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‘More than glass’: Louis MacNeice’s Poetics of Expansion

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By

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## ‘More than glass’: Louis MacNeice’s Poetics of Expansion

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The Northern Irish poet and dramatist Louis MacNeice, typically regarded as a minor modernist following in the footsteps of Yeats and Eliot or living in the shadow of Auden, is different from his most important predecessors and contemporaries in the way he attempts to explode conventional ideas of place, presenting human subjects in transit and shifting, melting landscapes, rooms and buildings that tend to blend in with their surroundings. While Yeats, Eliot and Auden evince a siege mentality that leads them to build religious or political Utopias easily separable from the chaos of the contemporary world, MacNeice denies the validity of any such imaginary constructs, instead taking apart the boundaries of imaginary private worlds, from rooms to islands to pastoral landscapes. MacNeice’s representations of space favor what Fredric Jameson terms ‘postmodern space’: his poems and radio plays operate outside of ideas of ‘home,’ ‘church,’ or ‘nation,’ opposing the rigidity of such places to the fluidity of travel.

MacNeice has been much misunderstood and underestimated, and a reappraisal of his career is due, particularly given the amount of material that has been published or reissued since his centenary in 2007. His revolutionary approach to space and his hostility to most forms of essentialism show that he is important not just as an influence on contemporary Irish and English poets, but that he was in the vanguard of postmodernism's assault on the grand narratives of the modern nation-state.

This dissertation by Michael A. Moir, Jr. fulfills the dissertation requirement for the doctoral degree in English approved by Virgil Nemoianu, PhD, as Director, and Joseph Sendry, PhD, and Pamela Ward, PhD, as Readers.

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## **Introduction**

### **‘But I come not to give you any idol or idea...’**

Louis MacNeice is a difficult poet to place, whether in the overarching canon of Literature in English or the smaller alternative canon of Anglo-Irish Literature. Born in Belfast in 1907 but educated and domiciled in England, he nevertheless thought of himself as Irish and remained imaginatively engaged with his home country, though he never lived there as an adult. He was a leftist intellectual who openly expressed doubts about the effect of a Marxist revolution on social life and culture. Though he was a classicist educated at some of the best schools in Britain, he managed to write in the voice of the ordinary ‘man in the street’ with much greater ease and panache than his more politically committed contemporaries. MacNeice is a bundle of contradictions, a skeptic writing in an era that seemed to insist on belief. His resistance to fixed positions is forward-thinking and innovative, and it may also be the ingredient in his poetry that damaged his critical standing.

Of the four poets who made up the four-man collective known alternately as “the Auden group” or, as the right-wing poet Roy Campbell disparagingly called them, “MacSpaunday”, only Auden and MacNeice have maintained their early reputations; their best poems are regularly anthologized, most of their work remains in print, and a steady stream of dissertations and books show sustained academic interest. Though in the years since his centenary in 2007 MacNeice has made some gains in this area while Auden has slowed

a bit, MacNeice has typically lived in Auden's shadow due to his failure to resolve the contradictions in his life and work by adopting a fixed political, philosophical, or religious point of view. His contemporaries seem to have regarded this as a weakness in his work, and the following remark by Francis Scarfe (in a 1942 book tellingly titled *Auden and After*) is typical. According to Scarfe, MacNeice 'can be considered a very good representative of many of the young poets...who have failed to make up their mind about society, philosophy, and religion, and whose tragedy is that they are aimlessly drifting through a hostile world, and failing to use their talent to the best advantage'<sup>1</sup>. Scarfe never lets us know exactly what this 'best advantage' would be, but he hints at it at the end of the chapter on MacNeice: 'there is no centre, as yet, to his work'<sup>2</sup>. The quality Scarfe seems to be after, then, is the kind of fixity of purpose that commitment would bring to MacNeice's work – whether it be the cultural nationalism of Yeats, the 'royalist' and 'Anglo-Catholic' attitudes of Eliot, or Auden's seemingly contradictory attraction to both Marx and Freud, both of whom are eventually thrown over for Christianity tinged with existentialism. The fact that MacNeice does not adopt any such program or creed renders him, for Scarfe, 'obscure'<sup>3</sup>; his work lacks a known structure of symbolism to which the critic can refer, and he is not attached to any particular body of opinion that might help to illuminate his work.

Criticisms of this sort have dogged MacNeice since the 1930s, as have comparisons to Yeats, Eliot, and Auden, which often present MacNeice in an unfavorable light. George

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<sup>1</sup> Francis Scarfe, *Auden and After: The Liberation of Poetry 1930-1941* (London: Routledge, 1942), 56.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 67

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 64

Bornstein accuses him of ‘facile adoption of Eliotic impersonality’<sup>4</sup> in his criticism, while group studies of the period tend to emphasize Auden’s centrality, a case in point being Samuel Hynes’s study of 1930s writing, *The Auden Generation*. MacNeice is clearly important to Hynes’s conception of the decade, given that he figures prominently in its organizational principle (Hynes discusses the decade year-by-year, focusing his analysis on a few key works, and MacNeice is represented at least once in every year after 1936); he calls *Autumn Journal* ‘the best personal expression of the end-of-the-’thirties mood’<sup>5</sup>. It is still Auden, though, along with Christopher Isherwood, who receives most of the author’s attention. MacNeice is, in the end, ‘the professional lachrymose Irishman’<sup>6</sup>, writing gloomy poems on autumnal themes.

Tellingly, both MacNeice’s admirers and detractors often cite his Irishness as either the great strength or the great weakness of his poetry. Scarfe sees it as a limiting factor; MacNeice is a less important poet than Auden because he ‘lacks one of Auden’s stabilizing factors, his understanding and love of England...It is evident by this, and by his Irish habit of beating his nurse when he writes of his home country...that MacNeice is a fundamentally Romantic poet...in a word, he is damnably Irish.’<sup>7</sup> Critics more sympathetic to Ireland and the Irish (and to MacNeice) make their argument in similar terms, though without Scarfe’s pro-English chauvinism. The generation of Northern Irish poets who came of age in the

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<sup>4</sup> George Bornstein, *Transformations of Romanticism in Yeats, Eliot, and Stevens* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1976), 74.

<sup>5</sup> Samuel Hynes, *The Auden Generation: Literature and Politics in England in the 1930s* (New York: Viking, 1972), 373.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 334.

<sup>7</sup> Scarfe, *Auden and After*, 62.



1960s, which includes Seamus Heaney, Michael Longley, Derek Mahon, and the slightly younger Paul Muldoon, claims MacNeice as an important influence (though Mahon is not willing to go so far as to affirm MacNeice's Irish nationality). Seamus Deane concedes that 'Valediction' and Section XVI of *Autumn Journal* 'are important as statements of a kind of rejection-in-acceptance of Ireland which is typical of the Northern Protestant mind in one of its subtler manifestations', though he does not think that they 'wear well as poetry'<sup>8</sup> – perhaps because they lack the 'regional loyalty'<sup>9</sup> that Deane cites as a positive value elsewhere in his essay. Deane attempts to make a poet who rejected his home province as a young man and wrote, in 'Valediction', 'Farewell, my country, and in perpetuum'<sup>10</sup>, a typical example of Northern Irish Protestant attitudes. To suggest that MacNeice is somehow typical of 'the Northern Protestant mind' is to make an implicit political argument – that Northern Protestants reject Ireland and Irishness as a matter of course, and that when MacNeice does so, he is speaking for his race and his class.

MacNeice fares little better at the hands of Declan Kiberd, who largely leaves MacNeice out of *Inventing Ireland's* narrative of Irish identity formation by relegating all discussion of him to an interchapter titled 'Underdevelopment'. Though this is meant to describe the state of Ireland during and immediately following the years of the Second World War, in which Ireland remained neutral, it echoes the criticisms leveled at MacNeice by Irish nationalist critics. Kiberd's MacNeice '...opted for a different form of neutrality,

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<sup>8</sup> Seamus Deane, 'Irish Poetry and Irish Nationalism: A Survey', in *Two Decades of Irish Writing*, ed. Douglas Dunn. (Chester Springs, PA: Dufour Editions, 1975), 11.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 7.

<sup>10</sup> Louis MacNeice, *Collected Poems*, ed. Peter McDonald. (London: Faber and Faber, 2007), 9.

calling down a plague on both houses in the internal conflict of Northern Ireland, which he sought to escape by means of a literary career in England.<sup>11</sup> Kiberd is too quick to focus attention on Ulster; MacNeice's feelings toward his home country, which were more complex than the Deane/Kiberd narrative of simple rejection suggests, extended south in the direction of the Republic of Ireland as well, despite Kiberd's claim that MacNeice reaches 'a rapprochement of sorts with "the south"'.<sup>12</sup> Kiberd writes that MacNeice was 'attracted by the indeterminacy of a Dublin whose many masks seemed to hide no face at all'<sup>13</sup>, but it is the Republic, not the North, that he castigates for allowing English soldiers to die in Europe that it may enjoy its neutral status, insulated from the conflict, in poems like 'Neutrality'. MacNeice was on holiday in Ireland when Germany invaded Poland, and was struck by the nonchalance he encountered in Dublin: '...he spent the Saturday drinking in a bar with Irish literary friends who, far from sharing his sense of catastrophe, only wanted to discuss variant versions of Dublin street songs.'<sup>14</sup> It is difficult to see the logic in casting such an attitude as a rapprochement.

The problem with readings like Deane's and Kiberd's is that, first, they do not allow for differences between different types of Northern Protestants; MacNeice was raised in an Anglican rectory and his family were native Irish with roots in Connaught, the very territory idealized by Yeats and his cohorts in the Irish Literary Revival. In addition, MacNeice's

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<sup>11</sup> Declan Kiberd, *Inventing Ireland: The Literature of the Modern Nation*. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995), 473.

<sup>12</sup> *Idem*.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 474.

<sup>14</sup> Jon Stallworthy, *Louis MacNeice*. (London, Faber and Faber: 1995), 259.

father, who was the Anglican Rector of Carrickfergus, was one of the few Protestant clergymen in Ulster who refused to sign the Solemn League and Covenant in 1912, which pledged resistance to Home Rule for Ireland by violent force if necessary. Just as his forebears are difficult to place in the conventional narrative of Irish/Ulster history, MacNeice defies any reading that attempts to make him typical of a Northern Protestant sensibility.

Critics sympathetic to MacNeice often raise similar concerns regarding his placement in the developing canon of Anglo-Irish literature, as they have difficulty deciding whether or not he truly belongs to Ireland. Tom Paulin, in an otherwise admiring review, refers to MacNeice as ‘The Man from No Part’<sup>15</sup>. Eamon Grennan, meanwhile, writes that

If Macneice’s world were to be seen in eschatological terms, its heaven and hell would be located in Ireland. Metaphorically, Ireland represents ecstatic emancipation and dreadful damnation, a spiritual dialectic MacNeice cannot resolve in any simple way. When fused with his childhood, the country becomes a kind of paradise lost elegiacally recalled by the poet bound to the purgatorial experience of time.<sup>16</sup>

Paulin’s title suggests that MacNeice is an Irishman who cannot be identified with any specific region or location in the country; without such ties, Ireland becomes an abstraction for him. Grennan, meanwhile, seems to argue for MacNeice’s Ireland as both lost Eden and uncertain afterlife. Both convey a sense of spatial indeterminacy that is typical of Ireland-centric MacNeice criticism.

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<sup>15</sup> Tom Paulin, ‘The Man From No Part: Louis MacNeice’, in Ireland and the English Crisis. (Newcastle upon Tyne: Bloodaxe, 1984) 75.

<sup>16</sup> Eamon Grennan, ‘In a Topographical Frame: Ireland in the Poetry of Louis MacNeice’, in Facing the Music: Irish Poetry in the Twentieth Century. (Omaha: Creighton University Press, 1999), 193.

A focus on more personal, if still typically Irish, spaces, is perhaps a more appropriate approach to MacNeice. Terence Brown, who has written extensively and perceptively on MacNeice since the 1970s, tries to place his subject in a tradition of Irish Protestant writers that includes Yeats, C.S. Lewis, and Samuel Beckett by pointing out similarities in their upbringings:

Alienation, deracination, loss of religious faith, emigration, identity crises were experiences of several literary generations of Protestant Irishmen in this century. So there is something poignantly characteristic, therefore, about the isolated Protestant Victorian or Edwardian suburban house which haunts each of these writers' imaginations, sad diminution of the Ascendancy's great houses to which their predecessor W.B. Yeats had aspired.<sup>17</sup>

Brown's argument is still too general, and too essentialist – he includes both Southern and Northern Protestant writers in his survey, though both groups underwent very different trials during the birth pangs of the Irish Republic – but it nevertheless represents an important development. While other Irish critics, particularly nationalists like Deane and Kiberd, tend to treat the island as a whole, Brown narrows his focus not to a particular region, but to a particular style of house. It is this sad, suburban imitation of the country houses of the great Protestant landlords, Brown argues, that conditions the development of Irish Protestant writers.

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<sup>17</sup> Terence Brown, 'Louis MacNeice's Ireland', in *Tradition and Influence in Anglo-Irish Poetry*, ed. Terence Brown et al. (Totowa, NJ: Barnes & Noble, 1989), 81.

What all of these readings have in common is a sense of Ireland, some part of Ireland, or, in Scarfe's case, England, as a kind of privileged space of which MacNeice either fails to take full advantage or by which he is traumatized. The critics cited above are attempting to categorize a poet who willfully defies any kind of reductive definition, and, in the hostile cases, their animus against MacNeice seems to stem from their inability to put him into a single imagined space, a critical box with predetermined dimensions. Nevertheless, this spatial element in MacNeice's work will be the primary focus of my study, particularly in relation to the spatial aesthetic of the Modernist mainstream, as developed by Yeats, Eliot, and their most direct successor, Auden. I contend that MacNeice's work is postmodern in Linda Hutcheon's sense of the term, as it creates a space which allows for the existence of 'difference'; postmodernism, according to Hutcheon, '...seek[s] to assert difference, not homogenous identity'; this creates problems for those who prefer top-down explanations of social reality:

Whatever narratives or systems that once allowed us to think we could unproblematically and universally define public agreement have now been questioned by the acknowledgement of differences – in theory and in artistic practice. In its most extreme formulation, the result is that consensus becomes the illusion of consensus, whether it be defined in terms of minority (educated, sensitive, elitist) or mass (commercial, popular, conventional) culture, for *both* are manifestations of late capitalist, bourgeois, information, postindustrial society, a society in which social reality is structured by discourses – or so postmodernism endeavors to teach.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Linda Hutcheon, A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction. (London: Routledge, 1988), 6-7.

The postmodernist project is, at its core, an anti-essentialist enterprise, and it is through the deconstruction of conventional notions of space that MacNeice critiques the essentialisms of left and right, nation and home.

In explaining how MacNeice lies outside of the Modernist tradition, I will attempt to reconcile three different approaches to dealing with space in literature and art: Fredric Jameson's distinction between modern and postmodern space, Yi-fu Tuan's distinction between amorphous, meaningless 'space' and meaningful, static 'place', and Henri Lefebvre's distinction between space as produced by designers, theoreticians and autocrats versus space as produced by the ordinary people who use it. These approaches are particularly useful in understanding MacNeice, as Jameson's emphasis on undifferentiated 'public' space ties into MacNeice's own apparent preferences, while Tuan and Lefebvre make finer distinctions between the kinds of space MacNeice most fears or dislikes, those which, according to Scarfe, would give MacNeice's work a 'centre' – space that is sanctified either by a religion or an ideology, and private domestic space – and those which he typically creates or uses. Jameson's argument is based in large part on architectural theory. He defines the modernist aesthetic in architecture as a break with the surrounding environment, while the postmodern building attempts to fit in with the (usually commercial) buildings in its immediate vicinity:

...the now more classical high-modernist space of a Corbusier or a Wright sought to differentiate itself radically from the fallen city fabric in which it appeared – its forms thus dependent on an act of radical disjunction from its spatial context...

postmodernist buildings, on the contrary, celebrate their insertion into the heterogeneous fabric of the commercial strip and the motel and fast-food landscape of the postsuperhighway American city. Meanwhile, a play of allusion and formal echoes (“historicism”) secures the kinship of these new art buildings with the surrounding commercial icons and spaces, thereby renouncing the high-modernist claim to radical difference and innovation.<sup>19</sup>

Put simply, the postmodern art building announces similarity rather than difference through references to its surroundings and to past styles; it is not a Utopian (or dystopian) space, set apart from its environment and therefore elitist. Rather, in its blend of past and contemporary styles and its refusal to distinguish absolutely between ‘inside’ and ‘outside’, the postmodern ‘has finally succeeded in transcending the capacities of the individual human body to locate itself, to organize its immediate surroundings perceptually, and cognitively to map its position in a mappable external world.’<sup>20</sup> The postmodern, then, gives us familiar reference points while refusing to tell us exactly where we are, much as MacNeice gives us poems in which a trick with windows and mirrors allows a taxi to park next to the poet’s desk.

Jameson associates the rise of the postmodern with a return to allegory from the concentration of imagery and internalization of private meanings associated with symbolism. MacNeice often named *The Pilgrim’s Progress* as one of his favorite books, despite his own lack of religious conviction, and the word ‘parable’ pops up frequently in relation

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<sup>19</sup> Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1991), 63.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 44.

to 1930s writing, though MacNeice's concern with the form continues into the 1960s. The 'reinvention of allegory' – defined as an expansion of literal meaning that is intended to be publicly understood – unseats the reigning Modernist orthodoxy, as Jameson argues:

...the displacement of Modernism by postmodernism can also be measured and detected in the crisis of the older aesthetic absolute of the Symbol, as its formal and linguistic values secured their hegemony in the long period from Romanticism to New Criticism and the canonization of "modernist" works in the university system in the late 1950s.<sup>21</sup>

The move from a private to a public form, then, is typical of postmodernism and indicates the reintroduction of a pre-Romantic mode of artistic expression – one which contains both public and private meanings, and is meant to be read outward, from the literal plane to the allegorical, rather than inward, to plumb the depths of a multivalent symbol. An important difference in form between the modern and the postmodern is, then, essentially directional.

Yi-fu Tuan shares Jameson's concern with space, though he terms the two poles of his spatial theory 'place' and 'space' rather than 'modern' or 'postmodern'. 'Place' is the product of 'space', and 'space' in its turn produces 'place':

In experience, the meaning of space often merges with that of place. "Space" is more abstract than "place." What begins as undifferentiated space becomes place as we get to know it better and endow it with value. Architects talk about the spatial qualities of place; they can equally well speak of the locational (place) qualities of

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 167.



space. The ideas “space” and “place” require each other for definition. From the security and stability of place we are aware of the openness, freedom, and threat of space, and vice versa. Furthermore, if we think of space as that which allows movement, then place is pause; each pause in movement makes it possible for location to be transformed into place.<sup>22</sup>

‘Space’ and ‘place’ are, for Tuan, opposite sides of the same coin; one represents freedom and movement, the other stasis. This is the important distinction to make between ‘space’ and ‘place’ in MacNeice’s work. Secure ‘places’ invested with meaning tend to be stagnant at best, terrifying and dangerous at worst. MacNeice is a poet who is most comfortable when he is on the move, and the freedom of ‘space’ seems to suit him. We can find common ground with Jameson’s theory of ‘postmodern’ space as well; while ‘place,’ like ‘modern’ space, is set up in a specific location and may be invested with particular symbolic meanings – think of Yeats’s towers, for example – ‘postmodern’ space lacks the landmarks or coordinates that allow the subject to locate himself or herself. ‘Postmodern’ space fails to provide specific points of orientation; all space blends into a single undifferentiated mass and all values are relative.

In *The Production of Space*, Henri Lefebvre posits three categories of spatial thinking: ‘spatial practice,’ ‘representations of space,’ and ‘representational space.’ ‘Spatial practice,’ for Lefebvre, ‘consists in a projection onto a (spatial) field of all aspects, ele-

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<sup>22</sup> Yi-fu Tuan, *Space and Place: The Perspective of Experience*. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1977), 6.

ments and moments of social practice.’<sup>23</sup> There are two kinds of space that can be produced in this manner. The first, ‘representations of space,’ is defined as ‘conceptualized space, the space of scientists, planners, urbanists, technocratic subdividers and social engineers, as of a certain kind of artist with a scientific bent – all of whom identify what is lived and what is perceived with what is conceived.’<sup>24</sup> This is an ideal conception of space; space is experienced as a product of the imagination, divided and portioned out as per the directions of the autocrat’s imagination. This is the space of High Modernism, space as a means of asserting control over the environment – or at least as a means of protecting oneself from what lies outside the walls one has imagined.

MacNeice’s work traffics in the third variety of spatial experience in Lefebvre’s schema, ‘representational space.’ ‘Representational space’ is not dreamed up by artists, planners, or scientists, but is instead

...space as directly *lived* (author’s emphasis) through its associated images and symbols, and hence the space of ‘inhabitants’ and ‘users’, but also of some artists and perhaps of those, such as a few writers and philosophers, who *describe* (author’s emphasis) and aspire to do no more than describe. This is the dominated – and hence passively experienced – space which the imagination seeks to change and appropriate.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Henri Lefebvre, The Production of Space, trans. By Donald Nicholson-Smith. (Oxford: Blackwell, 1974), 8.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 38.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 39.

This is the space of poetry as ‘journalism’ and the poet as a recorder of social life and environmental conditions, not as a force for change or a dominating imagination. MacNeice’s imagined spaces are rarely ideal; the outside world always threatens to tear them apart, and indeed the poet seems to encourage such engagement between inside and outside. MacNeice’s spaces are the spaces of everyday experience, not the spaces of retreat or conquest, as we will note when we discuss his particular animus towards towers.

This is not to say that MacNeice breaks from his predecessors in every way, springing up like Athena fully grown and fully armed from the imagination of a god. Rather, as Ihab Hassan argues, postmodernism is as much a continuation of modernism as it is a distinct historical and cultural movement:

...a ‘period’...must be perceived in terms *both* (author’s emphasis) of continuity and discontinuity, the two perspectives being complementary and partial. The Apollonian view, rangy and abstract, discerns only historical conjunctions; the Dionysian feeling, sensuous though nearly purblind, touches only on the disjunctive moment. Thus postmodernism, by invoking two divinities at once, engages a double view. Sameness and difference, unity and rupture, filiation and revolt, all must be honored if we are to attend to history, apprehend (perceive, understand) change both as a spatial, mental structure and as a temporal, physical process, both as pattern and unique event.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Ihab Hassan, *The Dismemberment of Orpheus: Toward a Postmodern Literature*. (University of Wisconsin Press, 1982), 264.

Postmodernism is possible only as an outgrowth of and a rupture from the mainstream of Modernism, just as MacNeice, in his first full-length book of criticism, *Modern Poetry* (1938), locates the roots of Modernist poetry in the pleasure-gardens of the Decadents and the pastoralism of the Georgians; indeed, Hassan's description of postmodernism as 'conjunction' coupled with 'disjunction' is not unlike MacNeice's own approach to 'pattern and flux,' which Terence Brown and others have noted in his work.<sup>27</sup> Hassan notes as well that postmodernist change is in part a 'spatial, mental structure,' an act of construction (or deconstruction) of space in the imagination. Modernist spatial structures are oriented towards defense, if not necessarily towards new construction; postmodernist spatial structures, meanwhile, confuse the conventional boundaries between inside and outside, inner structure and façade (or, as Jameson terms them, 'frame and wrapper.'<sup>28</sup>)

Romanticism and modernism share this concern with private space and private experience – both seek what Tuan calls 'place' in their construction of personal, subjective worlds. John Bayley sees this as romanticism's central concern:

Crudely speaking, the criterion of romantic success is to imagine a world different from anyone else's. This may be done self-consciously, by a perpetual, strong-willed juggling with abstracts, as in the case of Yeats; or instinctively, as in the case of Walter de la Mare or – to take a very different example – Dylan Thomas. But

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<sup>27</sup> Terence Brown, *Louis MacNeice: Sceptical Vision*. (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1975), 97.

<sup>28</sup> Jameson, *Postmodernism*, 111-2.

all Romantics are Robinson Crusoes, alone on a wide sea, and driven by 'le Coeur Robinson' to produce their own version of reality.<sup>29</sup>

Walter de la Mare and Yeats are very different kinds of poets, though, as Bayley argues, the Georgian pastoralist and the High Modernist employ more or less the same essentially romantic methodology. Poetry becomes increasingly divorced from the concerns of the everyday world: 'the premises on which any romantic poem is written are an acute consciousness of the isolated creating self on the one hand, and of a world unrelated, and possibly uninterested and hostile, on the other...'<sup>30</sup> Distrust of the external world leads to exploration of often obscure elements of personal subjectivity and the construction of personal Utopias. MacNeice, meanwhile, trusts the external world and its attendant flux more than he trusts the 'safe' boundaries of private islands intended to defend the 'isolated creating self'; it is the 'hostile' world that interests him, and that constantly threatens his imagined spaces.

In his revisionist study of the poetry of the 1930s, Adrian Caesar describes the predominant poetic impulse of the time as a reunification of the two disparate strands of romanticism mentioned in Bayley's example: 'the modernism of Eliot, Pound and Yeats with its reactionary political flavouring, and the more liberal, specifically English, Georgian tradition through poets like Wilfred Owen and Edward Thomas.'<sup>31</sup> Caesar places Eliot and Pound in the tradition of 'late nineteenth-century French Symbolism, which in turn may

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<sup>29</sup> John Bayley, *The Romantic Survival: A Study in Poetic Evolution*. (London: Constable, 1957), 83.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 9-10.

<sup>31</sup> Adrian Caesar, *Dividing lines: Poetry, class and ideology in the 1930s*. (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1991), 5.

be related to earlier theorists of Romanticism<sup>32</sup> rather than the neoclassicism with which both would have preferred to associate themselves, though he does not attempt to trace this development, nor does he name the ‘theorists’ who inspired Symbolism. Nevertheless, his definition of romanticism as applied to the modernist project seems appropriate: ‘If we define Romanticism as an impulse to create order from chaos, harmony from division, through a metaphysics of integration predicated upon the healing powers of the imagination, then...all twentieth-century poetry is Romantic in origin.’<sup>33</sup> Such a description fits the work of Yeats, Eliot, and Auden, as well as the Imagism and Vorticism of Ezra Pound and his closest associates, but cannot be stretched far enough to fully include MacNeice, who prefers letting flux and jarring juxtapositions remain as they are rather than trying to impose an artificial order upon them.

The retreat into private symbolic worlds, in which meaning is either purely personal or shared among a small group of initiates, is read by Lucy McDiarmid as a defensive action, meant to preserve what is best in civilization within a small clique who can then serve as an example to the rest of the world. This exclusive community preserves the values and material products of the past in order to save them from the forgetful masses:

If “civilization” is defined as material and symbolic artifacts alike, language as well as cathedrals, the whole “complex artificial environment”, then, for all the disparate writers between the wars, “saving” meant reassociating these artifacts

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<sup>32</sup> Idem.

<sup>33</sup> Idem.

with some communal value. They are redeemed when they become part of a shared system of belief.<sup>34</sup>

McDiarmid argues that these communities are given physical form by Yeats and Eliot, and that this form is indicative of the principles around which the community is founded: ‘The architectural structures in Eliot and Yeats, chapels, galleries, and great houses, suggest an idea of community that is external to its individual members.’<sup>35</sup> That is, there is an external authority of some sort that directs the action and the values of the community – a priest, a curator, a landlord. The members of these communities come together because they believe in something outside of, and more powerful than, themselves; their ‘representations of space’ are created in order to salvage what they can of ‘civilization’.

Such elite groups would be necessary to create a new order in the aftermath of the Great War, the conflict which shadowed the childhoods of both MacNeice and Auden, and this provided an opportunity for the renewal of the enervated European spirit:

The years just after the Great War brought dramatically to the European consciousness the fragmentation and unrest that had been growing since the middle of the nineteenth century. The cataclysmic destruction of one world seemed to have cleared the way for a new one. From the vantage point of 1939, the early twenties seemed to Eliot a time of “illusions”, when the “European Mind” might have been “renewed or fortified”.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> Lucy McDiarmid, Saving Civilization: Yeats, Eliot and Auden Between the Wars. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), 5.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 24.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, xv.

The language McDiarmid quotes at the end of this passage is worth noting, since in both places Eliot is concerned with the preservation of an imagined, ideal past which must be brought back; if this proves impossible, then the ‘chosen few’ will defend what’s left of it, even if the number of those who understand remains small (and, particularly for Yeats, Pound, and Eliot, the number of those who understand *ought* to be small). Caesar sees this dynamic at work in much of the poetry of the 1930s, particularly that of C. Day Lewis: ‘Day Lewis’s sequence [*The Magnetic Mountain*] is replete with...facile Romantic utopianism. The world ‘belongs’ to a group of public-school chums who are going to save it for themselves in a spirit of ‘play-up, play-up, and play the game’.’<sup>37</sup> The elitism of modernism is confirmed in the next generation, the poets who wandered around Oxford in the 1920s quoting from *The Waste Land* – in other words, MacNeice’s own peers.

This turn towards the inner, the private, and the sacred and away from the outer, the public, and the social is described by Edward Mendelson in terms of the difference between ‘vatic’ and ‘civil’ poetry. Romantic poets turn away from more civic-minded forms like the epic and the drama in favor of the lyric in an attempt to dislocate art from its specific social and historical contexts:

Romanticism, hearing epic resonance in the personal voice, glorified the lyric as the highest mode of poetry, and made it the vessel for philosophical and historical subjects few earlier ages would have tried to force into it. The large forms of literature and the arts left the service of specific audiences and social occasions, and

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<sup>37</sup> Caesar, *Dividing Lines*, 72.



became their own sufficient reasons for being. Art declared its independence from local settings, and established itself instead in the neutral international context of the museums and concert halls that sprang up as its temples, bastions of its newly won autonomy.<sup>38</sup>

Romantic art leaves the court, the public square, and other such sites of civic and social life, retreating into spaces that are specifically intended to accommodate it. Freed from his public duties, the artist explores his own subjectivity instead of writing coronation poems and singing the praises of his patron's spectacularly plain wife or mistress. Art of this type creates 'representations of space' intended to demonstrate not the poet's links to his social world and creative environment, but to show his dominance of it.

With this change in the social responsibilities of the artist comes a shift away from older forms of quest narrative towards a newer, largely internalized search for identity and meaning:

Formerly an allegory of civil obligation, the quest now became the allegory of inner discontent. In civil literature a quest hero ventured forth to seek a real goal that needed his presence, and that promised marriage and prosperity as a reward for his sufferings. But in literature that lacked external purpose, that had no audience who wanted it written, the quest, too, lost its tangible goals, and became compulsive and irresolute.<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> Edward Mendelson, Early Auden. (New York: Viking, 1981), xvi-xvii.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, xvii.

The romantic quest serves no practical purpose; no kingdom will be reunited, no princess will be rescued from a dragon, no society will be restored to order. It is its own end – exploration for its own sake – and the personal discoveries made will not be of the conventional sort. Childe Harold will not discover that he is the long-lost heir to a kingdom he must set to rights. He wanders only because it seems preferable to staying put. He carries his own space with him, much like the explorer MacNeice will mock in his radio play *Christopher Columbus* (1944); like many heroes of Romantic poetry, he is the bearer of what Edward Soja calls a ‘portable ego’, which he defines as ‘a remarkable micro-geography of human interaction hingeing (sic) around the portable bubbles of personal space zonation and ‘proxemic’ behaviour, a non-verbal and unwritten ordinary language of spatial intersubjectivity.’<sup>40</sup> MacNeice seems to enjoy bursting such ‘bubbles’ of subjectivity, bringing those who live in enclosed spaces into the harsh, glaring light of the social world.

It is this concept of an artist divorced from responsibility to anything other than an idiosyncratic personal vision that Mendelson calls ‘vatic’ poetry, and which he sees as evidence of the survival of romantic methods and subject matter into the twentieth century. Ezra Pound’s injunction for artists to ‘make it new’ represents an attempt not just to break away from civic duty, but from the political and cultural upheavals of the present moment:

Like romantic heroes lost upon the earth, the writers of modernism felt lost in historical time: to be modern was to be disenfranchised from a significant past. Vatic

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<sup>40</sup> Edward W. Soja, *Postmodern Geographies: The Reassertion of Space in Critical Social Theory*. (London: Verso, 1989), 151.

writing had always given credence to a lost mythical arcadia, a distant time when society was hierarchically secure and the grand manner still a natural tone of voice. Now the modernists translated this myth into a serious interpretation of history. They looked back to a recent European cataclysm that left society and art in exhausted disorder.<sup>41</sup>

Part of this cataclysm was the collapse of a shared, public set of ideas, emblems, and attitudes on which pre-romantic poetry had thrived. Mendelson refers to this as the ‘break-down of...the symbolic contract, the common frame of reference and expectation that joins a poet with a finite audience, and joins both with the subjects of his poems.’<sup>42</sup> Instead of trying to revive the symbolic contract, poets like Eliot and Yeats form personal sets of associations that privilege private meanings over accessibility.

The vatic poet is the hero of his own imagination’s psychodrama. What matters most is individual vision, and whether or not anyone understands it is immaterial. The powerful individual pursues his own goals, without regard for society’s rules or requirements. Rather than restoring the status quo, he creates his own:

Vatic poetry praises the unique powers of heroic individuality and longs for a past when heroism was unconstrained. Its freedom from conventional form is one manifestation of its wish; romantic Royalism, like the vague fascist sympathies of modernism, is another. The heroes of civil poetry are more cunning than volcanic, more

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<sup>41</sup> Mendelson, *Early Auden*, xvii.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, xviii.

intent on finding their way back to their city than on dying gloriously and far away; and a civil poet similarly finds his artistic challenge in demands made by existing poetic forms, forms that could be completed satisfactorily rather than left in deliberate fragments.<sup>43</sup>

The vatic poet is a kind of Nietzschean superman, rising above the taboos that constrained his forebears. In breaking the restraints of conventional form and symbolic contract, however, he becomes an island unto himself – an image that MacNeice will exploit in relation to his native country as well as other societies which he regards as closed or insular. MacNeice lives in dread of the island, though he finds it difficult to ward off its attractions; Yeats, Eliot, and Auden, meanwhile, are less resistant to the charms of obscurity and solipsism.

In MacNeice's work, the failure of the visionary experience is complete; the poet, distrustful of private, inner space and the vatic utterance, always allows himself a way out. Rooms are expanded outward through the use of windows and mirrors, and the latter reveal not the poet's own reflection, but other worlds glimpsed on the cusp of this reality. We notice as well the subversion of the private worlds of pastoral, and a peculiar animus against towers. Ancestral houses are places of stagnation and stifling dread; churches are sites of confusion and horror. If we read modernism as a defensive action dedicated to the preservation of 'sacred' or 'felicitous' space from the barbarous elements outside, then we cannot call MacNeice's poetry 'modernist'. Rather, his preference for dissolving barriers

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<sup>43</sup> Ibid., xix.

between inside and outside, his fear of ideologically loaded places, and his oft-expressed distrust of islands, both real and metaphorical, shows an affinity with postmodernism, if we accept Jameson's definition of postmodern space. This study aims to classify MacNeice as a pioneering postmodernist through a comparative analysis of five separate strands in his work.

In Chapter One, I will concentrate on MacNeice's criticism and aesthetic theory, with a particular focus on his preference for allegory and parable, or 'double-level writing', over symbolism and the poetic direction forecast by this preference for expansion of literal meaning over the concentration of multiple ideas and associations in a single image. In addition, I will examine MacNeice's reviews of his contemporaries, and compare his readings of particular poets and movements with those of Yeats, Eliot and Auden.

Chapter Two will cover the way MacNeice constructs public and private spaces in his poetry of the sort that are of primarily civic or domestic importance, in particular those that bear some resemblance to those created by the other poets included in this study. This chapter will explore MacNeice's interest in and deconstruction of the conventions of pastoral, as well as his use of particular recurring images that are part of the common stock of modernist tropes, including private rooms, towers, windows and mirrors, in order to demonstrate how he uses them in a postmodern way.

MacNeice was a prolific dramatist as well as a poet, and his plays, particularly those written for the BBC Features Department in the 1940s through the 1960s, will be the subject of Chapter Three. While Yeats, for example, built his theatrical sensibility around a

stock company that was tied to a particular location and an elitist aesthetic that eventually led him to writing plays to be performed for invited guests in drawing rooms rather than trying to satisfy a paying public, MacNeice wrote primarily for the radio, obliterating the need for a conventional performance space and breaking down the distinctions between different classes and categories of theatre-goers. I argue that MacNeice's dramatic work is postmodern in its form, its content, and its means of dissemination.

I have already alluded to MacNeice's rejection of conventional religious spaces, and Chapter Four will explore his resistance to sacred space in greater detail. Each of the other poets under consideration subscribes to the particular political and religious or occult ideologies discussed above. These ideological orientations give Yeats, Eliot and Auden a set of mythopoeic associations on which they can draw to provide structure and content for their poetry. Lacking such a framework, MacNeice revels in flux, expressing greater interest in the profane space outside of the cathedral.

Chapter Five traces each poet's work in collaboration with other artists. While MacNeice and Auden shared credit with those who assisted them in putting their works together, the older generation of modernists, including Yeats and Eliot, were less generous. Yeats, for example, is known to have written only a small part of the play *Cathleen ni Houlihan*, yet he does not credit Lady Gregory, who is believed to have been the primary author. Likewise, though he and Eliot both received a great deal of assistance from Ezra Pound, editorial and otherwise, he is never credited as a full collaborator by either poet, even on works which he arguably helped to write (though Yeats and Eliot both dedicated

some of their works to him). This chapter will apply Jacques Lacan's description of the Ego as a defense mechanism for the self, the author's 'private space', to MacNeice's life and work in order to demonstrate the ways in which a move away from 'ego-dominated' space is evident in his approach to writing.

Finally, I will discuss MacNeice's continuing influence, particularly on the generation of Northern Irish poets who came of age during the Troubles of the 1960s and 1970s. It has become fashionable for poets to name MacNeice as an influence, but his direct heir, as I aim to demonstrate, is Paul Muldoon, whose shifting, melting landscapes, clever wordplay, and deconstructions of conventional form echo both the substance and style of MacNeice's best work. This affinity with Muldoon is further evidence of MacNeice's postmodernist credentials, and separates him from a poet like Seamus Heaney who, though he is an avowed admirer of MacNeice, tends toward Yeatsian pastoral and a brand of regionalism reminiscent of John Hewitt.

This study demonstrates that MacNeice is more than an underappreciated late modernist, a 1930s left-wing poet, or a self-loathing Irishman. His interest in space that could not be contained within a closed structural framework is echoed in his resistance to political and religious commitments and his pioneering use of a cutting-edge dramatic medium. To think of MacNeice only as a member of 'the Auden Group' is to do him a disservice; more than any poet of his generation, he lets go of the romantic tradition of English poetry to create something radically new that blends inside and outside, personal and impersonal. In this respect, he is 20<sup>th</sup>-century Britain's first postmodern poet.

## Chapter One

### A Plea for Impure Poetry: MacNeice's Prose Criticism and Postmodernism

Although Louis MacNeice did not publish his first volume of mature poetry until 1935, he was writing perceptive criticism from the beginning of the decade, and continued to produce reviews and journalism until his death in 1963. As a critic, he shares the 1930s concern with art and its relationship to society, which he tempers with a keen understanding of poetry as an art form rather than a vehicle for propaganda. His critical prose, while constantly evolving and never systematic, foregrounds spatiality throughout his career. In particular, he takes issue with criticism that is narrowly moralistic or categorical; as Edna Longley notes, 'MacNeice's interchangeably negative terms for bad critics are 'puritanical' and 'procrustean' – terms that evoke ways in which minds might be closed in two countries.'<sup>44</sup> As such, he tends to notice things that his contemporaries ignore in their own work, particularly the ways in which they limit themselves, either through rigid adherence to an ideology or through lopping off the limbs of their ideas in order to fit them into smaller categories.

It is in this struggle with his contemporaries and his predecessors that MacNeice makes his most telling comments on space and its relationship to the poet and his audience.

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<sup>44</sup> Edna Longley, "Something Wrong Somewhere?": MacNeice as Critic', in Louis MacNeice and his Influence, ed. Kathleen Devine et al.. (Gerrards Cross, UK: Colin Smythe, 1998), 66.



His concern for poetry as a form of ‘communication’ between poet and reader rescues it from the esoteric difficulty of Eliot and Yeats, while working free from the constraints of the Marxist/Freudian system Auden sets up in his poetry. Conventional spatial categories, particularly as they relate to modernism, are effaced in MacNeice’s criticism, and the ways in which he employs them are postmodern in Fredric Jameson’s sense of the term. As Jameson writes, using Frank Gehry’s house in Santa Monica as an architectural metaphor for the postmodern,

The old wooden frame remains as a kind of scaffolding/memory in places, but the dining area and kitchen have now expanded beyond it and are essentially located in the former driveway and yard...These new areas, between the frame and the wrapper, are mostly glassed in and therefore visually open to and indistinguishable from the former “outside” or “outdoors”. Whatever aesthetic thrill we get from this formal innovation...will clearly have something to do with an effacement of the categories of inside/outside, or a rearrangement of them.<sup>45</sup>

The most important point Jameson makes here is in noting that the distance between the ‘frame’, or the structural framework of the house, and the ‘wrapper’, or outer covering, has increased, and as a result the house itself now includes areas that were once outside. Moreover, these areas are visible through glass to an observer standing outside of the house. It is this breaking down and expansion of formerly enclosed areas that MacNeice attempts in his criticism.

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<sup>45</sup> Jameson, Postmodernism, 111-2.

Since MacNeice's critical judgments evolve throughout his career, I will approach his major critical works chronologically, tracing the changing dynamics in his relationship with the history of English poetry and with the three major contemporaries mentioned in the introduction (Yeats, Eliot and Auden). In so doing, I aim to demonstrate that, while his opinions of particular poets, poems, and movements may change, and while he may in later works qualify remarks made in earlier books or essays, the core of MacNeice's criticism remains an aesthetics of spatial expansion, from his early concern with 'communication' and 'reportage' to his interest in parable, allegory, and 'dream-logic' in the years before his death. We see in MacNeice's prose a developing postmodernism that aims to push the poet out of the corners into which he claims the heirs of the *Symbolistes* painted themselves.

### **I. The 1930s and *Modern Poetry* (1938)**

Though he did not issue his first major book-length critical statement until the end of the decade, the pieces MacNeice wrote for various magazines and reviews in the 1930s show an awareness of the critical and poetic work of his most important contemporaries, as well as a keen interest in steering clear of either propaganda or aestheticism, both of which are noted as a limiting factor in the work of other writers. Writing for periodicals not only allowed MacNeice the space to develop ideas that would find more mature expression in *Modern Poetry*, but brought him into contact with a wide audience that shared his general political bent. Longley points out that MacNeice wrote for, among others, '*New Verse*, *Horizon*, the *Listener*,...*London Magazine* and *The New Statesman and Nation*...Here he

could count on a left-liberal readership for whom literature, culture and politics interpenetrated, even after the 1930s.<sup>46</sup> Thus, the audience that read his early reviews and essays was interested in and engaged with issues other than literature, and could be counted on to believe that these ‘outside forces’ had some kind of relevance for art.

These external elements are, for MacNeice, as important to the work of art as subject and sense. In ‘Poetry To-day’, first published in Geoffrey Grigson’s collection of essays, *The Arts To-Day* (1935), MacNeice argues against separating the ‘frame’ from the ‘wrapper,’ to borrow Jameson’s terms:

In every field of aesthetics people have been searching for what is *essential* (author’s emphasis). These investigations are mostly cant and clamour. You may not eat the shell of a nut but you can’t grow nuts without shells. Artistic organisms are too inextricably complex to be amenable to deliberate vivisection. You cannot divorce the substance of a poem from its accidents. No amount of theorizing will give you the essential in a bottle.<sup>47</sup>

While MacNeice’s argument that you can’t separate the nut from the shell without ruining it and his use of the word ‘organism’ suggest a superficial resemblance to modern theories of organic unity like Clive Bell’s ‘significant form’ and Yeats’s ‘unity of being’, by focusing the reader’s attention on the poem’s ‘accidents’ MacNeice shifts the emphasis away from concentrated imagery and towards a theory of poetry that embraces the random and

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<sup>46</sup> Longley, ‘MacNeice as Critic’, 56.

<sup>47</sup> Louis MacNeice, ‘Poetry To-day’, in *Selected Literary Criticism of Louis MacNeice*, ed. Alan Heuser. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1987), 11.

the chaotic as well as the carefully planned. As Alan Heuser writes, MacNeice had little time for poets who tried to prune all elements of the accidental from their poetry in favor of greater concentration: ‘the American Imagists had discouraged him with their miniature poems of arbitrary and often slack free verse.’<sup>48</sup> Such intense focus on a small, particular image, boiled down to what is ‘essential’, communicates nothing of importance and leaves little room for the play of sound and meaning that longer, looser forms made possible. This attempt to assert control over a poem by compressing it into a single sense impression is, in Lefebvre’s terms, a ‘representation of space’ by artists who seek to contain meaning in small, ‘procrustean’ spaces; MacNeice argues instead for a poetic that favors the ‘representational spaces’ of poetry as reportage of experience, not compression and distillation of it.

Like most of the High Modernists, MacNeice, in the short potted history of 19<sup>th</sup>- and 20<sup>th</sup>-century English poetry that is the center of ‘Poetry To-day’, displays a distinctly anti-Romantic bias. The major poetic movements of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, for MacNeice, cause poetry to part ways with the sensations of ordinary life:

English poetry of the 19<sup>th</sup> century was doomed by its own pretentiousness (‘poets are the unacknowledged legislators of the world’). Victorian scepticism made us draw in our horns: ‘Poetry is a Criticism of Life’. But Samuel Butler and his kind were the Critics of Life; the English poets of the 1890s, misapplying some recent hints from the French, left Life and Mankind out of it and turned to cultivating their own gardens. A suburban individualism prevailed, the penalty for the bumptious

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<sup>48</sup> Alan Heuser, ‘Introduction’, *Selected Literary Criticism of Louis MacNeice*, xix.

anarchism of the Romantic Revival. The poets of the 1890s 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.<sup>49</sup>

MacNeice's view of recent poetic history is linear in structure, and argues that poetry has diminished since the beginning of the Romantic Revival. This progression is easy to chart: for the Romantics, poetry not only affects life but can change the world and accepts no spatial boundaries; the Victorians retreat into 'criticism of life' and 'draw in their horns,' fleeing the expansive battlefield of Romanticism; the late Victorians retreat from life altogether into an 'art for art's sake' garden; finally, the Georgians are left afraid to take a stand on anything, and merely record individualistic impressions of nature. The movement throughout the century, for MacNeice, is towards a kind of artificial, pastoral, escapist poetry which the High Modernists will reject only to paint themselves into another kind of corner.

This is similar to the 'dissociation of sensibility' noted by earlier poet-critics, in which the spiritual function of poetry becomes divorced from its sensory content. In 'The Autumn of the Body' (1898), Yeats, drawing on William Blake's 'The Marriage of Heaven and Hell', locates this rupture in the ancient world, and asserts that the poet will soon take up the mantle of the priest yet again:

The arts are, I believe, about to take upon their shoulders the burdens that have fallen from the shoulders of priests, and to lead us back upon our journey by fill-

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<sup>49</sup> MacNeice, 'Poetry To-day', 14-5.

ing our thoughts with the essences of things, and not with things... We are about to substitute once more the distillation of alchemy for the analyses of chemistry and for some other sciences...<sup>50</sup>

T.S. Eliot, meanwhile, in his essay on 'The Metaphysical Poets' (1921), traces the point at which intellect and feeling come unglued to the second half of the 17<sup>th</sup> century, and blames that era's two most influential poets for the break:

The poets of the 17<sup>th</sup> century, the successors of the dramatists of the 16<sup>th</sup>, possessed a mechanism of sensibility which could devour any kind of experience. They are simple, artificial, difficult, or fantastic, as their predecessors were... In the 17<sup>th</sup> century a dissociation of sensibility set in, from which we have never recovered; this dissociation, as is natural, was aggravated by the influence of the two most powerful poets of the century, Milton and Dryden. Each of these men performed certain poetic functions so magnificently well that the magnitude of the effect concealed the absence of others.<sup>51</sup>

Eliot's examples, Milton and Dryden, concentrate too intently on a particular aspect of poetry, or harp on particular themes to the exclusion of others – Dryden is too much a creature of the Augustan social world, and Milton is 'a man whose sensuousness, such as it was, had been withered early by book-learning, and whose gifts were naturally aural'<sup>52</sup>, which

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<sup>50</sup> W.B. Yeats, 'The Autumn of the Body', in *The Collected Works of W.B. Yeats Vol. IV: Early Essays*, ed. Richard J. Finneran et al. (New York: Scribner, 2007), 141-2.

<sup>51</sup> T.S. Eliot, 'The Metaphysical Poets', *Selected Prose of T.S. Eliot*, ed. Frank Kermode. (New York: Harvest, 1975), 64.

<sup>52</sup> T.S. Eliot, 'Milton I', *Selected Prose of T.S. Eliot*, 259.

leads to a concern with sound over sense. Both Yeats and Eliot are concerned with getting at something 'essential' that they find is missing in contemporary poetry, but Yeats wants to get there through something like magic while Eliot wants to get there by reuniting the severed ends of poetry. Both smack of the hieratic, and both make great claims for poetry.

MacNeice locates the split at a later date than Yeats and Eliot, fixing it at the dawn of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and argues that those elements which have come undone are poetry and ordinary life. The Romantics begin the process by using poetry as a tool for shaping their world, and their arrogance begets the increasing levels of escapism seen in successive poetic generations. This sets the stage for the arguments MacNeice will develop further in *Modern Poetry*, which he describes in the Preface as 'a plea for *impure* poetry, that is, for poetry conditioned by the poet's life and the world around him.'<sup>53</sup> MacNeice's goal, in his poetry and his criticism, is to put the poet back into contact with the stuff of everyday life without sacrificing art for journalism. As he writes later in 'Poetry To-day' (sic),

'Pure poetry', as we have seen, is on the decline; this does not mean that poetry is to masquerade as anything else. For poetry *qua* poetry is an end and not a means; its 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.<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>53</sup> Louis MacNeice, *Modern Poetry: A Personal Essay*. (New York: Haskell House, 1969), Preface.

<sup>54</sup> MacNeice, 'Poetry To-day', 41.

The ‘external purport’, as MacNeice puts it, is not the reason for writing the poem, nor is it the goal the poet hopes to achieve. The goal is the poem itself, and the ‘external purport’ is what helps him to write it.

The one division that MacNeice does seem to maintain is that between the poet and his work. The influence of Eliot is perhaps most obvious here; as Eliot argues in his diatribe on Shelley in ‘The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism’ (1933), poetry can be best appreciated when the author’s biography does not intrude overmuch on his work:

I find [Shelley’s] ideas repellent; and the difficulty of separating Shelley from his ideas and beliefs is still greater than with Wordsworth. And the biographical interest which Shelley has always excited makes it difficult to read the poetry without remembering the man; and the man was humourless, pedantic, self-centred, and sometimes almost a blackguard. Except for an occasional flash of shrewd sense, when he is speaking of someone else and not concerned with his own affairs or with fine writing, his letters are insufferably dull.<sup>55</sup>

Shelley’s fatal flaw, as far as Eliot is concerned, is his inattention to that which does not originate inside himself. His most interesting work is that which does not involve his own life, beliefs, or theories. Shelley, and the other major Romantics, make everything personal, and, as Eliot claims, this makes their work dull.

MacNeice makes implicit use of this distinction between life and work in *Modern Poetry*, but with an angle that suggests a kind of *rapprochement*. At the end of a chapter

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<sup>55</sup> T.S. Eliot, ‘The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism’, Selected Prose of T.S. Eliot, 81.



called ‘The Personal Factor’, which comes immediately after the autobiographical chapters entitled ‘My Case-book’, he lists the factors that have conditioned his poetry up to the present moment:

Speaking for myself I should say that the following things, among others, had conditioned my poetry – having been brought up in the North of Ireland, having a father who was a clergyman; the fact that my mother died when I was little; repression from the age of 6 to 9; inferiority complex on grounds of physique and class-consciousness; lack of a social life until I was grown up; late puberty; ignorance of music (which could have been a substitute for poetry); inability to ride horses or practice successfully most of the sports which satisfy a sense of rhythm; an adolescent liking for the role of ‘enfant terrible’; shyness in the company of young women until I was 20; a liking (now dead) for metaphysics; marriage and divorce; Birmingham; an indolent pleasure in gardens and wild landscapes...; a liking for animals, an interest in dress.<sup>56</sup>

There are three major themes running through this paragraph that are important for our purposes. First, virtually all of the factors that MacNeice lists here relate to external impressions or to events that the poet did not instigate; by and large, these are treated as things that simply ‘happened’ to him. In addition, MacNeice insinuates that he writes poetry in part because it satisfies the basic human need for sound and rhythm, which he is unable

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<sup>56</sup> MacNeice, Modern Poetry, 88-9.

to fulfill elsewhere. Poetry is an important human activity because it gives us something which we require.

Finally, MacNeice tells us that these factors conditioned his *poetry*, not himself. The work and the artist are treated as separate entities. Up to a point, then, this follows Eliot's attitude towards separating the poet's life from his *oeuvre*. All of the factors which MacNeice lists, however, are specific events and tastes which are personal to him; we do not find any general impressions of the smell of cooking or the effect of reading Spinoza here. We have instead a compromise position. The poet's work is shaped neither by his personal subjectivity, nor by the arrangement of objective stimuli. Rather, the particular events in a poet's life impose themselves upon his poetry, penetrating the 'portable ego' he carries with him and invading his personal space with public concerns.

The importance of the poet's life to his body of work is demonstrated in the autobiographical chapters that comprise about 40 pages of *Modern Poetry*. Eliot did not write an autobiography, and any information about his life that we can gather from his critical prose has more to do with his artistic likes and dislikes than reference to particular events or insight into his psyche. Yeats wrote a great deal of autobiographical prose, though these deal mostly with his development as a feeling, perceiving subject; outside impressions enter the picture only to be ground into grist for Yeats's poetry, refracted through his particular perspective. MacNeice, on the other hand, attempts to combine the personal and the public in the 'My Case-book' chapters of *Modern Poetry*. The case-book begins in childhood, in which his approach to poetry is essentially formalist – 'What I was chiefly interested in was

the pattern of the words. My recipe for a poem was simple – use ‘thou’ instead of ‘you’ and make the ends of the lines rhyme with each other; no specific emotion or ‘poetic’ content required.<sup>57</sup> – and follows the poet through public school and university life into young adulthood, when he has married and taken up a lecturer’s post in Classics at the University of Birmingham:

Marriage at least made me recognize the existence of other people in their own right and not as vicars of my godhead. And I realized that while it is an asset to have an idiom, an idiom is only valuable as a differentiation of what is communal. Further, I had to earn my own living and this is antipathetic to a purely aesthetic view of life. And lastly, living in a large industrial city, Birmingham, I recognized that the squalor of Eliot was a romanticized squalor because treated, on the whole, rather bookishly as *décor*. The ‘short square fingers stuffing pipes’ were not brute romantic objects abstracted into a picture by Picasso, but were living fingers attached to concrete people – were even, in a sense, *my* fingers.<sup>58</sup>

What MacNeice gives us in these autobiographical chapters is a personalized version of the history of poetry he introduced in ‘Poetry To-day’. He moves from a kind of ‘pure sound’ poetry, based entirely on poetic diction and rhyme, through a kind of austere aestheticism in his teens and early twenties, and finally ‘graduates’ into an interest in the content of poetry, as he has to make his own living in the world outside of public school and Oxford

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<sup>57</sup> Ibid., 39.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid., 74.

and thus learns that other people are more than objects. Subject and object must both be included in the equation; as Peter McDonald reads this aspect of MacNeice's criticism, 'It is clear that neither world nor self can be discarded here, though at the same time the exclusive claims of both must be resisted.'<sup>59</sup> A successful poem, then, blurs the distinction between that which comes from within the self, and that which comes from without, as both must occupy the same locational coordinates.

Form never disappears from the equation, nor does MacNeice's pleasure in language as an end in itself, though both are subordinated to the idea of poetry as engagement with the space beyond the self. As Terence Brown writes, the adult poet continues an *agon* with his younger self:

The mature poet was sure of what poetry ought to be – an engaged criticism of life, communicating with the public, in verse which perfectly weds subject and form; the other (the residue of his youthful enthusiasms) was tempted to regard imaginative conceits and elaborate decorativeness as worthwhile in and of themselves.<sup>60</sup>

The young Oxford aesthete of the 1920s has not disappeared, but he has found ways to connect poetry and his thinking about poetry to real life, as we see in his definition of poetic language, which privileges the poetic over the scientific. Scientific language, MacNeice claims, 'attempts to record or analyse phenomena objectively without personal bias or emotion and without *formal* (author's emphasis) considerations other than those of sheer

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<sup>59</sup> Peter McDonald, *Louis MacNeice: The Poet in his Contexts*. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991), 65.

<sup>60</sup> Brown, *Sceptical Vision*, 127.

utility...'; moreover, 'Very few people use language frequently in this way.'<sup>61</sup> The bulk of our everyday language is that which MacNeice would define as 'poetic':

We are speaking poetically rather than scientifically when we 'make conversation', when we make a joke, when we use cliché metaphors or racy slang, when we express any emotion either by meiosis or hyperbole, when we let off steam by using bad language or surplus superlatives, when we say, 'It *would* rain just now when I've hung my washing out.'<sup>62</sup>

Two important differences between these contrasting uses of language inform these remarks. First, we note that scientific language is used only by a few people with specialized knowledge for purely utilitarian purposes – it is, like the spaces created by the High Modernists, exclusive and elitist – while 'every one without exception puts together words poetically every day of his life.'<sup>63</sup> In addition, the forms of speech which MacNeice defines as 'poetic' – conversation, jokes, slang, clichés – are all 'conventional' in that their use is governed by sets of rules that are largely determined socially. A joke, for example, depends on shared competency between speaker and listener in both the language of the joke and the social milieu in which it occurs in order for the punch line to have any effect; both sides must agree on what makes a joke successful, in contrast to the 'top-down' structure of scientific language, which is largely determined by specialists.

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<sup>61</sup> MacNeice, *Modern Poetry*, 31.

<sup>62</sup> Idem.

<sup>63</sup> Idem.

This is quite different from Eliot's idea of poetic language, as expressed in 'The Metaphysical Poets': 'The poet must become more and more comprehensive, more allusive, more indirect, in order to force, to dislocate if necessary, language into his meaning...'<sup>64</sup>; that is, the poet must force language into new spaces in order to make it conform to his desired meaning. This spatial 'dislocation' of language can result in solipsism or obscurity. As D.E.S. Maxwell points out, in *Modern Poetry* MacNeice, in contrast to Eliot, who gives all of the power of assigning meaning to the poet, adopts a social constructionist view of language, as words have only a social meaning and a social existence:

MacNeice's *Modern Poetry* makes the...point [that]...words are essentially social, both in origin and in function. Their connotations develop from their social use, their purpose is communication. They are 'community products', and the poet's business is to use them in a way that will make the 'things' mentioned in the poem its primary feature, a theory which exactly reverses Eliot's emphasis.<sup>65</sup>

Eliot's 'dislocations' of language are only meaningful, then, to the person who did the dislocating, since there has been no agreement between poet and reader that such dislocation is valid. MacNeice's definition of poetry as a form of communication restores the reader as a co-creator of meaning. This is in keeping with his distaste for poetry that appears to be a mere linguistic game as well; Valentine Cunningham notes MacNeice's distaste for Wil-

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<sup>64</sup> Eliot, 'The Metaphysical Poets', 65.

<sup>65</sup> D.E.S. Maxwell, *Poets of the Thirties*. (New York: Barnes & Noble, 1969), 31-2.

liam Empson's poetry 'for being merely a set of soluble puzzles'<sup>66</sup>. The poem has to mean *something*, and the poet has to communicate this meaning to the reader.

This view of the poet as a communicator who loves language for its own sake finds an analogue in Auden's 'Introduction to *The Poet's Tongue*' (1935), in which he describes poetry as 'memorable speech':

That is to say, it must move our emotions, or excite our intellect, for only that which is moving or exciting is memorable, and the stimulus is the audible spoken word and cadence, to which in all its power of suggestion and incantation we must surrender, as we do when talking to an intimate friend.<sup>67</sup>

Apart from a description of 'scientific' speech that is remarkably close to MacNeice's – in which 'the aura of suggestion round every word...must be rigorously suppressed and confined to a single dictionary' definition<sup>68</sup> - it should be noted that the key words here are not akin to MacNeice's idea of the 'everyday', that is, of conversational language as poetic. Further on in the essay, Auden argues that virtually any *subject* is fit for treatment in poetry, but it must be treated in a special way – through 'suggestion' and 'incantation', the key words of the *Symbolistes* and their successors. Auden's early theories of poetry remain closer to the fountainhead of High Modernist thought than MacNeice's.

We see further evidence of Auden's essentially Romantic view of poetic vocation in 'The Prolific and the Devourer' (1939), an aphoristic account of his development as a poet

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<sup>66</sup> Valentine Cunningham, *British Writers of the Thirties*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), 70.

<sup>67</sup> W.H. Auden, 'Introduction to *The Poet's Tongue*', in *The English Auden*, ed. Edward Mendelson. (New York: Random House, 1977), 327.

<sup>68</sup> *Idem*.

that remained unpublished during his lifetime. He describes the moment at which he knew himself to be a poet as a kind of epiphany:

I doubt if anyone with both these passions, for the word and for the symbol, could become anything but a poet. At any rate, when at the age of sixteen a schoolfriend casually asked me one day if I wrote poetry, I, who had never written a line or even read one with pleasure, decided at that moment that poetry was my vocation, and though, when I look at my work, I am often filled with shame and disgust, I know that, however badly I may write, I should do anything else even worse, and that the only way in which I shall ever see anything clearly is through the word and the symbol.<sup>69</sup>

The stimulus into poetry is external, as it was in MacNeice's case-book, but the emphasis in MacNeice's account was on the poetry itself, not on 'poet' as an identity. Auden, in this passage, is a poet because he does not feel he can be anything else; poets are apparently special people who cannot be other than what they are, rather than, as MacNeice would have it, 'specialist(s) in something which every one practices.'<sup>70</sup> MacNeice's 'ideal' poet is, as Robyn Marsack puts it, 'a man wholly alert, but not essentially different from other men.'<sup>71</sup> Auden's definition of 'poet' depends on inner subjectivity, and on 'poet' as a category that a certain kind of person might occupy.

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<sup>69</sup> W.H. Auden, 'The Prolific and the Devourer', *The English Auden*, 398.

<sup>70</sup> MacNeice, *Modern Poetry*, 178.

<sup>71</sup> Robyn Marsack, *The Cave of Making: The Poetry of Louis MacNeice*. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1982), 42.



What MacNeice seems to advocate in his criticism of the 1930s is an alternative to what he calls the ‘corner-poetry’ of the *Symbolistes* and their disciples. The Imagists, he suggests, despite their attempts to ‘produce poetry that is hard and clear, never blurred or indefinite’, still produce only ‘images in a vacuum [that] seem no more concrete than the Symbolists’ floating suggestions.’<sup>72</sup> That is, in ignoring context, the Imagists end up creating only free-floating images that do not add up to any kind of communicable meaning. Eliot, Yeats and Auden all offer ways out of the corner, though they have not abandoned its confines entirely, as MacNeice points out in ‘Subject in Modern Poetry’ (1936):

Yeats and Eliot broke away from the stifling fashion of corner-poetry. ‘We live in our own corner,’ the poets had been saying, ‘apart from the rest of the room.’ It did not occur to them that there is no such thing as a corner in abstraction from a room. Still, a corner can be more or less screened off. Yeats and Eliot themselves are still fairly well screened when compared with Wilfred Owen or even with Auden and Spender.<sup>73</sup>

The spatial metaphor is important here. What MacNeice wants is for poets to leave the corner and enter the room, or, better still, to leave the room and enter the wider world. Eliot and Yeats, he argues, move further into the room than the *Symbolistes* or the Georgians did, but remain concealed behind a screen, cut off from any real contact with ordinary life; in *Modern Poetry*, he refers to Eliot and Yeats as ‘poet(s) of the library’<sup>74</sup>. Rather than de-

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<sup>72</sup> MacNeice, *Modern Poetry*, 9-10.

<sup>73</sup> Louis MacNeice, ‘Subject in Modern Poetry’, *Selected Literary Criticism of Louis MacNeice*, 68.

<sup>74</sup> MacNeice, *Modern Poetry*, 168.

constructing the distinction between the ‘frame’ and the ‘wrapper,’ Eliot and Yeats create a new ‘wrapper’ within the ‘frame’ which results in the construction of a new space within a space. This sub-space is still closed off from the rest of room, however. It is, like the ‘corner’ of the Decadents and the Georgians, a private world.

Perhaps the most frequently quoted passage in *Modern Poetry* is MacNeice’s description of his ideal poet towards the end of the book. The poet should be, according to MacNeice, ‘a blend of the entertainer and the critic or informer; he is not a legislator, however unacknowledged, nor yet, essentially, a prophet.’<sup>75</sup> He stands both within and slightly outside of his society – he is close enough to understand it, but detached enough to criticize it. Indeed, an understanding of and engagement with the world around him seems to be the poet’s most important characteristic:

My own prejudice...is in favour of poets whose worlds are not too esoteric. I would have a poet able-bodied, fond of talking, a reader of the newspapers, capable of pity and laughter, informed in economics, appreciative of women, involved in personal relationships, actively interested in politics, susceptible to physical impressions.<sup>76</sup>

Once again, his bias is for the room and everything and everyone that it contains against the corner, in favor of engagement and against seclusion or escapism. The successful poet is a man of the world, not a man of the library, and must be willing and able to immerse himself in the life that others live.

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<sup>75</sup> Ibid., 197.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid., 198.

## II. *The Poetry of W.B. Yeats and the 1940s*

Most of the major 1930s poets found themselves on the defensive after 1939. Day Lewis and Spender had by this time left the Communist party, and Auden was backpedaling on his previous enthusiasm for Marx, Freud, and the idea of a socially engaged poetry; only MacNeice, never having adopted any particular creed or ideology, entered the 1940s with his critical opinions and political credibility largely intact. While the others retreat, MacNeice both defends the artistic decisions they made in the 1930s and refines his own ideas about poetry. His first major pre-war test comes in 1939, when the BBC broadcast from Belfast a debate between MacNeice and the Irish poet F.R. Higgins. Higgins argued for the orthodox Yeatsian position, and defends the *Symboliste*-derived idea of ‘pure poetry’ as a national(ist) property:

I am afraid, Mr. MacNeice you as an Irishman, cannot escape from your blood, nor from our blood-music that brings the racial character to mind. Irish poetry remains a creation happily, fundamentally rooted in rural civilization, yet aware and in touch with the elementals of the future. We have seen the drift of English poetry during the past few centuries – the retreat from the field to the park, from the pavement to the macadamed street, from the human zoological garden to the cinder heap where English verse pathetically droops today. You do not wish to repudiate us for that?<sup>77</sup>

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<sup>77</sup> Qtd. Stallworthy, Louis MacNeice, 256.

The movement in space which Higgins postulates for the contemporary poet is of paramount importance here; it is an aimless ‘drift’ from spaces of labor and conservation to spaces of leisure and waste. It also represents a move from stillness into activity – while a field, for example, is worked only at planting and harvest, a park is occupied year-round. Likewise, while nothing much happens on pavement most of the time, travelers move constantly up and down a busy street. Stasis is preferable to movement, and MacNeice as an expatriate, according to Higgins, still carries with him this Irish stillness despite his English ‘drift.’ Higgins appeals to MacNeice’s own sense of ‘national’ feeling as an Irishman living abroad, but MacNeice refuses to take the bait and goes on to reveal the oversimplified binary logic that informs Higgins’s argument:

I have the feeling that you have sidetracked me into an Ireland *versus* England match...I think that one may have such a thing as one’s racial blood-music, but that, like one’s unconscious, it may be left to take care of itself....Compared with you, I take a rather common-sense view of poetry. I think that the poet is a sensitive instrument designed to record anything which interests his mind or affects his emotions. If a gasometer, for example, affects his emotions, or if the Marxian dialectic, let us say, interests his mind, then let them come into his poetry. He will be fulfilling his function as a poet if he records these things with integrity and with as much music as he can compass or as is appropriate to the subject.<sup>78</sup>

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<sup>78</sup> Ibid., 256-7.

MacNeice's response dismisses the importance of anything as far outside of the poet's own control as his 'racial blood-music'; instead, he largely reiterates the arguments he made in *Modern Poetry* about the poet's function as a sensitive individual who artfully records impressions made upon him by objects in the outside world. Inspiration comes from without, not from within; it is Higgins's idea of poetry, dependent upon race and nationality, which ends up sounding more artificial.

Part of MacNeice's larger argument in this period is that his generation did maintain its integrity, despite the disappointments that they endured as the world lurched toward war and the criticisms leveled at them by insular traditionalists like Higgins. In a 1940 lecture delivered to the Workers' Educational Society of Brighton and later reprinted in *Folios of New Writing* as 'The Leaning Tower', Virginia Woolf argued that the essentially upper-middle-class writers of the 1930s Left preached revolution from a tower that leaned toward the earth but didn't quite touch it; she went on to ask, 'How can a writer who has no first-hand experience of a towerless, of a classless society create that society?'<sup>79</sup> MacNeice, responding in the spring of 1941 in the same journal, argues that her claim is based on false premises:

Do not be misled by her metaphor of the Tower. The point of this metaphor was that a certain group of young writers found themselves on a leaning tower; this presupposes that the rest of the world remained on the level. But it just didn't. The

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<sup>79</sup> Qtd. in MacNeice, 'The Tower that Once', *Selected Literary Criticism*, 121.

whole world in our time went more and more on the slant so that no mere abstract geometry or lyrical uplift could cure it.<sup>80</sup>

Furthermore, he writes, ‘As for the Leaning Tower, if Galileo had not had one at Pisa, he would not have discovered the truth about falling weights.’<sup>81</sup> Woolf means for her Leaning Tower to represent a kind of false or illusory engagement; MacNeice turns this around by suggesting first that the Tower leans because the ground beneath it is lurching. The Tower cannot be a retreat from the world around it, as its very foundations are dependent upon the soil in which they are laid.

The tower is, of course, one of the central images in the work of W.B. Yeats, whose own Norman tower at Thor Ballylee would anchor one of his greatest mid-career sequences. It is to Yeats and the problems of his influence that Auden and MacNeice return throughout the 1940s. Auden addresses the dead poet in a 1939 poem, and in a number of short essays; MacNeice wrote the first book-length study of Yeats to appear after the poet’s death. Auden’s first attempt to come to grips with Yeats’s legacy appeared in the Spring 1939 issue of the *Partisan Review* as ‘The Public v. the Late Mr. William Butler Yeats’. The title sets up a melee between public and private of which Yeats himself would have approved; it suggests an artist who is on trial for not giving the public exactly what they want, and the Public Prosecutor accuses Yeats of failing to achieve ‘greatness’ for being out of step with the times: ‘The deceased had the feudal mentality. He was prepared to admire the poor

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<sup>80</sup> Ibid., 120.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid., 124.

just as long as they remained poor and deferential, accepting without protest the burden of maintaining a little Athenian band of literary landowners, who without their toil could not have existed for five minutes.’<sup>82</sup> Furthermore, his sins include subscribing to the antiquated idea that ‘poetry existed in some private garden of its own’ and for preferring to live in ‘the world of noble houses, of large drawing rooms inhabited by the rich and the decorative’.<sup>83</sup> In short, he stands accused of aestheticism and snobbery, of living in an enclosed, rarified rural world in which the peasant or worker is at best an ornamental figure, and at worst finds his labor exploited by Yeats and his aristocratic friends.

The Counsel for the Defence counters that the Prosecutor’s argument tells us next to nothing about Yeats’s poetry, the ostensible subject of the debate, and focuses instead on the deceased’s failings as a human being. The Prosecutor, the Defence argues, asks too much from poets, or is at least asking for the wrong things:

Poetry in such a view is the filling up of a social quiz; to pass with honours the poet must not score less than 75%. With all due respect to my learned friend, this is nonsense. We are tempted so to judge contemporary poets because we really do have problems which we really do want solved, so that we are inclined to expect everyone, politicians, scientists, poets, clergymen, to give us the answer, and to blame them indiscriminately when they do not.<sup>84</sup>

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<sup>82</sup> W.H. Auden, ‘The Public v. the Late Mr. William Butler Yeats’, *The English Auden*, 390.

<sup>83</sup> *Idem*.

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.*, 391.

Poets, the Defence argues, do perform a vital social function; they have ‘the power to make personal excitement socially available’<sup>85</sup> – that is, they can effectively communicate their enthusiastic responses to the stimuli around them to others – but while they can be shapers of language, they react to historical trends rather than moving them in particular directions:

...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.<sup>86</sup>

The Defence thus demonstrates that the Prosecutor has the wrong idea about what the social function of art should be. If art has any relationship to the coming Socialist revolution against the corrupt, crumbling edifice of liberal capitalism, it is reactive rather than proactive.

Auden gives both the Prosecutor and the Defence equal space in which to make their case, and allows both to argue passionately and convincingly; no doubt he approached the problem from these contrary positions in order to work out for himself whether or not he thought Yeats was a great poet. As Samuel Hynes notes, however, the Prosecutor sounds more like the comparatively dogmatic C. Day Lewis than like Auden, while ‘the defence

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<sup>85</sup> *Idem.*

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid.*, 392.



gets the best lines, and the last speech'; for Hynes, this essay marks Auden's departure from the concerns of the 1930s – 'The whole essay is a public gesture of a change of heart; Auden had abandoned the conviction that poetry could be an agent in history, and had accepted what he offers as Yeats' view – the vision of tragedy.'<sup>87</sup> I take issue with Hynes's claim that in this essay – which is itself written with self-skewering irony and Auden's sense of humor (something which Yeats lacked) firmly in evidence – Auden adopts an idea of poetry as 'the vision of tragedy', which seems to me to come too close to making claims for a 'socially responsible' poetry, when in fact the opposite seems to be the case. Indeed, one of the most famous lines in 'In Memory of William Butler Yeats' is lifted from this essay – 'For poetry makes nothing happen'<sup>88</sup> – and Auden would, in other essays of the 1940s, back further away from the claims his generation had made for poetry in the 1930s. Hynes is correct in pointing out that the Defence appears to be closer to Auden's own views, or at least to those that he would develop later in the decade, and that this essay does mark a major shift in Auden's thinking about poetry. The scales tip further for the Defence when we take into account, as Edward Mendelson does, that 'Yeats is being accused not by the Crown or the People but by a category for which Auden never in his life had a good word, the *Public* (author's emphasis), not a community or a nation or a society or even a crowd, all of which comprise individuals with human faces, however distorted.'<sup>89</sup> The Public Pros-

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<sup>87</sup> Hynes, *The Auden Generation*, 350.

<sup>88</sup> Auden, *The English Auden*, 242.

<sup>89</sup> Edward Mendelson, *Later Auden* (New York: Farrar, Strauss & Giroux, 1999) 17.

ecutor speaks on behalf of an abstraction of mass-consciousness, not a concrete group or entity, which gives the Defence the advantage of arguing on behalf of a real person.

MacNeice's struggle with Yeats leads him in an entirely different direction. First, he seems to have felt Yeats's death not only as an important juncture in the history of modern poetry, but as an opportunity to think through his personal relationships with both his homeland and his powerful precursor. Jon Stallworthy writes that the elder poet's death got MacNeice to abandon his strategy of avoidance and grapple directly with Yeats's influence:

MacNeice had told [Geoffrey] Grigson [editor of *New Verse*] some years before that he had given up rereading Yeats for fear of being influenced, but the Arch-Poet's death in January 1939 seems to have removed that threat. On 1 March, MacNeice read a paper on 'Yeats' to a meeting of the Association of Writers for Intellectual Liberty, and that spring was commissioned by Oxford University Press to write a critical study of Yeats's work. He must have hoped this would make him some money but, more importantly, probably felt a need to 'have it out with Yeats' and define some of his own attitudes and priorities in relation to those of his fellow countryman.<sup>90</sup>

*The Poetry of W.B. Yeats* (1941) was largely written in the United States, where MacNeice had taken up a temporary teaching position at Cornell, and ambivalence over his own temporary retreat from wartime commitment perhaps brings him closer to an understanding of what he had labeled 'escape poetry' in the 1930s – and, as Peter McDonald has argued,

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<sup>90</sup> Stallworthy, *Louis MacNeice*, 253.

both the journey to the USA and the Yeats book represent ‘in part at least, a way of distancing himself from the public image of the ‘Auden generation’...’<sup>91</sup>. Unlike Auden, he is willing to acknowledge Yeats’s greatness without reservations, and to take his generation to task for not taking Yeats’s ideas seriously enough:

[Yeats] was neither so simple-minded nor so esoteric nor so dilettante a poet as he is often represented. I have met people whose attitude is ‘Yeats was a silly old thing but he was a *poet*.’ This is a foolish attitude. No silly old thing can write fine poetry. A poet cannot live by style alone; nor even by intuitions alone. Yeats, contrary to some people’s opinion, had a mind. He also had an extraordinary force of personality. It is impossible to explain him by merely murmuring about Beauty.<sup>92</sup>

This is perhaps a riposte to Auden, who wrote in ‘In Memory of William Butler Yeats’ that ‘You [Yeats] were silly like us...’<sup>93</sup>; ‘silly,’ in Auden’s usage, seems to refer to the belief that poetry is itself a powerful agent of historical change, a belief that, as we have seen above, Auden had abandoned by 1939. MacNeice, meanwhile, argues that we should take Yeats’s ideas seriously, not necessarily because he was correct, but because Yeats took them seriously, and as such they are vital to an understanding of his work.

For MacNeice, part of what marks Yeats as a great poet is his ability to reach an audience despite his esotericism; after all, Yeats did not lack for readers, and as such, despite

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<sup>91</sup> McDonald, *Louis MacNeice*, 99.

<sup>92</sup> Louis MacNeice, *The Poetry of W.B. Yeats* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1941) 31.

<sup>93</sup> Auden, *The English Auden*, 242.

his contempt for popular opinion, connected his private symbols to real-world events and to concepts with which his readers were familiar. As MacNeice writes,

We can say...that many poets – including, I think, Yeats – are more likely to write well, that is with clarity, strength, and emotional honesty, where they are writing about something which has moved them *and others* (author's emphasis) in their own time than when they are writing about something which belongs more exclusively to their own private mythology. We can say also that readers are more likely to react poetically to material which they know themselves than to material which they have to take on trust from the poet.<sup>94</sup>

Like many of MacNeice's critical positions, this calls for collaboration and compromise. One thing that sets MacNeice apart as a critic is that he never fails to keep a wider, even a popular, audience in mind, yet does so without advocating a lowering of poetic standards. Rather, this passage, like much of his critical work, tries to bring poet and reader out of their separate, private worlds and back into contact with one another and with the world at large.

It is this preference for liminal relationships that leads MacNeice to condemn both the aestheticism of the older generation and the facile realism of his contemporaries. The aesthetes, MacNeice argues,

...had gone too far in asserting that poetry can be judged without any reference to life. But the realists went too far in the other direction. A poem does not exist in a vacuum, but a poem at the same time *is* a unity, a creation. Criticism based on the

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<sup>94</sup> MacNeice, The Poetry of W.B. Yeats, 20.

assumption that a poem is a mere *translation* (author's emphasis) of facts is vicious criticism. The facts outside a poem, the facts which occasion a poem, are no longer the same facts when they have been fused into a poem.<sup>95</sup>

This is sometimes read as a slight retreat, or, as Edna Longley would have it, a 'realignment'<sup>96</sup> from his position in *Modern Poetry* that poetry is essentially 'reportage' or 'journalism'. MacNeice's own statement, however, reads more as a refinement of his previous position rather than a rejection; poetry must still be about something and deal with the world of facts, but reportage or journalism alone do not make a poem. Poetry and 'real life' must not be kept apart in hermetically sealed jars. Rather, they should be allowed to cross-pollinate.

It was his realization of this that allows Yeats to rise above early contemporaries like Lionel Johnson and Ernest Dowson, who '...lived in the Ivory Tower and died because of it.'<sup>97</sup> The Ivory Tower of dreams is a death-trap with no particular connection to the everyday world; the concrete, real-world content in Yeats's poetry, meanwhile, was largely supplied by Ireland, its folk-culture, and its mythology: 'Yeats escaped [the 'art for art's sake' trap] because he harnessed the aesthetic doctrine to a force outside itself which he found in his own country.'<sup>98</sup> That is, he uses the material provided by his native land in order to make beautiful things. This remains in keeping with the idea of Yeats as a

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<sup>95</sup> Ibid., 18.

<sup>96</sup> Longley, *Louis MacNeice: A Study*, 99.

<sup>97</sup> MacNeice, *The Poetry of W.B. Yeats*, 43.

<sup>98</sup> Ibid., 45.

poet with a relatively narrow range of interests, though at least these interests consistently inform his poetry.

MacNeice finds Yeats's relationship with Ireland helpful not only in understanding his poetry, but in helping him to write his way out of the Pre-Raphaelite cul-de-sac. He writes that the phases in the elder poet's career were largely shaped by his shifts in opinion regarding Irish nationalism:

In his early days he tried to equate Ireland with a Celtic Utopia – a land of beautiful dreams...During this period his nationalism was orthodox and romantic. In his middle years some experience of public life and politics disillusioned him. The kind of nationalism he admired was in decline. The nationalism dominant...was vulgar...<sup>99</sup>

Here, MacNeice draws an analogy between Yeats and his own 1930s contemporaries, who were by 1941 largely backing away from the leftist commitments of the 'Red Decade,' their experience of failure in Spain and betrayal by Stalin throwing mud on their earlier idealism. Yeats's 'Celtic Utopia' is of a different sort – it is aristocratic rather than socialist – but MacNeice recognizes it as being of a piece with similar fantasy worlds conjured up by his friends. When reality tears down the walls of Yeats's Utopian fantasy, forcing it to face up to material facts, the result is 'vulgarity' – that is, the triumph of the mob. The romantic aesthete can only defend the gates from the barbarians for so long.

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<sup>99</sup> Ibid., 46.

Engagement with ‘earthly things’ is not something that comes quickly or easily to Yeats, according to MacNeice’s reading of him. MacNeice provides Yeats with a poetic genealogy that begins with the Romantics, and which has ‘escape’ as its primary theme:

Yeats’s early poems are in the Victorian tradition which itself was a development from the Romantic Revival. Tennyson would not have come into being without Keats. Rossetti would not have come into being without Tennyson. One of the chief characteristics of this line of poets – in their better poems – is an autumnal, almost a morbid, languor. *The Isle of the Lotus Eaters*.<sup>100</sup>

MacNeice here reads the legacy of Romanticism, if not the work of the Romantics themselves, as one of disengagement from the everyday. Even poets who were deeply engaged in the intellectual and political struggles of their times are, MacNeice argues, read by Yeats as symbolic and esoteric. Shelley, for example, who loaned Yeats much of his characteristic imagery (particularly towers, caves, and stars, as Yeats admits in ‘The Philosophy of Shelley’s Poetry’ (1900)), was attacked by Eliot for failing to conceal his ideas behind symbols and for letting them invade his poetry in a crude manner. Yeats, however, ‘set out...to find literal religious truths in the poetry of Shelley. But these ‘literal’ truths, as so often with Yeats, continually lapse into symbols...’<sup>101</sup> Even when he is trying to access the literal, Yeats is unable to quit the impulse to obscure it behind a symbol. He is incapable of reading Shelley literally, and instead compresses even Shelley’s real-world schemes into

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<sup>100</sup> MacNeice, *The Poetry of W.B. Yeats*, 61.

<sup>101</sup> *Ibid.*, 59.

symbols to be read esoterically. While the Romantics may have been involved in the everyday world in their way, their descendants turn their towers and caves into private spaces, private symbols.

All that is left for the Romantic in the early twentieth century, as MacNeice writes of A.E. Housman, is ‘masochistically practising heroics in the last ditch’<sup>102</sup>, and this is what MacNeice argues is behind Yeats’s veneration of the Anglo-Irish Ascendancy and their Big Houses. Indeed, one of the attractions of the Big House is the fact that it is walled off from the modern world and from the vulgarity of commerce. In his attempt to escape from the vulgarity of the middle class, Yeats ‘found in the aristocracy the great exponents both of will and ceremonial; they had forced their way on top and they maintained themselves there in an elegant routine.’<sup>103</sup> The aristocracy are, for Yeats, strong enough to resist change, to keep up their polite rituals as they have always done; the aristocrat and the peasant are both keepers of tradition, though the two castes must not mix. This leads MacNeice to the conclusion that ‘In Yeats the love of tradition merged into support of reaction...he wanted to maintain with the barriers of privilege around the aristocracy those other barriers (of illiteracy and penury?) around the peasant.’<sup>104</sup> This passage sounds rather like the Public Prosecutor of Auden’s essay, as MacNeice’s parenthetical aside regarding the status of the Irish peasant reveals a critical stance. Still, MacNeice is far from the doctrinaire Marxism of someone like Day Lewis, who would argue along with Yeats that the peasant should not

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<sup>102</sup> Ibid., 76.

<sup>103</sup> Ibid., 82.

<sup>104</sup> Ibid., 96.



try to improve himself or his lot, but that he is noble in his way just as he is. MacNeice, meanwhile, has little use for such attempts to preserve a class of people in a kind of 'sacred space' outside of time and change; he goes on to sneer at the Big Houses, writing that they 'maintained no culture worth speaking of – nothing but an obsolete bravado, an insidious bonhomie, and a way with horses.'<sup>105</sup> Separation from ordinary life and flux breeds stagnation, not inspiration.

The Tower, though MacNeice concedes that Yeats does not always use it in the same way, is yet another example of Yeats's attempts to escape from mundane reality. In his essay on Shelley, Yeats defined the tower as the opposite of the cave and argued that the contrast between the two 'suggests a contrast between the mind looking outward upon men and things and the mind looking inward upon itself...'<sup>106</sup> Either way, the 'mind' so observed is not taking part in any kind of action; it merely watches, whether it is looking outward or inward. MacNeice reads Yeats's Tower as 'a symbol of retreat, of intellectual or spiritual asceticism', though it can also be, as in 'Blood and the Moon', 'a symbol of the self's assertiveness, of physical egotism, of the urges of earth and blood...'<sup>107</sup> Bate calls the Tower 'Yeats's version of Axel's castle,' that famous *Symboliste* retreat for the jaded aristocrat, but argues that it is also a real tower, 'rooted firmly in the soil of Ballylee.'<sup>108</sup> In either case, the self that the Tower represents is always a powerful individual self, combining the esoteric with the personal, either ignoring the community or imposing his or her will upon

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<sup>105</sup> Ibid., 97.

<sup>106</sup> Yeats, 'The Philosophy of Shelley's Poetry', *Early Essays*, 66.

<sup>107</sup> MacNeice, *The Poetry of W.B. Yeats*, 131.

<sup>108</sup> A.J. Bate, 'Yeats and the Symbolist Aesthetic,' *Comparative Literature* 98 (1983), 1231.

it. What matters most, for Yeats, are the aspirations of strong individuals who act without regard either the good or the ill that society must then endure.

MacNeice's book ends with an attempt to place Yeats among contemporary poets, and with a direct riposte to Auden. He reads Yeats and Eliot as more alike than unlike, as both are 'essentially *literary* (author's emphasis) poets' who 'hanker for a hierarchic social system' and 'combine speculative and sceptical habits with a somewhat frustrated urge to religion.'<sup>109</sup> Both are worshippers of tradition who prefer a glorious imagined past to the present and who draw their poetic technique and imagery from romantic sources: thus, as MacNeice writes, '...it cannot be said that [Eliot] represents a break from the English tradition, or even a complete break from the Romantic tradition; witness his use of lilac and hyacinths. He also, like Yeats, is full of echoes of the Past, and the Past for him, as for Yeats, is something irrecoverably glamorous.'<sup>110</sup> The Augustan neoclassicists, to whom Eliot preferred to compare himself, looked to the contemporary world for inspiration, not to the past, though they tended to dress up the present in Roman garb. They engaged with the contemporary world in ways that Yeats and Eliot would have found uncongenial. And Auden, once the darling of the Left intelligentsia of the 1930s, seems to be repeating what MacNeice views as the mistakes of the elder poets: 'It is an historical fact that art *can* make things happen and Auden in his reaction from a rigid Marxism seems in this article ['The Public v. the Late Mr. William Butler Yeats'] to have been straying towards the Ivory

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<sup>109</sup> MacNeice, The Poetry of W.B. Yeats, 188.

<sup>110</sup> *Ibid.*, 189.

Tower.’<sup>111</sup> This is the same tower in which Dowson and Johnson ‘died’; here MacNeice reaffirms his conviction of the social utility of art and the folly of divorcing it from ordinary life by accusing his friend of the same kind of retreat from public space into a private world of dreams and symbols that he noted in Yeats.

The essential argument of the book, and of MacNeice’s critical work in the 1940s, is summed up in a single sentence: ‘I am not one of those who hold that each one poem in the world must be isolated and appreciated in a vacuum’<sup>112</sup>; conversely, neither should a poem be created in a vacuum, or, indeed, a ‘tower’, whether Ivory or Brazen, as he writes in ‘The Poet in England To-Day: A Reassessment’, first published in *The New Republic* in March 1940:

Some of the poets who renounced the Ivory Tower were ready to enter a Brazen Tower of political dogma; where the Ivory Tower represents isolation from men in general, the Brazen Tower represents isolation from men as individuals (witness the typical entowered politician) and also from oneself as an individual. Bad logic demanded a choice between the Towers, but salutary self-deceit allowed many of the Brazen school to leave the door open.<sup>113</sup>

The Tower seems to represent for MacNeice any kind of isolation, whether from other people, from facts, or from the self. What MacNeice refers to as ‘bad logic’ here is the mistake of assuming that there is an either/or choice to make between the Towers, when in fact one

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<sup>111</sup> Ibid., 192.

<sup>112</sup> Ibid., 147.

<sup>113</sup> Louis MacNeice, ‘The Poet in England To-Day: A Reassessment’, Selected Literary Criticism of Louis MacNeice, 114.

could avoid both towers altogether, or, as MacNeice says of some of his less politically committed colleagues, one could also simply 'leave the door open' to account for other possibilities or theories of life. In light of this, it is worth quoting Edna Longley's observation that 'MacNeice invariably represents aestheticism and Marxist literary theory (1930s style) as inversions of each other'<sup>114</sup> in that one argues that art has no utilitarian function and the other contends that the only thing that matters about art is its potential to bring about social change. We see again MacNeice's reluctance to place art of any kind into a category that might constrain its freedom to develop in whatever manner it may.

He continues his attack on the spatial constraints of binary thinking in his attack on book reviewers in 'An Alphabet of Literary Prejudices' (1948):

*Book Reviewers.* I have been among these off and on, so know their occupational diseases. Their worst habit is assuming they know the questions to which work reviewed provides the answers. Because of this they often make two opposite but equally unjustifiable demands, (1) that an author should keep 'developing' (discovering every year a new message, new technique, or a new self – as if there were all the newness under the sun), (2) that an author should stay put in a pigeon-hole – as a lyric poet or a satirist or a realist or what-have-you.<sup>115</sup>

The expectations of reviewers set up a kind of Scylla-and-Charybdis which traps the author and insures that no matter what he does, they will find fault with it. Most of the 'prejudices'

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<sup>114</sup> Longley, 'MacNeice as Critic', 57.

<sup>115</sup> Louis MacNeice, 'An Alphabet of Literary Prejudices', Selected Literary Criticism of Louis MacNeice, 142.

MacNeice outlines in this article have to do with constraints of various sorts which critics, theoreticians, and audiences place upon authors. For example, he warns against both ‘writing down’ and ‘writing up’ to please particular audiences, since ‘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.’<sup>116</sup> The author must remain true both to himself and to the social world in which he moves. According to McDonald, this is a direct response to postwar critics and poets like G.S. Fraser, whose ‘contention that the war had taught poets ‘to depend on ourselves and the universe, the intermediate social worlds having been largely destroyed’ MacNeice attacks ‘by insisting that ‘language cannot be divorced from sort of social world’.’ McDonald goes on to write that ‘The responsibility imposed by this involvement is that of the ‘maker’ rather than the ‘modest registering machine’ of either unconscious-dominated surrealism or surface reportage.’<sup>117</sup> In other words, as MacNeice writes in *The Poetry of W.B. Yeats*, ‘art *can* make things happen’. Through his use of a social medium, which is essential if he hopes that anyone will understand him, the artist occupies and shapes public space; retreat into ‘sacred space’ of any sort is impossible.

### III. *Varieties of Parable*

MacNeice’s concerns evolve by the end of his career, but his basic orientation as a poet and critic has not changed much. For example, in an introduction to his 1957 volume

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<sup>116</sup> Ibid., 147.

<sup>117</sup> McDonald, Louis MacNeice, 135.

*Visitations* written for the *Poetry Books Society Bulletin*, he reiterates his argument that poetry blurs the boundaries between private and public, though its purpose is always ultimately social:

I hold that poetry, far from being a release of gas, is more like a precision instrument – one that can be used where that other precision instrument, science, is completely and for ever useless. That is, I agree with Christopher Caudwell that poetry is inevitably subjective – but this need not imply either imprecision or isolation; as Caudwell pointed out, the poet retires into his inner world thereby to re-establish communion with his fellows (not all his fellows, of course, but a worthwhile number).<sup>118</sup>

Like many earlier modernists, particularly Eliot, who compares ‘the mind of the poet’ to ‘a shred of platinum’ the purpose of which is to provide the ‘catalyst’ for the chemical reaction that produces a poem,<sup>119</sup> MacNeice uses a metaphor from chemistry to describe the poetic process. He does not, however, describe the fusing of disparate elements into new wholes; poetry is instead compared to a ‘measuring instrument.’ It does not create; rather, it records the conditions that brought it into being and communicates them to an audience.

In the 1963 Cambridge Clark Lectures that were published posthumously as *Varieties of Parable*, MacNeice tries on various terms for the kind of the double-level writing he wishes to discuss, but finds that most of them apply too many constraints or have con-

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<sup>118</sup> Louis MacNeice, ‘Louis MacNeice Writes...[on *Visitations*],’ *Selected Literary Criticism of Louis MacNeice*, 212.

<sup>119</sup> Eliot, ‘Tradition and the Individual Talent,’ 41.

notations that he finds unhelpful. He rejects ‘allegory’ largely because of public prejudice against the word, ‘fable’ because it ‘suggests a miniature, such as the fables of Aesop, with a painfully obvious moral and usually written in a shown-to-the-children manner,’ ‘fantasy’ because it ‘suffers from the pejorative associations of Coleridge’s ‘Fancy’’ and ‘would exclude the New Testament parables’, and ‘myth’ because it ‘is something that the will cannot supply, for it has to be given or rather inherited.’<sup>120</sup> ‘Parable’ is accepted because it has the broadest definition: ‘According to the *Oxford Dictionary*, ‘parable’ means ‘any saying or narration in which something is expressed in terms of something else’. ‘Also,’ it adds, ‘any kind of enigmatical or dark saying.’”<sup>121</sup> MacNeice attempts here to treat many different kinds of ‘double-level’ writing, and requires a definition that gives him breathing room. ‘Parable’ has the added advantage of confusing the ‘frame’/‘wrapper’ distinction in a way that a label like ‘allegory’ or ‘fable’ does not. ‘Allegory’ and ‘fable’ treat the ideas implicit in the narrative – the ‘frame’ – as separable content. ‘Parable’ does not make this distinction; while the ideas in the ‘frame’ are expressed in narrative or lyric form – the ‘wrapper’ – the means of expression and the ideas expressed are a unified whole.

Eliot, as a critic, was not opposed to double-level writing, but the ‘mythic method’ he discusses in ‘*Ulysses*, Order, and Myth’ (1923) is much more specific than MacNeice’s expansive definition of ‘parable.’ The parameters of the ‘mythic method’ are fairly narrow:

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<sup>120</sup> MacNeice, *Varieties of Parable*, 1-2.

<sup>121</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.

In using the myth [of *The Odyssey*], in manipulating a continuous parallel between contemporaneity and antiquity, Mr. Joyce is pursuing a method which others must pursue after him. They will not be imitators, any more than the scientist who uses the discoveries of an Einstein in pursuing his own, independent, further investigations. It is simply a way of controlling, of ordering, of giving a shape top the immense panorama of futility and anarchy which is contemporary history.<sup>122</sup>

The ‘mythic method’ has a very specific purpose – to use the past to make sense of a chaotic present by supplying a pattern for otherwise apparently random events (though Louis Menand questions how seriously Eliot really took this idea, suggesting that it ‘seems to be parodied by the footnotes to [*The Wasteland*]’)<sup>123</sup>. If we look only at the surface narrative, Joyce’s novel is sometimes an experiment in language, at other times a rambling, round-about way to describe the meeting of two Dubliners at the end of an ordinary day. It is the myth that gives the novel a backbone; without it, the book would disintegrate into chaos.

MacNeice prefers to group his ‘parable-writers’ together based on the results of their labors rather than the means they use to achieve them. The ‘six writers of parable’ he highlights in his lecture – ‘Spenser, Bunyan, Kafka, Beckett, Pinter and William Golding’ – are alike in that ‘they all create special worlds.’<sup>124</sup> These are not, however, the escapist worlds of pastoral, or of Ivory Tower aestheticism or Brazen Tower propaganda. Rather, there is a great deal of interplay between the ‘special world’ of the parable and the real

<sup>122</sup> T.S. Eliot, ‘*Ulysses*, Order, and Myth’, *Selected Prose of T.S. Eliot*, 177.

<sup>123</sup> Louis Menand, *Discovering Modernism: T.S. Eliot and his Context*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987), 113.

<sup>124</sup> MacNeice, *Varieties of Parable*, 5.



world: ‘...what is interesting in each case is to look for the relationship between that and the ordinary world, or in other words to examine the amount – or the kind – of realism they exhibit.’<sup>125</sup> Brown defines MacNeice’s parable as

...an oblique manner of confronting the world, and of suggesting or implying meaning in it... Thus the teller of parables seems somewhat suspicious or sceptical of the normal modes of commenting on and ordering reality. He attacks in an oblique, ambiguous manner, in parables which may mean much, or nothing... The parable-writer distrusts an organized, structured realism, but creates the unified world of his ‘dark conceit,’ leaving his hearers to discern whether it has any meaningful relationship to life or not.<sup>126</sup>

The parable is, then, a way to talk about the real world and real issues without resorting to the naïve realism so many of MacNeice’s 1930s colleagues insisted on, and which he himself blasted in much of his earlier criticism.

Parable, being broader in orientation and less concerned with the conditioning of *specific* individuals under *specific* circumstances than realism, can cover topics that are applicable to a wide audience and make ideas that may not themselves be entertaining or interesting palatable through letting the reader imagine himself in the hero’s position:

In contrast to the realistic novel or play which lays such stress upon character, parable writing... is more concerned with theme, this theme very often, as in *Pilgrim’s*

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<sup>125</sup> Ibid., 6.

<sup>126</sup> Brown, *Sceptical Vision*, 146-7.

*Progress*, finding its embodiment through a very strong story-line. Thus theme and story often coalesce: if you discard the story of *Pilgrim's Progress*, you are left with the disembodied theme, i.e. with the matter of a bleak and quite unoriginal sermon.

The hero in parable writing tends to be Everyman.<sup>127</sup>

Story and theme together create something that is more significant than either would be alone, and providing a hero who is essentially an ordinary person with few specific defining characteristics makes theme and story more broadly applicable through the intertwining of 'frame' and 'wrapper.'

At the same time, simple allegory which requires little or no thought from the reader, but instead presents a world which 'is all a matter of one-for-one correspondences'; each character or incident is a stand-in for an idea, object, or person in the real world, and the reader's only task is to puzzle out what represents what. By 'double-level writing,' MacNeice means something more complex and rewarding:

...Spenser, as has been known from his own day, can run various different kinds of allegory – e.g. the moral and the historical – simultaneously. Modern criticism has analysed and emphasized the very great variety in Spenser – not only the variety of the ground covered, which ranges from the dangers of accidie to the delights of pastoral, and from the psychology of love to the problems of Time and Eternity, but

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<sup>127</sup> MacNeice, *Varieties of Parable*, 77.

also the varieties of his approach or, as we might say, the way he keeps changing his camera angles.<sup>128</sup>

The appeal of Spenser's 'special world' is not that it is a cardboard stage crossed by two-dimensional characters and scenes that are meant to represent things in the real world; rather, it is appealing because it is coherent and believable in and of itself, while hinting at things in our world, more subtly at some times than at others. The key here is 'variety' – Spenser attempts to encompass more than a single facet of human experience and employs a number of different artistic conventions in order to achieve his end.

It is the representation of this relationship between the imagination and the real world that MacNeice seems to mean when he talks about 'dream-logic'; he uses this term to describe

...the more important structural type of image [in which] the criterion of mere correspondence will often fail us. In this category the *rational* (author's emphasis) metaphor...should normally get over to a rational reader, but those which carry the weight of dream or of too direct an experience will require from the reader something more – or less – than reason.<sup>129</sup>

He offers as an example of this kind of image, in which the rational is married to the irrational, the central conceit of his poem 'The Springboard', which, 'though rational in its working out, begins with two irrational premises – the dream picture of a naked man stand-

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<sup>128</sup> Ibid., 33-4.

<sup>129</sup> MacNeice, 'Experiences with Images,' Selected Literary Criticism of Louis MacNeice, 162.

ing 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.’<sup>130</sup> The poem is rational in that the diver follows through on the conclusion that he has drawn – that he must sacrifice himself for the good of all by jumping off of a building – but the imagery is decidedly irrational, and the premises are, as MacNeice himself admits, absurd.

MacNeice returns to *The Faerie Queene* as an example of the kind of ‘dream-logic’ he detects in parable writing. He quotes approvingly Graham Hough’s statement that

Spenser...illustrates another Freudian dream-process which is the converse of condensation: ‘an individual dream-thought may be represented by several different elements in the dream-content.’ Hough gives us as an example the figures of Amoret, Belphoebe and Florimell where an original bud or cell has broken, so to speak, into three.<sup>131</sup>

The interesting thing about dreams, for MacNeice, is not the way they can be ‘condensed’ into clear or coherent meanings, but the way in which a single ‘bud or cell’ can multiply into a myriad of possible expressions. This shows, once again, a preference for an aesthetic of spatial expansion, in which rational and irrational thought combine to create a multiplicity of potential meanings.

Dreams still have their sources in the real world, of course, as MacNeice acknowledged even before he encountered Freud or Jung. Marsack writes that ‘Before reading psy-

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<sup>130</sup> Ibid., 163.

<sup>131</sup> MacNeice, *Varieties of Parable*, 34.

chologists, he had already taken for granted that his dreams had their roots in his own real world,<sup>132</sup> but he also avoids simplistic or reductive interpretations of dreams or dream-like narratives, as this long passage from *Varieties of Parable* demonstrates:

In so far as parable writing is akin to dreams, it tempts one, just as religious myths and folktales do, to look below its 'manifest' content for a 'latent' content which can then be interpreted in terms of one's favorite modern psychologist. This is an amusing proceeding but can be very destructive. Just as in a poem the manifest content, which is inseparable from the *form* (author's emphasis) of the poem, cannot be reduced to something in the Unconscious which occasioned it, no more, of course, in the works I am considering can the image, whether it is object or event, be reduced without residue to that of which it is an image. Whether the parabolist was unconscious of some psychological origin of his images or, as with Spenser's historical allegory, only too conscious of a theme to be given a new body, it is this new body that counts. The writer's mythopoeic faculty transcends both his personal background and his so-called message: Duessa can never be reduced into Mary, Queen of Scots, nor Alice, swimming in the pool of her own tears, to a nostalgic, if unconscious, yearning for the forbidden joys of bed-wetting.<sup>133</sup>

The 'latent' content, or 'meaning,' of a parable, is not separable from the form in which it is expressed, and, as such, characters and events in a parable cannot be reduced to a single

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<sup>132</sup> Marsack, *The Cave of Making*, 133.

<sup>133</sup> MacNeice, *Varieties of Parable*, 77-8.

meaning; Duessa *is* Mary, Queen of Scots, but she is also a figure for the Roman Catholic Church and for 'false' religion (in Spenser's sense) in general, as well as a character in a narrative poem. The 'frame' and 'wrapper' can intertwine in myriad ways because the 'frame' is kept deliberately loose.

The open-ended 'metaphors' of parable writing are opposed to the compressed images-for-their-own-sake of Imagism, and MacNeice sees Eliot as following in the Imagist tradition, allowing images to simply 'be' without reference to outside ideas:

[Eliot] is certainly more concerned with the inside of man than with his outside; the desert in *The Waste Land*, for example, is as much an interior landscape as the forests in *The Faerie Queene*. But Eliot's *method* (author's emphasis) is different. The Elizabethans...regularly related allegory to metaphor, allegory being thought of as extended metaphor or metaphor as allegory in miniature. But Eliot is not a great exploiter of metaphor; he still uses images more as they were used by the Imagists, though for a quite different purpose.<sup>134</sup>

While Eliot's images are not celebrations of the image itself, but indictments of the horrors of modernity and industrial society, his method, as MacNeice reads him, is not metaphorical. He approaches 'interior landscapes' in a more literal sense than does Spenser (or any writer of parable, for that matter) and is judged to be closer to a kind of internal documentary method which records the internal responses of a sensitive individual to external stimuli.

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<sup>134</sup> Ibid., 104-5.

Similarly, Auden is found to be largely outside the bounds of parable. Despite the observation that ‘Unlike Eliot, Auden makes much use of metaphor,’ MacNeice determines that

...there is something atomic in *his* method, too. If at times he is a parabolist, he is not a consistent or sustained one. Thus his long poem, *The Age of Anxiety*, proceeds throughout on the verge of parable: there are four characters who share their fantasies with us – and sometimes with each other – but the content of these fantasies is largely arbitrary. To put it another way, here again this poet, like the more obviously descriptive type of poet, is getting his effects by enumeration rather than by fusion.<sup>135</sup>

Auden’s use of metaphor is neither controlled nor sustained enough to qualify as true parable. There is no theme to link the ‘fantasies’ of the characters in *The Age of Anxiety* together into a coherent narrative. Unlike the ‘dream-logic’ of parable, in which the rational and the irrational are fused into a cohesive whole, Auden’s poem lets the two sit side-by-side without interacting, ‘enumerated’ but not combined. Despite the metaphorical content, it still suffers from the ‘forced objectivity’<sup>136</sup> that MacNeice considers the hallmark of descriptive poetry. Indeed, in *Modern Poetry* he referred to Surrealism, in which the artist turns himself into ‘a modest registering machine’ of his own unconscious, as ‘pernicious.’<sup>137</sup>

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<sup>135</sup> Ibid., 106-7.

<sup>136</sup> Ibid., 104.

<sup>137</sup> MacNeice, *Modern Poetry*, 156.

Despite his emphasis on the creation of ‘special worlds,’ MacNeice’s observations on parable and dreaming are consistent with his earlier insistence on the poet as involved in and observant of the stuff of everyday life. The ‘dreams’ in which his parables begin are connected to events and persons in the waking world, and are shaped by the poet’s own hopes and fears (and he reveals much about his own fears when, in describing the ‘nightmare’ sequence that occurs just before Sir Guyon reaches the Bower of Bliss, when he writes that ‘Anyone who, like myself, hates being cooped up in a room, let alone a dark room, with a bird that keeps flying around wildly, will agree that this is an apt last item in this dream sequence.’<sup>138</sup>). The poet is still part of a community, and is shaped by personal and shared cultural experience: ‘...his personal experience and attitude do not exist in a vacuum but are conditioned by time and place, by the general experience and attitude of the community in which finds himself...’<sup>139</sup>. This is not so far from the poet whose work, not his personality, was shaped by various stimuli over which he had no control, and the critic who insisted that a poet should be ‘involved in social life’ in *Modern Poetry*. The thread that joins the late criticism to the 1930s musings is the concern for fusing the public and the personal, the remapping of space to take the poet out of the Tower and into the public square not only to share his personal vision with his fellows, but to let them help to determine its shape.

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<sup>138</sup> MacNeice, *Varieties of Parable*, 39.

<sup>139</sup> *Ibid.*, 51.



## Chapter Two

### **‘A cage across their sight’: Place, Space and Non-place in MacNeice’s Poetry**

From his first mature volume of poetry to his unpublished autobiography, MacNeice’s work is heavily invested in representations of physical and imaginary space. Yeats has his towers and great houses, Auden his circle of like-minded friends and panoptic aerial views, and Eliot his claustrophobic apartments from which there is no escape, but MacNeice’s approach to space is more subversive. While the aforementioned poets construct ‘strong’ spaces – that is, defensible positions that project the ego-consciousness of the poet into the poem – MacNeice undermines whatever he builds, blurring the boundaries between space and place until the distinction between the two becomes meaningless; one so permeates the other that distinctions between ‘inside’ and ‘outside’ start to break down. This use of space, in which virtually *all* space is liminal space, is typical of postmodern architecture, as Jameson has argued<sup>140</sup>. MacNeice blends into his surroundings and brings the poet back down to earth by placing himself in a landscape that is constantly melting, constantly changing.

To begin, let us revisit Yi-fu Tuan’s distinction between ‘space’ and ‘place.’ ‘Place’, according to Tuan, is a break in undifferentiated ‘space’ which is invested with meaning by

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<sup>140</sup> Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*. (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1992), 63.

human beings; ‘places’ are the points in ‘space’ at which we stop. For MacNeice, though, ‘places’ are merely temporary stops on a continuous journey, and they are constantly threatened by the encroachment of open, meaningless ‘space’. MacNeice’s places tend to become what Marc Augé terms ‘non-places’, which are ‘spaces of circulation, consumption and communication’, as opposed to ‘anthropological places’, which are ‘any space[s] in which inscriptions of the social bond...or collective history...can be seen.’<sup>141</sup> The posture MacNeice characteristically adopts is that of the eternal transient – he is always on his way to somewhere else, and regards the places in which he stops with suspicion. Their charms – particularly if they are real or imaginary ‘islands’ – are always potential traps for the unwary, and the poet who refuses to taste the honeyed fruits of the Lotus-Eaters and give up wandering for good acknowledges their attraction but forces himself to move on anyway. The island, tower, or comfortable home is always an escape from engagement with the world, and MacNeice continually declines to escape into fantasy or political ideology; rather, his peregrinations continue as the places he leaves behind disappear into the distance, opting to face the difficult questions of the day with honesty and a healthy skepticism rather than a ready-made set of responses.

In the present chapter, I will discuss what I take to be the main spatial formulas that appear in MacNeice’s poetry. The first section explores representations of home, both as dwelling and as ‘homeland’. I will then proceed to larger imaginary spaces – islands and

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<sup>141</sup> Marc Augé, *Non-Places: An Introduction to Supermodernity*, trans. John Howe. (New York: Verso, 1995), viii.

the ‘Arcadian’ spaces of conventional pastoral – with particular attention to the temptations they represent, and MacNeice’s rejection of them. Finally, I will consider what I take to be MacNeice’s most characteristic representation of space, that of the individual man in transit; whether on a passage steamer or a train, MacNeice seems to be most at peace when surveying a moving landscape through a window.

### **I. ‘Between the mountains and the gantries’: Home as liminal space**

MacNeice describes powerful feelings of dislocation in his childhood. One of the most telling scenes in *The Strings are False* involves an uncomfortable encounter with a Northern Irish schoolmaster and his English headmaster at Sherborne, the prep school he attended:

On the Twelfth of July Powys came into my dormitory and said: ‘What is all this do in your country today? Isn’t it all mumbo-jumbo?’ Remembering my father and Home Rule and the bony elbows of Miss Craig and the black file of mill-girls and the wickedness of Carson and the dull dank days between sodden haycocks and foghorns, I said Yes it was. And I felt uplifted. To be speaking man to man with Powys and giving the lie to the Red Hand of Ulster was power, was freedom, meant that I was nearly grown up. King William is dead and his white horse with him, and Miss Craig will never put her knuckles in my ears again. But Powys went out of the dormitory and Mr. Cameron came in, his underlip jutting and his eyes enraged. ‘What were saying to Mr. Powys?’ Oh this division of allegiance! That the Twelfth

of July was mumbo-jumbo was true, and my father thought so too, but the moment Mr. Cameron appeared I felt rather guilty and cheap. Because I had been showing off to Powys and because Mr. Cameron being after all Irish I felt I had betrayed him.<sup>142</sup>

There are several important points in this passage that have bearing on MacNeice's poetic output. First, when he thinks of Northern Ireland, the images that spring immediately to mind are unpleasant, including his overzealous governess and Sir Edward Carson, the political leader of the Unionist community. It is also interesting to note that he associates his ability to look at his home with critical distance with being 'grown up' – which stands in humorous ironic contrast to the image of his governess shoving her knuckles into his ears. Finally, though, we must also consider the sense of shame he feels in attacking Ulster within the hearing of another Ulsterman. Mr. Cameron's reaction does not affect the young MacNeice's opinion of the region, but it *does* negate the 'grown up' feeling that speaking 'man to man' with his headmaster, Llewellyn Powys, had given him; when Mr. Cameron angrily enters the room, MacNeice feels like a child who has been showing off. This tension is to be found in virtually all of MacNeice's writing about 'the home place,' whether the 'home' in question is a single dwelling or an entire country.

Homes of any sort are, for MacNeice, places to leave; they are at best temporary refuges that the peripatetic poet will soon abandon to return to the chaos outside. At worst,

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<sup>142</sup> Louis MacNeice, The Strings are False: An Unfinished Autobiography. (2007: London, Faber and Faber, 1965), 78-9.

they are escapist in the most negative sense of the term. We see several examples of houses and rooms as means of avoidance, whether of war or of commitment. ‘Home’ is no longer a stable center, location of the fixed hearth; Augé relates the postmodern (or, to use his term, ‘supermodern’) house to ancient Greek ideas of ‘home’: ‘...in the Hestia/Hermes couple, Hestia symbolizes the circular hearth placed in the center of the house, the closed space of the group withdrawn into itself (and thus in a sense of its relations with itself); while Hermes, god of the threshold and the door, but also of crossroads and town gates, represents movement and relations with others.’<sup>143</sup> MacNeice tends to focus on such thresholds – points of entry and exit – rather than the central stable features of a home; we get windows, melting walls, and passageways, but nowhere do we see the poet sitting alone in a comfortable room without worrying about what’s going on outside. This ‘Hermetic’ (though not in the Yeatsian sense of ‘magical’) concern is typical of postmodern treatments of space and place.

Modernist ‘homes’ are comparatively stable – indeed, many are not only secure, but firmly rooted in iconic locations. Yeats, for example, remembers the security of the comfortable hayloft on his grandparents’ Sligo estate where he learned both Orange rhymes and the essential facts of life<sup>144</sup>, and his towers and ‘great houses’ are centers of culture and authority in a chaotic world. In ‘Upon a House Shaken by the Land Agitation,’ he writes

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<sup>143</sup> Augé, *Non-Places*, 47.

<sup>144</sup> W.B. Yeats, *The Collected Works of W.B. Yeats Volume III: Autobiographies*, ed. William H. O’Donnell et al. (New York: Scribner, 1999), 47.

about his friend Lady Gregory's house at Coole Park in Galway, where an artistic clique that included Yeats, J.M. Synge, and Douglas Hyde was nurtured:

How should the world be luckier if this house,  
 Where passion and precision have been one  
 Time out of mind, became too ruinous  
 To breed the lidless eye that loves the sun?  
 And the sweet laughing eagle thoughts that grow  
 Where wings have memory of wings, and all  
 That comes of the best knit to the best? Although  
 Mean roof-trees were the sturdier for its fall,  
 How should their luck run high enough to reach  
 The gifts that govern men, and after these  
 To gradual Time's last gift, a written speech  
 Wrought of high laughter, loveliness and ease?<sup>145</sup>

Yeats's description of the house, which is threatened by one of a series of 'Land Acts' that split up the estates of Anglo-Irish landlords and allowed tenant farmers to purchase the property, is defensive in tone and in intent, and is juxtaposed against the 'mean roof-trees' of the petty bourgeois, Yeats's most consistent nemeses, who would inherit its remains; Michael North focuses on the 'gift' image and its relationship to systems of exchange:

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<sup>145</sup> W.B. Yeats, *The Collected Works of W.B. Yeats Volume I: The Poems*, ed. Richard J. Finneran. (New York: Scribner, 1997), 94.

...the very ease and spontaneity that Yeats calls a gift is in fact defined by opposition to the ordinary economy. Only the “best” is knit together to make the rest, so that the metaphor places an image of coherence in implicit opposition to the disorder around it. The gift, we might say, is only given after having first been withdrawn, removed from the crass economy of exchange.<sup>146</sup>

The denizens of Yeats’s ‘house’, which appears to be both a physical dwelling and a lineage, do not sully their hands with money; rather, they freely offer up their own ‘gifts’ for the betterment of society.

Such ‘great houses’ – as well as the iconic tower at Thoor Ballylee – represent for Yeats both the homes of powerful worthies and the present’s continuity with the past. As Cairns Craig notes, ‘That Yeats’s Anglo-Irish had been responsible for the destruction of Celtic life in its heroic form was no bar to his support of them as an established social form that preserved memory. Would the peasantry have kept their culture if it had not been organized around the stable center of the ‘big house’?’<sup>147</sup> Ideas of place and its significance thus provide a framework for Yeats’s concept of ‘home’. Such musings are not alien to T.S. Eliot, either; in the early poetry, we find Prufrock doubly trapped in his drawing room and in his own neurosis, and Gerontion in his rented house, while later on the *Four Quartets* are each named for places that are significant in Eliot’s personal and family history, and in

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<sup>146</sup> Michael North, *The Political Aesthetic of Yeats, Eliot, and Pound*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 41.

<sup>147</sup> Cairns Craig, *Yeats, Eliot, Pound and the Politics of Poetry*. (Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1982), 160.

‘East Coker’ we are told that ‘Home is where one starts from.’<sup>148</sup> W.H. Auden, meanwhile, models the ‘Auden Country’ of his 1930s work on the West Midlands landscape in which he grew up, and often chooses to write about locations to which he feels a strong personal attachment, like the English public school or Iceland.

For MacNeice, however, home is neither where one starts from nor where one ends up, unless one happens to be very unlucky. Rather, ‘home’ is one stop among many. Though he was born in Belfast, MacNeice consistently refuses to think of himself as Northern Irish, preferring instead to dream backwards to the ‘pre-natal mountain’<sup>149</sup> of his family’s Connemara roots. He outlines the attraction of this lost family Eden in ‘Landscapes of Childhood and Youth’:

The first of these dream worlds was ‘The West of Ireland’, a phrase which still stirs me, 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 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 people’s voices were different there, soft and rich like my father’s...and not like the pious

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<sup>148</sup> T.S. Eliot, *The Complete Poems and Plays 1909-1950*. (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1980), 129.

<sup>149</sup> MacNeice, *Collected Poems*, 262.



woman's or the ferocious mill-girls' whom I always expected to pelt us with rotten eggs.<sup>150</sup>

MacNeice associates this half-fantastic landscape with his father, thus situating it in his own reading of the family history. Later on in the same passage, however, he acknowledges that his nostalgia is based not on direct experience, but on 'two photographs of Achill Island, framed in plush' and that 'it was the plush frames that beatified this vision'.<sup>151</sup> He admits, then, that his affection for a place he did not visit until he was an adult is based entirely on snapshots placed in attractive frames, and thus concedes that memory is shaped by the spatial frameworks in which we place it. Connemara is attractive because it is placed in a beautiful, old-fashioned frame, and because it is the place from which his father's family fled after a row with a local priest.<sup>152</sup> This 'lost home' is irretrievable, accessible only through pictorial representations and family stories.

This bitterness over his family's lost past on the western island of Omev carries over into MacNeice's poetry, particularly in the early poems about Ireland; he cannot acknowledge any location on the island, North or South, as 'his own'; Dublin, he says in the first poem of 'The Closing Album' (1941), '...was never my town,/...and she will not/Have me alive or dead'<sup>153</sup>, and 'Valediction' (1935) is for the most part an exercise in defiance:

I will exorcise my blood

And not to have my baby-clothes my shroud

<sup>150</sup> MacNeice, *The Strings are False*, 216-7.

<sup>151</sup> *Ibid.*, 217.

<sup>152</sup> Stallworthy, *Louis MacNeice*, 4-5.

<sup>153</sup> MacNeice, *Collected Poems*, 179.

I will acquire an attitude not yours  
 And become as one of you holiday visitors,  
 And however often I may come,  
 Farewell, my country, and in perpetuum...<sup>154</sup>

Indeed, the poem as a whole presents a 'tourist's-eye' view of Ireland; it is composed of a series of visual images that vanish as quickly as they appear, and the tone MacNeice adopts is that of a bitter, sarcastic travel agent who serves his country up for the delectation of jaded holiday-makers while spitting on its typical pieties.

It is the Orange Protestant tradition and its rituals that bear the brunt of MacNeice's most excoriating criticisms. Belfast in particular is painted in infernal colors:

See Belfast, devout and profane and hard,  
 Built on reclaimed mud, hammers playing in the shipyard,  
 Time punched with holes like a steel sheet, time  
 Hardening the faces, veneering with a grey and speckled rime  
 The faces under the shawls and caps...<sup>155</sup>

The dominant images in this passage are of violence and petrification, the hardened faces of the people matching the 'Country of callous lava cooled to stone'.<sup>156</sup> Time and again MacNeice represents places in which he wishes to avoid being trapped as frozen in this way. Eamon Grennan reads MacNeice's North as 'a demonic place...where violence infects life

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<sup>154</sup> Ibid., 9.

<sup>155</sup> Ibid., 8.

<sup>156</sup> Idem.

at its cosmic and human sources', the negative pole of a cosmology in which the Republic of Ireland is its counterweight, as noted above.<sup>157</sup> While Grennan's reading of MacNeice's treatment of Northern Ireland is certainly defensible – 'Valediction' and 'Belfast' in particular present the North as 'hard' and stagnant – his 'heaven/hell' binary ignores the fact that MacNeice is equally contemptuous of the wolfhounds, round towers and 'Sham Celtic crosses'<sup>158</sup> that for him denote 'Irishness,' recalling Lefebvre's definition of 'representations of space' that use symbols to promote the dominant ideology. Instead of making the whole of the island into two distinct eschatological places, MacNeice re-imagines it as a 'non-place' for consumption by tourists.

This reduction of a place to a set of commodities is described by Augé as 'traveler's space', which he calls 'the archetype of *non-place* (author's emphasis)'. The consumption of a 'traveler's space' is largely passive:

...there are spaces in which the individual feels himself to be a spectator without paying much attention to the spectacle. As if the position of spectator were the essence of the spectacle, as if basically the spectator in the position of a spectator were his own spectacle. A lot of tourism leaflets suggest this deflection, this reversal of the gaze, by offering the would-be traveler advance images of contemplative faces, solitary or in groups, gazing across infinite oceans, scanning ranges of snow-

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<sup>157</sup> Grennan, 'In a Topographical Frame', 193.

<sup>158</sup> MacNeice, Collected Poems, 8-9.

capped mountains or wondrous urban skylines: his own image in a word, his anticipated image, which speaks only about him but carries another name.<sup>159</sup>

There are a few ideas in this passage that are important for our purposes. First, in a poem like ‘Valediction’ MacNeice himself behaves like Augé’s tourist brochure, describing the things that the tourist will do just to see himself doing them:

Park your car in Killarney, buy a souvenir  
 Of green marble or black bog-oak, run up to Clare,  
 Climb the cliff in the postcard, visit Galway city,  
 Romanticise on our Spanish blood, leave ten per cent of pity  
 Under your plate for the emigrant...<sup>160</sup>

After taking in all this splendor (and no doubt taking a few lovely snapshots), the visitor is advised to ‘...take the Holyhead boat before you pay the bill;/Before you face the consequence/Of inbred soul and climactic maleficence/And pay for the trick beauty of a prism/In drug-dull fatalism.’<sup>161</sup> That is, the tourist’s Ireland is a fantasy that elides the vicious feuds and the troubled history of the island, turning them into attractions (‘...meet/The statues of the patriots, history never dies’<sup>162</sup>) that allow the traveler to temporarily impose himself upon the ‘life’ of the nation. This fantastic construct, then, is a ‘non-place’ in Augé’s sense; it is a place that exists only in the imagination of the visitor and in the glossy cynicism of the travel brochure.

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<sup>159</sup> Augé, *Non-Places*, 70.

<sup>160</sup> MacNeice, *Collected Poems*, 9.

<sup>161</sup> *Idem*.

<sup>162</sup> *Ibid.*, 7.

This deconstruction of the idea of Ireland as a ‘nation’, positing instead a set of semi-fraudulent markers of identity, smacks of a tendency that Jean-Francois Lyotard detects in postmodernism: the dismantling of the scientific and political metanarratives of the nineteenth century. In postmodernism, Lyotard argues, ‘...the old poles of attraction represented by nation-states, institutions, and historical traditions are losing their attraction. And it does not look like they will be replaced, at least not on their former scale.’<sup>163</sup> MacNeice’s outright mockery of the historical and cultural narratives of both the Irish Republic and the Orange Order suggest just such a rejection of received ideas of the ‘nation’ by breaking apart and ridiculing the spaces that the ‘nation’ is said to occupy and control.

As the nation comes in for its fair share of criticism, so does MacNeice’s hometown, the small city of Carrickfergus, situated on the northern shore of Belfast Lough. Carrickfergus is older than its larger neighbor, and was an important Anglo-Norman stronghold in the 12<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> centuries; the castle completed by the Norman knight John de Courcy in 1204 still stands. The city held terrors for the young MacNeice, particularly its church, which I will discuss in detail in a later chapter, and ‘the slum streets called the Irish Quarter’:

We rarely went into the Irish Quarter and I used to hold my breath till I got through it. There was a dense smell of poverty as of soot mixed with porter mixed with cheap fat frying mixed with festering scabs and rags that had never been washed. Many of the houses were mere cottages and you looked down over the half-door

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<sup>163</sup> Jean-Francois Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, trans. Geoff Bennington et al.. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), 14.

into a room below the level of the street, always dark but the glow of a grate might show up a mangy cat or a quizzical wrinkled face.<sup>164</sup>

Apart from this passage's graphic sensory portrayal of poverty, one gets the sense that, for MacNeice, the city was always just a place to pass through on his way to somewhere else. Indeed, his memory of Carrickfergus is dominated by the road that lead to town from his house, which he and his older sister called the 'Cinder Path.'<sup>165</sup> The city is not a destination in and of itself – as such, it is not a 'place', in Tuan's sense of the term. Rather, it is more like what he calls 'space' – that through which we move on our way to some 'place' or other.

MacNeice's descriptions of Carrickfergus tend to stress his own disconnection from the daily life of the town. Indeed, MacNeice resists Tuan's definition of 'hometown' as 'an intimate place':

Its ugliness does not matter; it did not when we were children, climbed its trees, paddled our bikes on its cracked pavements, and swam in its pond. How *did* we experience such a small, familiar world, a world inexhaustibly rich in the complication of ordinary life but devoid of features of high imageability?<sup>166</sup>

Tuan describes a 'hometown' as a place in which we immerse ourselves in every intimate sensory detail; it is a place which we are willing to defend from the criticisms of 'outsiders' and which feels like an extension of the self. MacNeice's description of Carrickfergus, on

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<sup>164</sup> MacNeice, The Strings Are False, 49-50.

<sup>165</sup> *Ibid.*, 49.

<sup>166</sup> Tuan, Space and Place, 144-5.

the other hand, concentrates on avoidance of intimacy. The boy cannot see into the homes, the sights and smells repel him, and he holds his breath in order to avoid contact with this space.

Critics have long noted MacNeice's ambivalence regarding Carrickfergus, though they have tended to focus on the city as a sort of 'trap' or 'prison'. Terence Brown, for example, views the 1937 poem named for the city as a 'reading of Irish reality as both imprisonment and exclusion':

Born in the oppressive space 'between the mountain and the gantries' the poet evokes a social and cultural condition characterized by frozen constraint manifested in such words and phrases as 'bottle-neck harbour', 'crystal salt', 'jams', 'slums', 'walled', 'stop his ears', 'banned for ever', 'barred', 'knelt in marble', 'Banned to civilians', 'prison ship', 'A cage across their sight'. Childhood seems locked in a state of stultifying permanence.<sup>167</sup>

Brown's 'Carrickfergus-as-prison' argument is by no means unusual; Edna Longley notes the way the poem 'accumulates images of siege and barriers' and the tendency of characters mentioned in the poem to 'deny others or themselves...the full use of their senses.'<sup>168</sup> What such readings of the poems fail to recognize, though, is how the poem balances the permanence of geographical markers and monuments against the transience of the town's population, the poet included.

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<sup>167</sup> Terence Brown, 'Louis MacNeice's Ireland', 84.

<sup>168</sup> Edna Longley, Louis MacNeice: A Study, 18.

As Brown notes, MacNeice immediately informs the reader that ‘I was born in Belfast between the mountain and the gantries’<sup>169</sup>; what Brown misses in dwelling on the ‘oppressive’ nature of this space, though, is its liminality. The key word in this phrase is ‘between’; MacNeice begins the poems – and his life – in liminal space, somewhere between the natural world (the mountain) and the industrial city (the gantries of Belfast). The sounds of Belfast are themselves the noises of vehicles in transit: ‘the hooting of lost sirens and the clang of trams’<sup>170</sup>. From Belfast we get a sense of swift movement across the lake to Carrickfergus, where we find ourselves (temporarily) trapped: ‘Thence to Smoky Carrick in Country Antrim/Where the bottle-neck harbour collects the mud which jams...’<sup>171</sup> The city is defined by its static monuments – ‘the Norman castle’, the ‘church in the form of a cross but denoting/The list of Christ on the cross in the angle of the nave’, and ‘The Chichesters’, Elizabethan subduers of unruly Ulster, who ‘knelt in marble at the end of a transept/With ruffs about their necks, their portion sure’<sup>172</sup>; these are what Henri Lefebvre calls ‘representations of space’, that is, space that conceptualized by agents of the dominant power structure and which reflects their values, which are in this case shown to be feudal, militaristic, and Christian. Lefebvre’s juxtaposition of ‘representations of space’ and ‘representational spaces’ is again relevant; MacNeice’s own imagination cannot act on the monumental ‘representations of space’ – they project the power of the established order and embody rigidity and, for MacNeice, stagnation. The ‘representational spaces’ of

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<sup>169</sup> MacNeice, *Collected Poems*, 55.

<sup>170</sup> *Idem.*

<sup>171</sup> *Idem.*

<sup>172</sup> *Idem.*



quotidian life, however, are, to an extent, malleable: the ‘camp of soldiers’<sup>173</sup> that springs up near MacNeice’s boyhood house, for example. In addition, the poet demonstrates at the end of the third stanza that he is aware of a wider world beyond the confines of Carrickfergus: ‘Our lights looked over the lough to the lights of Bangor...’<sup>174</sup> It is this wider world that draws his interest, and which constantly invades the poem from this point.

The soldiers who appear in the sixth stanza (‘The war came and a huge camp of soldiers/Grew from the ground in sight of our house...’<sup>175</sup>) have left Carrickfergus – and the poem – by end of the seventh (‘Marching at ease and singing ‘Who Killed Cock Robin?’/ The troops went out by the lodge and off to the front.’<sup>176</sup>). They vanish as quickly as they appeared, though the townsfolk keep abreast of their movements on ‘maps above the fireplace/With flags on pins moving across and across...’<sup>177</sup>, and MacNeice follows after them to go to school in England: ‘The steamer was camouflaged that took me to England - / Sweat and khaki in the Carlisle train...’<sup>178</sup> This explains, in large part, the sense of displacement, the lack of connection to ‘hometown’ in Tuan’s sense; as the final stanza reminds us, MacNeice did not really grow up in Carrickfergus:

I went to school in Dorset, the world of parents

Contracted into a puppet world of sons

Far from the mill girls, the smell of porter, the salt-mines

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<sup>173</sup> Ibid., 55.

<sup>174</sup> Idem.

<sup>175</sup> Idem.

<sup>176</sup> Idem.

<sup>177</sup> Ibid., 56.

<sup>178</sup> Idem.

And the soldiers with their guns.<sup>179</sup>

For MacNeice, as for the soldiers, Carrickfergus is a 'space' through which one travels, not a 'place' which one invests with special importance; or, to put it into Augé's terminology, Carrickfergus is rendered a 'non-place', a nexus of paths to various other destinations, rather than a 'place' in and of itself.

MacNeice's rendering of smaller, specifically private spaces – homes and rooms – is no more affectionate than his treatment of his home city and country. Tuan's description of home as a secure point of orientation is useful for our purposes:

At the end of the day the office worker puts on his coat and prepares to return home. Home is now in his future in the sense that it takes time to get there, but he is not likely to feel that the return journey is a forward movement in time. He returns – tracing his steps back in space and going back in time – to the familiar haven of the home. Familiarity is a characteristic of the past. Moreover in an ideal sense home lies at the center of one's life, and center...connotes origin and beginning.<sup>180</sup>

MacNeice's 'homes' and the rooms of which they are constructed often do represent some connection to the past, but it is often either tenuous and dimly remembered or carries with it the threat of annihilation. In 'Eclogue between the Motherless', for example, Speaker A describes the family home as a decaying prison:

...In a way it went too far,

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<sup>179</sup> *Idem.*

<sup>180</sup> Tuan, *Space and Place*, 127-8.

Back to childhood, back to the backwoods mind;  
 I could not stand a great deal of it, bars on the brain  
 And the blinds drawn in the drawingroom not to fade the chair  
 covers...

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Our old house is just a grass-grown tumulus,  
 My father sits by himself with the bossed decanter,  
 The garden is going to rack, the gardener  
 Only comes three days...<sup>181</sup>

As the house stagnates, so do its inhabitants; it is clear that this house does, like Tuan's 'home', exist primarily in the past, but this is not a comfortable or comforting past; it is a dark room that stifles the intellects of its inhabitants, occupied by an elderly drunkard. Speaker A wonders about the moral implications of bringing a wife into such a home: 'I thought 'Can I find a love beyond the family/And feed her to the bed my mother died in...''<sup>182</sup> 'Home' is itself a sacrifice in this instance; it is a sacrifice for Speaker A to return home, and anyone he brings with him will in turn be sacrificed to the crumbling family idol.

We see a similarly unstable, potentially destructive relationship between home and occupant in late poems like 'Château Jackson'. 'Château Jackson' places the proverbial 'house that Jack built' at the center of a complex system of productive dependencies, but

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<sup>181</sup> MacNeice, *Collected Poems*, 82.

<sup>182</sup> *Ibid.*, 85

begins and ends with the question, ‘Where is the Jack that built the house?’<sup>183</sup> The poem focuses on the absence of the house’s namesake, wondering where he fits into the scheme that he apparently set in motion; there is no ‘Jack’ to be found in the house, as he has apparently moved on and hasn’t left a forwarding address. This is a far cry from Yeats’s Thoor Ballylee, which the poet uses to situate himself in – and achieve some measure of control over – (Anglo-)Irish history. MacNeice’s ‘Jack’ has disappeared from his own story.

MacNeice’s depictions of individual rooms further this potential disappearance of the individual, or at the very least destabilize his unitary identity. This depiction of the private room differs from the conventional modern(ist) representation of such spaces as a safe, secure haven, often an incubator for creative activity. Indeed, the private room is a relatively modern development in Western societies, as Fredric Jameson writes:

...the modern room comes into being only as a consequence of the innovation of the corridor in the 17<sup>th</sup> century; its privacies have little enough to do with those in-different sleeping spaces that a person used to negotiate by passing through a rat’s nest of other rooms and stepping over sleeping bodies. This innovation, thus re-narrativized, now generates cognate questions about the origins of the nuclear family and the construction or formation of a bourgeois subjectivity fully as much as do queries about architectural techniques.<sup>184</sup>

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<sup>183</sup> Ibid., 580-1.

<sup>184</sup> Jameson, *Postmodernism*, 106.

The rise of the private room coincides with the rise of the bourgeoisie as a distinct social group; it is the fortress of the bourgeois, the upper-middle-class intellectual's redoubt from the inchoate clamor of the modern world. It is to 'a room of one's own' that Virginia Woolf's hypothetical woman writer retreats, and Henry James writes of a 'chamber of consciousness' located in 'the house of fiction' in which a writer's ideas are allowed to take shape. As a boy, W.B. Yeats read books of Orange rhymes and dreamed of fighting the Fenians in a hayloft on his grandparents' estate,<sup>185</sup> while T.S. Eliot's early poems present us with unhappy souls trapped in drawing-rooms but unable to imagine or enact a preferable alternative. The 'modern' room, then, is secure, sometimes stifling, but always insulated from the outside world.

This seems to be the sort of room Gaston Bachelard has in mind when he describes the act of 'reading a room' in *The Poetics of Space*. The reader personalizes the room described by a writer, inhabiting it with her own memories and perceptions:

...at the very first word, at the first poetic overture, the reader who is "reading a room" leaves off reading and starts to think of some place in his own past. You would like to tell everything about your room. You would like to interest the reader in yourself, whereas you have unlocked a door to daydreaming. The values of intimacy are so absorbing that the reader has ceased to read your room: he sees his own again. He is already far off, listening to the recollections of a father or a grand-

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<sup>185</sup> Yeats, *Autobiographies*, 47.

mother, of a mother or a servant,...in short, of the human being who dominates the corner of his most cherished memories.<sup>186</sup>

In order to share his or her experience of a particular room, the writer invites us into it, and we in turn people it and decorate it with our own memories, our own experiences, our own friends and relations. This can happen in a negative as well as a positive way; Eliot wants his readers to experience J. Alfred's Prufrock's claustrophobia and neurosis just as fully as Yeats wants his readers to experience the warmth and comfort of his childhood hayloft refuge. MacNeice's rooms, though, erase the conventional boundaries that define the room as a species of privileged space.

Even in domestic spaces in which the poet isolates himself, or sits with only his friends and family about him, the idyll is always threatened by outside forces. We might take as an example 'Postscript to Iceland', first published as 'Epilogue' in the 1937 travel book *Letters from Iceland* which MacNeice co-wrote with W.H. Auden, and which he addressed to his friend and fellow-traveler. In 'Postscript,' the poet has returned to London, and sits alone in his study reflecting on contemporary events and on his recent trip to Iceland. The chilling final quatrain underscores the fundamental insecurity of the poet's position:

Our prerogatives as men  
 Will be cancelled who knows when;  
 Still I drink your health before  
 The gun-butt raps upon the door.<sup>187</sup>

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<sup>186</sup> Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, trans. Maria Jolas. (Boston: Beacon Press, 1994) 14.

<sup>187</sup> Louis MacNeice, *Collected Poems*, ed. Peter McDonald (London: Faber and Faber, 2007) 98.

Not only is the poet's comfortable isolation threatened, it may very well be interrupted violently, as it is in a scene that he would finish in his stage play, *Out of the Picture*. The room remains a refuge, but it is no longer safe.

MacNeice achieves a similar effect in 'Cushendun,' the second poem in 'The Closing Album,' the sequence he wrote about travelling in neutral Ireland as war was declared between Britain and Germany. The vacation house is described in terms of every sort of bourgeois comfort; everything in the house is meant to protect or divert its inhabitants from the turmoil outside. Even here, though, there is no real escape:

Only in the dark green room beside the fire

With the curtains drawn against the winds and waves

There is a little box with a well-bred voice:

What a place to talk of war.<sup>188</sup>

Despite the drawing of the curtains, the people in the comfortable 'dark green room' cannot keep the threat of violence out. The radio connects this room to all other rooms in which there is a wireless set, and the war announcement cannot be ignored. The radio renders the room open to the outside, and thus insecure. MacNeice seems to have a definition of domestic space that is closer to Bill Bryson's, in which the home absorbs influences from the outside world rather than keeping them out:

Houses are amazingly complex repositories...whatever happens in the world –  
whatever is discovered or created or bitterly fought over – eventually ends up, in

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<sup>188</sup> Ibid., 180.

one way or another, in your house. Wars, famines, the Industrial Revolution, the Enlightenment – they are all there in your sofas and chests of drawers...So the history of household life isn't just a history of beds and sofas and kitchen stoves...but of scurvy and guano and the Eiffel Tower and bedbugs and just about everything else that has ever happened. Houses aren't refuges from history. They are where history ends up.<sup>189</sup>

The ordinary stuff of life mingles with grand currents in history to produce domestic space that is neither isolated nor isolationist, much as MacNeice creates rooms and homes that will not – or cannot – keep out the chaos outside.

These poems of relative or attempted isolation are 'bridge' poems of a sort; as Samuel Hynes reminds us, 'In Europe men *were* being shot, and some of them were poets (Garcia Lorca was murdered in August 1936), and there *were* gun-butts rapping on doors'<sup>190</sup>; the poet can no longer sit in his study smoking, thinking, and insulating himself from the violence outside his door. These poems also serve as 'bridges' in a formal sense; Edna Longley writes that '...a postscript or epilogue, by definition, enters a new phase: in this case both historical and aesthetic. In fact the poem acts as a prologue for *Autumn Journal* since it projects a solitary consciousness who inhabits a world without...residual communal shelter...'.<sup>191</sup> As for 'Cushendun,' we must bear in mind that it occurs midway through a sequence in which the poet travels west through Ireland, becoming progressively

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<sup>189</sup> Bill Bryson, *At Home: A Short History of Private Life*. (New York: Doubleday, 2010), 5.

<sup>190</sup> Hynes, *The Auden Generation*, 292.

<sup>191</sup> Longley, *Louis MacNeice: A Study*, 53.



more aware of war and its effects the further he gets from Europe. Both of these ‘rooms’ connect us to larger spaces.

MacNeice also presents the reader with rooms that melt away into the space that surrounds them, often using windows and mirrors to make walls disappear. Brown remarks on the frequency with which MacNeice employs the window as an image:

One of the most frequent images in MacNeice’s poetry is of the lonely, isolated self peering out through glass, through a window, at the world of phenomena – persons, places, things... The sense derived from many of the poems which floats up before the window of the mind, in swift jabs of experience, distinct, incomprehensible.<sup>192</sup>

The window, for Brown, underscores the poet’s isolation, making him appear completely separate from the ‘world of phenomena’ on the outside. This reading ignores the fact that it is only in windowless rooms, or rooms in which the windows are obscured, that the poet really seems ‘isolated’ or out of touch with his surroundings. If we look at the bulk of MacNeice’s ‘room with a window’ poems, we find instead that the window expands the space of the room outwards to accommodate new or novel objects and experiences, some of which are strange but rarely, as Brown would have it, ‘incomprehensible.’ Peter McDonald is closer to the mark when he argues that ‘The window image...signals new beginning and the opening-up of a restrictive environment...’<sup>193</sup> The window brings inside and outside together, complicating their relationship, but not isolating either from the other.

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<sup>192</sup> Terence Brown, *Northern Voices: Poets from Ulster*. (Totowa, NJ: Rowman & Littlefield, 1975) 106-7.

<sup>193</sup> McDonald, *Louis MacNeice*, 133.

We see this at work in what is perhaps MacNeice's best-known poem, 'Snow' (1935); the poet sits before the fire in a room with a large window and eats a tangerine, relishing the incongruity of the various modes of sensory experience he enjoys:

The room was suddenly rich and the great bay-window was

Spawning snow and pink roses against it

Soundlessly collateral and incompatible:

World is suddener than we fancy it.<sup>194</sup>

The window is the focal point for the entire poem; it is what makes the variety of experience celebrated by the poet possible. He can peel his tangerine and admire his roses while watching a snowfall that would kill both pleasures through the 'great bay window' which keeps out the cold while allowing visual stimuli to penetrate the poet's inner sanctum. In their analysis of the poem, Michael O'Neill and Gareth Reeves settle on the final line, 'There is more than glass between the snow and the huge roses'<sup>195</sup>, for which they cannot determine a single meaning:

The notion of receptivity to immediate impressions may help to explain the final line...that is, we do not view the world through a transparent medium, we sense it on the pulses. 'Between' is tricky, though, seeming to have two, 'collateral' and 'incompatible', meanings: 'between' as in 'in common', and 'between' as in 'gulf

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<sup>194</sup> MacNeice, *Collected Poems*, 24.

<sup>195</sup> *Idem*.

between'. The line does not so much *mean* (author's emphasis), as evoke a feeling of spontaneous plenitude and 'plurality'.<sup>196</sup>

As both barrier and bridge, the window separates the snow and the roses while bringing them together, uniting, as D.B. Moore would have it, subjective and objective experience in a single space.<sup>197</sup>

This will be taken to its logical extreme in the late poems 'Variations on Heraclitus' and 'Reflections', which appear as a pair in MacNeice's penultimate collection, *Solstices* (1961). The first half of the diad, 'Variations on Heraclitus', is a play on that philosopher's dictum that one cannot stand in the same stream twice, since the water in the stream is constantly flowing, constantly moving towards the ocean. MacNeice takes this a step further, arguing in the poem's final line that 'One cannot live in the same room twice':

Even the walls are flowing, even the ceiling,  
Nor only in terms of physics; the pictures  
Bob on each picture rail like floats on a line  
While the books on the shelves keep reeling  
Their titles out into space...<sup>198</sup>

What this poem gives us, in a mere two sentences, is a picture of a room in a constant state of breakdown and renewal. None of the objects that make up the room remain in place: 'the carpet/Keeps flying away to Arabia', the 'standard lamp...keeps waltzing away/Down an

<sup>196</sup> Michael O'Neill and Gareth Reeves, *Auden, MacNeice, Spender: The Thirties Poetry*. (New York: St. Martin's, 1992), 68.

<sup>197</sup> D.B. Moore, *The Poetry of Louis MacNeice*. (Leicester: Leicester University Press, 1972), 60.

<sup>198</sup> MacNeice, *Collected Poems*, 560.

unbridgeable Ganges', and the poet himself explains to his auditors that this is fine as far as he's concerned: 'Nor need you be troubled to pin me down in my room/Since the room and I will escape...' <sup>199</sup> Here, MacNeice refuses to allow himself – or any of his possessions – to be pinned down to any specific 'place'; the private room itself falls apart, its contents scattered across the globe, and it is transformed into a 'non-place', a travelers' nexus. Longley argues that flux of this sort 'appealed to MacNeice as an antidote to Irish stasis' <sup>200</sup>, but there is nothing particularly 'Irish' that stands out in this poem – we can assume that the room of which MacNeice speaks is in England, his country of residence – nor is MacNeice's Ireland as 'static' as Longley argues. Rather, as per the discussion of 'Carrickfergus' above, Ireland is depicted as a set of transitional points, each operating as a kind of liminal space while failing to become an ideologically or psychologically important 'place'.

We see another such constructed 'place' melt into flux in the companion poem to 'Variations on Heraclitus', 'Reflections', which is worth quoting in full for our purposes:

The mirror above my fireplace reflects the reflected  
 Room in my window; I look in the mirror at night  
 And see two rooms, the first where left is right  
 And the second, beyond the reflected window, corrected  
 But there I am standing back to my back. The standard  
 Lamp comes thrice in my mirror, twice in my window,

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<sup>199</sup> Idem.

<sup>200</sup> Edna Longley, 'Louis MacNeice: The Walls are Flowing' in Across a Roaring Hill: The Protestant Imagination in Modern Ireland. Eds. Gerald Dawe and Edna Longley. (Belfast: Blackstaff, 1985) 100.

The fire in the mirror lies two rooms away through the window,  
 The fire in the window lies one room away down the terrace,  
 My actual room stands sandwiched between confections  
 Of night and lights and glass in both directions  
 I can see beyond and through the reflections the street lamps  
 At home outdoors where my indoors rooms lie stranded,  
 Where a taxi perhaps will drive in through the bookcase  
 Whose books are not for reading and past the fire  
 Which gives no warmth and pull up by my desk  
 At which I cannot write because I am not lefthanded.<sup>201</sup>

While in 'Variations on Heraclitus' it is the room that falls apart, here the room and its occupant are destabilized through the placement of windows and mirrors, which are treated here as both reflective and transparent surfaces, and the spatial confusion they engender is reflected in the frequent enjambment; the sudden mid-sentence shifts from line to line ('The standard/Lamp comes thrice in my mirror...', for example) underline the difficulty of locating oneself in a series of identical, illusory rooms. McDonald reads a kind of nightmarish impotence in this poem: 'The self is in focus again at the end of 'Reflections', but it is a different self, reflected into otherness, over which the 'I' is powerless. Inside and outside have shifted into each other, a nightmare of transformation of 'home' into

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<sup>201</sup> MacNeice, *Collected Poems*, 561.

the scene of the self's disintegration.'<sup>202</sup> The image is certainly dreamlike, but I fail to see where McDonald detects 'nightmare' in this situation: the spatial dimensions of the world constructed in the poem are disorienting, but the dream-like images in the poem – the taxi parking next to the desk, for instance – are not especially terrifying. In fact, MacNeice has again turned a private 'place' into a 'non-place' by bringing a means of transportation, a potential way out of the confusing maze of rooms, indoors.

MacNeice's windows are usually glimpsed from indoors, and as such they tend to refer to both what is inside and outside the room. Henri Lefebvre calls a window

a non-object which cannot fail to become an object. As a transitional object it has two senses, two orientations: from inside to outside, and from outside to inside.

Each is marked in a specific way, and each bears the mark of the other. Thus windows are differently framed outside (for the outside) and inside (for the inside).

Mirrors, meanwhile, are 'relays: transitory or transitional in nature, they refer to other objects.'<sup>203</sup> A poem like 'Reflections' confuses and combines 'inside' and 'outside', mixing up the referents to which Lefebvre's 'relays' point. The effect of this, as in MacNeice's poetry concerning 'home' in its various levels, is to confuse 'space' and 'place' to the point that they become indistinguishable from one another.

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<sup>202</sup> McDonald, *Louis MacNeice*, 184.

<sup>203</sup> Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, 209.

## II. 'One place is as bad as another': Arcadias, Islands and Other False Utopias

MacNeice often presents his Utopian imaginings in pastoral terms, only to deconstruct the very conventions of the pastoral genre from within; pastoral is, for MacNeice, largely defined in terms of space – it is, as Andrew Ettin writes in *Literature and the Pastoral*, '...a privileged spot marked off and enclosed from the world at large.'<sup>204</sup> Pastoral is also, to an extent, about rewriting or ignoring the past and the processes of historical change; Theocritus located his idylls on a rural island on which not much had changed from generation to generation, and Virgil wrote his eclogues in part to ingratiate himself with a regime his family had initially opposed. The ideal pastoral *locus amoenus* for MacNeice seems to be an island; indeed, he sometimes describes places that are not in fact surrounded on four sides by water as islands. In his work, island life is depicted as both admirable and founded on a kind of deception or avoidance. As Terence Brown argues,

[MacNeice] was attracted by much in island life; but there was something he distrusted about islands, as well as finding in them images of possible social life, paradigms of a coherent international order. They represented evasion, escapism, an unwillingness to confront responsibility.<sup>205</sup>

The island provides a sense of pastoral *otium*, or freedom from duty,<sup>206</sup> which is necessary for pastoral but which bothers MacNeice's social conscience. MacNeice's explicitly pas-

<sup>204</sup> Andrew V. Ettin, *Literature and the Pastoral* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1984), 131.

<sup>205</sup> Terence Brown, 'MacNeice's Ireland, MacNeice's Islands' in *Literature and Nationalism*, eds. Vincent Newey and Ann Thompson (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1991), 233.

<sup>206</sup> Thomas G. Rosenmeyer, *The Green Cabinet: Theocritus and the European Pastoral Lyric*. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1969), 67.

toral poems tend to treat the pastoral idyll as a trap, as in ‘An Eclogue for Christmas’, in which speaker A’s noisy, dirty, ephemeral but lively city is in the end preferable to speaker B’s rigidly old-fashioned, decaying countryside, or ‘Eclogue by a Five-Barred Gate’, in which Death tricks a pair of poets masquerading as shepherds into his illusory sheepfold. For MacNeice, the idyll never lasts, and it must always end in loss or pain.

This is the case in MacNeice’s description of his first marriage, which he describes in *The Strings are False* as ‘living on an island’ in which the newlyweds ‘ignored [their] Birmingham context as much as possible’,<sup>207</sup> and which Peter McDonald refers to, using pastoral terminology, as ‘idyllic to a stifling degree’.<sup>208</sup> MacNeice writes that his first wife, Mary (or ‘Mariette’, as he dubs her in *The Strings Are False*), ‘looked like a nursery rhyme shepherdess’,<sup>209</sup> but such an atmosphere stifles his creativity: ‘...I could no longer write poetry; Mariette required a soundproof room and you cannot write poetry in a soundproof room.’<sup>210</sup> Dwelling in such an idyll, which even sounds from outside are not permitted to penetrate, leads MacNeice to an artistic dead-end; a domestic life which takes no interest in things outside the home robs him of his muse, as he notes in his memoir:

The trouble is that you cannot write in a hot-house. Mariette would plug a leg of lamb full of rosemary and cloves and that would be the event of the day. To write poems expressing doubt or melancholy, an anarchist conception of freedom or nos-

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<sup>207</sup> MacNeice, *The Strings Are False*, 133.

<sup>208</sup> Peter McDonald, ‘Louis MacNeice: Irony and Responsibility’ in *The Cambridge Companion to Contemporary Irish Poetry*, ed. Matthew Campbell (Cambridge, UK, Cambridge University Press, 2003), 61.

<sup>209</sup> MacNeice, *The Strings Are False*, 122.

<sup>210</sup> *Ibid.*, 124.



talgia for the open spaces (and these were the things that I wanted to express), seemed disloyal to Mariette. Instead I was disloyal to myself, wrote a novel which purported to be an idyll of domestic felicity. Faking, I thought, doesn't matter so much in prose and one must at least keep one's hand in.<sup>211</sup>

MacNeice discusses his first marriage in terms of retreat from the world into a kind of domestic security blanket, one which he refers to in the above passage as an 'idyll', and indeed he remains artistically 'idle' throughout much of this period (having married in 1930, he would not publish his first mature volume until 1935, only two months before Mary left him for an American graduate student).

The end of the marriage as it is portrayed in *The Strings are False* is marked by a fire in the MacNeices' sitting room, and a symbolic act of violence against the house that has contained the couple and separated them from the life of the city around them:

This fire, I felt, was cathartic. I carefully changed my trousers, got our landlady's long-handled axe and smashed the cement base of the hearth, for the beams underneath it were burning...Soon there was a large hole in the floor and the bucketfuls of water and fragments of cement were falling on the head of our landlady's lodger.

Mariette's face was tragic but I was in the height of never-again don't-care spirits.<sup>212</sup>

The destruction of the hearth, the symbolic center of the home, damages the marriage irrevocably (Mariette leaves him on the following morning), but opens the poet up to his

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<sup>211</sup> Ibid., 137.

<sup>212</sup> Ibid., 151.

surroundings; he discovers that Birmingham has its own unique culture, and that he has been missing out on social life and the exchange of ideas while cocooned in his marriage. He even begins to respect his students at the University of Birmingham, whom he initially disdained:

I began to go out and discover Birmingham. Discovered that the students were human; discovered that Birmingham had its own writers and artists who were free of the London trade-mark...the best of the Birmingham students were not poseurs, were fully occupied having affairs and lending and borrowing money and being witty and foul-mouthed.<sup>213</sup>

In other words, the best of his students were involved in the world around them without falling victim to any of the prevailing 1930s ideological currents that MacNeice saw taking over Oxford and Cambridge.

The few pastoral poems that MacNeice writes before the disintegration of his marriage, then, might constructively be read as attempts to write himself out of the ‘hot-house’ of connubial bliss. ‘An Eclogue for Christmas’, perhaps the best known of MacNeice’s early experiments in the eclogue form, was written in December 1933 and first appeared in Geoffrey Grigson’s *New Verse* in April 1934; it was published in the *American Review* almost simultaneously,<sup>214</sup> granting MacNeice an international audience for the first time in his career which, as his rather apologetic letter to Grigson in January of that year suggests,

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<sup>213</sup> Ibid., 154.

<sup>214</sup> Louis MacNeice, *Letters of Louis MacNeice*, ed. Jonathan Allison. (London: Faber and Faber, 2010), 237.

was his aim. The letter also suggests that Yeats was on his mind ('Would you by any chance like me to review Yeats' new *Collected Poems*? I want the book and I think I might manage to be intelligent about it.'<sup>215</sup>), and, like Yeats, he chooses to begin his first mature book of poetry with a pair of pastoral eclogues, to be published by Eliot at Faber and Faber. As he writes to Eliot in April 1934, 'I have lately been writing some longer poems which, for want of a better name, I am calling 'Eclogues'. Two of these, I think, I could put at the beginning of my book.'<sup>216</sup> This seems to put MacNeice into conscious dialogue with the older generation; not only is Eliot his publisher, but the first poems to appear in the volume are in the style Yeats chose for the first poems in *Crossways* (1889), 'The Song of the Happy Shepherd' and 'The Sad Shepherd'. In addition, several lines in 'An Eclogue for Christmas' echo the later Yeats: 'I think things draw to an end, the soil is stale'<sup>217</sup>, for example, is structurally quite similar to 'Things fall apart; the center cannot hold...' <sup>218</sup>, the third line in Yeats's 'The Second Coming.'

While MacNeice's line retains the parallel structure of Yeats's, he reverses its implications. Yeats writes of chaos, of a coming tide of change that will sweep all before it and set up something new and terrifying in the place of the old order. The problem, for Yeats, is a pulling-apart of the things of the older world; the gyres are spinning so fast that the present order can no longer maintain itself. In MacNeice's line, meanwhile, the soil is made stale by age, inactivity, and unending sameness. The lack of outside influence in the

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<sup>215</sup> *Idem*.

<sup>216</sup> *Ibid.*, 239.

<sup>217</sup> MacNeice, *Collected Poems*, 5.

<sup>218</sup> Yeats, *Collected Poems*, 189.

countryside leads to a state of affairs in which everything becomes stagnant. This is contrary to the treatment of pastoral space that we find in ‘The Song of the Happy Shepherd’, which opens with lines mourning the death of Arcadia, but ends by celebrating its imminent return, arguing that pastoral space is still to be found in the dreams of enlightened individuals, as the earth no longer dreams: ‘But ah! she dreams not now; dream thou!/For fair are poppies on the brow:/Dream, dream, for this is also sooth.’<sup>219</sup> MacNeice, meanwhile, lets pastoral space crumble under the weight of encroaching industrialization which will bring an end to the traditions of the country gentry:

In the country they are still hunting, in the heavy shires  
 Greyness is on the fields and sunset like a line of pyres  
 Of barbarous heroes smoulders through the ancient air  
 Hazed with factory dust and, orange opposite, the moon’s glare,  
 Goggling yokel-stubborn through the iron trees,  
 Jeers at the end of us, our bland ancestral ease...<sup>220</sup>

The country isn’t a particularly attractive place to begin with – note that the moon goggles ‘yokel-stubborn’ – and the borders of this rural Arcadia are already disappearing.

We get the sense, however, that MacNeice believes that this is for the best. He locates beauty not in the rural landscape, but in the man-made constructs of city life:

But yet there is beauty narcotic and deciduous

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<sup>219</sup> Ibid., 6.

<sup>220</sup> MacNeice, *Collected Poems*, 4.

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.<sup>221</sup>

The artificiality of this 'landscape' is underscored by the recurrence of the word 'like' – the 'white globes *like* moons', the 'yellow light...*like* chrysanthemums.' Despite this, the city is an 'organism', though its life has its source in human activity; it has 'grown out of us' and taken on a life of its own, one that must expand in order to survive. Still, for MacNeice, the artificial copy seems to be more attractive than the real thing; Longley calls it 'Romantically seductive..., the stuff of Impressionist paintings' in that 'it emphasizes beauty by extending the values of the natural world...to an inorganic 'organism'.'<sup>222</sup> Of course, this 'Romantic' picture of a city taking over green spaces and obliterating the traditions of folk life is really anti-Romantic in its attribution of the city's growth to group activity rather than the power of the individual mind, while Yeats assigns to individual minds the task of revivifying Arcadia in true Romantic fashion.

Robyn Marsack notes a difference between MacNeice's failed Arcadias and the 'industrial pastoral' attempted by 1930s poets like C. Day Lewis and Stephen Spender. 'MacNeice', Marsack writes, 'was not moved, as his contemporaries were, by any sense of

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<sup>221</sup> Ibid., 5.

<sup>222</sup> Longley, *Louis MacNeice: A Study*, 47.

mechanical intrusion into a pastoral setting, nor by exultation in the power of engines.<sup>223</sup> While Spender gloried in the electrical pylons going up all over the country ‘like nude giant girls’<sup>224</sup> and Day Lewis retreated into Georgian pastoralism, MacNeice distrusts both the country’s false lure of individual life and the city’s tendency towards abstraction of human principles: ‘They have made of me pure form, a symbol or pastiche,/Stylised profile, anything but soul and flesh...’<sup>225</sup> As such, ‘An Eclogue for Christmas’, in which a city-dweller and a rural gentleman meet and discuss the disadvantages of their respective lifestyles, gives us a kind of meeting on neutral ground; we are left in a space that is neither city nor country and neither industrial nor organic.

Even figures that MacNeice represents as actual herdsmen do not attain the simplicity of the true pastoral speaker, and the pastoral space they seek is revealed to be a fantasy. ‘Eclogue by a Five-Barred Gate’ is subtitled ‘Death and Two Shepherds’, but it is clear from the outset that the shepherds are actually educated poets with an awareness of pastoral traditions. Of the four eclogues, this poem is, on the surface, the one most obviously engaged with pastoral conventions in that it features shepherds, sheep and a singing contest in an imaginary landscape. Elton Edward Smith complains that the poem ‘seems strangely irrelevant to modern life and even precious in its deliberate antiqueness’<sup>226</sup>; he seems to be missing the fact that the point of the poem is in fact the artificiality of the genre and its remoteness from the concerns of modern life.

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<sup>223</sup> Robyn Marsack, *The Cave of Making*, 5.

<sup>224</sup> Stephen Spender, *New Collected Poems*, ed. Michael Brett. (London: Faber & Faber, 2004) 21.

<sup>225</sup> MacNeice, *Collected Poems*, 4.

<sup>226</sup> Elton Edward Smith, *Louis MacNeice*. (New York: Twayne, 1970), 32.

Unlike the rural voice in ‘An Eclogue for Christmas’, the shepherd-poets in ‘Eclogue by a Five-Barred Gate’ initially speak an affected country dialect, even after Death asks for their credentials and the first reveals that he is ‘a shepherd of the Theocritean breed’<sup>227</sup>, that is, a poet posing as a shepherd for artistic purposes. The second shepherd holds on to his rusticisms a bit longer, even after the first shepherd speaks of ‘Thanatos in Greek, the accent proparoxytone’<sup>228</sup>, until Death insists that both ‘Cut out for once the dialect and the pedantry’<sup>229</sup>, the twin features that inform the pastoral as an academic exercise for young poets.

Death’s problem with the shepherd-poets, then, is the artificiality of their idiom, as William McKinnon writes:

...Death explicitly connects his idiom with the attitude and the thing expressed, as MacNeice has been using the varying colloquial rhythms to suggest the varying attitudes of the reality and unreality they embody. In the quiet, relentlessly regular flow of Death’s rhythms, the firmness and clarity of his idiom, we have the equation with reality, as the wavering, grotesque amalgam of the shepherds’ idiom equates with unreality.<sup>230</sup>

That Death is, as McKinnon argues, more consistent than the shepherds are is certain; his language doesn’t undergo the same dialectical contortions, and he eschews both the coy-

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<sup>227</sup> MacNeice, *Collected Poems*, 11.

<sup>228</sup> *Idem*.

<sup>229</sup> *Idem*.

<sup>230</sup> William McKinnon, *Apollo’s Blended Dream: A Study of the Poetry of Louis MacNeice*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1971) 199.

ness of rustic poetic conceit and empty pedantry. The problem with arguing that Death represents reality is that he is himself a poetic conceit, used to fool the shepherds into abandoning the tricks of their art; the gate he guards is ‘the façade of a mirage’<sup>231</sup>. While it may not be directly concerned with ‘reality’ as such, Death’s idea of proper poetry is more concerned with modernity and directness:

D. I thought he was a poet and could quote the prices

Of significant living and decent dying, could lay the rails level on the  
sleepers

To carry the powerful train of abstruse thought – <sup>232</sup>

The problem with poetry as practiced by the shepherds is that it is engaged in the praise of dead traditions – the Classical world and the rural idyll – while ignoring the changes, like the locomotive of Death’s metaphor – another image of motion through space – that render such poetry obsolete. If poetry deals in ideas of life and death, Classicist dialect verse is woefully out of step with the times, and the only place for such poets is in Death’s own sheepfold, which is itself an imaginary place. When the shepherds ask Death if they will enjoy life in his land, he responds, ‘*Enjoy what where?*’<sup>233</sup>, and once they have passed through the gate, he remarks that ‘There is no life as there is no land’<sup>234</sup> in his sheepfold. Arcadia and *otium* are illusions that belong to a vanished world.

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<sup>231</sup> MacNeice, Collected Poems, 14.

<sup>232</sup> *Ibid.*, 11.

<sup>233</sup> *Ibid.*, 14.

<sup>234</sup> *Idem.*



MacNeice employs a similar tactic in writing about islands, which are also represented as fragile and ultimately deceptive Utopias; *Letters from Iceland*, the eccentric travel book on which MacNeice and Auden collaborated in 1936, provides an interesting case in point in its treatment of island life, and particularly the island holiday, as a kind of idyll. This is territory Auden treads as well in his birthday poem for Christopher Isherwood, ‘August for the people and their favorite islands’, the island is not only the site of revelry and freedom from care for vacationers (‘Lulled by the light they live their dreams of freedom’<sup>235</sup>), but also exerts a powerful nostalgic pull in a time of crisis:

Nine years ago, upon that southern island  
 Where the wild Tennyson became a fossil,  
 Half-boys, we spoke of books and praised  
 The acid and austere, behind us only  
 The stuccoed suburb and the expensive school.<sup>236</sup>

While the poem does, as Edward Mendelson writes, go on to ‘evoke this hour of crisis and dismay’<sup>237</sup>, it serves primarily to provide a counterpoint to the Yeatsian serenity of the islands, offering the same kind of peace that Yeats sought at Innisfree.

MacNeice, newly divorced and living with his young son in London in 1936, was invited to join Auden on his journey north and contribute to the book he had been contracted to write about Iceland. His typical attitude towards the island is more jaundiced than

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<sup>235</sup> Auden, *The English Auden*, 55.

<sup>236</sup> *Ibid.*, 155.

<sup>237</sup> Mendelson, *Early Auden*, 310.

Auden's. Terence Brown's reading of MacNeice's portrayals of island life as torn between the poles of pleasure and irresponsibility is again relevant here. I would add to this that, in a way, islands become for MacNeice a sort of trap. While one might be drawn to an island in order to escape responsibility, insular space is also cramped and offers little possibility of escape once responsibility does indeed come calling. His description of the experience of writing *Letters from Iceland* points to his unwillingness to fully immerse himself in his subject:

Our travel book was a hodge-podge, thrown together in gaiety. There is one moment I remember that I did not mention, on a boat coming down the west coast from the Isafjord, a coast split up by fjords. The setting sun in the cold sea made a super de-luxe picture postcard and we all were crowded on the side of the boat looking at it. Suddenly an old German nun, wrinkled, plump and timid, who obviously normally kept herself to herself within the Chinese wall of her faith, suddenly turned to me with the face of a young mother when the nurse brings in the first of all her babies, and exclaimed in ecstasy 'Wunderschön! Wunderschön!' and I, conscious of a moment of communion, said 'Ja.'<sup>238</sup>

'Moment of communion' notwithstanding, MacNeice's description of the moment is skeptical and a bit condescending in tone. The German nun is described in terms that make her comical, and the scene to which she responds so enthusiastically is a mere postcard-painting to the poet; it is artificial and clichéd. It is exactly the sort of sentimental response that

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<sup>238</sup> Macneice, *The Strings Are False*, 164.

is ridiculed in much of *Letters from Iceland*, one which MacNeice's travelling companion, Auden, seems to want to believe in until he, too, is disappointed by the reality of Iceland.

Intimations of the coming conflict are found all over the island, but Auden continues to maintain a sense of pastoral detachment, finding himself able to hope in 'Auden and MacNeice: Their Last Will and Testament' that 'Erica, my wife, may have her wish/To see the just end of Hitler and their unjust rule'<sup>239</sup> while stating in his first letter to her that he was staying in the same place as a party of Nazis and that he 'saw Goering for a moment at breakfast next morning, and we exchanged politenesses. He didn't look in the least like his brother, but rather academic'<sup>240</sup>. It is as though he cannot take the fascist threat seriously while in Iceland; rather, he treats the Nazis and their sympathizers as fellow-travelers in the idyll, and when he does condemn them, tends to do so in the form of a joke about acquaintances at home ('We leave the Martyr's at Abergwilly/To Wyndham Lewis with a box of soldiers (blonde)/Regretting one so bright should be so silly'<sup>241</sup>). He also mockingly labels a photo of a blonde, blue-eyed child 'Germanischer Typus,' and the word he uses most often to describe the Nazis is 'silly'.

This may be, in part, because he, Goering's brother, and Rosenberg are all there for the same reason. In the letter in which he describes the meeting with Goering's brother, he notes that 'The Nazis have a theory that Iceland is the cradle of Germanic culture', adding that 'if they want a community like the sagas they are welcome to it. I love the sagas, but

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<sup>239</sup> W.H. Auden and Louis MacNeice, *Letters from Iceland*. (New York: Random House, 1937), 258.

<sup>240</sup> *Ibid.*, 119.

<sup>241</sup> *Ibid.*, 247.

what a rotten society they describe, a society with only the gangster virtues.<sup>242</sup> While he mocks the Nazis for seeking the more primitive roots of their own society, Auden was driven to Iceland in part by a genealogical impulse as well. In a short memoir of the Iceland trip, Michael Yates, who was part of the party of schoolboys which accompanied the poets for part of their tour, notes that ‘Iceland and its sagas had been part of his imagination ever since his father used to read him Icelandic fairy tales. Moreover, his own ancestry could be traced back to the island, hence his christian name Wystan.’<sup>243</sup> The primary difference is that for the holiday-making Nazis the journey is a kind of cultural obligation; they are looking to prove a point to people back home. For Auden it is personal; he is exploring his own roots (real or imagined) in order to get away from his responsibilities at home. Both, however, are seeking meaning in a ‘place’ cut off from the chaotic ‘space’ of the crisis European realignment in the 1930s. Iceland, at least, has stable borders, and Auden and the Nazi travelers are treating it as ‘representation of space’ dominated by mythic symbols drawn from the sagas.

An island is by its very nature an ideal spot for this sort of idyll, cut off as it is from the mainland and thus isolated from the mainstream of culture. As Auden writes in ‘Journey to Iceland,’ ‘...Europe is absent. This an island and therefore/Unreal.’<sup>244</sup> The enjambment that breaks up the sentence, however, points to the instability of the Arcadian dreamworld that islands offer, for we know that Europe is not in fact absent, since there are poets and polemicists from the Continent descending upon Iceland in an attempt to claim it

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<sup>242</sup> Ibid., 119.

<sup>243</sup> Michael Yates, ‘Iceland 1936’, in W.H. Auden: A Tribute, ed. Stephen Spender. (New York, Macmillan, 1974), 60.

<sup>244</sup> Auden and MacNeice, 26.

for their own, bringing their own troubles and terrors with them to the island. In 'Eclogue from Iceland,' for example, when the saga hero Grettir states that 'There is only hope for people who live upon islands', Ryan, the 'MacNeice' character, retorts that 'I come from an island, Ireland, a nation/Built upon violence and morose vendettas.'<sup>245</sup> Grettir's own experience as an outlaw gives the lie to his celebration of island life:

Under a curse I would see eyes in the night,  
 Always had to move on; craving company  
 In the end I lived on an island with two others.  
 To fetch fire I swam the crinkled fjord,  
 The crags were alive with ravens whose low croak  
 Told my ears what filtered in my veins –  
 The sense of doom.<sup>246</sup>

When Grettir is cursed by the *draugr* Glamr, there is nowhere for him to run; the only place to which he can escape is an island within an island, where he lacks the materials to make a fire and is constantly reminded of his impending demise. The same is true of the saga hero Gunnar, mentioned a few lines earlier, who also meets his death when he decides to stay in Iceland instead of accepting exile abroad. To remain on an island, then, is to court personal disaster by ignoring the storm clouds gathering nearby, as MacNeice argues Ireland does by remaining neutral in the war raging on the Continent in 'Neutrality' (1944):

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<sup>245</sup> Auden and MacNeice, 126.

<sup>246</sup> Ibid., 128.

But then look eastward from your heart, there bulks

A continent, close, dark, as archetypal sin,

While to the west off your own shores the mackerel

Are fat – on the flesh of your kin.<sup>247</sup>

Not only is Ireland united to Europe (and Britain in particular) through kinship ties, it is also too close to the continent to remain disengaged from the conflict for very long. The respite offered by an island is temporary at best.

In addition to the tale of the doomed Grettir, we get another argument against isolationism in the passages spoken by the Voice of Europe. The Voice seems to come from somewhere outside the island, and is a reminder of conditions in the wider world:

Blues, blues, sit back, relax,

Let your self-pity swell with the music and clutch

Your tiny lavendered fetishes. Who cares

If floods depopulate China? I don't care

Always in the air sitting among the stars

Among the electric signs among the imported wines

Always on the spree climbing the forbidden tree

Tossing the peel of the apple over my shoulder

To see it form the initials of a new intrigue...<sup>248</sup>

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<sup>247</sup> MacNeice, *Collected Poems*, 224.

<sup>248</sup> Auden and MacNeice, 132.

The Voice satirizes the desire for escape expressed in *Letters from Iceland*, deprecating the poets' desire for solitude by caricaturing their sense of detachment. The Voice suggests that they would be just as detached at home as they are abroad; their island idyll merely offers a convenient excuse for their lack of engagement.

Pastorals and islands, in the works of Yeats and Auden, become what Lyotard refers to as 'paradisiac representation[s] of a lost "organic" society'.<sup>249</sup> Such representations are a reaction to the perceived 'breaking up of the grand Narratives' and 'the dissolution of social aggregates into a mass of individual atoms thrown into the absurdity of Brownian motion'<sup>250</sup>; though Lyotard points out that he does not think anything of the sort is actually happening, writers like Yeats and Auden do fear such potential breakdowns of 'place' as represented in the grand narratives of either nationhood, political ideology, or religion. MacNeice, uncommitted in the previous respects, seems to prefer 'space' to 'place', regarding grand narratives of identity as something to be resisted – hence his refusal to acquiesce to the Utopian impulse, to accept the idyll despite its unreality.

MacNeice, given his demonstrated preference for the liminal over the determinate, finds an alternative to the island in the beach – the place where land meets water. His elegy for his father, 'The Strand', suggests that the elder MacNeice has been lifted whole from a beach in the West of Ireland<sup>251</sup>; it is paired with 'Last before America', in which a boatload

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<sup>249</sup> Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*, 15.

<sup>250</sup> *Idem*.

<sup>251</sup> MacNeice, *Collected Poems*, 263-4.

of travelers on their way to the United States spend their last night in their home country.

The destination is Utopian and thus unreachable:

Pennsylvania or Boston? It was another name,  
 A land of a better because an impossible promise  
 Which split these families; it was to be a journey  
 Away from death – yet the travellers died just the same  
 As those who stayed in Ireland.<sup>252</sup>

We see these emigrants only in transit between their homes and North America; as for the Bishop John MacNeice, we see him only in the poet's own reflection and in flashback, 'A square black figure whom the horizon understood.'<sup>253</sup> Like his son, he is apparently most at home in liminal space.

Indeed, we find MacNeice moving between places more often than we find him occupying them. *The Strings Are False* begins with the poet aboard a passage steamer bound for England from America; he refers to himself as a 'nomad who has lost his tent.'<sup>254</sup> Travel is a constant feature of his work, perhaps best exemplified by the early poem 'Train to Dublin', in which the poet travels through the Irish landscape and shares with the reader 'the incidental things which pass/Outward through space exactly as each was.'<sup>255</sup> The sensory impressions themselves are less important than the process through which the poet encounters them, as McDonald argues: "Train to Dublin' is concerned as much with the

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<sup>252</sup> Ibid., 264.

<sup>253</sup> Ibid., 263.

<sup>254</sup> MacNeice, *The Strings Are False*, 17.

<sup>255</sup> MacNeice, *Collected Poems*, 17.



experience of perception itself, the flux of the passing moment, as with what is actually perceived...<sup>256</sup> The perceptions themselves cover the full range of the senses, and are often sensations that cannot be experienced through the window of a train; we get

...the smell of Norman stone, the squelch  
 Of bog beneath your boots, the red bog-grass,  
 The vivid chequer of the Antrim hills, the trough of dark  
 Golden waters for the cart-horses, the brass  
 Belt of serene sun upon the lough.<sup>257</sup>

The frequent enjambments give one the sense of motion, the impressions hitting you quickly and then moving on, each making way for the next. This poem presents the space outside of the train as the site of nearly constant change, a speedy flow of sensory input that is too fleeting to take in. This is space of the sort that Jameson associates with postmodernism; while

Modernism...thought compulsively about the new and tried to watch its coming into being...the postmodern looks for breaks, for events rather than new worlds, for the telltale instant after it is no longer the same;...for the telltale shifts in the *representation* (author's emphasis) of things and of the way they change.<sup>258</sup>

The space through which MacNeice hurtles forward on the train is constantly changing, and is a riot of different sensations rather than a unified 'world'. This tips MacNeice's

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<sup>256</sup> McDonald, *Louis MacNeice*, 209.

<sup>257</sup> MacNeice, *Collected Poems*, 18.

<sup>258</sup> Jameson, *Postmodernism*, ix.

sensibility further from Modernism towards postmodernism, as defined by Lyotard and Jameson; his refusal to believe in any place as anything but a transitional point between places renders his entire world liminal, and thus postmodern.

### Chapter Three

#### **Childe Louis to the Broadcast Tower Came: Louis MacNeice and the Development of Postmodern Poetic Drama**

Despite the fact that Louis MacNeice was employed by the BBC Features Department for more than twenty years and produced a number of accomplished plays in what was then a new medium, his work as a dramatist has been regarded as secondary to his achievement as a poet. In the years following MacNeice's death, many critics argued that his BBC routine was bad for his poetry, pointing to the relatively weak long poems he produced in the late 1940s and the 1950s, when he was too busy with radio work to give much thought to poetry. This line of argument seems to have begun with W.H. Auden's article in the November 1963 issue of *Encounter*, in which Auden ponders what might have been had his friend continued teaching instead of going into radio work<sup>259</sup>. As recently as 1988, Edna Longley writes that 'all [MacNeice's] dramatic output...has the essentially subsidiary importance MacNeice attached to Yeats's plays'<sup>260</sup>; however, since the 1980s sympathetic critics have begun to reassess the role radio played in developing MacNeice's late style. Barbara Coulton's book, Louis MacNeice in the BBC (1980), treats his broadcasting work as a central element in the development of his final volumes of poetry, while

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<sup>259</sup> W.H. Auden, 'Louis MacNeice,' *Encounter* 21 (1963): 48.

<sup>260</sup> Edna Longley, Louis MacNeice: A Study, 117.

Peter McDonald writes that ‘the discipline of writing for radio offers an alternative frame of reference’<sup>261</sup>, one that is primarily dramatic rather than lyric, that leads directly into the dream-logic and quest motifs of the later poetry.

Even these sympathetic readings of MacNeice’s dramatic work regard it as important only to the extent that it affects his output as a lyric poet, for good or for ill. It is my contention that MacNeice’s so-called ‘middle-stretch’, spent in the Features Department of the BBC, is neither accidental nor merely fertile ground for seeds that would sprout into the later lyric poetry. Rather, through an examination of dramatic criticism written both before and after his acceptance of a position at the BBC in 1941 and analysis of a few of his most important radio plays, I aim to demonstrate that MacNeice uses radio to solve certain spatial problems posed by modern poetic drama as practiced by Yeats, Eliot and Auden, among others. MacNeice’s writings on both the conventional theater and radio drama show a deep awareness of the issues with which Yeats in particular grappled, and in his theory and practice he paints the conventional theatre space as a site of alienation rather than engagement. His adoption of radio as a dramatic forum gestures in the direction of a postmodern theatre that eliminates the need for a ritualized space in which actors are raised above or otherwise separated from the audience.

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<sup>261</sup> Peter McDonald, Louis MacNeice, 130.

### **I. A Sack (with earholes) to Put One's Head In: Theorizing Drama as Sound**

The modern play, particularly in the form practiced by Yeats, is, to borrow a phrase from Katharine Worth, 'a drama of the interior'; that is, as Worth argues, it attempts 'to render...the complexity of the mind's processes, its intuitions and fine shades of feeling, the whole undertow of the stream of consciousness.' In order to achieve this effect, Yeats requires, paradoxically, 'a technique of intense physicality. All the resources of the theatre – scene, colour, music, dance and movement – had to be brought into play...' <sup>262</sup>. Yeats's plays are reliant on props and scenery as well as sound and require a certain intimacy in the performance space itself; the audience must be able to see that the actors are made up to look as though they are wearing masks. Theatre-going becomes a kind of ritual experience, a brief journey into sacred space in which actors and audience plumb the depths of human interiority.

Yeats was an unabashed snob, and demanded a particular kind of audience for the work he and his associates produced. In an essay on 'The Theatre' dated February 1900, Yeats records the advice he gave to John Todhunter regarding *A Sicilian Idyll*, and what happened when his friend ignored him and sought a broader audience:

I remember, some years ago, advising a distinguished, though too little recognised, writer of poetical plays to write a play as unlike ordinary plays as possible, that it might be judged with a fresh mind, and to put it on the stage in some little suburban

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<sup>262</sup> Katharine Worth, *The Irish Drama of Europe from Yeats to Beckett* (Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities Press, 1978), 3.

hall, where a little audience would pay its expenses. I said that he should follow it the year after, at the same time of the year, with another play, and so on from year to year; and that the people who read books, and do not go to the theatre, would gradually find out about him...He followed my advice in part, and had a small but perfect success, filling his small theatre for twice the number of performances he had announced; but instead of being content with the praise of his equals, and waiting to win their praise another year, he hired immediately a well-known London theatre, and put his pastoral play and a new play before a meagre and unintelligent audience.<sup>263</sup>

Even at this relatively early period in his career, Yeats shows himself less interested in building a genuinely popular theatre movement than in appealing to small groups of elite theatergoers. Later in the same essay he writes that ‘We must make a theatre for ourselves and our friends, and for a few simple people who understand from sheer simplicity what we understand from scholarship and thought’; such people, Yeats argues, are prepared for plays that ‘will be for the most part remote, spiritual, and ideal.’<sup>264</sup> Small audience, small performance space, the Big Ideas about Life, the Universe, and Everything – the theatre is, for Yeats, a place where the elite go to achieve communion with ideas that are larger than themselves.

This kind of special theatrical space is ‘sacred’ in Mircea Eliade’s sense of the word. In *The Sacred and the Profane*, he describes the construction of such space as an attempt to carve out meaning from an otherwise meaningless environment:

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<sup>263</sup> Yeats, *Early Essays*, 122.

<sup>264</sup> *Ibid.*, 123.

For religious man, space is not homogenous; he experiences interruptions, breaks in it; some parts of space are qualitatively different from others... There is, then, a sacred space, and hence a strong, significant space; there are other spaces that are not sacred and so are without structure or consistency, amorphous. Nor is this all. For religious man, this spatial nonhomogeneity finds expression in the experience of an opposition between space that is sacred – the only *real* and *real-ly* existing space, and all other space, the formless expanse surrounding it.<sup>265</sup>

Theatrical space, for Yeats, has to be special in some way. It cannot be any old public space, nor can it be an ordinary commercial theatre, since these attract the wrong sorts of audience. He toys with the possibility of performing Nō plays outdoors, but only in places with mythic or religious significance: ‘under the slope of Slieve-na-mon or Croagh Patrick, ancient memories’.<sup>266</sup>

Indeed, the Nō form allows Yeats to create a drama that bows to virtually none of the conventions of 19<sup>th</sup>-century realism. Richard Ellman notes that Yeats’s Nō-influenced plays

won without his being aware of it the battle with naturalistic drama which he himself had been fighting in beleaguered fashion. Here was the authorization he needed for leaving probability in the lurch, by abolishing scenery so the imagination would be untrammelled, by covering faces with masks, by portraying character in broad

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<sup>265</sup> Mircea Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion*, trans. Willard R. Trask (New York: Harper & Row, 1959), 20.

<sup>266</sup> Yeats, *Early Essays*, 173.

strokes...through isolating the moment in which some irrevocable deed separates a man from his fellows as well as from his own idiosyncracies.<sup>267</sup>

Realistic, plausible plots and believable character development not being features of the Nō, Yeats is able to use it as an excuse to buck the expectations of a conventional theatrical audience. There are no glib bourgeois professionals sitting in drawing rooms and talking with their wives. The elements of the Nō that Yeats admires are those that are the least realistic: ‘...the Noh stage is a platform surrounded upon three sides by the audience. No ‘naturalistic’ effect is sought. The players wear masks and found their movements on those of puppets...They sing as much as they speak...’<sup>268</sup> This highly stylized form of theatre would weed out the ‘undesirable’ elements of the Abbey Theatre audience, both the rabid Irish nationalists who denounced Synge and ‘the clever young journalists, who, condemned to their treadmill of abstraction, hated music and style...’<sup>269</sup> and who championed Ibsen and his followers. The raised stage, masks, and stylized movement mark the dividing line between performers and audience most clearly – the stage is a demonstrably different kind of space than the pit.

Yeats’s concept of the playwright’s mission is what Edward Mendelson would refer to as a ‘vatic’ idea of art. The vatic poet cares little for whether the public needs or wants his art; it is an expression of his personal powers, not a service to the community. Yeats’s plays are dictatorial in this respect – he gives the audience what he feels like giving them

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<sup>267</sup> Richard Ellman, *Eminent Domain* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1967) 71-2.

<sup>268</sup> Yeats, *Early Essays*, 169.

<sup>269</sup> Yeats, *Autobiographies*, 219.



rather than what they actually want or need – and the content of a play like *On Baile's Strand*, in which the hero Cuchulainn refuses to be bound by an oath to serve the common good, illustrates the playwright's interest in protecting the prerogatives of unique 'heroic' individuals who must be permitted to pursue their own idiosyncratic goals without interference from meddlesome civil authorities.

MacNeice, like Yeats, expressed concerns about the average West End theatre audience a few years before he began working for the BBC, though he opposes Yeats's notion of an aristocratic theatre of interiority. In 'The Play and the Audience', first published in R.D. Charques' *Footnotes to the Theatre* in 1938, MacNeice describes the theatergoer as a dedicated follower of fashion:

The present-day London theatre is, on the whole, a snob institution. Country cousins inquire what shows are on in town and boys at school are told by their masters that to go to the theatre is part of one's education. But while I have met a few people who do go to the theatre in the hope of 'learning something', of getting uplift, of developing themselves, the great majority go because it is the thing to do; to go to a West End play is breaking bread with Society.<sup>270</sup>

'Society' in this instance refers not to the whole superstructure of culture, but to those who sit at the top of it. One goes to the theatre, MacNeice says, because it is what important people do – the very sort of people Yeats wished to court for his Japanese-influenced plays for dancers.

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<sup>270</sup> Louis MacNeice, 'The Play and the Audience', in Selected Literary Criticism of Louis MacNeice, 87.

MacNeice is more realistic than Yeats in his assessment of theatrical audiences, describing the audience he has rather than the audience he wants, though he is not particularly sanguine about it. West End theatergoers, MacNeice writes, ‘can be roughly divided into two groups’:

There is a smaller group of pseudo-critics who have canalized in the theatre the universal human passion for being ‘in the know’ and picking winners. They know all about the actors and are able to criticize acting and production, the sets or the lighting – everything except the essentials of the play itself. The larger group consists of people – mainly women – who use the theatre as uncritical escape from their daily lives. Suburb-dwellers, spinsters, schoolteachers, women secretaries, proprietresses of tea shops, all these, whether bored with jobs or idleness, go to the theatre for their regular dream-hour off. The same instinct leads them there which makes many hospital nurses spend all their savings on cosmetics, cigarettes and expensive underclothes.<sup>271</sup>

For MacNeice’s devotees of the theatre, everything but the play matters. The first group focuses on the details of the production, and the second will applaud anything as long as it gets them out of their daily routines for a few hours. The quality of the play itself is incidental. This disregard for the drama as anything but a superficial entertainment, a collection of dazzling parts that need not add up to a coherent whole, turns a venerable art form into a museum piece.

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<sup>271</sup> Ibid., 89.

In the large London theatres, the small, sensitive audiences for which Yeats yearned are not possible. Indeed, such audiences, cliques united by ideology rather than taste, will applaud bad plays as well as good, as was the apparent case at a performance at a left-wing theatre MacNeice attended: ‘I went to a Left Theatre Revue where the complacent reverence of the audience was painful to contemplate. Shoddy writing, production, and acting were uproariously applauded, under the aegis of Mr. Victor Gollancz and the shadow of Spain.’<sup>272</sup> While this audience, like the West End audience described in the above passage, cannot distinguish good theatre from bad, the reasons for its collective lack of taste are different. They do not know enough about stagecraft to criticize the sets, the lighting, or the direction; however, they are still focusing on what, for MacNeice, should only be incidental. For this audience the ideas in the play are all that matters, and the quality of the play as drama is not important.

Solutions similar to Yeats’s are suggested and found wanting. MacNeice notes that ‘The European theatre began in religion,’ but acknowledges that ‘we shall never reinstate the drama as something essentially religious,’ as Yeats would have wanted, ‘for the simple reason that many centuries have irrefutably proved that the theatre *can* be secular.’<sup>273</sup> Moving the theatre back into rarified ‘sacred’ space will not do in a culture that is used to a theatre that no longer serves an explicitly religious purpose. Nor will playing to smaller and smaller groups of those ‘in the know’ do anything to improve the quality of British theatre,

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<sup>272</sup> Ibid., 91-2.

<sup>273</sup> Ibid., 92.

though playing to small groups may be a means of eventually reaching a larger audience: ‘In the meantime we may have to make shift with something like cliques – writing for small specialized sections of the public but preferably in such a way that wider and wider sections can understand us if they want to.’<sup>274</sup> MacNeice always keeps this goal – bringing quality art to a larger audience – in mind when casting about for his ideal dramatic medium.

His first attempts at drama can perhaps best be described as ‘fumbling’. *Out of the Picture*, the only MacNeice stage play to be performed by a professional company in his lifetime (unless one counts his translation of the *Agamemnon* of Aeschylus), is an Auden-esque charade featuring music, dancing and a carnivalesque atmosphere which produced some fine lyrics, but is judged by most to be a failure as drama. It was performed in 1937 by Rupert Doone’s Group Theatre, who, according to MacNeice’s contemporary, Julian Symons, worked along principles that seem almost unconsciously Yeatsian:

The Group Theatre had aesthetic ideas, and it had social attitudes; the first springing from Doone, the second from Auden. ‘The form we envisage for our plays is analogous to modern musical comedy, or the pre-medieval folk play,’ Doone said. He considered that theatrical art was ‘an art of the body,’ presented by people ‘in action.’ The theatre was intended to depict ‘a life of action and the senses’, and it lagged behind the life it served...He called for the establishment of a permanent

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<sup>274</sup> Ibid., 93.

company of actors working together, and for auditoriums that would command a complete view from every seat by a turn of the head.<sup>275</sup>

Doone's interest in ancient dramatic forms and total sensory experience including music, dance, and elaborate masks, as well as his concept of the stage as a kind of ritual space, sound remarkably similar to Yeatsian dramatic theory. Indeed, as Roy Foster informs us, Yeats offered a number of his plays, including *The Player Queen* and *A Full Moon in March*, to the Group for performance in 1934, though by the following year the planned production fell apart due to artistic and ideological differences, the Group Theatre's milieu being essentially comic and their politics being too 'left' for the old poet's sensibilities.<sup>276</sup>

After the relative failure of this Audenesque stage production, MacNeice wrote a play about strikebreakers and submitted it to the Abbey, but it was never performed. In 1940, he followed Auden and Isherwood to America, where he taught at Cornell as a guest lecturer, failed to kindle a romance with the American writer Eleanor Clark, and almost died of peritonitis. His convalescence over, he set sail for England in November, in part out of a sense of responsibility; Jon Stallworthy notes that 'There is some evidence that...he volunteered for service in the Royal Navy, but was rejected on grounds of bad eyesight.'<sup>277</sup> When it became clear that this particular avenue of service was closed to him, and seeing as he was in dire financial straits and in need of a job, he responded to a letter forwarded by

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<sup>275</sup> Julian Symons, *The Thirties: A Dream Revolved* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1973) 79.

<sup>276</sup> R. F. Foster, *W.B. Yeats: A Life Vol II: The Arch-Poet* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003) 506-7, 516.

<sup>277</sup> Stallworthy, *Louis MacNeice*, 287.

his publisher from the BBC, who were looking ‘to secure a first class poet’<sup>278</sup> to write radio programmes for the Features department.

At the time, many writers and artists were developing an interest in the cinema – Auden’s work for John Grierson at the G.P.O Film Unit on documentaries like *Night Mail* (1936) provides a telling example – and, for once, MacNeice seems to be in something like agreement with the older generation in its evaluation of the relative merits of the new medium. In his essay on Marie Lloyd, T.S. Eliot discusses the feeling of community that the music hall gave to its working class audiences, a feeling that cinema cannot replicate:

With the decay of the music hall, with the encroachment of the cheap and rapid-breeding cinema, the lower classes will tend to drop into the same state of protoplasm as the bourgeoisie. The working man who went to the music-hall and saw Marie Lloyd and joined in the chorus was himself performing part of the act; he was engaged in that collaboration of the audience with the artist which is necessary in all art and most obviously in dramatic art. He will now go to the cinema, where his mind is lulled by continuous action too rapid for the brain to act upon, and will receive, without giving, in that same listless apathy with which the middle and upper classes regard any entertainment of the nature of art. He will also have lost some of his interest in life.<sup>279</sup>

MacNeice’s assessment of the effects of cinema on the brain and on human social life is not quite so pessimistic as Eliot’s, as he does not seem to regard it as symptomatic of the

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<sup>278</sup> Qtd. in Stallworthy, *Louis MacNeice*, 287.

<sup>279</sup> T.S. Eliot, ‘Marie Lloyd’, in *Selected Literary Criticism of T.S. Eliot*, 174.

hopeless degeneracy of contemporary society; however, his description of his trips to the cinema with his first wife leaves telltale hints as to his opinion of the seriousness of film as an art form:

Four or five times a week we went to the cinema, going solely for entertainment and never for value, holding hands like a shopgirl with her boy-friend. The organist would come up through the floor, a purple spotlight on his brilliantined head, and play us the 'Londonderry Air' and bow and go back to the tomb. Then the stars would return close-up and the huge Cupid's bows of their mouths would swallow up everybody's troubles – there were no more offices or factories or shops, no more bosses or foremen, no more unemployment and no more employment, no more danger of disease or babies, nothing but bliss in a celluloid world where the roses are always red and the Danube is always blue.<sup>280</sup>

While cinema as MacNeice experiences it is not inherently evil, it presents an imaginary world that is closed off from everyday concerns, and as such is a kind of idyll or isle of the Lotos-Eaters of the type that MacNeice warns against in so much of his poetry and criticism. He stresses that he went to the pictures 'solely for entertainment,' suggesting that the medium privileges passive consumption over active engagement. In other words, it creates a dislocated Utopian space, with little connection to the world outside of the cinema doors, which peddles escapist fantasies; it remains an enclosed, impermeable space.

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<sup>280</sup> MacNeice, *The Strings are False*, 138.

Radio, meanwhile, turned out to be a congenial medium for MacNeice, and provided an answer for many of the problems of space and audience that haunted Yeats's overtly symbolist theatre. Radio drama required no stage crew, and, indeed, no stage. The need for a conventional performance space was obliterated, as Barbara Coulton writes:

Technical developments included the use of multiple studios, all controlled by the producer who could fade them in and out from his 'dramatic control panel'. Different acoustics could thus be used, and effects separated from musicians and actors; great skill and accurate timing were needed.<sup>281</sup>

None of the participants in the production needed to be in the same place, and the audience was not required to pay for a ticket or go to one of the West End 'temples of art' in order to experience a quality dramatic performance. Through the diffuse nature of the radio medium, it could in fact bring together an audience that spanned great geographical distances.

For MacNeice's generation of radio writers, this afforded the opportunity to cultivate the tastes of the masses by sending quality art over the airwaves into the listener's own sitting room. The 'global space', to borrow Keith Williams's term, created by the new mass media and

relativised by technology and defamiliarised by Modernism, they hoped, could be inhabited by an adapted human subject, culturally reorientated and politically reactivated. Their method was indeed a neo-realism, taking Marxism's apparent cer-

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<sup>281</sup> Barbara Coulton, Louis MacNeice in the BBC (London: Faber and Faber, 1980), 38.



tainties as its unshakeable ideological foundation and emulating the unprecedented ‘authenticity’ of technological modes of reproduction in its forms.<sup>282</sup>

This comes very close to the concern over the status of the audience that MacNeice expressed in 1938, when he suggested ‘two ways’ in which British theatre might be improved: ‘Either educate the theatergoers so that they will demand better theatre, or produce better theatre which will educate the theatergoers (and capture the more educated non-theatregoers).’<sup>283</sup> At the time, MacNeice saw the prospects for either as grim:

The former course is the more helpful but the less likely to be immediately achieved, as it will depend in its turn on some sweeping change in society. The latter course can at the moment only be pursued in holes and corners. The official theatre is a money-racket, so that any systematic attempt forcibly to intrude better plays would fail automatically. Instead, we have all the different types of experimental theatre, whose audiences do not pay so well and are quite differently composed from the audiences of the West End.<sup>284</sup>

Radio offered a way out of the Yeatsian, Modernist, experimental ‘hole and corner’ trap. As Williams points out, ‘By the Second World War, three-quarters of families possessed [wireless] sets, paying nine million ten-shilling license fees. Radio grew from enthusiast’s pastime to national habit in less than two decades, literally part of the furniture in most homes.’<sup>285</sup> For MacNeice, the opportunity to reach an audience of non-theatregoers that

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<sup>282</sup> Keith Williams, *British Writers and the Media: 1930-1945* (New York: St. Martin’s, 1996), 4-5.

<sup>283</sup> MacNeice, ‘The Play and the Audience’, 90.

<sup>284</sup> *Idem.*

<sup>285</sup> Williams, *British Writers and the Media*, 26.

transcended regional and class boundaries was too good to pass up – and, in preparing propaganda programs, he felt that he was doing his bit for the war effort.

The typical tricks of the visually-oriented drama of Yeats and the Group Theatre would be impossible to replicate in a medium that was wholly dependent on sound, and the needs and tastes of the audience, which would have to be met in order to get anyone to tune in, precluded esoteric theatrical experiments. MacNeice saw the radio-writer's method as one of compromise between high artistic standards and the requirements of his listeners:

This audience he must regard, if only because of its size and diversity, as a primitive one; to reach it he must move on a more or less primitive plane. But what is primitive is not *ipso facto* crude or false or childish or even outmoded. This plane precludes the higher mathematics and the more erudite *nuances* of symbolist poetry; it does not preclude the basic human emotions or the broader forms of expression. It does not therefore preclude the broader forms of poetry.<sup>286</sup>

Leaving behind the self-conscious difficulty of the High Modernists brings poetry a large, if uncultivated, national audience and help them to develop a liking for quality art. The problem with the British public at large was, as MacNeice put it, 'not that they have innately bad taste but that they can be easily conditioned to admire what is vulgar and emotionally false. Give them a year of the Wurlitzer organ and they will not stomach a symphony orchestra. Write down to them and they will never look up.'<sup>287</sup> While there is certainly some

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<sup>286</sup> Louis MacNeice, Selected Plays of Louis MacNeice, ed. Peter McDonald et al. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993), 395.

<sup>287</sup> *Idem*.

residual snobbery in this statement – MacNeice assumes that the pleasures enjoyed by a cultivated bourgeois are better than those preferred by ‘ordinary’ people – it is of a different order than Yeats’s. Yeats was an exclusivist; he preferred to set limits on the potential size of his audience, preaching only to those already converted. MacNeice adopts a more evangelical method towards the promotion of highbrow culture; he tries to give it to those who do not possess it in a form that they will not find alienating.

As MacNeice writes in his 1941 study of Yeats, published around the same time he signed on with the BBC, one of the things he finds most intriguing and frustrating about Yeats’s plays is ‘their remoteness from ordinary life’<sup>288</sup>; this is a result of Yeats’s efforts to eliminate ‘character’ from his plays, thus turning his back on the popular (and populist) traditions of European drama:

Wishing to eliminate character, moral discussions, circumstantial realism, he naturally made his plays short. He found the model he wanted in the Noh plays of Japan, a narrow traditional genre practised for the pleasure of a small aristocratic circle and without commercial machinery or naturalism...The Japanese dramatist...is emulating *in drama* what the French *Symbolistes* attempted in lyric. Yeats, in adopting this elusive aim, turned his back not only on Shakespeare and Ibsen but on Racine and the Greeks; there was observation of life, and also moral argumentation, in Aeschylus as well as in Euripides. Yeats with his distrust of observation,

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<sup>288</sup> MacNeice, The Poetry of W.B. Yeats, 164.

of rhetoric, of ‘a leading article type of poetry’, preferred the Japanese game of ‘listening to incense’.<sup>289</sup>

That MacNeice finds Yeats’s dramatic style at best amusingly eccentric, at worst unintentionally absurd, is suggested by the final sentence; he refers to Yeats’s method as ‘a game’ which involves a silly kind of synaesthesia. Yeats breaks out of the Western tradition by putting himself into a straightjacket – no character development, no long plays, no didacticism, no insensitive bourgeois making noise in the pit, and, most importantly, no social responsibility on the part of the playwright.

Radio drama, on the other hand, despite – or perhaps because – it is limited to sound alone, offers the playwright a level of freedom he cannot get when writing for the conventional stage. The lack of a physical performance space is, in many ways, a positive boon for MacNeice:

Provided you make clear your transitions from scene to scene, you can take many more liberties with time and place; you are free of the dead hand of the Three Act tradition. You can jump from India to the Arctic and from 1066 to 1943. You can make a point with a scene consisting of three lines and no one need fiddle with a curtain or black out the lights. And you can, with less fuss and more credibility than on the stage (and perhaps than on the screen), introduce – if you want to – allegorical speakers or choruses. You can again, with the help of music and recorded effects...present all sorts of scenes – especially scenes of action – which theatre can

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<sup>289</sup> Ibid., 165.

rarely attempt. You can finally...get an effect, if you want to, of up-to-the-minute actuality, a set-piece as a running commentary.<sup>290</sup>

This kind of drama, in freeing itself from the need for a physical theatre building, also frees itself from the need to observe the classical unities or any other conventions of stage drama. This is a form of theatre that exists in the space which Eliade called 'profane', which he defined as 'an amorphous mass consisting of an infinite number of more or less neutral places in which man moves, governed and driven by the obligations of an existence incorporated into an industrial society.'<sup>291</sup> Indeed, radio drama occupies a 'neutral' space, if invisible waves beaming in all directions from a tower can be said to occupy any space at all, because the audience need not get dressed up and go out to enjoy the play; rather, the play comes to every home in which there is a wireless set, without regard for the social status or spiritual beliefs of the listeners.

We need not take as dim a view of this kind of neutral, unconsecrated space as Eliade does, however. Fredric Jameson describes postmodern space as 'an effacement of the categories of inside/outside'.<sup>292</sup> I have already noted his distinction between modern and postmodern architecture, in which modernist buildings announce their difference from their surroundings while postmodern buildings attempt to blend seamlessly into their environment. This distinction is useful in summing up the difference between Yeats and MacNeice as dramatists; Yeats is the high-modernist tower proclaiming its difference from and

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<sup>290</sup> MacNeice, *Selected Plays*, 397.

<sup>291</sup> Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane*, 23.

<sup>292</sup> Jameson, *Postmodernism*, 112.

authority over the surrounding cityscape, while MacNeice deliberately inserts himself and his work into the fabric of everyday urban life through his work with the BBC. This brings us back to Mendelson's distinction between vatic and civil poetry: 'The heroes of civil poetry are more cunning than volcanic, more intent on finding their way back to their city than on dying gloriously and far away; and a civil poet similarly finds his artistic challenge in demands made by existing poetic forms, forms that could be completed satisfactorily rather than left in deliberate fragments.'<sup>293</sup> Louis MacNeice finds in radio drama a powerful tool for the spread of socially responsible poetry that maintains a high level of artistic quality while responding to the needs of its public – it entertains and educates. By eliminating the sense of occasion and the ritualized stage, MacNeice brings drama into a secular, skeptical age and presents it – very successfully – to an audience that had grown to be skeptical of art-theatre. Whatever the quality of individual plays, MacNeice's dramatic work was clearly well-theorized and intended to provide a solution to certain dramatic problems raised by Yeats and his successors; it was not merely a source of a paycheck or grist for later poetry. By focusing on the needs of the audience and disseminating his plays far and wide through a then-unconventional medium, MacNeice demonstrates a postmodern understanding of theatrical space.

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<sup>293</sup> Mendelson, Early Auden, xix.

## II. 'A voice crying in the wilderness': MacNeice as Dramatist

In the first section of this chapter, I discussed radio drama as a way out of a theoretical cul-de-sac; modern drama had become so rarefied a pleasure that it was all but unintelligible to any but the elite, and radio provided civic-minded playwrights like MacNeice with the means to bring the theatre into the homes of average listeners, eliminating the need for a ritualized performance space. I will now turn my attention to MacNeice's dramatic practice, beginning with his stage play, *Out of the Picture* (1937), and the problems that this play and the aesthetic impulses of Rupert Doone and the Group Theatre presented for him, and following with a discussion of three of his most important works for radio: *Christopher Columbus* (1942), *The Dark Tower* (1946), and *The Mad Islands* (1962). All three plays present the listener with worlds that would be difficult to represent physically on stage, and use the techniques available to the radio dramatist – particularly the ability to move the scene in time and space without having to change the set or props – to great advantage. It is the shifting 'physical' worlds of these plays, in their constantly changing landscapes and frequent anachronism, which makes them postmodern, in addition to their shared theme: the unresolved or fruitless quest. MacNeice presents us with heroes who never achieve their original goals, and whose fates are left ambiguous. MacNeice's heroes are neither tragic figures nor overachievers; any dignity with which they are invested comes from their strength in the face of adversity despite their overwhelming normality.

In addition, it should be noted that MacNeice's plays are often situated at breaks in the historical timeline or artistic process. *Persons from Porlock* (1963), the play on which

he was working at the time of his death, is named for the incident Coleridge describes in his preface to 'Kubla Khan,' in which a visitor interrupts the poet in his attempts to turn the products of an opium-induced dream into poetry, and *They Met on Good Friday* (1959), which dramatizes Brian Boru's victory over Viking invaders at the Battle of Clontarf in 1014, represents a brief historical respite before the Norman conquest of Ireland. Barbara Coulton notes that 'It was not a romantic and heroic episode, but part of the continuity of the ambiguities and tragedy of Ireland...' <sup>294</sup>, and in his foreword MacNeice notes that the two sides are not clearly delineated, nor does he acknowledge the historical reality of any such place as 'Ireland' in that era:

Whether the word 'nation' should be used in this context is doubtful. The records show that there were Irishmen fighting on the Norse side and Norsemen on the Irish side; although Brian, as High King of Ireland, was the only one in history whose writ really ran throughout the whole country, regional jealousies still tended to outweigh 'patriotism'. And, contrary to tradition, this was not a straight fight between Christian and pagan; most of the Vikings had recently become at least nominally Christian. <sup>295</sup>

This interpretation of history rejects the idea of any kind of 'grand narrative' of Irish history, blending subject and object, self and other, into a cacophony of voices, alternately competing and cooperating. Indeed, MacNeice's debunking of what tradition regarded as a critical juncture in the formation of a distinctly 'Irish' identity takes aim at what Jürgen

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<sup>294</sup> Coulton, *Louis MacNeice in the BBC*, 172.

<sup>295</sup> MacNeice, *Selected Plays*, 263.



Habermas calls one of the central processes of ‘modernization’ – ‘...the establishment of political power and the formation of national identities’<sup>296</sup> – by demonstrating that the popular history that underlines these identities is often built on oversimplifications and outright lies. This debunking tendency and preference for indeterminacy is evident in the plays I intend to discuss, particularly in the way MacNeice represents interior and exterior spaces.

MacNeice’s early Audenesque revue, *Out of the Picture*, is eerily prescient in its depiction of an England teetering on the precipice of war, though it was written and performed two years before hostilities officially broke out between Britain and Germany. It was performed in December 1937 by the Group Theatre, who had staged MacNeice’s translation of Aeschylus’s *Agamemnon* the previous autumn; the new play featured music by Benjamin Britten and was well received by the Group’s audience.<sup>297</sup> It also featured a Radio Announcer and his counterpart, the Listener-In, performing connective interludes between scenes. These short interludes demonstrate that MacNeice was already thinking about the power of radio to connect performer and audience while at the same time diffusing the performance spatially; indeed, the Radio Announcer and the Listener-In trade places at the beginning of Act II, and the Listener delivers a talk entitled ‘Summer is a-Comen In’, in which the peace of English life is finally broken by intimations of war:

Summer is a-Comen in. A packet of sunflower seed

To plant along the wall. A packet of Sweet William.

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<sup>296</sup> Jürgen Habermas, *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity: Twelve Lectures*, trans. Frederick G. Lawrence. (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1992), 2.

<sup>297</sup> Stallworthy, *Louis MacNeice*, 214-5.

What else, my dear? The children like it, you know,  
 To have some flowers of their own.  
 They like a little garden to look after...  
 And what comes after that?  
 Flowers in the sky, rockets and flares.  
 Things are not what they were, the time is past  
 For growing in a quiet plot,  
 For sleeping in an easy bed.<sup>298</sup>

The current world situation – the war which will be declared in Act II after the International Peace Conference – will not allow the peace and quiet necessary to maintain the pastoral idyll described by the Listener-In. The weapons of war are described as ‘flowers in the sky’ – a further indication of the deadly peril of naïve utopianism and the way it leads to the aestheticization of violence. As Valentine Cunningham observes, ‘The holiday enclosures, like the fragile frontiers of Europe, just couldn’t keep out the hostilities you were trying to evade by being or going with them. The would-be still centre had a way of filling up with the din of war.’<sup>299</sup> *Out of the Picture* is a play that evades the ‘still centre’ altogether, complicating ideas of stable, unitary identity through the changes wrought on the onstage environment.

The play begins with a feckless bourgeois painter, Portright, who has completed only one painting in his career, awaiting the delivery of his framed masterpiece. The

<sup>298</sup> Louis MacNeice, *Out of the Picture*. (London: Faber and Faber, 1937), 78-9.

<sup>299</sup> Cunningham, *British Writers of the Thirties*, 382.

stage directions indicate a sparse set: ‘PORTRIGHT’S *room in a basement*. RADIO SET, *telephone*.’<sup>300</sup> The only furniture consists of conduits to the outside world, both of which come to life immediately – the first lines of the play belong to the Radio Set, which is interrupted by the ringing of the telephone. In the ensuing scene, we learn that Portright, despite being unable to pay either the gas or the electric, has a housekeeper and once lived ‘at the Hall’<sup>301</sup>, which indicates that he has come down in the world; even the basement room is merely a temporary stop on Portright’s downward slide into penury, as the Bailiff enters to strip him of his remaining possessions, including his painting of the Rising Venus. The actress Clara de Groot’s flat is no more stable. In Act II Scene I, we are told that we are in ‘CLARA DE GROOT’S *flat*. *About one-third of the stage from left is divided by a wall which is a light screen on rollers*.’<sup>302</sup> Instead of a stable set meant to represent the apartment of a wealthy and successful woman, we are given a flimsy screen that rolls away. While this is perhaps a matter of practicality in performance, given that the action moves between five different spaces in two acts, this in itself indicates the fluidity of MacNeice’s concept of theatrical space, which is very difficult to represent on a conventional stage. Clara de Groot’s flat is different when it is next opened to the audience: ‘*Noise and lights of an air raid*. *Except for these flashes the stage is dark*. *The flashes show the gaping of VENUS with a solid wall behind it*.’<sup>303</sup> When Clara enters at the beginning of the scene, she no longer recognizes her own home:

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<sup>300</sup> MacNeice, *Out of the Picture*, 9.

<sup>301</sup> *Ibid.*, 10.

<sup>302</sup> *Ibid.*, 86.

<sup>303</sup> *Ibid.*, 119.

CLARA. The end of the world!

*[She unlocks the door and enters sitting-room.]*

I must get to bed, I must cover my head with the  
clothes.

But where is the door to my bedroom?

Where has the wall gone? Where is the door?

Nothing is where it was.

The door ought to be here. I can't find it.

Perhaps I have forgotten.

It is Clara. She can't remember.<sup>304</sup>

Clara's disorientation and inability to navigate her new environment are reflected in both her loss of memory and her reference to herself in the third person. The changes to her home have damaged her sense of identity, leading her to question where – and who – she is; as Linda Hutcheon notes, the questioning of 'common-sensical' ideas like the individuality of the human subject is a hallmark of postmodernist thought<sup>305</sup>, and it is clear that in *Out of the Picture* the shifting nature of space undermines any sense of firm personal identity that the principal characters might feel.

There are demonstrations of the fluidity of personal identity throughout the play, including the moment at which the Radio Announcer and the Listener-In trade places men-

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<sup>304</sup> Idem.

<sup>305</sup> Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Postmodernism*, xiii.

tioned above. The artist's model, Moll O'Hara, is able to temporarily win Portright's affection by dressing in Clara de Groot's clothes<sup>306</sup>, the psychoanalyst Spielmann causes an entire room full of people to fall in love arbitrarily<sup>307</sup>, and the painting of Venus, the focus of Portright's obsession, changes its appearance<sup>308</sup> and finally breaks out of its frame to address the audience<sup>309</sup>. As the security of the onstage space is threatened by war, so the security of each character's identity becomes frayed.

While *Out of the Picture* presents identity crises caused by persistent threats to space represented on a conventional stage, *Christopher Columbus*, written for the radio, features the questing of a titanic ego through uncharted space in pursuit of a fixed idea. The play was commissioned by the BBC in December 1941 to mark the entrance of the United States into the Second World War; the purpose of the broadcast, delayed until October 12<sup>th</sup>, 1942, was to commemorate the 450<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Columbus's voyage to the Americas<sup>310</sup>. MacNeice's script, though, is hardly flattering to Columbus, and in his preface to the play he admits to giving in to the impulse to 'debunk the Columbus legend': 'Columbus, a man who like Hitler relied on his intuitions and was rather an offensive character, should after all be a Godsend to those who enjoy debunking.'<sup>311</sup> MacNeice's Columbus is a monomaniac, obsessed with finding a western route to Asia, who gives no thought to the collateral damage he leaves in his wake, including his mistress and their child.

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<sup>306</sup> MacNeice, *Out of the Picture*, p. 113.

<sup>307</sup> *Ibid.*, 68-70.

<sup>308</sup> *Ibid.*, 94.

<sup>309</sup> *Ibid.*, 115-8.

<sup>310</sup> Stallworthy, *Louis MacNeice*, 313-4.

<sup>311</sup> MacNeice, *Selected Plays*, 5.

The attitudes of Columbus and his contemporaries are summed up in interludes spoken by the voices of Faith and Doubt; Doubt expresses the official views of the Church and of the average person, while Faith insists that Columbus's quest is neither mad nor futile (and always gets the final word). These opposing viewpoints are framed spatially from the outset:

DOUBT        No, it cannot be done, it cannot be done,

Here on the shore of the final sea

Our windows open on unreality,

The bitter rubric of the sinking sun –

Ne plus ultra. This is the Western edge

Of the established world, the ocean wall

Beyond which none may pass. To pass

Would lead to nothing at all.

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FAITH        Yes, but it *can* be done, it *can* be done.

Wise men have proved the world is round:

Follow the sun to the west and you are bound

To come on unknown lands which know the sun.

Westward! Westward! Legendary isles

Call our ships to sea and who knows where

We shall come to port! We know,

We know there is something *there*.<sup>312</sup>

The voice of Doubt denies the existence of unmapped space altogether; if there is anything beyond the 'wall' of the western ocean, it is merely a void. The voice of Faith, on the other hand, assumes that, if the world is indeed round, then there must be something on the other side of it, though Columbus never really understands what it is that he's found. This appears to endorse the idea of Columbus and explorers like him as subscribers to a postmodern concept of open, unmapped space. His willingness to sail into an unmapped expanse is potentially postmodern, as per Jameson's definition of 'postmodern hyperspace': '...this latest mutation in space...has finally succeeded in transcending the capacities of the human body to locate itself, to organize its immediate surroundings perceptually, and cognitively to map its position in a mappable external world.'<sup>313</sup> While Jameson refers to 'built environments' in his definition of 'hyperspace', a similar effect is produced by pushing willfully into an undifferentiated, uncharted natural landscape; Columbus and his crew are, in pursuit of their captain's dream, forced into expanses of space in which the human subject is unable to locate itself.

Indeed, Columbus makes much of the fact that he is, as it were, a man without a map. The Portuguese barflies in the first scene call him a man with 'no place',<sup>314</sup> and when he arrives at the priory of La Rabida, he introduces himself as 'a man from Nowhere...A voice crying in the wilderness.'<sup>315</sup> At the meeting of the first Royal Commission to study

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<sup>312</sup> MacNeice, *Selected Plays*, 7.

<sup>313</sup> Jameson, *Postmodernism*, 44.

<sup>314</sup> MacNeice, *Selected Plays*, 10.

<sup>315</sup> *Ibid.*, 11.

the feasibility of his plan, he argues that his ‘country...is the Future’<sup>316</sup>; his demand – to which Queen Isabella accedes – is to be named ‘Admiral of the untraveled ocean!/Viceroy of the Unknown World!’<sup>317</sup> He consistently declares himself a man whose country is somehow indeterminate – or nonexistent. Columbus – rather like MacNeice himself – refuses to fall into any simplistic, pre-determined category of ethnic or geographical identity; he is a figure defined by his departures and his rambling peregrinations, as his abandoned lover, Beatriz, tells him: ‘When you come on a visit/The light is always behind you./The shadow of your departure crosses the door before you.’<sup>318</sup> A creature of ‘non-place,’ of constant transit, MacNeice’s Columbus is himself ‘unmappable’...

...or is he? Edward Soja’s theory of the ‘portable ego,’ the bubble of spatial subjectivity that an individual carries around, seems to describe Columbus’s essentially Romantic concept of himself. Columbus seeks not merely to lose himself in the western ocean, which would be genuinely postmodern, but to imprint the zone of space he carries with him, his own subjectivity, upon the uncharted regions he hopes to discover. He demands the titles mentioned above not because he *identifies* with the ‘undiscovered’ world, but because he wishes to *master* it. He is fixated on the meaning of his name and the power it grants him:

I am Christopher, the Bearer of Christ,

I am the Dove that travels the world,

And the words that I speak are the words that I hear

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<sup>316</sup> Ibid., 26.

<sup>317</sup> Ibid., 39.

<sup>318</sup> Ibid., 32.



And the words that I hear are the words of God.<sup>319</sup>

He comes to draw new maps, not simply to tear up the old, and to redefine space, not to obliterate it or render it meaningless. The spoils of conquest are displayed in his triumphal procession from Seville to Barcelona, including other human beings: ‘Look at the red savages crowned with feathers – /Gold rings in their noses and popinjays on their shoulders.’<sup>320</sup>

The main attraction, though, is ‘the Discoverer himself,/The man who is now the talk of Europe, the Very Magnificent Lord/Admiral of the Ocean Sea, Viceroy of the Western World,/With his pale face and burning eyes, sitting his horse/Like a Roman Emperor...’<sup>321</sup>

The procession is, as it was for the Romans, the conqueror’s opportunity to show off the riches of the new lands gained for the Empire. The star attraction is, of course, the colossal egoist who pulled off this amazing feat.

Columbus appears to understand space primarily as a ‘surface,’ as per Doreen Massey’s account of the ‘voyages of discovery’ of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. European explorers, according to Massey,

...equate[d] space with land and sea, with the earth which stretches out around us.

It...makes space seem like a surface; continuous and given...It is an unthought cosmology...So easily this way of imagining space can lead us to conceive of other places, peoples, cultures simply as phenomena ‘on’ this surface. It is not an innocent manoeuvre, for by this means they are deprived of histories.<sup>322</sup>

<sup>319</sup> MacNeice, *Selected Plays*, 16.

<sup>320</sup> *Ibid.*, 62.

<sup>321</sup> *Idem.*

<sup>322</sup> Doreen Massey, *For Space*. (London: Sage, 2005), 4.

Indeed, Columbus's understanding of the 'histories' of the islands he has discovered and the people he brings back to Spain with him is colored by his preconceptions; he goes to his grave believing that he has discovered a new passage to Asia. Ending the play with Columbus the Conqueror in triumph underscores the character's overconfidence and sets him up for ironic reversal; his inability to understand his discovery, his insistence that the space he has traversed is merely surface, will ultimately lead to his tragic denouement, as MacNeice notes in his preface.<sup>323</sup>

If *Christopher Columbus* is about the strong-willed individual imprinting his ego on the space around him, Roland, the hero of *The Dark Tower*, is Columbus's opposite. The plot is an elaboration on Robert Browning's poem: Roland is born into a family whose duty it is to fight the Dragon, who makes his lair in the Dark Tower far away. When Roland comes of age, he must sail away to find the Tower and summon the Dragon with a trumpet call. Along the way, Roland is tempted with drink, sex, gambling, and the prospect of a happy marriage; he is able to live up to his destiny only when the light in the ring that his mother gave him, which showed him that her purpose in sending him away still held, goes out. When he decides to face the Dragon of his own free will, he is finally able to perform his duty, and the play ends, as does the poem, with the hero raising his horn to his lips to blow a challenge.

The play makes the most of the possibilities of radio for presenting varied and occasionally ambiguous settings. The *Listener's* reviewer found the parable 'difficult to visu-

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<sup>323</sup> MacNeice, *Selected Plays*, 4.

alise', acknowledging that 'it was the poet's deliberate intention that it should be so',<sup>324</sup> and Keith Williams notes that the setting is 'both medieval and contemporary'<sup>325</sup>. The settings themselves are often apparently imaginary constructs; when Roland meets the Soak in the seaport, for example, his new companion conjures a tavern, complete with Barmaid, out of thin air:

SOAK That's the idea. Music does wonders, young man.

Music can build a palace, let alone a pub.

Come on, you masons of the Muses, swing it,

Fling me up four walls. Now, now, don't drop your tempo,

Easy with those hods. All right; four walls.

Now benches – tables – No! No doors or windows;

What drunk wants daylight? But you've left out the bar.

Come on – 'Cellos! Percussion! All of you! A bar!

That's right! Dismiss!<sup>326</sup>

Essentially, this is a demonstration of a unique feature of radio drama: since you cannot represent space visually, it must be produced sonically. The Soak commands the orchestra to build him a bar, and they do so to his exact specifications (so far as we can tell, anyway). The Soak, who denies the reality of everything around him and insists that Roland is a figment of his imagination ('Watch, Mabel, my new puppet drinks again – /A pretty boy but

<sup>324</sup> Qtd. in Stallworthy, *Louis MacNeice*, 344.

<sup>325</sup> Williams, *British Writers and the Media*, 202.

<sup>326</sup> MacNeice, *Selected Plays*, 129.

I've given him no more lines'<sup>327</sup>), is a figure for the radio playwright, whose only available building material is sound, which, as MacNeice acknowledges in a 1945 letter to Eliot, doesn't always come off properly on the page<sup>328</sup>. His speech contributes to the sense that Roland is not in control of his own destiny; though Roland escapes the tavern, it is clear that his fate is ultimately in the hands of the playwright, who does provide Roland some measure of freedom by ending Roland's story before he battles the Dragon.

The spatial environment of the play seems to be as malleable as the Soak's improvised tavern. The characters (apart from Roland) are able to move between continents with ease; when Roland arrives in 'the Dragon's demesne' (which is identified in spatial terms – 'See the deserted port,/The ruined shacks, the slag-heaps covered with lichen/And behind it all the frown and fear of the forest.'<sup>329</sup>) his childhood sweetheart, Sylvie, is there to meet him. Sylvie brings Roland to a chapel where they are to be married, but the voices of Roland's father and brother compel him to return to the quest, and the Priest explains to Roland and Sylvie their separate fates:

Goodbye, my daughter; your way lies back,  
 Back by the road you came over the hopeless sea,  
 Back to your little house and your apple orchard  
 And there you must marry one of your own kind  
 And spray the trees in spring and raise the ladders in autumn

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<sup>327</sup> Ibid., 130.

<sup>328</sup> MacNeice, *Letters*, 462.

<sup>329</sup> Ibid., 137.

And spread the shining crop on the spare-room floor and –

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Goodbye, my son; your way lies forward,

Forward through the gibbering guile of the forest,

Forward through the silent doubt of the desert.<sup>330</sup>

The priest explains their different fates in spatial and temporal terms; Sylvie is essentially going back to the past, where she will enjoy a comfortable idyll in her ‘little house’ and ‘apple orchard’, while Roland must push on into the uncharted future, braving forest and desert, foregoing security and certainty of location. The desert is a Jamesonian ‘hyper-space’ in that it provides no markers that would allow Roland to map it:

ROLAND      Flat – no shape – no colour – only here and there

A mirage of the past – something I’ve met before –

Figures arising from the dust, repeating themselves,

Telling me things that I have no wish to remember.<sup>331</sup>

There are no recognizable landmarks which Roland might use to orient himself, and the only breaks in the monotony of the seemingly endless expanse of the desert comes from interruptions by Roland’s memories, which aren’t much help, either.

When a rupture in this undifferentiated space does occur, it happens suddenly, and is once again represented musically by a ‘*Sudden chord*’; Roland finds himself ringed

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<sup>330</sup> Ibid., 140-1.

<sup>331</sup> Ibid., 142.

around by mountains, trapped at the site of the Tower: ‘A trap! I am cooped in./A circle of ugly cliffs – a lobster-pot of rock!’<sup>332</sup> The Tower itself begins as a tiny thing, barely noticeable, ‘Like a wart coming out of the ground’<sup>333</sup>, but it grows as Roland watches, urged on by the voices from his past. Indeed, the Tower appears to be the antagonist, not the Dragon, whom we do not see. As a fortified space from which a singular consciousness can dominate his surroundings, as per Yeats, the Tower stands in for the enclosed spaces of High Modernist art, an impenetrable and unassailable ego that the young hero must conquer in order to free others, though he cannot himself be free. Roland’s defiant final speech demonstrates that he submits to his destiny and to his family’s tradition of defending the world from the depredations of the Dragon:

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, you’re getting big,  
 Your shadow is cold upon me. What of that?  
 And you, you Dragon or whatever you are  
 Who makes men beasts, come out – here is a man;  
 Come out and do your worst.<sup>334</sup>

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<sup>332</sup> Ibid., 146.

<sup>333</sup> Ibid., 147.

<sup>334</sup> Ibid., 148.

As he comes to the conclusion that he must sacrifice his own freedom to act in order to insure that others do not fall into the Dragon/Tower trap, Roland actually affirms that, tradition or not, he *is* free to make his own choice. Tuan defines freedom as ‘having the power and enough room in which to act’:

Fundamental is the ability to transcend the present condition, and this transcendence is most simply manifest as the elementary power to move. In the act of moving, space and its attributes are directly experienced. An immobile person will have difficulty mastering even primitive ideas of abstract space, for such ideas develop out of movement – out of the direct experience of space through movement.<sup>335</sup>

Roland manifests this freedom not only in his peregrinations on his way to the Tower, but in the fact that he chooses to stand against the tower, to assault the Dragon’s fortress with sound (again, the radio dramatist’s only means of representing action or space). The fact that he assaults a Tower is significant in that he is striking a blow for freedom – for mobility – against an immobile object, a trap that is laid for the unwary.

The Tower and the Dragon are not necessarily a natural pairing, given the ideas with which dragons are usually associated. Eliade traces the connotations of this image, the creature ‘who rebels against the work of the gods’:

...the dragon is the paradigmatic figure of the marine monster, of the primordial snake, symbol of the cosmic waters, of darkness, night, and death – in short, of the amorphous and virtual, of everything that has not yet acquired a “form.” The drag-

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<sup>335</sup> Tuan, Space and Place, 52.

on must be conquered and cut to pieces by the gods so that the cosmos may come to birth....this victory of the gods over the dragon must be repeated every year, for each year the world must be created anew.<sup>336</sup>

Roland is locked in just such a struggle, being the last of a long line of young men to be sent away to fight the dragon. MacNeice's play reverses the spatial dynamics of Eliade's mytheme, however; it is the Dragon who inhabits the Tower and Roland who assaults it, suggesting that 'planned space' is the domain (or prison) of the Dragon, and it is up to freedom-loving individuals to disrupt such structures.

Both Tower and Dragon are, to borrow Slavoj Žižek's term, part of a 'Master-Signifier' relationship, in which the Tower becomes all traps or prisons and the Dragon stands in for all things that human beings fear; in 'a confused situation of social disintegration, in which the cohesive power of ideology loses its efficiency', a 'Master' must create 'a new signifier...which stabilizes the situation again and makes it readable'<sup>337</sup>. In this case, Roland's mother uses the Tower and the Dragon to represent all that her society ought to find reprehensible, as we learn when the Tutor explains its nature to Roland:

We call it the Dragon for short, it is a nameless force  
Hard to define – for no one who has seen it,  
Apart from those who have seen its handiwork,  
Has returned to give an account of it.

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<sup>336</sup> Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane*, 48-9.

<sup>337</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *The Parallax View*. (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2006), 37.



All that we know is there is something there  
 Which makes the Dark Tower dark and is the source  
 Of evil through the world. It is immortal  
 But men must try to kill it – and keep on trying  
 So long as we would be human.<sup>338</sup>

To assault the Tower and battle the Dragon is not the work of the gods, but of human beings who would be free of the sinister influence of the authority represented by these two powerful signifiers. Both rely for their existence on an act of compression – Roland's mother, who continually sacrifices her sons to keep these forces in check, assigns blame for all of the world's ills to a single structure and the dark force that is bound within it. Roland's task is to become 'Master' of these signifiers himself by *choosing* to take them on when he is no longer bound to do so.

*The Mad Islands* was written at the end of MacNeice's tenure with the BBC, is based on the medieval Irish epic *Immram Mael Duin*, and has been read by some as a summation of MacNeice's interest in quest narratives; as Edna Longley writes, 'It is not too far-fetched to see the composite Quester of MacNeice's poetry as landing at freakish parable islands'<sup>339</sup> like those Muldoon, the hero of the play, visits while under orders from his mother to find and slay the Lord of the Eskers, who is said to be wandering around the western islands. The plot is similar to that of *The Dark Tower*, in that we have a reluctant

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<sup>338</sup> MacNeice, *Selected Plays*, 120.

<sup>339</sup> Longley, *Louis MacNeice: A Study*, 156-7.

hero under maternal orders to complete a quest which is probably hopeless, and MacNeice acknowledged that ‘for the last decade or more I have been pestered to write “another *Dark Tower*”’<sup>340</sup>, which may have prompted him to return to this theme. The spatial construction of the play is quite different, however; while Roland wanders through a constantly shifting landscape constructed only through sound and experiences different kinds of space only as sudden breaks in the landscape, Muldoon visits a series of islands that seem to represent ‘pockets’ of space which are dominated by certain fixed ideas.

Each island presents Muldoon with a temptation to lure him away from his quest: the sisters Branwen and Olwen tempt him with sex, the Queen of Twilight tempts him with the peace of withdrawal from the world, and the Inventor attempts to lure him from his purpose with the promise of ‘progress.’ Muldoon is rescued from the traps set by each of these islands by the seal-woman Skerrie, who, as a liminal figure (not ‘quite a woman,’ as she explains to Muldoon<sup>341</sup>), avoids getting drawn into the ‘madness’ of each island; seals represent the spirits of drowned humans, as demonstrated in Skerrie’s conversation with the Drowned Man who has not yet ‘changed’<sup>342</sup>. Not only is Skerrie human and animal at the same time; she is also both living and dead, both a land creature and a sea creature. It is Skerrie who guides Muldoon from island to island, and pulls him away when the temptation of each island threatens to pull him in, though at the end of the play she must leave him: ‘I thought I could break the rules – I could have perhaps if you’d helped me.’<sup>343</sup> The

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<sup>340</sup> Qtd. in Stallworthy, *Louis MacNeice*, 460.

<sup>341</sup> Macneice, *Selected Plays*, 313.

<sup>342</sup> *Ibid.*, 324.

<sup>343</sup> *Ibid.*, 349.

‘rules’ to which she refers are deliberately left unclear, and indeed it is difficult to see how Muldoon could have ‘helped’ her, except perhaps by abandoning his purpose – which she frequently suggests he should do – and wandering the seas with her. As Skerrie seems to be the only character with a sense of direction, once she is gone Muldoon is lost:

MULDOON So here I am at the end alone in a small boat and it has all been for what? I thought that vengeance was mine but the fates took it away from me and what was I avenging anyway? My mother’s name and shame – and my father’s – are lost for ever in foam, the port from which I sailed is a gaping hole in the globe, my foster-brother and my friends are dead and Skerrie... Skerrie has left me. Well, let’s try once more. She said it should work now.

Muldoon’s quest has been a failure; he has learned that the Lord of the Eskers is in fact his father, not his father’s murderer, and his mother’s vendetta grew out of jealousy, not out of love for her slain husband. While he is alone and purposeless, he is also free; he still has his boat, and can lose himself wherever he chooses.

This boat is itself something of an amorphous construct; at the beginning of the play it is a medieval wooden galley, about halfway through it becomes a steamship, and at the end of the play, when the crew is no more, it is a small motorboat. As in *The Dark Tower*, these changes in the physical environment are rendered through sound; the movement of the first ship is represented by ‘*sound of harp and oars*’<sup>344</sup>, while we become aware of its transformation into a steamship through a change in the conversation between Ursach,

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<sup>344</sup> Ibid., 314.

the helmsman, and his subordinates. Once again we see that, in radio drama, all it takes to change the physical environment is sound; there are no sets to be hauled away, the characters can be anywhere (or nowhere), and the playwright can choose from a wider range of spatial possibilities than is possible on the stage. The changes in the boat occur at pivotal moments in Muldoon's voyage; the transformation from galley to steamship occurs after the death of his mother (accompanied by her trademark gong), and the steamship becomes a motorboat after the crew is reduced to Muldoon and Skerrie. Indeed, it becomes whatever Muldoon requires to continue his quest – physical space is altered in order to accommodate the needs of the hero.

In a play in which so little is of a fixed or static nature – even characters who are (or ought to be) dead continually return – it stands to reason that space would also be malleable, but one is tempted to look for clues in the play as to how space is conceptualized. We find such a key in the speeches of the Inventor, who lives on the Island of Progress. When Muldoon lands on his island and asks him about the concoction brewing in his cauldron, the Inventor refers to it as *aurum potabile* – ‘All Gold to Be Consumed on the Premises’, and then attempts to explain his theory on the nature of matter, beginning with a pun on ‘premises’:

INVENTOR    The first premiss is this: at the centre of everything is nothing. Take, for example, this block of granite; I lugged it all the way from the beach, I'll pop it in the cauldron shortly. Now you, being a layman, no doubt would call this stone solid.

MULDOON I might.

INVENTOR Well, it's nothing of the sort. There are more winds blowing through this single stone that you'd find in the whole cave of Aeolus. Now these winds couldn't blow at all if they had no space to blow in. Space – room for experiment. But for what kind of experiment? You'll be surprised when I tell you. It could make or break the world.<sup>345</sup>

'Premises' here are both the physical environment – the Inventor's cottage – and the propositions that set up an argument. The space the characters occupy is thus equated with the initial stages of disputation; the 'premises' are ideas as well as a place, and at the center of that place is the theory that the center of everything is nothing. While the Inventor is clearly a monomaniac like the inhabitants of the other islands, the play seems to endorse his view of the nature of space and matter, as each of his experiments is a success: 'INVENTOR News from the centre! Something out of nothing! I have split the stone and released the wind! I have split the wind and released the whirlwind. Aurum potable! Look! Yellow-yellower-yellowest!'<sup>346</sup> In both this and his attempt to prove that the earth is hollow by drilling through its crust at the Port of the Unwise<sup>347</sup>, the Inventor ends up destroying everything around him, but his theories are sound – at the center of each object he destroys, we find that there is only empty space, just as there is an empty space at the center of the

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<sup>345</sup> Ibid., 329-30.

<sup>346</sup> Ibid., 330-1.

<sup>347</sup> Ibid., 346.

play. Muldoon's quest is, as it turns out, also hollow, and his single-minded purpose has condemned everyone around him to death or disappearance.

In an attempt to formulate a theory of postmodern literature, Ihab Hassan comments on the relationship between art, language, and silence:

Art, language, and consciousness may seek transcendence in a state that we can evoke, anagogically, in the plenum of silence. But art, language, and consciousness may also seek to empty themselves as man recoils into a pure intuition of his subjectivity, recoils into a negative state of silence.<sup>348</sup>

Hassan detects in postmodern literature a kind of emptying-out of meaning, a silence at the center which results from the artist retreating into himself. MacNeice, meanwhile, writes a kind of play that offers up a whirlwind of sound that conceals while tacitly acknowledging the emptiness of the performance space. Instead of retreating into their own subjectivity, MacNeice and his heroes are forced to navigate a space that is sonic rather than physical, shifting rather stable, unmappable rather than knowable. None of these three dramatic protagonists – Columbus, Roland, or Muldoon – ends his journey in silence. What makes these figures postmodern is their relationship to space, or, more properly, to 'hyperspace'. All of them find themselves in worlds constructed out of sound, in which conventional means of mapping are useless.

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<sup>348</sup> Hassan, *The Dismemberment of Orpheus*, 4.

## Chapter Four

### **‘Give us this day our daily news’: Religion and Politics as Limiting Factors in MacNeice’s Poetry and Thought**

A common criticism of Louis MacNeice, leveled at him by his contemporaries as well as his posterity, is that his poetry lacked a central core of ‘belief’ – that is, that as an agnostic in both a religious and political sense, he is incapable of writing verse that is not ‘wholly self-centred,’ as Julian Symons put it in a 1940 article in *Poetry*: ‘...belief in some external driving force outside himself and his own feelings seems to be what is lacking to make Louis MacNeice a very fine poet.’<sup>349</sup> D.B. Moore painted an even starker picture of MacNeice’s unbelief, chalking it up to a character defect that crippled him as a poet, claiming that MacNeice ‘lacked, in the last analysis, the moral fibre, the capacity for intellectual achievement, or the single-mindedness, to attain belief, even in disbelief.’<sup>350</sup> More recently, Declan Kiberd has accused him of ‘sardonic detachment’ and unfavorably compared MacNeice’s own ‘neutrality’ to the neutrality of the Irish Free State in the Second World War, which the poet had deplored: ‘MacNeice himself opted for a different form of neutrality, calling down a plague on both houses in the internal conflict of Northern Ireland, which he sought to escape by means of a literary career in England.’<sup>351</sup> The implied accusation in

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<sup>349</sup> Julian Symons, ‘Louis MacNeice: the Artist as Everyman.’ *Poetry* 56 (1940), 91.

<sup>350</sup> Moore, *The Poetry of Louis MacNeice*, 247.

<sup>351</sup> Kiberd, *Inventing Ireland*, 473.

these passages is that, because MacNeice does not take sides on the important political and religious debates of the day, he is uninterested in anything outside of his own feelings and perceptions. When one looks at MacNeice's work, however, one is struck by his attempts to break down walls of ideology and prejudice that separate people from one another, and that separate the High Modernist poet from the people. MacNeice's refusal to adopt a positive religious or political program appears to arise not from indecision, but from a desire to avoid the spatial constriction inherent in narrow ideological categories, represented by poetry-writing elites as towers, drawing-rooms, and other varieties of enclosed space.

To begin, I would like to look at MacNeice's resistance to fixed ideas as a positive choice rather than a lack of commitment. In the final chapter of *The Parallax View*, Slavoj Žižek compares the nature of 'choice' in a closed society to attitudes toward choice in a secular liberal culture:

...a choice is always a metachoice, a choice of the modality of the choice itself: only the woman [in a conservative Muslim society] who does not choose to wear the veil is really making a choice...the "subject of free choice" (in the Western "tolerant" multicultural sense) can emerge only as the result of an extremely *violent* (author's emphasis) process of being torn out of one's particular life-world, being cut off from one's roots.<sup>352</sup>

In other words, making a free choice, particular one that may be technically permitted but is frowned upon by members of the subject's particular cultural group, requires the subject

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<sup>352</sup> Žižek, *The Parallax View*, 330-1.



to voluntarily tear himself or herself out of the cultural context in which he or she was raised – that is, to create a space for dissent apart from the cultural ‘place.’ MacNeice’s avoidance of political and religious entanglements, then, affirms his right to make a choice that would make his position in the various circles with which he associated – Northern Irish Anglicanism, Marlborough College, Oxford, the Left – uncomfortable, and perhaps even untenable. The fact that MacNeice pushes back against these institutions indicates not that he is ‘self-centred,’ but that he attempts to create spaces in which the individual is free from oppression by systems of thought imposed by outside forces.

This attitude is, I would argue, not an avoidance of commitment or evidence of intellectual laziness; rather, he aligns himself with what Henri Lefebvre calls ‘representational spaces’ as opposed to ‘representations of space.’ MacNeice’s concern is with the space of the everyday, in which people encounter and attempt to make sense of images and symbols; meanwhile, he opposes the spaces of the elite, who seek to ‘identify’ – that is, to name, classify, and divide up – space in order to fit some preconceived plan or model. The artist who traffics in ‘representations of space’ creates and divides space in order to suit his purposes. An artist like MacNeice who operates in ‘representational space’, on the other hand, experiences the world as he finds it and records his impressions.

In the present chapter, I will explore the relationship between belief and space in MacNeice’s work; the first section will discuss religious belief, particularly MacNeice’s adult reactions to the Low Church Anglican faith of his childhood and his youth in the Carrickfergus rectory, while the second will cover his attitudes toward politics, particularly as

they relate to places, spaces and groups with which he was associated. While I will stop short of William McKinnon's contention that MacNeice can 'legitimately be termed a believing poet'<sup>353</sup>, I aim to demonstrate that MacNeice's skeptical liberalism develops from a postmodern understanding of space which recognizes the power of location to influence ideas and attitudes.

# **I. 'Aye, you're here now, but you don't know where you'll be when you wake up':**

## **MacNeice and Religious Space**

As he was the son of a clergyman, it is perhaps not unusual that so many of Louis MacNeice's early reminiscences in *The Strings are False* focus on both his religious upbringing in the Rectory and the church in Carrickfergus. The church is, for the young MacNeice, a site of fear and confusion:

There were the terrors of Church. The church was cruciform, and the rectory pew, being the front pew of the nave, looked out on to the space where the chancel and the nave and the two transepts met. The transept on our left was on a higher level and was reached by a short flight of steps; the end wall of it was occupied by a huge Elizabethan monument to the Chichester family who had then been the power in the land...None of these marble people worried me at all; what I disliked were the things that hung high up on the wall on either side of the monument's narrower top.

A decayed coat of mail, a couple of old weapons, a helmet. I could not see the coat

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<sup>353</sup> McKinnon, *Apollo's Blended Dream: A Study of the Poetry of Louis MacNeice*, 211.

of mail when I was sitting, thanks to the solid front of the first pew in the transept, but, whenever I had to get up, there it would be, older and older and deader and deader, yet somehow not quite dead enough.<sup>354</sup>

We can see here the development of a powerful spatial imagination; he describes the physical characteristics of the space in detail, paying particular attention to which parts intersect in what places and what can be seen from specific vantage points. We also detect the presence of a divided mind, in that the church's most terrifying aspects can be seen only from a particular angle. The objects of the child's terror, the ancient weapons that hang above the monument, are described as 'old and dead'; the space he describes here is less a place of communion with the divine than a repository for frightening objects from the past invested with importance for reasons the child does not understand.

Even at home, the young MacNeice is subjected to religious terror; Miss MacCready, the mother's help the family engaged when Louis's mother fell ill (referred to in *The Strings are False* as 'Miss Craig'), 'brought hell home' to him, framing her admonitions to the boy to keep on the straight and narrow in terms of dislocation: 'Sometimes when Miss Craig had jerked me and thumped me into bed she would look at me grimly and say, 'Aye, you're here now, but you don't know where you'll be when you wake up.'"<sup>355</sup> Apart from the initial act of forcing the child from one location to another – he is 'jerked' and 'thumped' into bed – the mother's help suggests to him that damnation is itself a move-

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<sup>354</sup> MacNeice, *The Strings are False*, 46.

<sup>355</sup> *Ibid.*, 42.

ment from known space in the here-and-now to an unknown location. It is this part of her warning that frightens MacNeice – the idea that he might go to sleep in one place and wake up in another. Suddenly the familiar space of the nursery is not enough to protect him; he may at any moment disappear, only to reappear somewhere else.

Episodes like these mark what Robyn Marsack calls a ‘grim period of incubation’ for MacNeice, and notes the isolation felt by the rector’s family in a town like Carrickfergus, especially given the ways in which they were atypical for Ulster Protestants:

There was the natural distance kept from a minister’s son, compounded by the father’s political stance at a time of radical disturbance in Ireland. Not that the family were of Anglo-Irish stock, on the contrary its forebears on both sides were Irish, though never the peasants MacNeice boasted of in the ‘Last Will and Testament’ he composed with W.H. Auden...<sup>356</sup>

The difference that MacNeice as a child recognized between his family and other families is expressed in ‘Autobiography’ (1941): ‘My father made the walls resound,/He wore his collar the wrong way round.’<sup>357</sup> While the most striking clause in this sentence is the one about the elder MacNeice’s ‘collar’, indicating both his status as a clergyman and, possibly, the eccentricity of his Home Rule sympathies in staunchly Unionist Carrickfergus, I would like to focus on the first part of the sentence, which details the rector’s effect on the space around him. His voice and his presence disturb the comfortable, secure spaces he occupies,

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<sup>356</sup> Marsack, *The Cave of Making*, 1.

<sup>357</sup> MacNeice, *Collected Poems*, 200.

both in his role as preacher and as parent, contributing to the sense of isolation and exclusion felt by his youngest child.

It seems that MacNeice's favorite memories of his father, those in which the elder MacNeice is treated as a real human being and not as a distant, aloof agent of fearsome powers, are those that have to do with travel. MacNeice describes a game his father played with him when very young and juxtaposes it against the older man's solitary activities:

Pleasure was bright and terror had jagged edges. My father would seat me on his knee and imitate the train from our town to Belfast, chugging and whistling and stopping at all the stations...And then the train back again...That was pleasant but what my father did by himself was frightening. When I was in bed I could hear his voice below in the study – and I knew he was alone – intoning away, communing with God. And because of his conspiracy with God I was afraid of him.<sup>358</sup>

Though he has fond memories of his father pretending with him to be an object in motion in the external world – moving through space to place and back again – when his father retreats into the private world of his study, he takes up his 'conspiracy with God' again. The word 'conspiracy' implies a sinister plot from which others are excluded, suggesting that MacNeice felt as though his father's religious devotion was something private from which his children were turned away. Indeed, the room in which his 'conspiracy' takes place becomes a private retreat after the death of the rector's first wife, one which his children rarely enter; on the occasions when they do enter, meanwhile, it seems that he ignores them:

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<sup>358</sup> MacNeice, *The Strings are False*, 38.

The less I saw of my father – for I saw him less – the stranger I found him. He was suffering badly now from indigestion and, when he was not visiting the parish, would be sitting alone in the study. I hardly ever entered the study, but once in a way I would sit there awe-struck and look at him reading, moistening his thumb before he turned the pages of the book or sharpening a pencil which was pointed at each end and which beautified all his books with red and blue marks in the margin.<sup>359</sup>

There is something that the boy finds aesthetically pleasing about his father's activities, which he will develop in later poems that include religious themes or references, but he also recognizes that he is not a part of what goes on in his father's study; he will always be, at best, an observer, and will continue to hold the Church his father serves, and its idea of God, in a mixture of fear and awe.

MacNeice's early poetry plays with this idea of religion as a malevolent, exclusionist force that in some cases melds with the landscape itself. For example, in the early poem 'Belfast' (1935), Edna Longley has noted that one of the central images 'fuses industry and religion'<sup>360</sup>: 'Where hammers clang murderously on the girders/Like crucifixes the gantries stand.'<sup>361</sup> This incorporation of religious imagery into an industrial scene highlights the sectarian conflict that divides the city while implicating both Christianity and capitalism in violence. Sites of worship offer isolation instead of protection or solace to the faithful:

In the porch of the chapel before the garish Virgin

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<sup>359</sup> Ibid., 52.

<sup>360</sup> Longley, 'Louis MacNeice: 'The Walls are Flowing'', 108.

<sup>361</sup> MacNeice, *Collected Poems*, 25.

A shawled factory-woman as if shipwrecked there  
 Lies a bunch of limbs glimpsed in the cave of gloom  
 By us who walk in the street so buoyantly and glib.<sup>362</sup>

The woman in the chapel is figuratively dismembered by the poet, 'shipwrecked' and alone in a place that is meant to offer spiritual consolation, while passers-by glance at her and then look the other way. This calls to mind Mircea Eliade's definition of 'sacred space,' but with a twist; while Eliade refers to 'strong, significant space' that is 'qualitatively different' from the 'formless expanse surrounding it'<sup>363</sup> (similar to what Yi-fu Tuan and others refer to as 'place'), MacNeice reverses the polarity. 'Sacred' space is here presented as an alienating force, one that will not rescue the 'factory-woman' from the disintegration she seems to experience. Meanwhile, those 'who walk so buoyantly and glib' are outside, in public space; the street outside the chapel belongs to the kind of space Eliade would have called 'profane' in that it 'maintains the homogeneity and hence the relativity of space... for the fixed point no longer enjoys a unique ontological status; it appears and disappears in accordance with the needs of the day.'<sup>364</sup> For the relatively happy people in the street, the chapel and the broken women inside of it are little more than curiosities, cut off from the main stream of life.

MacNeice refers back to this stanza in the final two lines of the poem: 'While the male kind murders each its woman/To whose prayer for oblivion answers no Madonna.'<sup>365</sup>

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<sup>362</sup> Idem.

<sup>363</sup> Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane*, 20.

<sup>364</sup> Ibid., 23.

<sup>365</sup> MacNeice, *Collected Poems*, 25.

This is a direct reference to sectarian violence turned inward by the men in both the Catholic and Protestant communities against women for whom there is no help, either in religion – which is here allied to the forces of industrial oppression, as noted above – or in the street from which their retreat to ‘sacred’ space isolates them. Indeed, the religious spaces in this poem appear to be ‘representations of space’ in Lefebvre’s sense in that they are stand-ins for powerful outside interests rather than organic expressions of the lives of the people; they are imposed rather than experienced, and as such seek only to dominate, not to console.

There are similar exclusionist principles at work in ‘Carrickfergus’ (1938), which describes the divisions within the poet’s own hometown. The town’s primary ‘sacred’ space, St. Nicholas’s Church, is constructed by conquerors to aid in their subjugation of the indigenous population:

The Norman walled this town against the country

To stop his ears to the yelping of his slave

And built a church in the form of a cross but denoting

The list of Christ on the cross in the angle of the nave.<sup>366</sup>

Once again, religion is fused with power, but this time it is political rather than economic or industrial power. The church – and the city walls – are examples of what Lefebvre calls ‘dominated space’, that is

...spaces [that] are...invariably the realization of a master’s project...In order to dominate space, technology introduces some new form into a pre-existing space –

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<sup>366</sup> Ibid., 55.



generally a rectilinear or rectangular form such as a meshwork or chequerwork...

Dominated space is usually closed, sterilized, emptied out.<sup>367</sup>

Carrickfergus as a whole is 'dominated' by the Normans, who build a wall to keep the defeated Irish out, and who further project their power by building a cruciform church, implying that God is on their side – that is, on their side of the wall.

As the inheritor of this tradition, MacNeice should be located on the 'correct' side of the wall, but this feels to him like exclusion. It is the stone church, the dominated space inside the wall, which separates him from 'the Irish poor':

I was the rector's son, born to the Anglican order,

Banned for ever from the candles of the Irish poor;

The Chichesters knelt in marble at the end of a transept

With ruffs about their necks, their portion sure.<sup>368</sup>

Here MacNeice notes that he has been born into the cultural 'in-group', which is also described as 'order'; MacNeice's (Anglican) people, then, are not only initiates into a particular religious group, they are also the dominant power in the region – again, political power allied to religion, an island of law amidst chaos, as per Eliade's definition of 'sacred' space. The problem here, as in the stanza quoted above, is that these representations of space separate the dominant group from representational space; that is, MacNeice is isolated in an idea of space planned out by powerful interests, cut off from more direct

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<sup>367</sup> Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, 165.

<sup>368</sup> MacNeice, *Collected Poems*, 55.

engagement with space and its attendant symbols, like the ‘candles’ at which the poor worship. These are lively, flickering, ephemeral, as opposed to the monument he describes in St. Nicholas’s Church, the same monument that had frightened him as a child. The Chichesters may be dead and gone (though not entirely – a Major James Chichester-Clark was Prime Minister of Northern Ireland from 1969 to 1971), but their stone forms remain to project their authority.

Indeed, the monument embodies an idea of power and control – located within the ‘sacred’ space of the church – that sends a message to the initiated that they are part of the dominant culture, while those who are outside lack such a permanent reminder of their own power as a group. Lefebvre writes that

Monumentality...always embodies and imposes a clearly intelligible message. It says what it wishes to say – yet it hides a good deal more: being political, military, and ultimately fascist in character, monumental buildings mask the will to power and the arbitrariness of power beneath signs and surfaces which claim to express collective will and collective thought.<sup>369</sup>

While the monument itself is literally a remembrance of specific persons, it is also a reminder of the power and influence of ‘Anglo’ groups (be they Anglican or Anglo-Norman) in shaping the destiny of Ulster, to the detriment of the Gaels and, after the Reformation, Catholics. As such, the monument projects a ‘myth’ in the sense indicated by Roland Barthes in ‘Myth Today’:

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<sup>369</sup> Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, 143.

...myth is a peculiar system, in that it is constructed from a semiological chain which existed before it: it is a *second-order semiological system* (author's emphasis). That which is a sign (namely the associative total of a concept and an image) in the first system, becomes a mere signifier in the second.<sup>370</sup>

Myth married to monumental space becomes, in this case, oppressive; while the church as an independent sign is a house of Christian worship and the Chichester monument is a commemoration of particular people, as myths they signify the power of the union of Northern Ireland with Britain and, more specifically, of Protestant Ascendancy in Ulster.

The way out from within the walls of Carrickfergus seems to have led, initially at least, through architecture, as viewing similar monuments in England seems to have helped MacNeice to begin demythologizing the marble statues that frightened him as a boy. In a 1925 letter to his father, he describes an excursion he took to the village of Aldbourne to visit an old church. The letter includes a drawing of an arch, which MacNeice describes as 'half-way between Norman and Gothic', emphasizing the liminal qualities of a threshold, and proceeds to delineate the features of the church's monumental architecture:

In the church at Alborne [*sic*] there are some very interesting monuments, one long slab with a figure of a monk on it of the fifteenth century, I think, several old brasses and two Elizabethan monuments. I now realize that there was a definite style in

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<sup>370</sup> Roland Barthes, 'Myth Today' in *Mythologies*, trans. Annette Lavers. (New York: Hill and Wang, 1972), 114.

Elizabethan monuments for these two are very like the Chichester monument at home on a smaller scale.<sup>371</sup>

The Chichester monument is no longer unique; it is, rather, an example of a type, and this leads to an aesthetic epiphany. Describing the monument as part of a set that is typical for its time rather than a one-of-a-kind entity that encodes the myth of ‘Anglican order’ in the stone from which it is carved enables the young MacNeice to disengage from the myth and regard the marble monstrosity as a work of art, and nothing more. In short, he achieves critical distance; while he might still find himself haunted by memories of that monument and the church that houses it, he can attempt to broaden his own horizons by connecting the religious terrors of his childhood to a wider world.

Even in poems that are merely patterned on the liturgy of MacNeice’s childhood and do not directly invoke memories of the church or rectory, we often find a sense of ‘spatial dread’ – that is, of terror of being walled or frozen into an enclosed space which cuts him off from the fluid sensory impressions he treasures. In ‘Prayer before Birth’ (1944), the speaker prays for protection from those who would place walls between him and the outside world:

I am not yet born, console me.

I fear that the human race may with tall walls wall me,

with strong drugs dope me, with wise lies lure me,

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<sup>371</sup> MacNeice, *Letters*, 101-2.

on black racks rack me, in blood-baths roll me.<sup>372</sup>

The alliteration, repetition, and internal rhymes in this stanza lend it a claustrophobic air; the words are interwoven so tightly that there seems to be very little space between the cracks. Indeed, all of the unpleasant fates from which the speaker asks for protection involve placing limits on his ability to perceive his surroundings. This is ironic in that the prayer is itself an exclusionist act; the bulk of the poem is concerned with keeping things out, not letting things in. The suppliant requests protection from these forces, not communion with them.

In fact, there is only one stanza in the ‘prayer’ that reaches out beyond the barriers the speaker hopes will be constructed on his behalf. In the third stanza, he provides a list of the things he values in nature, and which he hopes will be supplied:

I am not yet born; provide me

With water to dandle me, grass to grow for me, trees to talk

to me, sky to sing to me, birds and a white light

in the back of my mind to guide me.<sup>373</sup>

The structure of this stanza is more open; while the alliteration remains, there are fewer repeated words, and each line ends with an enjambment rather than a formal pause or end-stop. The synaesthesia of the imagery also suggests a kind of openness; it is possible for ‘trees’ and ‘sky’, for example, to provide a variety of sensory enjoyment with which neither

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<sup>372</sup> MacNeice, *Collected Poems*, 213.

<sup>373</sup> *Idem*.

is usually associated. While the powers called upon in this stanza are still protective and nurturing, they are there to ‘guide’ the speaker – that is, to help him find his own way, not to impede him.

It has been argued that this poem is a product of London’s ‘siege climate’ in the early 1940s. Edna Longley, who thinks it ‘melodramatic’, reads ‘Prayer before Birth’ as a list of threats to the individuality of the subject, and as MacNeice’s reaction to war and the threat of totalitarianism:

Like war, the perspective highlights the powerful imperatives which mock our belief in individual autonomy. These imperatives vary from the predetermined...to the totalitarian...The unborn individual pins his hopes of ‘humanity’ and ‘entirety’ on a kindly nature (‘water to dandle me’) and the light of reason invested with spiritual authority: ‘a white light/in the back of my mind to guide me’.<sup>374</sup>

Longley does not address the fact that the fates the speaker hopes to avoid are based on relationships of inclusion and exclusion set up by other human beings. That is, they involve either being drawn into or left out of privileged, ‘sacred’ spaces. The ‘white light’ of reason helps him to avoid these entanglements. Of course, given that the poem is called ‘Prayer before Birth’ and not ‘Prayer after Birth’, we can safely assume that the speaker is already, in fact, spatially enclosed; he is, at present, safe in the womb. Despite the speaker’s uncanny precocity, he has no experience beyond the narrow confines of his mother’s uterus. As Yi-fu Tuan writes, ‘The infant has no world. He cannot distinguish between self and an external

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<sup>374</sup> Longley, *Louis MacNeice: A Study*, 86-7.

environment. He feels, but his sensations are not localized in space. The pain is simply there, and he responds to it with crying; he does not seem to locate it in some specific part of his body.<sup>375</sup> Indeed, what MacNeice's infant speaker seems to pray for is the ability to create and navigate a spatial world without fear of being enclosed by the spatial worlds of others.

Another 'liturgically structured' poem, 'Bar-room Matins' (1941), takes as its subject the same kind of willful self-imposed exclusion from history and human affairs that nettles him in 'Neutrality' (1944), but the escapism noted here does not involve retreat to an island. Rather, MacNeice here fuses the traditional early-morning prayer service with the self-centered musings of a group of barflies, whose imitations of the Paternoster request absolution from responsibility:

Give us this day our daily news

That we might hear behind the brain

And through the sullen heat's migraine

The atavistic voice of Cain:

'Who entitled you to spy

From your easy heaven? Am I

My brother's keeper? Let him die.'<sup>376</sup>

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<sup>375</sup> Yi-fu Tuan, *Space and Place*, 20.

<sup>376</sup> MacNeice, *Collected Poems*, 195.

The God whom the ‘atavistic voice of Cain’ addresses enters the room through the radio, MacNeice’s favorite device for bringing enclosed spaces into contact with the wider world: ‘And God in words we soon forget/Answers through the radio set:/‘The curse is on his forehead yet.’<sup>377</sup> The ‘curse’ is, of course, exclusion from grace due to a failure to care for the welfare of others. The denizens of the bar, then, are doubly excluded – their self-imposed exile takes them out of the world of events, which enter the barroom only as ‘news’, and as a result they are cast out of Eden by an angry, but distant, God.

Indeed, the speaker in the poem refers to himself and his fellows as ‘We whose Kingdom has not come’<sup>378</sup>, highlighting their exclusion from sacred space. Their morbid fascination with ‘news’ underscores the hardness of their hearts toward their fellow man and the comic absurdity of their ritual gestures, particularly in that it replaces the word ‘bread’ in the Paternoster – ‘Give us this day our daily news.’ The stuff of nourishment is thus conflated with useless information; despite their hunger for ‘news’, they don’t plan to do anything with it: ‘Pretzels crackers chips and beer:/Death is something that we fear/ But it titillates the ear.’<sup>379</sup> The lack of ‘nutritional value’, as it were, in the news is further demonstrated by the fact that the only foods mentioned in the poem are bar snacks. News of events in the outside world is enough to amuse the barflies, but it is not enough to rouse them from their torpor; they will remain inside the bar, a closed community engaging in empty ritual.

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<sup>377</sup> *Idem.*

<sup>378</sup> *Idem.*

<sup>379</sup> *Ibid.*, 196.



If we compare MacNeice's imaginary barroom community, hewing at least to the form of Christian ritual if not the spirit, with the 'Community of Christians' Eliot describes in *The Idea of a Christian Society*, published two years before 'Bar-room Matins', we detect a possible parodic relationship:

In any Christian society which can be imagined for the future – in what M. Maritain calls a *pluralist* society – my "Community of Christians" cannot be a body of the definite vocational outline of the "clerisy" of Coleridge: which, viewed in a hundred years' perspective, appears to approximate to the rigidity of a caste. The Community of Christians is not an organisation, but a body of indefinite outline; composed of both clergy and laity, of the more conscious, more spiritually and intellectually developed of both. It will be their identity of belief and aspiration, their background of a common system of education and a common culture, which will enable them to influence and be influenced by each other, and collectively to form the conscious mind and the conscience of the nation.<sup>380</sup>

While the 'Community of Christians' Eliot describes here may not be a 'caste' in the vocational sense of the word, it is clear that he intends for them to be an elite group with a top-down relationship to the rest of society – as the 'conscious mind' and 'conscience of the nation', this small elite will shape and guide the kind of society which Eliot argues is the only acceptable alternative for the Christian believer, a society governed according to Christian (specifically, Anglo-Catholic) principles. MacNeice, on the other hand, is nearly

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<sup>380</sup> T.S. Eliot, *Christianity and Culture*. (New York: Harcourt, 1948), 34.

always on the side of pluralism in the broader sense, and paints such communities as those Eliot imagines as disengaged from the social currents in the wider culture, much as the barflies say their ‘matins’ every night and follow the conflict in Europe but do nothing to end it.

In the previous chapter, I noted that while MacNeice acknowledged that the origins of European theatre, for example, were to be found in religion, he argued that the fact that it had been successfully secularized meant that it would never again be ‘essentially religious.’<sup>381</sup> I believe that we can sum up MacNeice’s account of the proper relationship between religion and culture by looking at the spatial placement of another monument, this one in London. In a short-lived feature called ‘London Letters’ which appeared in the American leftist magazine *Common Sense*, written two days after a devastating air-raid in 1941, MacNeice describes a humble church in the Strand called St. Clement Danes rather than the skyline-dominating edifice of St. Paul’s (itself damaged in the raid). It is not the damaged church itself but the churchyard to which MacNeice points us, where ‘a statue of Dr Johnson still stands among the debris, unconcerned and pawky, with an open book in his left hand, looking up Fleet Street.’<sup>382</sup> While the church has suffered in the bombardment, the statue of Samuel Johnson has survived unscathed – culture, located adjacent to religion and not housed inside the church as the Chichester monument was, announces its independence from an old and (for MacNeice) broken system. It is also significant that

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<sup>381</sup> Louis MacNeice, ‘The Play and the Audience’, 92.

<sup>382</sup> Qtd. in Stallworthy, *Louis MacNeice*, 289.

Johnson optimistically looks ‘up’ – not down – Fleet Street, the longtime haunt of writers and journalists. It is here, not within the confines of a church or a religious group, that MacNeice locates the future.

## **II. Why not plump for the puppy?: Louis MacNeice and the Politics of Space**

The political opinions of Yeats, Eliot and Auden, while not always consistent, are also not especially difficult to decode, as they left behind statements of belief in their poetry and their prose. Lucy McDiarmid has pointed out the extent to which these poets, whom she argues gave themselves the task of ‘saving civilization’, rely upon structures of exclusivity:

The architectural structures in Eliot and Yeats, chapels, galleries, and great houses, suggest an idea of community that is external to its individual members. In Auden, the whole is only the sum of its parts; there is no community without the spontaneous, voluntary love of one neighbor for another. The small circle is a group of discrete individuals who are connected only because they affirm a connection among themselves.<sup>383</sup>

To an extent, these all involve the poets in creating representations of space; they construct spaces that serve a particular political or social purpose, rather than allowing purpose to arise organically out of the way that people use the space. This involves a kind of ‘shoring-

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<sup>383</sup> McDiarmid, *Saving Civilization*, 24.

up' against what Jean-François Lyotard has described as the 'breaking up of the grand narratives,' which

...leads to what some authors analyze in terms of the dissolution of the social bond and the disintegration of social aggregates into a mass of individual atoms thrown into the absurdity of Brownian motion...this point of view, it seems to me, is haunted by the paradisiac representation of a lost "organic" society.<sup>384</sup>

While Lyotard scoffs at this notion of the death of the meta-narrative leading to the breakdown of the social bond, for Yeats, Eliot and Auden, this fear seems to be the animating political force in their work. Civilization must be rescued from the forces that would tear down the walls protecting 'culture'.

MacNeice's positive political beliefs, meanwhile, are difficult to pin down, given that, when asked about them, he tended to respond by explaining instead what he *didn't* believe in. For example, in his reply to a series of questions asked of contributors to *New Verse* about their writing habits and political opinions, MacNeice famously responds to the fifth question, 'Do you take your stand with any political or politico-economic party or creed?' by writing 'No. In weaker moments I wish I could.'<sup>385</sup> In *I Crossed the Minch* (1938), which documents his travels to the Hebrides, MacNeice includes a humorous imagined conversation with his Guardian Angel, who natters on about the island of Tiree before pressing the poet to adopt some definite principles. MacNeice answers him by hedging:

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<sup>384</sup> Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*, 15.

<sup>385</sup> MacNeice, 'Reply to 'An Enquiry' in *New Verse*', in *Selected Literary Criticism of Louis MacNeice*, 4.

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 manifestos, 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.<sup>386</sup>

While MacNeice shows that he is prepared to engage in relatively superficial political behavior of the sort that won't get him arrested or injured, such activity remains external to his sense of identity. That is, while he votes Left, he is unwilling to identify himself *as* Left, locking himself into the same kind of corner-space he argued Yeats and Eliot had painted themselves into artistically in *Modern Poetry* – and, not coincidentally, both Yeats and Eliot were poets with definite, if somewhat idiosyncratic, political beliefs. It should also be noted that MacNeice is the only major member of the so-called 'Auden Generation' whose work did not appear in the two anthologies of Leftist verse compiled by Michael Roberts, *New Signatures* (1932) and *New Country* (1933).

The closest MacNeice comes to a definite statement of principles is in an angry letter to Eleanor Clark, dated 21 May 1940, in which he takes her to task for accusing him of 'inhumanity' and of 'an awful lack of curiosity about the world.' MacNeice responds by accusing Clark, a committed Trotskyite, of condescending to the 'lower classes' with whom she claims sympathy, arguing that his status as 'a peasant who has gate-crashed culture'

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<sup>386</sup> Louis MacNeice, *I Crossed the Minch*. (Edinburgh: Polygon, 2007) , 130.

(not strictly true, of course) provides him with an insight into the lives of the working class that she can't possibly possess:

...you, darling, obviously judge my 'knowledge' of people or my 'curiosity' about them by my capacity for surface gestures towards them – which is very naïve of you. Actually, darling, you are much more 'upper class' in your attitude than I am just at the time when you are taking an intelligent interest and being sympathetic etc. e.g. if you & I were talking to a slum-dweller you would certainly make a much better job of the talking & the slum-dweller would think you were sympathetic and I was aloof. Because he couldn't recognise me owing to my metamorphosis. But I should recognise him, &, what is more, I should be (author's emphasis) him – which you couldn't be, darling, not in a thousand years. For you he remains an external person...I have an internal (author's emphasis) identity with him.<sup>387</sup>

This goes beyond the superficial political gestures he was willing to make on behalf of the Left only two years prior; while he is still unwilling to endorse the doctrinaire Marxist program, he insists on a kind of identification with the 'slum-dweller'. This has less to do with his supposed peasant status – the MacNeices, after all, were never *really* peasants – and is instead a product of the loneliness and alienation he felt as the rector's son in Carrickfergus: 'Outside the house we knew very few people, whether gentry, working-people or children...after Miss Craig's time there were no more parties and you had to be careful whom

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<sup>387</sup> MacNeice, Letters, 395.

you spoke to. Most of the world was untouchable.’<sup>388</sup> In a way, MacNeice’s identification with the slum-dweller is spatial; they both find themselves on the outside of the political debates taken up by well-meaning intellectuals like Clark.

In *I Crossed the Minch*, though, MacNeice does delineate conditions under which he would commit himself to politics, though he finds himself divided between nationalism and revolutionary Marxism:

Nationalism of the Irish type is often regarded as reactionary. With the World Revolution waiting for the midwife, why take a torch to the stable to assist at the birth of a puppy? Even if the puppy is pedigree. On this question I am unable to make up my mind. When I am in Ireland I find myself becoming Nationalist. If I lived in the Hebrides, I should certainly plump for the puppy.<sup>389</sup>

The point that MacNeice makes in this passage is simply that if he lived on an island, he would be more sympathetic to nationalist politics; the island-dweller privileges insular space above all else, being cut off from the rest of the world anyway. Of course, MacNeice did not live on an island, and made a point of deconstructing the idea of the island as ‘peaceable kingdom’ or potential Utopia. Ultimately, nationalism, when compared to Marxism, with its international scope, is merely a ‘puppy’, and thus relatively insignificant.

MacNeice’s most sustained engagement with – and attack on – nationalism, particularly that of the Irish variety, appears in Section XVI of *Autumn Journal* (1939):

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<sup>388</sup> MacNeice, *The Strings are False*, 49.

<sup>389</sup> MacNeice, *I Crossed the Minch*, 14.

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:

Up the Rebels, to Hell with the Pope,

And God save – as you prefer – the King or Ireland.<sup>390</sup>

MacNeice does not, in this passage, describe representations of space – that is, he does not give us monuments to the power of a particular cultural in-group that aim to shape the way people think about space; rather, we get, within the statelet of Ulster, itself a small subdivision of the island of Ireland, two conflicting and incompatible representational spaces. This ‘contested space’, as it were, is used for different purposes by different groups, and is thus experienced differently by Protestants and Catholics, Unionists and Nationalists – ‘one read black where the other read white’. This squabbling over a small corner of a small country leads to isolationist navel-gazing, the true unforgiveable political sin in MacNeice’s worldview: ‘...Griffith, Connolly, Collins, where have they brought us?/Ourselves alone! Let the round tower stand aloof/In a world of bursting mortar!’<sup>391</sup> Terence Brown argues that these ‘Three contemptuous lines associate...the Irish separatist and revolutionary traditions with archaism and the

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<sup>390</sup> MacNeice, *Collected Poems*, 138.

<sup>391</sup> *Ibid.*, 139.



picturesque, irrelevant in the midst of the general European crisis' spurred on by the rise of Fascism on the continent.<sup>392</sup> Brown largely ignores the spatial element at work here, however; the fledgling nation of Ireland uses representations of space, such as the 'round tower', to set itself apart from other European nations, and in choosing an archaic defensive structure, it has placed itself outside of the European mainstream and wrapped itself up in private concerns.

The pressures of war on the continent cannot be kept at bay, however, as the one thing MacNeice seems to despise most is the private Utopia; in section XIV, MacNeice describes his efforts in the Oxford by-election of 1938, in which the pro-appeasement Conservative candidate, Quinton Hogg (himself an Oxford contemporary of MacNeice's) defeated the Independent candidate A.J. Lindsay, for whom MacNeice had campaigned. A vote for Hogg, as far as MacNeice is concerned, is a vote for self-interested isolationism of the worst kind:

So Thursday came and Oxford went to the polls  
 And made its coward vote and the streets resounded  
 To the triumphant cheers of the lost souls –  
 The profiteers, the dunderheads, the smarties.  
 And I drove back to London in the dark of the morning, the trees  
 Standing out in the headlights cut from cardboard;  
 Wondering which disease  
 Is worse – the Status Quo or Mere Utopia.<sup>393</sup>

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<sup>392</sup> Brown, 'Louis MacNeice's Ireland', 85.

<sup>393</sup> MacNeice, *Collected Poems*, 134.

Once again, the problem is stated in spatial terms; both ‘the Status Quo’ and ‘Mere Utopia’ are examples of a kind of privileged, enclosed space which is thought by those who erect it to be impermeable by outside influences. MacNeice cannot help but remind them, however, of the forces which threaten to disrupt this idyll:

The nicest people in England have always been the least

Apt to solidarity or alignment

But all of them must now align against the beast

That prowls at every door and barks in every headline.<sup>394</sup>

The ‘beast’ of Fascism – and of the approaching war – will not remain at bay simply because one either ignores or appeases it; indeed, MacNeice alerts us to it in section V (‘But posters flapping on the railings tell the fluttered/World that Hitler speaks, that Hitler speaks...’<sup>395</sup>) and again in section VII (‘Hitler yells on the wireless...’<sup>396</sup>), using modern media technologies to demonstrate the inability of a barrier so primitive as a wall to keep pernicious ideas out. At some point the beast will break down the walls, MacNeice warns, and devour you.

Given the poem’s description of what is essentially a liminal moment – the build-up to Britain’s involvement in the Second World War – it seems appropriate that MacNeice ends *Autumn Journal* in liminal space: ‘To-night we sleep/On the banks of the Rubicon – the die is cast...’<sup>397</sup> We leave the poem – and the poet – at the moment before a final deci-

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<sup>394</sup> Idem.

<sup>395</sup> Ibid., 109.

<sup>396</sup> Ibid., 115.

<sup>397</sup> Ibid., 164.

sion is made; will he or won't he (and England) cross the river, as it were? 'The die is cast,' so we know that there can be only one possible course of action – the safety and comfort of isolationism must be abandoned. It is left unclear, however, whether or not this will come to pass; Britain may cross the river, or, like Ireland, betray itself, its allies, and western Liberalism by remaining aloof. The difficulty of the decision is reflected in the poet's decision to leave us waiting, hesitant and uncomfortable, upon the threshold.

Ultimately, though, *Autumn Journal* endorses the dismantling of the spaces in which we cocoon ourselves. Section VIII, for example, revisits MacNeice's failed first marriage in 'idyllic' terms, illustrating the degree to which he and his wife marooned themselves in a private world:

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.<sup>398</sup>

Fissures appear even in this façade of domestic bliss and creature comforts, as the poet notes that 'There were lots of things left undone' – that is, both unfinished and untied or

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<sup>398</sup> Ibid., 117.

unraveled. Indeed, we soon find the poet bereft of these consolations, with ‘No wife, no ivory tower, no funk-hole.’<sup>399</sup> The association of ‘wife’ with ‘ivory tower’ is revealing, since towers seem generally in MacNeice’s work to represent escapism; the doomed marriage, then, was another kind of escape from worldly responsibility. As Peter McDonald notes, ‘The poet with ‘No wife, no ivory tower, no funk-hole’, is in fact in a more privileged position as far as the opening up of the poetic self to be ‘no longer squandered/In self-assertion’ (XXIV) is concerned.’<sup>400</sup> Without a private retreat, MacNeice is forced into public engagement.

Of course, while MacNeice worries about the war that is to come, there is another war raging, one in which some of his friends and acquaintances participated. The Spanish Civil War claimed the lives of several of his contemporaries, including John Cornford, Christopher Caudwell, and Julian Bell, and became, for MacNeice’s generation, both a missed opportunity to change the world and a taste of what was to come as the 1930s drew to a close. Valentine Cunningham writes of the ‘frontier consciousness’ that the war engendered in English writers of the period:

The drama of the many Spanish fronts depended on the drama of the Spanish frontier that preceded and enclosed it. The foreigner who fought in Spain had first to travel to Spain, and cross into Spain. Spanish Front meant Spanish Frontier. So just as the ‘30s frontier consciousness grew, in part, from a First War front-line

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<sup>399</sup> Ibid., 119.

<sup>400</sup> McDonald, *Louis MacNeice*, 92.

mindfulness, with its particular apparatus of taking sides, confrontations and fearful goings-over, so now the period's general mythology of the frontier was reconnected to its military meanings in Spanish wartime fronts.<sup>401</sup>

Indeed, Cunningham points to section VI of *Autumn Journal* as a glib summation of the hopes and fears of the British left:

And next day took the boat  
 For home, forgetting Spain, not realising  
 That Spain would soon denote  
 Our grief, our aspirations;  
 Not knowing that our blunt  
 Ideals would find their whetstone, that our spirit  
 Would find its frontier on the Spanish front,  
 Its body in a rag-tag army.<sup>402</sup>

MacNeice makes a point of describing Spain as it was when he visited the country, both before and after the war, and not as an ideal space in which Left and Right faced off in their first major European conflict. It is quite different from Auden's 'Spain', which is, as Samuel Hynes notes, a strange war poem, in that 'There are no battles..., no dead boys or screaming women, no grisly details, and no personal voice testifying to war's hideousness. Not only is there no 'I' in it, there is no suggestion of direct observation at all; Auden's

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<sup>401</sup> Cunningham, *British Writers of the Thirties*, 434.

<sup>402</sup> MacNeice, *Collected Poems*, 114.

Spain is a shape on a map, or the earth seen from a great distance.<sup>403</sup> What Auden provides in his poem is a representation of space – he delineates boundaries, but does not bother to people the space with anything that resembles a real human being living in wartime.

Class divisions may have had something to do with Auden's inability to connect with Spanish space as the people on the Republican side actually lived and experienced it. Julian Symons has criticized Auden's brief involvement in the conflict, claiming that it exposed and hardened 'classist' fault lines already present in the poet:

The [Spanish Civil] War had no clarifying effects upon the feelings and actions of the Auden Group. Auden went to Spain, certainly, as a stretcher bearer in an ambulance unit, but he returned home after only two months, and, according to [Stephen] Spender, never spoke of his visit. The distaste shown in his work for people 'like the men you meet at any football match' has already been noticed. It is possible, and even likely, that in Spain Auden was confronted unavoidably with this feeling of distaste for all those with whom he was unable to make contact by taste or training, and that these weeks in Spain were in some way a decisive experience for him.<sup>404</sup>

Auden's inability to separate himself from his public-school, Oxonian background makes it difficult for him to relate to the Spanish peasant fighting in a ditch for the sake of a more equitable distribution of wealth. While Auden (at least, in the early stages of his career)

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<sup>403</sup> Hynes, *The Auden Generation*, 254.

<sup>404</sup> Symons, *The Thirties*, 123-4.

takes Marx seriously, he never goes so far as to join the Communist Party, and seems unable to find points of connection between himself and working people.

MacNeice, on the other hand, presents the Spanish disaster in stark, journalistic terms, and in section XXIII draws lessons from the situation for the glib foreign observer that seem to mock the ‘pudgy and debonair’ Cambridge don who blithely ‘ordered anis.../ Glad to show off his mastery of the language’ in section VI.<sup>405</sup> As the frontiers that delineate Spanish space are contended, so will all others be in time:

We have come to a place in space where shortly

All of us may be forced to camp in time:

The slender searchlights climb,

Our sins will find us out, even our sins of omission.<sup>406</sup>

MacNeice inserts himself and his colleagues and countrymen into the Spanish dilemma, arguing that the moral, ethical and political failings of the English will catch up to them even if they choose not to take an official position on the war in Spain. The Spanish war is a microcosm of currents that are about to sweep across Europe as Liberalism, Fascism and Communism butt heads and make and break alliances. However the Cambridge don might ‘master the language’ of Spain, he will suffer for his inability to care about the fate of the Spanish Republic and its people when his own home is besieged. All politics is thus rendered not only local, but spatial, as new frontiers are drawn and different ideas of space

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<sup>405</sup> MacNeice, *Collected Poems*, 114.

<sup>406</sup> *Ibid.*, 158.

and its uses are contested. This is the work of the poet who so vehemently insisted upon his identification with the ‘slum-dweller’ in the letter to Eleanor Clark; he draws attention to the suffering of real people, not abstract principles of right and wrong or lines drawn upon maps by committees. ‘The cocks crow in Barcelona’<sup>407</sup> as a warning to other nations, and also to offer ‘the sour/Reproach of Simon Peter’<sup>408</sup> which castigates the nations of Europe for allowing Spain to fall to Franco.

While his postwar work is similarly internationalist in scope, MacNeice would never again write so direct a chronicle of his own times as *Autumn Journal*. Rather, he frequently focuses on Britain’s awkward transition from militaristic empire to cultural hegemon. We find an example of this tendency in the late poem ‘Old Masters Abroad’ (1961), in which British writers are taken out of their individual spatial and temporal contexts and introduced to uncomprehending audiences of former colonials:

Painfully grinning faces like dogs’ or  
 Inattentive like cats’ all over  
 The static globe affect to be lectured  
 By the singing birds of unknown England.<sup>409</sup>

The reference here to the ‘static’ globe is telling; it is as though England has refused to acknowledge the change in its fortunes, that its political hegemony no longer extends beyond its own island (with the exceptions of Northern Ireland and the Falkland Islands). The Old

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<sup>407</sup> Ibid., 159.

<sup>408</sup> Idem.

<sup>409</sup> Ibid., 558.



Masters of English verse are presented to those who ‘affect’ – that is, pretend – to want to learn about them, though at best those being ‘lectured’ are merely being polite.

The Old Masters can only be understood by their new audiences if they are wrenched painfully from their English spatial context and put into dialogue with the native traditions of the ‘static globe’; that is, they must be remade in order to suit the new international space they are asked to occupy. They do not seem to be able to do so comfortably, however:

Shakespeare flaunts his codpiece at dhoti,

Ditto at sari, Pope with his clouded

Cane conducts the dancers of Bali,

The lesser celandine sprouts in Lagos.<sup>410</sup>

We see here sexual colonization in a Shakespeare who ‘flaunts his codpiece’, and cultural colonization both in Pope’s attempts to tell Balinese dancers what do, waving his cane (also a phallic symbol) to direct them, and the planting of British flowers – and, indeed, of Wordsworth – in Africa.

These images are primarily comic and point out the absurdity of trying to transplant British culture wholesale into alien space. The next two stanzas take a darker turn, however:

And the skylark crying ‘Bird I never!’

Routes parrakeet, hornbill, kookaburra,

While the nightingale puts on spurs in Hampstead

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<sup>410</sup> Idem.

To rip the guts from the decadent bulbul.

Wee sleekit courin' timorous warthog!

Tirra lirra by the Kabul River!

The elmtree bole is in tiny leaf

But not for long because of the termites.<sup>411</sup>

In the third stanza, the familiar birds of England (and of Shelley and Keats) gird themselves for battle against the birds of Africa, Australia and the Indian subcontinent, introducing violent conquest into the poem where there had been only an awkward attempt to maintain cultural hegemony. In stanza four, though, we see the former colonies striking back, as termites chew Robert Browning's 'elmtree bole in tiny leaf'. The newly de-colonized space continues to defend itself in the penultimate stanza:

At Bablockhythe the stripling Ganges

Burns on her ghats the scholar gypsy,

There's a deathly hush on the rocks of Aden,

Nine bean rows rise in the Kalahari.<sup>412</sup>

It is perhaps telling that this stanza ends with a jab at Yeats, whose 'Nine bean rows' are transplanted from a private island in the middle of an Irish lake to a vast, barren expanse of undifferentiated space in which they ought to wither and die. The fact that they 'rise' from

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<sup>411</sup> Idem.

<sup>412</sup> Idem.

the sands of the African desert suggests otherwise; somehow, this transplanted poem about pastoral retreat and solitude takes root in arid foreign soil, though its intentions are apparently turned upside-down with its context.

Ultimately, the Old Masters meet their match in their new audience, which has adopted a strategy of resistance that involves both adaptation – acclimating the Old Masters to new space and new soil – and violence – burning the feet of the Scholar Gypsy and the destruction of the elmtree bole. Indeed, the intensity of this resistance seems to vary based on the periodization of the poet in question; the most violent colonizers are the Romantics Shelley and Keats, while those who encounter the most determined resistance are the Victorians, Browning and Arnold. Older poets – Shakespeare and Pope – and moderns – Yeats – are accommodated, if somewhat uncomfortably. This may have something to do with the attitudes of these respective poetic generations towards space; generally, poets like Shakespeare and Pope describe it, the Romantics internalize it and reshape it for their own subjective purposes, and the Victorians divide, conquer, and map, attempting to force English values onto subject populations who aren't necessarily so keen to adopt them. The position of Yeats, meanwhile, highlights the conundrum of the High Modernist in a decolonized society; the self-proclaimed defenders of culture build their private worlds out of the detritus of modern popular culture, embracing both nationalism and internationalism in an untenable alliance. Yeats's 'bean-rows' appear in a 'wasteland' to illustrate the absurdity of trying to preserve a 'pure' culture, untainted by contemporary life.

It is MacNeice's willingness to side with the audience against the Old Masters that sounds the postmodern note in his political thought. He does not allow the Old Masters their cultural victory over their former subjects:

The faces listen or not. The lecturers  
Mop their memories. All over the static  
Globe the needle sticks in the groove.

It is overtime now for the Old Masters.<sup>413</sup>

We return to the images of the first stanza, in which it is clearly up to the listeners whether they will pay attention to the lecture or not; the Old Masters have only as much power over them as they will allow, since the audience is on its own ground, and thus in its own home space. We also revisit the idea of the 'static globe' – but is it static for everyone involved, or merely for the Old Masters, who have not yet accepted that times have changed? The Old Masters will go on doing what they have always done, never realizing that their best days are behind them, and that the spaces they once controlled are now in the hands of those whom they once ruled.

This kind of populism is common in MacNeice's verse; as we saw in *Autumn Journal*, he has more interest in the victims of wars than in their victors, and his readings of politicized space always take into account the thoughts and feelings of those who actually live in and use the space. Fredric Jameson, in discussing postmodern architecture, ascribes to it 'a kind of aesthetic populism':

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<sup>413</sup> Idem.

However we may wish to evaluate its populist rhetoric, it has at least the merit of drawing our attention to one fundamental feature of all...postmodernisms...namely, the effacement in them of the (essentially high-modernist) frontier between high culture and so-called mass or commercial culture...<sup>414</sup>

Postmodernism is more concerned with Lefebvre's representational spaces than the representations of space produced by elites. MacNeice's spatial constructions, in that they relate to the worlds of ordinary people interacting with space, are thus postmodern in this sense.

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<sup>414</sup> Jameson, Postmodernism, 2.

## Chapter Five

### **‘- But I will escape, with my dog, on the far side of the Fair’: MacNeice, Ego, and the Poet’s Social World**

Most critics of British writing in the 1930s are quick to point out the social bonds which link the principal players to one another, bonds formed early – often at boarding school – and sustained through University education and beyond. MacNeice, Auden, Spender and Day Lewis, the quartet whom Roy Campbell envisioned derisively as a composite four-headed creature called ‘MacSpaunDay,’ were contemporaries at Oxford. Auden and his friend and frequent collaborator Christopher Isherwood had been schoolmates at Gresham’s Holt, while MacNeice and the art critic (and Soviet spy) Anthony Blunt had shared a study at Marlborough. For the most part, these young men lived and worked in a privileged, homogenous world made up primarily of people who lived, wrote, and thought as they did; at the least, they could be confident that their major contemporaries shared a similar upbringing and socioeconomic background. Relationships that form across classes, like Spender’s lengthy romance with Tony Hyndman or Isherwood’s dalliance with a German named ‘Heinz,’ are tainted by accusations of sexual exploitation of working-class men by well-heeled bourgeois who fail to live up to the principles of ‘equality’ in which they claim to believe. MacNeice is different in a number of respects, given his heterosexuality, his skepticism regarding doctrinaire Marxism, and the relative paucity of his ‘official’ col-

laborations, especially when compared to Auden, who frequently worked alongside others to whom he gave equal credit. MacNeice's willingness to occasionally sink his ego in a fully collaborative project while managing to remain somehow separate and aloof can be expressed in spatial terms; he is both 'inside' of the protective circle of the 'Auden Group,' due to his friendship with Auden and Spender, and 'outside' of its major political and artistic concerns. Furthermore, the association between collaboration and ideas of 'place' invested with meaning conflicts with MacNeice's orientation towards neutral 'space'; when he does involve himself in a collaborative project, the aim seems to be to redefine or remap a particular 'space' or 'place' and his own relationship to it.

Collaboration of any sort involves the temporary submerging of two individual personalities into a kind of composite identity. While the extent to which particular authors sink their own egos in collaborative projects varies, such projects must involve a reworking of the psychological categories of Self and Other. Jacques Lacan offers two competing diagrams of the unconscious mind in *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*: the first is described 'as a *hoop net (nasse)* which opens slightly at the neck and at the bottom of which the catch of fish will be found,' while the second is referred to as 'the *double sack (besace)*' in which 'the unconscious is something kept in reserve, closed up inside, in which we *have* to penetrate from the outside.'<sup>415</sup> The individual unconscious is either a space that freely gathers information through an open orifice or a closed space which is

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<sup>415</sup> Jacques Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*. Ed. Jacques-Alain Miller. Trans. Alan Sheridan. (London: Hogarth Press, 1977), 144.

resistant to all but the strongest outside stimuli. The ego, the idea of self that allows the subject 'to constitute himself in his imaginary reality,' is formed through a kind of inter-penetration of Self and Other:

...it is in the space of the Other that [the subject] sees himself and the point from which he looks at himself is also in that space. Now, this is also the point from which he speaks, since in so far as he speaks, it is in the locus of the Other that he begins to constitute that truthful lie by which is initiated that which participates in desire at the level of the unconscious.<sup>416</sup>

Traditionally, the human subject locates itself in relation to others; working with others leads to discoveries about the self, or to new definitions of 'selfhood.'

It is informative to return to Edward Soja's definition of a 'portable ego' in this context; he argues that our conception of space is bounded by zones created by the interaction of different egos, and that the human subject stands at the center of his or her own spatial world. The 'portable ego' each individual carries creates and defines space. According to Soja, we are each at the center of our own spatial worlds, and we map the boundaries of our own 'egos' by tracing the points at which they meet other 'egos.' The human subject is bounded by 'territoriality,' which 'refers to the production and reproduction of spatial enclosures that not only concentrate interaction...but also intensify and enforce its boundedness.'<sup>417</sup> We can see this at work in the collaborative enterprises undertaken by

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<sup>416</sup> Idem.

<sup>417</sup> Ibid., 150.



W.B. Yeats, which seem generally to be attached to a particular location, real or imaginary: Coole Park, the Abbey Theatre, Stone Cottage, Thoor Ballylee, even the mystical ‘Castle of Heroes’ he proposed building with Maud Gonne within the Order of the Golden Dawn.

By contrast, the ‘postmodern hyperspace’ described by Fredric Jameson is space in which the traditional signposts are no longer an adequate guide to location. We make sense of the spaces and places which we occupy in part by watching the way our Others respond both to us and to the environment; a collaboration is a collective navigation through space in which two or more parties agree to perform the function of ‘cognitive mapping’ together (even though, as we will see, in some cases all of the credit goes to a single participating subject). MacNeice resists this kind of shared mapping, confusing, obfuscating, or writing over or past the signposts erected by his collaborators. Instead of helping to map out and define space, he undoes the work of his co-surveyors and complicates the spaces that they construct, moving them from ideas of clearly delineated, navigable space to the kind of postmodern hyperspace Jameson theorizes.

The present chapter will approach the spatial problem presented by MacNeice’s compulsion to take apart or leave unfinished his collaborative work from two directions. In the first section, I will discuss the social world in which MacNeice and his contemporaries lived and delineate its spatial parameters, including those set by the older generation and the ‘private worlds’ created by and for romantic relationships. The second section will take up the practice of collaboration itself, and in it I will trace MacNeice’s attempts to puncture the bubbles surrounding private Utopias in *Letters from Iceland*, the 1937 ‘travel book’

he wrote with W.H. Auden, and his inability to finish *The Character of Ireland*, the collaborative editing project he undertook with the Ulster poet W.R. Rodgers, with whom he worked at the BBC. In both his social and working relationships, MacNeice plays the role of *eirón*, resisting the lure of easy answers and pulling on loose threads to unravel carefully constructed fantasy worlds.

### **I. ‘But before you proclaim the millennium, my dear –’: MacNeice’s Social World**

In the previous chapter I mapped MacNeice’s reactions, as a child and as an adult, to the spaces in which religious and political majorities concentrate their power. I argued that MacNeice comes down on the side of what Henri Lefebvre calls ‘representational space,’ or space as it is actually perceived and used by the people who occupy it, as opposed to ‘representations of space,’ which are planned or mapped by artists or officials with a technocratic bent to project a particular set of values. While this section will focus on social relationships rather than the practice of describing spaces, MacNeice’s reactions to his peers and contemporaries take place in a number of specific spatial contexts, many of them centered upon important ‘places’ in which the poet (or his fellows) had a particular social or ideological investment.

One of the ‘places’ in question is the British public school, where elite youngsters are formed early into a coterie bred for future leadership. In *British Writers of the Thirties*, Valentine Cunningham comments on the lingering effect of such schooling on the lives of these impressionable pupils:

...you couldn't rinse that tastes of school out of your mouth, because school on the model of the English bourgeois and upper-bourgeois classes – a chain of boarding-schools away from home, entered into at a cruelly early age, an experience of home deprivation kept up right into one's early twenties when it continued, as it frequently did, into the years spent at Oxford and Cambridge – was, bluntly to put the matter, traumatic.<sup>418</sup>

Like MacNeice's childhood fear of Hell, which I discussed in the previous chapter, the experience of schooling for a child of his background was an experience of displacement; the student was repeatedly taken from a familiar place to an unfamiliar, returning home only for short holidays. For some of MacNeice's contemporaries, this seems to have encouraged the formation of surrogate family bonds that lasted well into adulthood. While MacNeice remained close to several of his school friends, notably John Hilton and Graham Shepard, he seems to have formed bonds with individuals rather than groups. School, as described in *The Strings are False*, is a place both of false appearances and of vaguely (sometimes explicitly) sexual threat. When he first arrived at Sherborne, his father and stepmother left him alone with two boys his own age:

What astonished me...was the two little boys' aggressiveness. The blond one, who had been so cherubic to my father, changed on the instant into a leering imp, his voice charged with malevolence, his nose twitching like a rabbit's. The dark

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<sup>418</sup> Cunningham, *British Writers of the Thirties*, 128.

one backed him up; both were delighted to have someone junior to themselves.

‘Where’s your little cocky?’ they said.<sup>419</sup>

MacNeice starts out on an adversarial footing with his schoolmates, both of whom treat the ‘junior’ boy as a potential victim once there are no adults around to observe them. The group united by the old school tie is a source of terror, not a surrogate family.

This aloofness apparently continued when MacNeice went up to Oxford. E.R. Dodds, once MacNeice’s mentor in the Classics department at the University of Birmingham and later his literary executor, mentions MacNeice as he was in his student days in his autobiography:

At Oxford [MacNeice] had been a somewhat isolated figure: he had not shared the usual undergraduate interests and had taken little trouble to know his fellow students outside a very small circle of intimate friends. (Of the so-called ‘Thirties poets’ he seems to have known only Stephen Spender at all well at this period; his acquaintance with Auden did not ripen into intimacy until later...and I never heard him mention Day Lewis.)<sup>420</sup>

This passage illustrates two important points about MacNeice’s university career, at least as he wanted his friends and acquaintances to perceive it. First, he did not go in for the usual undergraduate activity of making social connections with other future masters of the universe and their families. In addition, though he, Auden, and Day Lewis were Oxford

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<sup>419</sup> Macneice, *The Strings are False*, 64.

<sup>420</sup> E.R. Dodds, *Missing Persons: An Autobiography*. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1977), 115.

contemporaries, his name was linked to theirs several years after their student days were ended, in the pages of *New Verse* and amongst the older generation of critics. This complicates Cunningham's claim that Auden was the center of his poetic generation's world: '[Auden's] coterie was onion-like. If you patiently peeled away Day Lewis and Rex Warner, Spender and MacNeice, you would find Auden.'<sup>421</sup> This seems rather a reductive reading of Thirties writing in general, and of MacNeice in particular, given his efforts to remain apart from the 'old gang.' He was the only important left-leaning poet of his generation who did not contribute to Michael Roberts's anthologies, *New Signatures* and *New Country*. Samuel Hynes calls *New Signatures* 'the first attempt by members of the [Auden] generation to define, and to demonstrate, what it was that they shared that gave them a collective identity.'<sup>422</sup> Tellingly, MacNeice is not included in this 'collective identity.' Rather, it seems that his name was attached to this group of poets primarily by critics of an older generation who did not see the difference between MacNeice and the others.

MacNeice's name is often not included by his supposed peers when they rattle off the names of those who belong to 'the group,' while those outside the charmed circle, whether because of age or political difference, tend to include him. Cunningham provides a useful survey of such critical 'groupings,' and MacNeice's placement within the group is inconsistent:

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<sup>421</sup> Cunningham, *British Writers of the Thirties*, 24.

<sup>422</sup> Hynes, *The Auden Generation*, 75.

In her Workers' Education Association lecture of 1940, 'The Leaning Tower', published in *Folios of New Writing* (Autumn 1940), Virginia Woolf identified the Auden 'group' as crucial: the names of Day Lewis, Auden, Spender, Isherwood, MacNeice... 'adhere much more closely than the names of their predecessors'. The precise clientele of the group would shift in observers' minds. Day Lewis frankly thought 'the names of Auden, Spender and myself' comprised much of the going *Hope for Poetry*. Roy Campbell's gnashed-out composite 'MacSpaunDay' evidently encompassed MacNeice as well. Geoffrey Grigson, the editor of *New Verse*, never quite decided whether he had a trinity or a quartet on his hands. He wrote variously in *New Verse* of 'the inevitable trio', 'the Circle (or the Triangle)', 'the Three and Mr. MacNeice.'<sup>423</sup>

Day Lewis, MacNeice's supposed comrade in the Auden Group, does not include him in his membership list; Grigson, an influential tastemaker who was sympathetic to both Auden and MacNeice, lists him only intermittently, or else hedges by placing him both inside and outside of the group ('the Three and Mr. MacNeice'). It is those critics who are least sympathetic to the Thirties generation – the older Woolf and the right-winger Campbell – who lump MacNeice in with the others, either failing to notice or refusing to acknowledge what his contemporaries and supposed friends do: that MacNeice is in some way different from the others.

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<sup>423</sup> Cunningham, *British Writers of the Thirties*, 18.

To be sure, it is not as though MacNeice never participated in any of the ‘group efforts’ of the period or puffed for his friends; as Cunningham demonstrates in listing the collaborative projects and nepotistic relationships in which Thirties poets participated during their university days, MacNeice’s name, for once, features prominently:

...at Oxford, *Oxford Poetry* was only one...meeting point [for a literary coterie].

MacNeice edited the undergraduate paper *Sir Galahad*, for instance. His friend Bernard Spencer was one of its contributors...Stephen Spender has talked in his autobiography *World Within World* about the circle of his friends after Auden had gone down from Oxford: MacNeice, Spencer, [Arthur] Calder-Marshall, Humphrey House. A shared education *drove* these men into *droves* (author’s emphasis). And they were ready to turn the accidents of social formation into critical dogma. ‘All genuine poetry’, Auden and Day Lewis asserted in their preface to *Oxford Poetry* 1927, ‘is in a sense the formation of private spheres out of public chaos.’<sup>424</sup>

The ‘private spheres’ Auden describes, like Soja’s ‘portable egos,’ are islands of selfhood which interact with and are formed out of circumstances beyond the control of the individual poet, much as creator-gods form the world out of primordial chaos; Mircea Eliade likens the building of a dwelling to the cosmogony, ‘For what is involved’ in building a habitation ‘is *undertaking the creation of the world that one has chosen to inhabit* (author’s emphasis)’.<sup>425</sup> This can be applied to the act of creation involved in composing poetry, as

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<sup>424</sup> Ibid., 138.

<sup>425</sup> Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane*, 51.

well, if we think as Bachelard does of the poem as a kind of dwelling-place for images and ideas, itself a kind of ‘private world’ that the poet invites the reader to experience. The revolution among the □Thirties poets is the construction of *shared* private worlds or habitations; that is, the dwellings they create are still private, but are inhabited by a pair or a small circle of poets rather than a single commanding figure in the top room of a tower.

There remains a difference in MacNeice’s work, however; not only is he willing to criticize the private worlds of his friends, he also works to undermine their utopias – and his own – at every opportunity. Many critics, particularly those of Northern Irish extraction, attribute MacNeice’s difference to his Irishness, particularly his Ulster background, which, as Michael Longley argues, makes him into a kind of liminal, hybrid figure:

MacNeice...is a difficult figure to pin down and label. To the Irish he is an exile, to the English something of a stranger. He was an Ulsterman, and Ulster is a limbo between two (three?) cultures. Although he is still closely associated with Auden, Spender and Day Lewis, he was never really a card-carrying thirties poet. His contribution, the Celtic ‘Mac,’ detaches with proper ease from the front end of Roy Campbell’s composite monster, MacSpaunday.<sup>426</sup>

Longley attributes MacNeice’s deconstructive tendencies to his having grown up in the contested space of Ulster, which he implies is a kind of spiritual no-man’s land, and that the mere fact of his Irishness makes it easy to drop him from ‘MacSpaunday’ simply by eras-

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<sup>426</sup> Michael Longley, ‘The Neolithic Night: A Note on the Irishness of Louis MacNeice’ in Two Decades of Irish Writing: A Critical Survey, ed. Douglas Dunn. (Chester Springs, PA: Dufour, 1975), 99.



ing the ‘Mac.’ Terence Brown follows a similar line of argument, hyphenating MacNeice’s identity by claiming that he ‘is the closest thing twentieth-century Ulster has produced to an Anglo-Irish poet, torn as he was emotionally and intellectually between Ireland as a whole and an England in which he lived a life of semi-exile.’<sup>427</sup> Such readings of MacNeice attempt to reduce him to a kind of token figure, detachable from the mass or easily split in two, whom communities separated by ethnic or national identity can share, and ignore the complexity inherent in the spaces MacNeice chooses to inhabit – or not to inhabit. ‘Ireland,’ ‘Ulster,’ and ‘England’ are ideologically loaded sites, and MacNeice writes about, and perhaps belongs to, all of them. Categorizing him based on his nationality, however, only forces a poet who is resistant to enclosed spaces into just such a position. I have already noted MacNeice’s attitude towards Ireland as a kind of ‘private world,’ particularly as regards the sequence *The Closing Album* (1941), in a previous chapter. His mistrust of private worlds extends to spaces defined by national borders.

Meanwhile, MacNeice’s ‘politically advanced’ friends were publishing their first volumes of poetry, attending socialist meetings together, and contributing to anthologies like *New Signatures*. In his preface to this volume of poetry by young, up-and-coming left-wing writers, Michael Roberts, the editor, calls for ‘a clear reaction against esoteric poetry in which it is necessary for the reader to catch each recondite allusion.’<sup>428</sup> Roberts argues for a contemporary poetry that is not unlike that favored by MacNeice in his critical writ-

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<sup>427</sup> Brown, *Northern Voices*, 98.

<sup>428</sup> Michael Roberts, ed. *New Signatures: Poems by Several Hands*. (London: Hogarth Press, 1932), 12.

ings on the ‘corner poetry’ of Yeats, Eliot, the Decadents, and the Georgians, lamenting the poet’s ‘isolation’ from ordinary experience. The means to reach this goal, however, are left half-formed:

The writers in this book have learned to accept the fact that progress is illusory, and yet to believe that the game is worth playing; to believe that the alleviation of suffering is good even though it makes possible new sensitiveness and therefore new suffering; to believe that their own standards are no more absolute than those of other people, and yet to be prepared to defend and suffer for their own standards; to think of the world, for scientific purposes, in terms which make it appear deterministic, and yet to know that a human action may be unpredictable from scientific laws, a new creation.<sup>429</sup>

Roberts speaks in generalities, leaving the ‘standards’ of the poets represented in the anthology vague and raising issues that do not invite objection; of course the alleviation of suffering and perseverance in the face of adversity are desirable. As Hynes notes, Roberts’s preface ‘has little to do with communism as a political ideology; it is not much more than comradeship, team-feeling, the good of the school, all those collective emotions that these young men had felt long before they had any political ideas’.<sup>430</sup> What the poets have in common, really, is that they are part of a small, privileged circle; *New Signatures* was published by Leonard and Virginia Woolf’s small Hogarth Press, and two of the poets rep-

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<sup>429</sup> Ibid., 12-3.

<sup>430</sup> Hynes, *The Auden Generation*, 80.

resented therein – Julian Bell and John Lehmann – had personal connections to the Woolfs. The others were friends of Bell's or of Lehmann's. The small circle of socially engaged poets described by Roberts is, at this point in the decade, actually a tiny coterie largely talking to themselves in volumes published by tiny specialty presses, just as much a 'private world' as MacNeice's married life was.

MacNeice's divorce in 1936 ushered in a more fertile creative period, and brought opportunities to travel abroad with old friends like the art historian Anthony Blunt, with whom he visited Spain, and Auden, whom he accompanied on a trip to Iceland. Like Auden, he became a major contributor to Geoffrey Grigson's magazine *New Verse*, which also published work by Day Lewis and Spender, further cementing the image of an 'Auden group' of young, Oxford-educated poets in the public imagination. Grigson, at least, seems to have recognized that MacNeice stood on the periphery of the group, if he was a member at all, as Peter McDonald writes:

For Grigson, Auden and MacNeice are both 'ours', but in different ways, Auden by sharing 'our' peculiarities, and knowing that there are things 'outside and beyond poetry in the end', and MacNeice by transcending the marks of his origin and becoming an (international) artistic resource. To simplify this, it is as though MacNeice can leave behind the Irish company and the dirty fingernails to become real poetry, while Auden can finally leave even the poetry behind in becoming fully 'ours'.<sup>431</sup>

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<sup>431</sup> Peter McDonald, *Mistaken Identities: Poetry and Northern Ireland*. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997), 192-3.

The meaning of the pronoun ‘our’ in this context is, once again, vague; does it refer to the public at large, to believers in a particular political or social ideology, or to the small group of writers and critics who published in *New Verse*? I would suggest the latter as the most likely alternative, given *New Verse*’s lionization of Auden (though Grigson himself was often critical of Auden’s work) and the relatively paltry sales figures for books of poetry by any of these writers (though MacNeice initially outsold Auden). For Grigson, MacNeice could only become ‘ours’ by somehow getting beyond his place of origin – again, his reputation is attached to his nationality and the poet is forced to begin a career in a spatial category from which he must ‘emerge’ before he can be embraced by his fellow artists. Auden, meanwhile, is made into a kind of public possession, an avatar for the *New Verse* group as a whole, the embodiment of everything for which they claim to stand.

Nationality is a factor in most analyses of MacNeice by his contemporaries, though it is often either confused or married to some other factor. In 1939, Auden wrote a blurb on MacNeice for the Gotham Book Mart catalogue, in which he attributes to his friend ‘a wayward anarchist nature’ married ‘to a precise technique’: ‘Mr. Louis MacNeice is an Irishman with a classical education. Ireland gave him a love of the gracefully individual, the odd amusing detail, the disorderly charming; Latin and Greek a linguistic discipline and a distrust of vagueness in expression.’<sup>432</sup> The fact of MacNeice’s Irishness, itself a more complicated and debatable issue than Auden makes it out to be, accounts for all that

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<sup>432</sup> W.H. Auden, ‘Louis MacNeice’ in *The Complete Works of W.H. Auden - Prose Volume II: 1938-1948*, ed. Edward Mendelson. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2002), 35.

is ‘quirky’ and individualistic in MacNeice, while his classical education has taught him precision. The final paragraph of the blurb further discusses MacNeice’s singularity among the poets of his generation:

He is perhaps the only poet today whose work is directly in the classical tradition: Both as a person and as an artist, the first descriptive adjective he suggests to one is “Elegant,” and the first writer of whom one is reminded is Horace (from whom he has made some beautiful translations.) The one Horatian quality he lacks is content, but, in view of the world we live in, that lack is a positive virtue.<sup>433</sup>

Auden’s description of MacNeice hardly sounds like what one would call a ‘poet of the people.’ The elegant Horatian classicist may lack his Roman predecessor’s aristocratic content, but his work is still a part and a product of that rarefied social world in which young men can afford to spend several years reading Greek and Latin poetry rather than dirtying their hands alongside the workers. In addition, Auden singles MacNeice out as ‘the only poet today’ who writes in this vein; he is once again a man apart from his generation.

MacNeice’s writings concerning his own friends and contemporaries are brutally honest and often unflattering. Spender, in particular, bears the brunt of much of MacNeice’s pretension-deflating wit. Not only does MacNeice find fault with his friend’s work and ideas, the physical space Spender occupies also draws some not-so-gentle ribbing from MacNeice, as an example both of his friend’s poetic ego straining against its bourgeois constraints and as an ironic counterpoint to Spender’s left-wing politics:

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<sup>433</sup> Idem.

...Stephen Spender...was now living in a chic apartment with a colour scheme out of *Vogue*, a huge vulcanite writing-desk and over the fireplace an abstract picture by Wyndham Lewis. Very comfortable and elegant but not quite big enough for Stephen; his enormous craggy apostolic flaring face seemed liable to burst the walls.<sup>434</sup>

This is meant to provide a contrast to the realistic, propagandist poetry produced by Spender and his 'political' friends in this period – 'Sylvia Townsend Warner, Edgell Rickword, Randall Swingler, filled the *Left Review* with poems about barricades.'<sup>435</sup> In other words, just as the artistic Left turns to realism and to the spatial boundaries that separate bourgeois from worker, striker from strike-breaker, artist from proletarian, Spender is enclosed in a kind of comfortable middle-class bubble, his ego straining against the tasteful furnishings and the abstract painting that decorate his flat. The 'representations of space' of the essentially abstract decorations juxtaposed against the 'representational space' that Spender and his left-wing colleagues try to explore in their poetry create a sense of dislocation and discomfort for the poet, who finds his muse constrained by the competition between the two.

Though Spender was two years younger than MacNeice, his first mature volume, *Poems* (1933), appeared before MacNeice's. Richard Danson Brown points out the ways in which MacNeice used Spender as an example in the development of his own poetry; in fact, Danson Brown argues, it is largely thanks to Spender that MacNeice develops his

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<sup>434</sup> MacNeice, *The Strings are False*, 166.

<sup>435</sup> Idem.

typical persona of ‘detached observer,’ open to ideas but resistant to ideology, pointing to MacNeice’s review of Spender’s book *The Destructive Element* (1935) as instructive:

Though MacNeice was intrigued by the intellectual possibilities of communism, he remained dubious about the translation of such theories into practice. Accordingly, Lenin’s socialist puritanism is connected with Tolstoy’s Christian puritanism. In each case, ideological systems inappropriately constrict creativity. Because Spender identifies himself with the Communist Party and the Soviet experience, for MacNeice his work has an essentially bogus flavor...<sup>436</sup>

Once again, we see the resistance to systems of thought and to identification with particular groups that defines MacNeice’s poetic practice. The passages in *The Strings are False* illustrate, with devastating comic effect, the constraints that Communist ideology placed upon his unfortunate friend, who would soon abandon the party when it became clear, in the furor over his 1938 play, *The Trial of a Judge*, that he would only be permitted to follow his muse if it lead him down paths of which the party approved.

Two of the poems in MacNeice’s 1935 volume, *Poems*, offer his best early summations of his generation and its attitudes. The first, ‘The Individualist Speaks,’ addresses a group engaged in an idyll in less than flattering terms: ‘We with our Fair pitched among the feathery clover/Are always cowardly and never sober,/Drunk with steam-organs, thigh-rub and cream-soda/– We cannot remember enemies in this valley.’<sup>437</sup> The description of the

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<sup>436</sup> Richard Danson Brown, ““Your thoughts make shape like snow”: Louis MacNeice on Stephen Spender.’ *Twentieth-Century Literature* 8 (2002), 295.

<sup>437</sup> MacNeice, *Collected Poems*, 16.

gathering as a 'Fair' indicates a kind of extended holiday; these people are at play, not engaged in any serious enterprise. Edna Longley argues that the poem 'begins by portraying bourgeois society as a tawdry fairground, in a way that both admits and satirizes the Marxist charge'<sup>438</sup>; whether this is bourgeois society writ large or the faux-Communist bourgeoisie of MacNeice's university days, however, is debatable. The latter seems to me more likely, as Longley herself admits that there are several Audenesque turns of phrase, particularly in the final line – 'But I will escape, with my dog, on the far side of the fair'<sup>439</sup> – and its references to a small group caught up in its own play. The detection of something false or naïve in the Oxbridge left of this period is a frequent refrain in *The Strings are False* ('Cambridge was still full of Peter Pans but all the Peter Pans were now talking Marx'<sup>440</sup>), and MacNeice's acquaintance Dan Davin, later the editor of the ill-fated collection of essays proposed by MacNeice and W.R. Rodgers, *The Character of Ireland*, explains in his memoir *Closing Times* why he identified with MacNeice and not with the rest of the Auden gang in similar terms:

MacNeice was the one poet of more or less my own generation for whom I much cared. His feeling felt real. Curb and snaffle he had, but there was a real horse under him. For me the others, hierophants of a revolution that smelt of wax candles, Anglican, the sweat of highbrows, were future conformists creating an alibi, an

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<sup>438</sup> Longley, *Louis MacNeice: A Study*, 44.

<sup>439</sup> MacNeice, *Collected Poems*, 16.

<sup>440</sup> MacNeice, *The Strings are False*, 156.



elsewhere they could some day cite as an authority for disillusion, psychopomps of the *déjà vu* in the passage rites of the *passé*.<sup>441</sup>

According to Davin, the revolutionary ideology in which many of MacNeice's friends and acquaintances dabbled is merely an experimental identity which an essentially conservative circle can later point to when they retreat behind the barricades. Their communism is an affectation, an idyll, a lark; it is not a deeply felt philosophical commitment, but a temporary act of rebellion, expressed in 'The Individualist Speaks' in terms of the carnivalesque.

This is further evident when 'The Individualist Speaks' is read in conjunction with 'To a Communist,' which acknowledges the attractions of Marxist ideals while arguing that putting them into practice would require an unacceptable – and unsustainable – stasis: '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.'<sup>442</sup> The 'unity' towards which the Marxist strives blots out all of the individual peculiarities of space, covering everything with a lair of white. Such unity can only last for a short time, however: 'But before you proclaim the millennium, my dear,/Consult the barometer – /The poise is perfect but maintained/For one day only.'<sup>443</sup> The perfect, neutral white space created by the snowfall will return to its stubborn particularity when the weather changes. Much as the Fair is threatened by 'enemies' it ignores, the 'enemy' of simplistic Communism is, in this case, time, which erodes the perfection of Utopian space.

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<sup>441</sup> Dan Davin, *Closing Times*. (London: Oxford University Press, 1975), 46.

<sup>442</sup> *Ibid.*, 20.

<sup>443</sup> *Idem.*

There has been some debate over whether 'To a Communist' is addressed to a specific person, and, if so, what the identity of this unlucky individual might be. Jon Stallworthy argues for Auden, largely based on the inclusion of 'The 'camp' phrase, 'my dear,'"<sup>444</sup> while Edna Longley follows Roy Campbell's example in conflating the names of the poets with whom MacNeice was most often grouped: "'To a Communist', reversing familiar personae of Auden, Spender and Day Lewis, preaches against the converted..."<sup>445</sup> MacNeice was not well acquainted with Day Lewis and rarely mentioned him elsewhere, however, and while Auden had Marxist sympathies, he preferred his own eccentric blend of Marx and Freud to the official Communist party line. Danson Brown points out, I think correctly, that the arguments in favor of Auden 'would work equally well for Spender. During the early 1930s, Spender was as openly homosexual as Auden,'"<sup>446</sup> and, unlike Auden, publicly and definitively joined the Communist party in 1936, the year after *Poems* was published.<sup>447</sup> Poor Spender appears here as MacNeice's unwitting victim, his Communist Utopianism mocked for provincialism and for demonstrating a narrow intellectual range.

MacNeice, in the final analysis, reads his generation as being caught up in something like Soja's 'portable ego' which they carry with them wherever they go, and which is impervious – or oblivious – to intrusion. MacNeice does not entirely exclude himself from this 'mass ego'; recall that, in the final line of 'The Individualist Speaks,' he neither goes off alone nor abandons the Fair entirely. Rather, he remains on its outskirts with his dog, a

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<sup>444</sup> Stallworthy, *Louis MacNeice*, 154.

<sup>445</sup> Longley, *Louis MacNeice: A Study*, 43.

<sup>446</sup> Danson Brown, 'Louis MacNeice on Stephen Spender', 309.

<sup>447</sup> Stephen Spender, *World Within World*. (New York: St. Martin's, 1951), 211-2.

loyal companion who will not try to imprison him in a fixed Utopian ideal. The Individualist and his dog find themselves (or lose themselves, if you prefer) in Jameson's postmodern hyperspace, being present at and absent from the Fair at the same time.

## II. 'And who knows which of our legacies will endure?' – MacNeice as Collaborator

In keeping with their adherence both to Marxism and to the idea of small circles bound by friendship as the potential saviors of civilization, members of Auden's circle frequently collaborated with one another and with artists outside of the immediate confines of the 'group.' Auden himself collaborated with Christopher Isherwood, Chester Kallman, MacNeice, and the composer Benjamin Britten; Isherwood worked with his Cambridge chum Edward Upward to create the imaginary town of Mortmere; and MacNeice himself worked not only with Auden, but with Ernst Stahl, a South African who lectured in German at Birmingham University and at Oxford, and the Ulster Protestant poet W.R. Rodgers, with whom MacNeice shared an office at the BBC for a time. In addition, while at the BBC his plays were produced and performed by an array of talented actors, writers, musicians and engineers, most of whom were generously given credit for their contributions.

Collaboration was not a practice confined to this generation, of course, and MacNeice is, in many ways, less comfortable in collaboration than Auden seems to be; in *Letters From Iceland*, MacNeice plays the role of gadfly, dismantling Auden's fantasy-idyll from within. His other major collaborative projects, a translation of Goethe's *Faust* and the projected but ultimately unpublished collection of essays, *The Character of Ireland*, are

also atypical; MacNeice needed Stahl's assistance with *Faust* since his 'German was not good'<sup>448</sup>, and *The Character of Ireland* was a chaotic jumble that tried to look at the island too comprehensively, not to mention the fact that contributors kept signing on to the project and then dropping out, leaving it in limbo. Still, in each of these instances, MacNeice gives his collaborators their due, secure enough in his own ego-space that he does not need to defend it through the kinds of sleight-of-hand and outright theft to which the previous generation of poets had often resorted.

Eliot's half-facetious dictum that 'Immature poets imitate' while 'mature poets steal'<sup>449</sup> is well-known; according to Eliot, one poet should be free to poach from another with impunity, and there is no need to give credit to the party wronged in this manner, since the educated reader will pick up on the allusion anyway. Though he became himself a great nurturer of poetic talent at Faber and Faber, working with MacNeice, Auden, Spender, Ted Hughes, and others, Eliot tended to acknowledge the assistance he received from other writers primarily in dedications, the most famous being the lines at the beginning of *The Waste Land* (1922), 'For Ezra Pound, *il miglior fabbro*.'<sup>450</sup> Valerie Eliot's introduction to the 1971 edition of *The Waste Land*, featuring a facsimile of the original draft manuscript, reveals that Pound's role in Eliot's career began early and extended beyond the 1922 masterpiece: 'It was Pound who made the final adjustments to the manuscript [of *Prufrock*

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<sup>448</sup> Stallworthy, *Louis MacNeice*, 373.

<sup>449</sup> T.S. Eliot, 'Philip Massinger', in *Selected Literary Criticism of T.S. Eliot*, 153.

<sup>450</sup> Eliot, *Complete Poems and Plays*, 37.

*and Other Observations*] before sending it to the publisher...<sup>451</sup> She does not mention Pound's role in cutting and rearranging the text of *The Waste Land*, but she doesn't need to, since the evidence is all over the manuscript pages that follow. While Pound does not seem to have added much to the poem, he certainly removed a lot of verbiage from it and is largely responsible for its final shape, concentrating Eliot's sprawling landscape into a much smaller patch of limp brown grass.

Unlike Eliot, Yeats frequently worked in direct collaboration with others, on plays as well as on various occultist and cultural projects. His best-known collaborator was his patron and co-director of the Abbey Theatre, Lady Gregory; not only did he receive free lodging at Coole Park, but he was also lent money when he was down on his luck and assistance in writing those of his plays which included a 'peasant' element. Though scholars now acknowledge her contribution, during her lifetime her participation was partially effaced by Yeats, who admitted that she had assisted him without crediting her as co-author, claiming, as R.F. Foster writes, 'that plot and construction were his,' although 'Textual evidence suggests that Gregory wrote most of the play; her own diaries, and contemporary rumour, bear this out.'<sup>452</sup> The time Yeats spent at Stone Cottage in Sussex with Ezra Pound – once again, a closed social relationship associated with a specific location – was successful in part because Pound knew his place and, while helping Yeats to 'modernize' his verse, humbled himself by working as the great man's amanuensis, as James Longenbach

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<sup>451</sup> T.S. Eliot, *The Waste Land: A Facsimile and Transcript of the Original Drafts Including the Annotations of Ezra Pound*, ed. Valerie Eliot. (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1971), xiv.

<sup>452</sup> R.F. Foster, *W.B. Yeats: A Life Vol. I – The Apprentice Mage*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 249.

records: ‘Besides fussing with his own verse, Pound fulfilled his duty as Yeats’s secretary. The older poet’s eyesight became “practically useless after artificial light begins” so Pound read aloud in the evenings and took dictation in the afternoons.’<sup>453</sup> Pound ingratiated himself to Yeats by assisting him, not by putting himself on an equal footing with the older poet.

Yeats’s relations with those who demanded an equal share of the limelight were decidedly thornier. In 1896, he attempted to found a sub-chapter of the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn on an island he’d found ‘In the middle of Lough Key [in Roscommon]... with an unoccupied castle in the middle of it.’<sup>454</sup> The project failed because the aims of its two principals were at odds from the beginning; Maud Gonne ‘thought that the order might work for separation of Ireland from Britain,’ while Yeats ‘thought that in collaborating with Maud Gonne in this spiritual conspiracy their minds would be so united that she would consent to become his.’<sup>455</sup> Yeats found himself in a similar situation when he attempted to write a play on a subject from Irish mythology with the novelist George Moore, who was no neophyte like Pound, but an artist of established reputation. The play sunk beneath the weight of its authors’ egos and was never performed. Yeats blamed Moore and the lack of sympathy in their respective worldviews:

I saw Moore daily, we were at work at *Diarmuid and Grania*. Lady Gregory thought such collaboration would injure my own art, and was perhaps right. Because his

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<sup>453</sup> James Longenbach, *Stone Cottage: Pound, Yeats and Modernism*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), 42.

<sup>454</sup> Richard Ellman, *Yeats: The Man and the Masks*. (New York: Dutton, 1948), 121.

<sup>455</sup> *Ibid.*, 122.

mind was argumentative, abstract, diagrammatic, mine sensuous, concrete, rhythmical, we argued about words...Because Moore...was fundamentally a realist...he required many dull, numb words.<sup>456</sup>

Once again, Yeats finds himself unwilling or unable to work with a potential equal whose aims and methods differ from his own, and who is not willing to subordinate himself to the Arch-Poet. In Yeats's account, it is Moore's intransigence, his lack of vision, his insistence that 'all drama should be about possible people set in their appropriate surroundings,'<sup>457</sup> that undoes the entire project. He is faulted for an unwillingness to *imagine* space, to create closed fantasy-worlds of the type favored by Yeats.

Auden is the most frequent and generous collaborator of the four, often offering credit when his co-writers don't feel they deserve it. While working on *The Chase*, the play that would evolve into *The Dog Beneath the Skin* (1935), Isherwood became more involved in the project than he had initially intended: 'After reading the typescript in November 1934, Isherwood suggested a revised scenario...At first Isherwood did not think of himself as a collaborator – Auden insisted on sharing title-page credit later – but his ideas gave the play its final shape.'<sup>458</sup> The two had their differences – Isherwood claimed that “‘When we collaborate, I have to keep a sharp eye on him – or down flop the characters on their knees’”<sup>459</sup> – but managed to divide up the work in such a way as to play to each writer's strengths: 'Agnostic Auden wrote the verse in the plays, ironic Isherwood most of

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<sup>456</sup> Yeats, *Autobiographies*, 321-2.

<sup>457</sup> *Ibid.*, 322.

<sup>458</sup> Mendelson, *Early Auden*, 274.

<sup>459</sup> Qtd. in Mendelson, *Early Auden*, 259.

the prose.<sup>460</sup> Likewise, he collaborated with his partner Chester Kallman on the libretto for Igor Stravinsky's opera, *The Rake's Progress* (1947), and attributed the lion's share of the work to Kallman:

In *The Rake's Progress*, as in all their later collaborations, Kallman had an equal – sometimes more than equal – share in the “composite personality” of joint authorship. When an early critical essay about *The Rake* failed to mention Kallman, Auden dictated most of a reply that appeared over Alan Ansen's name. “Though the scheme of the work was largely Mr. Auden's,” the letter acknowledged, “its execution was in equal measure his responsibility and that of Mr. Kallman.”<sup>461</sup>

Not only did Auden allow Kallman to shoulder much of the load, he also insisted that the public acknowledge Kallman as an equal contributor. Michael O'Neill and Gareth Reeves note the appearance of ‘the team-spirit rugby mode...in Auden's poetry...as early as 1927,’ but also assert that ‘he was camping it up’<sup>462</sup>. These ‘camp’ tendencies may account for some of the differences in Auden's collaboration with MacNeice; it is one of Auden's few collaborations with an individual with whom he never had a sexual relationship.

Auden's collaborations are also frequently centered on a journey to a remote – but knowable and mappable – space, be it Iceland or China, which he covered with Isherwood in *Journey to a War* (1939) (the cover of the first U.S. edition even features a map of China). This allows MacNeice to play the role in which he typically shines, that of critic or de-

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<sup>460</sup> Mendelson, *Early Auden*, 259.

<sup>461</sup> Edward Mendelson, *Later Auden*. (New York: Farrar, Strauss, and Giroux, 1999), 269-70.

<sup>462</sup> O'Neill and Reeves, *Auden, MacNeice, Spender*, 87-8.



bunker, while Auden writes letters to an idea of Lord Byron and relates both the myths and legends and practical geographical and historical information relevant to Iceland. Since I have discussed the contents of *Letters from Iceland* in a previous chapter, I will focus my attention here on the way the book is put together and the interactions between the authors prior to and during its construction.

Cunningham asserts that ‘...one can hardly grace Auden and MacNeice’s Iceland trip with the notion of real arduousness...’<sup>463</sup> and it is MacNeice’s sardonic voice that constantly reminds us of this, in pieces such as the ‘camp’ letter to Anthony Blunt, ‘Hetty to Nancy,’ or MacNeice’s asides to Auden’s ‘For Tourists.’ Indeed, one of the oddities particular to this book among all of Auden’s works is that the individual contributions of each poet are labeled, a condition upon which MacNeice insisted, as letter to Eliot dated 20 August 1937 reveals:

Would it be possible at the next printing of ‘Letters from Iceland’ to add my initials (L.M.) in the table of contents after the heading ‘Hetty to Nancy’? Several reviewers attributed this to Wystan, which I feel is bad for business as it suggests that I really wrote very little of the book, whereas I actually wrote 40% of the original part.<sup>464</sup>

MacNeice resists the idea of a blending of voices here, ostensibly because it makes it look like he contributed little to the book; however, his choice of words also indicates his frustration at being confused with Auden. Elsewhere in the book, even in the jointly-written ‘Last Will and Testament,’ each poet’s contribution is labeled – and the jointly-composed

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<sup>463</sup> Cunningham, *British Writers of the Thirties*, 170.

<sup>464</sup> MacNeice, *Letters*, 302.

sections are labeled 'W.L.' for 'Wystan and Louis,' complicating the idea of a composite identity for the collaborators.

Throughout the book the voices of the two poets compete with and complement one another. MacNeice's asides in the 'For Tourists' chapter undermine Auden's expert advice, as we see in the 'Clothes and Equipment' section; Auden advises the traveler on what sort of gear to bring along, and MacNeice notes 'So W.H.A. I did not wear nearly as much as this. L.M.'<sup>465</sup> The same events are described in different places and in variant voices; much of the material that appears in Auden's letters to Erika Mann Auden and William Coldstream is repeated in camp fashion in MacNeice's 'Hetty to Nancy', in which MacNeice ('Hetty' for 'heterosexual') describes his holiday with his girlfriend 'Maisie' (Auden) and a party of schoolgirls to Anthony Blunt, referred to in the letter as 'Nancy'. Such variations on a single theme are part of the usual pastoral equipment. In *Literature and the Pastoral*, Andrew Ettin notes that

The pastoral song contest is [a] type of duality, in which the two singers alternate verses, each varying what the other has just said. Though it sometimes becomes a real contest, with a winner and a loser, it often ends with the singers exchanging gifts, each one a winner. And even when someone loses, it is on the basis of subtle differences in essentially similar presentations, not radical challenges or disagreements about basic aesthetic principles. In this way the pastoral world holds together its internal tensions.<sup>466</sup>

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<sup>465</sup> Ibid., 37.

<sup>466</sup> Ettin, *Literature and the Pastoral*, 21.

The tension in this Arcadia is between Auden's optimism and acceptance of the special Utopian space of the pastoral world and MacNeice's pessimism and refusal to stop mocking its artificiality and its irresponsibility. The idea of a singing contest is perhaps developed most fully in 'Auden and MacNeice: Their Last Will and Testament', in which the two poets leave their various belongings, including their ideological baggage, to various relatives, acquaintances and public figures. The poem subtly undermines the idea of the song contest in that neither poet wins any prize; rather, they give everything they have away in expectation of impending death. The specter of fascism rears its head again, but, as noted above, Auden is unwilling to take it very seriously.

The last word in the collection is given to MacNeice, whose sober 'Epilogue' points to the contrasts in the character of each poet, MacNeice arguing for objectivity,

And the don in me set forth  
 How the landscape of the north  
 Had educed the saga style  
 Plodding forward mile by mile

while Auden takes the part of subjectivity:

And the don in you replied  
 That the North begins inside,  
 Our ascetic guts require  
 Breathers from the Latin fire.<sup>467</sup>

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<sup>467</sup> Auden and MacNeice, *Letters from Iceland*, 260.

For Auden (as per MacNeice in an act of ventriloquism) the experience of Iceland has nothing to do with externals like topography and history; it is something to be felt. MacNeice, meanwhile, has to keep throwing in reminders of what's going on in Europe while the poets are on holiday. He cannot look at their trip in genuine pastoral terms:

Not for me romantic nor  
 Idyll on a mythic shore  
 But a fancy turn, you know,  
 Sandwiched in a graver show.

Down in Europe Seville fell,  
 Nations germinating hell,  
 The Olympic games were run –  
 Spots upon the Aryan sun.<sup>468</sup>

This is not an idyll, an imaginary space closed off from the dangers of the world at large, but a bit of a lark between episodes of trouble. The world he and Auden left behind to visit Iceland is still there waiting for them when they return; their journey has changed nothing, and is merely a short interlude of calm after one storm and before another.

The decade in which Auden and MacNeice grew to adulthood was marked by worldwide economic collapse and violent struggle between Fascists and Communists, among others, on the continent. Thus the Arcadian tendency in the poetry of the First World

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<sup>468</sup> Idem.

War was revised by writers who had been children when the war was fought. According to Patricia Rae, the war-era poets looked for ‘pastoral consolation...in places where the remembered landscape, the “green” prewar world, became an object of defense, consoling by *giving meaning* to the war’<sup>469</sup>. Their successors, meanwhile, faced with the prospect of another such war, develop what Rae terms the ‘proleptic elegy’ and defines as ‘consolatory writing produced in anticipation of sorrow, where the expected loss is of a familiar kind’<sup>470</sup>. Indeed, Auden’s contributions seem to be in large part an attempt to insulate himself from the looming conflict; MacNeice, on the other hand, plays the part of the realist killjoy who refuses to believe in the illusion of security presented by the pastoral landscape.

Despite, or perhaps because of, the spatial problems created by his collaboration with Auden, *Letters from Iceland* is MacNeice’s most successful collaborative project. The book that would intermittently consume his time beginning in the early 1950s, *The Character of Ireland*, would never see completion, perhaps because MacNeice’s own ideas about Ireland undermined the idea of any kind of individual ‘character’ or identity that could be ascribed to the island as a whole. Eamon Grennan has discussed MacNeice’s attitudes towards both sides of the partition, arguing that ‘MacNeice’s North’ is ‘...something like Dante’s Hell, a place petrified in history, with no outlets channeled by redeeming time,’<sup>471</sup> while ‘At the opposite extreme to this brutish, mindless malevolence is Irish

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<sup>469</sup> Patricia Rae, ‘Double Sorrow: Proleptic Elegy and the End of Arcadianism in 1930s Britain’, *Twentieth-Century Literature* 49 (2003), 253.

<sup>470</sup> *Ibid.*, 247.

<sup>471</sup> Grennan, ‘In a topographical frame’, 193.

cultural sentimentality (mainly in the South).<sup>472</sup> This is an oversimplification, but it does demonstrate that MacNeice's idea of 'Ireland' may be too nuanced to glean any particular reading of 'Irish identity' from his work, whether on *The Character of Ireland* or elsewhere.

The two major players in this enterprise were MacNeice and his BBC colleague W.R. Rodgers, who came from an Ulster Presbyterian background. The contracts were signed in March of 1952,<sup>473</sup> and MacNeice did not manage to produce his own contribution, a verse 'Prologue,' until 1959.<sup>474</sup> This 'Prologue' seems an odd choice to open a collection of essays on Irish identity, since it seems to question the very existence of such a thing as 'Irish character' by emphasizing the country's 'placeless' qualities and disunity, often defining it as negative space by telling what it is not rather than what it is. Disorder and decay of 'representations of space' are the rule:

...In vain

The Norman castle and the Tudor bribe:

The natives remained native, took their bribe

And gave their word and broke it, while the brambles

Swamped the deserted bastion. Thus today

Some country house, up to its neck in weeds,

Looks old enough to stand its ground beside

The bone-grey bog oak in the bogs...<sup>475</sup>

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<sup>472</sup> Ibid., 195.

<sup>473</sup> Stallworthy, *Louis MacNeice*, 393.

<sup>474</sup> Ibid., 433.

<sup>475</sup> MacNeice, *Collected Poems*, 780.

This is the country from which ‘The Romans looked the other way...’<sup>476</sup>; the fractious and chaotic nature of the country defeats the attempts of military and civilian planners to impose order upon it, leaving behind only the ‘deserted bastions’ of their failures to tame and unify the nation.

Later in the poem, MacNeice problematizes the very project in which he and Rodgers are engaged by asking whether there is any such thing as ‘Irish character,’ and if there is, which criteria can be used to define it:

‘The Character of Ireland’? Character?

A stage convention? A historical trap?

A geographical freak? Let us dump the rubbish

Of race and talk to the point: what is a nation?<sup>477</sup>

The terms in which MacNeice describes each possible criterion – ‘convention,’ ‘trap,’ and ‘freak’ – posit that ‘character’ is one of three things: it is either a set of common traits put on for show, a prison built by shared history, or an abnormality bred by a place into its inhabitants. All three definitions present Ireland as an enclosed, self-sustaining locale, with ‘character’ delineating its borders. ‘Character,’ to the extent that it can be defined, is thus presented as a quagmire. As difficult as it is to define it, it is more difficult to escape from it once defined.

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<sup>476</sup> Ibid., 779.

<sup>477</sup> Ibid., 780.

By contrast, Rodgers describes the Irish ‘character’ in terms of his own Ulster Presbyterian people, ascribing to them a definite racial and cultural identity:

I am Ulster, my people an abrupt people  
 Who like the spiky consonants in speech  
 And think the soft ones cissy; who dig  
 The *k* and *t* in orchestra, detect sin  
 In sinfonia, get a kick out of  
 Tin cans, fricatives, fornication, staccato talk,  
 Anything that gives or takes attack,  
 Like Micks, Tagues, tinkers’ gets, Vatican.<sup>478</sup>

While MacNeice refuses to define ‘character’ or ‘identity’ as a matter of place, at least in any positive way, Rodgers identifies his language and that of his own cultural group with their home region. By beginning this passage with ‘I am Ulster,’ Rodgers personalizes the characteristics, linguistic and otherwise, that he lists in the subsequent lines and makes himself and his home place one and the same thing. McDonald argues that ‘the dramatic identity assumed by Rodgers’ in this poem ‘is a limiting one in the end...’:

The hailstorm of fricatives develops from comic effect into a line of sectarian abuse, of angry and offensive noise. Of course, this aspires to an effective ironic detach-

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<sup>478</sup> Qtd. in McDonald, *Mistaken Identities*, 33.



ment; at the same time, though, the verbal excess betrays a certain complacency, a willingness to schematize, generalize, and divide...<sup>479</sup>

Rodgers's simple 'love/hate' binary is indeed a limiting factor of the sort that MacNeice typically avoids. Indeed, if MacNeice's 'Prologue' assigns to Ireland any 'character' at all, it is an anarchic one at best.

It is MacNeice's idea of Irishness that is reflected in the plan for *The Character of Ireland* which he mails to Dan Davin on 19 January 1961. Including his own and Rodgers' verse contributions, it comprises 29 essays on topics as diverse as archaeology, folklore, two chapters on drama, the Irish language, and sport. It was also to include chapters on each of the three largest religious groups and six chapters on emigration. Contributors included Davin himself, who was to write on 'The Irish in New Zealand,' John Hewitt on 'The Visual Arts,' and Elizabeth Bowen on 'The Big House.'<sup>480</sup> Indeed, the list of contributors included a number of notable emigrants apart from MacNeice himself and suggested that 'Irishness' was not necessarily a quality limited by geography. Rather, as the Irish were themselves dispersed, so might Irishness be diffused throughout the corners of the Commonwealth.

It is not surprising that so ambitious a project never came to fruition; MacNeice worked better as a kind of gadfly undermining stable notions of islanded identity, as was the case in *Letters from Iceland*. While Rodgers was a poet of some ability, he was not, like

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<sup>479</sup> McDonald, *Mistaken Identities*, 33.

<sup>480</sup> MacNeice, *Letters*, 670-1.

Auden, equal to (or, arguably, better than) MacNeice. McDonald notes this disparity in the talents of each man, claiming that

The role played by *The Character of Ireland* in MacNeice's later career is less somber, crossing as it does into his final period of imaginative renewal and poetic strength rather than, as in Rodgers's case, coinciding with the progressive failing of imaginative powers... MacNeice's interest in the project [*The Character of Ireland*] was at its strongest in the early 1950s – for him a strained and difficult time – but tailed off as he found his poetic resources renewing themselves in the late 1950s and early 1960s. In the cases of both poets, the need to invest in 'character' and 'identity' may be linked to the necessity of drawing on a 'common fund' that might help to float their own work. By the time he completed his 'Prologue' to the volume, MacNeice was already past this need...<sup>481</sup>

Rodgers, unlike MacNeice, requires a 'common fund' of images and ideas in order to continue to write, since his idea of himself as a poet ('I am Ulster') is tied up in his sense of himself as a member of a group. MacNeice, on the other hand, never met a space – group or otherwise – that he did not try to break open from the inside. I would propose revising Lacan's ego-categories as regards MacNeice. He is neither a 'hoop-net' capturing ideas from those around him, nor is he a 'double-sack,' impervious to penetration. MacNeice's sense of himself might be better described as a cannon blasting holes in the ego-enclosures of his friends and associates, never letting them rest secure with a simplistic sense of their own identities.

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<sup>481</sup> McDonald, *Mistaken Identities*, 37-8.

## Conclusion

### **‘If you want to die you will have to pay for it’ – MacNeice Becomes His Admirers**

In the preceding pages, I have aimed to demonstrate that Louis MacNeice creates spaces in his poetry that reflect the political and philosophical tenor of the years before and after the Second World War, when the self-conscious difficulty and closed imaginative structures of the High Modernist mandarins began to decay. Postmodernism as a spatial category seems to correspond to Lefebvre’s ‘representational spaces’ rather than his ‘representations of space’; space is now something that is directly experienced, even if it brings with it a sense of dislocation, rather than a set of boundaries drawn by some hieratic artist or other authority figure. The ‘grand narratives’ of modernism break up into pieces, and, as Linda Hutcheon argues, the assertion of difference against ‘homogeneous identity’ becomes the order of the day. Postmodernism, as such, lacks a central totalizing force: ‘Postmodern difference, or rather differences, in the plural, are always multiple and provisional.’<sup>482</sup> MacNeice’s spaces contain ‘differences’ of precisely this kind in that they allow apparently contradictory sensations and identities to exist simultaneously in an area of uncertain and unstable boundaries. It is this quality, among others, that makes MacNeice’s work ‘postmodern.’

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<sup>482</sup> Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Postmodernism*, 6.

It seems to me that the most effective way to show that MacNeice was ahead of his time in this regard is to trace the influence he has exerted upon contemporary poetry, particularly in Northern Ireland. While the critical establishment outside of Ulster has, to some extent, kept MacNeice at arm's length (an oversight which is finally being rectified by the fine work of Jonathan Allison and Peter McDonald, among others), he has for some time been claimed as an influence by other poets. The 1990s saw the publication of an authoritative biography by the English poet and critic Jon Stallworthy, and in 1997 McDonald wrote that 'among the smartest of the young English poets,...an admiration for (and emulation of) MacNeice along with Auden has become *de rigueur*.'<sup>483</sup> His star shines brightest, though, in his home province, where Seamus Heaney, Michael Longley, Derek Mahon, Paul Muldoon, and others have written tributes to him in prose and in verse. It makes sense, indeed, that a contested space dominated by competing 'grand narratives' rooted in past grievances, in which two (or more) radically different concepts of what Northern Ireland *is* coexist without cooperating, would be a fertile breeding ground for the aesthetic of difference and individuality Hutcheon defines as 'postmodern.' Elmer Kennedy-Andrews outlines the positions of the two largest communities as 'reactionary' and 'exclusivist':

For nationalists, place is the essential ground of identity and a continuous, unified Irish culture. For unionists, Northern Ireland is their constitutionally established

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<sup>483</sup> McDonald, *Mistaken Identities*, 211.

homeland founded to preserve their Protestant, British identity perceived to be constantly under siege from Catholic, Gaelic 'Irish Ireland.'<sup>484</sup>

Individuals who live down the street from one another may have completely different ideas of what their 'home place' looks like and what it means. The 'representational spaces' of certain working-class neighborhoods in Belfast, for example, are often cut off from one another by walls and other boundaries imposed by the authorities, and the gable-ends of the houses in Protestant neighborhoods will often feature paintings of Oliver Cromwell and King William III on his horse, while their Catholic neighbors will display portraits of Mother Ireland or Bobby Sands. One can break away from these unitary 'official' identities only by creating another kind of space, and several Northern Irish writers have looked to their province's emigrant poet *par excellence* to provide that example.

The poets who claim MacNeice as an influence seem to be, for the most part, well aware of the spatial dimension of his work, though they often choose to read it in the ways that they find most artistically advantageous. Heather Clark discussed this phenomenon in a 2002 article in the *Cambridge Quarterly*, arguing that MacNeice was a victim of a process similar to translation or 'rewriting':

The Belfast poets [Heaney, Mahon, et. al.] have, perhaps quite unintentionally, engaged themselves in such a process of rewriting MacNeice over the past decades.

In an act of astonishing reversal, they have symbolically invoked MacNeice as

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<sup>484</sup> Elmer Kennedy-Andrews, *Writing Home: Poetry and Place in Northern Ireland, 1968-2008*. (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2008), 2.

their patron only to eventually position themselves as *his* patrons, for it is really MacNeice's reputation which has benefited, posthumously, from their sustained attention. By collectively establishing MacNeice as the doyen of Northern Poetry, by promoting a selective canon, and by 'rewriting' many of his ideological and philosophical concerns in their own work (exile, origin, transience, self-division, humanism, skepticism, social consciousness), they have placed him at the beginning of a line of inheritance which is, by right, theirs.<sup>485</sup>

In other words, the 'Belfast poets' have co-opted MacNeice in order to create a line of poetic succession for themselves which does not begin with Yeats; they have used the Protestant, skeptical, anti-essentialist MacNeice as a model for what a *Northern* Irish poet is supposed to look and sound like. Many of them, as a result, get MacNeice wrong. For example, Clark recounts that the poet James Simmons chose MacNeice for the cover of the first issue of his new magazine, the *Honest Ulsterman*. Unfortunately Simmons, who was seemingly unaware of MacNeice's aversion to towers, 'superimposed [MacNeice's image] onto a round tower from Antrim...' <sup>486</sup>, aligning MacNeice with the very 'representations of space' he spent most of his career opposing.

This act of repatriation often requires a bit of sleight-of-hand, rooting MacNeice in soil he regarded as toxic throughout his life and career. Michael Longley, for example, regards MacNeice's *oeuvre* as a reaction to his harsh Ulster upbringing (and, in so doing,

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<sup>485</sup> Heather Clark, 'Revising MacNeice,' *Cambridge Quarterly* 31 (2002), 80-1.

<sup>486</sup> *Ibid.*, 77

makes it sound harsher than does MacNeice himself, emphasizing only the terrors instilled in him by his governess and his fear of his father's 'conspiracy with God' and ignoring the more pleasant aspects of his childhood which MacNeice records in *The Strings are False*, as well as his clergyman father's relative liberalism). Ulster religion, in particular, becomes a bugbear in Longley's reading of MacNeice:

Ireland must be one of the very few remaining areas in the English-speaking world which are still likely to produce poets who write out of a response to religion. The vividness of MacNeice's work was projected partly as an assault on religious narrowness and cultural restriction. In so many ways he seems to be a touchstone of what an Ulster (that is to say Irish) poet might be... The bright patterns he conjures from the external world and the pleasures of being alive are not fairy light and bauble but searchlight and icon.<sup>487</sup>

Longley insists on two key points in this passage: first, that MacNeice is an Irish poet, as evidenced by his quarrel with 'religious narrowness and cultural restriction,' and furthermore that there is a depth of philosophical seriousness beneath the dazzling surface impressions for which MacNeice has been both praised and castigated. Longley, born in Belfast to English parents and best known as a writer of love poems and nature verse, needs to locate MacNeice's 'Irishness' in something apart from his birth and ancestry, and finds it in what he reads as a reaction to Ulster puritanism on both sides of the religious divide. If

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<sup>487</sup> M. Longley, 'The Neolithic Night', 104.

MacNeice can be Irish while living virtually his entire life outside of Ireland, then Longley, who is a lifelong resident of Ireland, can also be Irish despite his ancestry.

The poet and critic Tom Paulin, meanwhile, is the product of a marriage between an English man and an Ulster Protestant woman, born in Leeds but raised in Belfast and currently resident primarily in Oxford. A committed socialist and a supporter of the Irish Nationalist political program, Paulin translates MacNeice into a populist poet – not a misreading, perhaps, but one which misses the nuance in MacNeice’s own pronouncements about his work:

The programmes MacNeice scripted and produced [for the BBC Features Department] were of the highest quality, and the position he occupied in relation to society was the egalitarian equivalent of a court poet. His plays and features are like masques created for a mass democracy, and his commitment to radio issued from his belief that the poet ‘is only the extension of the common man’. In his working life he was applying the socialist and documentary aesthetic of the 1930s.<sup>488</sup>

While Paulin refers to MacNeice as ‘the man from no part’<sup>489</sup> of Ireland, he nevertheless attempts to plant MacNeice in a particular time and place by making him ‘redder’ than he would have allowed himself to be and centering him in the ‘socialist and documentary aesthetic of the 1930s’, of which MacNeice was critical, even if he was occasionally complicit in the artistic schemes of the so-called ‘Auden Generation.’ Both critics attempt to

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<sup>488</sup> Tom Paulin, ‘In the Salt Mines’, in *Ireland and the English Crisis*, 82.

<sup>489</sup> Paulin. ‘The Man from No Part’, 75.



align MacNeice with ‘representational space,’ but instead of giving us a poet who merely describes space as he experiences it, they offer up MacNeice as a poet who helps to design and craft the borders of a particular place, whether actual or political and religious. As such, Longley and Paulin present MacNeice as a creator of ‘representations of space’ whose symbolic systems are a response to other symbolic systems; in other words, he becomes an authoritarian poet telling people how to behave and what to believe, even when what he preaches is the opposite of what they’re used to hearing.

Northern Ireland’s leading contemporary poet, Seamus Heaney, is guilty of similar misreading. Heaney is very much a poet of ‘place’ as opposed to ‘space,’ and indicates his preference clearly in both the titles of his works of criticism, like *The Place of Writing* (1989), and his volumes of poetry, like *Station Island* (1984) and *District and Circle* (2006). The essay ‘Mossbawn’ (1978) begins with a section entitled ‘Omphalos’:

I would begin with the Greek word *omphalos*, meaning the navel, and hence the stone that marked the centre of the world, and repeat it, *omphalos, omphalos, omphalos*, until its blunt and falling music becomes the music of somebody pumping water at the pump outside our back door. It is County Derry in the early 1940s. The American bombers groan towards the aerodrome at Toomebridge, the American troops manoeuvre in the fields along the road, but all of that great historical action does not disturb the rhythms of the yard. There the pump stands, a slender, iron idol,

snouted, helmeted, dressed down with a sweeping handle, painted a dark green and set on a concrete plinth, marking the centre of another world.<sup>490</sup>

Heaney indicates here that his work has something which MacNeice lacked – a ‘center.’ That ‘center,’ moreover, is located on the farm in County Derry on which Heaney grew up. The pump that provides water for the farm is not only rooted in the (Irish) earth; Heaney makes a point of telling us that it is ‘painted a dark green.’ If the reader was left with any doubts that the center of Heaney’s poetic universe was rooted in an Antaeus-like relationship with the Irish soil, this passage dispels them.

For Heaney, identity is very much coded in terms of place. As Kennedy-Andrews argues, ‘Heaney tend[s] to confirm the binary terms and divisions which have dominated cultural debate...between home and away, here and there, self and other...’<sup>491</sup>, and Edna Longley has accused him of ‘concentrating on the Anglo-Irish axis’ of difference in books like *North* (1975)<sup>492</sup>. Neil Corcoran, meanwhile, notes that Heaney incorporates MacNeice into his ‘quincunx of literary architecture’ in Ireland:

The quincunx establishes in relationship a central ‘round tower’ of ‘prior Ireland-ness’ located at MacNeice’s ‘pre-natal mountain’; Spenser’s Kilcolman Castle; Yeats’s Ballylee; Joyce’s Martello; and, finally and for the first time, ‘MacNeice’s Keep’ – which is, of course, at Carrickfergus Castle...It is, of course, to the point –

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<sup>490</sup> Seamus Heaney, ‘Mossbawn’, in *Finders Keepers: Selected Prose 1971-2001*. (New York: Farrar, Strauss & Giroux: 2002), 3.

<sup>491</sup> Kennedy-Andrews, *Writing Home*, 14.

<sup>492</sup> Edna Longley, *Poetry in the Wars*. (Newark, DE: University of Delaware Press, 1987), 193.

although it is not a point Heaney makes – that the accommodating quincunx is a figure constructed exclusively from military architecture: towers, castles and keeps.<sup>493</sup>

The quincunx is also, in this case, a metaphor for Ireland in which each of the five provinces – Ulster, Leinster, Connacht and Munster, with Meath at the center – becomes a point in the quincunx marked by towers and keeps of literary significance.<sup>494</sup> Heaney naturalizes MacNeice, but at the cost of pinning him to particular places that appear in only two poems – ‘Carrickfergus’ and ‘Carrick Revisited’ – which describe MacNeice’s vexed relationship with his home place. Heaney’s quincunx is further weakened by his inclusion of the virulently anti-Irish Spenser’s castle, which the Irish burned him out of in 1598. This attachment to place – and especially to towers of historical and literary importance – displays a distinctly ‘modern’ bias, according to Fredric Jameson’s description of the Modernist building as a tower which ‘sought to differentiate itself radically from the fallen city fabric in which it appeared – its forms thus dependent on an act of radical disjunction from its spatial context...’<sup>495</sup> While Heaney forms these ‘disjunctive’ towers into a new spatial context, he can do so only by wrenching them out of the contexts in which their authors lived and worked, and by making tenuous associations seem more important than they really were.

This leads the critic to wonder why Heaney turns to MacNeice at all at this point in his career, and why he makes him the center of a ‘quincunx’ of Irish literary towers, when

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<sup>493</sup> Neil Corcoran, *Poets of Modern Ireland: Texts, Contexts, Intertexts*. (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 1999), 62.

<sup>494</sup> Seamus Heaney, ‘Frontiers of Writing’, in *The Redress of Poetry: Oxford Lectures* (London: Faber and Faber, 1995), 199-200.

<sup>495</sup> Jameson, *Postmodernism*, 63.

he had previously used Patrick Kavanagh, John Hewitt, and Robert Frost as his primary poetic models. Kavanagh and Hewitt were, like Heaney, poets of place, and Hewitt has the added benefit of being Northern Irish; though he lived in England for a time, he did not relocate permanently, as MacNeice had done. Hewitt is most often associated with a poetic aesthetic he called 'regionalism,' the limits of which are delineated here by Kennedy-Andrews:

Hewitt doesn't know enough about otherness, and isn't sufficiently interested in exploring it. His 'mannerly verses,' as he admitted himself, left so much unsaid. 'Simple, honest and sturdy' they may be, but they are locked into stereotypical, essentialist assumptions about Irish culture and identity. Such assumptions would also seem to underlie the conception of Hewitt's and [John] Montague's celebrated 1970 poetry tour around the province, entitled 'The Planter and the Gael.' Although designed to encourage greater cross-community understanding,...the tour was very much a project of its time, its very title highlighting fixed and fossilised binary thinking and reflecting pre-given, ethnically-defined identities.<sup>496</sup>

Hewitt is problematic as a poetic forefather for Heaney not because he writes from an essentialist, 'us versus them' binary viewpoint (though, to his credit, his essentialism is humane), but because he writes from the opposite side of the cultural divide on which Heaney finds himself. MacNeice, while Protestant, is an Anglican, while Hewitt was a dissenter. MacNeice is also a poet of Northern Irish birth and Western Irish, Gaelic roots. As such,

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<sup>496</sup> Kennedy-Andrews, *Writing Home*, 34.

MacNeice's embodiment of difference – his postmodernism, as Hutcheon defines it – is what makes him attractive to Heaney.

In an earlier essay, Heaney chose to focus on the role of 'the pre-natal mountain,' borrowing MacNeice's phrase in order to describe certain tendencies in 20<sup>th</sup>-century Irish poetry. Heaney acknowledges MacNeice's distance from the stuff of everyday Irish life, but continues to insist on the centrality of bounded places rather than open spaces in MacNeice's poetry:

MacNeice is clearly an Irish poet who positioned his lever in England and from that position moved his Irish subject matter through a certain revealing distance. The provinciality of his feeling, that attribute which Thomas Hardy believed to be contributory to good poetry, was an English provinciality. To include him in an anthology of Irish poetry is to affirm in a politically useful way that the category of Irishness is no longer confined to persons with the native blood-thrum but has been expanded to include people of Irish birth who wish to be allowed the rights to all the other dimensions integral to their memory and their heritage.<sup>497</sup>

Is MacNeice imaginatively useful for Heaney, then, or, as he puts it here, 'politically useful?' Is he integral to Heaney's narrative of Irish poetry, as his placement in the quincunx would suggest, or is he a token Ulster Prod in exile whose inclusion demonstrates the generosity of the Nationalist poetic tradition? Heaney insists upon MacNeice's attachment to Ireland, arguing that he attempted to move Ireland from abroad with a 'lever'; this turns

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<sup>497</sup> Seamus Heaney, *The Place of Writing*. (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1989), 43.

a multi-faceted, cosmopolitan, peripatetic poet into a creature of fixed location and fixed interests. He resides in England only to try to affect Ireland from a certain critical distance.

This eventually leads Heaney to a reading of ‘Carrick Revisited,’ one of the two MacNeice poems that mentions the ‘Norman castle’ that Heaney renames ‘MacNeice’s Keep.’ Heaney’s reading of the poem suggests that place holds a determinist quality, shaping the poet’s opinions through the power of

...the whole parallelogram of cultural and ancestral forces operating MacNeice’s life...What the poem calls ‘the pre-natal mountain’ – the locus of his vision and desire, where the blissful subsumes the infantile – is an imaginary place held in equilibrium with two other places. First, the England of his schooling and domicile, the England of adult experience, of war and work. But second, and more important in its otherness from the dream-mountain, is the plumb, assured, unshakeable fact of an Ulster childhood which cannot be shed, since its intimacies and particularities are indelibly present to the consciousness that would opt beyond them – and indeed *has* opted for southern England.<sup>498</sup>

In some ways, this is not much different from F.R. Higgins’s claim that a poet cannot help but obey his ‘racial blood-music,’ which would in MacNeice’s case be Irish whether he likes it or not. MacNeice may have *opted* for southern England, but his life and work are still *determined* by the ‘parallelogram’ – again, a closed-off figure – of his Irish heritage. The imaginary mountain and the Norman castle become ‘representations of space,’ built

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<sup>498</sup> Ibid., 45.

into the landscape in order to dictate to the budding poet what things are going to be like from now on.

Heaney's attempts to repatriate MacNeice, and to root him more deeply in Irish soil, are part of his overall program for poetry, which, as he argues in the essays that make up *The Redress of Poetry* (1995), is the resolution of trauma and, ultimately, the erasure of difference in the construction of a well-ordered whole. He uses as an example Wordsworth's *Prelude*:

...the poem in which Wordsworth reports the trauma [of divided English and French loyalties] is the very poem whose composition was part of the process of healing the trauma. *The Prelude* is about a consciousness coming together through the effort of articulating its conflict and crises. And the same could be said of much poetry from Northern Ireland. For the best efforts there have been evident in writing that is a mode of integration, of redistributing the whole field of cultural and political force into a tolerable order.<sup>499</sup>

In other words, differences between the major cultural and political communities in Northern Ireland must be ironed out and put aside in the interest of 'integration' into a 'tolerable order.' Heaney's language of integration indicates a closeted nationalism, in that it implies (re)union with the rest of the island, and also points to a disintegration of difference in the interest of resolving divided allegiances and healing the wounds of decades of separation, if only those who continued to cherish the union with Britain would stop being so stubborn.

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<sup>499</sup> Heaney, 'Frontiers of Writing', 189.

While MacNeice allowed for the difference in Unionist and Nationalist representations of the same space, Heaney demands that they must blend together in some way – preferably in a way that leads to a united Ireland.

Heaney downplays his own indebtedness to what he calls MacNeice's 'bilocated extraterritorial fidelities'<sup>500</sup> in a discussion of his own poem, 'The Other Side' (1972), which discusses the friendly relationship between a rural Catholic family and their Protestant neighbor. As MacNeice might have done, Heaney indicates the atypical nature of this friendship in the context of an Ulster shattered by sectarian division and the essentially ephemeral nature of the experience:

...even if ['The Other Side'] showed Protestant and Catholic in harmony, it was not fundamentally intended as a contribution to better community relations. It had come out of creative freedom rather than social obligation, it was about a moment of achieved grace between people with different allegiances rather than a representation of a state of constant goodwill in the country as a whole, and as such it was not presuming to be anything more than a momentary stay against confusion.<sup>501</sup>

The fact that it is a 'stay against confusion' at all runs contrary to MacNeice's method, and Heaney's assumption that MacNeice is 'bilocated' is itself reductive in that it assumes that the well-traveled, cosmopolitan MacNeice, poet, dramatist, classics scholar and translator, existed in only two places – England and Ireland. Indeed, Heaney's invocation of 'The

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<sup>500</sup> Ibid., 198.

<sup>501</sup> Ibid., 194.



Other Side' in a poem traffics in a similar oversimplification, the essentialist reduction of complex religious and national identities into a binary opposition, and in its creation of its 'momentary' Utopia runs counter to MacNeice's own reading of his home province, in which two completely different spaces exist side by side and rarely ever meet.

In the end, Heaney's poetry is an internal, subjective poetry, and his aesthetic is heavily invested in the idea of retreat from the modern world and contemporary urban subjects. In an interview with John Haffenden, Heaney explained his fascination with the artifacts of the past in explicitly spatial terms:

I think there's some kind of psychic energy that cries out for a home, and you have to build the house for it with the elements of your poetry, with the given elements of your imagery, and that imagery has to have a breath of life in it. The breath of life and those elements come together best with me when I'm dealing with certain kinds of things. A rebuke is delivered occasionally in a simple-minded way to these poems with rural or archaic images because they aren't engaging with the modern world...I think that's entirely a kind of teacherly notion. I'm not going to say that you shouldn't engage with the modern world, but the way an artist engages with the modern world is through the techniques of his art among other things; it doesn't have to be modern subject matter at all, I think.<sup>502</sup>

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<sup>502</sup> John Haffenden, Viewpoints: Poets in Conversation with John Haffenden. (London: Faber and Faber, 1981), 66.

This is a far cry from the view MacNeice famously expressed in *Modern Poetry*, that a poet should be ‘able-bodied, fond of talking, a reader of the newspapers, capable of pity and laughter, informed in economics, appreciative of women, involved in personal relationships, actively interested in politics, susceptible to physical impressions.’<sup>503</sup> MacNeice’s ideal poet receives impressions from outside of himself, records them, and comments on them; he does not attempt to trap or contain surface impressions by building a ‘home’ for them. Heaney’s aesthetic is, by his own admission, mystical, and need not give expression to the ‘habits of life’ in the poet’s historical milieu: ‘The poetry I love is some kind of image or visionary thing. What the hell do we know about the habits of life in any age from its poetry?’<sup>504</sup> Heaney’s apparent impatience with a method like MacNeice’s further underscores the strangeness of his inclusion of MacNeice in his literary quincunx.

Derek Mahon, who is an exact contemporary of Heaney and Longley, makes for a more convincing disciple of MacNeice, though there are points at which his case falls apart as well, particularly when he tries to bring the elder poet into his own verse. Nevertheless, his readings of MacNeice are stronger than Heaney’s, and his background is, like MacNeice’s, that of a cosmopolitan wanderer. Born in Belfast, educated at Trinity College in Dublin and then at the Sorbonne, Mahon is currently a resident of Kinsale in County Cork, though he has also lived in London, the United States and Canada. Like MacNeice, Mahon is influenced by classical models; indeed, the two are often roped together by critics. In

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<sup>503</sup> MacNeice, *Modern Poetry*, 198.

<sup>504</sup> Haffenden, *Viewpoints*, 61.

*Irish Poetry After Joyce*, Dillon Johnston dedicates a chapter to MacNeice and Mahon, offering a slightly sentimental imaginative narrative about points at which their paths might have crossed before explaining why the two should be considered together:

From within Belfast the paths of MacNeice and Mahon seem divergent. However, viewed in relation to the island's poets, the two Protestant Belfast poets who took all or some of their studies abroad, who became editors and writers in London, who were influenced strongly by Yeats and Auden, and who assumed an ironic stance in their poetry, seem familial.<sup>505</sup>

Both poets write about Ireland from a critical distance, and there are undeniable similarities in their biographies. It is my contention, however, that while Mahon might disagree with Heaney over the extent to which MacNeice is a poet of place, Mahon himself *is* a poet who attaches himself to particular sites of imaginative importance – including MacNeice's grave in one of his best-known early poems – without attempting to deconstruct them as MacNeice did.

Mahon's MacNeice is less Irish than Heaney's, his English education being more central to his identity than his Irish upbringing. This does not disqualify him from being thought of as an Irish poet, though Mahon is largely dismissive of such questions of national identity as reductive and irrelevant: 'Was Kafka a Czech writer or a German one? Was Juan Gris a Spanish painter or a French one? These questions are interesting up to

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<sup>505</sup> Dillon Johnston, *Irish Poetry After Joyce*. (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1985), 204.

a point, but there is no need to find answers to them...The question is semantic, and not important except in so far as the writer himself makes it important.<sup>506</sup> The question of whether MacNeice is or is not an Irish writer, then, matters only in so much as it matters to MacNeice himself, and to the extent to which he allows it to inform his work. Mahon, more sympathetic to postmodernism in general than Heaney, goes on to write admiringly of MacNeice's embrace of difference and refusal to operate within the limited space of the national Grand Narrative:

Increasingly, his view of Official Ireland (the Ireland of patriotic graft and pious baloney) was one of positive distaste, which is all right coming from Austin Clarke but bad manners for an Ulster Protestant. There is a belief, prevalent since the time of Thomas Davis, that Irish poetry, to be Irish, must somehow express the National Aspirations; and MacNeice's failure to do so...is one of the reasons for his final exclusion from the charmed circle, known and feared the world over, of Irish poets. 'A tourist in his own country,' it has been said, with the implication that this is somehow discreditable; but of what sensitive person is the same not true?<sup>507</sup>

Mahon argues here that the 'sensitive person' *should* be critical of the 'representations of space' promoted by his or her nation's 'official' narrative. The fact that MacNeice does not regard Irish space as sacred space ought not to disqualify him from being thought of as 'Irish,' Mahon claims.

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<sup>506</sup> Derek Mahon, 'MacNeice in Ireland and England', in Journalism: Selected Prose 1970-1995. (Loughcrew, Co. Meath: Gallery, 1996), 21.

<sup>507</sup> Ibid., 24-5.

Yet in his elegy for MacNeice, 'In Carrowdore Churchyard' (1968), Mahon places MacNeice beneath his native soil in much the same way as Yeats had planted himself 'Under Ben Bulbin' many years before. Michael Longley describes the circumstances of the poem's composition (or, at the very least, its debut) as the result of a pilgrimage to the site Mahon, Longley and Heaney made together early in their poetic careers:

A year or so after his death in 1963 Derek Mahon, Seamus Heaney and I drove to MacNeice's grave in Carrowdore churchyard among the drumlins of County Down. We dawdled between the graves, then signed the visitors' book, each contemplating an elegy. MacNeice's premature death at the age of fifty-five had shocked us. We felt bereaved of a father-figure whom we had only recently been getting to know (Mahon was the only one of us who had met him personally.) The return of his ashes to Ireland did feel like some kind of repatriation. When the three of us were next together Mahon took from his pocket 'In Carrowdore Churchyard' and read it aloud. Heaney started to recite his poem, then crumpled it up. I wisely decided then and there not to make the attempt. Mahon had produced the definitive elegy.<sup>508</sup>

Longley's use of the words 'repatriation' and 'definitive' is particularly important. They indicate a desire to 'house' MacNeice, as Heaney might have it, in the sacred Irish soil, as well as a need to 'define' this 'father-figure,' to pin him down to a particular set of characteristics and to resolve the ambiguities and differences which the elder poet relished. The very act indicates a misunderstanding of MacNeice's life and work, which, as I have

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<sup>508</sup> Louis MacNeice, *Selected Poems*, ed. Michael Longley. (London: Faber and Faber, 2001), xi.

attempted to demonstrate, were wrapped up in an avoidance of the comforts of ‘place’ in favor of the freedom of ‘space.’

The poem lends itself to this kind of reading, particularly in that it places its subject in a particular patch of earth which Mahon then invests with meaning. If we compare ‘In Carrowdore Churchyard’ to elegies written by MacNeice, we notice that Mahon has got a sense of MacNeice’s style but not of his philosophical orientation. In ‘The Strand,’ for example, MacNeice’s elegy for his father, the specific location is never named. We are instead given a generalized liminal space created to honor a man ‘...who now has left such strands for good/Carrying his boots and paddling like a child,/A square black figure whom the horizon understood...’<sup>509</sup> The elder MacNeice is made into a creature of in-between spaces – strands and horizons – rather than a part of even the Western Irish landscape that he so loved.

Mahon’s poem, on the other hand, is an act of consecration. The rootless, wandering expatriate MacNeice is now rooted in the ground, unmoved and unmoving:

Your ashes will not stir, even on this high ground,  
 However the wind tugs, the headstones shake,  
 This plot is consecrated, for your sake,  
 To what lies in the future tense. You lie  
 Past tension now, and spring is coming round  
 Igniting flowers on the peninsula.<sup>510</sup>

<sup>509</sup> MacNeice, *Collected Poems*, 263.

<sup>510</sup> Derek Mahon, *Collected Poems*. (Loughcrew, Co. Meath: Gallery, 1999), 17.

Mahon gives MacNeice the Yeatsian ‘high ground’ and seems to ignore both the elder poet’s mistrust of fixity and his agnosticism in his creation of ‘sacred space’ around MacNeice’s tomb. While the style of the lines echoes MacNeice’s 1935 poem ‘Valediction’ (‘Their verdure dare not show’<sup>511</sup> scans almost identically to ‘Your ashes will not stir’), Mahon turns MacNeice’s rejection of the country he left behind in that poem on its head, reminding us that Northern Ireland is where MacNeice rests in the end. It is also telling that Mahon reduces MacNeice to ‘ashes’ but refuses to scatter them; the poet’s remains, which are now no more than individual particles, are contained in this plot of earth, the flux so beloved of MacNeice arrested at what might have been the moment of its ultimate expression.

There is something both affectionate and adversarial about the tone of Mahon’s poem. Richard York detects a ‘hint of rivalry’ in it, arguing that ‘one might suspect that this [Mahon’s indebtedness to MacNeice] is made a little too clear, the display of gratitude is a little too conspicuous and that there is just a hint of an attempt to take control, to take possession of his predecessor.’<sup>512</sup> This ‘hint of rivalry’ is perhaps best expressed in the poem’s seeming attitude towards the ambiguity in which MacNeice trafficked. The final stanza seems to end with an attempt to resolve these ambiguities:

The ironical, loving crush of roses against snow,  
  
Each fragile, solving ambiguity. So  
  
From the pneumonia of the ditch, from the ague

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<sup>511</sup> MacNeice, *Collected Poems*, 7.

<sup>512</sup> Richard York, ‘Louis MacNeice and Derek Mahon,’ in *Louis MacNeice and his Influence*, ed. Kathleen Devine et al. (Gerrards Cross, Buckinghamshire: Colin Smythe, 1998), 89.

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.<sup>513</sup>

MacNeice becomes the prophet of Ulster poetry, returning ‘home’ to renew the poetic energies of his native province. Kennedy-Andrews notes the dissonance between Mahon’s vision of MacNeice and the genuine article: ‘While registering MacNeice’s devotion to immediate, perceptual sensation, his fascination with the surfaces of the phenomenal world, Mahon’s poem...does in the end assert closure and resolution. The MacNeicean heritage is guaranteed for posterity...’<sup>514</sup> Edna Longley, meanwhile, writes that ‘Rhythmically and rhetorically [‘In Carrowdore Churchyard’] moves beyond ‘ambiguity’ in that it ‘goes on to claim that poetry can in some sense ‘solve’ or at least sieve the ‘inrush’ of phenomena and history.’<sup>515</sup> MacNeice has been drafted by Mahon to solve a particularly Northern Irish problem – the lack of an urbane, cosmopolitan poetic forebear who is an internationalist rather than a regionalist. Mahon ‘solves’ MacNeice’s ambiguities not to declare himself greater than his predecessor, but in order to legitimize his claim to MacNeice’s legacy.

If MacNeice has a genuine ‘successor’ in contemporary poetry, it is the Armagh-born Paul Muldoon, like MacNeice an expatriate, now based in Princeton, New Jersey. Like MacNeice, he has worked for the BBC (in Belfast, not in London) and as an academic; he has also expressed admiration for Keats’s ‘negative capability,’ as did MacNeice:

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<sup>513</sup> Mahon, *Collected Poems*, 17.

<sup>514</sup> Kennedy-Andrews, *Writing Home*, 48.

<sup>515</sup> Edna Longley, *The Living Stream: Literature and Revisionism in Ireland*. (Newcastle upon Tyne: Bloodaxe, 1994), 259.



My process is very simple...Since I don't know what I'm doing, there is a chance that the reader won't know what I'm doing also. So it is possible that something interesting might happen. Keats used the term "negative capability" to encourage the reader not to go seeking after conventional reason, the conventionally rational, but to give himself over to uncertainties, mysteries, and doubts.<sup>516</sup>

The titles of Muldoon's collections, unlike Heaney's, highlight themes of travel and liminality or hybridity – *Mules* (1977), *Why Brownlee Left* (1980), *The Wishbone* (1984), *Meeting the British* (1987), and *Horse Latitudes* (2006), among others – and he writes syntactically complex poems built around stanzas that undermine traditional forms, much as MacNeice relied heavily on eye and slant rhymes and enjambment in his otherwise formal verse, deconstructing received verse structures by opening up the lines, a similarity with a slight difference that Edna Longley has noted: 'MacNeice's odd syntactical shapes might be termed in one sense 'post-sentence' in their reaction against the poetry of statement... Muldoon's syntax, on the other hand, might be termed pre-sentence in its postponement rather than subversion of the indicative, its distrust of the definitive.'<sup>517</sup> Both poets avoid answering or resolving ambiguity in the very structure of their work, subverting certainty on the level of the sentence.

Like MacNeice, Muldoon has been accused of being all surface and no substance. In *Reading Paul Muldoon*, Clair Wills notes that 'the technical brilliance of his work [has]

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<sup>516</sup> Bill Moyers, *Fooling With Words: A Celebration of Poets and their Craft*. (New York: William Morrow, 1999), 169.

<sup>517</sup> Longley, *Poetry in the Wars*, 222.

led to suggestions that the stylistic surface of his poetry, while dazzling, hides a philosophical and moral emptiness, that his verbal ingenuity outstrips his capacity for genuine empathy and insight'<sup>518</sup>, much as MacNeice has been called, even by ostensible admirers like Mahon and Paulin, 'superficial' (if '*profoundly* (author's emphasis) superficial')<sup>519</sup> and 'gimmicky':

The urban rootless world of rootless urban clichés, consumer durables and advertising hoardings is an essential part of his imagination, and while he sometimes recycles images of the Irish landscape like a tourist board official eager to woo 'the sentimental English', few Irish writers have totally resisted the temptation to export their Irishness.<sup>520</sup>

Apart from the fact that Paulin seems to deliberately ignore the irony and, often, outright hostility in MacNeice's descriptions of Irish landscapes and structures, these assessments of Muldoon and MacNeice gloss over the process at work underneath their use of urban demotic diction and reliance on cliché. As Longley points out, Muldoon in particular uses MacNeice and their shared interest in the poetic possibilities of cliché 'as a stalking-horse, as a mask for subversion'<sup>521</sup>; both poets liberally employ clichés and other kinds of received phrases and images in order to cut them loose from their conventional meanings, demonstrating the absence of thought that lies behind such constructions.

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<sup>518</sup> Clair Wills, *Reading Paul Muldoon*. (Newcastle upon Tyne: Bloodaxe, 1998), 15.

<sup>519</sup> Mahon, 'MacNeice in Ireland and England', 22.

<sup>520</sup> Paulin, 'The Man from No Part', 76.

<sup>521</sup> Longley, *The Living Stream*, 263.

Muldoon most resembles MacNeice in his decidedly open and honest approach to the construction of space, acknowledging that the poet's function is not merely to render a space or place as it is, but to re-map it. In an interview with John Haffenden, Muldoon explains the spatiality inherent in his method:

Clearly any landscape or locale is going to be re-mapped by a writer – Hardy's Wessex, Faulkner's Yoknapatawpha, Joyce's Dublin, Yeats Country – I'm not setting myself against any of them, but these are places which are recognizable in their fixtures yet are changed by the creative process. I'm very interested in the way in which a small place, a parish, can come to stand for the world. As I began to read I became aware that several writers – particularly those from the North like Seamus Heaney, Derek Mahon and Michael Longley – were writing about places I knew, and that what they had to say about them was accepted beyond those places.<sup>522</sup>

The idea of space Muldoon articulates here is, like MacNeice's, open to the outside world and to the creative process. It is perhaps ironic that some of the writers he claims influenced his idea of space – Heaney and Longley, particularly – are heavily influenced by Hewitt's regionalism, but the thing that interests Muldoon about them is that, even if they are not creatively engaged with the world outside of their immediate locale, the rest of the world is listening to them. This contact with outside forces is what matters to Muldoon, and it offers another point of connection with MacNeice.

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<sup>522</sup> Haffenden, *Viewpoints*, 130-1.

This similarity in spatial perspectives can be traced in the common fund of images and tropes upon which both poets draw, including the *immram*, ‘an Irish tale of ‘other-world’ voyages to fantastic islands’<sup>523</sup> which provides the basis for MacNeice’s play *The Mad Islands* (1962), which I examined in detail in Chapter Three, and Muldoon’s long poem ‘Immram’ (1980), which closes the volume *Why Brownlee Left*. Both are retellings of the ninth-century Irish narrative poem *Immram Mael Duin* (‘The Voyage of Muldoon’) in which the hero journeys through a kind of Otherworld (in Muldoon’s case, California) in order to discover an alternative history of his own family. We also find, in ‘Early Warning,’ a condemnation of pastoral escapism akin to that found in MacNeice’s eclogues of the mid-1930s; while the speaker’s father works hard to protect his trees from a coming blight of apple-scab disease, ‘Our Protestant neighbour, Billy Wetherall,/Though he knew by the wireless/Of apple-scab in the air,/Would sling his hammock/Between two sturdy Grenadiers/And work through the latest *Marvel* comic.’<sup>524</sup> The image of the secure, comfortable Protestant farmer ignoring the warnings piped into his home over the radio airwaves recalls the last stanza of MacNeice’s ‘Cushendun’: ‘Only in the dark green room beside the fire/With curtains drawn against the wind and waves/There is a little box with a well-bred voice:/What a place to talk of War.’<sup>525</sup> Like the holiday-makers in MacNeice’s poem, Billy Wetherall insulates himself in a rural cocoon, ignoring warnings of the coming tree disease,

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<sup>523</sup> Longley, *Poetry in the Wars*, 211.

<sup>524</sup> Paul Muldoon, *Poems 1968-1998*. (New York: Farrar, Strauss & Giroux, 2001), 80-1.

<sup>525</sup> MacNeice, *Collected Poems*, 180.

while his more industrious neighbor heeds the warnings from outside the borders of his own property in order to protect his own livelihood.

Another poem from the same volume, ‘The Boundary Commission,’ brings to mind MacNeice’s most famous poem, ‘Snow.’ The title references the cross-community body that was convened to determine the border between Northern Ireland and what was then called the Irish Free State in 1924. While the Free State initially hoped to win back the majority-Catholic counties of Tyrone and Fermanagh, in the end the Commission moved the border only slightly, and in both directions. Muldoon’s poem describes a town split in two by the border:

*You remember that village where the border ran*

*Down the middle of the street,*

*With the butcher and the baker in different states?*

Today he remarked how a shower of rain

Had stopped so cleanly across Golightly’s lane

It might have been a wall of glass

That had toppled over. He stood there, for ages,

To wonder which side, if any, he should be on.<sup>526</sup>

Much as MacNeice’s ‘huge bay window’ in ‘Snow’ allows for two different seasons to coexist in the same place, the roses and the tangerine being incongruous with the winter

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<sup>526</sup> Muldoon, Poems 1968-1998, 80.

weather outside, Muldoon's border divides a village in two so thoroughly that the weather on one side of the street is different from that on the other. Unlike MacNeice's speaker, who seems to relish this confusion, Muldoon's is both unsettled and immobilized by the experience; he is unsure which side of the 'wall of glass' he is supposed to stand on. This echoes 'Reflections,' in which the placement of mirrors and windows in MacNeice's study make it impossible for the subject to place himself.

Muldoon mentions MacNeice specifically in his poems more often than his contemporaries do, and tends to do so in poems that reflect the slipperiness of our ideas of 'place.' 'History,' for example, articulates the relationship between meaningful spaces and our imperfect memories, suggesting that we often invest the wrong places with meaning, and for the wrong reasons:

Where and when exactly did we first have sex?  
 Do you remember? Was it Fitzroy Avenue,  
 Or Cromwell Road, or Notting Hill?  
 Your place or mine? Marseilles or Aix?  
 Or as long ago as that Thursday evening  
 When you and I climbed through the bay window  
 On the ground floor of Aquinas Hall  
 And into the room where MacNeice wrote 'Snow',  
 Or the room where they say he wrote 'Snow'.<sup>527</sup>

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<sup>527</sup> Muldoon, *Poems 1968-1998*, 87.

In addition to calling his own sexual history into question in ways that combine the local and the international and that juxtapose Catholic and Protestant as well as British and Irish history ('Cromwell' and 'Aquinas,' for example)<sup>528</sup>, Muldoon subverts the very idea of received history by turning 'the room where MacNeice wrote 'Snow'' into 'the room where they say he wrote 'Snow'.' The meaning assigned to this particular place is made into a detachable thing, a matter of perception rather than historical fact. This is a move of which MacNeice would have approved, as it turns the certainty of 'representations of space' on its head in favor of 'representational space.'

MacNeice features as a character in the long poem that closes *Meeting the British*, '7, Middagh Street.' The title refers to a house in Brooklyn in which W.H. Auden once lived, and consists of a series of seven monologues spoken by residents of and visitors to the house during an imagined Thanksgiving dinner in 1940. In addition to 'Wystan,' the speakers include Gypsy Rose Lee, Benjamin Britten, Chester Kallman, Salvador Dali (the only one of the speakers who never actually visited the house), Carson McCullers, and MacNeice. Formally, the poem is a corona; the first line of each new section is the same as the last line of the one that preceded it, returning to the first line of the poem at the end. Most criticism of the poem has focused on the first and last speakers, Auden and MacNeice, and it is here that I will focus my attention.

Corcoran argues that the 'home for transients' at 7 Middagh Street is 'at the opposite end of the architectural scale from Carrickfergus Castle', the locus of MacNeice's

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<sup>528</sup> Longley, *The Living Stream*, 259.

achievement as chosen by Heaney, in favor of ‘the poetic equivalent of ‘no fixed abode’” where the artist-speakers ‘become free to circulate and permutate in a self-conscious display of the way literary history actually produces its future...’<sup>529</sup> The poem’s references to and rewritings of Yeats and John Masefield, among others, point to the ways in which artists make use of the work of their predecessors in order to create new and different poetic structures. The last section, spoken by Louis, continues just such a revision of Yeats’s ‘In Memory of Eva Gore-Booth and Con Markiewicz’, begun in the preceding section, ‘Carson’: ‘two girls, I thought, two girls in silk kimonos.//Both beautiful, one a gazebo.’<sup>530</sup> MacNeice, in Muldoon’s reading of him, instantly turns Yeats’s ‘two girls’ into a decorative structure of a kind usually associated with garden parties. From the outset, his spatial imagination is rendered as hostile to facile escapism.

‘Wystan,’ meanwhile, begins by describing his arrival in America with Isherwood upon Masefield’s ‘Quinquereme of Nineveh from distant Ophir’<sup>531</sup>, allowing the ‘ship of Poetry’ to carry him to distant shores, where he dreams of American manifest destiny and trades political commitment for commitment to Chester Kallman: ‘Each loads flour, sugar and salted/beef into a covered wagon/and strikes out for his own Oregon,/each straining for the ghostly axe/of a huge, blond-haired lumberjack.’<sup>532</sup> The ‘oracular’ role of the poet is a trap in which the previous generation found itself ensnared: ‘And were Yeats living at this hour/it should be in some ruined tower/not malachited Ballylee/where he paid out

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<sup>529</sup> Corcoran, *Poets of Modern Ireland*, 64.

<sup>530</sup> Muldoon, *Poems 1968-1998*, 189.

<sup>531</sup> *Ibid.*, 175.

<sup>532</sup> *Ibid.*, 178.



to those below/one gilt-edged scroll from his pencil/as though he were part-Rapunzel and partly Delphic oracle.<sup>533</sup> Yeats is here rendered as part fairy-tale princess, part obscurantist prophet, and his worries over his role in fulminating the 1916 Rising and the subsequent executions of its leaders are mocked: 'If Yeats had saved his pencil-lead/would certain men have stayed in bed?/For history's a twisted root/with art its small, translucent fruit/and never the other way round.'<sup>534</sup> There is no point in worrying about whether verse affects future events, 'Wystan' argues, because, as Auden wrote in 'In Memory of W.B. Yeats,' 'poetry makes nothing happen.' Art does not drive history, but is driven by it. Auden's spatial imagination is focused squarely on his adopted country and its potential to sever him from his responsibility to history; he has uprooted himself from one place to another, and 'will not go back as *Auden*'<sup>535</sup>; rather, he will take advantage of the opportunities a new spatial context offers for reinvention.

'Louis' reads Auden's retreat from political commitment as 'art for art's sake' escapism and retreat from the responsibilities of the poet to his audience: 'Since when he's set himself up as a stylite/waiting for hostilities/to cease, a Dutch master/intent only on painting an oyster/or lemon/(all those afternoons in the Ashmolean)/or the slur of light in a red goblet/while Montagues and Capulets run riot,/as they did five years ago/in the Short Strand and Sandy Row.'<sup>536</sup> The creation of art is itself a political act, 'and the very painting of that

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<sup>533</sup> *Idem*.

<sup>534</sup> *Idem*.

<sup>535</sup> *Ibid.*, 177.

<sup>536</sup> *Ibid.*, 190.

oyster/is in itself a political gesture.<sup>537</sup> MacNeice's monologue moves through a variety of spaces – Yeats's 'gazebo,' Carrickfergus Castle, Iceland, the movie theater in Yorkville in which Auden heard the local German immigrants cheering for Hitler, the room where Lorca was shot by Franco's soldiers, and, finally (and tellingly) Muldoon's Pub in Belfast:

After drinking all night in a Sands Street shebeen  
 where a sailor played a melodeon  
 made from a merman's spine  
 I left by the backdoor of Muldoon's

(it might have been the Rotterdam)  
 on a Monday morning, falling in with  
 the thousands of shipyard men who tramped  
 towards the front gates of Harland and Wolff.<sup>538</sup>

As Stan Smith writes, this exit through the backdoor of the pub (but not from the poem) is just one of many departures it records: 'the sequence is fixated on leavings, reverting, in its final line, to that classic of *poésie de departs*, Masfield's 'Cargoes', with which it had begun.'<sup>539</sup> The place itself is left indeterminate – it might have been Muldoon's or the Rotterdam. Here, as in 'History,' Muldoon rather coyly plays a game in which he doesn't *quite* mingle his own personal (imagined) history and MacNeice's, using a pub with his own

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<sup>537</sup> Ibid., 192.

<sup>538</sup> Ibid., 193.

<sup>539</sup> Stan Smith, 'Leavings,' *Paul Muldoon: Poetry, Prose, Drama*, ed. Elmer Kennedy-Andrews. (Gerrards Cross, Buckinghamshire: Colin Smythe, 2006), 140.

name as the gateway to another gate, that which leads to the famous Harland and Wolff shipyards of Belfast, where the Titanic was built.

This leads to the poem's concluding irony, an act of exclusion from the privileged space of the shipyard which is based on mistaken identity. MacNeice, the son of an Anglican bishop, is denied a job by the foreman of the notoriously sectarian company:

The one-eyed foreman had strayed out of Homer;

'MacNeice? That's a Fenian name.'

As if to say, 'None of your sort, none of you

will as much as go for a rubber hammer

never mind chalk a rivet, never mind caulk a seam

on the quinquere of Nineveh.<sup>540</sup>

The shipyard becomes the island of Polyphemus, though MacNeice is barred from entering rather than kept from leaving. The poem then cycles back to the beginning, with Auden and Isherwood arriving in New York on the 'quinquere of Nineveh.' Corcoran and Longley have both observed – correctly, in my opinion – that this means that MacNeice does not actually get the last word, as Justin Quinn claims he does<sup>541</sup>; Longley writes that 'Masefield's 'Quinquere of Nineveh,' symbolizing poetry, circumnavigates for ever (sic) in a characteristic Muldoonian *immram* or mystery-voyage'<sup>542</sup>, while Corcoran notes

<sup>540</sup> Muldoon, *Poems 1968-1998*, 193.

<sup>541</sup> Justin Quinn, *The Cambridge Introduction to Modern Irish Poetry, 1800-2000*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 181.

<sup>542</sup> Longley, *The Living Stream*, 266.

that 'the implication of the corona is that the issues raised by the poem's seven characters are irresolvable.'<sup>543</sup> Indeed, Muldoon will not try to come to any kind of real conclusion or resolve MacNeice's treasured ambiguities as Mahon tried to do in 'In Carrowdore Churchyard.' Rather, he will leave the issues of exile, commitment, and the responsibilities of the artist covered in the poem up in the air.

The final line, however, contains a repetition with a difference, and it is one which seems to have gone unnoticed. While Auden and Isherwood arrive in America on 'the ship of poetry,' MacNeice's ambiguous status (a Protestant with a Catholic name) excludes him from being permitted to build the 'quinquereme of Nineveh.' So is the 'quinquereme of Nineveh' simply the 'ship of poetry,' as Longley claims, or is it something else? In *Modern Poetry*, MacNeice likens 'escapist poetry' to a boat:

In a sense all art is an escape like a boat in which we ride over life. But the real escapist is the man who sits in his boat while keeping it moored to the bank. The escapist turns to art to forget life, not to be able to face it more securely. Obviously all practice of art helps one in a sense to forget life and is therefore an escape, but there is a distinction between the escape of a man who, having been in a war, writes either honest descriptions of war ('to get it off his chest') or honest descriptions of anything he meets with in the light of his own experience, which inevitably

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<sup>543</sup> Corcoran, *Poets of Modern Ireland*, 66.

includes that war, and the man who, having been in a war, resorts to describing dreams which he has never met with and which imply the non-existence of wars.<sup>544</sup>

If we read the ‘quinquereme of Nineveh from distant Ophir’ in light of MacNeice’s attitudes toward escapist poetry, and if we recall that Masefield was one of the Georgian pastoralists whom MacNeice criticized elsewhere in the book, it becomes clear that this is not ‘the ship of poetry’ so much as ‘the ship of escapism.’ MacNeice is not excluded from the crafting of poetry – he is excluded from the possibility of escape, or, perhaps more accurately, he is not permitted to help *others* escape.

Like MacNeice, Muldoon is a poet of transit and exile, but not of exile as an escape. Rather, exile brings with it a different attitude towards space and place which is based on faulty and outdated premises. As Kennedy-Andrews writes, ‘The concept of ‘exile’, Muldoon suggests, harbours an outmoded essentialist myth of homeland. If ‘exile’ presumes an originary home and the eventual hope of return, Muldoon undoes the stable points of both departure and destination.’<sup>545</sup> That is, the idea of ‘exile’ does not allow for the normalization of ‘difference’ within space that Hutcheon claims is typically postmodern; the exile is different from those around him, but not normal or equal to his neighbors, as he is removed from his proper spatial context. Muldoon rejects the idea of a ‘proper spatial context’ for anyone, arguing, as MacNeice did, that ‘modern’ concepts of national space are insular and outmoded, and that self-conscious exile is just another form of escape. Given the postmod-

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<sup>544</sup> MacNeice, *Modern Poetry*, 7.

<sup>545</sup> Kennedy-Andrews, *Writing Home*, 18.

ern spatial dimension in Muldoon's work, it seems that, of the poets of his generation, he wears MacNeice's influence both most lightly and most successfully.

It is no coincidence that the contemporary poet who best seems to understand and benefit from MacNeice's example is also the most consciously postmodern. As I have aimed to demonstrate throughout this study, MacNeice's juxtaposition of different kinds of experience without privileging one over the other, his condemnation of 'consecrated' spaces like monuments and cathedrals and of defensive or militaristic spaces like castles and towers, and his tendency to blur the borders of nations and islands and to erase the walls that surround private rooms and escapist Utopias indicate a preference for the freedom of undifferentiated 'space' over the determinate meanings of 'place.' This indicates what Hutcheon refers to as the breakdown of consensus intrinsic to postmodern thought: acceptance of difference renders meaning subjective<sup>546</sup>, and the construction of 'place,' which requires an emotional and intellectual investment from the community that seeks to assign meaning to it, is often based on an illusion of consensus, as Lefebvre's distinction between 'representational space' and 'representations of space' makes clear. MacNeice's consistent alignment with the latter underlies his influence on postmodern poets like Muldoon; older ideas of 'nation' and 'place' are no longer relevant as the narratives that created them break up in a sea of difference. MacNeice's embrace of exile, transit and flux, as well as his constant criticism of received Nationalist and Unionist narratives, represent an early attempt to practice a postmodern poetics.

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<sup>546</sup> Hutcheon, *The Poetics of Postmodernism*, 7.

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