹⁴⁴ MacNeice, Autumn Journal 14. Edna Longley in “Louis MacNeice: Autumn Journal”, Poetry in the Wars (Newcastle upon Tyne: Bloodaxe Books, 1986) page 82 notes this echo of Hamlet.

Nightmare leaves fatigue:
We envy men of action
Who sleep and wake, murder and intrigue
Without being doubtful, without being haunted
And I envy the intransigence of my own
Countrymen who shoot to kill and never
See the victim's face become their own
Or find his motive sabotage their motives.¹⁴⁵

MacNeice's hesitations about the hardened political attitudes of his native country are of a kind with Yeats's horror at the intransigence of the Catholic Nationalists in Responsibilities and in "Easter 1916". His view is so similar to Yeats's, that it is to Yeats's poem that MacNeice in fact refers us. "So reading the memoirs of Maud Gonne.../ I note how a single purpose can be founded on/ A jumble of opposites". It is the fanaticism that Yeats identified as having made Constance Markiewicz's mind "a bitter, an abstract thing", and that led to her spending her nights in "ignorant good-will" until "her voice grew shrill". In 1931, Yeats could distance himself from his own involvement with fervent nationalism in a prefatory note to Plays and Controversies: "I doubt the value of the embittered controversy that was to fill my life for years".¹⁴⁶

The early Yeats had emphasised Hamlet – the intellectual at the expense of Hamlet – the doer. According to Yeats, "it was Hamlet's soliloquies and not his duel that were of the chief importance in the play".¹⁴⁷ Yeats's engagement with Hamlet is attributed in Autobiographies to the early influences of his father:

When I was ten or twelve my father took me to see Irving play Hamlet [...] For many years Hamlet was an image of heroic self-possession for the poses of youth and childhood to copy, a combatant of the battle within myself.¹⁴⁸

¹⁴⁵ MacNeice, Autumn Journal 61.

¹⁴⁶ Cited in Paul Scott Stanfield, Yeats and Politics in the 1930s (London: Macmillan, 1988) 30.

¹⁴⁷ W.B. Yeats, report of lecture originally printed in The Irish Literary Society Gazette, June 1899 and reprinted in Uncollected Prose 2: Reviews, Articles and other Miscellaneous Prose 1897-1939, ed. John P. Frayne and Colton Johnson (London: Macmillan, 1975) 156.

¹⁴⁸ Yeats, Autobiographies (London: Macmillan & Co., 1955) 47. See also Peter Ure's essay, "W.B. Yeats and the Shakespearian Moment" for an analysis of how the roots of Yeats's Shakespearean criticism lie in a reaction against the moral judgements of his father's friend, Professor Edward Dowden. Yeats and Anglo-Irish Literature: Critical Essays, ed. C.J. Rawson (Liverpool: Liverpool University

By 1939, however, in “On the Boiler”, Yeats was promoting the view of a politically active Hamlet, rebuking views of the hero that were solely centred on his thoughts:

English producers slur over that scene where Hamlet changes the letters and sends Rosencrantz and Guildenstern to their deaths, because they define him through his thought and think that scene but old folk material incompatible with Shakespeare’s Hamlet. Yet no imaginative man has ever complained, and Shakespeare when he made Hamlet kill the father of Fortinbras in single combat showed that he meant it. Hamlet’s hesitations are hesitations of thought, are concerned with certain persons on whom his attention is fixed; outside that he is a medieval man of action.¹⁴⁹

Yeats’s view of Hamlet as “a medieval man of action” was one with which MacNeice was familiar and one which he felt required mentioning in his study, The Poetry of W.B. Yeats.¹⁵⁰ The fact that MacNeice could interact with Yeats’s use of Hamlet as a means for examining the relationship between intellect, emotion, passion, and action suggests that MacNeice was finding in this Shakespearean character a mirror for his own dilemma as poet in these years. Reading Yeats in terms of his own preoccupations, MacNeice noted the change from the early Yeats of the theatre to the later Yeats who reaffirmed Hamlet as a man of action:

Yeats had been a dreamer and proud of it. Now having come to admire men of action he rationalized his admiration by the theory that the man of action is a dreamer who embraces his opposite, who dramatizes his dream in action; he finds this true of the heroes of Plutarch’s Lives. This theory absolves the man of action from the vulgar motivation of mere animal spirits or a merely mechanical necessity. Julius Caesar or Napoleon is playing a part; he is in fact what Nero wanted to be – an artist. Yeats might have instanced the hero of Synge’s Playboy who begins by pretending to be a violent character and ends by becoming one.¹⁵¹

Press, 1974) 205-7. See Ure also for his view that instead Yeats’s early essays focusing on Richard II are unconcerned with external matters are influenced by Walter Pater’s essay, “Shakespeare’s English Kings” (1889) 207.

¹⁴⁹ Yeats, “On the Boiler”, Later Essays: The Collected Works of W.B. Yeats 5, ed. William H. O’Donnell (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1994) 245.

¹⁵⁰ MacNeice, The Poetry of W.B. Yeats 189.

¹⁵¹ *Ibid* 107-8.

By the later 1930s, the analogy provided by Hamlet had become pronounced for MacNeice who battled with notions of political responsibility. MacNeice wrote of an England on the brink of war in 1939:

Ours was merely puffy and short of breath like Hamlet. Like Hamlet ourselves, we amused ourselves commenting on others, enjoying the distractions of sport and spectacle.¹⁵²

It is within this context that the echoes to Hamlet in “Neutrality” can be read. A reading of the poem as heavily engaged with MacNeice’s own concerns is substantiated by its placement within the collection Springboard. “Neutrality” is immediately preceded by the poem “Bottleneck”, in which we are introduced to a subject whose “unwritten rule” was “never to fight unless from a pure motive/ And for a clear end.” Knowing these ideals to be implausible, the subject remains behind as he watches “those who sailed away to make an opposed landing”. The poem, however, refuses a simplistic resolution. For, from the eyes of this Hamlet-type figure, an idealistic intellectual, “peered a furtive footsore envy”. We are left with an image of an impossible resolution between intellectual idealism, which prevents the subject from committing to war, and the guilty sense that he has refused what was his duty:

A crowd of components mutter and press
For compromise with fact, longing to be combined
Into a working whole but cannot jostle through
The permanent bottleneck of his highmindedness.¹⁵³

The situation depicted is the plight of Hamlet himself but it is also the plight of MacNeice in “Neutrality”. “The Conscript”, which is placed after “Neutrality” in Springboard, conveys the poet’s reservations about the political effectiveness of the war

¹⁵² MacNeice, The Strings are False 210. See also page 208. “The summer of 1939 was a steady delirium, the caterpillar wheels of enormous tractors rearing on every horizon. As individuals there was nothing we could do – just mark time or kill it”.

¹⁵³ MacNeice, Springboard 23.

even more profoundly. In “The Conscript” national wartime duty is presented in terms of an inexorable “Necessity”. That word “Necessity” had been used in The Dark Tower (1947) problematically. Roland’s quest in MacNeice’s play is etched in the following terms by his Tutor:

Per ardua ad astra [...]
It does not go very well in modern language.
We had a word ‘honour’ – but it is obsolete.
Try the word ‘duty’; and there’s another word – ‘Necessity’.¹⁵⁴

There is some amount of conflict in the play between the impositions of duty by Roland’s mother and Roland’s own doubts and questioning.

To you, Roland, my last message:
Here is a ring with a blood-red stone. So long as
This stone retains its colour, it means that I
Retain my purpose in sending you on the Quest
I put it now on your finger.¹⁵⁵

Roland troubles his mother because “he’s not like my other sons, He’s almost flippant, he’s always asking questions”. It is not until the ring has faded to white, and Roland can choose of his own free will, that he acts:

I Roland, the black sheep, the unbeliever –
Who never did anything of his own free will –
Will do this now to bequeath free will to others.
Ahoy there, tower, Dark Tower, you’re getting big.
Your shadow is cold upon me. What of that?
And you, you Dragon or whatever you are
Who can made men beasts, come out – here is a man;
Come out and do your worst.

The imposition of duty (whether external or from the subject’s conscience) has resulted in the Conscript’s being moulded into an “automaton”. His “choiceless” participation in war is depicted as petrifying, “like clay around his boots”, as a “groove/

¹⁵⁴ MacNeice, The Dark Tower, Selected Plays of Louis MacNeice, ed. Alan Heuser and Peter McDonald (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993) 121.

¹⁵⁵ Ibid 128.

That runs straight to an ordained disaster”.¹⁵⁶ The only optimism in the poem is that of a Yeatsian heroism, a strength of the imagination or will that can transcend its circumstances. The conscript’s “inward stalk/ Vertically aspires and makes him his own master”.

Rather than reading “Neutrality” as MacNeice’s dissociation from his native country, MacNeice’s utilisation of Yeatsian imagery and landscapes in that poem can be seen to question and come to terms with his own poetic stances. MacNeice’s difficulties in dissociating himself from his native country had been evinced in “Valediction”. Marsack maintains that “Valediction” is “fiercely resolved to resist the seductions that MacNeice cannot help enumerating”.¹⁵⁷ The point is succinct but when Marsack goes on to state that there is “no real discussion, not even MacNeice against himself”, she ignores an alternative reading which the poem offers, for there is in fact a dialogue within the poem. It is not a monologue which simply tells of MacNeice’s determination to relinquish his roots but a dialogue between the part of his personality that is determined to do this and the part that recognises the inherent problems of doing so. On four separate occasions MacNeice asserts his difficulty in severing links:

I would say, This is what you have given me
Indifference and sentimentality...
Cursed be he that curses his mother. I cannot be
Anyone else than what this land engendered me...
When I would peel my thoughts, the bells pull free –
Memory in apostasy...
I can say Ireland is hoey, Ireland is
A gallery of fake tapestries,
But I cannot deny my past to which my self is wed,
The woven figure cannot undo its thread.¹⁵⁸

¹⁵⁶ MacNeice, *Springboard* 25.

¹⁵⁷ Marsack, *The Cave of Making* 10.

¹⁵⁸ MacNeice, *Poems* 20-21.

After the honest awareness of the tendency towards this “drug-dull fatalism” in “Valediction”, one is justified in a sceptical acceptance of the poet’s determination to “exorcise my blood/ And not to have my baby-clothes my shroud”. In “Valediction” he uses the image of a round tower rather deceptively as a mark of his distance from Irish sentimentalising:

On a cardboard lid I saw when I was four
Was the trade-mark of a hound and round tower
And that was Irish glamour.¹⁵⁹

However, in The Strings are False, MacNeice made clear his own propensity to engage in this; the tower represented not just a Yeatsian mythicised Irish past, but the Ireland to which the poet felt he belonged, his “Ireland, my Ireland”:

My father had a brand of writing-paper which came in boxes decorated with a round tower and an ancient Irish wolfhound; whenever I looked at this trademark I felt a nostalgia, sweet and melting, for the world where that wolfhound belonged.¹⁶⁰

Nor were MacNeice’s doubts about Ireland’s role in the war to force him into relinquishing personal and poetic links with that country. As McDonald maintains, although the wartime poem “Neutrality” might be “an emphatic and pained statement by MacNeice”, it “tells much less than the whole story about the poet’s complicated feelings; especially after his father’s death in 1942, MacNeice found himself thinking more frequently about Ireland, and continued to visit the country and his friends and literary colleagues there”.¹⁶¹ Brown argues that MacNeice’s feelings about the country which were “becoming increasingly complicated, undergoing a kind of sea-change” were affected “in part by his immersion in the poetry of W.B. Yeats as he read for the

¹⁵⁹ Ibid 21.

¹⁶⁰ MacNeice, The Strings are False 50-1.

¹⁶¹ McDonald, “Louis MacNeice: Irony and Responsibility”, The Cambridge Companion to Irish Literature, ed. Matthew Campbell (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003) 63.

book on that poet which he published in 1941”.¹⁶² Instead, however, of reading “Neutrality” as a poem which is out of sync with MacNeice’s returns to the West, the poem can be directly correlated with the use of the West in his later poetry.

In “Day of Renewal” from Ten Burnt Offerings, MacNeice reminisced:

Where I was born,
Heckled by hooters and trams, lay black to the west
And I disowned it, played a ticklish game
Claiming a different birthplace, a wild nest
Further, more truly, west, on a bare height
Where nothing need be useful and the breakers
Came and came but never made any progress
And children were reborn each night.¹⁶³

Even then MacNeice was haunted by his propensity to mythicise that West and his ultimate disavowal of any such suggestions:

Go west and live. Not to become but be.
Still that remains an ideal – or a pretence;
Death is but life becomes.¹⁶⁴

“Under the Mountain”, from Holes in the Sky, in its division into two parts, depicts the illusory world of this landscape. Each of the first three stanzas detail the view “seen from above”:

The foam in the curving bay is a goose-quill
That feathers...unfeathers...itself [...]

¹⁶² Brown, “Louis MacNeice’s Ireland” 87. See for example Wills, “The Aesthetics of Irish Neutrality during the Second World War”, Boundary 2 31.1 (2004): 120: “MacNeice is sometimes regarded as having been straightforwardly hostile to Irish neutrality – but – as the poem suggests, the real picture was far more complicated. He often finds it hard to resist the spell of Ireland’s solipsism and self-romanticizing”. Yet Wills maintains: “The neutral island is isolationist, and MacNeice portrays Ireland’s isolation as a symptom of her folie de grandeur. (He puts it here in explicitly Yeatsian terms, not only in the swipe at Sligo but in the bankrupt coupling of ‘ceremony’ and ‘dream’”.

¹⁶³ MacNeice, Ten Burnt Offerings 65.

¹⁶⁴ *Ibid* 64. See also MacNeice’s reminiscences of his father in The Strings are False 112: “It was a country I had always known, mournful and gay with mournful and gay inhabitants, moonstone air and bloody with fuchsias. The mountains had never woken up and the sea had never gone to sleep and the people had never got civilised. My father was remembering the stories the fishermen used to tell him about the houses and the towers were down there under the sea, and he was looking around for rookeries all the rooks had left, and his nostalgia would make him walk fast, swinging his stick, and then break off impatiently. ‘Terribly backward’, he would say, ‘terribly backward’”.

The field is a flap and the haycocks buttons
To keep it flush with the earth.

The final three stanzas begin with the refrain “when you get down”. This second half of the poem undercuts any suggestions of an idyllic location that the aerial view entertains:

The breakers are cold scum and the wrack
Sizzles with stinking life [...]

The field is a failed or worth-while crop, the source
Of back-ache if not heartache.¹⁶⁵

“Western Landscape”, from Visitations (1957) depicts the poet’s seduction by those very same elements of the West in “Neutrality”:

In doggerel and stout let me honour this country
Though the air is so soft that it smudges the words
And heads of great clouds find the gaps in the fences
Of chance preconceptions and form-quoits on rock-points
At once hit and miss, hit and miss.
So the kiss of the past is narcotic, the ocean
Lolling lullingly over-insidiously
Over and under crossing the eyes
And docking the queues of the teetotum consciousness
Proves and disproves what it wants.
For the western cloud is Lethe.¹⁶⁶

Again, it is the poet’s alienation from such life that focuses his fantasy:

But we who savour longingly
This plenitude of solitude
Have lost the right to residence,
Can only gleam ephemeral
Ears of our once beatitude.
Caressingly cajolingly –
Take what you can for soon you go –
Consolingly, coquettishly,
The soft rain kisses and forgets,
Silken mesh on skin and mind.¹⁶⁷

¹⁶⁵ MacNeice, Holes in the Sky 34.

¹⁶⁶ Ibid 30

¹⁶⁷ Ibid 31.

MacNeice's use of the cairn image is notable since it also appears in "Neutrality". Here, however, the poet's fantasising of the West is explicitly associated with such objects. "Western Landscape" draws on a similar range of images to that used in the earlier "Neutrality". The "soft reminders" of "Neutrality" are mirrored in "the air that is so soft" and "the soft rain" that "kisses and forgets". The dream qualities of the earlier poem are found now in the ocean "lolling lulling" and the West "caressingly, cajolingly" luring the poet. The preoccupation with the past in "Neutrality" – "a litter of chronicles and bones" – is paralleled in "the kiss of the past" which is "narcotic" in "Western Landscape". The use of the word "gleam" hints at the "gloom and glint" of MacNeice's wartime poem. Though well aware ultimately of the fragility of such interludes, "Western Landscape" ends with a note of affection for the landscape:

Let now the visitor, although disenfranchised
 In the constituencies of quartz and bog-oak
 And ousted from the elemental congress [...]

 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.¹⁶⁸

In "Dreams in Middle Age" the poet had couched "our dreams of dalliance" in imagery of "gloom or green". In "Donegal Triptych" the poet describes how the landscape he had been alienated from becomes his once more through an act of the poetic imagination:

Here for instance: lanes of fuchsias
 Bleed such hills as, earlier mine,
 Vanished later; later shine
 More than ever, with my collusion.

¹⁶⁸ Ibid 32.

The phrase “all our ends” which “once more begin” also hints at the earlier poem “Neutrality”. The poet describes “the rumbled/ Tigers of the bogland streams” which are “more and mine than ever” as they “Prowl and plunge through glooms and gleams/ To merge their separate whims in wonder”. “Surface takes a glossier polish/ Depth a richer gloom” in that poem. Once again, however, the poem ends with the recognition that such existence is untenable:

So now from this heathered and weathered perch I watch the grey
 waves pucker
And feel the hand of the wind on my throat again,
Once more having entered solitude once more to find communion
With other solitary beings, with the whole race of man.¹⁶⁹

MacNeice’s group of poems “A Hand of Snapshots” depicted the ways in which his own background and his alienation from his roots in the West of Ireland informed his longing to be reconciled with a rural world, yet his ultimate detachment from it. The poem depicts the return of a native now living in England. “Back for his holiday from across the water”, he fishes for pollock or mackerel; an image which suggests again the extent to which the imagery in “Neutrality” had as much to do their associations for MacNeice, as they had to do with Yeats. The returned speaker, out of place in his city clothes, is trapped by his own thoughts centring on his alienation from the life left behind and the feeling that something has been lost:

And his thoughts return to the city as he fingers
His city tie, thinking he has made good,
Gone up in the world, on the whole, were it not for something,
Intuited perhaps though never understood,
Which flitted through this room around his cradle.¹⁷⁰

¹⁶⁹ MacNeice, *Visitations* (London: Faber and Faber, 1957) 18.

¹⁷⁰ *Ibid* 25.

Chapter 4

MacNeice, Yeats and Shakespeare

Whatever their system was, they stood with Yeats for system against chaos, for a positive art against passive impressionism. Where Eliot had seen misery, frustration and ruins, they saw heroic struggle – or, sometimes heroic defeat – and they saw ruins rebuilding.¹

In *The Poetry of W.B. Yeats* (1941), MacNeice sought to prove that Yeats's was not necessarily an influence that choked his own poetic authority. His belief in the validity of poetry, at a time when many writers questioned its effectiveness, governed his readings of the elder poet's work. Towards the conclusion of his full-length study, MacNeice outlined what he considered to be the primary relationship between Yeats and his generation. That relationship was rooted in what he saw as the ultimately positive nature of the elder poet's art. While MacNeice's own art confronted the despair felt in a decade hurtling towards another world war, he insisted that it should not rest on pessimistic or defeatist values. Rather, the major source of influence was, MacNeice asserted, the tragic nature of Yeats's poetry. In turning to Yeats's aesthetics, MacNeice was actively seeking a model for the role of poetry in an era which questioned that role explicitly.

Yeats's poetic stances were drawn upon and worked into MacNeice's writings in multiple ways and on numerous occasions. MacNeice was often preoccupied in his prose engagements with Yeats with the elder poet's doctrine of "tragic joy" as evinced in his prose writings or as illustrated in his later poetry. MacNeice turned to Yeats's

¹ Louis MacNeice, *The Poetry of W.B. Yeats* (London: Oxford University Press, 1941) 224.

readings of Shakespeare, and the use of Shakespearean allusions in his poetry, to explicate his poetic and philosophical stances, in an effort to seek authority for the validity of the poetic act. Yeats's presence is manifest in MacNeice's work particularly in the years approaching and during World War II – the period in which MacNeice was most directly engaged in studying Yeats's work. MacNeice's allusions to Shakespearean tragedy drew heavily on Yeats's readings and interpretations. Significantly, the intrusion of direct intertextual allusions in the form of Shakespearean quotations was one of the few occasions when direct borrowings from another poet were appropriated by MacNeice. That said, MacNeice's use of Shakespearean imagery allowed for his own independence. Yeats supplied a model for the efficacy of art, though not all of Yeats's poetic strategies were, in MacNeice's view, applicable to his generation or indeed to the modern world. "We want to have the discoveries of other poets in our blood but not necessarily in our minds", MacNeice once wrote.² This chapter will examine MacNeice's "absorption and transformation" of these Yeatsian poetic models.³

² MacNeice, "Poetry To-Day", *The Arts To-Day*, ed. Geoffrey Grigson (6 Sept. 1935): 66. Rpt. *Selected Literary Criticism*, ed. Alan Heuser (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1987) 21.

³ Julia Kristeva, "Word, Dialogue and Novel", *Desire in Language: A Semiotic Approach to Literature and Art*, trans. Thomas Gora, Alice Jardine and Leon S. Roudiez (Oxford: Blackwell, 1980) 66. Any text, Kristeva argues, is the "absorption and transformation" of another.

i. Yeats's Tragic Joy and Shakespeare

To me the supreme aim is an act of faith and reason to make one rejoice in the midst of tragedy. An impossible aim; yet I think it true that nothing can injure us.⁴

Yeats's poetry of the 1930s increasingly came to rely upon a belief summed up in the phrase "tragic joy", by which the poet meant a transfiguring of suffering and defeat in the actual world. What Yeats advocated was not despair or nihilism when faced with a repetitive or deterministic history, but rather a conscious subsumption of such events in a tragic affirmation of life. In other words, a tragic awareness that would culminate in joy not sorrow, "Gaiety transfiguring all that dread".⁵ In his *Autobiographies* (1955), Yeats remarked that "we begin to live when we have conceived life as tragedy".⁶ The tragic joy of Yeats's poems lay in an acceptance of loss or defeat as well as in an ability to recognise something beyond that loss. Art, Yeats maintained, "delights in the soul expressing itself according to its own laws and arranging the world about it in its own pattern, as sand strewn upon a drum will change according to the notes of music that are sung or played to it".⁷ For Yeats, the issue revolved around two opposing theories as defined in *A Vision* (1925). Should the artist produce antithetical art, that in which the mind shaped the world, or primary art, that in which the mind was subject to outward influence? It was Sean O'Casey's representation of suffering that had spurred Yeats to reject *The Silver Tassie* for the Abbey Theatre.⁸ In a letter dated April 20,

⁴ W.B. Yeats, letter to Dorothy Wellesley, dated 6th July 1935, *The Letters of W.B. Yeats* ed. Alan Wade (London: Rupert Hart-Davis, 1984) 838.

⁵ Yeats, "Lapis Lazuli", *New Poems* (Dublin: Cuala Press, 1938) 2.

⁶ Yeats, *Autobiographies* (London: Macmillan & Co. 1955) 189.

⁷ Yeats, "The Play, the Player and the Scene", *Plays and Controversies* (London: Macmillan, 1923) 121.

⁸ The play was eventually performed in August 1935 following Yeats's reconciliation with O'Casey.

1928, Yeats chastised O'Casey for a tragic drama that depicted external pain and suffering imposed on the characters rather than portraying the internal means by which the character overcame that pain. Yeats wrote that, though in the past O'Casey had created "some unique character who dominated all about him" and who was "a main impulse in some action that filled the play from beginning to end", in The Silver Tassie, "the mere greatness of the world war has thwarted you; it has refused to become mere background".⁹ Similar reasons dictated Yeats's selection of poetry for The Oxford Book of Modern Verse, which he edited in 1936.

The publication of The Oxford Book of Modern Verse was met with incredulity in many circles. H. A. Mason, reviewing the book for Scrutiny, thought it "astounding that the present selection should appear" in the Oxford series of books. "Although, as recent anthologies have made distressingly clear, there seems no longer to be a general consensus of opinion as to which are the better modern poems, so that every choice must seem unduly personal, it does appear a counsel of despair to entrust the selection to one whose taste is merely eccentric". And Mason felt, "if the word should appear too severe for the selection, the perverse 'introduction' fully deserves it".¹⁰ The reception of Yeats's anthology in New Verse was equally severe. The introduction to the book, this particular reviewer felt, "becomes mainly a comment boomeranging on to Yeats". "Until lately", Yeats "must have known very little about recent English verse. He seems ill-informed about it, ignorant of its peculiarities, insensitive to its real excellence". A "great respect for Mr. Yeats", could not persuade the reviewer that Yeats's selection of poetry was anything other than "eccentric, reactionary, narrow, frequently stupid, often

⁹ Yeats, The Letters of W.B. Yeats 741. See also Yeats, "The Play, the Player and the Scene", Plays and Controversies page 117 where already in 1904 Yeats makes the same point about drama in differentiating the old writers from modern English playwrights: "The persons acted upon one another as they were bound by their natures to act, and the play was dramatic, not because he had sought out dramatic situations for their own sake, but because will broke itself upon will and passion upon passion".

ridiculous – in a word, the objective criticism a man needs for making an anthology is not in Mr. Yeats’s equipment”. The anthology “as a view of the best poems between 1892 and 1935, is cuckoo”.¹¹

The primary objection to the book stemmed from Yeats’s poetic stances as defined in his introduction. In that piece, Yeats infamously laid out the reasons for his exclusion of Wilfred Owen from the selection – reasons governed by his belief in a tragic poetry:

I have rejected these poems for the same reason that made Arnold withdraw his Empedocles on Etna from circulation; passive suffering is not a theme for poetry. In all the great tragedies, tragedy is a joy to the man who dies; in Greece the tragic chorus danced.¹²

It was this exclusion of “one of the most influential modern poets both in sensibility and technique” that most preoccupied Stephen Spender in December 1936. The poetry of the First World War had been omitted, Spender felt, because the most important event of the past forty-three years – the Great War – was “distasteful” to Yeats. During that War “a strange kink appeared in English poetry: two officers, Owen and Sassoon, sympathized with the suffering of their men and identified themselves in their work with that suffering”. Yeats, however, could see none of the significance of these poets for Spender’s generation: “Mr. Yeats sees them as the inheritors of an aristocratic tradition identifying themselves with the oppressed, whereas really, of course, they should either forget about oppression or else dance over it. He is determined, in

¹⁰ H.A. Mason, “Yeats and the English Tradition”, rev. of The Oxford Book of Modern Verse, 1892-1935, Scrutiny 5.4 (March 1937): 449.

¹¹ Rev. of The Oxford Book of Modern Verse, 1892-1935, New Verse no. 23 (Christmas 1936): 21. Cf. G.W. Stonier, “Mr. Yeats Fumbles”, rev. of The Oxford Book of Modern English Verse, New Statesman and Nation 12.302 (5 Dec. 1936): 942. Stonier felt the book suffered from “not so much bad taste as an incoherent tastelessness” and was a deliberate attempt by Yeats to put forward his own idiosyncratic tastes in poetry as opposed to its ostensible aim to “represent a period”.

¹² Yeats, introduction, The Oxford Book of Modern Verse (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1936) 34-5.

publishing this official and educative anthology, to let the rot go no further”.¹³ Spender’s views were endorsed by Auden’s Prosecutor in “The Public v. the Late Mr. W.B. Yeats”, who considered the book “the most deplorable volume ever issued under the imprint of that highly respected firm”.¹⁴ Cecil Day Lewis’s review emphasised the social function of poetry and berated the exclusion of Owen whom he insisted was “the real ancestor of our new revolutionary verse”. Yeats’s selection was, he asserted, “capricious to the verge of eccentricity, scandalously unrepresentative, as arrogant in its vulnerability as any aristocrat riding in a tumbril”.¹⁵

Yeats’s exclusion of Owen was in part due, as he later explained in a letter to Dorothy Wellesley, to his blindness to Owen’s reputation: “When I excluded Wilfred Owen, whom I consider unworthy of the poet’s corner of a country newspaper, I did not know I was excluding a revered sandwich-board man of the revolution and that somebody has put his worst and most famous poem in a glass-case in the British Museum”. However, as Yeats’s choice of words suggests, any further insights gained into Owen’s popularity as a result of this controversy did not deter him from his opinions. Defending his decision, Yeats insisted: “however, if I had known it, I would have excluded him just the same. He is all blood, dirt and sucked sugar-stick (look at the selection in Faber’s Anthology – he calls poets ‘bards’, a girl a ‘maid’, and talks about ‘Titanic wars’)”.¹⁶ In Yeats’s readings, Owen had portrayed humans as the innocent victims of the horrors of war, much as O’Casey had done in The Silver Tassie. For Yeats, such a passive response to evil and suffering was considered a failure on the part of the imagination. Poetry written on the basis of mere pity could never achieve the

¹³ Stephen Spender, “Notes on the Way”, Time and Tide 17.49 (19 Dec. 1936): 1804.

¹⁴ W.H. Auden, “The Public v. the late Mr. W.B. Yeats”, The English Auden: Poems, Essays and Dramatic Writings 1927-1939, ed. Edward Mendelson (1977; London: Faber and Faber, 1986) 390.

¹⁵ Cecil Day Lewis, Left Review 5.16 (Jan 1937): 899-900.

supreme art form – tragedy.¹⁷ All “good art”, for Yeats, would be “extravagant, vehement, impetuous, shaking the dust of time from its feet, as it were, and beating against the walls of the world”.¹⁸

It was, however, not only Yeats’s exclusion of Owen that attracted attention, but his attitude towards the thirties writers in that book. A few years later in November 1939, Spender remarked that Yeats’s belief that poetry must “emerge triumphant and rejoicing from the darkness” had not only ensured Owen’s exclusion, but had also slighted “some of the best poetry since Keats, written, by, say, Tennyson, Arnold, Clough, Hardy, and a good deal of Keats as well, *not to mention contemporary writers*”.¹⁹ On the other hand, H.A. Mason, reviewing the book for Scrutiny, and characteristically of that periodical, lamented the inclusion of MacNeice’s contemporaries at all. He concluded that Yeats’s “choice of the younger poets seems to follow the current values (against which various protests have been made in these pages) so closely that it is only charitable to suppose that his interest in them is recent and slight”.²⁰ Mason, however, had underestimated Yeats’s interest in and choice of those poets. R.A. Scott-James, editor of London Mercury, noted following the poet’s death that Yeats had “read all the younger poets with scrupulous care and would often ask to hear more about this or that young poet” whose work had appeared in the periodical. Indeed Scott-James considered that “sometimes in attempting to make generous allowances for work which stood at the opposite pole from his own he was

¹⁶ Yeats, Letter to Dorothy Wellesley dated December 1936, The Letters of W.B. Yeats 874.

¹⁷ Cf. Paul Scott Stanfield, Yeats and the Politics of the 1930s (London: Macmillan, 1988) for a lengthy reading of these events as formed by Yeatsian tragic beliefs 78ff.

¹⁸ Yeats, Plays and Controversies 153.

¹⁹ Spender, “Honey-Bubbings of the Boilers”, rev. of On the Boiler by Yeats and The Arrow by the Abbey Theatre, New Statesman and Nation 18.455 (11 Nov. 1939): 687. (emphasis added)

²⁰ Mason, “Yeats and the English Tradition” 449.

inclined to over-praise”.²¹ Yeats had expressed his wish that a second award of The King’s Medal for poetry (which he had previously received) take place. When that award was made to Auden, Yeats “thought the choice a right one”.²² It is noteworthy too that when O’Casey visited Yeats in 1935, the elder poet was surrounded by books of poems from which he would make his selection for the Oxford Anthology. Yeats questioned O’Casey intensely on Communism and its appeal for contemporary writers. His topic of conversation suggests the degree to which Yeats was attempting to come to terms with Auden and his contemporaries. Yeats, however, on this occasion exclaimed:

It isn’t enough. What I’ve heard of it, O’Casey, doesn’t satisfy me. It fails to answer the question of What is Life. What is Man? What is reality? It tells us nothing of invisible things, of vision, or spiritual powers: or preternatural activities and energy beyond an above man’s ordinary knowledge and contemplation.²³

It would appear then that Yeats’s selection of English thirties poetry was at least as deliberate as his determined inclusion of Irish poetry and his choice of the work of friends like Dorothy Wellesley. Elsewhere, however, Yeats laid out the differences that he saw between the thirties poetry and his own views on a tragic art:

The English movement, checked by the realism of Eliot, the social passion of the war poets, gave way to an impersonal philosophical poetry. Because Ireland has a still living folk tradition, her poets cannot get it out of their heads that they themselves, good-tempered, tall or short, will be remembered by the common people. Instead of turning to impersonal philosophy, they have hardened and deepened their personalities.²⁴

²¹ R.A. Scott, “The Farewell to Yeats”, London Mercury 39.233 (March 1939): 479. Cf. R.F. Foster, W.B. Yeats: A Life, II: The Arch-Poet 1915-1939 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003) 517. Foster too maintains that Yeats “was more attuned to the Auden generation than is often allowed”. Foster suggests that “the fragmentary effects and harsh juxtapositions of some of his own poetry may represent an echo of the Auden-Isherwood dramatic tone, and Auden’s interest in dance, music and speech were – in principle, if not in effect – closely compatible with WBY’s enduring but unrealized ambition for a poet’s theatre”.

²² *Ibid* 480.

²³ Foster, W.B. Yeats: A Life II 518.

²⁴ Yeats, introduction, The Oxford Book of Modern Verse 35.

Yeats's comments perhaps misjudged the extent to which MacNeice would engage with his predecessor's advice for succeeding poets.

In "A General Introduction for My Work", Yeats recalled having heard Lady Gregory say, while "rejecting some play in the modern manner sent to the Abbey Theatre", that "Tragedy must be a joy to the man who dies". In Yeats's view, exactly the same philosophical belief was applicable to his poetry, for "neither scholars nor the populace have sung or read anything generation after generation because of its pain".²⁵ In his own lecture on the aims of the Irish Theatre, given to the Irish Literary Society in 1899, he espoused a drama that would be a "revelation of lofty and heroic life", whether in "the mind of the writer alone, as with the great realists", or "in the persons that move before one upon the stage, as with the Greek dramatists".²⁶ This assertion, that poetry should be an affirmation of the joy of life, is made through Seanchan in The King's Threshold (1904):

And I would have all know that when all falls
In ruin, poetry calls out in joy,
Being the scattering hand, the bursting pod,
The victim's joy among the holy flame,
God's laughter at the shattering of the world.²⁷

It is an example quoted by MacNeice in his engagement with Yeats's aesthetics in his full-length study of the poet.²⁸

In "An Irish Airman Foresees his Death", written in 1918, Yeats rejected the passivity of reflecting outward emotions in favour of individual choice. Instead he

²⁵ Yeats, "A General Introduction for My Work", Essays and Introductions (London: Macmillan, 1961) 523.

²⁶ The Irish Literary Society Gazette, June 1899, report of speech, reprinted in Uncollected Prose: 2: Reviews, Articles and Other Miscellaneous Prose 1887-1939, ed. John P. Frayne and Colton Johnson (London: Macmillan, 1975) 156.

²⁷ Yeats, The Collected Plays of W.B. Yeats (1934; London: Macmillan, 1952) 114.

²⁸ MacNeice, The Poetry of W.B. Yeats 195.

urged the autonomy of the imagination and the ability to integrate in a shaping vision the modern world. In this poem, Major Robert Gregory (at least in Yeats's imagining of him) does not consider himself the victim of duty or of the overwhelming forces of law, politics or mass opinions, but transforms his fate by turning it into a deliberate act of the will or imagination:

Nor law, nor duty bade me fight,
Nor public men, nor cheering crowds,
A lonely impulse of delight
Drove to this tumult in the clouds.²⁹

In "Dramatis Personae", published first as a three-part series in London Mercury in 1935 and later included in Autobiographies, Yeats's evaluation of The Countess Cathleen rested largely on its lack of tragedy as he now defined it:

It was not, nor is it now, more than a piece of tapestry. The Countess sells her soul, but she is not transformed. If I were to think out that scene today, she would, the moment her hand has signed, burst into loud laughter, mock at all she has held holy, horrify the peasants in the midst of their temptations.³⁰

The characteristics which Yeats felt should now be attributed to the Countess Cathleen are, in fact, the tragic stances of the personae of Yeats's later poetry – those of Ribh, Old Rocky Face and the aged poet himself. In "On the Boiler", written in 1938 and published in 1939, Yeats could evaluate the success of his work by virtue of its tragic nature, regardless of whether this was endorsed by the modern poetry of his time:

Then I say to myself, I have had greater luck than any other modern English-speaking dramatist; I have aimed at tragic ecstasy, and here and there in my own work and in the work of my friends I have seen it greatly played. What does it matter that it belongs to a dead art and to a time when a man spoke out of an experience and a culture that were not of his time alone, but held his time, as it were, at arm's length, that he might be a spectator of the ages. [...] what matter if the people prefer another art, I have had my fill.³¹

²⁹ Yeats, Collected Poems, ed. Augustine Martin (London: Vintage, 1990) 133.

³⁰ Yeats, Autobiographies 417.

³¹ Yeats, "On the Boiler", W.B. Yeats: Later Essays, The Collected Works of W.B. Yeats: 5, ed. William H. O'Donnell (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1994) 226.

In “The Gyres”, the first poem in Yeats’s New Poems (1938), no bleakness can diminish the poet’s tragic affirmation of life: “We that look on but laugh in tragic joy”.³² The poem was written between July 1936 and January 1937.³³ The relentless rhythm conveys the sense of destruction – the “things thought too long” that “can no longer” be thought, the beauty dying of beauty, the ancient lineaments blotted out, the “irrational streams of blood” “staining earth”. Yeats evokes, in these descriptions, the destruction witnessed in his body of work in the 1920s and 1930s in poems such as – “The Second Coming”, “Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen” and “Byzantium”.³⁴ The destruction is heightened now with the sense of the poet’s own old age. Though “numb nightmare ride on top/ And blood and mire the sensitive body stain”, Yeats exclaims, “What matter!” It is a refrain repeated four times throughout the poem. While the end of a historical cycle nears, nothing that happens is of significant consequence. This attitude is evident in Yeats’s casual reference to a previously momentous historical moment – “a light in Troy” – underplaying the effects and destruction. (I think it true also, as Arra M. Garab points out, that “a light” refers as much to the illuminating moment of tragic joy.)³⁵ Yeats envisages the return of “the workman, noble and saint”, and a time when “all things run/ On that unfashionable gyre again”. History, in Yeats’s theories, would reverse itself. Yeats’s aloofness to the present situation thus fills the second stanza. He may see the downfall of society, but he clings to the certainty that a new aristocracy will replace the old:

³² Yeats, New Poems 1.

³³ Norman A. Jeffares, A Commentary on the Collected Poems of W.B. Yeats (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1968) 435.

³⁴ Thomas Parkinson, W.B. Yeats: The Later Poetry (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1964) 169-179.

³⁵ Arra M. Garab, Beyond Byzantium: The Last Phase of Yeats’s Career (De Kalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 1969) 40-1.

What matter? Heave no sigh, let no tear drop,
A greater, a more gracious time has gone;
For painted forms or boxes of make-up
In ancient tombs I sighed, but not again.
What matter? Out of Cavern comes a voice
And all it knows is that one word 'Rejoice'.³⁶

Yeats's manuscript revisions document an increasing concern that the poem should focus on a tragic stance as evinced through that word "rejoice".³⁷ It is that same word that MacNeice seized upon as a viable role for poetry at the end of the decade.

It is of critical importance that Yeats found in Shakespeare an authoritative figure, and that he sought in the characters of the Shakespearean tragedies a means of explaining and validating his philosophical belief. Yeats made clear in his prose writings the importance of Shakespeare to him. During his last visit to the United States in 1932, when he was asked about the books that had moved him, Yeats replied that Shakespeare came first, then the Arabian Nights, William Morris and Balzac. Shakespeare's inclusion in that list is hardly surprising. Nonetheless, the conscious and deliberate nature of Yeats's catalogue suggests that Shakespeare's inclusion was not simply a predictable choice. As Rupin Desai notes, "the other authors he lists are not as widely acclaimed as, for example, Chaucer or Spenser or Milton, in whose writings he was well read".³⁸ Indeed, the inclusion of Morris and Balzac should alert us to the fact that these are writers who were of importance to Yeats throughout his poetic career. Desai also notes that Shakespeare is the only figure invoked at considerable length twice in A Vision.³⁹ Such references to Shakespeare, when read alongside Yeats's

³⁶ Yeats, New Poems 1.

³⁷ Yeats, New Poems: Manuscript Materials, ed. J.C.C. Mays and Stephen Parrish (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2000) 3-19. See Yeats's increasing concern at placing the lines on the light in Troy and the laughter of tragic joy and the number of revisions to the final line of the second stanza.

³⁸ Rupin W. Desai, Yeats's Shakespeare (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1971) 17.

³⁹ *Ibid* 70.

essay “At Stratford-on-Avon” and numerous other prose pieces, signify Yeats’s preoccupation with Shakespearean tragedy and his confidence in its relevance for his tragic beliefs.

Yeats’s response to Shakespeare has been the subject of three important critical studies: Rupin Desai’s Yeats’s Shakespeare (1971), Peter Ure’s “W.B. Yeats and the Shakespearian Moment” (1969) and J. Kleinstuck’s “Yeats and Shakespeare” (1965).⁴⁰ For each of these three critics, Yeats’s interpretations of Shakespearean characters are directly related to his own artistic concerns. Kleinstuck argues that Yeats’s “ideas about art and life are continually explained by references to Shakespeare”, so much so that “one does not claim too much in saying that to a large extent Yeats discovered himself through Shakespeare”. Desai also points out that Yeats “found in Shakespeare’s tragic vision a remarkable correspondence with his own” and frequently related Shakespeare’s work to his own writings.⁴¹ Ure suggests the use of “Yeats’s expressed opinions about his experience of Shakespeare as a lens to bring into focus some portions of his dramatic theory”.⁴²

Ure charts the ways in which Yeats’s constructions of certain Shakespearean characters were attributable to the influence of his father; he also argues that they can be read as a reaction to the moralistic criticism of Edward Dowden, Professor at Trinity College, Dublin, as expressed in Shakespeare: A Critical Study of his Mind and Art. Indeed, Yeats succinctly expressed his antipathy to such an approach in Plays and Controversies:

⁴⁰ Peter Ure, “W.B. Yeats and the Shakespearian Moment”, first published by Institute of Irish Studies, Queen’s University (1969). Rpt. in Ure, Yeats and Anglo-Irish Literature: Critical Essays, ed. C.J. Rawson (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1974) 204-224. J. Kleinstuck, “Yeats and Shakespeare”, Yeats 1865-1965: Centenary Essays on the Art of W.B. Yeats, ed. D.E.S. Maxwell & S.B. Bushrui (Ibadan: Ibadan University Press, 1965) 1-16.

⁴¹ Desai, Yeats’s Shakespeare 132.

⁴² Ure, “W.B. Yeats and the Shakespearian Moment” 205.

This character who delights us may commit murder like Macbeth, or fly the battle for his sweetheart as did Antony, or betray his country like Coriolanus, and yet we will rejoice in every happiness that comes to him and sorrow at his death as if it were our own.⁴³

Ure highlights Yeats's use of Shakespeare "as a stick with which to beat the naturalists in his long campaign against the naturalistic theatre".⁴⁴ This, for Ure, "is really the point where Yeats attaches himself not to what Shakespearian drama really is but to what he would like it to be – something more akin to heroic drama".⁴⁵ Yeats at the time argued for a theatrical background that consisted of decorative scene-painting which was inseparable from the robes of the players and the falling of light, rather than the naturalistic versions then prevalent on the English stage.⁴⁶ In "At Stratford-on-Avon" (1901) he criticised a production of Richard III for its failure to use suggestive or decorative settings rather than realistic ones. The play had been produced with the decision not to pitch the tents of Richmond and Redmond side-by-side in Act V, scene iii. This was a response to the demands of realistic settings, and this decision would not have been required had the setting been as simple as Yeats advocated.⁴⁷

Shakespeare, Yeats felt, had created Kings, Queens, historical or legendary people, "about whom all was reality, except the circumstance of their lives which remain vague and summary". For Yeats, tragedy dealt with those traits that the audience could identify with in the heroic individual, rather than the surface details of life which he felt were depicted in comedy. He believed that "tragedy must always be a

⁴³ Yeats, Plays and Controversies 104.

⁴⁴ Ure, "W.B. Yeats and the Shakespearian Moment" 208.

⁴⁵ *Ibid* 221.

⁴⁶ See Yeats, "At Stratford-on-Avon", originally published in The Speaker, May 11, 1901, reprinted in Uncollected Prose 2: 250. See also Yeats, Plays and Controversies 48 where Yeats maintains that as a rule the background should be a single colour.

drowning and breaking of the dykes that separate man from man, and that it is upon these dykes comedy keeps house".⁴⁸ In 1910 he laid out these views extensively in an essay entitled "The Tragic Theatre", awkwardly differentiating between comedy and tragedy:

In writers of tragi-comedy (and Shakespeare is always a writer of tragi-comedy) there is indeed character, but one notices that it is in the moments of comedy that character is defined, in Hamlet's gaiety let us say; but that in the great moments, when Timon orders his tomb, when Hamlet cries to Horatio "absent thee from felicity awhile," when Cleopatra names "Of many thousand kisses the poor last" all is lyricism, unmixed passion, "the integrity of fire". Nor does character ever attain to complete definition in these lamps ready for the taper, no matter how circumstantial and gradual the opening of events, as it does in Falstaff who has no passionate purpose to fulfill, or as it does in Henry the Fifth whose poetry, never touched by lyric heat, is oratorical like speech at a general election, like an article in some daily paper; nor when the tragic reverie is at its height do we say "How well that man is realised, I should know him were I to meet him in the street", for it is always ourselves that we see upon the stage, and should it be a tragedy of love we renew, it may be, some loyalty of our youth, and go from the theatre with our eyes dim for an old love's sake.⁴⁹

In his attempt to construct in Shakespeare a mirror for his own beliefs, Yeats was thus left in a difficult position, "obliged to imply that Falstaff is more of a 'character' than Cleopatra or Hamlet". However, his ultimate casting of Shakespeare as a "tragic-comedian" was, as Ure notes, "Yeats's device for explaining the powerful characterological element in Shakespeare without abandoning his theory that tragedy does not define and sharpen character".⁵⁰

⁴⁷ See also Yeats, "First Principles" in Plays and Controversies 98. "Who to-day could set Richmond's and Richard's tents side by side on the battlefield [...]?" See also Yeats, "At Stratford-on-Avon", The Speaker, 11 May 1901. Rpt. Uncollected Prose 251.

⁴⁸ Yeats, "The Tragic Theatre", The Mask, October 1910. Rpt. Uncollected Prose 2: 386.

⁴⁹ Ibid 386. See also Yeats, "A People's Theatre: A Letter to Lady Gregory", Plays and Controversies 206. "Certainly it is this objectivity, this making of all from sympathy, from observation, never from passion, from lonely dreaming, that has made our players, at their best, great comedians, for comedy is passionless".

⁵⁰ Ure, "W.B. Yeats and the Shakespearian Moment" 215.

One of the clearest examples of Yeats's creative (mis-)reading of Shakespearean characters in an attempt to define his own tragic aesthetics occurs in "A General Introduction for My Work" (1937):

The heroes of Shakespeare convey to us through their looks, or through the metaphorical patterns of their speech, the sudden enlargement of their vision, their ecstasy at the approach of death [...] but all must be cold; no actress has ever sobbed when she played Cleopatra.⁵¹

Yeats's use of Shakespearean tragedy as support for his theories in that piece was perhaps determined by his reading at this time. Desai points out that when Yeats visited Ezra Pound at Rapallo in 1934, he told Pound that he had been "re-reading Shakespeare".⁵² Yeats was evidently reading Shakespeare with one eye on his own poetic concerns, and was interpreting the characters in this light. In the heroes of the Shakespearean tragedies, Yeats saw his poetic and dramatic stances enacted. Yeats's reading of these plays prompts Kleinstuck to conclude that Yeats's "approach is therefore highly subjective; Yeats is not interested in making scientifically watertight statements, and many of the things he says about Shakespeare will not meet the approval of the professional critic".⁵³ Nonetheless for Yeats, interpreting the plays in terms of his own preoccupations, these heroes did not indulge in despair or self-pity. Rather they grew in stature through their acknowledgement of defeat and their awareness of something beyond that defeat, in other words their tragic joy. In an age of weariness, there only remained the chance "to labour with a high heart, though it may be with weak hands, to rediscover an art of the theatre that shall be joyful, fantastic, extravagant, whimsical, beautiful, resonant and altogether reckless". The arts would be

⁵¹ Yeats, "A General Introduction for My Work" 522-3.

⁵² Desai, *Yeats's Shakespeare*. 17.

⁵³ J. Kleinstuck, "Yeats and Shakespeare" 14.

at their greatest when they sought “a life growing always more scornful of everything that is not itself”, where the “laws of nature” would seem “as unimportant in comparison as did the laws of Rome to Coriolanus when his pride was upon him”. From this imaginative transcendence of actual political and historical conditions would come “tragic joy and the perfectness of tragedy – when the world itself has slipped away in death”.⁵⁴

In a letter to Pound, Yeats depicted the Shakespearean tragic characters as examples of individual transcendence of history and time:

[Theseus] raged against his sons, and this rage was noble, not from some general idea, some sense of public law upheld, but because it seemed to [word missing?] all life, and the daughter who served him as did Cordelia Lear – he too a man of Homer’s kind – seemed less attendant upon an old railing rambler than upon genius itself. He knew nothing but his mind, and yet because he spoke that mind fate itself possessed it and kingdoms changed according to his blessing and his cursing.⁵⁵

“The arts are all the bridal chambers of joy”, Yeats declared in “On the Boiler”. No tragedy could be legitimate, in Yeats’s view, unless it led some great character to this final joy:

Polonius may go out wretchedly, but I can hear the dance music in ‘Absent thee from felicity awhile’, or in Hamlet’s speech over the dead Ophelia, and what of Cleopatra’s last farewells, Lear’s rage under the lightning, Oedipus sinking down at the story’s end into an earth ‘riven’ by love?⁵⁶

These Shakespearean characters were exemplars of what Yeats sought in his own dramatic and poetic works. These heroes and heroines contained “something immortal and imperishable” within themselves; “all else is but an image in a looking-glass”.⁵⁷ Their final deeds were examples of an intense moment of life, an individual action

⁵⁴ Yeats, “The Play, the Player and the Scene”, Plays and Controversies 123-4.

⁵⁵ Yeats, The Letters of W.B. Yeats 9.

⁵⁶ Yeats, “On the Boiler” 247.

⁵⁷ Yeats, “First Principles” (1904) in Plays and Controversies 99-100.

“taken out of all other actions” and “reduced to its simplest form, or at any rate to as simple a form as it can be brought to without our losing the sense of its place in the world”. The characters involved in that action “are freed from everything that is not a part of that action”.⁵⁸ Such moments could only be a source of joy: when “Lucifer stands among his friends, when Villon sings his dead ladies to so gallant a rhythm, when Timon makes his epitaph, we feel no sorrow, for life herself has made one of her eternal gestures, has called up into our hearts her energy that is eternal delight”.⁵⁹ And so, Yeats, in that 1928 letter to O’Casey explaining his rejection of The Silver Tassie and proffering advice to the playwright, found support for his theories in Shakespearean drama:

Among the things that dramatic action must burn up are the author’s opinions; while he is writing he has no business to know anything that is not a portion of that action. Do you suppose for one moment that Shakespeare educated Hamlet and King Lear by telling them what he thought and believed? As I see it, Hamlet and Lear educated Shakespeare, and I have no doubt that in the process of that education he found out that he was an altogether different man to what he thought himself, and had altogether different beliefs.⁶⁰

“Three Movements”, written in January 1932, compared Shakespearean tragedy with Romantic and modern art, and found both art forms wanting:

Shakespearean fish swam the sea, far away from land;
Romantic fish swam in nets coming to the hand;
What are all those fish that lie gasping on the sand?⁶¹

⁵⁸ Ibid 103.

⁵⁹ Ibid 115.

⁶⁰ Yeats, The Letters of W.B. Yeats 741.

⁶¹ Jeffares, A Commentary on the Collected Poems of W.B. Yeats 334; Yeats, The Winding Stair and Other Poems (London: Macmillan, 1933) 21. Cf. Denis Donoghue’s deductions that “presumably these lines ask us to think that the freedom of Shakespearean fish was real, true to the element that sustained it: the freedom of Romantic fish was a delusion, they were already a lost cause though ignorant of their state; they merely felt and thought themselves free. And the modern fish know that they are lost, and feel it through sand and the loss of their element”. Denis Donoghue, “Romantic Ireland” in Yeats, Sligo and Ireland, Irish Literary Studies 6, ed. A. Norman Jeffares (Gerrards Cross: Colin Smythe, 1980) 22.

It was to Timon and Lear that Yeats looked in “An Acre of Grass”, written in November 1936 and published in London Mercury in April 1938, in his desire to be remodelled with an old man’s frenzy, in what Desai rightly notes is an “extraordinary juxtaposition” of fictional Shakespearean heroes and actual historical figures:⁶²

Grant me an old man’s frenzy,
Myself I must remake
Till I am Timon and Lear
Or that William Blake
Who beat upon the wall
Till truth obeyed his call.⁶³

Yeats’s theory of tragic joy dominates “Lapis Lazuli” as it does no other poem. The poem was written in July 1936 following a revival of Yeats’s Deirdre for the Abbey Theatre. Jean Forbes-Robertson played the main part. Her performance, Foster notes, infuriated Yeats. “Ignoring Yeatsian rhythms, she played the part like ‘an Upper Tooting hen, a Camberwell canary, a Blackpool sparrow’”.⁶⁴ The poem appeared in London Mercury in March 1938 and in The New Republic on 13th April. In “Lapis Lazuli”, despair in an era of destruction and death is mockingly depicted through Yeats’s impatience with the hysterical women. The women set the question for the poem: what is the proper reaction of the artist in a time of crisis. The women reject passivity in art and urge the poet to adopt a political role: “I have heard that hysterical women say/ They are sick of the palette and fiddle-bow/ Of poets that are always gay”. Yeats’ poem asserts, however, that the artist’s role is not political activism but the preservation of human values and individuality through art and the imagination. In contrast to the overwrought performance of Jean Forbes-Robertson, Yeats suggests the

⁶² Jeffares, A Commentary on the Collected Poems of W.B. Yeats 456; Desai, Yeats’s Shakespeare 89.

⁶³ Yeats, New Poems 12.

⁶⁴ Foster, W.B. Yeats: A Life II 549.

appropriate stance in the face of defeat. It is to the Shakespearean characters, Hamlet and Lear, that Yeats directs his reader for an illustration of “tragic joy”:

All perform their tragic play,
There struts Hamlet, there is Lear,
That’s Ophelia, that Cordelia;
Yet they, should the last scene be there
The great curtain about to drop,
If worthy their prominent part in the play
Do not break up their lines to weep.
They know that Hamlet and Lear are gay;
Gaiety transfiguring all that dread.⁶⁵

That word “gay” that is repeated in Yeats’s depiction of the Eastern sages in the following section of the poem:

There on the mountain and the sky;
On all the tragic scene they stare [...]
Their eyes mid many wrinkles, their eyes
Their ancient, glittering eyes, are gay.⁶⁶

It is not finally the distanced observation of these Eastern figures that Yeats endorses. In a letter to Ethel Mannin in 1935, Yeats depicted his poetics of tragedy as the raising of “the heroic cry in the midst of despair”, and corrected the possibility of looking towards the East for such a model: “But no, I am wrong, the east has its solutions always and therefore knows nothing of tragedy. It is we, not the east, that must raise the heroic cry”.⁶⁷

Allusions to Yeats’s assertion that “Hamlet and Lear are gay” surface regularly in MacNeice’s prose writings of the late 1930s and early 1940s, and re-appear intermittently in subsequent years. “Poets,” Harold Bloom has asserted, “by the time, they have grown strong, do not read the poetry of X, for really strong poets can read only themselves. For them, to be judicious is to be weak, and to compare, exactly and

⁶⁵ Ibid 2.

⁶⁶ Yeats, New Poems 4.

fairly, is not to be elect”.⁶⁸ Such comments, as we have seen in the first chapter, were laid out less emphatically by MacNeice who, in his study of Yeats, acknowledged the dangers of reading his own concerns into the elder poet’s work. MacNeice’s engagement with Yeatsian tragic aesthetics provides a means by which he validates his own creative art. His assessment in his prose commentaries of Yeatsian aesthetics centres upon his ability to foreground the issues most pertinent to him, as a writer, and to overcome the conflicts between his own work and that of Yeats.⁶⁹

ii. MacNeice and Yeatsian Tragic Joy

Valentine Cunningham, in his vivid account of the atmosphere of the thirties, considers that “early in any approach to the period must come an awareness of the multiplied fears and forebodings and the widespread sadness that make a constant background and foreground”. Cunningham surmises that “whatever style was learned or learnable”, it came “from a despair”.⁷⁰ This ominous and despairing attitude was in part attributable to the sense of loss inflicted by the First World War. It was also due to the experience of the Spanish Civil War, and the belief towards the end of the decade that another crisis was unavoidable, particularly in the light of the Munich Crisis of 1938. Spender, analysing the literary scene of the early 1930s, wrote in The Destructive Element (1935) that “all these writers seem to me faced by the destructive element”, by which

⁶⁷ Yeats, Letter to Ethel Mannin dated July 26 [1935], The Letters of W.B. Yeats 837.

⁶⁸ Harold Bloom, Anxiety of Influence: A Theory of Poetry (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973) 19.

⁶⁹ Julia Kristeva, “Word, Dialogue and Novel” in Desire in Language: A Semiotic Approach to Literature and Art 66.

he meant “the experience of an all-pervading Present, which is a world without belief”.⁷¹ But if MacNeice faced a world without belief, this did not imply that poetry, too, should be devoid of it. Throughout the thirties, but particularly in the final years of the decade, he asserted his conviction that art should involve some kind of transcendence of despair. It is within this context that MacNeice found himself turning towards Yeatsian aesthetics as a possible model and influence. MacNeice’s engagement with Yeatsian poetics was at its most intense at the end of that decade and the early years of the 1940s. An assimilation of Yeatsian poetics, however, can still be seen in his later work. That influence might not be reducible to one of simple imitation or borrowing. Nonetheless, what MacNeice defined as his primary relationship with Yeats in these years helped inform his later poetry and is manifest particularly in the collections Solstices (1961) and The Burning Perch (1963).

Early assessments of MacNeice tended to occlude any kind of philosophical substance in his poetry. Witness the following review of Poems in The Dublin Magazine (1936): “[H]is is the familiar dilemma of the modern poet, aware that great poetry proceeds from faith and not from scepticism, but unable like most of his contemporaries to believe in anything”.⁷² In fact for this early reviewer, MacNeice’s despair was a measure of how unwilling he was to accept communist ideology, and thus could be used as a gauge to determine his distance from his English contemporaries: “The familiar triumvirate of modern poets, Spender, Auden and Day Lewis, attempts to find in the aspirations of Communism fuel to stoke the poetical fire: an attempt only

⁷⁰ Valentine Cunningham, British Writers of the Thirties (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988) 36.

⁷¹ Stephen Spender, The Destructive Element, The Life and Letters Series Vol. 87 (1935; London: Jonathan Cape, 1938) 14.

⁷² Rev. of Poems by MacNeice, The Dublin Magazine 11.2 (Apr-Jun 1936): 79.

half successful [...] But Mr. MacNeice, an Ulsterman, will not swallow the Communist potion against despair, and shrugs his shoulders at the multiple menace of the world.⁷³

In 1947, R.L. Cook commented, in one of the first extensive features on MacNeice, that the poet was merely “a recorder of the surface of society in the thirties, with an occasional vision of the troubled waters below the sunlit ripples of contemporary life that was soon to become contemporary death, chaos and war”. While Cook acknowledged that there was “a latent social reformer beneath the poet’s cloak,” and that “the sudden purpose, the message which keeps cropping up throughout his work” redeemed MacNeice “from the danger of being classed as a virtuoso”, he concluded that MacNeice, until his later poetry, “was always essentially in touch with the leaves, the flesh, the surface rather than the roots and the bone and the depths”.⁷⁴

The critical commonplace that Auden, Spender and Day Lewis “each in his own way achieved some sort of faith – religious, political, or metaphysical”, while MacNeice “could never do this”, was promoted too easily, and is in direct contradiction to MacNeice’s own stated poetical beliefs.⁷⁵ This commonplace is evinced in a wealth of early studies, including Francis Scarfe’s “Louis MacNeice: Poetry and Common Sense” (1941), G.S. Fraser’s “Evasive Honesty: The Poetry of Louis MacNeice” (1959), Stephen Wall’s “Louis MacNeice and the Line of Least Resistance” (1964) and Graham Hough’s “MacNeice and Auden” (1967).⁷⁶ The early reception of MacNeice as

⁷³ Ibid 79.

⁷⁴ R.L. Cook, “Louis MacNeice: An Appreciation”, *The Poetry Review* 38.3 (Autumn 1947): 162-169. Cf. R. Chapman, “A Public for Poetry”, rev. of *Janus*, by George Barker and *Poems* by Louis MacNeice, *Scrutiny* 4.3 (Dec. 1935): 301. Chapman considered that MacNeice’s poetry lost by “being attached to nothing”.

⁷⁵ D.B. Moore, *The Poetry of Louis MacNeice* (Leicester: Leicester Press, 1972) 21.

⁷⁶ Francis Scarfe, “Louis MacNeice: Poetry and Common Sense”, *Auden and After: The Liberation of Poetry 1930-1941* (London: Routledge, 1941); G.S. Fraser, “Evasive Honesty: The Poetry of Louis MacNeice”, *Vision and Rhetoric: Studies in Modern Poetry* (London: Faber and Faber, 1959) 179-97; Stephen Wall, “Louis MacNeice and the Line of Least Resistance”, *The Review* no. 11-12 (1964): 91-94; Graham Hough, “MacNeice and Auden”, *Critical Quarterly* 9.1 (Spring 1967): 9-12.

a poet of the surface with evasive liberal beliefs has since been brought to task by later critics – beginning with William T. McKinnon and Terence Brown in the 1970s – who have endeavoured to illustrate the serious philosophical worth of his work.⁷⁷

This thesis situates itself within a line of criticism that sees MacNeice's poetry as engaging with philosophical issues, the questions of belief and the possibility of some kind of transcendence of defeatism in the face of political, social and historical circumstances. This chapter will argue, however, that it is precisely through MacNeice's engagement in his prose with Yeats that the positive nature of his art comes to the fore. For in his writings on the elder poet, MacNeice not only found much to admire in Yeats's belief in tragic joy, he also found an authority for his defence of poetry. This sense of the ultimately positive nature of poetry found its way into MacNeice's creative art particularly in the late 1930s and early 1940s. The doubts and forebodings of these years are evident in MacNeice's work, and his poetry was never to free itself of them. Nonetheless, there is a continuous sense in his work of an attempt to reach a poetic stance beyond that of despair. If evidence were needed to support the proposition that poetry could allow these negative feelings whilst still endeavouring to attain a stance beyond defeatism, it could be found in Yeats's own later poems. "The Gyres", "The Man and The Echo" and "The Black Tower" all admit this gloomy atmosphere while Yeats's later poetry as a body of work refuses that mood any final word.

⁷⁷ William T. McKinnon, *Apollo's Blended Dream: A Study of the Poetry of Louis MacNeice* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1971). Terence Brown, *Louis MacNeice: Sceptical Vision* (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1975). Following these lines of enquiry, later critics have focused on MacNeice's religious sensibilities. See Daniel Murphy, "All Religions Must Deceive: The Poetry of Louis MacNeice", *Imagination and Religion in Anglo-Irish Literature, 1930-1980* (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 1987) 123-147; Alan Peacock, "Received Religion and Secular Vision: MacNeice and Kavanagh", *Irish Writers and Religion*, ed. Robert Welch, *Irish Literary Studies*: 37, IASIL – Japan Series 4 (Gerrards Cross: Colin Smythe, 1992) 148-168.

In Modern Poetry (1938), MacNeice wrote dismissingly of his adolescent work in which he had “no system which could at the same time unify the world and differentiate its parts significantly [...] The most that I attained to was a vague epicureanism”. It is noteworthy that in that work he repudiates “Epicureanism”, for much criticism has been levelled at his work for precisely this aspect. To a large extent, Blind Fireworks (1929) does seem characterised by a youthful sense of *carpe diem*. MacNeice felt, however, that his poetry which extolled the values of individual moments had some greater purpose than fiddling while Rome burned. The critical analysis of his own early work preceded his observations on what was required of a poet in the 1930s. For MacNeice, the good poet has “a definite attitude to life; most good poets, I fancy, have more than that – they have beliefs (though their beliefs need not be *explicit* in their work)”.⁷⁸ In the Case-Book sections of Modern Poetry, he ironically denigrated his adolescent notions of defeat and self-pity, depicting them as a vain youthful pose: “And self-pity had become an important factor. Keats was very sorry for himself. It had always been easy and pleasant to be sorry for oneself; now we knew that it was also a poetic occupation”.⁷⁹

It was a Yeatsian tragic view of life, MacNeice suggested, that offered some kind of poetic example for himself and his contemporaries. This marked a veering away from Eliot as a major influence. For MacNeice, as early as 1935, the history of poetry since the War had been in fact “the history of Eliot and the reaction from Eliot”.⁸⁰ In

⁷⁸ MacNeice, Modern Poetry, A Personal Essay (1938; Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1968) 62. (original emphasis)

⁷⁹ *Ibid* 46.

⁸⁰ MacNeice, “Poetry To-Day” 62. Rpt. Selected Literary Criticism 39. MacNeice does however distinguish between the Eliot of *The Waste Land* and his later poetry’s admittance of Christianity: “By Eliot I mean the Eliot of Poems 1909-1925. Needless to say Eliot himself has been reacting from his earlier poetic self in Ash Wednesday, his various Ariel poems, and, most recently, in the choruses in The Rock”.

pointing out the shortcomings of Eliot's work – its lack of tragedy, most significantly – MacNeice pointed his reader towards Matthew Arnold's Empedocles on Etna, the same work that Yeats used when he dismissed the poetry of Owen from The Oxford Book of Modern Verse. Reviewing Eliot's Collected Poems in June 1936, MacNeice wrote that Eliot's answer to the modern predicament had been voiced in one particular line of the poem: "These fragments I have shored against my ruins". It was "no wonder", he thought that "the younger poets, for whom at one time this poetry had the authority of a gospel, have after some study of Marx and Freud begun to attempt to order their lands differently."⁸¹ "Auden and Spender", he asserted, "recognize the existence of the Waste Land but believe that its fertility will be restored".⁸² By the later years of the decade, MacNeice was insisting that the subject of The Waste Land was "a subject to be rarely treated; it comes too near nihilism".⁸³ In contrast, he felt that "tragedy implies a hero", and in the works of his contemporaries "heroic values are once more being admitted".⁸⁴

MacNeice's constructions of the legacies of Yeats and Eliot were marked out for special criticism by Orwell. In Modern Poetry, MacNeice had reverted to "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock", and some of Eliot's other early poetry, in an attempt to explain why his generation had turned their attention from Eliot. In so doing, MacNeice offset his generation's reading of the poem in the late thirties with the readings

⁸¹ MacNeice, rev. of Collected Poems, 1909-1935 by T.S. Eliot, Listener 15.388 (17 June 1936) 1175. Rpt. Selected Literary Criticism 56-7.

⁸² MacNeice, "Subject in Modern Poetry", Essay 8 in Essays and Studies by Members of the English Association, collected by Helen Darbyshire, 22 (Dec. 1937): 144-58. Rpt. Selected Literary Criticism 73.

⁸³ MacNeice, Modern Poetry 166-7. MacNeice wrote that his earlier view of Eliot "has balanced itself" but "I still think of the earlier Eliot as the poet of cigarette stubs - not a great poet nor essentially a tragic poet, but a very sensitive aesthete in literature, learned in an obsessed with the past, for whom the problem is not the problem of a world-believer or a rebel or even a reporter, but the problem of a rather pedantic individualist who would like his daily life and his personal relationships to conform to some pattern which he has extracted from other people's poetry or philosophy. But that conformity is unachievable and so he sits blowing smoke-rings."

⁸⁴ *Ibid* 16.

espoused by E.M. Forster. Forster, MacNeice noted, had described how in 1917 it had heartened him to get hold of poems that were “innocent of public-spiritedness”. Eliot’s poems “sang of private disgust and diffidence, and of people who seemed genuine because they were unattractive or weak”. Here in these poems “was a protest, and a feeble one, and the more congenial for being feeble”. He “who could turn aside to complain of ladies and drawing rooms preserved a tiny drop of our self-respect, he carried on the human heritage”.⁸⁵ MacNeice set his generation’s attitudes in opposition to Forster’s readings. Ten years later, he wrote, “less feeble protests were to be made by poets and the human heritage carried on rather differently”. “The contemplation of a world of fragments” had become boring, and Eliot’s successors were “more interested in tidying it up”.⁸⁶ MacNeice’s comments are testament to his growing preoccupation with the example of Yeats’s tragic stances. Taking little heed of such alterations in MacNeice’s ambitions for poetry, Orwell dismissed his views as symptomatic of a generation which had no direct experience of the brute reality of war:

What he wishes us to believe is that Eliot’s successors (meaning Mr. MacNeice and his friends) have in some way ‘protested’ more effectively than Eliot did by publishing *Prufrock* at the moment when the Allied armies were assaulting the Hindenburg Line. Just where these ‘protests’ are to be found I do not know. But in the contrast between Mr. Forster’s comment and Mr. MacNeice’s lies all the difference between a man who knows what the 1914-1918 war was like and a man who barely remembers it. The truth is that in 1917 there was nothing that a thinking and a sensitive person could do, except to remain human, if possible. And a gesture of helplessness, even of frivolity, might be the best way of doing that.⁸⁷

Other contemporary reviews missed much of the significance of MacNeice’s analysis of Yeats’s relevance in the late thirties. In March 1939, Geoffrey Walton’s review in *Scrutiny* dismissed MacNeice’s appraisal of his generation’s relationship with Yeats in *Modern Poetry*, maintaining glibly that “after all this defeatism and defeat Mr.

⁸⁵ Ibid 12.

⁸⁶ Ibid 12-13.

MacNeice's friends are 'tragic' even when gloomy".⁸⁸ Such reviews fail to allow for the extent to which MacNeice's questioning of the example of both Eliot and Yeats represents his questioning of the role of art. Modern Poetry laid the ground work for MacNeice's assertions of Yeats's legacy in The Poetry of W.B. Yeats. In the concluding sections of that latter book, turning towards Yeats as an authoritative figure, MacNeice asserted that something other than pessimism or defeatism was required of poetry:

Both Yeats and Rilke (and herein they are distinguished from Eliot), insist, for all their recognition of misery and bewilderment and frustration, that the mainspring of Art, and even of Life, is *joy*.⁸⁹

There is little doubt that a writer involved in the exercise of producing a full-length study on Yeats could have resorted to the term "joy" without being conscious of the word's connotations. In that work MacNeice outlined the affinity between his predecessor and the younger poets. His generation had followed Yeats in reacting against a passive art focusing on pity or suffering – in Yeats's term a "feminine conception of poetry" – and had:

returned to the old, arrogant principle – which was Yeats's too – that it is the poet's job to make sense of the world, to simplify it, to put shape on it. The fact that these younger poets proposed to stylize their world in accordance with communist doctrine or psycho-analytical theory (both things repugnant to Yeats) is comparatively irrelevant.⁹⁰

⁸⁷ George Orwell, Inside the Whale and Other Essays (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1975) 46-7.

⁸⁸ Geoffrey Walton, "The Progress of Poetry", rev. of Modern Poetry and This Year's Poetry, ed. D. Kilham Roberts and Geoffrey Grigson, Scrutiny 3.4 (Mar. 1939): 439.

⁸⁹ MacNeice, The Poetry of W.B. Yeats 186. (original emphasis)

⁹⁰ *Ibid* 223-4.

In the context of these years' questioning of the role and efficacy of art, Yeats's poetry had evinced a firm belief in the value of poetry. Writing of Yeats's influence with regard to Auden and Spender, MacNeice remarked:

They cannot be called optimists, for they see that there are always brute facts in opposition to their progress. But they should not be called pessimists, for they see that, while on all sides there is a vast waste of effort among human beings, to be able to waste effort like this implies an astonishing fund of energy, and to be able to choose wrong so often implies a capacity for choosing right. So when, as often, their poems are gloomy, the gloom is tragic rather than defeatist.⁹¹

MacNeice's comments on the example of Yeatsian aesthetics have received cursory acknowledgement, but little sustained attention.⁹² Edna Longley accords MacNeice's statements one sentence in her essay "Louis MacNeice: Autumn Journal": "From the perspective of late 1939 MacNeice makes amends to the breadth of Yeatsian vision (queried in Modern Poetry), aligning his generation with Yeats on behalf of 'system against chaos'". This aspect of MacNeice's relationship with Yeats is allowed two sentences only in Louis MacNeice: A Study: "When he finally salutes Yeats as 'an example of zest', MacNeice also seems to discover in his poetry the fullblooded humanity of soul and flesh for which 'An Eclogue for Christmas' longs"; "MacNeice's arguments with Yeats and Eliot are not simply a generational quarrel: they channel his artistic quarrel with himself". In Robyn Marsack's study of MacNeice, this engagement with his precursor is referred to in one sentence: "MacNeice was inclined to give Yeats's influence precedence in the 1930s, suggesting that Eliot's nihilism, despite some superficial resemblances, was distant from the poetry of Auden and his contemporaries, who like Yeats staked their belief on a system and on human capacity for heroic action". Reducing MacNeice's comments to significance only in terms of

⁹¹ MacNeice, Modern Poetry 16.

⁹² Edna Longley "Louis MacNeice: Autumn Journal", Poetry in the Wars (Newcastle-upon-Tyne: Bloodaxe Books, 1986) 83; Longley, Louis MacNeice: A Study (London: Faber and Faber, 1988) 100-101.

poetic form, Marsack continues: “The admiration of MacNeice’s generation for Yeats’s later poetry was a response, as to Eliot’s previously, to its ‘modernity’. His reaction against Eliot’s assumption of chaos pleased them: things should be selected and patterned, and naturally poems had a regular pattern also, while flexibility of language avoided ‘poetic’ diction”.⁹³

Tragic joy as a feature of Yeats’s work clearly preoccupied MacNeice in his writings on the elder poet during the decade, particularly from 1938 onwards. An engagement with Yeats’s tragic aesthetics is prominent in each of MacNeice’s major prose works of this period as well as in his more minor articles. In 1950, it was to Yeats’s notions of tragedy that MacNeice drew attention when reviewing Yeats’s Collected Poems for the Observer. He surmised that Yeats “deplored no less bitterly than some younger poets much that was happening in the world, but, unlike them and partly perhaps because of his cyclic philosophy and his doctrine of the Masks, he was too much of a tragedian ever to become a pessimist”.⁹⁴ MacNeice tellingly chose to conclude this review with the final lines of Yeats’s “The Gyres” – lines which had already been quoted in The Poetry of W.B. Yeats. The use of the quotation tells us as much about MacNeice’s use of Yeats as an authoritative role model as it tells us about Yeats’s own poetry:

What matter? Out of cavern comes a voice
And all it knows is that one word ‘Rejoice’.⁹⁵

⁹³ Robyn Marsack, The Cave of Making: The Poetry of Louis MacNeice (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1982) 6.

⁹⁴ MacNeice, “Great Riches”, rev. of Collected Poems of W.B. Yeats, Observer no. 8308 (27 Aug. 1950): 7. Rpt. Selected Literary Criticism 172.

⁹⁵ *Ibid* 172. Cf. MacNeice, The Poetry of W.B. Yeats 186.

Crucially again, MacNeice chose to foreground those aspects of Yeats's tragic stance that were most pertinent to his attempts to define his own poetic stances. In finding in Yeats's work a defence of art and the imagination, MacNeice showed a remarkable ability to overcome some of the problems inherent in Yeats's tragic aesthetics. MacNeice did not question the elder poet's disregard for human suffering – what Bloom has termed the “inhumane nonsense” of Yeats's tragic stance and he refused Yeats's confidence in recurring historical cycles:⁹⁶

To speak of cycles
Rings as false as moving straight
Since the gimlet of our fate
Makes all life, all love a spiral.⁹⁷

MacNeice's work may have also omitted many of Yeats's spiritual connotations associated with his definitions of “tragic joy”. Nonetheless that did not prevent him appreciating what he called the “zest” of Yeats's later poetry: “The poems of his old age, in atonement for the Weltschmerz of his youth, all display one quality – zest”.⁹⁸

MacNeice's interpretation of Yeats's significance for his contemporaries was corroborated to a large degree by Spender's own thoughts on Yeats following his death in January 1939. Spender, who was a much harsher critic of Yeats than MacNeice, found Yeats's work characterised by this tragic stance: “this insistence on rejoicing is the theme of all Yeats' later poetry: it is the key to his whole development and to his particular kind of discrimination”. This was, Spender thought, what defined Yeats's influence for the younger writer: “He devoured the world; he did not allow its terrors to devour him. If there is any challenge he has to offer, any part of his greatness that does

⁹⁶ Bloom, *Yeats* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1970) 437.

⁹⁷ MacNeice, “Donegal Triptych”, *Visitations* (London: Faber and Faber, 1957) 18.

⁹⁸ MacNeice, *The Poetry of W.B. Yeats* 177.

not remain in isolation, it is this insistence that poetry, like his God, must rejoice”.⁹⁹ MacNeice’s comments regarding Yeats’s relevance were in some respects endorsed by Spender’s reappraisal of The Oxford Book of Modern Verse at the end of the decade. While Spender’s comments in 1936 echoed a widespread discontent with Yeats’s introduction and his selection of verse, the younger poet’s opinions had altered drastically by the time he wrote an article on Yeats for The Listener in 1941. In that article, and in the context of the Second World War, Spender’s reading of Yeats’s anthology now took account of the consequences of Yeats’s insistence on a positive art. The present war, Spender wrote, would not produce either a Rupert Brooke or a Wilfred Owen, for the “moods of naïf enthusiasm and of spiritual defeatism are equally unsuited to the times”. Revoking his earlier analysis of Yeats’s anthology, he elaborated:

W.B. Yeats refused to include the war poems of Owen in his Oxford Book of Modern Verse because he said that they were poems of ‘passive suffering’ written by an officer who identified himself with the suffering of his men and was unable to rise above this mood. This may seem unjust, but nevertheless it is true that Owen expressed the victimisation of the poet by the war. In the present war, where machinery has advanced far beyond even the last war, and not only the front-line soldiers but whole countries are victims of mechanisation, the contemplation of the sufferings of individuals would simply be an illustration of their defeat by machinery. This is not only unbearable but it would make art pointless, for if machines are what matter and their triumph over life is complete, then there is no place in the world for art.¹⁰⁰

Spender now wrote of Yeats’s example, as MacNeice had also done in his study of Yeats, that “Poetry must express the triumph of man’s mind and spirit, not contemplate his defeat”. “When the whole world is threatened”, Spender commented, “one cannot appeal to a sense of outrage and pity; one must assert the strength of a faith in a civilisation which will be able to conquer and survive”. Reviewing the poetry of the preceding years, Spender could see “a gradual awakening to this situation amongst

⁹⁹ Spender, “The ‘Egotistical Sublime’ in W.B. Yeats”, The Listener 21.527 (16 Feb. 1939): 377-8.

¹⁰⁰ Spender, “War Poetry in this War”, The Listener 26.666 (16 Oct. 1941): 539.

poets". The writers who had "drawn attention to what was most cruel, ugly, squalid, pitiful in modern civilisation", had "gradually strengthened themselves and tried to understand what was heroic, to construct a philosophy of life or to support a plan of action on which a better society could be built".¹⁰¹ By 1939 Auden, too, had come some way towards acknowledging MacNeice's definitions of Yeats's significance. In the context of war, Auden sought authority from Yeats's refusal to indulge in pity or despair:

Follow poet, follow right
To the bottom of the night,
With your unconstraining voice
Still persuade us to rejoice.¹⁰²

iii. Autumn Journal

Autumn Journal, MacNeice's lengthy work of 1939, confronts his growing sense of apocalypse and the despair at the heart of society. The mood of the poem was generated to a great degree by the threat of imminent crisis experienced in 1938. Samuel Hynes writes of the year:

This sense of crisis, of powerful and active evil at work in the world, dominated consciousness in this, the last full year of peace [...] Crisis here is not simply a term for a tense political situation – for the days when the Nazis entered Austria, or for those September negotiations that cost the Czechs their country; it names a state of mind in

¹⁰¹ Ibid 539. See also "A Double Debt to Yeats", The Listener 56.1436 (4 Oct. 1956): 515: "He sees clearly what other modern poets have signally failed to see; that the faith alone of a single existence ought to outweigh a world of circumstance".

¹⁰² Auden, "In Memory of W.B. Yeats", The English Auden 243. See Samuel Hynes, The Auden Generation: Literature and Politics in England in the 1930s (1976; London: Faber and Faber, 1979) 350-1: In recanting his belief that poetry "could be an agent in history", Hynes suggests that Auden offers here instead a Yeatsian "vision of tragedy", a "new, minimal affirmation" that "in the bad times survival is a basic value, and poetry survives". MacNeice's engagement with Yeats was far more sustained and pervasive than this. Hynes provides no analysis of the impact of his particular dialogue with Yeats on his own work.

which men lived and wrote in those months when Europe slid downhill toward the Second World War.¹⁰³

This atmosphere is evident throughout MacNeice's poem – most vividly perhaps in his nightmarish vision in Section XV:

O look who comes here. I cannot see their faces
Walking in file, slowly in file;
They have no shoes on their feet, the knobs of their ankles
Catch the moonlight as they pass the stile
And cross the moor among the skeletons of bog-oak
Following the track from the gallows back to the town;
Each has the end of a rope around his neck.
Where have we seen them before?
Was it the murder on the nursery ceiling
Or Judas Iscariot in the Field of Blood
Or someone at Gallipoli or in Flanders
Caught in the end-all mud?¹⁰⁴

The passage encompasses World War I imagery, the images of death that Valentine Cunningham remarks are more persistent in the 1930s than any other period, and also articulates MacNeice's childhood nightmares as sketched in The Strings are False.¹⁰⁵

The mood is evident in the poet's forebodings at the signs of coming war:

And so to my flat with the trees outside the window
And the dahlia shapes of the lights on Primrose Hill
Whose summit once was used for a gun emplacement
And very likely will
Be used that way again. The bloody frontier

¹⁰³ Hynes, The Auden Generation 296-7.

¹⁰⁴ MacNeice, Autumn Journal (London: Faber and Faber, 1939) 58-9.

¹⁰⁵ Cunningham, British Writers of the Thirties 55-7. See MacNeice, The Strings are False: An Unfinished Autobiography, ed. E.R. Dodds (1965; London: Faber and Faber, 2007) 38 for his account of childhood nightmares associated with the nursery: "The oil-lamp in the nursery made a brown stain on the ceiling which no one could get off; and when my mother put her hands together, made rabbits on the wall, how was I to know they would not stay when she took away her hands? I wished my mother would not encourage them but was too frightened to tell her I was frightened. And Annie the cook had a riddle which began 'What is it that goes round and round the house?' And the answer was the wind but, though I knew that was the answer in the riddle, I had a clammy suspicion that in fact it might be something else. Going round and round the house, evil waiting to get me". The sense of the poem's roots in MacNeice's childhood nightmares appears elsewhere. See for example Autumn Journal 13:

I am afraid in the web of night
When the window is fingered by the shadows of branches,
When the lions roar beneath the hill
And the meter clicks and the cistern bubbles
And the gods are absent and the men are still –

Converges on our beds
Like jungle beaters closing in on their destined
Trophy of pelts and heads.¹⁰⁶

Autumn Journal mirrors The Waste Land in its sense of pessimism, its boredom, even its sense of ending. Section I of MacNeice's poem indulges in the sensual details of Eliot's modern life presented in "Preludes" to depict the ending of a *laissez-faire* attitude. It is filled with the language of despair. Verbs denote the entrapment of upper class life – "insulates, "dead leaves falling", "dying", "dawdle", "hung" – as do the adjectives – "retired", "abandoned", "harder", "stale", "tired", "faded" – and the repetition of "close" in the first and second lines. Verbs denote as well the sense of a loss of human agency or control as things come apart – "wandering", "unravelling", "losing". Social and political attempts are derided as "failures" and "the building of castles in the sand". This becomes all the more poignant because in later sections MacNeice accuses himself of the same lethargy in his own personal life. MacNeice, in the first section, unequivocally denies attempts at escape or reprieve from political and social circumstances:

That we cannot make any corner in life or in life's beauty,
That no river is a river which does not flow.¹⁰⁷

Seasonal change will not bring about a change of tone or outlook. Instead MacNeice echoes Eliot's "Journey of the Magi" where the birth of Christ for the Magi results not in a sense of spiritual joy but in the recognition of their future alienation and the death of a familiar way of life: "The dying that brings forth/ The harder life". Personal love affairs are dismissed in the images of a woman with "calculated lashes/ Inured forever to surprise", a male lover with "whisky on the breath". They are also portrayed by

¹⁰⁶ MacNeice, Autumn Journal 24.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid 10.

references to the betrayal of Dido by Aeneas, with the reference to the “wares of Carthage”. Personal and private attempts to ignore public history are dismissed with an air of frustration:

And the train’s rhythm becomes the *ad nauseam* repetition
Of every tired aubade and maudlin madrigal,
The faded airs of sexual attraction
Wandering like dead leaves along a warehouse wall.¹⁰⁸

Autumn Journal may present none of Yeats’s confident beliefs in a cyclical version of history, but moments of despair are destabilised, even reversed with MacNeice’s delight in human vitality. MacNeice’s fears and doubts surface in the nightmarish dark imagery of Section II – “afraid”, “wary”, “fingered by the shadows of branches” – and in his religious scepticism – “gods are absent”. Though these images have their roots in MacNeice’s childhood terrors, they are now made to herald a sense of threat facing society itself:

Spider, spider, twisting tight –
But the watch is wary beneath the pillow –¹⁰⁹

The encroachment of a despairing tone into Autumn Journal is revoked or refuted several times within the poem. Section II of the poem ends optimistically as the poet is reminded of human vitality. Again, it is the image of the spider that MacNeice draws upon in the change of tone:

Spider, spider, your irony is true;
Who am I – or I – to demand oblivion?

The oblivion of an enclosed domestic life (“happy in the hive of home”), MacNeice’s own isolated longing for love and his wish to become “pure Not-Being, Nirvana”, is

¹⁰⁸ Ibid 10.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid 13.

revoked. MacNeice ends the section with an image of the resilience of the human spirit. It may not be an exhortation to political action, a belief that the destruction of society can be remedied, but it is an exhortation to maintain the human will and imagination even in times of defeat:

I must go out tomorrow as the others do
And build the falling castle;
Which has never fallen, thanks [...] [
[...] to the human animal's endless courage.
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.¹¹⁰

Section III witnesses the same reversal of tone. The sense of despair and ending is witnessed in the opening line's crude denial of respite or escapism – "August is nearly over".¹¹¹ "Joie de vivre" is now contraband and all that exists of the human spirit is stamina, "enough to face the annual/ Wait for the annual spree", or the August holiday. All that exists of escapism is the softening of the eight-hour workday by "films or football pools", "gossip or cuddle", but these are merely "moments of self-glory/ Or self-indulgence", "blinkers on the eyes of doubt". This despair is revoked in the optimistic mood with which this section concludes. The poet writes of his hopes for a cure to be found 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.¹¹²

Romantic egotism and solipsism are refuted:

¹¹⁰ Ibid 13-14.

¹¹¹ See Chapter I, section III for a discussion of MacNeice's use of the month August as a symbol for his preoccupation with the passage of time; May and June being for him the buoyant months.

¹¹² Ibid 18.

None of our hearts are pure, we always have mixed motives.
Are self-deceivers, but the worst of all
Deceit is to murmur 'Lord I am not worthy'
And, lying easy, turn your face to the wall.

Though Autumn Journal contains numerous relapses, by the end of Section III MacNeice is optimistic enough to find a spirit of human will and action even within himself:

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

Section IV opens by continuing this positive attitude:

September has come and I wake
And I think with joy how whatever, now in future, the system
Nothing whatever can take
The people away, there will always be people
For friends of lovers though perhaps
The conditions of love will be changed.¹¹³

The poet, who had earlier, lamented the dissolution of a comfortable private life, can now cherish the memories of a relationship that has not lasted.

This chapter will return to some of the middle sections of Autumn Journal in the context of MacNeice's engagement with Yeats's Shakespearean allusions. I offer here instead later sections of the poem as further examples of MacNeice's refusal to indulge in a despairing poetry. MacNeice's growing recognition of Yeats's poetic example in his prose writings can be correlated with his poetry of these years. In Section XVIII, MacNeice, in echoes of Yeats's insistence on a rejoicing voice in "The Gyres", can delight in moments of individual will and courage:

Yes, the earlier days had their music,
We have some still to-day,
But the orchestra is due for the bonfire
If things go on this way.

¹¹³ Ibid 19.

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.¹¹⁴

Section XXI poses again the question of The Waste Land:

And when we clear away
All this debris of day-to-day experience,
What comes out to light, what is there of value
Lasting from day to day?¹¹⁵

It refuses, however, the weary answer of The Waste Land, for here, as in Section XI, if history is considered cyclical, it brings with it the thought of a new beginning: “The world is round and there is always dawn/ Undeniably somewhere”.¹¹⁶ The optimism of Section XXI resides in a tragic joy in life whatever the actual historical circumstances:

And while I sympathise
With the wish to quit, to make the great refusal,
I feel that such a defeat is also treason,
That deaths like these are lies.
A fire should be left burning
Till it burns itself out:
We shan't have another chance to dance and shout
Once the flames are silent.¹¹⁷

In Section XXIII the poet finds in the Barcelona of the Spanish Civil War not an impulse to political action but a ready example of the capacities of the human spirit:

The human values remain, purged in the fire,
And it appears that every man's desire
Is life rather than victuals.

¹¹⁴ Ibid 74.

¹¹⁵ Ibid 81.

¹¹⁶ Ibid 82. Cf. Section XI 46:

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.

¹¹⁷ Ibid 84.

[...]
Here at last the soul has found its voice
Though not indeed by choice;
The cost was heavy.¹¹⁸

The conclusion of the section re-writes “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock”, where the protagonist confesses in a moment of bathos to be unfit for the role of Hamlet:

I have loved defeat and sloth,
The tawdry halo of the idle martyr;
I have thrown away the roots of will and conscience,
Now I must look for both,
Not any longer act among the cushions
The Dying Gaul:
Soon or late the delights of self-pity must pall
And the fun of cursing the wicked
World into which we were born.¹¹⁹

The ending of the section is again an invocation to learn from the testament to the human spirit found in Barcelona, the “bearers of the living will”, the “stubborn heirs of freedom” whose “matter-of-fact faith and courage shame/ Our niggling equivocations”. The final lines of Autumn Journal are more optimistic than those of “The Sunlight on the Garden”, which was written a year earlier:

Sleep to the noise of running water
To-morrow to be crossed, however deep;
There is no river of the dead or Lethe,
To-night we sleep
On the banks of the Rubicon – the die is cast;
There will be time to audit
The accounts later, there will be sunlight later
And the equation will come out at last.¹²⁰

Edna Longley wisely points out that in Autumn Journal MacNeice refrains from assuming “the Yeatsian character of the artist or ‘solitary soul’ as tragic hero. He inhabits – whether as citizen, common man, Everyman or individual – what he says

¹¹⁸ Ibid 89-90.

¹¹⁹ Ibid 91-92.

¹²⁰ Ibid 96.

Yeats avoids, 'flux, the sphere of the realist proper'."¹²¹ It is an adjustment of Yeatsian aesthetics which is persistent in MacNeice's work. She does, however, take account of MacNeice's interpretation of his generation's work, maintaining that in the poem "the gloom is tragic rather than defeatist". "It is built into the whole design of Autumn Journal that the protagonist should continually recognise and resist the temptation to wallow".¹²² Longley's reading of the poem is quite different from contemporary responses to the poem. Autumn Journal was subjected to harsh criticism in Scrutiny in June 1939, where the reviewer missed much of the significance of the poem and overlooked the relationship between MacNeice and Yeats:

MacNeice's long pseudo-autobiographical poem is, like his earlier volumes only more so, ostensibly concerned with the Contemporary Situation but doesn't convince us that he is, as a poet, aware of anything at all. No doubt thousands of nice young men felt as Mr. MacNeice felt about the September crisis and about their experiences during these 'disturbing times'; they didn't therefore feel entitled to publish their ruminations as poetry or even as prose, and prose, dished up in metre, is what Autumn Journal virtually is. The Contemp. Sit. is a dreadfully threadbare business and in itself and in Eliot, in later Yeats or in *Hugh Selwyn Mauberley* it's the distinguished sensibility that makes it absorbing. [...] of the Contemp. Sit. his verse remains not a criticism but a symptom.¹²³

Austin Clarke's review in The Dublin Magazine was no more complimentary to MacNeice's work:

In concealing his real emotions under a bright breezy vernacular surface, MacNeice misses the sense of catastrophe which loomed last year. This, however, is intentional, and he relies on the method of anti-climax. His work, like that of Mr. Spender, expresses the mental predicament of the English intellectual, that ineffectual Fabianism, which usually leads to intellectual dilettantism or a romantic interest in other people's revolutions. In abandoning Ireland for England, Mr. MacNeice has obviously exchanged their frying-pan for the fire, and this may account for his fabian exasperation.¹²⁴

¹²¹ Longley, "Louis MacNeice: Autumn Journal" 83.

¹²² Ibid 79.

¹²³ W.H. Mellors, "Modern Poets in Love and War", rev. of The Still Centre by Spender, Poems and Songs by Gavin Ewart, Poems by F.T. Prince, Autumnal Journey [sic], Scrutiny 8.1 (June 1939): 125-6.

¹²⁴ Austin Clarke, rev. of The Still Centre by Spender and Autumn Journal, The Dublin Magazine (Jul-Sept. 1939): 84.

What I wish to argue in this chapter is that it is precisely within the context of MacNeice's engagement with Yeats that the poem should be read. MacNeice refuses to indulge in romantic self-pity in his work, or to wallow in despair. What Autumn Journal strives to achieve is an endorsement of the human spirit or imagination. If in Poems (1935), MacNeice found little reason for believing in a transcendence of historical circumstances, his poetic belief has developed in line with that of Yeats by the time of The Earth Compels and Autumn Journal. Perhaps the most visible sign of that development is the poet's confident assertion that "there will be sunlight later". As Stan Smith points out, contrary to popular notions of MacNeice's scepticism, "MacNeice, in fact, is pretty good at plastering over the cracks with artful gestures. All those rueful confessions of verbal inadequacy, of inability to 'cage the minute/ Within its nets of gold', scarcely dissemble a consummate mastery in turning the world of appearances into the fool's gold of poetry".¹²⁵ By turning to Yeats, MacNeice found such a model for poetry.

¹²⁵ Stan Smith, Irish Poetry and the Construction of Modern Identity (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 2005) 78. Smith comments too that "Yet he remained stubbornly convinced of the immanence of value, struggling pragmatically to 'Conjure value in passing and out of the passing', and finally finding in death and denial themselves, the ultimate validation of life." Smith, Irish Poetry 76.

iv. Sunlight Poems

I think he would wish that neither impatience nor despair may ever prevent us from being open at all times to those sudden visitations of joy, those moments of vision granted us by Dame Kind, or Eros, or, maybe, God himself, moments which cannot be commanded or anticipated, but which can only be received by hearts which are open to receive them.¹²⁶

Auden's interpretation of MacNeice's work in his Memorial Address points towards the ultimately positive nature of MacNeice's poems despite their admittance of despair or gloom. In MacNeice's early poetry, a preoccupation with time and the onslaught of history had been foregrounded.¹²⁷ No two images convey this more persuasively than the fading of sunlight and the peal of bells. One of MacNeice's earliest poems to include both images was "A Serene Evening" published in his first collection, Blind Fireworks (1929):

The staggering sun, that old barger,
Unlocks the crimson western sluices;
With shadow dances the night advances,
So ring the bells up conqueringly.¹²⁸

The poem included much of the detail that was to figure in MacNeice's thirties poetry. The word "advances" was to emerge again in "The Sunlight on the Garden" and in "Three Poems Apart", in the 1940 collection The Last Ditch (entitled "Trilogy for X" in Plant and Phantom in 1941):

Switch the light off and let me
Gather you up and gather
The power of trains advancing,
Further, advancing further.¹²⁹

¹²⁶ W.H. Auden, "Memorial Address for Louis MacNeice", Time Was Away: The World of Louis MacNeice, ed. Terence Brown and Alec Reid (Dublin: Dolmen Press, 1974) 7.

¹²⁷ MacNeice, The Strings are False 143. "Sometimes in the nights I woke and wondered where we were going, but most of the time I was doped and happy, most of the time except when I thought about time that most of the time is waste but whose is not? When I started to write poems they were all about time".

¹²⁸ MacNeice, Blind Fireworks (London: Gollancz, 1929) 21.

In “Entirely” bells and sirens, carrying sinister overtones from MacNeice’s childhood, function as the portents of the inescapability of time:

... and almost hourly
Bell or siren banishes the blue
Eyes of love entirely.¹³⁰

In “A Serene Evening”, time is depicted in terms of a “tomb of day”:

The shadow boxers twist and sway,
Plunge and lunge on the tomb of day;
Dawned is the day beyond recall,
So peal the bells for his funeral.¹³¹

This image of the tomb materialized again in “August” in Poems. Therein, MacNeice strove to believe in the power of art to make permanent ephemeral moments:

For the mind, by nature stagey, welds its frame
Tomb-like around each little world of a day.¹³²

But by the conclusion of the poem he dismissed such possibilities as false illusion:

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.

“A Serene Evening” contains none of the optimism that is later apparent in the conclusion of Autumn Journal. Nor, does it end with the tone of gratitude for those transient moments which concludes “The Sunlight on the Garden”. Most importantly,

¹²⁹ MacNeice, The Last Ditch (Dublin: Cuala Press, 1940) 30.

¹³⁰ MacNeice, Plant and Phantom (London: Faber and Faber, 1941) 21. Cf. MacNeice, “Experiences with Images” 159. Rpt. Selected Literary Criticism 159: “My father being a clergyman, his church was a sort of annex to the home – but rather a haunted annex (it was an old church and there were several things in it which frightened me as a child). Which is one reason, I think, though I would also maintain that the sound is melancholy anyhow, why church bells have a sinister association, e.g. in my poem ‘Sunday Morning’ (1933)”. See also “Primrose Hill” where thoughts of war are mentioned in terms of the “evil sirens” calling or “impartial bombs” falling. MacNeice, The Last Ditch 19.

¹³¹ MacNeice, Blind Fireworks 21.

¹³² MacNeice, Poems (London: Faber and Faber, 1935) 50.

“A Serene Evening” is structured very differently to the later poem: it is without the regular stanza structure or length, for instance, and it does not contain its dominant rhyme, slant-rhyme or use of assonance.¹³³ In “A Serene Evening”, there is little hope that poetry might transcend its actual conditions.

“Sunday Morning” chastises the vain attempt to “abstract this day and make it to the week of time/ A small eternity, a sonnet self-contained in rhyme”. Such illusions are harshly dismissed in the final stanza where in effect the rhyming scheme and enjambment of lines works to convey time’s movement or progression:

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.¹³⁴

“An Eclogue for Christmas” might have depicted the poet’s wishes for capturing such moments in art: “Let all these so ephemeral things/ Be somehow permanent like the swallow’s tangent wings”.¹³⁵ “Train to Dublin”, on the other hand, carries reminders of real historical circumstances, focusing on “the bell/ That tolls and tolls, the monotony of fear”.¹³⁶

While his poetry honestly confronted its gloomy political contexts, MacNeice, in a manuscript note attached to Poems, was at pains to stress the “dramatic character” of these poems. This, in MacNeice’s view, would preclude two mistakes being drawn: firstly, the reader would not look for “any message, creed or theory of life” in the poems (MacNeice was never swayed by any easy political or philosophical

¹³³ MacNeice, Blind Fireworks 21.

¹³⁴ MacNeice, Poems 38.

¹³⁵ *Ibid* 19.

¹³⁶ *Ibid* 32.

systematising of the world); secondly, the reader “*would not draw any wrong conclusions from the preponderance of gloomy ones*”.¹³⁷ MacNeice continued:

If a man writes ‘tragedies’ one knows what to expect and one does not accuse him of melancholia. Macbeth is speaking as Macbeth and not as (the whole) Shakespeare. But when it comes to ‘lyrics’ people seem to think than anything the poet writes is the ‘expression’ of the whole poet. This is bosh. The lyric is the expression of it maybe, a particular moment, or else a particular facet in a man’s outlook. Different parts of him want or believe different, or even opposite, things. Which parts shall have the most say depends largely on external circumstances.¹³⁸

In a review of MacNeice’s Poems in New Verse, Spender proffered the view that this collection was “full of humour, conceit, and a gaiety which exists in no other contemporary poetry.”¹³⁹ In “Mayfly”, for instance, MacNeice could exhort the example of the mayfly that makes the most of one day, not focusing on time’s onslaught:

So we, whose strand of life is not much more,
Let us make our time elastic and
Inconsequently dance above the toppling wave.¹⁴⁰

The “toppling wave” became for MacNeice a motif of appreciation of transient moments. If by the late 1930s the possibility of art as a means of political action had begun to grow remote, the sense that art could preserve moments of human value and individuality still remained in tact. In this climate, MacNeice found in Yeats’s tragic stance a model for poetry. Edna Longley notes that even in “An Eclogue for Christmas” “the ephemeral things” that modify this chorus of doom amount to more than fragments

¹³⁷ Cited in Peter McDonald, Louis MacNeice: The Poet in his Contexts (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991) 33-34. (emphasis added)

¹³⁸ Ibid 34.

¹³⁹ Spender, “Mr. MacNeice’s Poems”, rev. of Poems by Louis MacNeice, New Verse 17 (Oct./ Nov. 1935): 18.

¹⁴⁰ MacNeice, Poems 58-9.

shored against ruins.¹⁴¹ Her reading follows MacNeice's own comments regarding his generation's reaction from Eliot:

A. But yet there is beauty narcotic and deciduous
In this vast organism grown out of us:
On all the traffic-islands stand white globes like moons,
The city's haze is clouded amber that purrs and croons,
And tilting by the noble curve bus after tall bus comes
With an osculation of yellow light, with a glory like chrysanthemums.¹⁴²

While fading sunlight can often be seen in MacNeice's poetry as rebuking vain attempts to escape time ("we fool our fancy/ To catch intact what is always in dispersal"), the image of sunlight, particularly in the late thirties and forties, also figures as a positive symbol on many occasions.¹⁴³ In "The Dowser" (Plant and Phantom), MacNeice's vision is captured by the image of:

...the geyser suddenly of light that erupted, sprayed
Rocketing over the sky azaleas and gladioli.¹⁴⁴

In "The Return" Persephone's return to earth is depicted in the final stanza as:

The acclamation of earth's returning daughter,
Jonquils out of hell, and after
Hell the imperative of joy, the dancing
Fusillade of sunlight on the water.¹⁴⁵

"That a rose withers", insisted MacNeice, in The Poetry of W.B. Yeats, "is no disproof of the rose, which remains an absolute, its value inseparable from its existence (for existence is still existence, whether the tense is past or future)".¹⁴⁶ Rewriting his

¹⁴¹ Longley, Louis MacNeice 46.

¹⁴² MacNeice, Poems 16.

¹⁴³ MacNeice, "Departure Platform", The Last Ditch 20.

¹⁴⁴ MacNeice, Plant and Phantom 84.

¹⁴⁵ *Ibid* 85.

¹⁴⁶ MacNeice, preface, The Poetry of W.B. Yeats vii.

earlier distinction in Modern Poetry between mysticism and poetry, MacNeice insisted: “to both the question of pleasure and the question of value the utilitarian has no answer. The faith in the *value* of living is a mystical faith”.¹⁴⁷ MacNeice’s poems written in the early 1940s regularly attempt this positive aesthetic outlook. This stance was the premise of “The Cromlech”:

So Tom and Tessy holding hands
(Dare an abstraction steal a kiss?)
Cannot be generalized away,
Reduced by bleak analysis
To pointers demonstrating laws
Which drain the colour from the day;
Not mere effects of a crude cause
But of themselves significant,
To rule-of-brain recalcitrant,
This that they are and do is This.¹⁴⁸

There was no bitter war poetry from MacNeice, as Mahon commented, and as we have seen in Chapter III. Rather, his was a poetry that saw the fact of death during that war as something which gave life itself value. It is a feature of MacNeice’s poetry that provides the basis for Terence Brown’s study of the poet.¹⁴⁹ In “The Trolls”, in Springboard (1944), one of a series of poems incorporating imagery of trolls and inspired by the London air-raids, MacNeice insists:

Death has a look of finality;
We think we lose something but if it were not for
Death we should have nothing to lose, existence
Because unlimited would merely be existence
Without incarnate value.¹⁵⁰

¹⁴⁷ Ibid viii. (original emphasis)

¹⁴⁸ MacNeice, Holes in the Sky: Poems 1944-1947 (London: Faber and Faber, 1948) 24-25.

¹⁴⁹ Brown, Sceptical Vision 82ff. Cf. “Suite for Recorders”, Ten Burnt Offerings (London: Faber and Faber, 1952) 17:

The windblown web in which we live
Presumes a yawning negative,
A nothing which cries out to see
A something flout its vacancy.

¹⁵⁰ MacNeice, Springboard: Poems 1941-1944 (London: Faber and Faber, 1944) 16.

Time, MacNeice, suggests:

Swings on the poles of death
And the latitude and longitude of life
Are fixed by death, and the value
Of every organism, act and moment
Is, thanks to death, unique.¹⁵¹

MacNeice's prose article "Broken Windows" ends with the poet's "most profound account of war as an experience and as an aesthetic".¹⁵² MacNeice writes of death in that article: "Death in its own right – as War does incidentally – sees 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 unites us in life. And death not only levels but differentiates – it crystallizes our deeds".¹⁵³ That sense of the value of life brought about by the fact of death, heightened by the circumstances of war, is an important point in MacNeice's poetry:

We did not need a war to teach us this but war has taught us it. Before the war we wore blinkers. Applied science, by increasing comfort and controlling disease, had – geared to a 'liberal' individualism – encouraged us to think of death as a pure negation, a nuisance. But applied science, by shattering a town overnight, by superimposing upon ordered decay a fantastic but palpable madness, has shown us the integral function of death. Death is the opposite of decay; a stimulus, a necessary horizon.¹⁵⁴

While MacNeice's poetry – with its insistence on social or communal values – is radically different to Yeats's solitary and arrogant stances, MacNeice nonetheless finds in Yeats a model. In MacNeice's poetry, there is an awareness of the damage

¹⁵¹ Ibid 16.

¹⁵² Longley, *Louis MacNeice* 92.

¹⁵³ MacNeice, "Broken Windows or Thinking Aloud", signed holograph manuscript, written c. 1941-2 in Heuser's view, *Poetry Review* 78.2 (Summer 1988): 6. Rpt. *Selected Prose of Louis MacNeice*, ed. Alan Heuser (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990) 142. Cf. MacNeice's comments on Barcelona during the Spanish Civil War which are etched in similar terms in "To-Day in Barcelona", *Spectator* 162:5769 (20 Jan. 1939): 84-5. Rpt. *Selected Prose* 67. "There may be bitter dissensions among the politicians, but the people in the streets, one feels, have become a family party – or, if you prefer it, are in on the same racket – united by material necessities, by hunger, by the fear of sudden death which enhances the value of life."

¹⁵⁴ MacNeice, "Broken Windows" 6. Rpt. *Selected Prose* 142.

done to the social community by war, but this awareness is articulated in the manner encouraged by his predecessor – it is man’s attempt to overcome these conditions that MacNeice endorses in his poetry of this period. “Our end is our own to be won by our own endeavour/ And held on our own terms”, MacNeice asserts in “Explorations”.¹⁵⁵ In “Prospect” he urges:

Though Nature’s laws exploit
And defeat anarchic men,
Though every sandcastle concept
Being ad hoc must crumble again,
And though to-day is arid,
We know – and knowing bless –
That rooted in futurity
There is a plant of tenderness.¹⁵⁶

The ways in which MacNeice’s poetry attempts to transcend its conditions, however, has often been read by critics as merely some kind of stoical stance.¹⁵⁷

¹⁵⁵ MacNeice, Springboard 12. Indeed McDonald notes that all of the five ballads written in August 1940 “affect a plain-spoken defiance, managing to be at once admissions of defeat and assertions of integrity – for this kind of stance, Yeats is an exemplary figure”. See Poet in his Contexts 109. McDonald however goes on to assert “the definition of death as ‘the opposite of decay: a stimulus, a necessary horizon’, works in ‘The Trolls’, as a way of assigning value to moments of time as well as to individual actions. A clear corollary of this is the celebration of the individual himself; uniqueness is finally the only answer to the trolls’ negation. The actual results of this in poetry, however, did not always strike a balance between the uniqueness of individuality and the reality of the external, destructive pressure of war.” Writing of “Convoy” McDonald thought “the poem’s lack of success in this respect is arguably no more than a concrete example of how little MacNeice felt individual integrity and its strategies for survival could in fact be reconciled without forcing – the forcing is, in real terms, the strain imposed upon the artist by the war itself”. See page 119. McDonald’s points out, however, that it was Yeats’s emphasis on individuality which Spender criticised but MacNeice came to value.

¹⁵⁶ MacNeice, Springboard 39.

¹⁵⁷ See R.L. Cook, “Louis MacNeice: An Appreciation” 170. In Cook’s opinion, “this is not optimism; but it is as much hope as we can allow ourselves in the present state of the world, and it is the sort of yardstick we need for the spiritual reconstruction which must be attempted”. See also G.S. Fraser, “Poetry and Civilisation”, London Mercury 36.215 (Sept. 1937): 447. MacNeice “suggests a feasible attitude – other than heroics – to society as it is, here and now. He does not really react against it, like Yeats and Eliot; neither, like Auden or Spender, does he use it as his jumping-board into a future ideal America. He accepts it with pleasure and contempt, with a playful pessimism”. See for example Brown, Sceptical Vision 76-77. “In MacNeice’s poetry the battle is going very badly, the world seems valueless, but the stoical affirmation of many may turn the tide against defeat. In this way MacNeice’s stoicism is always about to move beyond itself, to become an affirmation of life and of value in life”. Brown does, however, mitigate the positive nature of MacNeice’s belief when he comments “He wrote a poetry of prosaic statement and keen logic which consistently suggests a poet of doubting honesty, a sceptic attempting to get at some truth, aware how easily questions can be begged or false emphases cultivated. The sceptic seeks to comment with a kind of sober controlled sanity; he adopts a Horatian urbanity in the

In “London Rain”, published in The Last Ditch, MacNeice resorted to the imagery of sunlight again. This poem, in contrast, to MacNeice’s earlier works portrays the coming of sunshine in cycles:

So let the water sizzle
Upon the gleaming slates,
There will be sunshine after
When the rain abates,
And rain returning duly
When the sun abates.¹⁵⁸

In Section III of “Three Poems Apart” MacNeice depicts the march of time in terms of puffing trains (again, train imagery surfaces), and in images of omens and the inability to capture sunlight:

Nursemaids gossiped,
Sun was bright on pram-paint,
Gold in the breeze the arrow
Swivelled on church-tops;
But Living drains the living
Sieve we catch our gold in.¹⁵⁹

This poem, in a similar manner to “The Sunlight on the Garden” and Autumn Journal, ends with an urge to celebrate the memories of such days, and a hope that they may re-appear:

And now, and last, in London
Poised on the edge of absence
I ask for a moment’s mention
Of days the days will cancel,
Though the long run may also
Bring what we ask for.

It is perhaps little wonder that it is the ending of summer days that most seems to capture the poet’s sense of time’s advances, considering that war had broken out at the

face of his sense of the tragedy and mystery of life. This is all he can honestly manage.” See also page 165.

¹⁵⁸ MacNeice, The Last Ditch 17.

¹⁵⁹ *Ibid* 32.

end of the summer of 1939. “Rampant on Europe headlines/ Herald beasts of fable”.¹⁶⁰ In “The Cyclist”, MacNeice again adopts the imagery that opened “The Sunlight on the Garden” – that of the futile attempt to catch sunlight in nets. Once again, however, it is the reminder that “these five minutes/ Are all to-day and summer” that informs this poem and its hypnotic final repetition of the word “calmly”:

... Summer, summer –
 They chase it with butterfly nets or strike it into the deep
 In a little red ball or gulp it lathered with cream
 Or drink it through closed eyelids, until the bell
 Left-right-left gives his forgotten sentence
 And reaching the valley the boy must pedal again
 Left-right-left but meanwhile
 For ten seconds more can move as the horse in the chalk
 Moves unbeginningly calmly
 Calmly regardless of tenses and final clauses
 Calmly unendingly moves.¹⁶¹

The Last Ditch may have opened with MacNeice’s epitaph to Eleanor Clark:

Without heroics, without belief,
 I send you, as I am not rich,
 Nothing but odds and ends a thief
 Bundled up in the last ditch.

Nonetheless MacNeice, in a letter to Clark, suggested there was more to his work than this gloomy epitaph might suggest. In a letter accompanying a copy of the poems for her birthday, MacNeice apologised “for the cynically-sentimental little versicle attached to your dedication – written on the spur of a very black moment”.¹⁶²

In “Plurality” MacNeice’s tragic stance comes to the fore:

... you and I
 Can only live by strife in that the living die,
 And, if we use the word Eternal, stake a claim
 Only to what a bird can find within the frame

¹⁶⁰ Ibid 33.

¹⁶¹ MacNeice, Holes in the Sky 38. See also “Death of a Cat”, Ten Burnt Offerings 87: “Each of our moments as they pass/ Is of some moment; more than an object”.

¹⁶² Cited in Jon Stallworthy, Louis MacNeice (1995; London: Faber and Faber, 1996) 278.

Of momentary flight (the value will persist
But as event the night sweeps it away in mist).

“Man is truly man”, MacNeice suggests, in that “he would transcend and flout the human span”.¹⁶³ It is typical of MacNeice that the poem does not lose sight of the poet’s or the individual’s moral responsibilities. It reminds us of poetry’s roots in the social or political world, and it suggests many of the failings of humankind. However, it very clearly rests on an endorsement of the human will and spirit, in spite perhaps of its failings, and in spite of its failure to ever fully escape its circumstances:

Man is surely mad with discontent, he is hurled
By lovely hopes or bad dreams against the world,
Raising a frail scaffold in never-ending flux,
Stubbornly when baffled fumbling the stubborn crux
And so he must continue, raiding the abyss
With aching bone and sinew, conscious of things amiss,
[...]
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.

In “Plurality”, what the individual attempts to do is clearly offset against the attempt of philosophers to impose some static system upon the world. For, as the poet insists in “Mutations”, such an attempt is doomed to failure:

For every static world that you or I impose
Upon the real one must crack at times and new
Patterns from new disorders open like a rose
And old assumptions yield to new sensation.¹⁶⁴

In “The Stygian Banks” MacNeice’s endorsement of this ultimately positive view of art is given remarkable voicing:

There *is* a despair
Which the animals do not know, it is chiefly exhaustion
When the bull kneels down in the ring; but our despair

¹⁶³ MacNeice, Plant and Phantom 79.

¹⁶⁴ MacNeice, Springboard 13.

Need not exhaust, it is our privilege –
 Our paradox – to recognize the insoluble
 And going up with an outstretched hand salute it.
 [...] the paradox
 Is that we can break out – being about to die
 We can salute our death, the consciousness
 Of what must be ennobling that arena
 Where we have defied what must be.¹⁶⁵

The poem contains explicit echoes of Yeats's definitions of moments of joy, or those moments of courage in the face of defeat by actual historical circumstances:

Now it is Spring
 And the blossoms fall like sighs but we can hold them
 Each as a note in the air, a chain of defiance,
 Making the transient last by having Seen it
 And so distilled value from mere existence;
 Thus when our own existence is cut off
 That stroke will put a seal upon our value
 The eye will close but the vision that it borrowed
 Has sealed the roses red.
 [...]
 But in the meantime – which is time – it is ours
 To practise a faith which is heresy and by defying
 Our nature to raise a flag on it. Come, let us laugh
 As the animals cannot, laugh in the mind for joy.¹⁶⁶

It was, after all, those moments of tragic joy that MacNeice emphasised in his review of Yeats's A Full Moon in March (1936). MacNeice thought the play had “the weight of a life and philosophy behind it and its edge is a very sharp one, a final expression of the necessity of desecration and the bravado of defeat”.¹⁶⁷ “The Stygian Banks” reminds us of MacNeice's troll poems of World War II, for it makes clear that in the midst of the suffering and destruction of war, a tragic aesthetic is most clearly defined.

The collection Solstices (1961), while concerned with thoughts of the poet's own age and future death, also makes clear the value of such moments of courage and individuality:

¹⁶⁵ MacNeice, Holes in the Sky 61. (original emphasis)

¹⁶⁶ Ibid 66.

¹⁶⁷ MacNeice, “The Newest Yeats”, rev. of A Full Moon in March, New Verse no. 19 (Feb-March 1936): 16. Rpt. Selected Literary Criticism 44.

Incorrigible, ruthless,
It rattled the shingly beach of my childhood,
Subtle, the opposite of earth,
And, unlike earth, capable
Any time at all of proclaiming eternity
Like something or someone to whom
We have to surrender, finding
Through that surrender life.¹⁶⁸

In some respects that late collection returns to the tropes of MacNeice's thirties work. MacNeice's childhood fears which haunt his earlier poetry surface again in "The Riddle". His propensity for Icelandic poems and Northern sagas is referenced in "On the Grettir Saga". "The Snow Man" reverts to the concerns of "Snow" and "To a Communist", and once again MacNeice's depiction of the transience of things is depicted in snow imagery:

Yesterday was a dance of flakes
Waltzing down, and up,
But today is lull and smudge, today
Is a man with a pipe that will not draw.

But again, MacNeice's poem contains the germ of his tragic stance:

Today is a legless day with head-on
Idiot eyes, a standard deaf
Mute in a muted world. This lump
Is what he remembered when he forgot,

Already beginning to dribble. Tomorrow
Comes the complete forgetting, the thaw.
Or is it rather a dance of water
To replace, relive, that dance of white?

MacNeice's concern with time, which was depicted in the earlier poems "The Glacier" and "Hidden Ice", is mirrored in "Icebergs":

There are no words below the water,
Let alone phrases, let alone
Sentences – except the one
Sentence that tells you life is done

And what you had of it was a mere

¹⁶⁸ MacNeice, *Solstices* (London: Faber and Faber, 1961) 44.

Ninth or tenth; the rest is sheer
Snub to those who dared suppose
Icebergs warm below the water.

MacNeice's evocation of his night-time rain-swept drive in section XIV of Autumn Journal is echoed in Solstice's driving poem "The Wiper". In his 1939 poem MacNeice's thoughts turn to "Qu'allais – je faire to-morrow" and are set against the backdrop of what he sees as a laissez-faire political attitude in 1938. In "The Wiper" MacNeice's drive serves as a stimulus for his thoughts on time:

Boxes of glass and water,
Upholstered, equipped with dials
Professing to tell the distance
 We have gone, the speed we are going,
But never a gauge nor needle
To tell us where we are going
Or when day will come, supposing
 This road exists in daytime.

MacNeice's thirties concern with flux re-appears in "Variation on Heraclitus", using the same river imagery of Autumn Journal to depict the progression of time. Indeed, the poems in the collection subtitled "Memories of 1940", or 1941, detail the poet's reminiscing on these years. The familiar trope of the sea returns as part of "Nature Notes", expressing the transience and flux of life but also MacNeice's absorption of a Yeatsian tragic stance in his recognition of such:

And, unlike earth, capable
Any time at all of proclaiming eternity
Like something or someone to whom
We have to surrender, finding
Through that surrender life.¹⁶⁹

The poet's preoccupation with mortality in his later work, as opposed to the more distant concern with time in his 1930s poetry, is stressed by Longley. Certainly many of these poems can be read against the backdrop of the poet approaching middle

¹⁶⁹ MacNeice, Solstices 44.

age and looking forwards to his later years. The poet's quotation from Horace's Book IV.11 which opens Solstices – "*age iam meorum finis amorum*" ("Come then, last of my loves") – alludes to Horace's struggle in accepting old age, established through his declaration of love for the youthful Phyllis who in turn is in love with another man. Horace's Book IV was dominated by the passage of time and the inevitability of death. The allusion thus signifies the concerns that will dominate MacNeice's own book. Not only death but nightmare, Longley feels surfaces in these poems, and Longley considers that MacNeice, in these poems, "could no longer rely on sunlight coming to the rescue".¹⁷⁰ What does come to the rescue is MacNeice's positive stance in the face of defeat. For Cook, on the other hand, MacNeice's philosophy had altered by the late 1940s and had "become less pessimistic".¹⁷¹ The roots of this philosophy can be seen in the poet's engagement with Yeatsian tragic beliefs in the 1930s. One of MacNeice's most persuasive espousals of the essentially dialectical nature of his poetry – its acknowledgement of despair while ultimately resisting refusing to rest on such an attitude – is to be found in his article for the Poetry Book Society's Bulletin in (1963). Reflecting on the change in his poetry from his previous collection MacNeice wrote:

When I assembled the poems in The Burning Perch (I am not happy about the title but could not think of anything better), I was taken aback by the high proportion of sombre pieces, ranging from bleak observations to thumbnail nightmares. The proportion is far higher than in my last book, Solstices, but I am not sure why this should be so. Fear and resentment seem here to be serving me in the same way as Yeats in his old age claimed to be served by 'lust and rage', and yet I had been equally fearful and resentful of the world we live in when I was writing Solstices. All I can say is that I did not set out to write this kind of poem: they happened.¹⁷²

¹⁷⁰ Edna Longley, Louis MacNeice 167.

¹⁷¹ Cook, "Louis MacNeice: An Appreciation" 170.

¹⁷² MacNeice, "Louis MacNeice Writes...[on The Burning Perch]", Poetry Book Society Bulletin no. 38 (Sept. 1963): 1. Rpt. Selected Literary Criticism 247.

MacNeice, however, was not to finish on that tone. Rather, he continued, and stressed, as he had done repeatedly, that a poem which admitted gloom could still result in a positive stance:

I would venture the generalisation that most of these poems are two-way affairs or at least spiral ones: even in the most evil picture the good things, like the sea in one of these poems, are still there round the corner.¹⁷³

v. MacNeice and Yeats's Shakespeare

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?¹⁷⁴

MacNeice's address to Shakespeare in "Autolycus" suggests in its final line some sense of affinity with the playwright. We are reminded that Shakespeare's works for all their adoption of old tales, myths and legends were filled with truths taken from contemporary life. MacNeice's title plays on the notion of theft, using as it does the Greek fictional character referenced by one of Shakespeare's own characters in The Winter's Tale:

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.

¹⁷³ Ibid 247. Stallworthy points out the mixture of "the shadow of approaching death" in MacNeice's later poems coupled with a "wit and certain gaiety" as in Yeats's last poems. See Stallworthy, Louis MacNeice 468.

¹⁷⁴ MacNeice, "Autolycus", Holes in the Sky 44.

MacNeice's descriptions of the world of Shakespeare's comedies, "A gay world certainly though pocked and scored/ With childish horrors", denote the playwright's work in the very terms that pervaded MacNeice's own writings – the sense of gaiety always on the edge of loss and the recurring childhood imagery. In this section I shall argue that MacNeice found an authoritative model in certain Shakespearean characters, but he did so through the lens of Yeats's prior writings. MacNeice's intertextual dialogue with Yeatsian "tragic joy" went further than simply corroborating the example of the positive nature of Yeats's poetry for his own generation. (It was not surprising that MacNeice should have read Yeats's work closely given that he was occupied in the later part of the decade in a full-length study of the poet. In the opening pages of that work, MacNeice had in fact stressed how he enjoyed re-reading Yeats more than most other poets.¹⁷⁵) In his prose works, MacNeice foregrounded Yeats's reading in certain Shakespearean tragic characters a mirror for his own tragic beliefs. Thus, when engaging with Yeatsian tragedy, MacNeice repeatedly focused on the Shakespearean references in Yeats's poetry and endorsed the positive interpretations that Yeats had accorded to the Shakespearean characters. Likewise, nearly every allusion to Shakespeare in MacNeice's prose reverberates with echoes of Yeats.

In "Yeats's Epitaph" (1940), MacNeice considered this tragic stance the most impressive aspect of the elder poet:

Yeats's ingredients became odder and odder but, they were at least dry and hard, they helped him to assert a joy of life which was comparatively lacking in his early Celtic or Pre-Raphaelite twilights. The great discovery of the later Yeats was that joy need not imply softness and that boredom is something more than one gets in dreams. Axel has been refuted; 'Hamlet and Lear are gay'.¹⁷⁶

¹⁷⁵ MacNeice, *The Poetry of W.B. Yeats* 1.

¹⁷⁶ MacNeice, "Yeats's Epitaph", *New Republic* 102.26 (24 June 1940): 862-3. Rpt. *Selected Literary Criticism* 118.

Again, in 1950, it was Yeats's notions of tragedy that MacNeice highlighted when reviewing Yeats's Collected Poems. MacNeice's sense of Yeats's importance was ultimately based upon the positive nature of his poetry, and that, significantly, was expressed through Yeats's use of Shakespearean allusions:

He said of himself that as he grew older his poetry grew younger, and his latter-day text seems to have been the paradox 'that Hamlet and Lear are gay'. He deplored no less bitterly than some younger poets much that was happening in the world, but, unlike them and partly perhaps because of his cyclic philosophy and his doctrine of the Masks, he was too much of a tragedian ever to become a pessimist.

What matter? Out of cavern comes a voice
And all it knows is that one word 'Rejoice'.¹⁷⁷

The allusion to Yeats's "The Gyres" was the same one that MacNeice seized upon in The Poetry of W.B. Yeats. MacNeice focused his readings of "An Acre of Grass" in that book on Yeats's tragic vision as illustrated through his Shakespearean allusions. MacNeice explained Yeats's choice of Timon and Lear by the fact that in both of these characters "passion was stronger than reason and in both of them disillusionment, anger, and hatred, which would seem to lead to nihilism, lead actually to a most articulate assertion of human vitality and individuality". Most importantly, MacNeice demonstrated his approval of Yeats's tragic stance: "Yeats's paradox *still holds good*, that tragedy implies the joy of life".¹⁷⁸ Yeats held the belief that "a Lament can lead to the source of joy", MacNeice wrote, and in a late poem Yeats had made "the *very true* paradox that 'Hamlet and Lear are gay'".¹⁷⁹

¹⁷⁷ MacNeice, "Great Riches" 172. Cf. MacNeice, The Poetry of W.B. Yeats p. 186. "Yeats has progressed through a series of disappointments to the conclusion: Out of cavern comes a voice/ And all it knows is that one word 'Rejoice'."

¹⁷⁸ MacNeice, The Poetry of W.B. Yeats 177. (emphasis added)

¹⁷⁹ Ibid 186. (emphasis added)

Following the death of Dylan Thomas, it was to Yeatsian tragic beliefs, and Yeats's readings of Shakespeare, that MacNeice resorted in order to explain the appeal of Thomas's poetry:

Yeats described the poet as one who knows 'that Hamlet and Lear are gay'. No poet of our time was a better example of this than Dylan Thomas. When his first work appeared it was astonishingly new and yet went back to the oldest of our roots – roots which had long been ignored, written off, or simply forgotten. He was not just a poet among poets; he was, as has often been remarked, a bard, with the three great bardic virtues of faith, joy, and craftsmanship – and, one could add, of charity. Many of his poems are concerned with death or the darker forces, yet they all have the joy of life in them. And many of his poems are obscure but it is never the obscurity of carelessness; though I, for one, assumed it might be when I first read his early work in the 1930s. Lastly, all the poems (a rare thing in this age of doubt) are suffused both with a sense of value, a faith in something that is simultaneously physical and spiritual, and with (what is equally rare in an age of carping) a great breadth of generosity, goodwill not only towards men but towards all created things.¹⁸⁰

Significantly, in a review of Sean O'Casey's memoirs in 1945, MacNeice turned again to Yeats's espousals of an art that would depict "tragic joy". Yeats, as we have seen, rejected O'Casey's The Silver Tassie because it failed to achieve just this. In a resounding play of intertextuality, it was precisely Yeats's focus on this aspect of O'Casey's work that MacNeice highlighted in his own article:

Unlike most English writers of 'proletarian' origin, Mr. O'Casey scorns the mere 'chunk of life' and pseudo-objective reportage and is not afraid of flowing rhythms or dramatic lighting effects. And such rhythms and effects are needed in treating the slums of Dublin which are of themselves well on the way to hyperbole.

This book accordingly is full of death, disease, drink, madness, batonings and other brutalities; yet these add up to a tragic gaiety such as Yeats discovered in Hamlet and Lear. It is not surprising that the youthful O'Casey, a born enthusiast, was excited by Whitman's Leaves of Grass – 'a book in which the whole world danced, even on its way to the grave'. But he also has a full share of the Irish common sense which provides the Grain of Salt.¹⁸¹

In Section X of Autumn Journal, an explicit example of a Yeatsian-like tragic joy is made in the intertextual echoes of Hamlet, King Lear and Macbeth. The

¹⁸⁰ MacNeice, "Dylan Thomas: Memories and Appreciations", Encounter 2:1 (Jan. 1954): 12-13. Rpt. Selected Literary Criticism 183.

¹⁸¹ MacNeice, "Mr. O'Casey's Memoirs", rev. of Drums Under the Windows, Time and Tide 26.45 (10 Nov. 1945): 942.

destruction and deaths represented in these plays resound in the context of the foreboding atmosphere of Autumn Journal. The passage in Section X of the poem begins with a scathing view of mass conformity:

You must lose your soul to be strong, you cannot stand
Alone on your own legs or your own ideas;
The order of the day is complete conformity and
An automatic complacency.
Such was the order of the day.¹⁸²

But MacNeice juxtaposes this picture of contemporary society with images of the vitality and individuality of the human spirit – images of tragic joy and a refusal to indulge in nihilistic despair. King Lear is alluded to in the lines:

Only at times
The Fool among the yes-men flashed his motley
To prick their pseudo-reason with his rhymes
And drop his grain of salt on court behaviour.

The word “motley” carries echoes of Yeats’s “Easter 1916”, a poem which itself depicted the contrast between tragic and comic art. This poem, as we have seen, was a significant point of debate for MacNeice and his contemporaries in assessing Yeats’s influence. The poem was clearly in MacNeice’s mind when he was writing Autumn Journal, and allusions to it also appear, as noted in the previous chapter, in Section XVI. The passionate Lear on the moors, an example of tragic joy which both MacNeice and Yeats used in their prose writings, is also referred to later in Section X in the phrase “the mere batter of light on the senses”.

Section X resorts to the figure of Hamlet and carries echoes of Shakespeare’s play, alluding to the point in the play when Hamlet overcomes his inaction, grief and world-weariness:

¹⁸² MacNeice, Autumn Journal 42.

And the critic jailed in the mind would peer through the grate
And husky from long silence, murmur gently
That there is something rotten in the state
Of Denmark but the state is not the whole of Denmark.¹⁸³

The lines in Autumn Journal – “And sometimes as whisper in books/ Would challenge the code, or a censured memory sometimes” –which were discussed in the previous chapter, refer to the point in the play when Hamlet’s reading compels him to weigh the options of despair and grief or a tragic awareness of his role.

It is the passionate and defiant Macbeth who is evoked in the following lines:

And a spade is still a spade
And the difference is not final between a tailored
Suit and a ready-made.¹⁸⁴

The lines evoke Act Five, Scene Two of the play, where Macbeth’s political defeat is imminent and Angus comments of the king:

Now does he feel his title
Hang loose about him, like a giant’s robe
Upon a dwarfish thief.¹⁸⁵

The explosion of rooks also alludes, perhaps, to Macbeth’s defeat in the final act of the play. Significantly, this adoption of Yeatsian readings is illustrated particularly when MacNeice discusses the suicides of Shakespeare’s heroes and heroines. Writing on Eliot’s satire in “Subject in Modern Poetry” (1936), MacNeice characterized his readings in terms akin to Yeatsian tragic joy:

Like the characters in Shakespeare whose glorifications of suicide betray their lust for life, Mr. Eliot’s satire of his world in these earlier poems betrays that it was his world and the only world congenial to him.¹⁸⁶

¹⁸³ Ibid 43.

¹⁸⁴ Ibid 43.

¹⁸⁵ Shakespeare, Macbeth, The Norton Shakespeare, ed. Stephen Greenblatt (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1997) Act Five, Scene II ll 20-22: 2610. The clothing imagery is a motif in Macbeth. Macbeth himself speaks of his “borrowed robes” and Banquo refers to his “strange garments”.

This was a view that had been forming since MacNeice's days at Oxford. In Modern Poetry, MacNeice cites a paper of 1926 which had first put forward the basis of this belief:

'Art is essentially an expression, not necessarily of joie de vivre, but at any rate of the lust of living...' This is true, I claim, even of such 'suicidal' poetry as Webster's or Eliot's. 'The very act of saying how they feel means that they have not yet abnegated feeling...When Cleopatra advocates suicide...her very desire for suicide signifies a masterly appreciation of life.'¹⁸⁷

In The Poetry of W.B. Yeats MacNeice laid out far more explicitly his use of Yeats as an authoritative figure to validate these readings. In asserting the relevance of the older poet for his generation, MacNeice chose the figure of Cleopatra, a Shakespearean character favoured by Yeats. MacNeice wrote that Yeats could:

Serve us [...] as an example of zest. Much modern poetry has inevitably a gloomy content; so had much of Yeats's poetry, but whether it is nostalgic, love-lorn, cynical, darkly prophetic, angry over politics, or embittered over old age, there is nearly always a leaping vitality – the vitality of Cleopatra waiting for the asp. The poet kicks against life but that is because his demands from life are high.¹⁸⁸

MacNeice's choice of Cleopatra as an example of this poetic vision was precisely the same example that was quoted earlier by Yeats in his explanation of "tragic joy" – no actress had ever sobbed when playing Cleopatra. This choice surfaced again in MacNeice's book on Yeats, when he remarked that "Cleopatra's suicide was after all an assertion of the values of life – and of the joy of life also".¹⁸⁹

¹⁸⁶ MacNeice, "Subject in Modern Poetry" 147. Rpt. Selected Literary Criticism 62.

¹⁸⁷ MacNeice, Modern Poetry 67-8. See contrast between great and complete refusal in MacNeice, The Poetry of W.B. Yeats 119. "T.S. Eliot's Prufrock, published in 1917, heralded the cynicism of a whole post-war decade. The title poem in that volume was a most delicate piece of self-analysis, self-satire, the portrait of an intellectual who finds nothing worth while, who makes not the great but the complete refusal (there is no greatness in it for he does not believe in what he refuses) –
"I am no prophet – and here's no great matter".

¹⁸⁸ MacNeice, The Poetry of W.B. Yeats 232.

¹⁸⁹ *Ibid* 186.

In his book on Yeats, MacNeice exclaimed how strange it was to read the elder poet in his works “admiring individual human beings, not questioning their individuality, not stressing their subservience to circumstance”. In Yeats’s poems, the hero was “conceded full individuality, his Marxist conditioning is ignored”.¹⁹⁰ MacNeice, however, resisted Yeats’s clear-cut distinction between the antithetical or the primary, in other words, an art in which the world would be shaped by the poet’s imagination or an art that would be subject merely to external influences:

Opposed to this theatrical discipline, this cult of the Mask, which goes with Yeats’s admiration for aristocracies is the more democratic discipline, accepted *from without* of New Signatures. This discipline can be roughly said to be *a posteriori* where that from within is *a priori*. It involves, firstly, an honest survey of the contemporary world, an unflinching recognition of its evils and deficiencies, but, secondly, a recognition of that world’s potentialities for good; the poet, if only by pointing out where the actual world does and does not realize the ideal, will be at the same time realist and idealist, honest while taking sides, indirectly a militant.¹⁹¹

MacNeice was insistent on the virtues of the thirties generation’s attempt to include external realities in their poetry. He countered that Yeats’s comments “implied that the latter kind of discipline is antipathetic to art; Yeats could never admit that a poet, for instance, who turned Communist, was not deceiving himself.” MacNeice refused to concede this absolute distinction between discipline imposed from without and discipline imposed from within:

Again the alternative disciplines are too rigorously separated. Does a man who accepts a current code – as so many of the Greeks did, for instance – only accept it *passively*? And is it possible to discipline oneself without coming to terms with external circumstances and society?¹⁹²

What MacNeice’s poetry did accept, however, was that art should attempt something more than a passive recognition of suffering and despair.

¹⁹⁰ Ibid 120.

¹⁹¹ MacNeice, Modern Poetry 24. (original emphasis)

¹⁹² Ibid 108. (original emphasis)

For Yeats, as we have seen, tragedy was removed from life, and consisted of passions and emotions rather than contemporary problems or what he termed “character”:

Tragedy is passion alone, and rejecting character, it gets form from motives, from the wandering of passion; while comedy is the clash of character. [...] A poet creates tragedy from his own soul, that soul which is alike in all men. It has not joy, as we understand that word, but ecstasy, which is from the contemplation of things vaster than the individual and imperfectly seen, perhaps, by all those that still live. The masks of tragedy contain neither character nor personal energy. They are allied to decoration and to the abstract figures of Egyptian temples.¹⁹³

The character of Richard II, for Yeats in “First Principles” (1904), was “typical not because he ever existed, but because he has made us know of something in our own minds we had never known of had he never been imagined”.¹⁹⁴ It was the passions and emotions of the characters that “makes us say, ‘How true, how often I have felt as that man feels’; or ‘How intimately I have come to know those people on the stage’”.¹⁹⁵ Yeats’s belief, however, MacNeice insisted, was founded on “an admitted hatred for the real world”. This had been the reasoning behind Yeats’s dismissal of Ibsen as “a true tragedian”: “Ibsen’s themes are contemporary and his characters characters”.¹⁹⁶ MacNeice was adamant about Yeats’s misunderstandings of Ibsen, maintaining that Yeats “was misled by a surface view; he disliked Ibsen because of the modernity of his themes”. In actual fact, “the Greek tragedians had taken modern themes and disguised them in mythology. With Ibsen it is almost the other way round: he takes the archetypes and disguises them in Here and Now”.¹⁹⁷ This early tendency of Yeats to exclude character or the surface of life, was for MacNeice, untenable. Yeats’s omissions were

¹⁹³ Yeats, *Autobiographies* 470-1.

¹⁹⁴ Yeats, “First Principles”, *Plays and Controversies* 93.

¹⁹⁵ Yeats, *Plays and Controversies* 156-7.

¹⁹⁶ MacNeice, *The Poetry of W.B. Yeats* 87.

akin to Hamlet without the Prince of Denmark.¹⁹⁸ For MacNeice, Yeats's exclusion of the surface of life ignored the possibility that "certain things seen or felt in normal moments can serve – as has often been proved – as symbols for spiritual truth". He also good-humouredly noted that Yeats's argument "does not answer the opposition's probable contention that Yeats's cat-headed figures of hounds with one red ear are no more spiritual than the everyday figures or objects met with in the Greek Anthology or in Burns or Wordsworth".¹⁹⁹

For MacNeice, who found much appealing in Yeats's assertions of individuality, however, such conclusions were irreconcilable with his democratic beliefs and his beliefs in the relationship between poetry and the community. MacNeice wrote that although "at the apex of a tragic story there is perhaps a moment when distinctions are submerged", it was still true that no tragedy "is merely an apex; it must be the whole pyramid. Yeats mistakenly wished to dispense with the base".²⁰⁰ MacNeice concluded:

This means simplification, means – in Shakespeare and in Yeats – the diminution from the tragic figure of all psychology except some simple trends, it means the explanation of a man not by his daily life but by one or two great moments; thus we get the paradox that in Shakespeare death is so often the great moment of life and Cleopatra's suicide an assertion of the joy of life. This is what Yeats meant when he wrote in his old age that 'Hamlet and Lear are gay'.²⁰¹

MacNeice's "The Casualty" re-writes Yeats's earlier "In Memory of Robert Gregory" by refusing to eulogise the poet's friend in terms of heroic moments, focusing instead on "inklings" and "trivial signs". The poem pictures Graham Shepard "spilling a paint-pot

¹⁹⁷ Ibid 36.

¹⁹⁸ Ibid 37.

¹⁹⁹ Ibid 89.

²⁰⁰ Ibid 87.

²⁰¹ Ibid 120.

on a virgin wall”, “boisterous in a sailing-boat or bubbling/ At a Punch-and-Judy show”
and:

at a students' dance
Pinching a girl's behind – to reappear
A small boy twined in bracken and aprance
Like any goatfoot faun to propagate disorder.²⁰²

MacNeice focuses on the inconsequential and insignificant shared moments. It is the remembrance of the everyday details that also informs “Tam Cari Capitis”, MacNeice’s elegy for Graham Shepard:

Yet it is not at floodlit moments we miss him most,
Not intervolution of wind-raised plumage of oat-field
Nor curragh dancing off a primeval coast
Nor the full strings of passion, it is in killing
Time where he could have livened it, such as the drop-by-drop
Of games like darts or chess, turning the faucet
On full at a threat to the queen or double top.²⁰³

One of the most direct debts to Yeatsian tragic beliefs is discernible in “The Sunlight on the Garden”. In the poem historical inevitability and looming destruction is met with stoicism: “And not expecting pardon/ Hardened in heart anew”. Chapter I of this thesis engaged with MacNeice’s use of garden imagery to depict historical determinism and this chapter has already referred to MacNeice’s use of sunlight as a motif in his work. This poem incorporates another Yeatsian allusion – that of Yeats’s reading of Cleopatra. If MacNeice, like Yeats, saw in the characters from Antony and Cleopatra an ability to keep despair at bay, it is this message that the poem enacts. The direct borrowing from the play (“We are dying Egypt, dying”) has been regularly overlooked. When it has been considered, it has been in dismissive terms. A reviewer in the Times Literary Supplement considered that the overall effect of the poem was

²⁰² MacNeice, Springboard 43-44.

²⁰³ MacNeice, Holes in the Sky 20.

“marred by its melodramatic quotation from Antony and Cleopatra”.²⁰⁴ More recently, John Whitehead commented that “The Sunlight on the Garden” is a “metrically neat poem that somehow manages to assimilate its not-very-relevant quotation from Antony and Cleopatra”.²⁰⁵

Nonetheless, if we accept William Irwin’s proposition that the very nature of direct allusion means that a poet consciously intends for that echo to bear significance for his work and for the reader to notice it, the allusion is deserving of further consideration.²⁰⁶ MacNeice’s quotation is taken from the point in Shakespeare’s play where Antony inscribes his immortality by reminding Cleopatra of his reputation. The line, spoken by Antony, is re-iterated twice in Act Four, Scene Sixteen. The first voicing of the line is preceded by Cleopatra’s recognition that Antony has reclaimed his own will and strength, and in so doing has defeated Octavius Caesar:

So it should be
That none but Antony should conquer Antony.
But woe ‘tis so.²⁰⁷

The repetition of Antony’s line is followed by his speech which makes clear that this is not an act of despair but rather an act of tragic joy. The political realities of Caesar’s

²⁰⁴ Cited in Moore, The Poetry of Louis MacNeice 62.

²⁰⁵ John Whitehead, A Commentary on the Poetry of W.H. Auden, C. Day Lewis, Louis MacNeice and Stephen Spender (New York: Lempeter Mellen, 1992) 82. One exception to this critical tendency has been Michael O’Neill and Gareth Reeves, Auden, MacNeice, Spender: The Thirties Poetry (London: Macmillan, 1992) 69. However, even in this work, the importance of the intertext is overlooked given the poem’s incorporation of the quotation is given only a cursory glance: “Written two years before the start of the Second World War [...] captures the sense of an ending with MacNeice’s most engaged sang-froid, an elegantly tight-lipped bravado: time cannot be prevented, but, as in Anthony’s death-speech in Shakespeare’s play [...] despair can be kept at bay by the almost self-indulgent ability to express it extremely well”. The summation of the allusion as illustrating art’s ability to express something well misses MacNeice’s engagement with Yeats’s model for a positive art and Yeats’s readings of Shakespeare.

²⁰⁶ William Irwin, “What is an Allusion”, Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism 59.3 (Summer 2001): 290.

²⁰⁷ Shakespeare, Antony and Cleopatra, The Norton Shakespeare, Act Four, Scene Sixteen, ll 16-18: 2693.

victory have been appropriated by his imagination into a celebration of his own power and glory or a reclamation of what in political reality he had lost.²⁰⁸ Again in Act Five, Scene Two, at the point of Cleopatra's suicide, Cleopatra does not focus on mortality or loss of power, but the glory of death and the appropriative powers of the act she has decided upon:

Give me my robe. Put on my crown. I have
Immortal longings in me.

Even the clown who enters with the asp puns that "his biting is immortal". The error may be unintentional on the part of the clown, but it reverberates poignantly in the context of Antony's and Cleopatra's last speeches.

Though MacNeice refuses a simplified resolution in his poem (art is powerless to prevent the impending doom), and though "The Sunlight on the Garden" reverses any simplistic resolution of the founding of a poetics on the poet's loss (the poet insists that both the sonnets and the birds descend), we are left not with despair at the illusion of the transfigurative powers of art but an attitude approaching a Yeatsian tragic stance. MacNeice insisted during the Second World War in "Broken Windows or Thinking Aloud" on the necessity for a belief that did not indulge in despair: "though 'the 'message' of a work may appear to be defeatist, negative, nihilist; the work of art itself is always *positive*. A poem in praise of suicide is an act of homage to life".²⁰⁹ It is this

²⁰⁸ Ibid Act Four, Scene Sixteen ll 43-44: 2694 and ll 53-61: 2694:
The miserable change now at my end
Lament nor sorrow at, but please your thoughts
In feeding them with those my former fortunes,
Wherein I lived the greatest prince o' th' world,
The noblest, and do now not basely die,
Not cowardly put off my helmet to
My countryman; A Roman by a Roman
Valiantly vanquished. Now my spirit is going;
I am no more.

²⁰⁹ MacNeice, "Broken Windows or Thinking Aloud" 4. Rpt. Selected Prose 135. (original emphasis)

attempt to achieve a stance beyond despair that “The Sunlight on the Garden” depicts. The image of the sunlight is described as hardening throughout the poem. Yet there is a radically different emphasis on the word “hardened” which depicts that attitude of the poet at the end of the poem, and this is contrasted with the ominous overtones initially surrounding the verb “hardens” in stanza I which depicted inexorable time. The mood in the final stanza is one of defiance and optimism. There is a greater understanding of and resignation to the flux of time, and the poet is even grateful for the experiences granted.

While MacNeice was no doubt aware of the dangers of culpable isolation and escapism (as seen in the previous chapter), this is not what “The Sunlight on the Garden” attempts to achieve. Rather, the poem struggles, while recognising the inevitability and destruction of history, to resist a mere indulging in grief and despair. It is notable that when MacNeice writes in The Poetry of W.B. Yeats of the self-pity he found evoked in Keats, Tennyson and Rossetti, he resorts to the following imagery:

[T]hey looked at the world through glasses coloured with self-pity and their music is sultry, overcharged with emotions accumulated during the summer and waiting for some thunderstorm to freshen them away.²¹⁰

It is precisely this image of thunder and rain that accompanies the change of attitude at the end of “The Sunlight on the Garden”. The poem manages to affirm the value of life and of such transient moments. MacNeice refuses a simplistic overcoming of history by art, but he does allow the tension generated by these antinomies to at least dissipate by the end of the poem. The struggle between freedom and captivity, flight and descent, warmth and coldness, time and history, has subsided by the final stanza of the poem, for here the poet’s attitude has altered so much that pardon or respite from historical determinism is neither expected nor anticipated. MacNeice’s assertion in the poem:

“Our freedom as free lances/ Advances towards its end” is perhaps not as simple as it might otherwise appear.²¹¹ Elsewhere, MacNeice wrote of how difficult any such attempt by writers to escape their circumstances had been:

The best poets of to-day belong to, and write for, cliques. The cliques, lately, have not been purely literary; they identify themselves with economic, political or philosophical movements. This identification is more fruitful when it is voluntary; I am told that Communism in Russia and Fascism in Italy have not, as yet, elicited much good poetry to order. The poet must primarily be a poet and this is still possible in England. But the common assumption that English poets have always been free lances is a gross misrepresentation. Those who admire the ‘freedom’ of the free lance should take a course of Spinoza; the best English poets have been those most successfully determined by their context. The context must be a suitable one. The English context is now more congenial to poets than it has been for a long time.²¹²

In Modern Poetry MacNeice insisted of his contemporaries that “none of these poets are unrealistically anarchist”. They do not “hanker for an unconditioned existence”, he continued. “Freedom for them is not freedom from conditions but the freedom to see one’s own conditions clearly and to work upon that basis towards an end which is seen as necessary”.²¹³ The poet recognises in “The Sunlight on the Garden” that the passage of time cannot be defeated; the poem in its printed version avoids a full-stop only at the end of Stanza III. And yet the poem moves beyond this gloomy recognition. The final line of the third stanza “We are dying, Egypt, dying”, with its reminders of Antony’s speeches, is related to the outlook of the poem’s speaker in Stanza IV:

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.²¹⁴

²¹⁰ MacNeice, The Poetry of W.B. Yeats 59.

²¹¹ MacNeice, The Earth Compels (London: Faber and Faber, 1938) 10.

²¹² MacNeice, “Poetry To-Day” 30-1. Rpt. Selected Literary Criticism 14.

²¹³ MacNeice, Modern Poetry 16.

²¹⁴ MacNeice, The Earth Compels 10.

“Rites of War”, from Solstices, begins by contrasting the Yeatsian view of these characters’ deaths with the more brutal and realistic deaths of Fortinbras’ soldiers in Hamlet. “So Fortinbras; Alas is now the keyword here” MacNeice maintains in the opening line of his poem, thus laying out from the outset that the choice is between the pity and suffering of death and an opposing tragic stance. Yeats’s readings of these tragic deaths is referenced in the lines “Yet graced with swagged and canopied verse, / All tragedies of kings having wings to raise their gloom/ (Even as the lights go down the crowns come up)”. Behind MacNeice’s lines lay Yeats’s interpretations of these heroes in “Lapis Lazuli”. But the facts of death, as witnessed by Fortinbras, are set in opposition to these tragic readings. Fortinbras has “seen far more of gore without this pomp”. His soldiers’ deaths have resulted in no poetic speeches that will “reach the future’s ears”. He has heard his soldiers cry “though not in iambs”. Their death was “merely breath that ceased and flesh that slumped.” Horatio’s words on Hamlet’s death are irrelevant in the face of these brute realities:

On a cutprice night, not a flight of angels near to sing
Their souls to whatever rest were best if souls they had.²¹⁵

For MacNeice here, as elsewhere, Yeats’s choice of particular heroic moments occluded the reality of day-to-day events. The deaths of these soldiers were a reflection of what must happen “ten years, ten centuries, hence”. MacNeice reminds the reader of Fortinbras’ descriptions of these deaths as a waste. Yet MacNeice is not content to leave the poem rest on this view of death:

We also
Trust for the future’s sake you will take your immediate cue,
That curtain, that certain line – and the last chance to boot
For Fortinbras to pass. Go, bid the soldiers shoot.²¹⁶

²¹⁵ MacNeice, Solstices 26.

²¹⁶ *Ibid* 26.

If Fortinbras had initially berated death for “its cries on havoc”, asking, “What feast is toward in thine eternal cell/ That thou so many princes at a shot/ So bloodily hast struck!” the closing lines serve a different purpose.²¹⁷ Hamlet’s dying words had not been cries destined to be lost on the night. His final wish had chosen Fortinbras not only as successor but as the prince’s “dying voice”. The final speech of the play paints Hamlet’s death as equal in suffering and honour to the deaths of Fortinbras’s soldiers, thus denying the initial opposition that MacNeice’s poem established:

Let four captains
Bear Hamlet like a soldier to the stage,
For he was likely, had he been put on,
To have proved most royally; and for his passage,
The soldiers’ music and the rites of war
Speak loudly for him.
Take up the body. Such a sight as this
Becomes the field, but here shows much amiss.
Go bid the soldiers shoot.²¹⁸

MacNeice’s poem, whatever his reservations about Yeats’s exclusion of the realities of death, is in effect an endorsement of art’s attempt to transcend the suffering and defeat implicit in that death. While D.B. Moore considers the poem marred by its artificial referencing of the closing scenes of Hamlet and thinks of it in terms of its humane pity, the poem might more usefully be read in the context of MacNeice’s persistent engagement with Yeatsian aesthetics.²¹⁹

²¹⁷ Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, Act Five, Scene Two, ll 308-310: 1755.

²¹⁸ *Ibid* Act Five, Scene Two, ll 339-347: 1756.

²¹⁹ Moore, *The Poetry of Louis MacNeice* 210.

Chapter 5

Conclusion: Absorptions and transformations

In the final chapter and the conclusion to his study of Yeats, MacNeice considered it fitting to ultimately assess Yeats's accomplishments in terms of his relevance for his successors. The achievement of MacNeice's poetry might also be measured by the concern that succeeding generations have shown to engage with his influence. Nowhere has that attempt been as acute as in the writings of later Northern Irish poets. MacNeice's influence has been a dominant force in the work of these writers, albeit in differing ways. Seamus Heaney, Michael Longley, Derek Mahon, Gerald Dawe, Paul Muldoon and Tom Paulin have all engaged with MacNeice's legacy. MacNeice's presence is manifest in the form of intertextual allusions and echoes, and to a greater extent in prose engagements and recourse to the poet in recorded interviews. The multiple ways in which MacNeice has functioned as an influence for these writers has been the subject of numerous articles.¹ It is perhaps appropriate, therefore, for this thesis to conclude its analysis of MacNeice's engagement with Yeats by focusing on certain ways in which that relationship has reverberated and echoed through the work of some of these later poets. That relationship is given added weight and nuance in the attempts by later writers to engage with and situate themselves in relation to that dialogue, largely through their critical writings.

¹ See Richard York, "Louis MacNeice and Derek Mahon", *Louis MacNeice and his Influence*, ed. Kathleen Devine and Alan J. Peacock (Gerrards Cross: Colin Smythe, 1997) 85-98; Edna Longley, "Derek Mahon: Extreme Religion of Art", *Poetry in Contemporary Irish Literature*, ed. Michael Kenneally, *Studies in Contemporary Irish Literature 2*, *Irish Literary Studies* 43 (Gerrards Cross: Colin Smythe, 1995) 280-292; Terence Brown, "Michael Longley and the Irish Poetic Tradition", *The Poetry of Michael Longley*, ed. Kathleen Devine and Alan J. Peacock (Gerrards Cross: Colin Smythe, 2000) 1-12.

i. Heaney and Yeats's Example

This thesis illustrated the ways in which MacNeice's engagement with Yeats differed considerably from those of his English and his Irish contemporaries. MacNeice's mixture of identities – Irish, Northern Irish and English – afforded him a distance with which he was able to cope with that powerful figure and released him from the anxieties about Yeats's legacy for Irish poetic traditions which daunted Austin Clarke.² MacNeice was also better able than his English contemporaries to overcome the differences between his own work and that of the elder poet. It is the debating of the importance of Yeats undertaken by MacNeice and his generation that provides a touchstone for Heaney's own readings of Yeats.

Yeats, Heaney maintains in interview with Denis O'Driscoll, "wasn't really part of the air I breathed" in the early years of his career; Kavanagh was instead a greater and a more familiar influence.³ It was in the context of the political situation in Northern Ireland in the 1970s, when Heaney suggests he needed Yeats most, that he did his "serious reading" of Yeats's work.⁴ Elsewhere Heaney, like Auden and MacNeice, has insisted that when poets do turn to their precursors, "they turn to an image of their own creation, one which is likely to be a reflection of their own imaginative needs, their own artistic inclinations and procedures".⁵ Heaney outlines in his foreword to Preoccupations (1980) how his essays are bound together "by searches for answers to

² Edna Longley, for one, argues that MacNeice's background that "made it easier" for MacNeice to become "the Irish poet of his generation who most thoroughly, if dialectically, absorbed Yeats into his creative and critical systems". See "Poetic Forms and Social Malformations", The Living Stream: Literature and Revisionism in Ireland (Newcastle upon Tyne: Bloodaxe Books, 1994) 202-3.

³ Dennis O'Driscoll, Stepping Stones: Interviews with Seamus Heaney (London: Faber and Faber, 2008) 191.

⁴ Ibid 192.

⁵ Seamus Heaney, "Envy and Identifications: Dante and the Modern Poet", Irish University Review 15.1 (Spring 1985) 5.

central preoccupying questions”; these questions being “how should a poet properly live and write? What is his relationship to his own voice, his own place, his literary heritage and his contemporary world?” In answering these questions, Heaney judges it essential, as he notes Auden did too, to break “bread with the dead”.⁶ In his essay “Yeats as an Example?”, it is to the poetic figure of Yeats that Heaney turns in an attempt to explain and resolve his own poetic concerns. Peter McDonald notes that “the line between autobiography and critical judgement” in Preoccupations is “not so much ill-defined as put in question”. This may well be the case for many critics, but, McDonald asserts, Heaney is “remarkable for his degree of frankness on the subject”.⁷ By implication, however, it is also Auden’s and MacNeice’s questioning of Yeats with which Heaney contends. Heaney’s deliberate attempt to situate himself within that debate can be deduced from his acknowledgement of the borrowing of the title, with the addition of a question mark, from an essay which had been published by Auden in the Kenyon Review in the spring of 1948.

In that essay Auden had questioned the ways in which Yeats’s poetic problems overlapped with those of his generation, and how they might learn “from the way in which Yeats dealt with his world, about how to deal with our own”.⁸ Heaney begins by engaging with the difficulties in reconciling Yeats’s poetry with his political beliefs that Auden had expressed not only in “Yeats as an Example” but also in “The Public v. the late Mr. W.B. Yeats” and his poem “In Memory of W.B. Yeats”:

All through his life, of course, and ever since his death, Yeats has been continually rebuked for the waywardness of his beliefs, the remoteness of his behaviour and the

⁶ Heaney, Foreword to Preoccupations (1980; London: Faber and Faber, 1985) 13-14.

⁷ Peter McDonald, “Seamus Heaney as a Critic”, Poetry in Contemporary Irish Literature 180-1. The problem, McDonald argues, is that “Heaney does not go on to examine the implications of his critical practice”.

⁸ W.H. Auden, “Yeats as an Example”, Prose: Vol. 2, 1939-1948, ed. Edward Mendelson (London: Faber and Faber, 2002) 384.

eccentricity of his terms of reference. Fairies first of all. Then Renaissance courts in Tuscany and Big Houses in Galway. Then Phases of the Moon and Great Wheels. What, says the reliable citizen, is the sense of all this? Why do we listen to this gullible aesthete rehearsing the delusions of an illiterate peasantry, this snobbish hanger-on in country houses mystifying the feudal facts of the class system, this charlatan patterning history and predicting the future by a mumbo-jumbo of geometry and Ptolomaic astronomy?⁹

Heaney notes how these Yeatsian attitudes had proved problematic for Auden. These were the problems of Yeats's legacy, expressed by Auden and contemporaries, that MacNeice's book set out to explore. The eccentricity of Yeats's behaviour and the "mumbo-jumbo" of A Vision (the echoes of that phrase reverberate from Auden's "The Public v. the late Mr. W.B. Yeats") had all surfaced in MacNeice's work. Heaney's objection to Yeats's mythologizing of "aristocratic ceremony and grace", and his belief that "the redistribution of Coole Park estate among the tenants would be a step back, not a step forward, in the life of the country", had also been questioned in MacNeice's study of the poet. Heaney goes further than MacNeice, however, in his criticism of Yeats's evolution of a "tone for detaching rather than attaching himself, for saying 'I' rather than 'we'". Heaney points out that Yeats's views were those of an "Anglo-Irish Protestant deeply at odds with the mind of Irish Catholic society", a man "stung into superb attitudes" by middle-class reactions to Synge's The Playboy of the Western World and their refusal to fund a gallery for Hugh Lane's collection of pictures.¹⁰ Yeats, he writes, watched the world not through "the eye of a pedestrian" but with "the eye of an equestrian".¹¹

Heaney is in no doubt about the differences between the social-minded views of Auden's generation and Yeats's aristocratic dismissal of the middle or lower classes. MacNeice, while acknowledging the absurdities of Yeats's opinions expressed in On

⁹ Heaney, "Yeats as an Example?", Preoccupations 101.

¹⁰ Ibid 106.

¹¹ Ibid 98.

the Boiler, read that piece as an example of Yeats's less than fully serious tone and considered it indicative of an Irish quality of "pig-headed" energy and exuberance when on platforms or boilers. Heaney, however, in his introduction to Yeats's Selected Poems, takes issue with the poem "Why Should Not Old Men be Mad?" and its endorsement of the reactionary beliefs published alongside it in On the Boiler. Yeats's poem evinced his distaste for modern Ireland:

Why should not old men be mad?
Some have known a likely lad
That had a sound fly-fisher's wrist
Turn to a drunken journalist;
A girl that knew all Dante once
Live to bear children to a dunce;

A Helen of social welfare dream,
Climb on a wagonette to scream.¹²

In that introduction Heaney considers that Yeats's "own self-absolution – 'Why should not old men be mad?' – does not necessarily extenuate the rant and licence" of the poem.¹³ Yet like MacNeice, Heaney finally decides that his engagement with Yeats must go beyond the problems posed by the Anglo-Irish poet's political beliefs. Like MacNeice also, Heaney decides that the temptation to make excuses for Yeats is of no use either. Yeats, Heaney points out, "would not have thanked us for explaining him apologetically. He would want us to affirm him with all the elaborate obstinacy with which he affirmed himself".¹⁴

Yeats's eccentricities might have been criticised by contemporaries like George Moore, but Heaney insists in "Yeats as an Example?", "what Moore presents us with is a picture of Yeats exercising that intransigence which I praised earlier, that

¹² W.B. Yeats, "On the Boiler", Later Essays, The Collected Works of W.B. Yeats 5, ed. William H. O'Donnell (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1994) 221.

¹³ Heaney, introduction, W.B. Yeats: Poems selected by Heaney (London: Faber and Faber, 2004) xxiii.

¹⁴ Heaney, "Yeats as an Example?" 102.

protectiveness of his imaginative springs, so that the gift would survive". Yeats "donned the mantle" of an aristocrat so that "he might express a vision of communal and personal life that was ample, generous, harmonious, fulfilled and enhancing". Yeats's reactionary politics as evinced in his celebration of Coole Park are thus, Heaney argues, "innocent in the original sense of the work, not nocent, not hurtful" and resulted in a poetry "whose music is a guarantee of its humane magnificence".¹⁵ For Heaney, then, as for MacNeice before him, the discrepancies between the poets' political views are "not of cardinal importance".¹⁶ Interestingly, in Heaney's admiration of Yeats's tragic stance, it is the word "integrity" that surfaces in his writing. The word is important, for it is to the same word that MacNeice resorted in defending Yeats's tragic stances and poetic beliefs.¹⁷ Heaney admires "the way that Yeats took on the world on his own terms, defined the areas where he would negotiate and where he would not; the way he never accepted the terms of another's argument but propounded his own". Heaney assumes that "this apparent arrogance, is exemplary in an artist, and that it is proper and even necessary for him to insist on his own language, his own vision, his own terms of reference".¹⁸

It was Yeats's defence of the imagination and his authoritative validation of the poetic act which supplied a model for MacNeice; and this is seized on and adapted by Heaney. If Heaney's engagement with Yeats is conscious of MacNeice's writings, then it is MacNeice's readings of Yeats's legacy that largely inform Heaney's critical writings. Whether or not Heaney was consciously aware of the defence of Yeats which is set out in those works, his prose writings provide a significant point of contact

¹⁵ Ibid 108.

¹⁶ Louis MacNeice, The Poetry of W.B. Yeats 15. (See Chapter I page 25)

¹⁷ Ibid 230.

¹⁸ Ibid 101.

between MacNeice's readings and Heaney's own views on Yeats's relevance. In "Yeats as an Example?", Heaney asks of Yeats's late tragic and heroic stances: "Is this, then, exemplary? Do we altogether assent to the samurai stare and certainty of 'Cast a cold eye/ On life, on death'?" He decides that he finds "much to admire in the intransigence of the stance".¹⁹ It is not, however, Yeats's "vaunting of the special claims of art and the artist", Heaney suggests, that "is finally to be saluted". Instead it is "the humility of his artistic mastery before the mystery of life and death".²⁰ For Heaney, "the finally exemplary moments" in Yeats's poetry "are those when this powerful artistic control is vulnerable to the pain or pathos of life itself".²¹

Heaney's engagement with Yeats has increasingly centred on the elder poet's tragic aesthetics. His preoccupation is evinced in "Yeats as an Example", "Joy or Night: Last Things in the Poetry of W.B. Yeats and Philip Larkin", and his introduction to Yeats's Selected Poems. In "Joy or Night", his 1990 Oxford lecture, Heaney reads the late poem "The Man and the Echo" as one example of how Yeatsian tragic aesthetics might provide a model for his own art. Implicitly, Heaney's engagement with that poem situates his readings within the terms of the 1930s debate between Auden and MacNeice. The publication of the poem and its questioning of the role of Yeats's poetry in the public sphere, as Chapter II has argued, prompted Auden's qualifications about poetry's effectiveness and his recantations of a committed poetry. In "The Man and the Echo", Heaney considers, the poet has been "confronted with the limitations of human existence itself". The poem "concedes that pain necessarily accompanies the cycles of

¹⁹ Ibid 100.

²⁰ Ibid 110-1.

²¹ Ibid 109.

life”.²² Heaney, however, here considers that the poem, while recognising defeat and gloom, achieves, like MacNeice’s work, something altogether more positive. It is “the resilience of the man and the vigor of the metre in face of the echo’s intransigence” that Heaney points out in his lecture.²³ The poem not only demonstrates “that which the spirit must endure”, it shows “*how* it must endure, by pitting human resource against the recalcitrant and the inhuman, by pitting the positive effect of mind against the desolations of natural and historical violence, by making ‘rejoice’ answer back to the voice from the rock, whatever it says”.²⁴ “Rejoice” was precisely the word MacNeice too had chosen to focus on in his engagement with these Yeatsian aesthetics. “The Man and the Echo”, in Heaney’s view, manages to overcome defeatism and despair. The poem ultimately pronounces “a final *Yes*.” And that *Yes* “has weight and significance because it overpowers and contains a No”. Yeats’s poetry “shows how the wilful and unabashed activity of poetry itself is a manifestation of ‘joy’”. Poetry, according to Yeats’s example, “fortifies the spirit against assaults” from external realities.²⁵

In finding in Yeats’s work a defence of art and the imagination, Heaney, like MacNeice, shows an ability to overcome some of the problems inherent in Yeats’s tragic aesthetics. Drawing firmly on Yeats’s relevance for the circumstances in which he finds himself writing, Heaney insists that although it might be right to question some of Yeats’s stances, it is nonetheless “imperative to recognize the immense contribution his work makes to our general intellectual and imaginative resource”.²⁶ “*Yeats managed*

²² Heaney, “Joy or Night: Last Things in the Poetry of W.B. Yeats and Philip Larkin”, The Redress of Poetry: Oxford Lectures (1995; London: Faber and Faber, 1996) 160.

²³ Ibid 162.

²⁴ Ibid 163. (original emphasis)

²⁵ Heaney, introduction, W.B. Yeats: Selected Poems 163.

²⁶ Ibid xxiv.

to create a heroic role for the poet in the modern world".²⁷ Heaney's work, like MacNeice's, displays none of Yeats's spiritual transcendence of conditions, or his inhumane stances. Nonetheless this does not prevent either poet appreciating the "zest" of Yeats's later poetry. Heaney finds in Yeats, as MacNeice did, an endorsement of the human will and spirit in spite perhaps of its failings, and in spite of its failure to ever fully escape its circumstances.

Heaney's prose readings of Yeats have turned to Yeats's definitions of tragic joy and his illustration of these beliefs by recourse to Shakespeare. In the introduction to a Folens's school edition of Macbeth. Heaney outlines the predominant concerns of character, theme and imagery in Shakespeare's play, which is unsurprising given that this edition is intended to assist students with examination questions on these issues. Heaney also cannot resist declaring in phrases which echo Yeats:

Macbeth is no snivelling Everyman, cowering in the eye of a just God. He has indeed, an obsessive sense of his own sin, but the idea of seeking forgiveness or attempting expiation of his guilt does not enter fundamentally into his mind. He is a self-created hero, a man whose sense of his own meaning is wielded in the face of time and eternity. His remorse comes in eddies but the proper current of his life is a consciously willed enactment of his destiny. The promptings of the witches and of Lady Macbeth have influenced the curve of his destiny but he would never think of their part in his crime as an excuse for it. That he affirms his own will and self even in face of *'th' equivocation of the fiend'* makes him a tragic hero rather than a preacher's example.²⁸

The intrusion of Yeats in this piece is manifest in Heaney's concern with the will and courage of the "self-created hero" in the face of his defeat by actual historical conditions; and it is also evident in the claims that Macbeth is not to be judged according to moral concerns. Heaney's most significant engagement with these Yeatsian aesthetics has been his article "Joy or Night". Here, Heaney, deliberately and unambiguously, sets the "the affirmative impulse" of Yeats's poetry against Larkin's "defeatist" aesthetics. He did so knowing that his readings "would raise eyebrows as

²⁷ Ibid xii. (emphasis added)

²⁸ Heaney, introduction, Macbeth by William Shakespeare (Dublin: Folens, 1977) 17-18.

well as questions”.²⁹ As an illustration of Yeats’s poetic example in that piece, Heaney resorts, as MacNeice did, to Yeats’s readings of Cleopatra:³⁰

For Yeats, there was something both enviable and exemplary about the enlargement of vision and the consequent histrionic equanimity which Shakespeare’s heroes and heroines attain at the moment of their death [...] Larkin might declare:

Courage is no good
It means not scaring others. Being brave
Lets no one off the grave.
Death is no different whined at than withstood.
Yeats absolutely disagreed. ‘No actress’, he maintained, ‘has ever sobbed when she played Cleopatra, even the shallow brain of a producer has never thought of such a thing’. Which amounts to saying that death withstood is indeed very different from death whined at; and that it is up to poets and actresses to continue to withstand.³¹

Heaney’s engagement with the Yeatsian heroic model of poetry again provides a significant point of contact between the usefulness of Yeats as a poetic influence for MacNeice and for Heaney.

Heaney has repeatedly voiced his concerns over the function of art when faced with turbulent and violent realities. Like MacNeice and Yeats, he has resisted the subjection of art to political demands, noting in a review of Osip Mandelstam that “we live here in critical times ourselves, when the idea of poetry as an art is in danger of being overshadowed by a quest for poetry as a diagram of political attitudes”.³² Heaney’s poetry documents the difficulties of finding “images and symbols adequate to our predicament”.³³ His poetry struggles with the representation of that violence: “I felt it imperative to discover a field of force in which, without abandoning fidelity to the processes and experience of poetry, as I have outlined them, it would be possible to encompass the perspectives of a humane reason and at the same time to grant the

²⁹ O’Driscoll, *Stepping Stones* 434.

³⁰ Heaney, “Joy or Night” 152-3.

³¹ *Ibid* 157.

³² Heaney, “Faith, Hope and Poetry”, *Preoccupations* 219.

³³ Heaney, “Feelings into Words”, *Preoccupations* 56.

religious intensity of the violence in its deplorable authenticity and complexity”.³⁴ Poems like “Punishment” in North (1975) problematise the poet’s role in such depictions. Heaney’s need to illustrate the “intensity” of tribal violence and killings results in self-castigation in that poem as a result of his graphic images of these individuals. The poem questions his effectiveness as writer and individual in the face of such violence in his own community:

I almost love you
but would have cast, I know
the stones of silence.
I am the artful voyeur
of your brain’s exposed
and darkened combs,
your muscles’ webbing
and all your numbered bones.³⁵

The critical reception of North was polarised on the problems of Heaney’s use of the mythic past to represent the Troubles of the 1970s.³⁶ Later collections like Station Island (1984) depict more vigorously Heaney’s own self-questioning of the dangers of his poetry’s tendency to “whitewash ugliness”. In “The Strand at Lough Beg”, published in Field Work (1979), Heaney had written of the death of his cousin, Colum McCartney, in the following terms:

I turn because the sweeping of your feet
Has stopped behind me, to find you on your knees
With blood and roadside muck in your hair and eyes,
Then kneel in front of you in brimming grass
And gather up cold handfuls of the dew
To wash you, cousin. I dab you clean with moss
Fine as the drizzle out of a low cloud.

³⁴ Ibid 56-7.

³⁵ Heaney, North (London: Faber and Faber, 1975) 38.

³⁶ See for example Ciaran Carson, “Escaped from the Massacre?”, rev. of North, The Honest Ulsterman no. 50 (Winter, 1975) 184-5: “the real difference between our society and that of Jutland in some vague past are glossed over for the sake of the parallels of ritual.” “It is as if there were and never will be any political consequences of such acts; they have been removed to the realm of sex, death and inevitability”.

I lift you under the arms and lay you flat.
With rushes that shoot green again, I plait
Green scapulars to wear over your shroud.³⁷

In Station Island, however, his cousin, is one of numerous ghosts that appear to the poet, and rebukes in no uncertain terms Heaney's tentative depiction of his death:

You saw that, and you wrote that – not the fact.
You confused evasion and artistic tact.
The Protestant who shot me through the head
I accuse directly, but indirectly, you
who now atone perhaps upon this bed
for the way you whitewashed ugliness and drew
the lovely blinds of the *Purgatorio*
and saccharined my death with morning dew'.³⁸

In Section I of "Mycenae Lookout", in The Spirit Level (1996), the responsibilities of the role of the poet still haunt Heaney. This time the Night Watchman from Aeschylus' Agamemnon represents the troubled burden of the poet:

I'd dream of blood in bright webs in a ford,
Of bodies raining down like tattered meat
On top of me asleep – and me the lookout
The queen's command has posted and forgotten,
The blind spot her farsightedness relied on.
And then the ox would lurch against the gong
And deaden it and I would feel my tongue
Like the dropped gangplank of a cattle truck
Trampled and rattled, running piss and muck.³⁹

Characteristically in Heaney's work, the images of violence and bloodshed from another mythicised era resound in Heaney's own contexts. This poem holds no easy resolutions of the poet's responsibilities either. If the Watchman of the first section is reprehensible in his silence regarding the events he knows to be taking place, that criticism of his abnegation of duty is qualified in the following section. Here the poet's focus switches to Cassandra whose premonitions and warnings were ignored.

³⁷ Heaney, Field Work (London: Faber and Faber, 1979) 18.

³⁸ Heaney, Station Island (London: Faber and Faber, 1984) 83.

³⁹ Heaney, The Spirit Level (London: Faber and Faber, 1996) 29.

Heaney has also expressed his doubts about “sanctimonious and high rhetoric”.⁴⁰ In the context of violent political actualities in “Ulster and Isreal and Bosnia and Rwanda and a host of other wounded spots on the face of the earth”, “we are rightly suspicious”, he maintains, “of that which gives too much consolation”. Having voiced such worries, however, Heaney still expresses his belief in the validity of the poetic act:

Here is the great paradox of poetry and of the imaginative arts in general. Faced with the brutality of the historical onslaught, they are practically useless. Yet they verify our singularity, they strike and stake out the ore of self which lies at the base of every individuated life. In one sense the efficacy of poetry is nil – no lyric has ever stopped a tank. In another sense, it is unlimited. It is like the writing in the sand and in the face of which accusers and accused are left speechless and renewed.⁴¹

Heaney has never lost sight of the danger that “there can be a complacency and an insulation from reality in some song and art”, that art can be seen as a kind of “consoling and mystifying rhetoric at safe distance”.⁴² Indeed, many of Heaney’s poems point that accusation at the poet himself. Yet in The Government of the Tongue, Heaney reads Eastern European poetry as a “reminder that humanity is served by the purely poetic fidelity of the poet to all words in their pristine being”.⁴³ For Heaney, these poets are attractive because there is something familiar in this insistence on the value of the poetic artifice in their “unsettled” worlds to a poet writing in the circumstances of Northern Ireland.⁴⁴

The ways in which Heaney reads Yeats’s work in terms of his own poetic concerns are suggested by his changing focus on the role of poetry. While one answer

⁴⁰ Heaney, interview by Nick Gammage, Thumbscrew no. 19 (Autumn 2001): 5.

⁴¹ Heaney, The Government of the Tongue: The 1986 T.S. Eliot Memorial Lectures and Other Critical Writings (1988; London: Faber and Faber, 1989) 107.

⁴² *Ibid* xii-xiii.

⁴³ *Ibid* xx.

⁴⁴ *Ibid* xx.

to the question of poetry's effectiveness might be the commitment of poetry to some kind of action, Heaney has been increasingly reluctant to see the value of the poetic artifice as allied to this.⁴⁵ The transfigurative power of poetry "does not intervene in the actual", Heaney insists in The Government of the Tongue, but "by offering consciousness a chance to recognize its predicaments, foreknow its capacities and rehearse its comebacks in all kinds of venturesome ways, it does constitute a beneficent event, for poet and audience alike".⁴⁶ The "redressing effect of poetry", Heaney has insisted, "comes from its being a glimpsed alternative, a revelation of potential that is denied or constantly threatened by circumstances".⁴⁷ The redressal of poetry does not require the poet to be "aiming deliberately at social or political change".⁴⁸ Heaney suggests that the appeal for poetry to fulfil its role as an "agent for proclaiming and correcting injustices", is "in danger of slighting another imperative, namely, to redress poetry *as* poetry, to set it up as its own category, an eminence established and a pressure exercised by distinctly linguistic means".⁴⁹ Heaney's views of "literature's capacity for 'redress' in such universal, and unapologetically transcendental terms" has met with some amount of criticism.⁵⁰ Peter McDonald argues that:

The language of poetry, as Heaney sees it, can achieve something which sets it apart from the language of quotidian expression and exchange; he is more reticent, however, about the fact that such language is made of the same stuff as the words of poetry, that its dynamics influence poetic language, and that poetry is constantly open to infection

⁴⁵ Heaney, The Government of the Tongue xviii. See also page 101. "The fact is that poetry is its own reality and no matter how much a poet may concede to the corrective pressures of social, moral, political and historical reality, the ultimate fidelity must be to the demands and premise of the artistic event".

⁴⁶ Ibid 2.

⁴⁷ Heaney, The Redress of Poetry 4.

⁴⁸ Heaney, "Frontiers of Writing", Redress of Poetry 192:

⁴⁹ Heaney, The Redress of Poetry 5-6.

⁵⁰ McDonald, Serious Poetry: Form and Authority from Yeats to Hill (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2002) 90.

from the linguistic element in which it has meaning. The flip-side of transcendence, as it were, is present perpetually in the language in which that transcendence is attempted (and in which it may seem to be achieved).⁵¹

MacNeice was more cautious about making claims for art's transcendence, as we have seen in Chapter III. Nonetheless, in the face of the defeat and despair of actual human conditions, Yeats provided a model of how art could offer something more than mere passive acknowledgement of such realities. Heaney adapts and takes that Yeatsian model a step further than MacNeice in his insistence of poetry's operation within a separate artistic sphere and in his confident assertions of the nature of poetic authority. The "idea of poetry as an answer, and the idea of an answering poetry as a responsible poetry, and the idea of poetry's answer, its responsibility, being given in its own language rather than in the language of the world that provokes it," has, Heaney asserts, "been one of my constant themes".⁵² Nonetheless Yeats's ultimately positive role for poetry served MacNeice in good stead at a time when poetry's effectiveness was severely doubted. In Heaney's critical writings, Yeats also provides a viable model for art in the social and political circumstances of Northern Ireland. It is in that context that Heaney has turned to Yeatsian poems like "The Tower", "Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen" and "Meditations in Time of Civil War".⁵³ While the search for a "role model", Heaney suggests, might not accurately describe his engagement with Yeats, as his own work after North began to change its focus on the role of poetry, he sensed "a corroboration" between the altered vision of his poetry and that of Yeats.⁵⁴

⁵¹ Ibid 90-1.

⁵² Heaney, "Frontiers of Writing" 191.

⁵³ O'Driscoll, Stepping Stones 192.

⁵⁴ Ibid 194.

ii. Defending Poetry: Longley and Mahon

Derek Mahon and Michael Longley's considerable engagements with MacNeice's legacy have been evident in a number of modes: in the two editions of MacNeice's poems selected by Longley, as well as in numerous essays on MacNeice written by Longley and Mahon, and Mahon's attempts to remedy earlier exclusions of MacNeice from anthologies of Irish poetry. It has also been manifest in the intertextual echoes of MacNeice that surface regularly in their creative work. There are shared reasons why MacNeice has functioned for these poets as poetic precursor, if often in differing ways. As an early attempt to differentiate themselves from poets from the South of Ireland, Heather Clark argues that these poets have consciously recuperated different poetic fathers. "The work of Kavanagh, Hughes, Frost, Hill, Larkin, and Lowell, though deeply influential, could not provide a common point of origin. But John Hewitt and Louis MacNeice could".⁵⁵ Longley and Mahon have found in MacNeice some kind of mirror for their own political and cultural complexities. Like MacNeice, they have felt at early points in their careers the pressures that the political situation brought to bear on their roles as artists. Their concern has been less to do with the debating of whether poetry should take account of that context, but the way art might express the political realities of Northern Ireland. "Bad poems about the troubles are unforgiveable", Longley insists, "because they do damage with their clumsiness".⁵⁶ These poets have emphasised their reluctance "to hitch a ride on yesterday's headlines", to write "the poetry of the latest atrocity", as Longley puts it, and yet Longley writes in Watching the

⁵⁵ Heather Clark, The Ulster Renaissance: Poetry in Belfast 1962-1972 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006) 104.

⁵⁶ Longley, "The Longley Tapes", Honest Ulsterman no. 78 (Summer 1985): 30. See also Reading the Future: Irish Writers in Conversation with Mike Murphy, ed. Cliona ni Anluain (Dublin: Lilliput Press, 2000) 128.

River Flow (1999) that “what we inadequately call ‘the Troubles’ created a further kind of mutual awareness among poets from the North”.⁵⁷ Longley writes in his “Letter to Derek Mahon” of “two poetic conservatives/ In the city of guns and long knives” receiving “the stereophonic nightmare/ Of the Shankill and the Falls”, and in his dedicatory verse to Mahon spoke to one who would understand how “We are trying to make ourselves heard”.⁵⁸

In a similar manner, Auden’s and his contemporaries’ persistent addresses and private references to each other, which met with a good deal of criticism, were a measure of their shared poetical and political questions in the 1930s. In the winter of 1970, Mahon and Longley sent a number of verse letters to each other in an effort to stem Longley’s writing block. In one of these unpublished letters, it is a comparison between their letters and the writings of MacNeice’s and Auden’s generation that Mahon invokes:

wryly conscious too, perhaps,
of certain precedents in kin
(*Letters from Iceland* comes to mind).
Twelve lines already, and what haste
to invoke the practice of the past! –
though Auden and MacNeice themselves
had Pope and Dryden on their shelves.⁵⁹

These poets have been subjected to the critical challenge that their work has not engaged significantly with the political turmoil of the decades in which they have been writing (most notably perhaps in the criticism of Stan Smith).⁶⁰ Longley has mentioned

⁵⁷ Longley, “A Boat on the River 1960-1969”, Watching the River Flow: A Century in Irish Poetry, ed. Noel Duffy and Theo Dorgan (Dublin: Poetry Ireland/ Eigse Eireann, 1999) 139-140.

⁵⁸ Longley, Collected Poems (London: Cape Poetry, 2006) 58. As Peter McDonald notes Longley’s “dedicatory verses speak from a dilemma, but it is a dilemma confidently shared”. “Michael Longley’s Homes”, Mistaken Identities: Poetry and Northern Ireland (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997) 110.

⁵⁹ Qtd. Clark, The Ulster Renaissance 183-4.

⁶⁰ See Stan Smith, “At One Remove”, The Literary Review no. 22 (8th-21st August 1980): 11-12. “It performs its civic duties equitably, by reflecting, in an abstracted kind of way, on violence, which is,

in interview the pressurised cry of “Where are the War Poets?” that went up as the Troubles in Northern Ireland erupted, and has explicitly related that cry to the same one facing MacNeice’s generation at the onset of the Second World War.⁶¹ Both Longley and Mahon have pointed towards MacNeice’s lack of war poetry between 1939 and 1945.⁶² Longley points out in his introduction to the Selected Poems of MacNeice (1988) that although “up to a point” MacNeice shared “the political and aesthetic concerns” of the English thirties’ poets, his poetry “was never put at the service of political opinions or revolutionary scenarios as was that of Stephen Spender and Cecil Day Lewis”.⁶³ It was, as we have seen in Chapter II, this very aspect of MacNeice’s poetry which allowed him to accept Yeats as a model in The Poetry of W.B. Yeats, and to excuse Yeats from many of the accusations of the younger poets. In his introduction, Longley attributes MacNeice’s reluctance to espouse political stances in his poetry – 1930s communist doctrines or the poetry of war – to the political tensions he had witnessed in Ireland. MacNeice’s “Irish conditioning and perspectives” had “inoculated” him against “political certainties and false optimism”.⁶⁴

MacNeice’s cultural ambiguities – his Irish, Anglo-Irish, Northern Irish and English identities – were bound to strike a chord with these poets and their experience

after all, its Province; but its hands are indubitably clean. [...] It speaks, at times, with the tone of a shell-shocked Georgianism that could easily be mistaken for indifference, before the ugly realities of life, and death, in Ulster.”

⁶¹ Longley, Poets Talking: The ‘Poet of the Month’ Interviews from BBC Radio 3, by Clive Wilmer (Manchester, Carcanet, 1994) 116. See also Longley, introduction, Causeway: The Arts in Ulster (Belfast: Arts Council of Northern Ireland and Dublin in association with Gill and Macmillan, 1971) 8.

⁶² See Longley, “A Misrepresented Poet”, The Dublin Magazine 6.1 (Spring 1967): 71. See also Mahon, “MacNeice, the War and the BBC”, Journalism: Selected Prose 1970-1995, ed. Terence Brown (Oldcastle: Gallery Books, 1996) 38.

⁶³ Longley, introduction, Louis MacNeice: Selected Poems (London: Faber and Faber, 1988) xiii, xvii.

⁶⁴ *Ibid* xvii.

of “a complex and confusing culture”.⁶⁵ Heaney has commented that while MacNeice grew up in pre-partition Ireland, he “did not allow the border to enter his subsequent imaginings: his sense of cultural diversity and historical consequence within the country never congealed into a red and green map. In MacNeice’s mind, the colours ran – or bled – into each other”.⁶⁶ For Longley and Mahon, the question of MacNeice’s Irishness has been even more profound. Playing perhaps on MacNeice’s depictions of the Yeatsian West of Ireland to highlight his propensity for, yet ultimate isolation from, such places, Longley’s own sense of alienation from the Gaelic Irish culture on a trip to the Aran Islands with Mahon was documented in “Letter to Derek Mahon”:

We were tongue-tied
 Companions of the island’s dead
 In the graveyard among the dunes,
 Eavesdroppers on conversations
 With a Jesus who spoke Irish –
 We were strangers in that parish,
 Black tea with bacon and cabbage
 For our sacraments and pottage,
 Till, islanders ourselves, we bent
 Our knees and cut the watery sod
 From the lazy-bed where slept a God
 We couldn’t count among our friends.⁶⁷

There is a clear sense in which Mahon’s unease within canons of Irish literature as a Northern Irish writer has informed his readings of MacNeice’s place within Irish poetic traditions. Increasingly, Mahon has written, MacNeice’s “view of Official Ireland (the Ireland of patriotic graft and pious baloney) was one of positive distaste”.

⁶⁵ Michael Longley, “Strife and the Ulster Poet”, *Hibernia* 33.21 (7 Nov. 1969): 11. See Edna Longley, “Poetry and Politics in Northern Ireland”, *Poetry in the Wars* (Newcastle Upon Tyne: Bloodaxe Books, 1986) 205. See also York, “Louis MacNeice and Derek Mahon” 86. “Mahon’s relationship to Northern Ireland (in particular) is therefore more crucial to his sensibility than MacNeice’s was and it is more complex – but it is not dissimilar in kind: it mingles a sense of belonging, or quasi-belonging, of respect and concern, with a sense of restriction, of illiberalism and discomfort, of the need to be elsewhere”.

⁶⁶ Heaney, “Frontiers of Writing” 198-9. See also page 200. “He can be regarded as an Irish Protestant writer with Anglocentric attitudes who managed to be faithful to his Ulster inheritance, his Irish affections and his English predilections. As such, he offers a way in and a way out not only for the northern Unionist imagination in relation to some sort of integral Ireland but also for the southern Irish imagination in relation to the partitioned north”.

⁶⁷ Longley, *Collected Poems* 59.

This was “all right coming from Austin Clarke” but “bad manners from an Ulster Protestant”.⁶⁸ “‘Exile’ in the histrionic and approximate sense in which the word is used in Ireland”, in Mahon’s view, was not an option available to MacNeice “whose background was a mixture of Anglo-Irish and Ulster Protestant (C of I)”. It was an option available only to writers like Joyce and O’Casey “who ‘belonged’ to the people from whom they wished to escape.” “Whatever his sympathies”, Mahon continued, MacNeice “didn’t, by class or religious background, ‘belong to the people’.”⁶⁹ Nor has Mahon found any kind of stability in defining MacNeice in terms of his Ulster roots. At times Mahon has suggested that Longley has not recognised this sufficiently, commenting that there is a tendency in Longley’s prose work “to over-emphasise the Ulster aspect” of MacNeice’s personality. MacNeice, Mahon insists in “Incorrigibly Plural”, thought of himself as “in effect, a Connaughtman born into exile” who had no Ulster connections until his father re-married. “Asked if he were an Irish poet or an English one”, MacNeice would have replied that he was simply “a poet” and perhaps, Mahon suggests, “we should let it go at that”.⁷⁰

For Longley, MacNeice’s crossing of Irish, English and Anglo-Irish canons has prevented him from being properly understood. The response of English critics focused on “those bits of his work which superficially resemble Auden”, Longley argues. Though closely associated with Auden, Spender and Day Lewis, MacNeice “was never really a card-carrying thirties poet”. The “Celtic ‘Mac’”, he writes, detaches “with

⁶⁸ Mahon, “MacNeice in Ireland and England”, *Journalism* 24-5.

⁶⁹ Ibid 25. See also page 21. “The English school system has a way of ironing out regional, and indeed national differences, and turning its products into Englishmen; and this is what happened to MacNeice. [...] His contemporaries were not Frank O’Connor and Patrick Kavanagh, but Auden and Cyril Connolly. He had no place, unfortunately, in the intellectual history of modern Ireland; his place was in Oxford, Hampstead or Broadcasting House”. See Mahon, Interview by Terence Brown, *Poetry Ireland Review* no. 14 (Autumn 1985): 18-19. When directed by Brown to the fact that “on one occasion you wrote about MacNeice as not really being part of the intellectual history of modern Ireland at all”, Mahon replies “I think that’s true; he’s not”. Mahon does admit that his generation have made him a part of it.

⁷⁰ Mahon, “Incorrigibly Plural”, *Journalism* 49.

proper ease from the front end” of Roy Campbell’s famous term “MacSpaunday”. Neither, however, did MacNeice “with any neatness slot into the pantheon of Anglo-Irish literature”.⁷¹ It was a new generation of poets from Northern Ireland, Longley suggested, that caught “frequencies in his work which were inaudible in Dublin or London”.⁷²

MacNeice’s mediation in a line of poetry between these Northern Irish writers and Yeats is not the only way in which MacNeice’s influence has filtered through to these poets. The multiple ways in which MacNeice’s significance manifests itself in the writings of these poets does not diminish the fact that MacNeice’s readings and defences of Yeats have been absorbed in specific ways. Leaving aside his relationship with MacNeice, it was also inevitable that Yeats would be a significant precursor for these poets. MacNeice, however, provided an example of how Yeats might be a poetic influence that did not choke their poetic authority. Unlike MacNeice’s counterparts in the south of Ireland – Austin Clarke, Thomas Kinsella and Patrick Kavanagh – these younger Northern poets have echoed MacNeice’s insistence, that they have never been oppressed by Yeats (the words are Derek Mahon’s).⁷³ “In a way what happened to Austin Clarke”, Longley insists, “is the great example of how not to respond to a great forebearer”. Longley surmises that there was enough of a gap between Yeats and his own generation to prevent such anxieties. In fact, he writes of Yeats: “there’s never really been a poet quite like him when you think about it. I can think of nobody of that range and breadth of humanity. So to have Yeats as an Irish poet in this century is

⁷¹ Longley, “The Neolithic Night: A Note on the Irishness of Louis MacNeice”, *Two Decades of Irish Writing: A critical Survey*, ed. Douglas Dunn (Cheadle: Carcanet Press, 1975) 99.

⁷² Longley, introduction, *Louis MacNeice: Selected Poems* xxii-xxiii.

⁷³ Mahon, Interview by Terence Brown 17.

sustaining and nourishing rather than menacing or tongue-tying in any way”.⁷⁴ Where Heaney, however, tends to resort to Yeats as a poetic model, albeit significantly reading that precursor according to MacNeice’s example, both Mahon and Longley engage more fully with the figure of MacNeice; they do so, however, in different ways. While Mahon draws on both Yeats and MacNeice, he does so in large part without engaging with MacNeice’s writings on Yeats. Longley, on the other hand, of the three poets, espouses the clearest line of contemporary poetry stemming from Yeats and mediated through MacNeice.

More so than Heaney or Longley, Mahon has expressed his uncertainties about the value of poetry. “I went through a period when I wondered what it was all supposed to be about anyway. It’s a doubt that remains with me”, Mahon asserts in an interview with Willie Kelly. He does, however, maintain that: “I don’t now question the value of what I’m doing to the extent that I did before”.⁷⁵ These doubts have been espoused in many of his poems. In “Rage for Order”, the poet simply indulges “his/ Wretched rage for order”. His is “a dying art”, an “eddy of semantic scruple/ In an unstructurable sea”.⁷⁶ In “Afterlives” the middle-class intellectuals fare no better:

What middle-class shits we are
To imagine for one second
That our privileged ideals
Are divine wisdom, and the dim
Forms that kneel at noon
In the city not ourselves.⁷⁷

⁷⁴ Longley, “Walking Forwards into the Past”, An Interview with Michael Longley by Fran Brearton, *Irish Studies Review* no. 18 (Spring 1997) 38.

⁷⁵ Mahon, Interview by Willie Kelly, *The Cork Review* 2.3 (June 1981): 10-12.

⁷⁶ Mahon, *Collected Poems* 47.

⁷⁷ *Ibid* 58.

In "The Mao Tao" the poetic act has been reduced to a speaker who has "been working for years/ on a four-line poem/ about the life of a leaf". This winter he thinks "it might come out right".⁷⁸ If Yeats had attempted in "Sailing to Byzantium" to privilege the permanence of the world of art, that idea is unequivocally derided in Mahon's "Heraclitus on Rivers", a poem which responds to MacNeice's "Memoranda to Horace":

You will tell me that you have executed
A monument more lasting than bronze;
But even bronze is perishable.
Your best poem, you know the one I mean,
The very language in which the poem
Was written, and the idea of language,
All these things will pass away in time.⁷⁹

In "Ovid in Tomis" we are told that it is

Better to contemplate
The blank page
And leave it blank

Than modify
Its substance by
So much as a pen-stroke.⁸⁰

These doubts and hesitations about the effects of poetry have led Mahon to resist Yeats's poetic example. While Mahon has written that Yeats might be "the greatest Irish poet", he has qualified that praise by adding that he is "grand and magnificent and at a distance a splendid monument".⁸¹ The conditions in which Mahon has been writing have invoked a certain resistance to "the Yeatsian charm and the Yeatsian authority"; MacNeice's poetic example was instead "a familiar voice

⁷⁸ Ibid 68.

⁷⁹ Ibid 114.

⁸⁰ Ibid 162.

⁸¹ Mahon, Interview by Terence Brown 18.

whispering” in Mahon’s ear.⁸² Mahon has commented in interview that he has “always had a thing about MacNeice”. Though he met the older poet only twice and felt that MacNeice had more interest in rugby than the younger poet from Northern Ireland, Mahon nonetheless believed that “some connection had been made”.⁸³ He has described “In Carrowdore Churchyard” as his first real poem.⁸⁴ In this tribute to MacNeice, he focuses on MacNeice’s setting of moments of light and vision against the darkness and bleakness of the modern world. The poem takes as its starting point Auden’s “In Memory of W.B. Yeats”, the poem in which Auden’s doubts about the influence of Yeats surfaced in the line “You were silly like us”. The “like us” certainly mitigated Auden’s criticism of Yeats’s beliefs, for in these years too, Auden recanted his own beliefs on the political effect of poetry. However, Auden’s hesitations regarding the example of Yeats were not entirely retracted. Though Auden too exhorted Yeats to “persuade us to rejoice”, he resorted to images of Yeats’s legacy “scattered among a hundred cities/ And wholly given over to unfamiliar affections [...] The words of a dead man [...] modified in the guts of the living”. “In Carrowdore Churchyard” begins, however, by stating the very opposite about MacNeice’s legacy:

Your ashes will not stir, even on this high ground,
However the wind tugs, the headstones shake.⁸⁵

Instead Mahon’s generation has already discovered that legacy – “All we may ask of you we have” – which resides in the very play of light and darkness, bleakness and joy to be found in MacNeice’s poetry. “In Carrowdore Churchyard” alludes to MacNeice’s

⁸² Qtd. Ronald Schuchard, “The Legacy of Yeats in Contemporary Irish Poetry”, *Irish University Review* 34.2 (Autumn/ Winter 2004): 307; Mahon, Interview by Terence Brown 18.

⁸³ Mahon, interview by William Scammell, *Poetry Review* 81.2 (Summer 1991): 5.

⁸⁴ Ibid 5.

⁸⁵ Mahon, *Collected Poems* 17.

“Snow” in which MacNeice’s delight in the variousness of things was memorably expressed:

Locked in the winter’s fist, these hills are hard
As nails, yet soft and feminine in their turn
When fingers open and the hedges burn.
This, you implied, is how we ought to live –

The ironical, loving crush of roses against snow,
Each fragile, solving ambiguity.⁸⁶

The poem concludes with an endorsement of the positive nature of the poetic imagination that MacNeice most forcibly brings home to his successors.

So
From the pneumonia of the ditch, from the ague
Of the blind poet and the bombed-out town you bring
The all-clear to the empty holes of spring,
Rinsing the choked mud, keeping the colours new.⁸⁷

Mahon’s “vested interest in MacNeice” is apparent in the play of light and darkness, bleakness and vision, and in his depiction of strong individuals, even in a body of work that at times is apocalyptic, displaced and almost post-historic.⁸⁸ Mahon saw in MacNeice’s poetry a range of heroes who are “discoverers of ‘life in the life we make’”.⁸⁹ The value of poetry for Mahon in an interview with Willie Kelly in 1981 is implicitly connected with its refusal to indulge in despair and this can be witnessed in his readings of Beckett:

I’m not happy with the word despair. I don’t think that – finally – Beckett is a despairing writer. The time will come when he will be seen for what he would least want to be seen, and that is, in the last analysis, as an uplifting writer.

There are a great many middle-brow writers who provide uplift consolation. Beckett strips all that away, leaves you with the bare forked animal. But after this there’s a growth of hope, the beginning of a real uplift (horrible word!). Sometimes I

⁸⁶ Ibid 17.

⁸⁷ Ibid 17.

⁸⁸ Mahon, “MacNeice in Ireland and England” 27.

⁸⁹ Ibid 27.

have a curious sense that Beckett is almost a sentimental writer, and if he's a sentimental writer I don't know who isn't. Having hit rock bottom as you do with him, you know there's nowhere to go but up.⁹⁰

Tellingly, these readings of Beckett are remarkably similar in kind to the readings of the positive nature of Beckett's art that MacNeice also endorsed.⁹¹

Reminders of the human spirit in the face of despair preoccupy Mahon. Terence Brown comments in Northern Voices (1975) that Mahon is:

drawn to romantic outsiders, individuals who assert their individuality not in dour, provincial self-satisfaction but in bohemian success, rhetorical panache, by style in the face of metaphysical bleakness.⁹²

In Brown's mind, Mahon, like MacNeice, "senses an interdependence of dark and light knowing that life's moments of vision and ecstasy are set against the dark and the cold".⁹³ Longley concurs with Brown, writing of Mahon:

An imagery of light pervades his poetry as it does MacNeice's. He may, within a rhetorical gesture, set the two side by side, as facts of life. [...] Or, more disturbingly, he will venture down the dark tunnel which MacNeice using all his fireworks tried in vain to obliterate [...]. More than just the opposite of darkness, light in Mahon's poetry also represents the imagination.⁹⁴

For all his work's bleakness, Mahon's poetry does not lose sight of the belief voiced in "The Forger", that "sheltered in my heart of hearts" is "A light to transform the world".⁹⁵ Longley suggests that Mahon's "brave acceptance of 'the darkness of night fall', of man's tragic situation makes his resolutions all the more decisive and

⁹⁰ Mahon, Interview by Willie Kelly 11.

⁹¹ MacNeice, Varieties of Parable (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1965) 154.

⁹² Terence Brown, Northern Voices (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1975) 196.

⁹³ *Ibid* 197.

⁹⁴ Longley, "Poetry", Causeway: The Arts in Ulster (Belfast: Arts Council of Northern Ireland; Dublin in association with Gill and Macmillan, 1971) 108. See also Edna Longley, rev. of Night Crossing by Derek Mahon, Honest Ulsterman no. 8 (Nov. 1968) 27. In Mahon and MacNeice, "there is the same pervasive imagery of night and darkness. [...] Like MacNeice Mahon answers darkness with light. But just as his darkness is blacker and bleaker so his light is steadier and more complex".

⁹⁵ Mahon, Collected Poems 24.

inclusive when they come”.⁹⁶ Even in “Rage for Order” the earlier summations of the role of the poet are revoked when the speaker remarks that “it cannot be/ Long now till I have need of his/ Terminal ironies”.⁹⁷ In Mahon’s poetry, as in “A Disused Shed in Co. Wexford”, “even now there are places where a thought might grow”.⁹⁸ That “place” for thought in “A Disused Shed” echoes Longley’s urge in “Bog Cotton” to “make room for bog cotton, a desert flower”. It is the perseverance of the human spirit which informs “Everything Is Going To Be All Right”, and that stance is depicted in images strikingly reminiscent of MacNeice:

How should I not be glad to contemplate
the clouds clearing beyond the dormer window
and a high tide reflected on the ceiling?
There will be dying, there will be dying,
but there is no need to go into that.
The lines flow from the hand unbidden
and the hidden source is the watchful heart.
The sun rises in spite of everything
and the far cities are beautiful and bright.
I lie here in a riot of sunlight
watching the day break and the clouds flying.
Everything is going to be all right.⁹⁹

That sense that everything will turn out all right is caught up with the very act of writing itself. It is this sense of poetry as not ineffective that emerges from the plea of the mushrooms at the end of “A Disused Shed in Co. Wexford”:

You with your light meter and relaxed itinerary,
Let not our naïve labours have been in vain!¹⁰⁰

While Mahon has embraced MacNeice’s focus on moments of individuality and human courage, he has been reluctant to see that stance as informing MacNeice’s

⁹⁶ Longley, “Poetry”, *Causeway* 108-9.

⁹⁷ Mahon, *Collected Poems* 48.

⁹⁸ *Ibid* 89.

⁹⁹ *Ibid* 113.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid* 90.

readings of Yeats, as well as in some ways being informed by that poetic example. Mahon has written dismissingly of the relationship between Yeats and MacNeice: “He met Yeats briefly, with E.R. Dodds, in the 1930s, and later wrote a book about him; but there is no evidence that he was ever influenced by him”.¹⁰¹ In his review of MacNeice’s Selected Poems entitled “An Ulster Blackthorn”, Mahon, however, turns to both the figures of MacNeice and Yeats. MacNeice, like Yeats, Mahon writes, “was a frustrated man of action; yet who was it insisted that poetry is *not* a sedentary trade?”¹⁰² Mahon’s resorting to these poetic influences is in fact a rare occasion on which he combines the two figures. Yet Mahon’s article underestimates the ways in which MacNeice’s critical writings turned to Yeats against the backdrop of the questioning of the role and effectiveness of art that took place in the 1930s. Commenting on a review by MacNeice of Yeats, Mahon writes:

For the author of that fine synoptic study The Poetry of W.B. Yeats (the original and still the best), MacNeice on Yeats here is curiously dull. Reviewing the Collected Poems he concludes: ‘It is to be hoped that some time we shall be granted a complete variorum edition. In the meanwhile let us be grateful for a book which contains great riches; it is also the record of an artist who remained single-minded in a world of trimmers and who, for all his posing, had integrity’. Only an aversion to journalism as such can explain such a string of half-hearted platitudes; yet journalise he did.¹⁰³

Mahon does not acknowledge the ways in which MacNeice’s critical writings on Yeats evinced a gradual acceptance of Yeats as an authoritative figure. MacNeice’s study on Yeats was remarkable for its willingness to accept Yeats as an influence, regardless of the doubts and hesitations expressed by other 1930s’ writers. MacNeice found in Yeats an example of a residual faith in the power of poetry, in its expression of human vitality and individuality, whatever changes MacNeice may have made to Yeats’s more

¹⁰¹ Mahon, “MacNeice in Ireland and England” 22.

¹⁰² Mahon, “An Ulster Blackthorn”, Journalism 46.

¹⁰³ Ibid 44.

arrogant cyclical notions of history. The same engagements with the Yeatsian tragic example were to be found in that review of his Collected Poems.¹⁰⁴

Nonetheless, Mahon's own engagement with Yeats has increasingly been expressed in MacNeicean terms. In "Yeats and the Lights of Dublin" (2002), Mahon follows MacNeice's example in not taking Yeats's pronouncements too literally. Yeats himself, in A Vision, Mahon notes, "describes his strange ideas as 'stylistic arrangements of experience'". If he did take such ideas literally, "he reports, 'my reason has soon recovered'". This, Mahon writes, "is reassuring to us sceptics".¹⁰⁵ Like MacNeice's before him, however, Mahon's engagement with Yeats goes beyond such idiosyncrasies to find something serious and valuable in Yeats's systems: "The gyres have come in for a lot of stick over the years; but aren't they really a way of asking questions like 'Is there a shape to history?' and 'Where do we go from here?', questions not in themselves ridiculous".¹⁰⁶ Yeats did not embrace the changes to poetic diction, up-to-date imagery and subject matter favoured by the thirties generation; his poetry consisted of archaic language and he "studiously ignored many modern developments". "Readers of the future, exploring the texture of twentieth-century life", Mahon writes, "will find little of it in Yeats".¹⁰⁷ Mahon in effect addresses his own earlier stated hesitations about Yeats's poetry when he engages with the criticism that Yeats's "heroism is too relentless; that his standards of beauty and performance are too elevated to be humanly interesting".¹⁰⁸ "We came to think of him as a monument, even as a

¹⁰⁴ See Chapter IV page 220.

¹⁰⁵ Mahon, "Yeats and the Lights of Dublin", Dublin Review no. 8 (Autumn 2002): 76.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid* 77.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid* 77.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid* 78.

statue”, Mahon admits.¹⁰⁹ For all this, however, Mahon points out that all of the Northern poets have echoed Yeats, and Heaney he reminds us, echoes Yeats echoing Shakespeare. “All this intertextuality is nothing new”, he writes; “works of art are always begotten by previous works of art”.¹¹⁰ Yeats, he concludes, has “left us phrases like talismans, consolatory and inspiring (‘a lonely impulse of delight’; ‘our proper dark’), an ideal of audacity and empowerment, and a paradigm of transfiguration, personal and historical. His example shames and ennobles us all”.¹¹¹

In an interview with Eamon Grennan in 2000, Mahon’s questioning of the value of poetry led him to a consideration of the 1930s debate:

I don’t think poetry makes anything happen. No scratch that, because it educates the imagination, so you get more imaginative people, a higher quality of civilization, people behave better toward one another. I’m more inclined to Shelley than to Auden on this: “The great instrument of moral good is the imagination...Poetry contributes to the effect by acting upon the cause”. So no, I don’t think Auden is right. It was a very half-hearted declaration of Auden’s anyway. It’s my observation that not just poetry, but art in any shape or form can tutor the imagination – the imagination can feed and strengthen itself on art, on poetry, in such a way that the sum of goodness and wisdom in the world is infinitesimally increased. I think that is so.¹¹²

Mahon’s differentiation of usefulness from value borrows its terminology explicitly from MacNeice’s writings and their turning to Yeats in the context of the decade’s debating of the role of poetry. In that interview, Mahon expresses his views on poetry in terms of “hissing chemicals inside the well-wrought urn, an urnful of explosives”. In a significant revision of his earlier ambivalence towards his precursor, Mahon now insists that what is “so great about Yeats, after all” is “the Dionysian contained within the Apollonian form, and bursting at the seams – shaking at the bars, but the bars have

¹⁰⁹ Ibid 79.

¹¹⁰ Ibid 80.

¹¹¹ Ibid 81.

¹¹² Eamon Grennan, “The Art of Poetry LXXXII: Derek Mahon”, *The Paris Review* 42.54 (Spring 2000): 174.

to be there to be shaken”.¹¹³ The poem, according to Mahon, is “a secular act of faith”, “a faith in meaningfulness, a defiance of nihilism”.¹¹⁴ In an address to the Yeats Summer School in Sligo in 1996, and in accordance with his own changing assessments of poetry, Mahon also re-evaluates his early attitudes towards Yeats. Yeats, Mahon feels, “tells us everything is possible, that personal defeat is incidental to the larger picture”.¹¹⁵ Like MacNeice, and like Heaney, Mahon finally comes to see Yeats’s legacy as resting in his declarations of tragic joy, and cites in that lecture, lines from “The Gyres” and “Lapis Lazuli”.¹¹⁶ It is Longley, however, who voices most forcibly MacNeice’s example in adopting that Yeatsian poetic model.

Longley has claimed in interview that he is “not the kind of poet who arranges treasure-hunts to please the academics and keep them busy. Poetry should be surprising in deeper ways”.¹¹⁷ MacNeice’s influence on Longley, and by extension, the importance of MacNeice’s dialogue with Yeats must then be found in a more indirect manner in Longley’s writings. In an interview with Fran Brearton in 1997, Longley explicitly states the relevance of the 1930s poetry for Northern Irish poets. These Northern poets “needed some kind of shape with which to deal with the emerging nightmare of the Troubles”. Some kind of tact, as well as some kind of order, he insists, was required. That entailed looking back to “an earlier time of disturbance and of menace – the ‘thirties – especially Auden and MacNeice”. Then in turn to the poets to whom they had looked “in order to make sense of what was happening as Europe was nazified” –

¹¹³ Ibid 169-70.

¹¹⁴ Ibid 173.

¹¹⁵ Qtd. Schuchard, “The Legacy of Yeats in Contemporary Irish Poetry” 308.

¹¹⁶ Ibid 308.

¹¹⁷ Longley, “An Interview with Michael Longley” by Peter McDonald, *Thumbscrew* no. 12 (Winter 1998/9): 9.

namely, the poets of the First World War.¹¹⁸ Longley's own interest in that war poetry germinates from what he sees as its demonstration that "the central strand of the genius of English poetry could stand up to the worst the modern world could throw at it".¹¹⁹

It was precisely their evaluations of the validity and role of poetry that informed Auden's and MacNeice's responses to Yeats. Longley, too, has constructed a space for himself within this debate. Questioned by Brearton as to whether the modern elegy could merely record loss or "actually transcend or redeem it", Longley replies:

I think finally I do believe in the redemptive power of art, believe there's something holy in the enterprise. I think it's useless. A lot of people say what use is poetry: I say none whatsoever. But that's not to say it's valueless. It is one of the embodiments of value. I don't actually agree with Auden when he said 'Poetry makes nothing happen' and it didn't save one Jew from the gas ovens. How do we know? If it saved only one Jew from the gas ovens it was worth it all.¹²⁰

In his emphasis on the lack of direct war poems in MacNeice's work between 1939 and 1945, Longley echoes the general contemporary reception of MacNeice's work. Unlike many of those early appraisals, however, Longley points towards some other relevance in MacNeice's poetry. Where early critics expressed their discontent at MacNeice's evasion of war in his work, Longley has been concerned to direct us towards some quality that has been missed in MacNeice's poetry. In "A Misrepresented Poet" (1967), Longley prefers to read in MacNeice's work the emergence during a turbulent political context of "a more appreciative understanding of his fellow human beings". War helped MacNeice to see that "ordinary people are peculiar too".¹²¹ Longley reads MacNeice's war poetry, perhaps unsurprisingly, in terms of his own poetic concerns, for much of Longley's poetry is an endeavour to depict the Troubles in terms of a focus on ordinary

¹¹⁸ Longley, "Walking Forwards into the Past" 37.

¹¹⁹ *Ibid* 37.

¹²⁰ *Ibid* 39.

¹²¹ Longley, "A Misrepresented Poet" 71.

people and the encroachment of the political context on domestic lives. Of his own work, Longley has written: “Many of my poems have their beginnings in ordinary domestic experience. (Though nothing remains ordinary if you look at it for long enough. Anyone’s back garden can become a gold mine). Poetry is a normal human activity, its concerns all of the things that happen to people”.¹²² Longley’s insistence on MacNeice’s relevance, however, is worthy of further critical attention, considering that MacNeice’s emphasis on the individual in his poetry of these years was correlated with his relationship with Yeats.

Longley’s prose demonstrates a growing preoccupation with MacNeice’s belief in the ultimately positive nature of art. In his review of The Burning Perch, published in the same month as MacNeice’s death, Longley writes that while the book contained “a few dazzling, cheeky pieces”, enough to remind the reader of “the brilliant improviser who wrote “Bagpipe Music” and “Prayer Before Birth”, the poems in the main comprised “a self-engrossed, unhappy book”. MacNeice, “preoccupied with admitting time and death”, was “pessimistic and disenchanting” though “writing with a powerful sadness”.¹²³ Even in this early article on MacNeice, however, Longley points to more than just sadness or despair in the collection:

He is the would-be gay dog, exiled in middle-age, not yet acclimatised, raging against and lamenting his years, making his solstice a stormy one and these last poems *his* Letters from Pontus. Death is an enemy, but one to be dealt with, for the time being, dealt with gaily, bravely.¹²⁴

It is MacNeice’s dissatisfaction with middle-age on which Longley chooses to focus – death might be the enemy, but growing-old was the arch-enemy. What strikes Longley

¹²² Longley, “A Tongue at Play” How Poets Work, ed. Tony Curtis (Bridgend: Seren, 1996) 113-4.

¹²³ Longley, “Death of A Poet”, rev. of The Burning Perch, The Irish Times (14 Sept. 1963): 8.

¹²⁴ *Ibid* 8.

most, as he concludes the review, are MacNeice's "chief qualities" of "intelligence and compassion".¹²⁵

Longley had, already at this stage, gone further than Mahon in his recognition of the dialectic between despair and gaiety in MacNeice's work. Reviewing *Solstices* in 1961, Mahon maintains that MacNeice was "no visionary" and "no-would be visionary, like Yeats". Instead, MacNeice's world is "what he has experienced with five fairly-well-developed senses, and a circumspect, urbanised mind". His work has "no magical effect upon the reader, but, with his earlier poems, it is hard, once you have started to put it down". Many of the fifty poems in the collection are pretty sterile, Mahon writes. He concludes that MacNeice, "nobody's favourite poet" can be "superbly readable".¹²⁶ While Mahon feels that MacNeice was the sort of poet "who does not change very much as his writing life proceeds", Longley, in "A Misrepresented Poet", directly contradicts Mahon in his insistence that this has been one of the falsehoods disseminated about the poet.

In later articles, it is more than compassion that Longley finds espoused in MacNeice's poetry. In his article on MacNeice entitled "The Neolithic Night", and subtitled "A Note on the Irishness of Louis MacNeice", where one might have thought the dominant concern might be MacNeice's ambiguous identity, Longley reverts to an engagement instead with MacNeice's 'zest' for life. MacNeice's poetry "began and continued as a reaction against darkness and a search for light", he insists. "Darkness in MacNeice's poetry" might be "overpowering", "but it is answered by an intense brightness". Longley points to MacNeice's use of light and sun imagery which "recur frequently as life-symbols", and asserts that he can think "of few poets who convey so

¹²⁵ Ibid 8.

¹²⁶ Mahon, rev. of *Solstices*, *Icarus* no. 34 (June 1961): 51.

fully what being alive can mean”.¹²⁷ Longley rebukes early critical comments on the superficial subject matter of MacNeice’s poetry. “The gaudy paraphernalia of MacNeice’s poetry, the riot of imagery, the dizzy word-play add up finally to a reply to death, ‘the fear of becoming stone.’”¹²⁸

In his introduction to MacNeice’s selected poems, Longley remarks of Autumn Journal: “Somehow everything comes together poetically in MacNeice’s courageous summoning of all available human resources against anarchy and despair”.¹²⁹ Though taking into account the “bleak view of the contemporary world” which the poems in The Burning Perch (1963) incorporate, Longley agrees with MacNeice’s comments that “the ‘sombreness’ of The Burning Perch does not altogether negate his happier masks, that “most of these poems are two-way affairs”.¹³⁰ It is this “reaction against darkness”, that Longley finds in the best of MacNeice’s poems, and that leads him to disfavour Ten Burnt Offerings (1952) and Autumn Sequel (1954). “It might help”, Longley asserts, “to regard this dry period as an equinox when the tensions between light and darkness were too even”. Instead, the best of MacNeice is to be found in the creative work of his twenties and thirties and again after his fiftieth birthday.¹³¹

The features of MacNeice’s poetry which Longley seizes upon in that introduction are of direct concern to him as an artist – MacNeice’s depiction of the West of Ireland, the question of MacNeice’s ‘Irishness’, MacNeice’s relationship with

¹²⁷ Longley, “The Neolithic Night: A Note on the Irishness of Louis MacNeice”, Two Decades of Irish Writing: A Critical Survey 103-104. See also Longley, introduction, Louis MacNeice: Selected Poems xv: “Fantasy, make-believe and above all a relish for the sensory world were the antidotes he evolved to vanquish religion, darkness, loneliness, fears of death and petrification. These childhood antidotes anticipated in miniature the strategies of the adult poet. MacNeice’s many words for light, and images of light, remember his Ulster darkness: glitter, rainbow, dazzle, glint, ‘a sliver of peacock light’, ‘sunlight on the garden’, ‘timeless prism’.”

¹²⁸ Longley, “The Neolithic Night” 104.

¹²⁹ Longley, Introduction, Louis MacNeice: Selected Poems xiii.

¹³⁰ *Ibid* xxi-xxii.

¹³¹ *Ibid* xxi.

“darkest Ulster”, and most tellingly, given its importance in Longley’s own works, his relish in making catalogues. Similarly, Longley’s focus on MacNeice’s positive stances has as much to do with Longley’s own poetic concerns as it has with MacNeice’s. If MacNeice’s work was a reaction against loss and despair, Longley has made telling comments in interview of his own poetry’s confrontation of such: “Perhaps I’m obsessed with the way things come and go, the way they fade, the way nothing lasts. There’s a poem in Gorse Fires about the brief mark an otter’s tail makes in wet sand. Those are the moments that move me. Poems give them a second chance. There’s a danger of being paralysed imaginatively and emotionally, mesmerised by such fleeting mysteries”.¹³² When it comes to MacNeice’s love poems – “Mayfly”, for example, or “Meeting Point” – it is a positive belief in human vitality and imagination that Longley reads into these poems. MacNeice’s sense of art’s celebration of life despite its recognition of loss or sorrow – in Mahon’s terms “the existential tingle of the passing minute” – is MacNeice’s most pervasive influence over his successors.¹³³ Longley has selected “Mayfly”, MacNeice’s “first masterpiece”, for special emphasis. MacNeice’s love poem was, for Longley, a delicate balancing act between “the delights of a moment and the knowledge that they cannot last”.¹³⁴ Longley’s reading has focused on the final two lines of the poem:

But when this summer is over let us die together,
I want always to be near your breasts.

¹³² Longley, Interview with Peter McDonald 11-12.

¹³³ Mahon, “MacNeice in Ireland and England” 27.

¹³⁴ Longley, “A Misrepresented Poet” 69.

“The tremor from these beautiful lines ripples out across all of his poetry”, Longley writes of MacNeice.¹³⁵ For Brown, Longley’s isolating of this specific “moment in MacNeice’s verse” anticipates “some of his own poetic characteristics”.¹³⁶ Certainly, Longley’s absorption of MacNeicean influences seems evidenced by the use of the image in Longley’s “The Linen Industry”. Brown also points out that when Longley suggests that these two lines “disclose the nucleus” of MacNeice’s imagination, in fact “such frank, slightly plush eroticism with an intimation of decadent satiation is a very unusual note, a Longleyan note indeed, in MacNeice’s work”.¹³⁷

Longley’s “Epithalamion”, from his first collection No Continuing City (1969), opens with a description of a couple’s self-contained world:

And everything seems bent
On robbing in this evening you
And me, all dark the element
Our light is earnest to.¹³⁸

It is a world where nature is bent on entering the couple’s room:

These are the small hours when
Moths by their fatal appetite
That brings them tapping to get in,
Are steered along the night
To where our window catches light.

Who hazard all to be
Where we, the only two it seems,
Inhabit so delightfully
A room it bursts it seams
And spills on to the lawn in beams.¹³⁹

¹³⁵ Longley, introduction to Louis MacNeice: Poems, selected by Longley (2001; London: Faber and Faber, 2005) x.

¹³⁶ Terence Brown, “Michael Longley and the Irish Poetic Tradition” 5.

¹³⁷ Ibid 5. Brown points to the contrast between MacNeice’s “Trilogy for X” and Longley’s “The Linen Industry” in and the “bodily absence” in MacNeice’s work.

¹³⁸ Longley, Collected Poems 3.

¹³⁹ Ibid 3.

The poem is heavily influenced by MacNeice's "Trilogy for X" from his collection Plant and Phantom. Longley adopts MacNeice's premise of the isolated room of the couple, "our one night's identity", which "dawn's waves trouble with the bubbling minute".¹⁴⁰ Like MacNeice, Longley focuses on the sharpness of objects with the approaching dawn and the sudden noisy interruption of a passing train to the quiet of the room (the train often works in MacNeice's poetry as a symbol of advancing time).

Like MacNeice's "The Sunlight on the Garden", the enjambment of lines in "Epithalamion" conveys the inexorable movement of time. While "The Sunlight on the Garden" is premised on the approach of darkness and the fading of sunlight, symbolic of an ended love affair, "Epithalamion" works from the basis of the approach of light and dawn which disrupts the night-time world of the couple in the manner of John Donne's "The Sun Rising".

With dawn upon its way,
Punctually and as a rule,
The small hours widening into day,
Our room its vestibule
Before it fills all houses full.¹⁴¹

There cannot be any reprieve for the couple. Ambiguities and doubts exist in the verb "linger on". The delight in the particular moment is continually, as Longley writes of MacNeice's own poetry, "hugged and swirled by doubts and reservations".¹⁴²

The sense of ending in "Epithalamion" and its contrast with the world of night is dominant in the second half of the poem. The moth that had earlier come "tapping to get in", "hazarding all to be" in the room the couple "inhabit so delightfully", now "lies there littered". The "garden's brightest properties" and "folded flowers" are reduced to

¹⁴⁰ MacNeice, Plant and Phantom (London: Faber and Faber, 1941) 29.

¹⁴¹ *Ibid* 4.

¹⁴² Longley, "The Neolithic Night" 98-99.

flowers everywhere that are withering. The stars which revolved discreetly round the couple the previous night are “dissolved,/ Amalgamated in a glare”. And yet the poem in its use of assonance and ababb rhyming scheme which unite the stanzas into self-contained units does achieve something for the moment has been reclaimed and made permanent in the act of writing. In “Epithalamion”, for all the disturbance of the couple’s intimacy and unity in a world of night with the breaking of day, the poem can summon up the optimism to hope:

The two of us, in these
Which early morning has deformed,
Must hope that in new properties
We’ll find a uniform
To know each other truly by, or,

At the least, that these will,
When we rise, be seen with dawn
As remnant yet part raiment still
Like flags that linger on
The sky when king and queen are gone.¹⁴³

Mahon has commented on Longley’s poetry that “it rains a lot of the time”, but “when the sun breaks through it’s a MacNeicean country sun-shower worth waiting days for”.¹⁴⁴ His readings point to the ways in which MacNeice’s work provides a model for Longley’s own poetry.

Longley has repeatedly objected to any facile notions of the consoling nature of art, maintaining that “the notion that poetry might provide solace for the grief of others repelled” his generation of Northern Irish writers.¹⁴⁵ In “To the Poets” Longley

¹⁴³ Longley, Collected Poems 4-5.

¹⁴⁴ Mahon, “Careful Footprints: Poems 1963-1983 by Michael Longley”, Journalism 100.

¹⁴⁵ Longley, “A Boat on the River 1960-1969”, Watching the River Flow 139-140. In his autobiography he too insisted: “I find offensive the notion that what we inadequately call “the Troubles” might provide inspiration for artists; and that in some weird quid pro quo the arts might provide solace for grief and anguish [...] You have got to bring your personal sorrow to the public utterance [or] [...] you are in deadly danger to regarding the agony of others as raw material for your art”.

expresses his doubts about the effectiveness of art, depicting poets as a dying species.¹⁴⁶ In “Ghost Town” and “Alibis”, from An Exploded View (1973), the claims of poets are deprecatingly depicted – one is determined to become the local eccentric and to be content with “a reputation and a half acre”, and the other’s “remaining ambition is to be/ The last poet in Europe to find a rhyme”.¹⁴⁷ Yet poems such as “Ghetto”, while recognising suffering, assert a place for optimism in art. The poem deals face on with the horrors of a Ghetto in Eastern Europe but leaves us with some semblance of the positive nature of art, for the impulse to create has not been quenched:

Fingers leave shadows on a violin, harmonics,
A blackbird fluttering between electrified fences.¹⁴⁸

There is always in Longley’s poetry, as McDonald notes, “an awareness of the absurdity implicit in any kind of artistic expression”, citing for example Longley’s “Self-Portrait” where the speaker admits “I articulate through the nightingale’s throat,/ Sing with the vocal chords of the orang-outang”. Yet this “serves finally to strengthen the seriousness and integrity of the endeavour”.¹⁴⁹

While art may not have done anything to remedy the events of the historical or political field, “Ghetto”, from Gorse Fires (1991), asserts a belief in human stamina, of the kind extolled by MacNeice in Autumn Journal. “And the only windows were the windows they drew”. It is characteristic of Longley that the example of endurance is to be found in the resources of nature. The list denotes not only the afflictions of the vegetable world to be resisted but those of despair or solipsism in the human spirit:

¹⁴⁶ Longley, Collected Poems 41.

¹⁴⁷ *Ibid* 72 and 76

¹⁴⁸ *Ibid* 188.

¹⁴⁹ McDonald, “From Ulster with Love”, rev. of Michael Longley’s Poems 1963-1983, Poetry Review 74.4 (1985): 15.

My delivery of Irish Peace, Beauty of Hebron, Home
Guard, Arran Banners, Kerr's Pinks, resistant to eelworm,
Resignation, common scab, terror, frost, potato-blight.¹⁵⁰

While Longley's poetry is aware of the darkness of the contemporary world, Gorse Fires refuses to concede victory to it. It is the impulse to "celebrate and affirm, despite loss and sorrow" which "permeates" Gorse Fires.¹⁵¹ What in fact the poems achieve, as Longley tentatively suggests an artist should, is to "suggest the sacerdotal values of life – in a completely secular way, of course."¹⁵²

It is to MacNeice's example of the ultimately positive force of poetry that Longley turns in his critical writings. In "The Neolithic Night", Longley attributes MacNeice's zest, to a reaction against an austere Ulster Protestant background as evinced in poems like "Belfast" and "Carrickfergus":

Ulster was for MacNeice a place hard with basalt and iron, cacophonous with 'fog-horn, mill-horn, corncrake and church bell', 'the hooting of last sirens and the clang of trams', 'the voodoo of the Orange bands'. The place was dark and oppressive with religion – 'devout and profane and hard'.¹⁵³

For Longley, the role of MacNeice's reaction against his Ulster background in effecting this "zest" for life or light is a reason why MacNeice has too often been overlooked by English critics.¹⁵⁴ MacNeice's "relishing of the external world" can be seen as an antidote he "evolved to vanquish religion, darkness, loneliness and fears of death".¹⁵⁵ Yet elsewhere Longley focuses on other reasons for MacNeice's insistence on a positive art, reasons which were directly related to MacNeice's relationship with Yeats.

¹⁵⁰ Ibid 188.

¹⁵¹ Elmer Kennedy-Andrews, "Conflict, Violence and 'The Fundamental Interrelatedness of All Things' in the Poetry of Michael Longley", The Poetry of Michael Longley 91.

¹⁵² Longley, "The Longley Tapes" 24.

¹⁵³ Longley, "The Neolithic Night" 101.

¹⁵⁴ Longley, "Poetry", Causeway: The Arts in Ulster 97.

¹⁵⁵ Longley, "The Neolithic Night" p. 103.

MacNeice repeatedly turned towards Yeats in the late 1930s in an attempt to use his precursor's work as an authoritative validation for his defences of poetry. In an address to the Yeats Summer School in 1970, entitled "Yeats as Tragedian", Longley suggests how this Yeatsian model has provided an example in his own circumstances. "Yeats was helping me to clarify my own responses to almost daily violences", Longley asserts in that speech.¹⁵⁶ Yeats had supplied a model of how the lyric form could be "a mode capable of encompassing and solving extreme experience". If Shakespeare were writing in the twentieth-century, Longley suggests, "he would judge the Yeatsian lyric a more than adequate vehicle".¹⁵⁷ Longley turns in that lecture to "Easter 1916", "Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen", "Meditations in Time of Civil War" and "The Tower" as examples of Yeats's tragic aesthetics, or what Longley calls "Shakespearean altitude".¹⁵⁸ It was Yeats, Longley asserts in interview with Brearton, who was "the greatest modern poet by several lengths", and "the best poet in the English language after Shakespeare". Yeats had demonstrated how art could confront conflict and violent political realities. His "great 8-line stanzas with complicated rhyme schemes and varying lengths" were "a more than adequate sounding board or receiving vessel for the nightmares of the twentieth century".¹⁵⁹

As Longley engages with the significance of the Yeatsian poetic model, he recognises MacNeice's similar attempt to come to terms with that legacy. Longley asks in his introduction to MacNeice's selected poems:

What other twentieth-century poet writing in English explores with such persistence and brilliance all that being alive can mean? Perhaps only Yeats. Certainly, when MacNeice honours Yeats's 'zest', he betrays a kinship. We can say of Louis

¹⁵⁶ Qtd. Schuchard, "The Legacy of Yeats in Contemporary Irish Poetry" 296.

¹⁵⁷ Qtd. *ibid* 296.

¹⁵⁸ Qtd. *ibid* 296.

¹⁵⁹ Longley, "Walking Forwards into the Past" 38.

MacNeice's poetry too: 'there is nearly always a leaping vitality – the vitality of Cleopatra waiting for the asp'.¹⁶⁰

This examination of MacNeice's significance involves a striking accumulation of intertextual references. Longley's comments draw attention to the relationship that existed between MacNeice's poetry and his readings of and engagement with the works of Yeats. Longley's quotation from MacNeice's study of Yeats, and in turn that quotation's allusion to Antony and Cleopatra, is important. The quotation, drawn from The Poetry of W.B. Yeats, concerned, as we have seen, MacNeice's readings of Yeats's tragic beliefs and his endorsement of Yeats's finding in the Shakespearean characters a mirror for those beliefs.

Longley's summation of the relationship between MacNeice and Yeats is based on MacNeice's readings of this "zest" in Yeats's poetry – this tragic art that refused to rest on negative stances. In The Poetry of W.B. Yeats, MacNeice had explicitly depicted his generation's relationship with Yeats in terms of Yeats's tragic beliefs. Elsewhere in another selection of MacNeice's poems, Longley has no objection to MacNeice's insistence on the thirties' generation's affinity with Yeats. Longley cites, without any qualifications, MacNeice's assertion at the end of his book on Yeats: "Like Yeats they opposed to the contemporary chaos a code of values, a belief in system, and – behind their utterances of warning – a belief in life, in the dignity, courage and stamina of the human animal".¹⁶¹

¹⁶⁰ Longley, introduction, Louis MacNeice: Selected Poems xxii-xxiii. In a very brief and general conclusion to his biography of MacNeice, Jon Stallworthy has noted Longley's comment on MacNeice and Yeats and 's has attributed it to "a leaping vitality" in Irish poetry of the last century. "Michael Longley has rightly praised in MacNeice the zest that MacNeice praised in Yeats. For all their differences, the greatest Irish poets of our century have this in common: "a leaping vitality – the vitality of Cleopatra waiting for the asp". Jon Stallworthy, Louis MacNeice (London: Faber and Faber, 1995) 484.

¹⁶¹ Longley, introduction, Louis MacNeice: Poems, selected by Longley ix.

MacNeice, above any of his contemporaries in the 1930s, provided a model of how Yeats's aesthetics might be a "usable influence". His adaptation of Yeatsian poetic models centred upon his ability to foreground the issues most pertinent to him, as a writer, and to overcome the conflicts between his own work and that of Yeats. Yeats's achievements were not, according to MacNeice, to be slighted due to the poet's reactionary beliefs or early escapist tendencies. Yeats's "doctrine of poetry may have been unsound", MacNeice wrote, but "it does not compare too badly with the doctrines of his contemporaries or immediate predecessors".¹⁶² Through his engagement with Yeats's poetic concerns, structures and imagery, MacNeice debated his own poetry's relationship to political imperatives. Above all, Yeats's legacy, MacNeice insisted in his study of the poet, resided in Yeats's focus on moments of joy, or moments of courage in the face of defeat by actual historical circumstances. MacNeice might have mitigated Yeats's high-flown rhetorical forms through his focus on the quotidian, the communal, the ordinary. Nonetheless, MacNeice himself thought that even Yeats, though "the younger poets sometimes seemed wilfully original", must have "recognized also that they had their own disasters, they could not be expected to write to his own recipe".¹⁶³ The lesson that his generation ("a generation with a vastly different outlook"), MacNeice insisted, could learn from Yeats was "to write according to our lights".¹⁶⁴ It was, however, to Yeats's model of poetry that MacNeice turned at the most crucial points in his poetic career. Longley suggests that, quite apart from MacNeice's poetic achievement, it is MacNeice's "passionate criticism" which "is central to our

¹⁶² MacNeice, The Poetry of W.B. Yeats 228.

¹⁶³ *Ibid* 224.

¹⁶⁴ *Ibid* 232.

understanding of twentieth-century poetry”.¹⁶⁵ His criticism’s engagement with Yeats not only provided a model for MacNeice’s own poetry, however. The influence of MacNeice’s critical and poetic engagements with Yeats reached out to succeeding generations of poets. Many of the frequencies, which Longley suggests Northern Irish poets alone have heard in MacNeice, are directly interlinked with MacNeice’s relationship with Yeats. Reverting to his generation’s discussions of Yeats’s achievements, MacNeice wrote:

The word ‘major’, however, does carry certain implications of bulk, depth and width, and when we start trying to find these qualities in Yeats, we shall find they have changed in his hands. He *is* wide in a sense – but not the usual sense. He *is* deep in a sense – but not the usual sense. Conclusion: this is a major poet – but a very, very odd one. It will probably be many years yet before critics can get this oddity in focus.¹⁶⁶

It is MacNeice’s work that perhaps did most to get Yeats’s legacy into focus. It is successive Northern poets that have foregrounded the aspects of MacNeice’s dialogue with Yeats which have often been underestimated in critical commentary, and who have, in their various ways, endorsed MacNeice’s reclamation of Yeats as an enabling precursor.

¹⁶⁵ Longley, Introduction, Louis MacNeice: Selected Poems xiv.

¹⁶⁶ MacNeice, “Endless Old Things”, rev. of The Letters of W.B. Yeats, ed. Allan Wade, New Statesman and Nation 48. 1230 (2 Oct. 1954): 398. Rpt. Selected Literary Criticism 193-4.

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