THE FINAL ANOMALY: CONFIGURATIONS OF THE HUMAN SUBJECT IN THE
POETRY OF LOUIS MACNEICE

A Thesis Submitted to the College of
Graduate Studies and Research
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy
in the Department of English
University of Saskatchewan
Saskatoon

By
Jesse Denoon Stothers
Fall 2000

© Copyright Jesse Denoon Stothers, 2000. All rights reserved.
The author has granted a non-exclusive licence allowing the National Library of Canada to reproduce, loan, distribute or sell copies of this thesis in microform, paper or electronic formats.

L’auteur a accordé une licence non exclusive permettant à la Bibliothèque nationale du Canada de reproduire, prêter, distribuer ou vendre des copies de cette thèse sous la forme de microfiche/film, de reproduction sur papier ou sur format électronique.

The author retains ownership of the copyright in this thesis. Neither the thesis nor substantial extracts from it may be printed or otherwise reproduced without the author’s permission.

L’auteur conserve la propriété du droit d’auteur qui protège cette thèse. Ni la thèse ni des extraits substantiels de celle-ci ne doivent être imprimés ou autrement reproduits sans son autorisation.

0-612-63966-5
PERMISSION TO USE

TITLE OF THESIS
The Final Anomaly: Configurations of the Human Subject in the Poetry of Louis MacNeice

NAME OF AUTHOR
Jesse Denoon Stothers

DEPARTMENT
English

DEGREE
Doctor of Philosophy

In presenting this thesis in partial fulfillment of the requirements for a postgraduate degree from the University of Saskatchewan, I agree that the libraries of this University may make it freely available for inspection. I further agree that permission for copying of this thesis in any manner, in whole or in part, for scholarly purposes may be granted by the professor or professors who supervised my thesis work or, in their absence, by the department Head of the Department or the Dean of the College in which my thesis work was done. It is understood that any copy or publication or use of this thesis or part thereof for financial gain shall not be allowed without my written permission. I also understood that due recognition shall be given to me and to the University of Saskatchewan in any use which may be made of any materials in my thesis.

Requests for permission to copy or to make other use of material in this thesis in whole or in part should be addressed to:

Head of the Department of English
University of Saskatchewan
Saskatoon, Saskatchewan S7N 5A5
ABSTRACT

This thesis examines the various modes and configurations of subjectivity to be found in the poetry of Louis MacNeice, analyzing the shifts in voice and perspective that constitute the primary focus of inquiry in his work. Since one of MacNeice's most important contributions to twentieth-century poetry in English involves a rigorous quest to examine the nature of subjectivity in its cultural and philosophical contexts, the thesis is ordered by seven distinct yet related keywords or themes through which subjective configurations obtain individual and social meaning: memory, history, politics, place, desire, alienation, and anomaly. This thesis investigates the strategies whereby MacNeice seeks to obviate the ideological interpellations of socio-historical forces and the individual's psychology, contesting them with notions of flux and a divided subjectivity.

The methodology employed combines close analysis of specific poems with the examination of broad theoretical perspectives such as psychoanalysis, Marxism, post-structuralism, and existentialism. The emphasis on multiple theoretical points of view provides a number of different avenues into MacNeice's poetry intended to open up the corpus of his work to competing visions of the formation and categorization of subjectivity, as well as to incorporate some of the major philosophical traditions of the twentieth-century within which both MacNeice and his critics operate. The central thrust of the thesis locates MacNeice's perception of configurations of the human subject in the tension between the fixity of socially and psychologically determined positions and the belief that subjectivity is defined by fragmentation and isolation, culminating in the positioning of MacNeice as an existentialist writer.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank my supervisor, Dr. John Lavery, my Advisory Committee, and the Department of English and University of Saskatchewan for their support.

I owe large debts of gratitude to my father, without whose constant support this would not have been possible, my mother for her guidance and enthusiasm, and my sister for setting the bar so high.

Note on text:

Although I have used E.R. Dodds' edition of MacNeice's Collected Poems, I have preferred the original capitalization of poem titles from first editions rather than the idiosyncratic capitalization employed by Dodds.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

PERMISSION TO USE ................................................................. i

ABSTRACT ................................................................................ ii

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS ............................................................... iii

TABLE OF CONTENTS ................................................................. iv

INTRODUCTION ........................................................................... 1

CHAPTER ONE  
“Binding my feet to the floating past”: MacNeice and memory ........... 23

CHAPTER TWO  
“So the kiss of the past is narcotic”: MacNeice and history ............... 51

CHAPTER THREE  
“In answer to the drums”: MacNeice and politics ......................... 85

CHAPTER FOUR  
“A litter of chronicles and bones”: MacNeice and place .................. 118

CHAPTER FIVE  
“To be neither strange nor dead”: MacNeice and desire ............... 156

CHAPTER SIX  
“Rapping with an impertinent precision”: MacNeice and alienation ... 191

CHAPTER SEVEN  
“For we are unique”: MacNeice and anomaly ............................. 226

CONCLUSION ............................................................................ 262

BIBLIOGRAPHY ......................................................................... 273
Introduction

“For every static world that you or I impose
Upon the real one must crack at times and new
Patterns from new disorders open like a rose
And old assumptions yield to new sensation;
The Stranger in the wings is waiting for his cue,
The fuse is always laid to some annunciation.”
Louis MacNeice – “Mutations”

What is difficult to understand is how Louis MacNeice himself has become the stranger in the wings of twentieth-century literary history. The reason may lie in his dedication to the classical world, and his insistence on a rigorous self-investigation that often made political commitment and stylistic innovation secondary in importance. Even a brief reading of MacNeice’s poetry shows a stark contrast in thought to many of his contemporaries, fashionable political positions – such as the Marxism espoused by many intellectuals coming to prominence in Britain of the 1930s – being laid aside for a personal testament, an “annunciation” whispered in our ears that celebrates flux and impermanence. The news has little to do with immaculate conception or deliverance, however, MacNeice’s vision being focused squarely on a very mortal, very imperfect world. While Eliot searched for answers in the Church, and Auden in politics, MacNeice developed an individualistic sensibility moulded by classical literature and a philosophy of life akin to continental existentialism. While monotone ideologies of gigantic stature warred around him, the poet never lost his love for the multifarious, and
it is his ability to write from and through a remarkable number of perspectives that makes MacNeice one of the most iconoclastic and powerful poets of this century. As Europe crumbled and was slowly reshaped during the Cold War, MacNeice's voice remained, probing into what makes us human, and what might possibly save us.

The two central thrusts of MacNeice's poems are directed inward and outward: inward to reveal an earnest probing into his own constitution as an individual, and outward analyzing how the poet, and indeed all of us, negotiate the various frameworks, contexts, and ideologies that constitute the self. Thus the human subject is configured in his work as a nexus of possibilities, working within the constraints of impersonal forces to create "new / Patterns from new disorders," an integral element of the modernist project in general. MacNeice acknowledged the necessarily dual focus of the poet in his 1938 book Modern Poetry: "The poet does not give you a full and accurate picture of the world nor a full and accurate picture of himself, but he gives you an amalgam which, if successful, represents truthfully his own relation to the world" (197). MacNeice's work shows a clear recognition that the human subject is itself an amalgam, and while it will always remain subject to the external cultural forces that create the conscious and unconscious mind, the possibility exists for the poet to recombine these imposed identities through language, thus, at least momentarily, deflecting them. The ethical implications are clear in MacNeice's work: a rigorous interrogation of subjective awareness (directed at himself and the world) and the conventions of poetry and ideology are blended, often uneasily, but the poet never chooses between them, indeed cannot, but can only find space in which to make utterance. The insistence one finds on multiplicity,
and the various voices which make these utterances, provide glimpses of spaces in which the subject is free to construct and choose alternate identities.

An Anglican minister's son from the north of Ireland with a staunchly middle-class education and living in England, MacNeice has become an anomalous figure in literary history. MacNeice's reputation and status remained steady, if not so celebrated as some of his contemporaries, throughout his lifetime. As a British poet of the mid-century whose central preoccupations seemed to be the bright surfaces of things, he was often dismissed as a writer of merely decorative verse. Perhaps MacNeice himself is partly responsible for the critical and popular neglect he suffered, for his own essays and criticism maintain the calm, measured tone of much of his poetry, making it easy for many of his readers in England and Ireland to label him as a weak humanist in an age of daring ideologues. Rarely was it acknowledged that he was a subtle poet of ideas, even less that his affinities among his contemporaries were both continental and British. Indeed, one way to describe MacNeice is as a British existentialist, a rare breed. His simultaneous love of the experiential world and distrust of all statements claiming truth make him surprisingly similar to Albert Camus, as much in their philosophical scepticism as their paradoxical belief in the power of the individual to choose his or her mode of living. For instance, in 1942 in The Myth of Sisyphus Camus begins his treatise by declaring: "There is but one truly serious philosophical problem and that is suicide" (11). This is echoed by MacNeice's "Prayer Before Birth" written in 1944 which finishes with the lines: "Let them not make me a stone and let them not spill me. / Otherwise kill me" (CP 194). The correlation is not direct, yet each is capable of a disarming simplicity that
masks a preoccupation with the nuances of our subjective experience of the world and the primary ethical implications of our lives. Not many writers in Europe were as resistant to the viciousness of the times.

MacNeice was not content, however, to confine his philosophical explorations to the esoteric, but was also committed in a real way to social change (because of rather than despite his love for multiplicity and his ability to see the world through various perspectives), and unlike many of his contemporaries he remained steadfast to this belief throughout his life. Rather than retreating into an isolated individualism, MacNeice advocated a social role for the poet, as we can see from Zoo, published in 1938: “What I do believe is that as a human being, it is my duty to make patterns and to contribute to order – good patterns and a good order. And when I say duty I mean duty; I think it is the turn of enjoyment, I believe that life is worth while and I believe that I have to do something for life” (79). He was keenly aware of the paradox in his position as a poet, creating ordered worlds that contain visions of constant change. Contemporary critics such as Allan Tate¹ were turned off by MacNeice’s refusal to cry out the catchwords of the day: bourgeois, proletariat, etc. And yet, in a simple, direct language, MacNeice makes clear both his love for existence and the recognition of his “duty” towards both himself and humanity. That this position is problematic is unquestionable, though no less sincere or perceptive for that. He recognized that to find his own way through the critical and intellectual minefields of the time, while remaining true to his understanding

¹ Tate’s review of Poems (1933) dismisses MacNeice’s work as “a kind of rambling accumulation of sensitive perceptions” (New Verse, No. 3, May 1933).
that he could never become a dedicated Marxist writer, he must remain wary of all political parties and creeds that devalue beauty and relegate the poet to the position of a functionary.

MacNeice delighted in the multifarious world, and another reason why his politics and philosophy are hard to pin down is because of the wide range of subjects and perspectives he took on. The human subject, to MacNeice, was an unstable conglomeration of influences that should never be pinned to a single ideological framework. In “A Statement,” published in 1938, he avows that “a poet...should be synoptic and elastic in his sympathies” (SLC 98), and as critics we must bring the same qualities to an understanding of his poetic achievement. The primary tension in MacNeice's work is between this ability to see the world on a broad scope (without falling into generalizations) while examining the minutiae of his own life and the socio/political arena surrounding him. The effects of this tension on the subject positions taken up in individual poems is twofold: they are on the surface a-historical, voices and perspectives crying in the wilderness like Biblical prophets, while they also often engage with the historical forces that try to program them. The sensuous and intellectual, placid and destructive, reserved and committed, are blended into an uneasy series of alliances reflecting the ideological dilemmas of his times.

It is therefore not surprising that many critics have believed MacNeice's poetry to express a middle-road classicist's humanism, a philosophy usually dismissed as superficial, even reactionary.² Whether or not this is true, it certainly does not apply to

² Prime examples of this critical attitude can be found in D.E.S. Maxwell's Poets of the
MacNeice, whose talent delights in blending the appearance of things while investing the poems with perceptions of society and the world that are more aptly called humane than humanist. Death warns the two shepherds in “Eclogue by a Five-barred Gate”: “Poetry you think is only the surface vanity” (CP 38, 40). Yet it is this superficial vanity – in poetry and society – that MacNeice repeatedly investigates. The fact that he found it amongst the communists as well as the right, and even found powerful poetry in pointing it out in himself, shows that his primary allegiance is to an honest examination of self and world. The self to MacNeice is therefore a process, never finding expression in the static doctrines of ideology, but growing and changing as the subject mediates the world of facts and history. His statement in the 1939 prefatory Note to “Autumn Journal” is quite clear: “But poetry in my opinion must be honest before anything else and I refuse to be ‘objective’ or clear-cut at the cost of honesty” (CP 101). In an age of science, industrialism, imperialism and ideology, this is as controversial and argumentative a position as can be imagined. For MacNeice, the heart of the lie is in the pretense to objective truth, knowledge of the world without knowledge of the self, and as such his theory of the human subject as it evolved is more closely connected to existentialism and the tradition of British romanticism than the classical humanism by which he has been primarily known.

MacNeice’s literary output was by no means limited to poetry, having published a number of plays, radio dramas, translations and criticism. In addition, The Strings Are Thirties (1969), A.T. Tolley’s The Poetry of the Thirties (1975) and Samuel Hynes’ The Auden Generation (1976).
False contains some of the most evocative and lyrical prose passages written in the period. Yet it is primarily for his poetry that MacNeice is known, rightly or wrongly. Perhaps his own predilection for poetic form derives less from propensity than a belief in lyrical truth, that only through the strictures of form and meter could he express his vision of himself and the world, however at odds the stress on ordered form may be with his philosophy of change and alienation. This did not, however, keep him from joining the BBC propaganda section during the Second World War. It seems incongruous that the same poet who defies Nazism in “Autumn Journal” (“Lies on the air endlessly repeated / Turning the air to fog,” [CP 139]) would participate in a similar project in England. He acknowledged, however, that he must “choose between enormous evils” (CP 109), thus making the choice to fight fascism, against his inclination turning out glowing accounts of British resolve for the American ear. It was this ambiguous wartime experience that brought him into the BBC fold, where he would remain to write and produce radio programs until his death in 1963, although he continued to compose and publish poetry at a prolific rate.

The corpus of criticism that has been built up around MacNeice’s work is nowhere nearly as extensive as that of his contemporaries, and so he remains one of the unsung major talents of twentieth-century British poetry. This relative neglect began with the publication of his first book, and the process of reversing it did not begin until the early 1970s. MacNeice had the misfortune to be writing intellectually subtle, sensuous poetry at a time when critics and poets alike were calling for ideological commitment. His situation in this regard again closely mirrors that of Albert Camus;
while Camus laboured under the shadow of Sartre, MacNeice's reputation has suffered under the glare of W.H. Auden's even to this day. One instance of this is Samuel Hynes' 1976 work titled *The Auden Generation*, a critical study that continues the dismissive attitude towards MacNeice's poetry that has its roots in the 1930s in England. This attitude is less the result of critical antagonism than a byproduct of literary history, the prevailing critical attitude for so much of this century tending to analyze writers according to national groups and movements. That this kind of analysis is inappropriate highlights just how important MacNeice's work is as a counterbalance to the prevailing attitudes towards mid-century British poetry.

Another major factor in MacNeice's critical relegation to the background\(^3\) is his Irish inheritance, which only in the last twenty-five years has entered the debate. MacNeice lived and made his reputation in England since boyhood, and so many contemporary critics were blind to much of the political complexity of his poetry, ignoring the crucial dilemma of a divided cultural inheritance that informs MacNeice's intellectual life. Rather than engaging directly with MacNeice's texts and the cultural factors in which they are embedded, many critics, basing their judgments mainly on his reputation, merely labelled him an urbane classicist and moved on. Francis Scarfe, for instance, in his 1942 book *Auden and After* scoffed at MacNeice as one of those “who have failed to make up their mind about society, philosophy and religion” (62). Scarfe, like many other critics, clearly sets up MacNeice as a negative example in order to confer

\(^3\) Again, Samuel Hynes' *The Auden Generation* and A.T. Tolley's *The Poetry of the Thirties* are prime examples of this.
upon Auden the canonical robes of the thirties poet, politically committed and intellectually superior. That even in his early poetry MacNeice had a highly developed sense of the complexities of political life, however, is seen from a close examination of the work itself. Consider the final stanza of “Wolves,” written in 1934:

Come then all of you, come closer, form a circle,

Join hands and make believe that joined

Hands will keep away the wolves of water

Who howl along our coast. And be it assumed

That no one hears them among the talk and laughter. (CP 29)

In these lines is an awareness of the dilemma MacNeice faced as an “aesthete” with a social conscience, as well as the belief that community and poetry are not enough to keep the wolves of war at bay. In addition, the notion that an uncritical sense of community can cause people to shut the world out would become a running idea throughout his poetry, and one reason why he refused to find false comfort in the fashionable ideologies of the day.

The resurrection of MacNeice’s poetry was begun in earnest in 1971 with the publication of William T. McKinnon’s Apollo’s Blended Dream, followed by D.B. Moore’s The Poetry of Louis MacNeice (1972) and Terence Brown’s Louis MacNeice: Sceptical Vision (1975). Only the latter treats MacNeice’s political and philosophical elements with any real zest, and many of the critical studies that followed for the next twenty years were in this vein. MacNeice enjoyed not only a critical renaissance at this time, but also was taken into the fold of several Northern Irish poets who claimed him as
a literary progenitor, most notably Derek Mahon, Michael Longley, Paul Muldoon and Seamus Heaney. Indeed, the first poem in Derek Mahon's *Selected Poems*, "In Carrowdore Churchyard," is addressed and dedicated to MacNeice, celebrating his "humane perspective" and thanking him for "rinsing the choked mud, keeping the colours new" (9). The adoption is an apt one, for just as MacNeice's politics sought the humane solution to a seemingly endless political crisis, so do these Northern Irish writers attempt to analyze the Troubles from a non-partisan perspective.

It is through these select few poets and critics (mainly Irish) that the study of MacNeice's poetry has taken on the shape of real cultural debate rather than historical dismissal. Recently there have been a number of books and articles dedicated not only to his poetry, but to the considerable work he has left us in radio drama, plays, translations, criticism, and autobiography. Until Jon Stallworthy's biography *Louis MacNeice* (1995), critics were left with MacNeice's unfinished autobiographical fragment edited by E.R. Dodds, *The Strings Are False* (1965), which covered only up to the late 1930s. This biography, along with the 1998 publication of *Louis MacNeice and His Influence* edited by Kathleen Devine and Alan J. Peacock, marks the culmination of over two decades of work that has finally brought MacNeice the recognition he deserves as a major British poet. This recognition is reflected in the steady rise in the number of his poems included by editors in anthologies of modern British poetry, and the fact that his work is now taught as part of many university English courses.

Yet the critical work done on MacNeice's poetry to date has yet to treat this impressive body of work with the full consideration it deserves. Despite the efforts of
critics such as Terence Brown, Edna Longley and Alan Heuser to examine his work in light of the intellectual and social contexts it represents, MacNeice criticism is for the most part limited to biographical interpretation, invariably centred on his status as an Irish poet or his relationship to Spender and Auden. In his introduction to Louis MacNeice and His Influence, Alan J. Peacock calls for “a more rounded, synoptic approach” (vii), but the essays included in the book remain for the most part firmly rooted in the tradition of biographical interpretation. Although this aspect of MacNeice's work is crucial, the lack of any serious theoretical examination of the intellectual aspects of his poetry is disturbing, and a problem that my critique is intended to address. As MacNeice states in his 1935 essay “Poetry To-day,” “The poem...is a kind of Alter Ego. But the Alter Ego is another polarized concept. As Ego it is self-expression; as Alter it is escape from Self. Hence the dangers in explaining a poem through its author” (SLC 12). For both these reasons I will keep comparative and biographical interpretation limited to those areas and poems which require it.

I will not focus solely on the internal properties of the texts under scrutiny in New Critical fashion, although the bulk of each chapter will be devoted to close readings that demonstrate the complex ways in which MacNeice's poetry intersects with those larger forces which affect our understanding of subjectivity. It is important to bring to the study of a poet such as MacNeice a balance between acknowledging the cultural and ideological origins of his work and that play of language and form that both inscribes and often refutes them. I agree with George Levine when he states that “the social and historical location of art and its criticism, the recognition of literature's entanglement with
the politics of the moment, does nothing to deny its particular power to move and engage, or the critic's responsibility to account for that power” (4). The reduction of poetry to a mere expression or instance of ideology does justice neither to the enduring fascination we have as critics with primary texts, nor to the complex ways in which we interact with it, and it interacts with the culture in which it was produced. As Levine argues for the aesthetic, “[it] has no particular political commitments. It leaves itself open to endless and indeterminate interpretations” (20). The internal properties of the texts under study here are expressions of the frameworks in which human subjectivity is played out, and poetry is perhaps the most intricate and refreshingly indeterminate form of the human expression of self and its construction as subject. Therefore the re-interpretation of MacNeice's poetic works within themselves, and the analysis of the ways in which the characterizations and articulations of subjectivity to be found in them interact with various modern theories of the subject, will allow for a balanced examination (endless and indeterminate as it may be) of his role and importance as a poet.

The methodology I employ in this assessment of MacNeice's poetry will therefore draw on previous scholarship, but will also explore his work from a variety of theoretical standpoints that have hitherto only scantily been addressed. Peacock also notes that many MacNeice critics retain “that familiar wish for an encapsulable core in MacNeice's poetry – an ideology, a belief around which generalizations might comfortably be manufactured” (xiv). Terence Brown, in his essay “MacNeice and the Puritan Tradition” in the same volume, asserts that MacNeice “was unlikely to submit to any dogma which
would have reduced poetry to a merely functional activity in the service of ideology” (20). That MacNeice abhorred generalizations that masked or even destroyed the individuality of things and experiences is borne out in his poetry from the earliest to latest, and any approach that seeks to reduce the poetry to this level is doomed to failure. Therefore I will avoid a convenient unifying theme in examining the poems, aside from the common thread of configurations of human subjectivity, and will rather use eight key concepts as access points to begin a serious discussion of this element of MacNeice’s poetry. This is not meant to be exhaustive, but rather to provide theorized readings of particular poems and passages and various themes from a number of critical perspectives, and to open up the critical debate on MacNeice’s contribution to our understanding of subjectivity.

MacNeice’s most important contribution to twentieth-century British poetry is his rigorous quest to examine the features of subjectivity in its cultural and philosophical contexts. These poems engender multiple subject positions, and express a number of perspectives engaged in a common search for emotional, intellectual and social stability, but rarely find it. The various configurations MacNeice employs in his interrogations into subjectivity will be reflected in the multiple approaches this study will apply. The possibility of resistance in the human subject as agent should not be seen as teleological in nature, but (in poetry and in life) an open-ended process of constant redefinition according to the cultural and historical milieu in which the poems take place. MacNeice firmly resisted and transformed the contradictory forces of ideology in his poetical works, finding voices and spaces from which to articulate a conception of the human subject as
capable of limited self-definition. As Paul Smith states in *Discerning the Subject*, “what is produced by ideological interpellation is contradiction, and through a recognition of the contradictory and dialectical elements of subjectivity it may be possible to think a concept of the agent” (37). Change, flux and impermanence are brought into dialectical opposition with the dogmas of his day, and MacNeice never resolves this tension into a pat teleology or unifying ontology.

Each chapter of this examination will therefore gain access to MacNeice's poems through a keyword which represents one of the major intellectual positions, and consequently subject positions, to be found in a specific cross-section of poems. The cumulative effect of these multiple subject positions is to undermine the unifying and generalizing trend that is often brought to the study of poetry. Although acknowledging that the subjectifying force of determinist ideologies is necessary to gain access to literature of any kind, there must be a concomitant recognition of the multiplicity and fluidity of subject positions. In *The Long Revolution* Raymond Williams pinpoints this difference: “Because it is a form of organization, and not a single substance, the individual's relationship with society will be a wide area of real relationships, although within this certain forms of organization...may be determining” (93). Establishing the nature of the relationship between the individual and society is a common thread in MacNeice's poetry, especially in the longer poems “Autumn Journal” and “Autumn Sequel,” and it is precisely this “wide area of real relationships” that his work investigates (although notions of the “real” become problematic).

Chapter One will focus on the concept of *memory*, and how MacNeice uses it as
both a means to analyze the formation of subjectivity and as a site where the conflicting forces that constantly realign the subject are played out. Memory is a potent force in MacNeice's poetry, relying as it often does on the interplay of present and past selves to (re)create alternative subject positions. MacNeice's unfinished autobiography *The Strings Are False* is valuable as one point of access into the autobiographical elements in his work, but beyond the strictly autobiographical lies a project other than simply describing a subjective impression of past events. Childhood becomes an arena where the poet-as-autobiographer uses the past as metaphor for the present, resulting in basic reconfigurations of the individual's self-awareness. Memory and autobiography are separated through their function: memory operates as a source of imagery and content, while the conscious shaping of past events into autobiographical discourse, especially in MacNeice's poetry, shapes and reshapes the memories into strategically constructed other selves. Many of MacNeice's poems feature a voice that, though seemingly detached from the events it records, subtly influences the impressions of the past just as it is in turn transformed. The melancholy in poems about childhood that many critics of MacNeice have noticed is not merely nostalgia, but the appropriate tone with which to approach memory as a source of both loss of self and self-transformation, as in the final stanza of “When We Were Children”:

Now we are older and our talents

Accredited to time and meaning,

4 Although not solely an Irish phenomenon, this aspect of MacNeice's poetry is very reminiscent of Yeats, yet while the latter mingles personal memory with cultural memory and myth, MacNeice tends to use it as a more personal springboard for reflection.
To handsel joy requires a new
Shuffle of cards behind the brain
Where meaning shall remarry colour
And flowers be timeless once again. (CP 214, 13-18)

The deck remains the same for MacNeice, but each resuffling produces new beauties, and new possibilities for the self.

Chapter Two will analyze history, investigating the relationship between the formation of identity and actual historical events in MacNeice's work, particularly in "Autumn Journal" and "Autumn Sequel." While the latter tends to lack force and conviction, "Autumn Journal" stands as one of the great achievements in long form of the century, as much for its combination of the socio-political and personal as its vision of participation in living history. History as a subjectivizing force is deflected by MacNeice's intensely personal reactions not only to the turbulence of Europe in the 1930s though 1950s, but to his own deepest fears concerning his ethical role as a historical agent. The poet poses the uncomfortable question of what our daily life means in "Autumn Journal":

And when we clear away
All this debris of day-to-day experience,
What comes out to light, what is there of value
Lasting from day to day? (CP 143, XXI 1-4)

The echoes of Camus are strong here, with the poet forced by great events and the minutiae of life into a realization of the absurdity of human consciousness, finding solace
only in the possibilities that life still represents: “We shan't have another chance to dance and shout / Once the flames are silent” (145, 96-97).

In Chapter Three I will use notions of *place* to contextualize MacNeice's poetry, focusing particularly on the complex notions of self that arise out of the conflict between his Irish heritage and English/European education. Confronted by this dual sense of place, MacNeice's reactions are varied and strategic, often using the landmarks of his youth as metaphors for the journey each human subject faces. Place for MacNeice is unstable, whether it be the turf-stacks of his native Ireland, the smoking ruins of London during the Blitz, or the battleground that was Europe. As is so often the case in his poems, MacNeice uses this instability in his sense of place to his advantage intellectually, drawing on the contradictions of his multiple inheritance (Irish, English, continental, classical) in order to reconfigure the subjective perspective of each voice he creates. This strategic use of place is complemented by a delight in the particulars of landscape and people, combining and recombining his past and events, then overlaying them with the poet's submission to these roots of his conscious and unconscious minds.

The transition from place to *politics* in Chapter Four will draw upon the poet's sense of the self as gained through memory, history and place, as each represents crucial elements in the development of a politically active subject. It is his politics that have attracted the most negative criticism for MacNeice's poetry, and even the most recent studies tend to pass over this aspect of his poetic output as either too elusive or even potentially shameful. It is precisely the difficulty in pinning down his political perspective, though, that should intrigue the critic of his poetry. He was in a way
representative of a certain perspective, historically located, that has been described by Terence Brown as thoroughly sceptical (1975), yet the political statements MacNeice made in his poetry and other writings – or even the more subtle political beliefs that can be gleaned from the disposition of the speaking subjects in particular works – are perhaps more accurately described as existentialist. In a century of conflicting and increasingly disparate ideologies MacNeice found it difficult, but not impossible, to negotiate the political terrain without compromising his desire for a world in which differences and multiplicity abound. Ironically (considering his passion for flux) the core of MacNeice's politics remained relatively unchanged throughout his lifetime, while many other “thirties poets” felt it necessary to renounce most of their early writings as politically naive. World events, of course, influenced MacNeice's choice of subject matter, but it is the attitude the speaking subjects of the poems bring to it that expresses his careful politics. For MacNeice, the political arena was a staging area for the ethical and philosophical beliefs he explored throughout his writing career.

In Chapter Five I will redirect my examination of MacNeice's configurations of the human subject to the role desire plays in the poems. Though often seen as conflicting forces from a critical standpoint, the relationship between the political and psychological in MacNeice's poetry provides us a rich set of contexts in which the poems may be interpreted. Using Lacanian reconfigurations of classical Freudian psychological paradigms, particularly Lacan's notion of “the self's radical ex-centricity to itself” (Écrits 171), I will examine the various ways in which MacNeice uses poetry to establish a contingent relation between the constructed subject and the fluid, desiring self. The
constructed subject becomes an object of desire, not through narcissism, but through a strategic act of the imagination that momentarily frees the poet from the restraints of memory and history. The psychological aspects of his poetry are not confined, however, simply to freeing the poet from his past, but also establish the parameters of his personal relationships as they are explored in particular poems. The humane but inaccessible father, the mother who died while he was young, the wife who divorced him, nightmare figures, and even his contemporaries, all become for MacNeice avenues into the role of desire in subjective life, eliciting those longings through which the self is shaped and re-shaped.

Chapter Six will make the transition from the political and psychological contexts of MacNeice's poetry to the ways in which the concept of *alienation* affects his configurations of the human subject. I intend to utilize this concept in its more pedestrian definition of a state of being in which the subject is forced into a realization of its isolation from other subjects, as well as the natural world, rather than its strictly Marxist meaning. MacNeice did not write from a Marxist perspective, but rather as a poet whose ethical obligations to society were often confounded by a deep sense of estrangement from contemporary social life. MacNeice's writing is better accessed through the context of continental existentialism (which I will examine in Chapter Seven) than the more stringent economic and political ideologies, and his perception of the self and its relation to the world certainly has more existentialist tones than those of his contemporaries. Just as the sense of place is developed in the poetry, so too does the sense of self draw on a recognition of the human subject's consciousness of division,
multiplicity, and isolation. MacNeice’s work is at its most powerful when his love for the world of shared experience collides with the knowledge of loneliness, on both a personal level and that of human beings generally. Family, society, nature, and art all fall away as the poet strips the subject’s pretenses bare and faces the ambiguous nature of our perception of the world. It is these moments that charge MacNeice’s poems with the force and elusiveness of epiphany. The resulting poetic vision is one that encompasses the fragmentary nature of human consciousness and the elusiveness of natural phenomena.

The final chapter in this investigation will examine the various ways in which MacNeice posits the human subject as an anomaly that is not merely alienated socially or naturally, but also as an agent, both consciously and unconsciously, divided permanently from any uniform or stable subjective configuration. MacNeice’s perception of this basic separation is complex, yet it is through his constant investigations into the role the human individual plays within this world, and the various roles they are forced to assume, that bring out the most powerful and challenging elements in his poetry. There is a recognition in MacNeice’s work of the inevitable uniqueness of each human being, regardless of the determining factors placed on them historically, socially, and psychologically, that is both a source of ethical liberation and angst. Relying primarily on Sartre’s understanding of the ethical implications of this existentialist perspective, and Camus’ vision of human self-awareness and the indifference of reality as absurd, I will draw out the connections between MacNeice’s articulation of individual agency and responsibility. While establishing flux and change as basic features of the individual’s
experience of the world, MacNeice acknowledges the solidarity and community within
which these shifts in perspective occur, and the necessity for the ethical agent to
participate in social life.

Doubtless the revisionary process of reassessing MacNeice's work, and his
contribution to the never-ending debate on the nature of the human subject, will continue
as it does for most writers. This resuscitation of his work is important to our
understanding of twentieth-century history: social, artistic and intellectual. Beyond this
process of re-contextualization, however, remains the fact that MacNeice was one of the
poets writing in English in this century whose faith in the ability of the printed word to
move and inspire as well as manipulate and destroy remained unwavering. The
philosophical depth of his work is matched only by its technical precision and the
sincerity and accessibility of his use of language, and perhaps only Yeats can match the
scope of MacNeice's achievement. The relegation of the writing and reading of poetry in
the latter half of this century to isolation, an exercise of merely therapeutic value, reflects
a social dismissal of the cultural value such artistic endeavours retain. MacNeice was all
too keenly aware of this trend, foreseeing that poetry, "one of the chief embodiments of
human dignity" (MP 205), was fighting a losing battle, its champions no longer relevant.
And yet, MacNeice stands as an exemplum, a classical scholar unwilling to shut the
world out, writing in a language that retains its beauty and power to move, and insisting
that poetry is as alive and various as people.

Louis MacNeice died in 1963 from pneumonia, caught while recording sound
effects underground, his delight in the natural world and insistence that his art convey
this ironically betraying him. What he left behind was a somewhat puzzling career, that of a "thirties poet" who, it seemed, never really captured the attention of his own generation. Like the personas in his poetry, MacNeice remained a solitary figure, despite his limited success during his lifetime, never really able to commit to a world that was at once strange and familiar. The roles he played were those enacted in his poems, speaking for himself and those around him, but never satisfied, immersed in the flux that is human consciousness. In his poem "Autobiography," MacNeice envisioned the final change: "the chilly sun / saw me walk away alone" (CP 184, 22-23). This image captures MacNeice's vision of himself as an anomalous subject, the loneliness each person faces only serving to accentuate the manifold experiences that are a poet's gift to the world.

To posterity

When books have all seized up like the books in graveyards
And reading and even speaking have been replaced
By other, less difficult, media, we wonder if you
Will find in flowers and fruit the same colour and taste
They held for us for whom they were framed in words,
And will your grass be green, your sky be blue,
Or will your birds be always wingless birds? (CP 443)
Chapter One

"binding my feet to the floating past": MacNeice and memory

"...memory, even the memory of concepts, cannot exist apart from imagery."
Aristotle – De Memoria

"The idea of memory is an intersection."
Jacques Le Goff – History and Memory

The debates concerning the nature of the self have shaped the human quest for knowledge since ancient times, and have proliferated into full-scale ideological conflict in the twentieth century in both the political and intellectual spheres. The rise and influence of structuralism and deconstruction have further complicated our notion of the human subject, and in academic circles at least have contested humanist notions of self-identity. Global politics have mirrored this trend, fragmentation and balkanization at local, national and international levels subverting and interacting with the imposing ideologies of imperialism and religion. Into this complex cultural and political situation have arisen notions of the self as situated within language, the unconscious, race and gender, with the result that positions concerning subjectivity become interdiscursive choices, insertions of the human individual into various ideological frameworks. The ramifications of this categorization of the subject are being felt across the humanities and social sciences, in recent times particularly in the fields of sociology, psychology, and historiography. The assertion of scientific objectivity in these fields has been challenged by methodologies
acknowledging the mediating role of language and the numerous ideological commitments underlying the presuppositions of disciplines of knowledge. As a new millennium arrives, we seem far from establishing a coherent body of knowledge about, and method of investigation into, the nature of subjectivity.

Into this debate the concept of memory has re-emerged as a major focus of scholarship across the human sciences, with diverse fields of inquiry such as biology, clinical psychology, psychoanalysis, philosophy, history, and literary criticism attempting a cross-disciplinary merging of theory and praxis in order to navigate the variety of existing bodies of knowledge concerning the human subject. Historiographer Patrick Hutton notes that “terms such as habit, recollection, commemoration, image-making, representation, and tradition, once considered separately within particular disciplines, have become the currency of an interdisciplinary discourse” (1). Thus the philosophical genesis of subject has been relocated within various strategic ontologies, using memory as a locus of not only identity formation, but also desire, division and politics. Collective and individual memory have been enhanced by the idea, derived from linguistics, of a fundamental split in the self: the subject that remembers posits the past self as object, while that past “object-self” transforms the present subject. In other words, the “I” that articulates memory remembers a past, estranged self, and through the process of recollecting that self modifies present self-awareness. From this complex notion of memory arises the theory of a poetics of memory, functioning through the image, unconscious or conscious, that mediates this transformation. The image does not, however, come pristine to the individual, but is mediated by desire (what do I remember,
and how do I want to remember myself?) and cultural history. Hutton, whose work on the history of memory is an essential part of the revaluation of memory as an interdisciplinary point of contact, acknowledges that “memory is only able to endure within sustaining social contexts. Individual images of the past are provisional” (6). When used in the context of poetry, as we shall see through an examination of MacNeice's poems, these provisional memory-images form the basis not only of the poet's conception of self (past and present), but of the cultural image-pool in which he works.

Freud, the first to identify the role of desire in memory, asserts that the unconscious is memory, in the sense that “the unconscious is a storehouse of traces, inscriptions, remembrances, fantasies” (Cadava 65). The images provided by memory become, therefore, symptoms of narcissistic desire, the desire of oneself for oneself, dislocated temporally. Memory can therefore be seen as external to the conscious individual mind, operating as a source of imagery that can never be fully assimilated into the present subject, but remaining a tantalizing reminder of the individual's other. Slavoj Žižek has theorized that this is one of the reasons why “self-consciousness is the very opposite of self-transparency: I am aware of myself only insofar as outside of me a place exists where the truth about me is articulated” (67). The use of memory-images in poetry can often be seen, in light of this, as an attempt to confess the truth about oneself, but which ends up actually relocating the subject's self-awareness through the transformative power of the image itself. Personality and memory are therefore inextricably linked, but not in a linear fashion that provides a stable, uniform identity.
Mary Warnock, for instance, insists that "the sense of personal identity that each of us has is a sense of continuity through time. We could not have this without memory" (75). On the surface this seems a reasonable analysis of the formation and continuity of subjectivity, but it is misleading because the fragmentary images we receive from memory simply do not support the idea of a continuous self over time informed by personal recollection; the life-narrative based on memory does not come to an individual ready-made, but is constructed after the fact through a narrativization process variously termed analysis, autobiography, and confession. As in a poetic text, so does individual human memory utilize fragmented, disjointed or often arbitrarily connected images that constantly shape and reshape the conscious and unconscious mind of the subject.

Memory is not, therefore, a temporal experience, at least in the sense of memory being the mental function that makes us aware of ourselves as temporally unified along a linear axis. This experience must first pass through language, mediated by narrative form, and therefore becomes stylized, even atemporal in the mind of the subject.

MacNeice was keenly aware of the discontinuous nature of memory-images, and used them in his poetry as a means to relocate the self in the present, rather than to establish an imaginary continuity with his past self. In his 1949 essay "Experiences with Images," MacNeice discusses the implications that the recollection of childhood images had on his early poetry:

These circumstances between them must have supplied me with many images of fear, anxiety, loneliness or monotony (to be used very often quite out of a personal context). They may also explain – by reaction –
what I now think an excessive preoccupation in my earlier verse with things dazzling, high-coloured, quick-moving, hedonistic or up-to-date.

(SC 160)

MacNeice acknowledges here three important aspects of memory as a source for imagery: first, that the past as remembered “supplies” images rather than a coherent narrative; second, that these images are summoned by the poet, consciously or not, to inform his/her interpretation of the relationship between world and self; third, that the poet in the present reacts to these images in his/her verse, but not necessarily directly, nor in a manner transparent to interpretation either by the poet or reader: that is, they are filtered by culture and language. Through the voice of the speaker of any given poem, then, the poet must retrieve memory-images in a context, and by doing so transform both images and context. Autobiographical narrative and poetry, sharing the common element of a split narrativizing/narrativized subject, can utilize these images to relocate the present subject within any number of contexts, and MacNeice does this – at least on one level – to analyze and resist the interpellative forces of ideology and history. This is not to say that memory-images are free from these forces, but MacNeice often utilizes them in order to dislocate the speaking subject from the previously unexamined position he has occupied in relation to the dominant ideologies that went into his formation and socialization.

Before moving to a closer examination of MacNeice's poems in particular, however, it is useful to point out the distinctions that narrative theory has brought to our understanding of autobiographical discourse in general. Paul Smith summarizes the
complications of the filter of language on memory:

The subject of the discours, the ‘I’ that speaks, is immediately not available as the ‘subject’ of the récit [the story of the past self] but is rather the organizing ‘subject,’ different from the putative or desired ‘subject’ of the récit. This split corresponds to what structural linguists describe as a division in any utterance between the ‘subject of the enunciation’ and the ‘subject of the enounced’: ‘I’ does not talk about or correspond to ‘I’: rather, ‘I’ talks about ‘me.’ (105)

This basic difference that divides the speaking subject from the subject spoken of functions in poetry much as it does in prose autobiography, with the result that any interpretation of “autobiographical” poetry must recognize the distinction between subjects past (me, he or she) and present (speaking subject, narrator), as well as the historically distinct poet, who is manipulating the speaking subject and drawing upon memory-images that have been filtered by the unconscious and the culture in which these images and the poet are embedded. MacNeice’s critics and interpreters have often relied on fairly straightforward biographical interpretation, assuming a direct correspondence between the poet, his voice, and the past subject, and much of the complexity and subtlety of MacNeice’s work has therefore been overlooked.

The following examination of the workings of memory and memory-images in MacNeice’s poetry will therefore proceed under the assumption that these three subjects are distinct but related in composition, and that through the unresolved tension between them MacNeice seeks to obviate the pressures which can cern the self. He was aware,
too, that the concept of a continuous conscious existence, shaped by memory and driven
by progress, is an illusion, and that by accepting this illusion one accepts the interpellative
forces (and master narratives) that shape subjectivity, causing stagnation – for MacNeice
the worst of all possible fates. A passage from The Strings Are False makes this clear:
“Our life being so episodic we are always wanting to hitch our wagon to the stars. Which
cannot be done. This romantic self-indulgence is in fact a self-abdication” (21).
MacNeice felt that to seek unity is to be doomed to failure, and his use of memory-
images and the personal past reflect not a need to become one with the past self, but to
shore up some fragments against the ruins, and embrace flux and discontinuity. His
poems are often both stylistically and philosophically directed towards this goal.

Like many writers, Louis MacNeice wrote extensively, in both poetry and prose,
about his recollections of childhood, but it is worth noting that very rarely does he
attempt to recreate past scenes in his poetry. More often childhood memories are used
to communicate the poet’s perception of the world, particularly in its social, artistic and
geographical contexts. One of his earliest published poems, “Trains in the Distance”
(1926) does reflect directly on the childhood scene, but MacNeice uses it,
characteristically, as an avenue into an understanding of death and alienation. The poem
begins with images rooted in experience:

    Trains came threading through my dozing childhood,
    Gentle murmurs nosing through a summer quietude,
    Drawing in and out, in and out, their smoky ribbons,
    Parting now and then, and launching full-rigged galleons
And scrolls of smoke that hung in a shifting epitaph. \((CP\,3,\,1-5)\)

The imagery and rhythm here are simple (reminiscent of Dylan Thomas), the speaking voice approaching the subject of modern industrial society (here in the form of trains) from the child's vantage point, but underneath is a deliberate use of memory-images that undermines the past self's perspective. Smoke hanging in a “shifting epitaph” is an image of a different order from “full-rigged galleon,” the speaker of the poem undermining the idyll of childhood with a more adult diction. The poem turns at this point to a more mature reflection in the final lines: “Till all was broken by that menace from the sea, / The steel-bosomed siren calling bitterly.” The metaphors in this poem are mixed here, the poet combining the memory-images of childhood with the anxieties of the mature speaker, turning a fond recollection into an acknowledgement of fear and death (symbolized ambiguously by the sea, also a symbol of escape and alienation). D.B. Moore, noting that these images “form an early stratum of experiences which persists in one's work just as it persists in one's dreams” \((33)\), intimates the nature of these memories: they are disconnected, as in dreams, and mean less to the speaker as evidence of continuity with the past self than symptoms of a simultaneous acceptance of the modern world and fear of the realities of adult life.

MacNeice's poems about childhood often take a more detached tone, while still dwelling on the displaced fear of the speaker projected back into his memories, as in “Intimations of Mortality,” in which the recollected dream images are of nightmare, focused on family relationships and religion:

The little boy cannot go to sleep.
He is afraid of God and the Devil—

If he shuts his eyes they will draw level,

So he watches the half-open door and waits

For people on the stairs carrying lights.  

(CP 28-29, 4-8)

The use of the third person here indicates a desire for detachment and objectivity, the speaking voice seeking to rewrite the past self as a distinct identity, though the scene is that of MacNeice's childhood in his father's rectory at Carrickfergus. Peter McDonald, defending MacNeice from accusations of liberal humanism, identifies this pretence of objectivity as "the need to renounce the 'private', isolated relation to external reality" (80). The poem's narrative is structured, therefore, in such a way as to de-personalize the poet's childhood memories. As such, however, it fails, the fragmentary images of the poem remaining specific to the speaker's past, as we can see in the descent into nightmare images in the penultimate stanza: "The tick of his pulse in the pillow, the sick / Vertigo of falling in a fanged pit" (29, 15-16). These are not the recollections of a detached observer, but the specific retrieval, by MacNeice, of images tied up in the fears of the young son of an Anglican clergyman, as we see in the final stanza where the remaining images — which by themselves would be emotionally neutral — retain this element of fearfulness:

After one perfunctory kiss

His parents snore in conjugal bliss.

The night watchman with crossed thumbs

Grows an idol. The Kingdom comes....  

(17-20)
Again, here the speaker uses the images of childhood to encode the vertiginous fear embedded in the poet's psyche by a stern religious upbringing. The element of desire here is for a release that can never come, a past that cannot be changed, and a unity with the subject's memory that is impossible.

MacNeice takes on childhood memories more directly in another early poem, “Eclogue Between the Motherless,” structured as a conversation between two youngsters, “A” and “B,” about going home for the holidays (“going home” being used in the poem as a metaphor for the journey back to a lost childhood, and as a representation of cultural dislocation). “A” discovers the desire and fear of reaching back to the past:

Quite a good time on the whole at home for the holiday
As far as it went—In a way it went too far,
Back to childhood, back to the backwoods mind;
I could not stand a great deal of it,
bars on the brain…. (CP 48, 9-13)

The unconscious becomes identified with memory here (“the backwoods mind” is identified with “bars on the brain”), and as an evocation of loneliness and self-alienation becomes further complicated as “A” attempts to communicate these feelings as aspects of his memory:

And so I got haunted. Like a ball of wool
That kittens have got at, all my growing up
All the disposed-of process of my past
Unravelled on the floor—One can't proceed any more

Except on a static past…. (49, 59-63)

Here revisiting the scene of childhood is, for the speaker, a conflation of present and past, the continuity of his life ("process of my past") being shattered, forcing an acknowledgement that in order to live at all one must freeze the past and its images in order to give them meaning. The speaker moves from a sense of being "haunted" to a specific memory of his mother, the scene of memory becoming inscribed with an essential guilt: "And I kept having dreams and kept going back in the house. / A sense of guilt like a scent - The day I was born / I suppose that that same hour was full of her screams" (49, 67-69). The speaker identifies the moment of birth as the scene of guilt (importantly identified with the sense of smell) that will never leave him, a memory beyond memory that, like the image of his mother, can never be evaded. This guilt becomes the root of the confessional impulse, forcing the poet to re-evaluate constantly the past in order to create a refuge from the primary trauma of his life.

The poem thus takes on the form of a confession, "A" feeling a compulsion to detail the scene of primal guilt to "B," conflating reality and dreams and the fragments of images into a narrative of anxiety. It is worthwhile to analyze this piece in terms of the discourse of confession that Foucault details in *The History of Sexuality*; he begins with the blanket statement "Western man has become a confessing animal" (59). He goes on to state that literature has metamorphosed into "the infinite task of extracting from the depths of oneself; in between the words, a truth which the very form of the confession holds out like a shimmering mirage." The formal confession in Catholic practice (the
importance of which MacNeice understood) is quite similar to what “A” is attempting in “Eclogue Between the Motherless,” where in the presence of an interlocutor/priest (“B”) he summons up the fragments of the past in order to face his own guilt and be absolved. Foucault goes on to note that the confession is based on “the self-examination that yields, through a multitude of fleeting impressions, the basic certainties of consciousness” (60).

This process, in other words, constitutes the “subject” in both senses of the word: the “I” that speaks, and the “me” that is embedded within (and created by) the confessional discourse, or in this case poem. Within this poem, therefore, is a complex relationship, manifestly between “A” and “B,” but actually within the divided subject. MacNeice is not merely exploiting a secondary subject (speaker) in order to reconstitute a coherent past narrative, but is enacting a ritual whereby the future self can be modified. Foucault identifies this as a “ritual in which the expression alone, independently of its external consequences, produces intrinsic modifications in the person who articulates it” (60). It is not simply a matter of articulating the past in order to exorcise it though, as “A” understands, but is in fact the creation of a metaphorical past reconstructed from fragmentary memory-images, the creation indeed of a “static past” which is symptomatic of a fear of overwhelming flux in the present.

As in Freudian analysis, Foucault’s conception of confession is incomplete without “the one who assimilated and recorded it” (66), in the poem represented on one level by “B,” whose brief interruptions and questions closely mirror the role of the analyst or priest, repeating “Who is the woman?” and “What is her name?”, enacting the compulsion to articulate the other that is intrinsic to “A’s” goal of self-transformation.
MacNeice goes to great lengths to mirror the analytical scene, and "A" is compelled to articulate the dream-logic of his memory:

Wait till you hear what I've done.
It was not only dreams; even the crockery (odd
It's not all broken by now) and the rustic seat in the rockery
With the bark flaked off, all kept reminding me, binding
My feet to the floating past. In the night at the lodge
A dog was barking as when I was little in the night
And I could not budge in the bed clothes. Lying alone
I felt my legs were paralysed into roots
And the same cracks in what used to be the nursery ceiling
Gave me again the feeling I was young among ikons,
Helpless at the feet of faceless family idols,
Walking the tightrope over the tiger-pit,
Running the gauntlet of inherited fears. \( \text{(CP 49, 71-83)} \)

The confession takes on a dreamlike conflation of the past here, a complicated gesture in which "A" recreates how he remembered remembering, the ways in which his mother haunted him as a spectre of guilt. Again, the coherence we traditionally associate with a memory-narrative is absent, this narrative being replaced by the discourse of nightmare, almost common in its imagery ("legs paralysed into roots," "faceless idols," and "the tightrope"). The poet's memory is not operating as an incentive to self-exploration, but as the means to modify the subject's desire: desire of the (m)other, desire for continuity
with the past, desire for self-identity. Paradoxically, “A’s” articulation of this desire brings with it the realization it is impossible to consummate, and all “B” is left with are “splinters of memory” (CP 50, 100).

Few other poets of this century have returned to these “splinters” more often than MacNeice, and his work is characterized by constant evaluations of the scene of his childhood in the north of Ireland, particularly in his famous 1937 poem “Carrickfergus,” which gives the poet occasion to analyze Ireland from a native’s perspective, but also in less socially-oriented poems, such as “Order to View.” The latter revolves around revisiting his childhood home in Carrickfergus, and the speaker is startled by the changes within himself and the scene:

We had been there before
But memory, weak in front of
A blistered door, could find
Nothing alive now. (CP 169, 3-6)

The use of “we” constitutes a new development in MacNeice’s technique of using memory-images, as the speaker is alone, suggesting an awareness of the inevitable transformations life has wrought (engendering multiple selves), bleakly mirrored by the forsaken house and landscape, “a crypt / Of leafmould dreams” (170, 7-8). There is a curious logic to this poem, where the second stanza immerses the reader in ambiguous imagery of decay (“The pear trees had come loose / From rotten loops,” and “The world was closed”), only to reverse this with a sudden revelation in the final stanza:

Near at hand

36
Somewhere in a loose-box

A horse neighed

And all of the curtains flew out of

The windows; the world was open.     (170, 29-33)

While following the associational logic of a dream, however, memory remains in this poem a closed system, the speaker being freed by an external event (the horse neighing) rather than the ameliorating effects of a return to the present.

Similarly, in “Autobiography” the memory of childhood is enmeshed in nightmare and guilt from which the speaker finds release, but only through turning his back on the past. Set in childlike rhyming couplets differentiated by the refrain “Come back early or never come,” the poem begins with the diction and imagery appropriate to early childhood: “In my childhood trees were green / And there was plenty to be seen,” and “My mother wore a yellow dress; / Gently, gently, gentleness” (CP 183). The recreation of childhood memory through simple diction here is similar to the opening of Joyce’s *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (and Thomas’ “Fern Hill”\(^1\)), and is similarly narrated from the perspective of the mature speaker. His mother’s death is the occasion for the turn in the poem, but MacNeice retains the simple diction: “When I was five the black dreams came; / Nothing after was quite the same” (183, 10-11). The poet identifies the psychological trauma as the death of his mother (never overtly stated), but there is an increasing sense of the speaker’s isolation, not only from family and

---

\(^1\) Compare MacNeice’s lines with Thomas’: “And I was green and carefree, famous among the barns...” (“Fern Hill”).
surroundings ("When my silent terror cried, / Nobody, nobody replied"), but also in a more subtle way from that past self that is being examined. The irony of the title becomes clearer with the realization that this "autobiography" is another fragment (albeit a decisive one psychologically that indicates issues of separation are crucial to this life-story), and pinpoints a moment of transformation into the speaking subject's adult loneliness that the speaker projects back onto his past self: "I got up; the chilly sun / Saw me walk away alone" (184, 22-23). As in "Order to View," the speaker's awareness of a gap in self-understanding is ironized by his awareness of the present self as sundered from the past and discontinuous.

MacNeice's poems written directly concerning childhood are not always successful as accounts of the complex subjective nexus that memory provides, as in the 1944 poem "When We Were Children." The opening stanza does show a subtle understanding of how a child acquires language, however:

When we were children words were coloured
(Harlot and murder were dark purple)
And language was a prism, the light
A conjured inlay on the grass,
Whose rays to-day are concentrated
And language grown a burning-glass. (CP 214, 1-6)

It becomes obvious in the final stanza, however, that these musings on how our understanding of language changes as we age is the occasion for the speaker to reflect on "the adult, historical necessities of content and context" (Longley 103):
Now we are older and our talents
Accredited to time and meaning,
To handsel joy requires a new
Shuffle of cards behind the brain. (CP 214, 13-16)

The idea of change is still present here in the shuffling of the cards, as is the desire to forge a lost unity of "time and meaning." This utopian version of memory, especially in those poems in which MacNeice uses it as a springboard for intellectual argument, remains contested by the flux and impermanence imposed on the remembering subject by the experience of aging.

Terence Brown has pointed out how MacNeice uses the imagery of memory and experience to acknowledge the "imaginary country" of childhood (SV 101), to which the poet returns not only for a subject, but also as one possible source of imagery that parallels the present self's understanding of the world. Thus in "Soap Suds" the aging poet notices that "This brand of soap has the same smell as once in the big / House he visited when he was eight" (CP 517, 1-2), which in turn sets the scene for the poem in which the mature speaker relives the details of this once-forgotten house from childhood. Now, however, "a grown-up voice cries Play!", the authorial voice inaugurating a ghostly game of croquet that leads, as in the previous poems we have looked at, to a recognition of loss and self-alienation: "But the ball is lost and the mallet slipped long since from the hands / Under the running tap that are not the hands of a child" (15-16). The anxiety of the speaker is thinly masked by self-reference in the third person ("To which he has now returned"), and the imaginary identification of the speaking subject
with the “me,” a false narcissistic gesture completely undermined by the final lines. The imaginary country is not always perceived as an invention of the self in MacNeice's poems about childhood, although it is in poems such as “Twelfth Night” – “Snow-happy hicks of a boy's world” (CP 219, 1); in “Easter Returns” – “Easters of childhood heaped in motley shards” (CP 458, 1); and “Notes for a Biography” – “An oranges (sweet) and lemons (bitter) childhood” (CP 475, 1). There is a joyous remembrance of the world of childhood here, but it is mediated by deliberate self-consciousness (and the inevitable mediation of language), revealed in the “bittersweet” emotions provoked by such memories that can cut like “shards” as much as they can be “snow-happy.” MacNeice's acknowledgement of this dual emotive response to memories is indicative of the balance his poetry consistently struggles to achieve.

MacNeice’s longer topical poems, “Autumn Journal” (1938) and “Autumn Sequel” (1953), although avowedly reportorial in nature and tied to the fall of the year in which they were written, nevertheless draw extensively on the images provided by the poet’s memory. Indeed, both poems, as poetic “journals,” utilize immediate memory as the source of content and form. There is an element of risk in this for the poet, who must straddle the line between the personal and the social, holding them together in a tenuous balance. As Le Goff has noted, “to privilege memory excessively is to sink into the unconquerable flow of time” (xii), and as historical documents these long poems delve into personal and social history in order to control this “unconquerable flow,” if only momentarily. As he states in the preface to “Autumn Journal,” this combination is precisely what MacNeice was attempting to merge, the significance of personal events –
as they are remembered – being immersed in the surrounding historical realities: "It is the nature of this poem to be neither final nor balanced. I have certain beliefs which, I hope, emerge in the course of it but which I have refused to abstract from their context" (CP 101). Using memory in this way foregrounds the separation between the speaking subject’s present and the events, historical and personal, that are retrieved in order to transform the speaker’s understanding of current and future events. Jean Piaget, critiquing the anti-historical elements of Freudianism, singles out the act of reconstruction as the site of indeterminacy in the psychoanalytic experience, which can be extended to the subjective scenario mapped out in the structure of memory writing in general:

What this operation [analysis] yields is the subject’s current conception of his past, and not a direct knowledge of this past....The past is reconstructed in relation to the present just as the present is explained by the past. There is interaction. For orthodox Freudians the past determines the adult’s current behaviour. But then how can this past be known?

Through memories which are themselves reconstructed in a context, which is the context of the present and in relation to this present. (181)

What has been undermined, therefore, is not our ability to remember the past, but the imaginary objectivity of our own relation to the past, and the impossibility of bringing it into a discourse, whether analytic or poetic, without the subject’s understanding of both past and present being mutually changed. For MacNeice, this is a strength, allowing him in his two longer poems to engage in a dialectic of personal memory and historical
context, each mutually informing the other, creating a new perception of self and world in the process.

The process of “Autumn Journal,” then, relies heavily on the intersection between private memory and public history, but the speaker is wracked by doubt and pessimism: doubting the validity or even relevance of the past, both personal and social, to a world on the brink of madness and war, and pessimistic for the future, especially in the opening cantos:

    Glory to God in the Lowest, peace beneath the earth,
    Dumb and deaf at the nadir;
    I wonder now whether anything is worth
    The eyelid opening and the mind recalling.  

(\textit{CP} 104, II 13-16)

The speaker is caught at the lowest point, personally and historically, and the rest of the poem is dedicated to finding methods of avoiding the extreme depression forced upon the poet by impending slaughter and difficult political choices. This depression finds its source in the Spanish Civil War, a battleground of belief that MacNeice had visited and came to symbolize the best and worst of Europe's collective memory: “And I remember Spain / At Easter ripe as an egg for revolt and ruin” (110, VI 1-2). The obvious outlet from this intolerable sense of impending disaster is escapism, a personal ploy mirroring the shameful retreats of Chamberlain at the conference table, and the speaker retreats “into the green / Fields in the past of English history; / Flies in the bonnet and dust on the screen / And no look back to the burning city” (116, VII 61-64). Sentimental escape, however, is instantly undermined by the realization that memories of a past untainted by
politics are misleading:

That was then and now is now,

Here again on a passing visit,

Passing through but how

Memory blocks the passage.

Just as in Nineteen-Thirty-One

Sun shines easy but I no longer

Docket a place in the sun. (116, VII 65-71)

The speaker recognizes here that memory is also interdiction, historical context irrevocably changing the subject's relation to the past, forbidding any final escape from self and history. Much of the rest of "Autumn Journal" is therefore an attempt at re-evaluating the personal past, not in relation to an objective present, but as a source of memory images that are symptomatic of subjective division and loss, relieved only by the recognition of a human continuity holding out the possibility of change:

Sleep, my body, sleep, my ghost,

Sleep, my parents and grand-parents,

And all those I have loved the most:

One man's coffin is another's cradle. (151, XXIV 1-4)

"Autumn Sequel," generally thought by critics (and MacNeice) as less successful than its predecessor, is much more consistently informed by the poet's private memories and, written in the early fifties, lacks the forceful historical context of 1938. Even more so than "Autumn Journal," therefore, it takes on the form of a confession, particularly
obsessed with the death of close friends (notably Dylan Thomas and Graham Shepard) and the effects personal relationships have on the poet's subjective awareness. The tone is much darker than in "Autumn Journal," reflecting both a sense of personal lack and social stasis. The poem begins with a stark realization of the poet's estrangement from his past self, and the inevitable split that memory brings to poetic utterance:


Castle your king in sand; as the dog days die,

I hate the grey void that crams the guts of the doll

And deplore each megrim and moan I scrawled on the sky

In my hand of unformed smoke those fifteen years

A-going, a-going, ago, I to I

Is not for that self and me; the long surge nears

The crumbling drawbridge and the tears of things

Will drown out his and mine and all such partial tears.  (CP 331, I 1-9)

With "render unto Caesar" the poet implies history itself as the confessional interlocutor. The image of the parrot, endlessly repeating truisms, appears repeatedly in the poem, indicating a sense of meaning being lost, mirrored by the image of the void in the doll, a de-humanized vision of the subject's lack of purpose and vision. The second stanza reinforces the speaker's feeling of helplessness, the poet who wrote "Autumn Journal" being reduced to the metonymy of "hand of unformed smoke," a lost past self forever
unapproachable except as a source of guilt and emptiness. The illusory correspondence, or continuity, between the selves past and present is therefore broken — “I to I / Is not for that self and me” — and the speaker is left to sift through the traces of memory as they disappear. Lacan has, in a psychoanalytic context, identified the cause of the subject's fascination with the dead past: “In effect, it is in the disintegration of the imaginary unity constituted by the ego [“I to I”] that the subject finds the signifying material of his symptoms. And it is from the sort of interest aroused in him by the ego that the significations that turn his discourse away from those symptoms proceed” (137). This turning away from the symptoms of lack and split subjectivity is, in a sense, what defines the search for meaning that the speaker embarks upon in “Autumn Sequel,” an attempt to elicit from the parrot a way of speaking the past that is, if not true, at least symptomatic of a possible truth about the self.

Focussing on personal memories, therefore, the poet seeks to revive the ghosts of the past, not to resurrect them, but as narcissistic mirrors of a personal lack at the core of his being. Mikkel Borch-Jacobsen defines this process as one in which “emptied of any substance, in all rigor null, the subject continues to subsist in the representation of its lack, in the closed combinative of signifiers in which it stubbornly continues to self-represent itself, always vanishing but always, upon its disappearance, re-emerging” (Cadava 64). The past self MacNeice constructs in “Autumn Sequel” constantly re-emerges, most often in the form of a spectral presence representing a fear of living death and decay:

Our flesh goes gooseflesh and our earlobes tingle
Because he speaks of us; his long hair leaks
Into our minds and his great web-feet plash
Over our graves, making our bones antiques.  (CP 351, V 90-93).

Here the lack at the core of being which the past self was meant to fill turns to nightmare, and the other threatens to disrupt or destroy the speaker’s ability to conceive of any coherent selfhood at all. In Canto XIII the speaker identifies this as an emotive rather than intellectual or physical response to his past self: “I stand outside / This past but feel it” (384, 98-99), and as the poem takes on the ritual of confessional discourse, the ghosts of the past (both of the past self and dead friends) recede: “All devils and fancy spent, only an ache / Where once there was an anguish” (399, XVII 40-41). The speaking subject finds the representation of the past self as it is filtered by memory is another kind of loss, although with the ameliorating effect of turning anguish to ache:

    My sense of value now as driving by

    The gates of youth I see youth dawdle down,

    Chalk on its shoes, to pass those gates where I

For five years kept on sidestepping the frown
Of an unrecording angel, till it occurred
To me that, whatever purpose or renown

May lie in a record, it remains absurd
To expect an angel to keep it for one, so
I began to keep it myself, word upon fumbling word.

Which was the easier, once I came to know
Gavin, Stretton, and Hilary, all of whom
Living those same years through in the same rut below

These timeless downs, found time enough and room
To keep their records too. When thus befriended,
We feel less need of angels; and our doom,

Though certain, seems — for a moment or two — suspended.

(423, XXII 125-140)

The past becomes a document, recorded by poets not as historical evidence, but as an ever-changing voice in the wilderness, momentarily halting the unconquerable flow of time, paradoxically affirming the subject's ability to perceive itself across time and the inevitability of "our doom," the finality of death.

The human subject's consciousness being tied to a temporal axis, it is not surprising that memory should inform the poet's imagery and content, but MacNeice did not always use the idea of memory in order to demonstrate the fundamental split between past and present selves, even when the subject is still death. In "The Stygian Banks," an extended phenomenological meditation, the speaker finds that the gap between present and past is not unbridgeable, although the workings of memory as it informs subjectivity
remain complicated by language:

We have no word for the bridges between our present
Selvess and our past selves or between ourselves and others
Or between one part of ourselves and another part,
Yet we must take it as spoken, the bridge is there
Or how could your child's hoop cross it? (CP 259, II 23-27).

This succinct acknowledgement of the many gaps that divide the self from self and world is combined with the realization that the mere fact we can speak to, or through, these gaps in the many ways that we do gives the human subject some limited freedom.

MacNeice is led, therefore, to a paradox typical of his poetry: the divided self that cannot access the past except through the conjuring trick of metaphor and confession nevertheless is determined by that past in ways that can only momentarily be deflected.

As the speaker of "Valediction" tells us, "I cannot deny my past to which my self is wed,
/ The woven figure cannot undo its thread" (CP 53, 43-44). The process of memory for the poet is therefore one of creating new woven figures from the threads of the past self, a process of renunciation, announcement and creation that MacNeice terms "memory in apostasy" (52, 38).

Through memory MacNeice comes to a conclusion familiar in his poetry: the power of flux, impermanence and change forces the divided self to divide itself anew, to reconfigure his/her perception of the world, as he shows in "An April Manifesto":

We never come full circle, never remember
Self behind self years without number,
A series of dwindling mirrors, but take a tangent line

And start again. (CP 25, 6-9)

The poet does not seek to reconstitute the self in a newly affirmed unity, but takes the inevitability of a divided subjectivity (as well as the knowledge that the past self can only be reconstructed, never directly accessed) and turns it to advantage, contesting the notion of a permanent, static self and so celebrating the possibilities for renewal and tangential creation. Smith identifies this ability of the speaking subject to obviate the force of memory: “even if the ‘subject’ establishes certain forms of consistency or repetition by way of its imaginary identifications [or memory-images] (and here it is understood that the demand that such identifications be made is a fundamental interpellation), these are continually vulnerable to the registration of ever renewed and contradictory interpellations” (106). Despite its interpellative force, memory and its images can therefore supply a field in language that offers contexts and combinations that resist the ideologies encoded in it. Memory can be many things: fulcrum, confession, symptom, and especially an intersection:


Ribbons grow faded, clappers cracked.

What to the child was loss or gain -

Who knows? was never fact.

Movable? asks the man; you mean removed.

And yet, whether our childhood stand disproved

49
Or not, the myth returns, the stone
Is rolled away once more, the grooved
Sad earth still finds her own
Resurrection in corn. As man can find
The same green shooting from the wounded mind.

(from "Easter Returns," CP 458, 17-27)
Chapter Two

“So the kiss of the past is narcotic”: MacNeice and history

“The days gone by
Return upon me almost from the dawn
Of life; the hiding-places of man’s power
Open; I would approach them, but they close.”
Wordsworth – The Prelude

“’Not that you lied to me but that I no longer believe you – that is what has distressed me.’”
Nietzsche – Beyond Good and Evil

Poetry and history have been intertwined for as long as writing and oral communication have existed. The relationship between the two has been a matter of considerable debate, though, from the early Greeks onward, and the various theories of literary historians, philosophers and historiographers that have emerged in the twentieth century have not, and perhaps cannot, resolve the divisions surrounding the nature of their interdependence. That the historical, as both real events and surviving texts, is one of the determining factors in the use of language and interpretation is undeniable, and the way that we understand history is thus intertwined with the way in which we interpret all other cultural artifacts and events. Myth, epic, tragedy, elegy, even the lyric, and many other literary forms have their roots in maintaining and dispensing a historical record, but these forms do not come to the contemporary reader free of the biases of selection and the fields of ideology. Hence the project, across many disciplines, in this century of
writing and re-writing alternative histories is one of the central thrusts in the re-
evaluation of how the past is constructed and what configurations of power traditional
historical writing perpetuates (specifically the deflection of a past that has been
deliberately cleansed of the personal, anecdotal histories of subjugated peoples). Cultural
history, long ignored as merely a footnote to the inheritance of generations to come, has
also come to the fore through this never-ending revisionary process.

Most poetry tends to be read as devoid of any particular historical context: it
does not concern itself directly with historical events, and therefore may be interpreted as
ahistorical. Of course, this is to ignore the real historical events surrounding the
composition and publication of every literary work, not to mention the author's own
inevitable involvement in the discourses prevailing at the time of composition, and finally
the reader's inevitable investment in certain culturally modified attitudes. Not only the
assumption of objectivity in poetic texts, however, has been thoroughly undermined in
the past two centuries, but this pretence in the practice of historical writing itself has also
come under serious attack, most notably from historiographers such as Hayden White
and various post-structural theorists and deconstructionists. Le Goff analyzes this shift in
perspective in order to emphasize the writing of history, both within the discipline and in
literary works, as a social practice: “The ‘unique’ character of historical events, and the
historian's need to mix narrative and explanation, have made history a literary genre, an
art at the same time as a science” (xix). This blurring of the lines traditionally
differentiating literary from historical practice has brought about various challenges
seeking to undermine this post-structuralist perspective, most notably from that strain of
literary criticism that has come to be known as New Criticism.¹ The debates between New Critical and New Historicism critics concerning the interrelationship of history and poetry have come to symbolize the opposing critical attitudes towards the function of poetry prevalent in this century.

The most serious challenge to traditional literary interpretation along historical lines has come from the growing recognition that "the historical fact is constructed and that documents are not innocent" (Le Goff xviii). This has led, almost inevitably, to a fundamental scepticism in which notions of objectivity and truth are often abandoned. As Le Goff goes on to note, citing among others Michel de Certeau, "history is also a social practice," and thus while pretensions to objective truth have been undermined, the historian and the historically-oriented poet are yet capable of considering and rejecting certain historically-determined subject positions. As in the case of memory and the poetic subject, so too does the force of historical circumstance impinge upon the awareness of any poet, yet there still remains a field of choice in which the subject may reconstitute his/her relationships with the dominant historical fictions. For this reason alone it is necessary for a critic of poetry to take seriously both the historical forces at work within the poet's milieu, as well as those historical topics and events that find their way into the poems themselves.

In the wake of deconstruction historiography has undergone significant

¹ John Crowe Ransom's book The New Criticism (1941) is generally heralded as the first major articulation of this critical position, which focuses solely on the interior properties of a text, ignoring biographical or historical context. I.A. Richards and William Empson have also been closely associated with this movement.
transformations, and while many historians still practise their craft in a fairly traditional way that does not take into account the fact of their imposing upon the subjects at hand narratives conditioned by their own culture, many have taken up the challenge articulated by Hayden White to write history with a dual awareness. By demonstrating how a historical narrative endows both itself and the past with meaning, certain crucial questions applicable also to the study of poetry are raised, as Alun Munslow outlines in his study of White: “Does the prison house of language mean that we can never escape to truth? Does the form of our historical reconstruction directly condition or constitute our interpretation?” (142). One can see in poetic works such as MacNeice’s “Autumn Journal” that this insistence on an alternative form for representing history – a rare combination of the long-form personal journal expressed in couplets – clearly affects both the poet’s and the reader’s understanding of how historical events can be related. There is no pretension to objective truth, but rather an insistence on the validity and usefulness of the “imposed or invented meaning” (Munslow 142) as an alternative to the interpellative force of history’s grand narratives. Both the New Critical and New Historicism approaches in literary criticism can access these meanings, the former through a detailed study of a poem’s inner tensions as they relate to the historical vision of the poem as a whole, and the latter through careful examination of the biographical and cultural/historical traces in which each work is embedded.

A particular poetic work’s relationship to history is therefore complicated by the lack of a correspondence between language and that which is described, by the imposition of narrative form, and by the relative stances taken towards the historical
between poet and reader. The past is not banished as a reality from a poem that takes it as its direct subject, however, as Harold Tolliver notes in his 1981 study *The Past That Poets Make*: “The past that poems reflect is not totally decomposed in them, merely recomposed, as they share with internal recollection the quality of vivid dreams” (3). The fictionalization of the past through poetry – be it MacNeice's long journal poems, Yeats' explorations into Celtic mythology, or W.H. Auden's biting political satire – is in effect the attempt to reconstitute the past in order to modify the future; the “dream” is reorganized by the poet to fit this vision, and to deflect the forces he or she sees as the most stifling in historical narratives. The literary struggle against determining forces such as history defines much of the twentieth century, from Yeats to Plath, Eliot to Heaney, and those works which are most successful in redefining the subject's relationship to history are precisely those that manage to reconfigure it into new forms and symbols, seeking to engage the experience of the historical rather than relate events or determine their meaning.

MacNeice wrote a great deal of literary criticism devoted to studying how the poet must encounter such forces without giving in to oversimplification of the human awareness of the experience of history, both past and present, and merely perpetuating the dominant myths of the culture in which he/she is writing. His position is most clearly stated in a 1935 article titled “Poetry To-Day,” published in Geoffrey Grigson's *The Arts To-Day*.

Poetry to-day is seen (contrast Aristotle with twentieth-century philosophers) to have affinities with history. History is not, for most
people, a science; they read it because they take its persons and events as symbols. But symbols of what? The whole point, perhaps, is that we do not know what they symbolize. Philosophies of history over-simplify and cheapen, just as psycho-analysis tends to over-simplify and cheapen our dreams. (SLC 36)

We can see here MacNeice's familiar insistence that although a certain topic (in this case a historical event) is the occasion for a poem, the experience of the poem should not be reduced to a resolved dialectic or simple correspondence: scientific objectivity in the field of history is unmanageable, and therefore any conclusions drawn from an encounter with it are provisional and subjective. Rather than merely avoiding history — either that long ago past or the staggering events unfolding in Europe at the time — MacNeice engages it in the same way he did childhood memories: as a source of symbols through which external historical forces could be modified and re-formed. As he states in Modern Poetry, published three years later as the Munich Crisis loomed, “History is recognized as something having a shape and still alive, something more than a mere accumulation of random and dead facts” (17). That history is “alive,” then, means that its “shape” is always shifting as new cultural circumstances arise which the subject must negotiate.

There are three central threads to MacNeice's articulation of the subject's relationship to history. Many of his poems examine the ways in which the individual is cerned as a historical subject, locating these poems within a context of the relatively minor, and often hopeless, role the human as agent plays within the field of historical possibility. These poems range from meditations on how the sum of western culture has
provoked his generation to various considerations of how the ebb and flow of current events affects the poet's subjective awareness of himself and the world. He also approaches the topic from the perspective of literary history, examining how his progenitors have mapped out the field in which the poet writes, the effects this heritage has on his own use of form and style, and how this particular version of history too provides a series of gaps in which the subject may seek a valid voice. Finally, he addresses in many poems social history, using specific events and periods as examples and sources of imagery in order to meditate on how the subject must function as an ethical agent in times of crisis. Naturally, the Second World War and the events leading up to it play an important part in spurring MacNeice's imagination in this regard, and poems such as "Autumn Journal" and "Autumn Sequel" are as important as documents of this turbulent period as they are innovative in craft. Indeed, MacNeice can and should be considered one of Britain's most important civilian wartime poets of any generation, his often documentary style complementing the work of such writers as Owen and Sassoon arising out of World War One in capturing the spirit of wartime life and reflecting on the divided loyalties and emotions such conflicts elicit.\(^2\)

MacNeice's first extended exploration of how the individual fits into the flow of history occurs in "Autumn Journal," an indication of which comes in the prefatory Note; he states that he has certain beliefs which he "refused to abstract from their context" (CP 101). The reader is immediately made aware that this is a topical poem written at a time

---

\(^2\) For an account of MacNeice's role as a radio propagandist during the Second World War see Barbara Coulton's *Louis MacNeice in the BBC* (1980).
of historical crisis, MacNeice's awareness of himself as a public individual, as well as the role a poet plays in creating a new awareness of historical forces through his work, provide the impetus for the poem. Camus points out the dual role that artists have in coming to terms with the flow of history around them in a passage that echoes MacNeice's thoughts in the preface to the poem: "The constant tension that keeps man face to face with the world, the ordered delirium that urges him to be receptive to everything, leave him another fever. In this universe the work of art is then the sole chance of keeping his consciousness and of fixing its adventures. Creating is living doubly" (87). Serving almost as a definition for MacNeice's project in his two long poems, this notion of living doubly plays itself out in "Autumn Journal" from beginning to end. In Canto II the speaker acknowledges the necessity of private and public duty during a moment of historical crisis:

As all the others do with a grin

Shake off sleep like a dog and hurry to desk or engine

And the fear of life goes out as they clock in

And history is reasserted.

Spider, spider, your irony is true;

Who am I—or I—to demand oblivion?

I must go out to-morrow as the others do

And build the falling castle;

Which has never fallen, thanks

Not to any formula, red tape or institution,
Not to any creeds or banks,

But to the human animal's endless courage.  

History here is the compelling force of everyday participation in human affairs, yet the speaker is aware of an ironic difference between this public persona and the escapist self which seeks to evade these routine responsibilities. This section also enunciates an acknowledgement of the flow of living history ("And history is reasserted") and the individual's inevitable immersion in it ("I must go out tomorrow"), with the mere ability to confront an endless task being seen as an ennobling act worthy of poetry.

The speaker later admits, though, that this act of public participation is no longer voluntary, and that each individual must live up to the historic moment or be buried by it, suggesting the power of the dominant narrative and the precarious nature of the alternatives. In Canto V, for instance, the speaker uses military terminology to express the feeling of inevitability in the atmosphere of late 1938:

Nor can we hide our heads in the sands, the sands have
Filtered away;
Nothing remains but rock at this hour, this zero
Hour of the day.  

One senses that the speaker here is acknowledging the impossibility of choice in a time of

---

3 Peter McDonald in Louis MacNeice: The Poet in his Contexts has noted that “the stakes for MacNeice...entailed a denial of isolation along with an admission of its seductive power” (94).

4 The overtones of Sisyphus' torturous, absurd task in this passage are also reminiscent of Camus, both he and MacNeice sharing a vision of historical circumstance as both an interpellative necessity and an ethical challenge to the individual to participate in history.
national crisis, although certainly elsewhere in the poem the speaker’s attitude takes on these acts of conscience more positively. History engages everyone, willing or no, and much of the rest of the poem is dedicated to very personal responses to this imposition from without on the subject’s self-awareness. The feeling of helplessness evoked by this “zero hour” also conjures up an absurd moment in which the speaker accepts the challenge of building the falling castle fatalistically, knowing that the “castle” symbolizes a historical continuum of privilege, militarism and oppression. Camus describes this experience: “Conscious men have been seen to fulfill their task amidst the most stupid of wars without considering themselves in contradiction. This is because it was essential to elude nothing. There is thus a metaphysical honour in enduring the world's absurdity” (86). The dark foreboding hanging over “Autumn Journal” (noticeable here in phrases such as “hide our heads in the sand,” and “Nothing remains but rock”) is certainly lessened by the speaker’s sense of “metaphysical honour” in enduring it, but it arises out of the knowledge that what is being defended is likely a political/social system which is itself outdated. Stan Smith observes that poetry of the thirties “consistently displaces into a realm beyond human volition the very workings of that ‘History’ which is supposed to be a product of human choice” (141). MacNeice realizes that the individual is powerless to stop the march of world history, but the very act of accepting an active role in current events suggests that registering protest through a poetic act of the imagination can provide a subjective avenue of escape from its interpellative force.

MacNeice retains his personal reaction to the past, both the individual and the larger history of the world, in “Autumn Sequel,” although its more elegiac tone gives the
poem an almost sentimental quality. The speaking subject suggests an alienation from history in this poem, and it is directed less at outlining the ethical necessity of action to better the future than a eulogy for the compromises the past has forced upon him, as can be seen in Canto I:

Fifteen years—and enough. Plain or pearled,
Chequered or lacquered, I do not want them again;
Though golden curls in lockets come uncurled,

Put back no clock; clocks were made for men.
It is not time I resent, it is that the hand should stick

On a lie which the heart repeats again and again. (CP 331, 13-18)

These lines evoke a real sense of dislocation and frustration with the role the poet has played out in historical terms, and the realization that the "lie" which seemed inevitable in "Autumn Journal" entailed a loss of self which became submerged in the impersonal forces surrounding it. The "Parrot" of rhetoric and propaganda "repeats again and again," and history seems at this point less an evolving continuum than a stuck-in-the-rut refrain. The recognition of the self's historicity has dissolved the transcendent subject and replaced it with one provisionally determined by impersonal systems (one thinks particularly of rhetoric and propaganda again) that are historically specific. David Roberts details this process of the historical experience of selfhood as "a sense of relationship with the world's historical progression, a sense of one's place in its totality....This relationship contains an inherent tension between the self's being fully
autonomous and fully at one with the changing, historical world” (109-10). The speaker in this section is inhabiting this space of tension between isolated self and immersed participant, what Heidegger sought as a “post-subjectivist mode of selfhood, wound around neither action as self-creating nor action as history-making, but rather utter and permanent tension with the actual world coming to be in history” (ibid. 119). MacNeice uses this unresolvable tension in order to dislodge the experience of subjectivity from the force of history and the mirage of self-identity; each identification is a “lie” in the sense that neither gives an accurate or fulfilling vision of the individual as both independent historical agent and ideological/cultural product, especially in the absence of a transcendent framework for history (such as Marxism) or the individual.

Canto XXIV explores more fully this tension and the resulting alienation in what Peter McDonald describes as “a self-historicizing habit of interpretation and presentation” (RT 71). The speaker is dislocated not only from the experienced past, but from the sum of human history itself:

Can we sever

Two thousand years ago from here and now,

Or Bethlehem from say Birmingham? I never

Can make of history what the dates allow

Or clamp historic places to the map. (CP 429, 79-83)

The rhetoric of “here and now” cannot be conflated with the distant past, indicating the speaking subject has evaded the surface “lies” of transcendent history and selfhood to a
new awareness of the human experience of time, which Wolfgang Holdheim describes as “a jump into another mode of being,” going on to state that “if in life our knowledge is fragmentary and clouded, it is because we are steeped in temporality” (155). That this temporality has been problematized in the speaker's mind becomes obvious in his description of “the foundry worker” whose brow “seems wrinkled deep as Joseph's” (CP 430, 85-86), and in the canals beside which “one still can find a stable” (88). The paradox here of being “steeped in temporality” only to find our historical understanding is fragmented demonstrates MacNeice’s simultaneous desire to link the modern poetic with the ancient and to accurately encode contemporary alienation. Biblical allusion is combined with modern economics and politics in “Autumn Sequel,” and this process of recombination and reconfiguration is central to MacNeice's project of deflecting the forces of history through the creation of a fluid but grounded self, provisional and historically specific, yet capable of ongoing self-creation in order to refashion some aspect of its subjective experience.

Another poem written during the Second World War in which MacNeice considers the individual's role in living history is “The Conscript” (1942), a piece that imagines the experience of a new recruit forced to learn the arts of war. Discussing the psychological repercussions of this war and its subsequent imprinting on both individuals and western culture, Kaja Silverman points out the “traumatically unassimilable nature of certain historical events” (52). For the conscript in this poem, the task of assimilating these disturbing new experiences brings a feeling of inevitability and alienation:

5 My arguments concerning memory in the preceding chapter are relevant here.
Being so young he feels the weight of history
Like clay around his boots; he would, if he could, fly
In search of a future like a sycamore seed
But is prevented by his own Necessity,
His own yet alien, which, whatever he may plead,
To every question gives the same reply.  

The historical situation in which the soldier finds himself is envisioned as freezing the subject in a timeless present (symbolized in the final stanza by the “stars that are yet his,” and the “dolmen in his spine”), his relationship to his past and future selves being cast into doubt not only by his enlistment in the army but by the necessity caused by the violence in Europe and the threat to Great Britain. Bereft of choice, the conscript yet remains “aware, at times, of life’s largesse,” and is not wholly brutalized by the experience. He “lives a paradox,” therefore, of being forced to follow orders toward “an ordained disaster” while also being aware that he is not merely an “automaton” since he retains his personal hopes and vision of the world around him. Just as the speaker in “Autumn Sequel” found some freedom from the forces of history in a provisional, self-creative subjectivity, so too does the conscript retain his dignity and individuality in his memory of a past before the war, and in his awareness of a larger universe of experience beyond it:

By feeling down and upwards he can divine
That dignity which far above him burns
In stars that yet are his and which below

64
Stands rooted like a dolmen in his spine. (21-24)

This movement from contemplating the helplessness of the individual when faced with the towering forces of history to the belief in a limited, individual freedom is common in MacNeice's work of the period.

Cantos II and III of "Suite for Recorders" continue this exploration of the polarity between the individual and their inherited history, and are examples of the balanced tension that MacNeice often sought to achieve, a tension that is complicated by an awareness of a split self, as we see in III:

Pride in your history is pride
In living what your fathers died,
Is pride in taking your own pulse
And counting in you someone else. (CP 285, 1-4)

The entire series of poems posits a tension between serene pastoral and violence, the ancient and the modern, and the speaker envisions the contemporary subject as being split by these forces, often assuming an alternate identity that has come from a paternal inheritance of belief that is a reading of histories besides one's own. Canto II, however, disrupts this notion of a proud inherited history, and the speaker here is aware that the idealized versions of the past that are handed down do not reflect a real history:

Golden age? Age of discovery? Age of madrigals and liars,

Age when men died young. We envy what we think an innocent ardour,

What in fact was staged revolt upon a tightrope, a creative

Despair, a blithe despair of youth,
Which in that swivelling dubious web essayed its white lies in defiance

Of the black void of truth.  (CP 284-85, 19-24)

The conversational tone MacNeice adopts in this passage is saturated with a kind of creative despair that is complemented by the “staged revolt” against idealizing the past; nevertheless, “truth” about this past is a “black void,” unknowable, and therefore the speaker’s position is ironized by the “white lies” of his own assertions about this “Golden age.” Onto this black void MacNeice suggests that we project alter egos (and also have them thrust upon us), historically defined personas that cover over the lack (or as it is put in the poem, the “yawning negative”) at the subject’s core of being:

Your Alter Egos, present, past,

Or future even, could not last

Did your word only prove them true;

Though you choose them, yet they chose you.  (286, III 17-20)

The vision of these past selves that come to the subject through history and literature is not entirely negative and indecipherable, however, and Canto III ends with the acceptance of this inheritance and acknowledgement of its worth:

And you, a would-be player too,

Will give those angry ghosts their due

Who threw their voices far as doom

Greatly in a little room.  (41-44)\(^6\)

\(^6\) These lines echo Shakespeare’s *As You Like It*: “It strikes a man more dead than a great reckoning in a little room,” and the epigraph of the poem itself.
The cumulative effect of this poem's assessment of the individual in history is finally ambiguous, the inability of the subject as agent to avoid taking on the "dubious web" with which the historical enmeshes the individual being matched by a belief in history as a powerful source of the liberating imagination (a dual awareness of history reflected by the epigraphs from Nietzsche and Wordsworth at the beginning of this chapter).

MacNeice also utilized literary history as a topic and for inspiration, focusing on how as a poet the language, forms and ideas of past writers influence his work. His familiarity with classical literature (the training of English public schools is important here) finds expression in many poems through imagined conversations, parody, comparison, and imitation of writers long dead. In his discussion in "Elegy and Theory: Is Historical and Critical Knowledge Possible," W. David Shaw outlines the impulse behind this overt use of material from the past:

We can trace the outlines of a critical history of elegy in the poets' discussions of dead predecessors and in their strong creative response to their heritage. Whether combative acts or acts of homage, the responses will be genuinely subversive or vivid enough to make us remember the people and traditions they commemorate and the deaths to which they bear witness.  

MacNeice's poem sequence "Memoranda to Horace," for instance, takes the form of a personal address to the Roman poet, and celebrates the enduring qualities of his work and the inspiration that MacNeice finds there:

Yet your image
‘more lasting than bronze’ will do: for neither
Sulphuric nor other acid can damage,
Let alone destroy, your Aeolian measures
Transmuted to Latin—_aere perennius._ (CP 540, I 20-24)
The speaker acknowledges, however, that Horatianism can offer only a respite from the
modern, alienating world, not a remedy for an individual
Caught between cosmic and comic radiation,
Against which world we have raised a monument
Weaker and less of note than a mayfly
Or a quick blurb for yesterday's detergent. (8-11)
The point of contact with Horace in this poem is more in the nature and pitch of the
voice MacNeice employs than a typical Horatian resignation — the speaker acknowledges
they are “apart yet parallel” — and the effect is therefore less one of imitation than of
critical comparison of the periods in which each poet lived.
MacNeice strikes a similar note in Canto IX of “Autumn Journal,” much of which
summarizes the progression of human civilization in the west from ancient Greece to the
present. It is not a famous poet or historical figure which captures his attention here,
though, but those lives that went unrecorded:

These dead are dead
And when I should remember the paragons of Hellas
I think instead
Of the crooks, the adventurers, the opportunists,
The careless athletes and the fancy boys,

The hair-splitters, the pedants, the hard-boiled sceptics

And the Agora and the noise

Of the demagogues and the quacks; and the women pouring

Libations over graves

And the trimmers at Delphi and the dummies at Sparta and lastly

I think of the slaves.

And how one can imagine oneself among them

I do not know;

It was all so unimaginably different

And all so long ago. (CP 118-19, 66-80)

Here the emphasis is placed on the irretrievability of the past (what is left out in literary history) and the limits of the imagination, and despite the speaker's need to come to terms with it, this past remains a source of escapist fantasy rather than continuity within a literary tradition. By focusing on the historically other, MacNeice seeks to undermine the influences and biases of his education in order to create a more realistic vision not just of the realities of ancient and modern life, but of his own relationship to them. The burden of sanctioned history and its famous authors is therefore relieved by insisting on alterity, while remaining a spectral presence that can never be exorcised, as he states in Canto XX: "Their premises are unsound / And history has refuted them and yet / They cast their shadows on us like aspersions" (CP 142, 40-42). In The Struggle of the Modern Stephen Spender voiced the feeling that poets of his generation had towards the
old masters: "The art of the past is attached to traditions, values, symbols, objects, nature, which had, until modern times, a relative stability. Modern art moves within a world which, in all these respects, is shifting" (143). Living in an industrial society that is fragmented, the problem for MacNeice is thus how to integrate the traditions of the past – language, form, style, thought – within a radically different cultural situation.

In "Elegy for Minor Poets" MacNeice directly establishes a bond of sympathy with those writers in the past who laboured in obscurity and remain there still, and by claiming these as an integral part of the overall tradition in which poets work he undermines the notion that only those canonized authors have influenced the use of language and the profession of writing. These "minor" figures are claimed as progenitors, and the speaker emotionally identifies with their failure: "I would praise these in company with the Great; / For if not in the same way, they fingered the same language / According to their lights" (CP 231-32, 6-8). Just as the poet's imagination is stirred by the almost completely forgotten figures of history in "Autumn Journal," it is moved to sympathy for these makers who "were lost in many ways" (13), and it seems as though MacNeice finds in them a source of pride and community absent from his "conversations" with Horace. These appear now to the speaker as "ghosts" who are "gagged," their relegation to the status of minor, however deserved, investing them with a pathos that MacNeice felt was more compelling and relevant than the staid verses of the Romans. Thus the speaker wants to

hang on the grave of each a trophy

Such as, if solvent, he would himself have hung
Above himself; these debtors preclude our scorn—

Did we not underwrite them when we were born? (39-42)

The tone of the poem is simultaneously respectful and sardonic, ending with reflections couched in financial terminology that admit the poet's debt to these unsung (and perhaps unsingable) predecessors.

MacNeice returns to consider the more general implications of his relationship with his cultural inheritance in Canto II of "Autumn Sequel," where the speaker ruminates on the similarities between ancient and modern history, artfully conflating past and present yet still insisting on paying attention to the minutiae of life rather than being overwhelmed by history's grandeur:

Ancient history, one might think,

Runs into World War Two. A dive-bombed jeep

Is no less broken, or old, than a bronze wheel

From Agamemnon's chariot. Sleep, sleep,

You widows of Mycenae. The years reveal

The need for everydayness, for picking up

Such trivial threads, more durable than steel. (CP 336-37, 51-57)

Here again MacNeice undermines the traditional poet's historical debt, refusing to identify with the past that has come down through writing, as the speaker states in Canto XXI: "The Eighteenth Century, like Ovid's Rome, / Makes a fine show for sightseers to
see / But never a context where I feel at home” (CP 416, 44-46). While much of the poem details the siren call of the literary past, and the speaker often engages in wistful detailing of his debt to it, the reality of the present is always affirmed:

I leave these noble names to their own ends,
The Pumphoom to its phantoms, and pursue
My course to where a mist of trees descends
Beneath a mouth of stone that drinks the view. (CP 417, 82-85)

That literature and events of the past have left innumerable traces within the poet's mind is never doubted, but they are more often related to intimations of death and decay than a vibrant reality which the poet can recapture, as in Canto XXII which is occasioned by a visit to Glastonbury: “Bedivere, Arthur, Lancelot, Guinivere, / They left their names, their mark, and the mark is death” (CP 419, 5-6). The tension between romance fictions and historical reality (the inaccessibility of the latter and selective artifice of the former), provides the poet with the opportunity to consider the history of language only, of texts, the realities of the world they describe having long since passed away.

MacNeice wrote several other poems associating particular places with their artistic history, such as the 1961 travel poem “Ravenna” published in The Golden Perch, an account of his visit there during which “the mosaics knocked me flat,” and he saw the statue of Theodora, and “the long-lost naval port of Caesar” (CP 527-28). Once again the ultimate effect of considering these past masterpieces and marvels is one of modern alienation and rejection, and what truly influences the poet is the understanding that these are merely relics of a dead era that has been lost to time: “What do I remember of
Ravenna? / A bad smell mixed with glory, and the cold / Eyes that belie the tesselated gold” (17-19) The tension between an idealized, artistic past is juxtaposed with the reality of modern urban life, and the speaker finds he is unable to identify with either. The poet’s memory and the collective history handed down through canonized texts are at odds, and so MacNeice asserts an ambiguous critique of their representation. The next poem in the collection, “Constant,” which details MacNeice’s impressions of Constantinople, solidifies this sense of history having left only decaying traces that cannot give the poet any true sense of himself as part of that past which yet haunts him:

    too much history

    Tilting, canting, crawling, rotting away,

    Subsiding strata where ghosts like faults, like mites,

    Reminders of stagnation or collapse,

    Emerge into the mist.        (CP 528, 3-7)

The imagery here is indicative of a disappointed imagination (symbolized in the phrase “emerged into mist”), the speaker’s vision of the ancient and medieval worlds being thoroughly undercut by what he sees. The geological metaphor of “subsiding strata” mirrors the mental state that the speaker is forced to acknowledge when confronted with the ruins of the past, and he realizes that only specters and decaying monuments remain to remind him of his connection to it.

MacNeice often utilizes imagery that yokes together this idealized past and urban reality, and in “An Eclogue for Christmas” this habit reflects the literature that helped form his impression of the English countryside through the use of the pastoral mode:
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;
We shall go down like Paleolithic man
Before some new Ice Age or Genghiz Khan. (CP 34, 50-57)

As Edna Longley has noted, in many ways this poem is MacNeice's version of the
"Decline of the West" (45), a decline saturated with a decaying rusticism that both uses
imagery reminiscent of seventeenth-century lyrics ("the heavy shires," and "a line of
pyres") and undercuts it with a wry, ironic modern awareness with a phrase like
"Goggling yokel-stubborn through the iron trees." This combination is picked up again
in "Dark Age Glosses," a series of four poems that are occasioned by Icelandic and
Celtic works of literature. Robyn Marsack points out that in this poem MacNeice's "own
cultural confrontations take place across centuries" (120); for instance, the first section
(on the Venerable Bede) uses the story of the bird that flies out into the dark from the
brightly-lit feasting hall as a symbol of the impossibility of metaphysical knowledge,
making it "seem absurd" to "postulate any other life than now" (CP 484, 15-17). The
cultural confrontation MacNeice draws out here is between the faith in a transcendent
self of the ancients and the modern disillusionment with religions and teleologies. The
section on the Grettir Saga draws a similar parallel between a "burly major" and the

74
Icelandic hero who was cursed, yet the major, unlike Grettir, is unaware of his fate and only “cursed by the curse of his time” (18). The final section (on the Four Masters) offers an alternate explanation of Ireland’s heyday, and although admitting that “those who today / think it a golden age” (2-3) are free to do so, the poet insists that the heroes of this epoch were inspired by ruthless ambition. The differences between the past that has been romanticized in poetry and song and the conservative cultural ideology of that past which is encoded in these narratives is the real subject of these comparative “glosses”:

“The light was no doubt the same, the ecology different: / All Ireland drowned in woods” (CP 485, 1-2). For MacNeice, the allure of the pastoral which drives the poem is balanced by a critique of the romanticization of the past it creates; if these accounts have been transformed into myth that inspires the imagination, so too have they covered over the actual histories which spawned them.

MacNeice’s preoccupation with the historico-mythical is not confined to personal and literary reflections, and some of his most memorable poems confront the violence and misery caused by social and military conflicts. His records of these events are often personal, bringing a unique perspective to periods such as the Spanish Civil War, World War Two, and the mass emigrations from Ireland and its bloody history. Such pieces focus on moments of crisis, and, as Jeremy Hawthorn puts it, “they make history strange, and interact with their historical contexts in ways calling for subtlety and caution” (169).

A poem such as “Valediction,” for instance, posits a sardonic awareness of Ireland’s violent history:

Park your car in the city of Dublin, see Sackville Street

75
Without the sandbags in the old photos, meet

The statues of the patriots, history never dies,

At any rate in Ireland, arson and murder are legacies

Like old rings hollow-eyed without their stones

Dumb talismans. \( (CP\ 52,\ 9-14) \)

MacNeice's vision of the Irish attitude towards history here borders on sarcasm, exposing as sentimentality and fancy the violence that spawned the modern version of the country. The patriotic revisions of these events are too strong to be simply ignored, however:

I have to observe milestone and curio

The beaten buried gold of an old king's bravado,

Falsetto antiques, I have to gesture,

Take part in, or renounce, each imposture. \( (CP\ 54,\ 95-98) \)

Although in places the poem betrays a fondness for Ireland - "If I were a dog of sunlight I would bound / From Phoenix Park to Achill Sound" (89-90) - the overall effect is one of resisting the "drug-dull fatalism" of the island. Robyn Marsack concludes that "although he cannot 'deny my past to which my self is wed,' he can attempt, in taut lines, to immunize himself, preserve himself in detachment" (11). It is less a detached perspective that MacNeice achieves in the final lines which directly address Ireland, rejecting "your drums and your dolled-up Virgins and your ignorant dead," than a bitter awareness of how specific versions of history come to be dominant and often fatal. For MacNeice, Ireland's obsession with a misleading vision of its past was the main source of what he saw as the country's poverty and intellectual stagnation.

76
The poems MacNeice wrote concerning World War Two approach contemporary social history from a less direct angle, most likely because he, as so many writers of the period, found the actual experience of war very difficult to sum up. In an article titled “The Tower that Once”⁷ MacNeice summarizes the problem: “The whole world in our time went more and more on the slant so that no mere abstract geometry or lyrical uplift could cure it” (SLC 120). Forced to approach the subject obliquely, MacNeice often combines lyricism with a journalistic style, a combination that allows him to meld personal reactions with the historical event, as in the 1934 poem “Aubade”:

Having bitten on life like a sharp apple
Or, playing it like a fish, been happy,

Having felt with fingers that the sky is blue,

What have we after that to look forward to?

Not the twilight of the gods but a precise dawn

Of sallow and grey bricks, and newsboys crying war. (CP 30, 1-6)

Here the descent of Europe into another round of bloody conflict parallels the speaker’s maturation and estrangement from childhood, the expected repose of middle and old age being disrupted by the imposition of uncontrollable events. There is no settled perspective of history in this poem, only the relentless flux of events and the awareness that what once seemed permanent is not so. Spender alludes to this burgeoning

⁷ Published in Folios of New Writing 3 (Spring 1941), 37-41.
awareness of historical discontinuity in *The Struggle of the Modern*: “Many things that formerly signified rootedness and permanence...today have become significant almost of their opposite....It is as though what stays still moves backwards, recedes, against the onrush of the transformed world” (143).

The war also managed to cause MacNeice, and many others, to feel a certain amount of guilt about their unwillingness to stand up to the dictators (Chamberlain’s infamous appeasement was very popular at the time) and fear of having their lives so seriously disrupted, as he elaborates in “Autumn Journal”:

And the next day begins

Again with alarm and anxious

Listening to bulletins

From distant, measured voices

Arguing for peace

While the zero hour approaches,

While the eagles gather and the petrol and oil and grease

Have all been applied and the vultures back the eagles.

But once again

The crisis is put off and things look better

And we feel negotiation is not vain—

Save my skin and damn my conscience.  

*(CP 116-17, VII 89-100)*

It is not just the reality of the war that is traumatic, but the knowledge that lofty ideals can crumble so easily before the fear that it generates. Kaja Silverman discusses the
effects that this kind of realization can have on the subject's relation to the fictions he or she has created about him/herself:

The notion of historical trauma represents...an attempt to conceptualize how history sometimes manages to interrupt or even deconstitute what a society assumes to be its master narratives and immanent Necessity – to undo our imaginary relation to the symbolic order, as well as to the other elements within the social formation with which that order is imbricated.

(55)

The British self-conception as the protector of democracy and freedom throughout the world was thoroughly undermined by the betrayal of Czechoslovakia in 1938, and intellectuals like MacNeice understood that such promises were founded less on idealism than the manipulation of politicians and business interests, as can be seen at the end of Canto VIII:

Glory to God for Munich.

And stocks go up and wrecks

Are salved and politicians' reputations

Go up like Jack-on-the-Beanstalk; only the Czechs

Go down and without fighting. (CP 117, 104-108)

As crisis followed crisis and the Second World War erupted, MacNeice continued to record this sensation of having lost even the illusion of control over the flow of events. Having no recourse to an explanation for the reasons behind this calamity, in the 1939 poem “The Closing Album” MacNeice fell back on autobiographical recollections to
impose some order on his awareness of them. Canto V poses a series of questions for which the poet has no answers, such as: “And why, now it has happened, / Should the atlas still be full of maps of countries / We shall never see again?” (CP 167, 9-11). The naïve belief in the fixed world of the atlas (in Europe as much a product of the Treaty of Versailles as a reflection of long-term cultural boundaries) is exposed by the war as provisional and unstable, and like so many others MacNeice was aware that many illusions about humanity were in the process of being stripped away, as he implies in The Strings Are False: “Just as our capacity for satire had already been outstripped by the lunacies of the dictators, so now this calamity was beyond and below our vocabulary” (213). The stable continuity of history, which after World War One had seemed a thing of the static past, finally forces MacNeice to accept the present as discontinuous and fluctuating: “My family still had family prayers in the morning but the god of the house was the radio. ‘And that is the end of the news.’ But it never was” (ibid.). This sense of events moving out of control is reinforced by certain wartime poems such as “Brother Fire,” addressed to the raging fires in London during the Blitz, and seeing in them a metaphor for the madness that had seized upon Europe:

Did we not on those mornings after the All Clear
When you were looting shops in elemental joy
And singing as you swarmed up city block and spire,
Echo your thoughts in ours? ‘Destroy! Destroy!’ (CP 196, 15-18)

MacNeice implies in this poem that the experience of the war has fed the individual’s desire to live the historical moment fully, to submerge the self in it, but at the cost of
losing the veneer of civility and benevolence which the British historical self-conception had fostered, both despite and perhaps because of the Empire.

Britain's role in world affairs and history underwent a forced re-evaluation after the war, a process that MacNeice writes about in his 1945 poem "Hiatus," a piece that Edna Longley describes as "an ambiguous balance sheet" (93), and which refers to the war years as "The years that did not count" (CP 218, 1), stating that this experience proves "that civilization is vain" (11). The final stanza gives us a vague impression of how these six years have affected the young men of MacNeice's generation:

Yes, we wake stiff and older; especially when
The schoolboys of the Thirties reappear,
Fledged in the void, indubitably men,
Having kept vigil on the Unholy Mount
And found some dark and tentative things made clear,
Some clear made dark, in the years that did not count. (13-18)

The repetition of the opening line to end the poem implies a circularity, suggesting the experience of war was an insular one that cannot be assimilated into the "schoolboys'" life, and imparts a symmetry to the poem deliberately at odds with the bleak articulation of "the void." The individual's subjective awareness has undergone an ambiguous change, the certainties of the past have been undermined, and the dark knowledge gained from the experience remains mysterious. In "Aftermath," written in 1946, the poet considers the effects that this alteration of the individual's relation to history and his/her newfound knowledge have cost:
the bandaging dark which bound

This town together is loosed and in the array

Of bourgeois lights man's love can save its breath:

Their ransomed future severs once more the child

Of luck from the child of lack—and none is wild. (CP 219, 8-12)

Unlike “Brother Fire,” in which the Blitz is seen to remove social barriers and create a true sense of community in shared suffering and rage, here the poet sees that the old social barriers have been erected again, and there is a feeling of anticlimax, as though the more just society towards which history had seemed to be moving was the product of a superficial political understanding.

This vision of civilization in decline continues to inform MacNeice's poetry to the end of his life. The 1961 poem “In Lieu” laments for the substitution of commodified culture for traditional practices and values: “Roses with the scent bred out, / In lieu of which is a long name on a label” (CP 522, 1-2). In this poem the speaker feels threatened by the external world and by language – “in lieu of a flag / The orator hangs himself from the flagpost” (23-24) – and any continuity with the past is gone:

The savour is lost, in deep

Freeze after freeze in lieu of a joint

Are piled the shrunken heads of the past

And the offals of unborn children. (15-18)

The high hopes of the thirties have been betrayed and replaced by commercialism, the substitutes symbolic of a dehumanized culture. The history of western civilization for the
speaker has culminated in cheap artifice, and even religious beliefs once held so dear are on the market: “And in lieu of a high altar / Wafers and wine procured by a coin in a slot” (5-6). The transformation of culture into industrial mass culture does not strike the poet as the inevitable result of world history, but as the product of world war and the fetishization of a living history rooted in the past but constantly changing. The poem's final stanza turns on an inversion of the Lord's Prayer — “In lieu therefore of choice / Thy Will be undone” (19-20) — that is at once aggressive and wistful. The biting satire of the poem goes unrelieved, and there is no belief in the progress of humanity through history, only an admission of defeat before huge, impersonal forces that either disregard or cynically manipulate the past, brutalize the present, and condemn the future. The subject is once more capable only of articulating opposition to these forces, using memory and evidence of the past as testimony to those experiences and utopian dreams that were held up like a shimmering mirage in the pre-war years.

If “In Lieu” is an articulation of disgust with the modern world which a generation fought so hard to redeem, it is also a testament to the individual's willingness to continue to oppose the de-humanizing patterns in history. Although MacNeice's understanding and portrayal of the relationship between the individual and history continually underwent permutations, his core belief in the capability of the self to experience the flux of life and the passage of time — negotiating history's interpellation without giving in to its more radically determining and de-humanizing aspects — remained firm. Camus defined the challenge of the historical subject as “the dogged struggle against one's own degradation and that of others” (MS 188), an everyday battle that has
no final solution, no teleological goal other than the limited freedom to participate in
history and give voice to opposition. Encoded in language and enmeshed in narrative
form, the histories of the individual, of literature, and of societies are made only to be
broken down and remade again in an endless process of destruction and creation.

Not ready yet? For what may spill

Or shine or pipe or pounce? This world,

Ingrown, outgoing, soon outgone,

Stays ours. We are ready now as then.

(from "Country Week-end," *CP* 489, I 25-28)
Chapter Three

"In answer to the drums": MacNeice and politics

"The primary function of poetry, as of all the arts, is to make us more aware of ourselves and the world around us. I do not know if such increased awareness makes us more moral or more efficient: I hope not. I think it makes us more human and I am quite certain it makes us more difficult to deceive, which is why, perhaps, all totalitarian theories of the State from Plato's downwards, have deeply mistrusted the arts."

W.H. Auden – Preface to Poems of Freedom

"Artists of the past could at least keep silent in the face of tyranny. The tyrannies of today are improved; they no longer admit of silence or neutrality. One has to take a stand, be either for or against."

Albert Camus – The Myth of Sisyphus

Poetry and politics have always intersected in many different ways, at different times, and with varying results. There is of course a wide spectrum of “political” poems, ranging from those works designed to impart a particular political viewpoint of the day, through pieces that engage in a general political discourse in the poet's choice of subject and theme, and those poems which, while not overtly political in nature, are embedded within and express one or more definable political stances. Some trends in literary criticism – most notably Marxist theory, post-colonial theory, and certain elements of feminism – have gone so far as to assert that every text is political, and that the only way to understand a work of literature is through decoding the political presuppositions it represents. This may or may not be true (and is likely unprovable), but there is certainly productive work to be done in re-interpreting past literary works from this perspective,
so long as a claim is not made that the only function that poetry serves is politicized ends. Critical discourse should, in my view, always be searching for ways to open up texts to varying and indeterminate readings, rather than being an act that forces each and every text to conform to a current theory that will itself pass into history, and which may or may not be supported by primary and secondary evidence. Poetry may never be outside politics, but its relation to the political changes with its readers; a poem that to a critic of the mid-twentieth century symbolized conservatism may to a later critic come to embody a radical or revolutionary politics. The notion of "demystification," the process whereby the ideological presuppositions of a particular text are exposed, becomes culturally relative, and while still of use it should not unduly dominate our experience of a certain poem or poet's work.

If critical practice should not be reduced to simplification and reductivism, neither should we overlook the very real and rich experience a focused analysis of the politics in poetry can bring. George Levine pinpoints the problem that excessive preoccupation with a text's embedded politics can cause:

In the current critical scene, literature is all too often demeaned, the aesthetic experience denigrated or reduced to mystified ideology. Moreover, in discovering the complicity of texts with an ideology they never formally articulate, critics tend to assume that they are smarter and more honest than writers, who either didn't know what they were doing, or, worse, thought they could get away with their devious moves. (2-3)

I would like to bring to an analysis of MacNeice's expression of politics in his poetry both
an awareness of the ideological and historical underpinnings of the texts, and a
willingness to investigate how political ideas are envisioned within particular works.
Poetry such as MacNeice's encodes and interacts with the political at every level, and in
many ways, yet I believe that merely labelling him along generic political lines (that is
liberal, left-wing, reactionary, etc., as has often been done) dismisses the complicated
tension that he always seeks in his work between the private and public, commitment and
individualism, flux and form. His poetry cannot and should not be reduced to a mere
example of a particular political ideology – it is not, for example, merely representative of
late imperialism, capitalism or class – but an investigation of the various political ideas
that compose a good deal of his poetry does reveal another aspect of his complicated
awareness of the human being as a political subject.

The most compelling and complex poetry is not, for the most part, didactic. As
Auden intimates in the epigraph to this chapter, one function of the poet is to
defamiliarize our political experiences (not necessarily to legislate or purvey
propaganda), thereby renewing and sometimes even changing the way we perceive
ourselves as political subjects and politically subjected. Derek Attridge argues that
certain literary texts are capable almost of free play (itself a politicized perspective) and
creating a space wherein the political and ideological influences are held at bay:
“literature can act powerfully to hold the political and ethical up for scrutiny by means of
its power of suspension, momentarily dissociating them from their usual pressing context,
performing the ethical decision and the political gesture” (Levine 248). I will argue that
this is precisely what MacNeice's poetry does, balancing the ethical imperatives of
individualism with the interpellative forces of political tradition and historical necessity in order to act out, as it were, various strategies whereby the subject can gain a limited freedom of action and interpretation (the values of a politics designed to contest determining ideologies). Robert Pinsky identifies this dual political urge in poetry in different terms: “the idea of social responsibility seems to raise a powerful contradiction, in the light of another intuited principle, freedom. The poet needs to feel utterly free, yet answerable” (von Hallberg 8). This paradoxical situation defines MacNeice's attitude towards the political in his poetry as well as it does any other writer, and rather than seeking to resolve it dialectically he prefers to allow this tension between freedom and responsibility to animate his poetry without resolution. This is, to be sure, a very political strategy, but an aspect of his work that has unfortunately led to his dismissal as a non-political poet since he only rarely takes on political issues directly. Didactic poetry is therefore quite foreign to MacNeice, as we shall see, and the political awareness demonstrated by his work is suffused with a politicized questioning rather than any attempt to utter political “truth.”

In order to understand the political influences on MacNeice's poetry it is necessary first to outline the political situation as it became defined in the 1930s in England, particularly as it affected writers emerging at that time. Literary critics and historians, from Samuel Hynes in his book The Auden Generation to George Watson in Politics and Literature in Modern Great Britain, have tended to modality, defining the political affiliations of these writers along broad lines of right and left. Watson, for instance, goes so far as to insert what he believes to be the major literary figures of the
era into two columns, right wing and left wing, putting MacNeice along with Spender, Auden, and Day-Lewis in the latter (88). This became a common practice for critics of the period, spawning the now infamous “MacSpaunday” tag\(^1\), an artificial grouping that has little relevance to the actual political stances each of these authors took, but one that until recently held a good deal of sway amongst literary historians.\(^2\) In his essay “Believing in the Thirties” Peter McDonald points out the source of this “club”: “the ‘political’ may be playing a part in the evaluative strategies of canon-formation during and after the thirties – it is a term called upon to do critical service” (Matthews and Williams 76). What this critical service has achieved is to compress the considerably different work being produced by these writers into a convenient classification of “Marxist”; while Auden, Spender and Day-Lewis each deliberately cultivated this myth, and undoubtedly wrote much of their work during the period from a Marxist perspective, MacNeice never considered himself to be a communist, or for that matter wrote verse that could be ascribed to anything so far to the political left. As A.T. Tolley has noted, Marxist theories were common at the time amongst the youthful British intelligentsia, and do not in themselves denote a dedication to communism: “Many Marxist notions were commonplaces of the time. On the other hand, the extent of a writer’s affiliation with the Communist Party is not necessarily a measure of his commitment to left-wing ideas. Discussions of the influence of Marxism in the thirties may easily fail because they

---

\(^1\) A term originally coined derisively by Roy Campbell (Watson 90).

\(^2\) Samuel Hynes, Adrian Caesar, and D.E.S. Maxwell, in their general studies of the decade, all fall back on this generalization.
ignore the pervasiveness as well as the cogency of Marxist ideas” (27). Marxism, for MacNeice, was an undeniable feature of the social milieu in which he was working, particularly with the eruption of the Spanish Civil War, yet he remained firmly at a distance from communist commitment and Party affiliation.

There is, however, a real sense given by these writers of being representative of a new awareness that often found its expression in Marxist terms. Watson summarizes this shift: “The literary Marxist is usually younger than most members of the Right by a whole generation: he was commonly born in the first decade of the century, his opponents in the 1880s. The contest of the Thirties smacks strongly of a generation struggle” (89). Although he has his facts in order, Watson succumbs here to a generalization that simply is not true, or is at least not so simple, and carries embedded within it a canonical mainstream of modernists and thirties “English” male poets. The poets of the 1880s generation against which the “MacSpaunday” group are supposed to be arranged are T.S. Eliot, Ezra Pound and W.B. Yeats, among others. While poets such as Auden and MacNeice certainly felt that with the change in historical circumstances came a need to express political reality differently from these writers, the relationship was certainly more productive and creative rather than combative. T.S. Eliot was MacNeice's publisher at Faber & Faber throughout the thirties, and both MacNeice and Auden wrote critical accounts of Eliot and Yeats that were for the most part celebratory, although they

1 MacNeice's reaction to the end of the Spanish Civil War in The Strings Are False is indicative of his ambivalent belief in purely political causes and the disillusionment the collapse of the left-wing forces there generated: “There is no such thing as a snow-white cause” (197).
acknowledged the need for a change in form and direction. At any rate, the
"MacSpaunday" configuration, with certain exceptions at certain times, did not envision
themselves as communist writers only, whose sole purpose was to express the will of the
proletariat and bring about the collapse of capitalism, as MacNeice, speaking of the
poetry of Auden, Spender, Day-Lewis and others, details in Modern Poetry:

Their attitude...is controlled by the conception of man as a "political
animal". "Political animal" would, indeed, be a key-phrase to this poetry,
for with the recognition that man is conditioned by economic factors and
therefore needs the company of men qua community goes the recognition
that man is a creature of strong physical instincts and affections, and
therefore needs the company of men qua individuals. These poems do
not, like so many politicians, think of human beings as cogs in a political
machine but as organisms necessarily dependent upon other organisms.

(MP 15-16)

We see here MacNeice's recognition of the writer's dual role in politics noted earlier, and
a certain distancing from these poets ("their attitude") that presages the reserve he was
always to show in the face of ideological commitment. He recognizes the difference
between propaganda and art in the Preface to Modern Poetry: "The poet is a maker, not
a retail trader. The writer to-day should not be so much the mouthpiece of a
community...as its conscience, its critical faculty, its generous instinct. In a world
intransigent and over-specialized, falsified by practical necessities, the poet must maintain
his elasticity and refuse to tell lies to order" (xix). Certainly the phrase "falsified by
practical necessities” distances him from the Marxist emphasis on direct revolutionary action. And finally, in “Poetry To-Day” (1935) he states: “In as far as these poets have the sense of touch, their poetry (whether they think so or not) will not be ancillary to their politics, but their politics ancillary to their poetry” (SLC 41). These are neither the convictions of a Marxist writer, nor the elaboration of a political ideology of a particular group, but MacNeice's youthful articulation of the principle which would guide his political sensibility as a poet throughout his career: the belief that in poetry ideology and commitment are elements of poetic construction and form, but not determining factors.

MacNeice's ambivalent relationship to all political parties can be seen early on in his career. In 1934 Geoffrey Grigson, editor of New Verse, sent out “An Enquiry” to a number of the most famous and emerging poets of the period, asking six questions intended to elicit responses on various topics. MacNeice replied (although Auden, Spender, and Day-Lewis did not), and his answer to the fifth question is very revealing of his attitude towards political commitment. The question posed was: “Do you take your stand with any political or politico-economic party or creed?” to which MacNeice replied, “No. In weaker moments I wish I could” (SLC 4). The admission that he does not commit himself to a party or creed implies that by remaining at a distance from identification with them he has made his political life more complicated and difficult, a fact that is borne out in his poetry. The 1933 poem “To a Communist,” for instance, simultaneously admits the attraction that the unity of the Party elicits while denying it as a viable political vision of a necessarily-divided social world in flux:

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.

But before you proclaim the millennium, my dear,

Consult the barometer—

This poise is perfect but maintained

For one day only.  (CP 22, 1-8)

The tone of ironic detachment in the poem is maintained through the image of the snow, which while it gives to the Communist Party's vision a compelling unity of the world, nevertheless is imposed upon reality rather than growing out of it, the unity it provides being fleeting. The methodizing power of Marxism is undercut because its symmetry (the "perfect poise" of a theoretical position) relies on abstractions which are undermined by the "barometer" forecasting historical change that cannot be controlled. The snow here symbolizes the elision of differences such methods of thought and action entail, with the implication that it must soon melt away. For MacNeice it is not simply a matter of proving or disproving a Marxist vision of political reality, but of denying its overarching claims to truth and historical explanation and prediction. The poem's conclusion displays an envy on the speaker's part of the "perfection" of "this poise," holding out as it does a hope for unity between self and society (and indeed self-transcendence through commitment to the "cause"), but undercuts it with an awareness that there can be no such final, fixed political statements.

In his essay "The Poet in England To-Day: A Reassessment" (written in 1940),
MacNeice elaborates on the difficulty the subject encounters when confronted with the impermanence and flux of the world, especially in political terms: “Man's deference to any logic of black-and-white, or all-or-nothing, is probably due to his basic illogicality; he just cannot cope with the world in colour. He refuses to distinguish conditions from causes. He cannot recognize the importance of the Economic Factor without trying to split the atom with it” (SLC 112). In other words, the political subject must at least attempt to see the world as various and from multiple perspectives, as in “Snow”:

“World is crazier and more of it than we think, / Incorrigibly plural” (CP 30, 5-6).

MacNeice is faced with the task of reflecting and investigating this incorrigible plurality rather than merely reducing it to a static theory that envisions the human being as the helpless product of social and economic factors. This would reduce the poet to the level of a propagandist, and MacNeice always maintained the important distinction between propaganda and belief:

It is nonsense to say, as many say nowadays, that all great poetry has in all periods been essentially propaganda. The propagandist is consciously and solely concerned with converting people to a cause or creed...I have already maintained that major poetry usually implies a belief...But, for the poet, any belief, any creed (and beliefs and creeds tend to be a priori) should be compromised with his own individual observation. (MP 201)

MacNeice’s distinction between the poet and the person is indicative of his vision of the poet’s public function and responsibility, and the necessity of bringing to the composition of poetry a mind open to diverse possibilities, political or otherwise. This notion of
"compromise" is enunciated clearly in "To a Communist," where the poet's belief in fluidity and impermanence challenges a politics that seeks to reduce that experience to static, impersonal theorizing.

MacNeice does not simply sidestep the challenge of political belief and commitment, however, nor does he retreat into a besieged individualism, as he goes on to state in "The Poet in England To-Day: A Reassessment": "This does not mean a retreat to the Ivory Tower or to purely private poetry. To assume that it does is bad logic. If the artist declines to live in a merely political pigeonhole, it does not follow that he has to live in a vacuum" (SLC 1133). The appeal of communist (small "c") ideas and perceptions of social inequality pervades a number of his poems written in the thirties, notably "Eclogue for Christmas." MacNeice describes the impulse behind writing this poem in *The Strings Are False*:

I had a certain hankering to sink my ego, but was repelled by the priggishness of the Comrades and suspected that their positive programme was vitiated by wistful thinking and over-simplification. I joined them however in their hatred of the *status quo*, I wanted to smash the aquarium. During Christmas of 1933...I sat down deliberately and wrote a long poem called "Eclogue for Christmas". I wrote it with a kind of cold-blooded passion and when it was done it surprised me. Was I really as concerned as all that with the Decline of the West? Did I really feel so desperate? Apparently I did. Part of me must have been feeling like that for years. (146)
Whether or not we believe MacNeice's reading of the poem as biographical testimony, the social diagnosis the poem portrays is clear from the opening line announced by "A": “I meet you in an evil time” (CP 33). There is a definite feeling of decadence and decline reminiscent of a communist analysis:

The jaded calendar revolves,
Its nuts need oil, carbon chokes the valves,
The excess sugar of a diabetic culture
Rotting the nerve of life and literature. (4-7)

These are clearly social symptoms of a civilization that has ceased to function properly, the mechanical imagery of the engine paralleling images of bodily sickness, the speaker witnessing a neurotic, dysfunctional society. As Edna Longley has observed, “the people in the ‘Eclogue’ are socially symptomatic, and MacNeice ascribes some of their moral emptiness to dependence on a corrupt class system” (45). “B”, representing the country in opposition to “A’s” articulation of city reality, describes the injustice perpetuated by the rich, symbolized by the “country gentry”: “They cannot live once their idols are turned out, / None of them can endure, for how could they, possibly, without / The flotsam of private property….,” (34, 90-92) The communist overtones are clear in these lines, yet the poem does not move towards a firm resolution of the class conflict, and the speakers seem to accept the decline of their civilization with relish without seeing a way out of it. The poem ends with “A” and “B” cataloguing the leftovers of a previous time they still cherish: “Let all these so ephemeral things / Be somehow permanent like the swallow's tangent wings” (36, 149-150). The need to capture the transient experience of life –
summed up in the paradoxical final phrase – and to preserve what has for the speaking subject value (vaguely defined as “ephemeral things”), therefore balances the savage social critique articulated earlier in the poem. If “Eclogue for Christmas” is an indictment of a class system and society that are no longer relevant to modern life, it also details an attempt to preserve parts of the past that can provide a tolerant continuity. The poem bears witness to social ills, diagnoses them, but does not pretend to find a solution in a classless society.

MacNeice admitted that his feelings about class were ambivalent in his account of a trip to the Hebrides in *I Crossed the Minch*: “My sympathies are Left. On paper and in the soul. But not in the heart or my guts. On paper—yes. I would vote Left any day, sign manifestos, answer questionairres. Ditto my soul. My soul is all for moving towards the classless society. But unlike Plato, what my soul says does not seem to go….With my heart and my guts I lament the passing of class” (*ICM* 125, 127).

MacNeice was never, however, an apologist for the class system, and his sensibility was attuned more to the relationships between individualism and collectivism than a preference of one over the other. This tension denied to him refuge either in isolated individualism in defense of class or collective action against it: “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…and also from oneself as an individual” (*SLC* 114). MacNeice therefore worked out in his poetry a belief in the subject as confronted, and to an extent conditioned, by the pressures of ideology, and in a poem
such as "Eclogue from Iceland," formalized as a conversation between Ryan (who represents MacNeice), Craven (who represents Auden) and the Icelandic hero Grettir, we see the desires of the two former expressing a yearning to escape from external pressure into conformity: "they are presented as two men who at home lead a regular, bourgeois life—'kowtowing to boss or wife'...wanting to 'stay here a week like a placid brute'" (Marsack 31). Yet the voice of Grettir (who speaks as a figure enshrined by history) commands them to duty, to resist the interpellative force(s) which devalue their individuality:

You cannot argue with the eyes or voice;
Argument will frustrate you till you die
But go your own way, give the voice the lie,
Outstare the inhuman eyes. That is the way.
Go back to where you came from and do not keep
Crossing the road to escape them, do not avoid the ambush,
Take sly detours, but ride the pass direct.  (CP 46, 260-266)

Grettir's advice is ambiguous, urging Ryan and Craven to avoid articulating their resistance to the impersonal forces seeking to use them while advocating "direct" confrontation with them. The ghostly "eyes or voice" here can variously be seen as the forces of history and ideology compelling them to political commitment, the specters of the past that come in the form of literary tradition, and/or their own social consciences.

---

4 Originally published in Letters From Iceland, co-authored with W.H. Auden, a volume occasioned by their joint trip there in 1936.
Rather than advocating individualist escapism, Grettir urges Ryan and Craven to stand up to these forces, acknowledging them without giving in to them. Grettir goes on to elaborate this ethical duty:

Minute your gesture but it must be made—
Your hazard, your act of defiance and hymn of hate,
Hatred of hatred, assertion of human values,
Which is now your only duty.  (47, 308-311)

An act of defiance of any system that seeks to control the individual is preferred over any other ideological commitment or escapism, yet the indeterminacy of “human values” is troubling here, likely intentionally so. The poem leaves no doubt, however, that these values are in opposition to partisan politics and the reduction of the human experience to economics and rampant consumerism. The poem ends on a note of hope, albeit slight, that by testifying to the degradation of individuals, as well as whole classes, in poetry, the poet can find space in which to enunciate a provisional politics immersed in each, but submerged by neither: “Yes, my friends, it is your only duty. / And, it may be added, it is your only chance” (315-316).

The series of international crises that led to the Second Word War brought to an end any coherence and solidarity the British left had garnered through the course of the thirties, the failure to create a united front to oppose fascism removing what political efficacy the left could have had. Auden's much debated departure for America in 1939 seemed to signal the end of an era in poetry, which in many ways it was. His subsequent renunciation of political poetry (which is not so surprising as it was made out to be at the
time) is indicative of a general trend amongst poets of the “MacSpaunday” era to redirect their gaze inwards, but MacNeice stands out as an exception. “Autumn Journal” recreates the mood generated by events in late 1938 through personal recollection, yet much of the poem remains firmly rooted in the political necessities of the time. Canto VII, for instance, is concerned directly with how the political necessities of the war that loomed on the horizon affected his understanding of his role as a political subject. The canto opens with an overview of the current situation:

Conferences, adjournments, ultimatums,

Flights in the air, castles in the air,

The autopsy of treaties, dynamite under the bridges,

The end of laissez faire. (CP 113, 1-4)

Immediately the reader is given a bleak picture of British politics buckling under the pressure of events, while the forces of fascism gained strength and purpose. Treaties are dead and worthless, the bridges to the past are blown, and whatever awaits in the future, there is the recognition that the era criticized by the left-wing poets in the thirties has ended. The political necessity has changed from transforming the oppressive class system to holding the line against an even deadlier enemy:

Meetings assemble not, as so often, now

Merely to advertise some patent panacea

But simply to avow

The need to hold the ditch. (10-13)

Once again MacNeice distances himself from the “patent panacea” (and all “final
solutions”) that Marxism offered, while he recognizes that solidarity is now to be enforced by events, which are swiftly moving out of control: “There is no time to doubt / If the puzzle really has an answer. Hitler yells on the wireless” (20-21). The imagery that MacNeice employs reinforces the sense of disruption from the past, symbolized by the transformation of the hill near where he lives to wartime purposes: “They are cutting down the trees on Primrose Hill. / The wood is white like the roast flesh of chicken, / Each tree falling like a closing fan” (24-26) Even natural beauty is being destroyed by political necessity, the “closing fans” that are falling trees emblematic of a civilization withdrawing into itself and the dawn of propaganda and wartime production. These considerations lead the poet to conclude, simply, “This is the end of the old regime” (36). Ironically aware that he had hoped for many years to see an end to this old regime, the poet can only bear testimony to its replacement by something even less amenable to truth and individuality.

The ominous tone of this section continues unabated and unrelieved, leaving the speaker bewildered in the face of catastrophe, the evidence of which surrounds him: “rumble of tendrils / Drums in the trees / Breaking the eardrums of the ravished dryads” (CP 113-114, 41-43). Even the duly repetitive rhythm and diction here impart a feeling of doom, in the consonance of “rumble,” “drums,” and “eardrums,” and the falling rhythm echoing the sense of a society spiraling down into disaster. The speaker has no sense of political leadership or direction (hardly surprising considering the British policy of appeasement), projected in the image of an empty car:

And as I go out I see a windscreen-wiper
In an empty car

Wiping away like mad and I feel astounded

That things have gone so far.  (45-48)

These considerations lead the poet to an acknowledgement of the necessity of participation in the fight against fascism, and the paradoxical conclusion that no individual action can stem the tide of violence being let loose:

But one—meaning I—is bored, am bored, the issue

Involving principle but bound in fact

To squander principle in panic and self-deception—

Accessories after the act,

So that all we foresee is rivers in spate sprouting

With drowning hands

And men like dead frogs floating till the rivers

Lose themselves in the sands.  (CP 114, 57-64)

The apocalyptic tone here – in the flood, the corpses, the desert – are reminiscent of Yeats’ “The Second Coming,” and proffers a similarly bleak vision of the future of humanity, once thought so bright in the thirties. In this atmosphere the political has been thoroughly compromised by utility, people “now preparing to essay good through evil” (67), and the speaker confirms this necessary evil while still lamenting it, reality forcing the people to

become uncritical, vindictive,

And must, in order to beat
The enemy, model ourselves upon the enemy,

A howling radio for our paraclete. (69-72)

The radio has been transformed into a ghastly advocate, or Holy Spirit, through whose
counsel both communal and individual life are transformed by frenzied propaganda into
subordinates of the political will. As MacNeice states later in Canto X, “the order of the
day is complete conformity” (CP 120, 75). The crisis of events for a time reduce the
agency of the subject to a morose but willing submersion in the political cause.

The deleterious effects of the political events of 1938 on a conception of the
subject as a political agent are again taken up in Canto XIII, with perhaps even more
negative connotations. There is a concomitant recognition of the freedoms lost, and a
sympathy for those who have been made to suffer from the violence in Europe:

The year has little to show, will leave a heavy

Overdraft to its heir;

Shall we try to meet the deficit or passing

By on the other side continue laissez faire?

International betrayals, public murder,

The devil quoting scripture, the traitor, the coward, the thug

Eating dinner in the name of peace and progress,

The doped public sucking a dry dug;

Official recognition of rape, revival of the ghetto

And free speech gagged and free

Energy scrapped and dropped like surplus herring

103
Back into the barren sea;
Brains and beauty festering in exile,
The shadows of bars
Falling across each page, each field, each raddled sunset,
The alien lawn and the pool of nenuphars;
And hordes of homeless poor running the gauntlet
In hostile city streets of white and violet lamps
Whose flight is without a terminus but better
Than the repose of concentration camps.  \((CP \: 138, \: 81-100)\)

The only people to profit from the political situation are traitors, cowards, and thugs, while the plight of the poor and the victims of oppression still go unrecognized and unrelieved. The grim social picture envisioned here is an amalgam of the horrors being perpetrated in Germany and continental Europe, as well as at home in England, and the official propaganda line that valorized Great Britain as a champion of the oppressed is undercut by a vision of all humanity teetering on the brink of genocide and suicide. The politicians, rather than “meeting the deficit” (as Grettir advised in “Eclogue for Christmas”) in order to uplift and support the people, are merely engaged in a desperate struggle to maintain the status quo that MacNeice, Auden, Spender et al. had so fervently hoped would be replaced by a more humane system of government. The world is turned inside out and upside down, and now more than ever the traditional political system must be supported. Freedom and art have been imprisoned (“bars falling across each page”), and the poet is helpless to fight for individuality and freedom, and can only bear witness
to the suffering that common people are facing. There is still, however, an ethical imperative that must be obeyed in refusing to submerge the self in the clamour:

No wonder many would renounce their birthright,
The responsibility of moral choice,
And sit with a mess of pottage taking orders
Out of a square box from a mad voice. \(105-108\)

The radio here becomes both a symbol and the practical means of oppression, a source of alienation of the individual, enforcing a mass conformity that will lead inevitably to war and death. The vision of violence and hypocrisy in the canto does not remain unrelieved, however, and ends on a note of quiet hope that reason and humanity will win the day:

Still there are still the seeds of energy and choice
Still alive even if forbidden, hidden,
And while a man has voice
He may recover music. \(121-124\)

In these four lines this section of “Autumn Journal” descends from fiery apocalyptic rhetoric to a quieter, more reflective rhythm and diction, as though out of the ashes of despair the speaker finds some hope in the “hidden” recesses of sanity. The repetition of “still” gives these lines a quietude that relieves the swaying nightmare previously described, and the word is paradoxically yoked to terms of action – “energy,” “choice,” “alive,” “recover” – to provide a counterbalance to the mad, empty rhetoric on the radio. MacNeice's familiar use of inner tension resides here, putting the lie to propaganda, and sowing the “seeds” for a more humane future and a politics geared to serve humanity.
MacNeice's vision of the political necessities of the war period finds expression in a number of poems, most notably " Entirely" and "Bar-room Matins," both composed in 1940. In " Entirely" the political is approached in a much more buoyant, even optimistic vein, while admitting the darkness and violence of the real world and the inefficacy of the prevailing ideologies to account for it, as we see in the final stanza:

And if the world were black or white entirely

And all the charts were plain

Instead of a mad weir of tigerish waters,

A prism of delight and pain,

We might be surer where we wished to go

Or again we might be merely

Bored but in brute reality there is no

Road that is right entirely. (CP 159, 18-24)

We see here MacNeice's familiar insistence on "colour," the variety of flux and experience, and the incapability of dogma to encompass it. While the "tigerish waters" and "prism of delight and pain" are images redolent with violence, they are also alive with energy and vitality, holding up opposites without resolving them. The rhetoric of "black or white entirely" employed by the various ideologies contesting the war occasions deep concern for the poet's self-conception, and he is unable to posit an alternative that retains variety and solidarity while giving himself the direction and surety he desires. The circularity of the stanza, and the poem as a whole -- beginning and ending with "entirely" -- serves ironically to undercut notions of the political world as governable
and solutions to the crisis at hand that seek to solve problems dialectically through opposites. Throughout the poem there is an obvious delight in the play of language that undermines the “yammering fire alarms,” the “spears of the spring,” and “the bell or siren,” these being defied, if not abolished, by “the splash of words in passing / And falling twigs of song.” The subject here presents what Marsack defines as “his inability to be dogmatic” (67), a belief in the power of rhythm and language to recreate the self’s political sensibility. “Bar-room Matins,” on the other hand, conveys a much more bitter tone, attacking the “sponsored programme,” denying the playfulness of voice since we “have mouths like men but still are dumb” (CP 178, 3). Focused on American culture and neutrality, the poem returns often to a debased form of the Lord’s Prayer: “Give us this day our daily news.” The confusion that the war generated in America is paralleled by a cynical materialism that evades political commitment without searching for any honest alternatives: “Let him die, his death will be / A drop of water in the sea, / A journalist’s commodity” (25-27). The tight economy of words, strictly observed triplets, and jingoistic diction satirize neutrality and materialism through mimicry of journalistic style and opportunism, the outcome of which is a commodified, individualistic politics bereft of compassion or dignity.

A later poem, “Memoranda to Horace” (1962), looks back on the war period, its propaganda and jingoism and MacNeice’s repeated attempts to articulate a humane politics amid the destruction of Europe, in a more nonchalant manner. Addressing Horace, and implying a similarity between them (after acknowledging the Roman poet’s propaganda), the speaker remarks: “Yet we can guess between politics and personal /
Ties what making your expected / Bow you really preferred” (CP 541, III 10-12). What
MacNeice had always been primarily interested in was articulating an individual political
ethics that intersected with ideologies and historical forces, but was not dominated by
them. As “Memoranda to Horace” concludes,

When all the loudspeakers bellow

‘Wolf repeat Wolf?’ I can find asylum,

As you did, either in language

Or laughter or with the tangles. (21-24)

This is not the narcissistic individualism of “save my skin and damn my conscience” from
“Autumn Journal,” but an “asylum” in language and satire that provides a space in which
the subject can conceive of the self politically without necessarily becoming politicized in
the ways the loudspeaker insists it must. This is the voice that in “Autumn Sequel” “still
decides / To defer to politicians as his betters” (CP 382, XIII 17-18). The human
subject is conceived neither as a coherent political agent within or without the political
system, nor as a powerless victim of it, but as a complicated nexus that can gain a limited
freedom through resistance, and retains a power of choice even when unable to decide
for him or herself what the range of choices will be, as the speaker relates in “Autumn
Journal”:

And the individual, powerless, has to exert the
Powers of will and choice
And choose between enormous evils, either
Of which depends on somebody else's voice. (CP 109, V 29-32)
For MacNeice, the political, particularly in poetry, was a question first and foremost of ethics, and partisan politics was merely a symptom of the debased political situation he lived in. Being confronted de facto with a social condition requiring political thought and analysis, his response was often a careful individualism that has led many critics to assume he was non-political, or at best an ineffective, disillusioned liberal. In the Preface to his study of MacNeice, Elton Edward Smith provides a prime example of this vein of dismissal: "The budding, then disillusioned, liberalism of his personal experience mirrors the rather repentant liberalism of our time" (126). Smith goes on to say that "the young man who faced the war as a Liberal [note the impertinent capital "L"] came out of the war with a thoroughly battered Liberalism—and even with the conviction that the old Liberalism had no place in the new world" (ibid.). Smith finally uses as evidence that MacNeice was all his life a "broadly liberal humanist" his obituary in the London Times (167). Although he valued tradition and used it to effect in his poetry, and favoured the reform of society along more enlightened, humane lines, this does not make MacNeice a Liberal in strict political terms. "Humanist," a term that has gained negative connotations in recent times, is also a misnomer, unless one is to infer that this means only that he received an education in the liberal arts and concerned himself with human values. Humanism has come to be identified with a belief in the human being as a seat of reason that can organize human experience without interference from outside forces – Descartes' cogito comes to mind. MacNeice rejected this position early on in a review published in 1935 of Stephen Spender's The Destructive Element titled "Modern Writers and Beliefs": "The ego as an indestructible substrate is as obsolete as the old
philosophical conception of "substance"" (SLC 6). It is therefore inappropriate to define MacNeice as a "liberal humanist," since this categorization diminishes the depth and complexity of his political awareness as it is revealed in his poetry, and confines him to a historically over-determined category with which he has a convoluted, often negative, relationship.

There are many of MacNeice's poems which articulate the ethics of individuality as he understood it, but I would like to draw attention to a few as examples. "Convoy," written in 1942, describes the idea of the convoy moving "across the blackboard sea in sombre echelon" (CP 200, 2) as an abstraction, a generalization that while useful often failed in practice: "No Euclid could have devised / Neater means to a more essential end— / Unless the chalk breaks off, the convoy here is surprised" (3-5). MacNeice uses the convoy as a metaphor\(^5\) for the life of the community, traversing the oceans of time and history according to the dictates of a rigid theory that is often "surprised" by real events, unable to take into account their fluidity. The middle stanza describes the convoy in mid-ocean, all business ("steady as we go"), then the final stanza turns the metaphor back onto the individual:

This is a bit like us: the individual sets

A course for all his soul's more basic needs

Of love and pride-of-life, but sometimes he forgets

How much their voyage home depends upon pragmatic

\(^5\) MacNeice uses this as an example of "the rational metaphor" in "Experiences with Images" (SLC 162).
And ruthless attitudes—destroyers and corvettes. (11-15)

The individual is represented as “us,” the poet recognizing that the human community is made up of individuals who share “basic needs.” There is an element of allegory here, and if it seems somewhat forced, it is for good reason, since in the vicissitudes of war and the battle of gigantic ideologies, individuality and the integrity of the subject can only be maintained by forcing its recognition, and by using the material that reality provides the poet. MacNeice elaborated on the significance of this necessity in *The Poetry of W.B. Yeats*:

Yeats:

The paradox of poetry is like the paradox of individual freedom. An individual is not less free but more free, if he recognizes the factors which condition him and adjusts himself to his context; a poem is not less of a poem, but more of a poem, if it fulfills its business of corresponding to life. The necessity of circumstance does not destroy either the individuality of a man or the poetry of a poem. (227)

By inscribing the conditioning factor of war into the poem, MacNeice strengthens the ties between the individual as agent (“sets a course”) and the individual as constructed by the “voyage” through an often brutal, cerning reality (“depends upon ruthless and pragmatic attitudes”). There is also a subtle ethics at work in this poem, a knowledge that dependence on such ruthless attitudes (the choices between evils) must be balanced by an awareness of the “essential end” — in the context of this poem survival itself — which must not be achieved by violent means.

Another poem written in 1942, the darkly satiric “Alcohol,” uses cliché, myth,
and barroom talk to express the various strategies of moral evasion that many indulged in, not only during the war, but throughout the period in which MacNeice was writing. The poem opens with the line “On golden seas of drink,” a metaphor for escapism and alcoholism, and the speaker draws the typical London pub scene of the time as a negative asylum, a place where repetition and death abide: “We watch the many who have returned to the dead / Ordering time-and-again the same-as-before” (CP 208, 3–4). It is a truly democratic territory inside the pub, but one in which individuals find comraderie and a “popular front” only in their defeatism:

These Haves who cannot bear making a choice,

Those Have-nots who are bored with nothing to choose,

Call for their drinks in the same tone of voice,

Find a factitious popular front in booze. (4–8)

The poem moves through a quick series of contextualizations that prove “self-deception golden,” from Bacchylides to Adam in the Garden and finally Cain, leading the speaker to the conclusion that “the beautiful ideologies have burst” (20). The final stanza ends on a bitter note:

Take away your slogans; give us something to swallow,

Give us beer or brandy or schnapps or gin;

This is the only road for the self-betrayed to follow—

The last way out that leads not out but in. (25–28)

No longer able to swallow the slogans, each person in the pub nevertheless takes some responsibility for the war which the poem’s religious images reinforce. The notion of
ethical considerations leading "not out but in" is picked up in a poem written some twenty years later, "New Jerusalem," which with Victorian overtones contrasts the noise and confusion of the modern city with the need for the individual to find time and peace to reflect:

With all this rebuilding we have found an antidote

To quiet and self-communing: from now on nobody

Strolling the streets need lapse into timelessness

Or ponder the simple unanswerable questions. (CP 530, 13-16)

Both poems impart an ironic, even satirical sense of the individual as caught up in a whirlwind of pointless activity, unable to disengage long enough for the reflection that can lead to ethical action and consideration of the future, but also immersed in a communal life that has a value of its own.

In "Epitaph for Liberal Poets" MacNeice attempts to summarize the experiences of the thirties poets and establish their place in history, beginning with a negative assessment of their role as agents of social change: "What, though better unsaid, would we have history say / Of us who walked in our sleep and died on our Quest?" (CP 209, 5-6). Here the "MacSpaunday" configuration is portrayed as knights errant who, like Don Quixote, were merely tilting at windmills while the real world fell apart around them. The epitaph goes on to admit that their idealism was grounded in the belief that they were free, an idealism that the war has destabilized: "We who always had, but never admitted, a master, / Who were expected—and paid—to be ourselves, / Conditioned to think freely" (210, 7-9). The speaker goes on to note that "The Individual has died
before,” citing Catullus as an example, and concluding that “Though our songs / Were not so warm as his, our fate is no less cold” (18-19). This vision of the end of the
tradition of individualism that MacNeice's poetry was a part of is softened, however, by
the concluding lines:

we shall vanish first,

Yet leave behind us certain frozen words

Which some day, though not certainly, may melt

And, for a moment or two, accentuate a thirst. (21-24)

The halting syntax reinforces the poem's apologetic tone, yet, as Edna Longley has
observed, “even while MacNeice acknowledges their historical obsolescence, he claims
his share in a lasting artistic if not social synthesis. And he implies that the former at least
keeps the possibility of the latter alive” (94). By accepting the knowledge of individual
defeat, there is a paradoxical affirmation of the value of their project to ensure an
individual perspective on the world, a value that may have relevance to an as-yet
unprescribed future. This, MacNeice implies, is one of the ethical imperatives of the
poet: to bear witness to his/her times for the sake of the future.

MacNeice's most comprehensive articulation of the importance of individuals
occurs in his 1943 long poem “The Kingdom,” which after an introductory section goes
on to detail how the lives of six distinct individuals retain and exemplify the power the
life and memory of a single person has to uphold the integrity of the self. While the
poem tends to over-simplification (everything outside the Kingdom is merely relegated to
“other”), the intellectual and political positioning he works out in the poem is indicative
of a belief in the value of each human life beyond social utility. Moreover these integrated pieces are testimonials to the dead and the dying, and MacNeice feels an ethical imperative to bear witness to their existence, their alternative histories submerged beneath the vast historical scope of the Second World War: “Under the surface of flux and of fear there is an underground movement, / Under the crust of bureaucracy, quiet behind the posters, / Unconscious but palpably there—the Kingdom of individuals” (CP 248, I 1-3). Gary Taylor makes the connection between the cultural significance of these forgotten individuals and the ethical imperative in art: “The building blocks of culture—all those individual stories of a death, a survivor, a struggle—are inextricably ethical, bound up with memories of duty to the dead, of duty to the future, of moral obligations to tell the truth, defeat lies, and give people what they deserve” (280). The individual has a story just as societies and whole histories do, and MacNeice valorizes those who are “working within their limits / And yet transcending them” (CP 248, I 25-26) in order to undermine the notion that only through social and political identification with broad ideological movements can the subject participate in living history.

The political significance of these individuals is therefore not lost on MacNeice, and he plays with the complexities of their living out their lives within the system, yet “apart” from it:

    Apart from slaves and tyrants and from every
    Community of mere convenience; these are
    Apart from those who drift and those who force,
    Apart from partisan order and egotistical anarchy,
Apart from the easy religion of him who would find God
A boss, a ponce, an alibi, and apart from
The logic of him who arrogates to himself
The secret of the universe, the whole
Choreography of atoms… (16-24)

By not identifying with convenient systems of thought, and by retaining a pride of self
that is yet humble in its pretensions to truth, MacNeice implies that these are the people
for whom the politics of the moment are irrelevant, and who rather rely on an individual
ethical stance toward the world, informed by whatever perspective(s) they choose so
long as it is humane. The wartime descent into propaganda and butchery is undermined
by this version of individualism that grounds the subject in the social world without
making him or her subservient to all its whims, and it is these people who retain a faith in
the future free from dogma “who vindicate the species.” There is certainly a
metaphysical element in this vision of the political subject. In his Preface to The Poetry
of W.B. Yeats MacNeice states that “the faith in the value of living is a mystical faith,”
and it is this insistence on value that sets his political thinking apart from party lines and
ineffectual individualism. There is a call to action in this value that sets daily human
activities (of which MacNeice counted poetry as one) above propaganda, and a fruitful
tension between the two that MacNeice exploited fully. Albert Camus summarizes this
tension and call to political and artistic action it engenders: “We must simultaneously
serve suffering and beauty. The long patience, the strength, the secret cunning such
service calls for are the virtues that establish the very renaissance we need” (MSS 191).
Whatever convenient labels we choose to ascribe to MacNeice's politics – liberal, humanist, left-wing, individualist – the core of political belief in his poetry refused easy answers, but always answered this call to service, and to testify to the inhumanities perpetrated in the name of politics.

Lavender green for youth, lavender blue for love—

Never is time to retire.

I have had both and unstinted and now, whatever

Doubt may rise from below or terror brood from above,

I will stand as if under fire

With a sweet-smelling bunch in my hand, face to face with Never.

(from "Notes for a Biography," CP 477-78, V 13-18)
Chapter Four

“A litter of chronicles and bones”: MacNeice and place

“You had such a vision of the street
As the street hardly understands.”
*T.S. Eliot* – “Preludes”

“At times home is nowhere. At times one only knows extreme estrangement and alienation. Then home is no longer just one place. It is locations.”
*bell hooks*¹

Place in poetry, like memory, is an intersection or nexus wherein the various guises of the subject confront determining factors, and through which the subject comes to terms with his or her self-awareness. By locating the self within varying geographical contexts, the subject in poetry can manipulate the various identities that particular places impose, as well as gain cultural perspectives that challenge hegemonic modes of thought which certain locations elicit. The illusory unity of identity with place can be undercut by creating a dialogue between places, and the subject may inhabit these between spaces, as MacNeice often does, through the processes of defamiliarization and irony. Since places (birthplace, city, country, nation) impose upon the subject a landscape – both real and mental – and particular historical, social, ethnic and linguistic forms, the poet must negotiate this terrain with an awareness of how such interpellative factors govern the

subjective response to place. The result is a long and varied tradition in poetic
expression of the relationship of the self to place, including investigations into origins,
language, regionality and travel. As Robert F. Garratt has noted, “poetic representation
and treatment of place must accept the burden of history, both cultural and political”
(Ludwig & Fietz 190), and so place in literature is often symbolic and/or emblematic of
the relationships established at certain times and in specific locales between the dominant
fictions of a given culture and the marginalized articulations of identity that inevitably
emerge to counteract them.

The profound influence that geography, or “landscape,” has in shaping any
society is accompanied by a parallel influence at the level of the individual. The
enscription of place as a locus for cultural significance in literature signifies an awareness
of place as an important element in the socialization of human beings, and the
 politicization of this concept in critical practice can lead to a fuller understanding of how
a poet envisions that process. Douglas Pocock identifies this renewed critical
understanding of place as a “concept [that] provides an organising concept for what is
 termed our immersion in, or interpenetration with, the world” (17). As Lothar Fietz has
observed, the development of place into a “critical concept within the framework of a
new aesthetics of regionality [takes] place beside the aesthetics of universality at the
opposite end” (Ludwig & Fietz 15), and thus it has emerged as a counterbalance to
generalizing trends concerning literary history and the process of canonization. The
emergence of the study of literatures previously defined as regional or peripheral has
challenged notions of traditional centres of cultural power, resulting in a critically fruitful
destabilization of the concept of place. For the poet also, place provides this organizing concept whereby notions of centrality and periphery can be arranged, de-stabilized, and re-routed in order to expose the underlying politics that such definitions inscribe within texts and individuals. The task that a poet such as MacNeice undertakes is therefore devolutionary, dismantling concepts of place which express cultural hegemony and constituting locations as sites where the complexities of political geography can be investigated. Rosemary Marangoly George describes this “politics of location,” which “come into play in the attempt to weave together a subject-status that is sustained by the experience of the place one knows as Home or by resistance to places that are patently ‘not Home’” (2), and this process of sustaining and resisting provides a powerful impetus for a poet such as MacNeice.

Poetry written in English in this century developed a complex reaction to the notions of place that arose during the Romantic period. Poetry that criticizes life is never neutral or disinterested, and for the Romantics, as Fietz asserts, “the shift from the ‘encomia’ of the metropolis to…praise of nature and the countryside to contemporary realism has always reflected partiality and interest in specific historical situations” (Ludwig & Fietz 17). The investment of place with specific historical significance and connotations is therefore a device with a long history in poetry in English. For poets of MacNeice’s time, the Romantic expressions of continuity between self and nature have become extremely problematic, historically and socially. Jeremy Hooker defines this basic shift in poetic understanding as a split between humans and nature, matter and spirit: “The breaking of the Wordsworthian link between Nature and the human
soul... has had a profound influence on subsequent English poetry concerned with landscapes or place” (Ludwig & Fietz 80-81). Modernist conceptions of place (especially in the wake of such works as “The Wasteland” and *Ulysses*) tend to focus on place as fragmentary, reflecting an ambivalent relationship towards any politics of identity (such as intense regional and national affiliations) with locations and/or nature. This shift in the subject's relation to place is summarized by Brian Robinson as a change in emphasis from unitary world views to a pluralistic one: “Modernism's main characteristic is that it pluralizes by means of juxtapositions and, in order to do this, it relies less on experience in a defined environment than on fragmentation of experience in settings that may be difficult to define” (Lutwack 187). This assault on the certainties of place, at least as it was previously defined by poets such as Wordsworth and AE, led to a revision by modernist writers of how the subject responds to concepts such as homeland, nation, city and country; MacNeice's understanding of place plants him firmly in this tradition where place is envisioned as a concept involving loss and a site wherein an often brutalizing politics is inscribed.

The most common process whereby MacNeice and similar writers affect a re-evaluation of place is defamiliarization. Unlike a poet such as Patrick Kavanagh, who invests the particular place of his poetry with political meaning through emphasis on realism and the importance of the peripheral region in order to gain a certain distance of perspective, MacNeice enlists his feelings of exile and placelessness to defamiliarize the places he describes and evaluates. Fietz analyzes the need to undercut previous uses of place as stereotype in order to negotiate the various articulations of centre and periphery:
“automatizations and habitualizations characteristic of the traditional view of places, will have to be replaced by a new way of looking at places, which means that through critical ‘defamiliarization’ the senses must be sharpened again both for the stereotypes as stereotypes and for the places in their own right” (Ludwig & Fietz 18). The stereotyping of Ireland, for instance, by English writers of the nineteenth century, or the immersion and communion with place in Wordsworth, are both stylistic inventions with which MacNeice maintains an ambiguous connection. By using his status as an Irishman in England, that of expatriate in Ireland, and other configurations MacNeice is able in his poetry to attain a dynamic tension between stereotype and revision, between place as a locus of political interest and individual desire. In this way the “familiar” inscription of place as a symbol of the “private sphere of patriarchal hierarchy, gendered self-identity, shelter, comfort, nurture and protection” (George 1) can be undermined by re-writing the subject as radically de-centred by these forces. As Seamus Heaney suggests, “if one perceptible function of poetry is to write place into existence, another of its functions is to unwrite it” (Heaney 47), and the project that MacNeice undertakes is most often the latter, as he exposes the influences place has on the formation of subjectivity by deconstructing traditional perspectives bound up with specific locations. As Heaney goes on to note, “[MacNeice’s] celebrated thematic obsession with flux…may be a consequence of his unsettled and unsettleable placing between a pre-natal Ireland, a native Ulster and an embraced England” (ibid.). Utilizing this unstable series of identifications with places, MacNeice critiques notions of allegiance and constantly re-evaluates his personal placelessness in terms of the national politics and identities of
Ireland and England in order to de-realize both and establish a subjectivity formed by each but determined by neither.

Place emerges in MacNeice's poetry often as an idea or series of ideas that are bound up with nationalism and the specific portrayal of national identities, as well as a setting for the interplay of subjectivity and location/description. He does not emphasize realism in depiction, but rather invests places with personal and political meaning. As Leonard Lutwack asserts, “all places…serve figurative ends and thereby sacrifice part of their concreteness as they cater to some human desire or craving beyond present reality” (32), and in MacNeice's poetry one can see this emphasis on “figurative ends” most clearly in the pieces he writes set specifically in Ireland and England which usually defy an easy antimony between the two. During the Irish Literary Revival, as Robert Garratt observes, “Ireland as a place or region was consciously placed in opposition with England, the seat of industrial and political power” (Ludwig & Fietz 175). For writers after Yeats, then, the choice seemed between imitating this characterization of Ireland or rejecting its clichéd aspects for a more cosmopolitan sense of place. Although recognizing the power that the Yeatsian conception of Ireland held (in both his romantic and modernist veins), MacNeice's sensibility was dissociated from it by a more urban, industrial experience. As Seamus Heaney perceives, “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” (Heaney 43). This notion of the “lever” is an instructive one, for MacNeice certainly utilized his geographical distance from Ireland in order to undermine the many stereotypes of that place as held by both the Irish and the

123
English. His relationship to both countries was to remain consistently ambivalent throughout his life, a trend that can be marked from early poems addressing childhood images and experiences of Ireland.

Perhaps MacNeice's most celebrated poem concerning his Irish upbringing is "Carrickfergus," a piece that is firmly rooted in the physical and geographical realities of turn of the century Northern Ireland, utilizing its images to conjure up a curious blend of realism and childhood fancy. MacNeice gives a pertinent background to the poem in "Experiences with Images":

All human upbringing are more like than unlike each other but the peculiarities do have their lasting effect. Thus place and time are important. [I] was born in 1907 in Belfast and brought up on the northern shore of Belfast Lough, i.e., in a wet, rather sombre countryside where linen mills jostled with primitive rustic cottages and farmyard noises and hooters more or less balanced each other. (SLC 158)

This insistence on the specificities of time and place are common in MacNeice's work, and lend to poems such as "Carrickfergus" a historicity that blends nostalgia with philosophical detachment. Thus lines such as "I was born between the mountains and the gantries / To the hooting of lost sirens and the clang of trams," with their romantic evocation of MacNeice's childhood geography (significantly placing the speaking subject "between" nature and industry and evoking a sense of loss) are balanced by a mature awareness of that specific, divided place as the locus of historical and political forces: "The Scotch Quarter was a line of residential houses / But the Irish Quarter was a slum
for the blind and halt" (CP 69). The general cartography outlined by the poet in these lines inscribes the cultural and social differentiation he experienced as a child. MacNeice admits that the images of factory, small fields and gardens come more naturally to him, since the place of his birth has saturated his responses and use of language: “for it is these...images which I am more likely to use ‘instinctively’” (SLC 159). The physical and emotional facts of childhood are permanent if not unproblematic for a poet, and as Heaney states MacNeice is forced to acknowledge “the plumb, assured, unshakable fact of an Ulster childhood [whose] intimacies and particularities are indelibly present to the consciousness that would opt beyond them” (45). MacNeice emphasizes, however, the emotional aspect that this particular place has, and as these emotions are often expressed negatively in the poem, the result is a combination of emotive distancing and detailed description from Carrickfergus:

The brook ran yellow from the factory stinking of chlorine,
The yarn-mill called its funeral cry at noon;
Our lights looked over the lough to the lights of Bangor
Under the peacock aura of a drowning moon. (9-12)

Although certain images (such as “peacock aura of a drowning moon”) reflect a limited romantic response, this is not the romanticized, idyllic country childhood so often recalled in poetry,² but the evocation of a desolate, cold place. The industrial pollution of the river signals the decay of the countryside in the industrial North, the yarn-mill is a grim reminder of death, and even the moon is infected with the city’s sickly emanations.

² One thinks of Dylan Thomas’s “Fern Hill” here.
There is also a disturbing sense of isolation here, with the lonely lights perceived in the speaker's mind as looking at each other across the lough.

The suffocating sense of place evoked in “Carrickfergus” is reflected in the political realities of Ulster and its history of conquest and resistance – “The Norman walled this town against the country / To stop his ears to the yelping of his slave” (CP 69, 13-14) – a recognition that causes the poet to turn the focus in on himself as “the rector's son, born to the anglican order, / Banned for ever from the candles of the Irish poor”(17-18). This blending of the personal and historical modes in “Carrickfergus” inscribes the political difference that is written into not only the society, but also into the very experience of the geography of Ulster. Protestant Northern Irish culture seems heavy and oppressive to MacNeice, and the interruption of the First World War and his journey to England for education come as an obvious relief, although the familiar images and smells of childhood remain to haunt the poet:

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

And the soldiers with their guns.       (41-44)

The hereditary, traditional inheritance the speaker names “the puppet world of sons” is characterized as sterile and alienating, as opposed to the world of violence and hard labour he has left behind. This ambivalent attitude towards both the Ireland and England of MacNeice’s childhood transforms Ireland into “a place of hauntings, where dark ghosts of the past cannot be laid to rest” (Brown 79). The mill girls, smell of porter and
salt-mines become symbols for MacNeice of a world by which the adult mind is haunted.

This insecurity led MacNeice continually to re-invent the Ireland of his childhood in an attempt to exorcise the past while re-inscribing it into new contexts. Lutwack summarizes this paradoxical attachment to place as "the despair of deracination" which is "countered with the hope of restoring attachments to remnant places" (184), and it is when approaching Ireland as a locus for both detachment and connection that MacNeice's understanding of his childhood place is most complex.

In "Carrick Revisited" the poet relates returning to his childhood home after thirty years living in England. The poem posits a realistic vision of "Carrick" that does not treat its subject in a superior way and invokes the West of Ireland and southern England as places of refuge, yet still "foreign." As Seamus Heaney has remarked, "Carrick" moves "from delight to wisdom" (Heaney 46) as the poet considers "the child's astonishment not yet cured" (CP 224, 5). The second and third stanzas position the speaker in time and space while he maintains a curious resistance to interpreting the world:

Who was—and am—dumbfounded to find myself
In a topographical frame—here, not there—
The channels of my dreams determined largely
By random chemistry of soil and air;
Memories I had shelved peer at me from the shelf:

Fog-horn, mill-horn, corncrake and church bell
Half-heard through boarded time as a child in bed
Glimpses a brangle of talk from the floor below
But cannot catch the words. Our past we know
But not its meaning—whether it meant well. (6-15)

Here the place of childhood bridges the gulf created by the “random chemistry of soil and air,” and the speaker is “dumbfounded” to find that memories without meaning can be elicited by a place from which he felt thoroughly alienated. The location itself confronts the poet with a past that has suddenly become present, with a renewed intensity at once fascinating and dislocating, and with memories peering at him from shelves. Even the remembered conversations of adults “from the floor below” rely on a spatial rather than auditory metaphor (“glimpses a brangle of talk”), as though the “topographical frame” of reference has inserted itself into the subject’s very consciousness of events. This topographical frame reminds the speaker that place, every bit as much as time, defines the subject’s relationship with the world, yet this understanding comes at the price of a loss of stable perspective:

Time and place—our bridgeheads into reality
But also its concealment! Out of the sea
We land on the Particular and lose
All other possible bird’s-eye views, the Truth
That is of Itself for Itself—but not for me. (16-20)

Here the significance of place for the individual is abstracted into a paradox of subjective awareness, the need to encounter specific times and places in order to access “reality”
concealing that other reality which the subject gains through distancing him or herself from such particulars. The subject is once again, therefore, envisioned as divided within itself, as Peter McDonald acknowledges: "The self is divided, not so much between England and Ireland as between 'the Particular' and 'All other possible bird's-eye views'; if this very realization means that the self is profoundly displaced, the displacement is also a condition of its freedom" (McDonald 206). The perspective from which the self now looks at other places, this "displaced place," becomes a malleable construct in the mind, and recognition of this limited freedom comes at the price of being de-centred from the "Truth that is of Itself for Itself." The capitals imply a transcendent system of ideas and logic that are not manifest to the human mind except through an abstraction that is hermetic, and which remains outside the realm of direct human experience, a metaphysics. Place in this instance elicits an understanding of the conflict between the particular and the general in which truth and meaning remain hidden, and out of which grows an angst-ridden freedom.

The final two stanzas of "Carrick Revisited" recognize this lonely state as an aspect of the poet's divided identity, wherein Ulster, western Ireland and England become "co-ordinates of an independent voice" (McDonald 206). A tone of anxiety is introduced that cannot be explained away, a sense of loss, displacement and even sentimental identification that functions as tension between the place of childhood and the adult's geographical and emotional instability:

Torn before birth from where my fathers dwelt,
Schooled from the age of ten to a foreign voice,
Yet neither western Ireland nor southern England
Cancels this interlude, what chance misspelt
May never now be righted by choice.

Whatever then my inherited or acquired
Affinities, such remains my childhood's frame
Like a belated rock in the red Antrim clay
That cannot at this era change its pitch or name—
And the pre-natal mountain is far away.  

(CP 225, 21-30)

The pre-natal violence of the penultimate stanza reflects the speaker's awareness of a traumatic break from a place in which he could have been at home (western Ireland, the patriarchal territory of "where my fathers dwelt"), followed by the acknowledgement that in England he was merely "schooled to a foreign voice," a division within the desiring self indicative of placelessness and homelessness. All that the subject can experience is an "interlude" in which the "chance" of his birth and childhood in Ulster is softened by the knowledge that for better or worse this place evokes a direct connection that the West and England can only approximate. The central geological image of the final stanza ("Like a belated rock in the red Antrim clay") re-contextualizes the "childhood frame": the speaker's childhood is rooted in the earth of the North, emerging out of it almost glacially, yet is "belated," dislocated in time from the world for which his "acquired affinities" make him long. Home as place becomes a complex site where the subject's desire is at once stimulated and confounded, the deeply unsettling experience of the natal
place (Brown 80) making the speaker reach out for identifications with other places as substitutes. Yves Bonnefoy has summarized the romantic “longing for the true place [which] is the vow made by poetry” (Naughton 116), and we can see this longing at work in “Carrick Revisited,” but without satiety. MacNeice could not and would not conform his vision of the “pre-natal mountain” to the idealized place of desire’s consummation, either in the past or future, and the speaker in the poem is forced to accept the ceaseless anxiety of alienation from home, or any “true place.”

As a mature poet MacNeice would come to identify England and Ireland with clearly demarcated historical and political significances. Although he warns the reader in *The Poetry of W.B. Yeats* that it is “notoriously dangerous to generalize about Ireland” (44), he did so in a number of poems, usually in a negative political or social context, but never without acknowledging, to borrow a phrase from Gramsci, the infinity of traces that the country of his birth left in him. While MacNeice retained an active respect for Yeats' poetic achievement, for instance,³ he rejected the ideals and methods of the Literary Revival repeatedly. The most bitter indictment of the Revival and Irish nationalism (as well as unionism) comes in Canto XVI of “Autumn Journal.” Unable to reconcile himself to the Anglo-Irish Protestant tradition into which he was born, MacNeice is even less interested in identifying with the largely Protestant Revival:

So reading the memoirs of Maud Gonne,

Daughter of an English mother and a soldier father,

³ In “Poetry To-Day” he writes: “We now laugh at the Celtic Twilight and at the self importance of these dilettante nationalists, but their naïveté and affectation had manured the ground for poetry” (*SLC* 15).
I note how a single purpose can be founded on
A jumble of opposites. \(CP\) 131, 9-12)

The ironic note here is quite deliberate, the speaker undercutting any sense of the validity of “single purpose” with the emotional vagary of “jumble of opposites,” and he goes on to give examples of these:

Dublin Castle, the vice-regal ball,
The embassies of Europe,
Hatred scribbled on a wall,
Gaols and revolvers. \(13-16\)

Here the speaker reflects sourly on a perceived contradiction within the Irish Literary Revival: the imbalance between its populist, nationalist sentiments and its inherent elitism, both of which support, wittingly or no, a regime of violence. These considerations lead the poet to voice the violence and fear that invaded his own childhood in the North:

When the wind blew from the west, the noise of shooting
Starting in the evening at eight
In Belfast in the York Street district;
And the voodoo of the Orange bands
Drawing an iron net through darkest Ulster,
Flailing the limbo lands— \(CP\) 132, 22-27

The violence of the Ulster of MacNeice’s childhood is drawn differently from that in the South during the Revival and through the Civil War: where the latter is seen as
incompetent hooliganry ("hatred scribbled on a wall"), the regime of hatred in the North is much more insidious and dark. The "voodoo of the Orange bands" is strangely culturally dislocated (perhaps because the indigenous cultures have no language of hatred more eloquent than the drums themselves), as though the speaker cannot comprehend its genesis, while all the country seems to be in darkness and without purpose; a self-regenerating cycle of hatred penetrates the very place itself, transforming the place of childhood into the "limbo lands." All that is left for the poet to contemplate are ghosts, spirits of the victims of violence in an Ireland divided as much by bigotry and ignorance as real political problems.

MacNeice returns his gaze to the "purblind manifestoes" of Irish nationalism, seeing in the resuscitated maternal image of Ireland merely the continuation of an age-old hatred out of place in the modern world:

Kathleen ni Houlihan! Why

Must a country, like a ship or a car, be always female,

Mother or sweetheart? A woman passing by,

We did but see her passing.

Passing like a patch of sun on the rainy hill

And yet we love her for ever and hate our neighbour

And each one in his will

Binds his heirs to continuance of hatred. (41-48)

Irish nationalism is countered in the poet's view by an equally ludicrous, historical dedication to violence on the part of the Orangemen:
Thousands of banners, thousands of white
Horses, thousands of Williams
Waving thousands of swords and ready to fight
Till the blue sea turns to orange.     (53-56)
The poet's reaction, however, is not a simple condemnation of the violence tearing apart
Irish society, and he is unable to reject his homeland:

    Such was my country and I thought I was well
    Out of it, educated and domiciled in England,
    Though yet her name keeps ringing like a bell
    In an under-water belfry.     (57-60)
The use of the word “domiciled” to refer to his residence in England demonstrates how
the poet rues his loss of the vitality and commitment of Irish life, and regrets being tamed
and alienated from the romantic longing signified by the bell. He knows this is a
delusion, but it echoes like a siren call

    …because one feels that here [Ireland] at least one can
    Do local work which is not at the world's mercy
    And that on this tiny stage with luck a man
    Might see the end of one particular action.
    It is self-deception of course.     (69-74)
The characterization of Ireland as a “tiny stage,” loaded with ideological presuppositions
about the relative importance of Irish and English culture, momentarily engages the
poet's mind, yet he realizes “there is no immunity in this island either” (75). Sinn Fein is
castigated for its self-absorption – “Ourselves alone! Let the round tower stand aloof / In a world of bursting mortar!” (79) – and mystic patriotism: “Let them pigeon-hole the souls of the killed / Into sheep and goats, patriots and traitors” (97-98). The industrial North receives an equally dismal accounting: “A culture built upon profit; / Free speech nipped in the bud, / The minority always guilty” (CP 133). He rejects both the nationalists and the Orangemen because they perpetuate the cycle of fear and violence rather than trying to assuage it. The poet's only relationship to Ireland thus becomes one of denial and even hate: “The blots on the page are so black / That they cannot be covered with shamrock. / I hate your grandiose airs” (107-109). The final indictment is swift and brutal, as he sarcastically returns to the typical image of Ireland as female: “She is both a bore and a bitch” (121). It is the investment of a compelling geography with violent fantasy born of myth and history that enrages the speaker, and the Canto closes on a scarcely more optimistic note that characterizes Ireland's culture as an empty shell that permanently alienates and exiles its sons and daughters: “And she gives her children neither sense nor money / Who slouch around the world with a gesture and a brogue / And a faggot of useless memories” (127-128). The implications of this pessimism are inscribed in an unstable self-conception with which MacNeice was to grapple throughout his life.

MacNeice's emotional and intellectual exile from Ireland finds expression in a number of poems, and the distance he assumes from the violence and hypocrisy he sees inherent in his birthplace is resumed in a poem such as “Eclogue from Iceland”:

I come from an island, Ireland, a nation
Built upon violence and morose vendettas.

My diehard countrymen like drayhorses

Drag their ruin behind them.

Shooting straight in the cause of crooked thinking

Their greed is sugared with pretence of public spirit.

From all which I am an exile. \( CP \ 41, \ 48-54 \)

The diagnosis of Ireland's disease puts the blame for the "morose vendettas" on hypocrisy; in The Poetry of W.B. Yeats he summarizes it somewhat differently: "Most Irish people cannot see Ireland clearly because they are busy grinding axes" (39). While in the context of "Eclogue from Iceland" this generalization is rather ironic, clearly MacNeice has eschewed Ireland and its culture. His European, modernist, and urban influences perhaps left him little choice: two of the most famous and influential Irish writers of this century, James Joyce and Samuel Beckett, had similarly deep misgivings about the patriotism and nationalism flourishing in their homeland, and sought to deconstruct and fragment these notions in their work. It is not, however, the oppressive intellectual atmosphere that sunders MacNeice from his Irish roots most, but the politics of the new regime in the Free State, particularly during the Second World War, as he conjures up Irish non-involvement in "Neutrality": "The neutral island facing the Atlantic,

/ The neutral island in the heart of man" \( CP \ 202, \ 1-2 \). Ireland here is pictured facing away from Europe, isolated unto itself and a "bitterly soft reminder" of the similar impulses to avoid confronting the horrors of the war that everyone felt at the time:

Look into your heart, you will find a County Sligo,
A Knocknarea with for navel a cairn of stones,
You will find the shadow and sheen of a moleskin mountain
And a litter of chronicles and bones. (5-8)

The heart here conjures up the sentimental feelings of the Irishman in exile for the home country, turned bitterly ironic through images of death such as the “cairn” and “litter of chronicles and bones.” There is a frightening absence of morality and community in this vision of neutral Ireland, a blind spot that would only be fully exposed with the revelations of the concentration camps. Europe in the poem is “dark, as archetypal as sin” (14), yet while the Irish may turn away from it, “to the west off your own shores the mackerel / Are fat—on the flesh of your kin” (15-16). The spatial configuration of Ireland's neutrality – “facing the Atlantic” – undergoes an ironic reversal in these closing lines. The destruction of the war is an Irish matter and is taking place on the Atlantic every bit as much as elsewhere: Irish men and women are dying while the state looks on impassively, and the poet, while sympathizing with the impulse towards neutrality, condemns the entire nation for hypocrisy and cowardice.

The poem in which MacNeice's self-imposed division from Ireland is most forceful and satirical is “Valediction,” where the evocation of place is of a country and cities infected by the malignance of the human inhabitants. As Jim Wayne Miller has pointed out, “ways in which different groups make use of the land and its resources are as much a part of what is ultimately meant by place as are rivers, valleys, mountains and plains” (Housley & Mallory 15). Belfast, for instance, takes on the personality of what MacNeice envisions as the stereotypical Northerner: “See Belfast, devout, profane and
hard, / Built on reclaimed mud, hammers playing in the shipyard, / Time punched with holes like a steel sheet” (CP 52). Here personification borders on allegory; the city, like the people, has no real rootedness or permanence in its place (“Built on reclaimed mud”), the physical violence of the hammers is like a game, and the alienation of industrial labour infects even time. The valediction is thus a rejection of Northern industry and intolerance and the “indifference and sentimentality” of the nationalist’s Ireland. The rejection seems final—

I will exorcise my blood

And not to have my baby-clothes my shroud

I will acquire an attitude not yours

And become as one of your holiday visitors— (67-70)

but the speaker cannot will away “my country” even while bidding it farewell. As the poet admits, “Cursèd be he that curses his mother. I cannot be / Anyone else than what this land engendered me” (33-34). He therefore conceives of himself as a tourist in order to evade the responsibilities of his Irish heritage, yet even this manoeuvre is an obligation thrust upon him by that cultural inheritance. A voice that aspires to individuality is caught up in the nexus of place identification, and the act of denial – the curse – paradoxically entraps the speaker just as he envisions a new-won freedom. The assumed objectivity of the poem, in which the speaker decides to “tot up my factors” as though identity was simple math, is thus undermined by a renewed sense of the inescapability of the Irish inheritance to which MacNeice returned in his poetry throughout his life without resolution.
Often noted for his “urban” sensibilities, it is not surprising that, inheriting the
tradition of Eliot and the modernists, MacNeice should focus his attention on the modern
city and the human elements which endow it with life. In his essay “Eliot and the
Adolescent,” MacNeice discusses the influence that his early experience of the great
urban and industrial centres of Great Britain had on his developing awareness: “I had
only occasionally visited great cities—London, Belfast, Liverpool, Birmingham—but the
fact of these cities was mysterious, compelling, frightening; it was one of the great
inescapables of my world which a poet, I thought, must recognize” (SLC 152).
MacNeice found in Eliot's poems such as “Preludes” and “The Wasteland” the evocation
of urban sights, sounds and smells, as well as an indication of “the human element below
that surface,” which signified a major challenge for the poets of his generation, even if it
wasn’t their primary landscape: “However sheltered our young lives, however rural our
normal surroundings, however pre-Industrial-Revolution our education, we knew in our
bones, if not explicitly, that this which Eliot expressed so succinctly and vividly, this was
what we were up against” (ibid.). This urban, industrial reality provided a new, more
contemporary site of opposition for the poet and played a part in MacNeice's rejection of
the aesthetics of Yeats and his followers, for whom “the Industrial Revolution was
something which must not be recognized; everything connected with it was lank and
jaded and had no place in poetry” (PY 76). Like Eliot, MacNeice embraced this “lank
and jaded” world of the modern city as not only a fit subject for poetry, but also as a
counterbalance to the often idealistic pastoral tradition of the lyric which he had
inherited. It is significant that Poems, the first volume of poetry MacNeice published
after leaving Oxford, was not only acquired by Eliot for Faber & Faber but contains two poems, “Belfast” and “Birmingham,” which take the modern industrial city as their direct subject, and have distinctly Eliotesque uses of imagery, diction and tone.

The 1931 poem “Belfast” grinds though its rhythm and diction with an inevitability and harshness that evokes a city and landscape on the brink of darkness and chaos. The poem opens, however, focused on the image of the Northerner, described in terms that reflect the city's physical reality:

The hard cold fire of the northerner

Frozen into his blood from the fire in his basalt

Glares from behind the mica of his eyes

And the salt carrion water brings him wealth.  (CP 17, 1-4)

The vitality and energy of the language is juxtaposed with the cold, frozen imagery of Antrim geology, evoking a peopled landscape bent on accumulation of wealth. The second stanza turns the poem towards a panoramic view of the lough, the centre of industrial Belfast:

Down there at the end of the melancholy lough

Against the lurid sky over the stained water

Where hammers clang murderously on the girders

Like crucifixes the gantries stand.  (5-8)

Here the decidedly Protestant references that would seem to delineate post-Industrial Revolution society as being civilized are deliberately inverted by images of murder, the gantries like crucifixes grim reminders of puritanism and sectarian hatred. The middle
stanza shifts the focus again to the commercialism that this industrial society has endorsed:

And in the marble stores rubber gloves like polyps
Cluster; celluloid, painted ware, glaring
Metal patents, parchment lampshades, harsh
Attempts at buyable beauty. (9-12)

Voicing a characteristic distaste for the mechanized, the man-made, and the artificial, MacNeice utilizes these images to express the urban sensibility that is at once fascinated with and alienated by the products of a consumption-driven society. Even these plastic wares are imbued with a hectic energy ("painted ware, glaring"), through the use of enjambment and colourful diction. These products only serve to distract the speaker from another reality of urban life, poverty, as he acknowledges in the fourth stanza:

In the porch of the chapel before the garish Virgin
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. (13-16)

The embedded class system of Ulster (the more fortunate of which MacNeice admits he belongs to with the use of "us"), and Belfast in particular, drawn roughly along religious lines, is evoked, the factory-woman so poor she cannot lay flowers (too pastoral an image) before the Catholic altar, only her exhausted limbs. In the final stanza the poem's bright, quick-moving imagery darkens into a vision of a closed society from which there is no hope of escape:
Over which country of cowled and haunted faces

The sun goes down with a banging of Orange drums

While the male kind murders each its woman

To whose prayer for oblivion answers no Madonna. (17-20)

Peter McDonald describes this feeling of approaching doom as “the inevitability of the familial ‘murder’ which extinguishes the saving aspects of the feminine in this male-centred culture” (207). The city of Belfast is thus envisioned, accurately or not, as a cold, masculine place wherein the beauties of nature and the pastoral have no place.

Leonard Lutwack provides a provocative insight into the possibilities of gender roles in the composition and depiction of the modern city: “The twentieth-century male’s rejection of female fecundity is often symbolized by his preference for places barren of vegetation” (49). MacNeice himself does not prefer the barren, cold, masculine energy of “Belfast,” nor does he set up an easy opposition positing country/feminine vs. city/masculine, yet this poem shows an awareness of how gender functions are encoded in modern urban life. “Birmingham,” while in the same vein and tenor as “Belfast,” centres the reader’s attention more squarely on the city as a masculine place of ceaseless toil, its topography defined by economics. While as in Belfast there is “the proud glass of shops,” this gives way to a suburban reality: “But beyond this centre the slumward vista thins like a diagram” (CP 17, 7). Simon Dentith summarizes the effect that the growth of these new suburbs (in this case of London) had on the young poets of the 1930s:

It is worth recalling just how extraordinary was the transformation of the landscape effected by suburban growth between the wars – four million
houses built between 1918 and 1939; the surface area of London doubling in the same period; around London alone, at the height of the building boom in the early thirties, houses being built at the rate of 65,000 and 70,000 a year. But the problem...was just that, as symbols of the modern world, these were not modern at all; on the contrary, these suburbs drew upon an eclectic range of revival styles which included Queen Anne as well as the most immediately recognisable Tudor.

(Williams & Matthews 111)

The description of the comparably massive slums and suburbs in Birmingham is noticeably depressing, as no doubt was the actual view, focused on a scene more of dilapidation than revitalized living:

Splayed outwards through the suburbs houses, houses for rest
Seductingly rigged by the builder, half-timbered houses with lips pressed
So tightly and eyes staring at the traffic though bleary haws
And only a six-inch grip of the racing earth in their concrete claws.

(CP 18, 9-12)

Once again MacNeice uses personification to imbue the suburban houses with a weird life, drab and precarious but tenacious, much as their inhabitants: “In these houses men as in a dream pursue the Platonic Forms” (13). The pervasive alienation of the city life leads to a conclusion that equates this existence with automation of the human subject and death, arrayed in a variety of colours that are dull but hypnotic:

On shining lines the trams like vast sarcophagi move

143
Into the sky, plum after sunset, merging to duck's egg, barred with mauve
Zeppelin clouds, and Pentecost-like the cars' headlights bud
Out from sideroads and the traffic signals, crème-de-menthe or bull's
blood.... (25-28)

There is a clear disjunction between human beings and their environment here, as Edna
Longley points out, going on to assert that “MacNeice draws on a tradition of opposition
between art and industrialism, even while implying his own ability to portray an
industrialized and commercialized society” (48). The malaise and poetic practice are at
odds. It is the fact that this urban landscape is deeply personal – inhabited by people for
whom the speaker, although horrified by their alienation, carries a degree of respect –
that allows MacNeice to relieve the oppressive physical and emotional realities of a city
such as Birmingham.

The city that MacNeice most often inscribed in his poetry was, naturally enough,
London. The suburbs that sprawl outward from London are described from the
perspective of a suburban train ride in Canto III of “Autumn Sequel,” a trip through
“intestinal tunnels like a pain / That London would get rid of” (CP 340, 3-4). The
painful physiological imagery is complemented by “drab realms of television” (8) where
“the houses spill / And become semi-detached, a smug decision” (9-10). There is no
sense of community in London’s suburbs, and even “Oxford in October / Seems all dead
stone” (CP 378, XII 18-19). London itself is “the prosaic mould / In which our bright
dreams cool” (CP 400, XVII 90-91), a bleak vision of the world’s largest city which in
“The British Museum Reading Room” becomes a scene of “the guttural sorrow of the
refugees” (CP 161, 21). MacNeice brings a detached, philosophical tone to his depiction of London as “the prosaic mould,” which is balanced by an emotive recognition of “the refugees” that inhabit it. Perhaps MacNeice's most memorable evocation of London is the dirge “The Streets of Laredo,” based on the American cowboy song of the same title. Using a “western” speed and rhythm to portray London sets an ironic mood, and the poem swings along on a ballad line, allegorizing the incendiary fires during the Blitz in London and moving to a final, unifying vision of Judgment Day. As D.B. Moore has observed, MacNeice “shared Eliot’s vivid and detailed knowledge and gift for evocation of the London scene, seeing it as wholly real…but also as a phantasmagoria, an allegory” (16), and this poem deftly combines the geography of London with an interspersed history of the city and an allegory of apocalypse:

O early one morning I walked out like Agag,

Early one morning to walk through the fire

Dodging the pythons that leaked on the pavements

With tinkle of glasses and tangle of wire. (CP 217, 1-4)

The easy rhythm and lighthearted tone belie the destruction that surrounds the speaker. The relevance of Agag to the poem as a whole is summarized by Marsack: “MacNeice's is also the song of a doomed man, since Agag only temporarily survived his people, and was eventually the victim of God's wrath as they had been (I Sam. 15)” (115). Sir Christopher Wren, Blake and Bunyan all make cameo appearances as London's history, compressed and fragmented, returns to haunt the city in its death throes. The “voice of the Angel, the voice of the fire” (32) has the final say: “O you streets of Laredo, you
streets of Laredo, / Lay down the red carpet—My dowry is death” (218, 39-40). In each of these poems London is not characterized as the “centre” of imperial culture and power, but as a fragmented, modern industrial city that is burdened by its own history and likely destined for fire.

One of MacNeice’s latest poems, “Goodbye to London” (1962), hearkens back to the farewell he envisaged giving Ireland in “Valediction”; while not so bitter and denunciatory as “Valediction,” this piece also is energized by the need to take leave of a place that has become like home, yet neither feels nor looks like it: “Having left the great mean city, I make / Shift to pretend I am finally quit of her / Though that cannot be so long as I work” (CP 544, 1-3). London is envisaged as similar to Belfast, a place defined by labour, hard and uninviting, yet inevitable as only a very large city and “centre” of culture can be. Each stanza is concluded with a refrain that is at once a lament and a prayer: “Nevertheless let the petals fall / Fast from the flower of cities all.” The following three stanzas reflect positively on pre-war London, “a kaleidoscope / Of wine and ice, eyes and emeralds” (12-13) where “To be tired of this is to tire of life” (18). The effects of the war on the sense of community in London are also a treasured memory for the poet: “Then came the headshrinking war, the city / Closed in too, the people were fewer / But closer too, we were back in the womb” (21-23). This vision of London as a protective, maternal place into which the “head” may “shrink” contrasts sharply with MacNeice’s descriptions of Carrickfergus, Belfast, and Ireland in general, yet it is an

\[4\] This refrain is taken from William Dunbar’s “In Honour of the City of London,” which has nothing but praise for the city.
ephemeral identification which history sweeps away: “From which reborn into anticlimax / We endured much litter and apathy hoping / The phoenix would rise, for so they had promised” (26-28). The hopes that people felt for this renewal in post-war Britain were soon dashed, however, as it became obvious that the war had exhausted the nation's ability to maintain its empire in the face of burgeoning nationalist movements, or even properly feed and house its citizens: “And nobody rose, only some meaningless / Buildings and the people once more were strangers / At home with no one, sibling or friend” (31-33). The sense of London as the exemplary site of alienation and isolation returns, reinvested with apathy and the breaking of all human contacts. The urban poet who inherited Eliot's modernist vision of the city was as disenchanted with what he found there as he was with nationalist Ireland, and MacNeice was forced to recognize placelessness as his permanent condition.

In the first section of “The Closing Album” titled “Dublin,” MacNeice envisions the Irish capital as an uneasy blend of Irish and English, neither modern and industrial nor rural and pastoral, and it gives the poet an opportunity to reflect on the delicate balancing act he must mediate between town and country, centre and periphery:

This was never my town,
I was not born nor bred
Nor schooled here and she will not
Have me alive or dead
But yet she holds my mind
With her seedy elegance,
With her gentle veils of rain
And all her ghosts that walk
And all that hide behind
Her Georgian façades—
The catcalls and the pain,
The glamour of her squalor,
The bravado of her talk. \( CP 163-164, 14-26 \)

Dublin for MacNeice is a gentle series of balanced oppositions between light and dark, splendour and squalor, bravado and pain, and the poet suggests that this may be because “She is not an Irish town / And she is not English” (39-40). Dublin is a repository for other cultures:

Augustan capital
Of a Gaelic nation,
Appropriating all
The alien brought. \( 54-57 \)

The city suggests itself as the product of multiple cultural influences, and perhaps this, more than his lack of personal identification with it, makes Dublin a source of fruitful juxtaposition for MacNeice. The poem moves to consider other places in Ireland that MacNeice visited in 1939, most notably the rural west which is depicted in a pastoral vein:

In Sligo the country was soft; there were turkeys
Gobbling under sycamore trees

148
And the shadows of clouds on the mountains moving
Like browsing cattle at ease. \(\text{(CP 165, 1-4)}\)

While the alienation and grim realism of his evocations of Belfast and Birmingham are not present here, the Irish countryside retains a powerful totemic force ("shadows of clouds on the mountains moving") that the poet is wary of:

And when the night came down upon the bogland

With all-enveloping wings

The coal-black turfstacks rose against the darkness

Like the tombs of nameless kings. \(\text{(166, 21-24)}\)

The penultimate section describes Galway in similarly dark tones: "O the crossbones of Galway. / The hollow grey houses, / The rubbish and sewage, the grass-grown pier" \(\text{(CP 166)}\). The indefinable fear of humanized nature in lines such as "turfstacks rose against the darkness" and "the hollow grey houses" shows how the western landscape retains a power over MacNeice's imagination as both a disruptive and magical place of beauty, as Heaney notes: "it shimmered with an aura of pastoral; it remembered an Ireland previous to the fall into urban sectarianism and political faction, and it retained a visionary appeal for him in spite of his accustomed guardedness and irony" \(\text{(44)}\). This relief landscape of the imagination and eye came to MacNeice as a counterbalance to his immersion in the urban realities of modern life and the political strife in Ireland and abroad, yet this strife remains inscribed in this section with the refrain that ends each stanza: "The war came down on us here" \(\text{(167, 21)}\).

Although at times MacNeice seems to agree with Pound's assertion that
"provincialism is the enemy" (as cited in Ludwig & Fietz 55), his poems about the "provincial" west of Ireland fairly consistently characterize that region as a space of imaginative freedom. In "Donegal Triptych," for instance, the west is infused with a productive melancholy:

   Broken bollard, rusted hawser,
   Age-old reasons for new rhyme,
   Bring forward now their backward time:
   The glad sad poetry of departure.  (CP 445, 1-4)

The reality of flux and absence complicate the poem, however, and no neat dichotomy can replace the poet's awareness of how this western imaginative country is just another means of escape from self and responsibility to community:

   Once arrived, the clocks disclose
   That each arrival means returning.
   Returning where? To speak of cycles
   Rings as false as moving straight…. (446, 7-10)

The poet cannot simply oscillate between the country and the city, finding renewal in what each has to offer. Fietz poses a pertinent question concerning the role of the culturally marginalized place in literature: “Does the obvious shift from the centre to the periphery…from the metropolis to the regions, imply an ethical category such as liberation?” (Ludwig & Fietz 17). The answer MacNeice gives in "Donegal Triptych" is a melancholy no; the subject is exiled from all places by the passage of time and the inevitable reconfigurations that accompany maturation:
Yet the cold voice chops and sniggers,

Prosing on, maintains the thread

Is broken and the phoenix fled,

Youth and poetry departed. (33-36)

The seemingly detached, "cold," "prose" voice of philosophical argument is interrupted by the innocence that the west of Ireland holds out like a mirage for MacNeice that can never be regained, through language or direct experience, only approximated in anticipation of the fall. In "Western Landscape" the landscape itself seems to conspire against the poet's attempts to encapsulate it and thereby insert himself into its peaceful frame: "In doggerel and stout let me honour this country / Though the air is so soft that it smudges the words" (CP 255, 1-2). The inability of language ("smudged words") to communicate or express the self's relationships with the natural and human worlds is emphasized, and once again the poet is left with the certainties of isolation:

But what

Is the hold upon, the affinity with

Ourselves of such a light and line,

How do we find continuance

Of our too human skeins of wish

In this inhuman effluence? (24-29)

The western landscape, from which the poet is alienated but which he desires to invest with continuity of the self and community with others, is momentarily captured in fleeting glimpses as a source of respite and place-identification.
But we who savour longingly
This plenitude of solitude
Have lost the right to residence,
Can only glean ephemeral
Ears of our once beatitude. (35-39)

The post-lapsarian vision here is accompanied by paradox ("This plenitude of solitude"), signalling a fundamental rift between the human subject and the object of his or her desire: the natural, unitary world.

The English countryside offers for MacNeice a similar arena for the complex interplay of identity and place. In "Woods," for instance, which examines the maturing relationship the poet has with what his father felt was the "tame" Dorset countryside, he encounters another landscape peopled by the imagination and history:

But I have also this other, this English, choice
Into what yet is foreign; whatever its name
Each wood is the mystery and the recurring shock
Of its dark coolness is a foreign voice. (CP 231, 27-30)

The recognition of the foreign in this poem is characterized positively, the "recurring shock" providing a necessary defamiliarization of what the poet expects to find, the "mystery" providing a sense of unexplored possibilities. The strangely comforting natural isolation of the west of Ireland is absent, however — "These woods are not the Forest; each is moored / To a village somewhere near" (32-33) — and civilization inevitably reasserts itself in a way that it does not in Ireland. If Ireland is a place where
the poet's mind is turned towards the contemplation of the tension between isolation and
community, the English landscape forces him to acknowledge the encroachment of the
industrial world and the march of history, as in Canto XVIII of "Autumn Journal":

    The soil is tired and the profit little and the hunchback
    Bobs on a carthorse round the sodden ricks.
    Sing us no more idylls, no more pastorals,
    No more epics of the English earth;
    The country is a dwindling annexe to the factory,
    Squalid as an after-birth.
    This England is tight and narrow, teeming with unwanted
    Children who are so many, each is alone.  (CP 136-137, 11-18)

The realities of the English countryside in the mid twentieth-century, awareness of the
fundamental social and environmental changes incurred by the Industrial Revolution and
war, and the knowledge of himself as foreign to England by birth and temperament leave
MacNeice with a fragile understanding of England as the source and destroyer of
culture(s), a place that dispossesses the subject of tradition by reinscribing it in a modern,
alienating form.

    Frustrated by alienation from all the places in his life, MacNeice turns to the
concept of the tourist to counteract the "tight and narrow" definitions of location that
have enclosed his poetic awareness of self and place. If, as Jim Wayne Miller suggests,
"any particular regional identity might prove to be no more than a facile attempt to heal
the 'unanchored condition' of modern man, with the promise of instant community,
group security, connection with the past, and a bogus sense of self-esteem” (Housley & Mallory 10), then MacNeice's refusal to identify with any place can be seen as an eschewal of these false identities in preference of a recognition of placelessness as a basic human condition. Perhaps this accounts for his numerous travel poems, such as “Didymus,” “Letter from India,” “Iceland” and “Train to Dublin,” where the restless subject is more free to seek out new landscapes that are unburdened by personal history, if not politics and economics. Psychologically separated from the communities with which he is nevertheless compelled to identify – the northern Irish, the Irish, the English, the rural, the metropolitan – MacNeice posits the subject as spatially dislocated just as memory signified temporal dislocation, a divided self driven to find a unity that is impossible, and a communion with place(s) and home(s) that is forever beyond the reach of thought, emotion, and language. And yet these places remain, mysterious and obvious, compelling and alienating, and ultimately dependent on a divided human consciousness for meaning:

What ghosts of cuckoo-spit and dew

Veil those fields that once I knew

And, in my absence, who dare sleep

In beds were once I counted sheep,

Counted and counted and forgot

---

2 Of course, every locality, including those conceived as central, should be included in Miller's definition of the "facile attempt" to heal this "unanchored condition," a tacit recognition made repeatedly by MacNeice in his refusal to inscribe London and England as the centre of culture and historical meaning.

154
Where I was—and now am not?

But not to be where I once was
Casts doubt upon that same spot, because
Being somewhere now where I am not
It seems no longer that same spot;
The view, without myself to view,
Is gone, like cuckoo-spit and dew.

(from “Jigsaws,” *CP* 455–456, 1-12)
Chapter Five

“To be neither strange nor dead”: MacNeice and desire

“From desire I plunge to its fulfillment, where I long once more for desire.”
Goethe – Faust

“Even the righteous man himself will not live the life he wishes unless he reaches that state where he is wholly exempt from death, deception, and distress, and has the assurance that he will for ever be exempt. This is what our nature craves, and it will never be fully and finally happy unless it attains what it craves.”
Saint Augustine – Concerning the City of God Against the Pagans

One of the common threads among the various critical and theoretical discourses prevalent in this century is the notion of desire. This relatively new focus has been part of the overall attempt to dislodge reason and the rational from their traditional seats of power within Western thought, opening up theory and interpretation to alternative models of the self and subjectivity. Arising out of psychoanalytic theory, desire informs a wide variety of theoretical positions, from feminism and Marxism to post-structuralism and new historicism, although each tends to interpret its actions and meaning differently.

The most influential figures in the debate over desire in the last few decades are Lacan and Foucault; whereas Lacan's revision of the traditional Freudian concept of desire emphasizes the endless deferral of its fulfillment and its primary reality, Foucault clearly situates desire in the knowledge/power nexus, tying it to discursive and social practices and emphasizing its cultural construction (Traub 7). Each of these visions of the
operations of desire has its merits for contemporary critics, and the currency this concept
has gained strengthens the arguments of gender critics, for whom "the simultaneous
construction of gender and sexuality... problematizes even as it upholds patriarchal
prerogatives," and historical critics seeking "a theory of the radical contingency of a
speaking subject always constructed through social practices" (Traub 95). The conflict
between the psychoanalytic conception of desire as embedded in the symbolic – and
therefore a primary psychological reality that defines the individual – and the insistence
that it is a matter of force relations determined by socio-historical networks of power and
the law, is unlikely to be resolved, and indeed does not require to be so. Desire is a
matter of both bodies and minds (Traub 7), and the mediated access that a subject has to
each can be examined both as a product of the unconscious (the polymorphous desires
with which every infant is born) and their cultural reorganization within the competing
systems of power in any given society. This negotiation between the private and public
spheres utilizes the imagination as it works its way into poetry, and in this form the
subject’s desire finds complex, aesthetic articulation.

As part of the challenge to the unitary subject, desire functions as a cathexis
whereby the unconscious disrupts, and interacts with, ideological imperatives that
channel the self-constructions of the subject, as Eugene Goodheart observes in Desire
and its Discontents: "Desire signifies an unstable and aggressive energy that disintegrates
structures of reason, self, morality, convention, all attempts to contain and fix reality"
(2). Desire itself is not a fixed concept, but one which undergoes constant redefinition
within various cultural and political spheres of influence. Although desire (specifically in
its connection to the libido) has in the psychoanalytic tradition been the province of the masculine, for instance, the understandable feminist project to undermine this assumption does not simply do away with the concept of desire, but relocates and re-distributes it among various marginalized subject positions. Desire has therefore been variously seen as the disruptive site upon which the subject inscribes radically counter-discursive re-formations of the self, and paradoxically the means whereby dominant ideologies deploy the erasure of difference and the other. Marlon B. Ross states that “ideology is the attempt to control desire, the attempt to stabilize the energetic process of interminable change” (9), and thus ideology and desire are linked in an inexhaustible circle in which “desire produces ideology, ideology reproduces desire, desire shapes ideology, ideology reshapes desire in an endless spiralling dialectic that can never achieve synthesis” (ibid.).

We see here a dynamic interaction also of the psychoanalytic and post-structuralist conceptions of desire, each reinforcing and subverting the other as the symbolic, generated by the unconscious (either of the individual or the community), interacts with the cultural forces that seek to control it.

What most authors on any side of the theoretical debate agree upon is the founding of desire on lack or absence, a basis that forces the subject into a complicated relationship with the other. Desire’s source is almost always attributed to the post-partum experience, as Antoine Vergote outlines in Guilt and Desire: “The oral position of desire when it is newly born predestines the child’s attachment to the first object that presents itself: the mother” (127). The entry into language (or the symbolic in Freudian terms) contributes to the formation of desire by structuring the individual’s awareness as
a subject. The assumption of the “I,” separate from the “me,” as we have seen, splits the subject and constitutes desire as the desire of the other, as well as founding the experience of desire on the knowledge of lack. Joanne Stroud provides a general synopsis of the relation between desire and lack: “Desire sears us, opens up a cavernous space deep inside us. That may be the whole point: desire alerts us. We become aware of our incompleteness through our yearnings that desire translates into demands” (7).

The nature of these demands – whether characterized as yearnings, cravings, demands or lust – is for identification with the other,¹ whether it be the speculative other of narcissistic desire, or the object which is constructed as a source that will alleviate the absence at the core of subjectivity. Desire is endlessly deferred, however, inextricably linking it with anxiety and a fractured subject position, leaving the subject in a “tripartite structure of a radically discontinuous subjectivity, gender, and sexuality, in which the unruliness of the unconscious undercuts the subject’s pretensions to self-identity” (Traub 95). It is in this context that Lacan’s formulation of “the I is the other” becomes clear: the subject is discontinuous with itself and can only find articulation in the linguistic space opened up by the other. As Kaja Silverman puts it, “what the subject takes to be its ‘self’ is thus both other and fictive” (3).

I would like first to examine how desire indicates and even defines this split in the subject. Arguing against Foucault’s claim that society is founded on desire, Joan Copjec

¹ Lacan takes this one step further: “These various formulations are to be understood only in reference to the truth of ‘I is an other’, an observation that is less astonishing to the intuition of the poet than obvious to the gaze of the psychoanalyst” (Écrits 23). In this way desire is formulated as the product of a radical self-excentricity.
states that “the law does not construct a subject who simply and unequivocably has a
desire, but one who rejects its desire, wants not to desire it. The subject is thus
conceived as split from its desire, and desire itself is conceived as something – precisely –
unrealized” (25). For this reason “appearance and being never coincide” and it is the
“syncopated relation that is the condition of desire” (14). Because it must remain
unrealized, “desire possesses the subject and signifies incompleteness” (Goodheart 17),
and it is precisely this sense of the self as incomplete that MacNeice engages in many of
his poems. Often this project involves examining the desiring subject in terms of what is
articulated outside the self, the drive towards full self-consciousness articulated by Žižek:
“I am aware of myself only insofar as outside of me a place exists where the truth about
me is articulated” (67). Desire is thus located within an inaccessible discursive realm: it
must be articulated, but it is inarticulable. Through the multiple aesthetic and intellectual
possibilities of poetry and the poetic imagination, desire becomes a locus of change,
wherein the poet expresses and symbolizes desire only to find it deferred, but this is a
process through which the subject can effect transformations of desire itself. Although
the lack at the core of being that instigates desire cannot be filled, and the subject's desire
is always interacting with the stasis and fixity of ideology, these transformations
nevertheless indicate one strategy whereby the subject can redefine the self.

MacNeice's poetry often examines the various categories of desire, from the
sexual impulses and the need for social change through a more theoretically-based
concept of desire positing it as a fundamental characteristic of subjectivity, although his
priority seems to have been given to the more general significances of the latter.
MacNeice was aware that the poetic impulse, the desire to articulate, is predicated on lack. In his reply to Grigson's "An Enquiry," which asked about the stimulus behind writing a poem, MacNeice offered up that "often I have a vague feeling of deficiency which I try to fill out with a poem" (SLC 4). The "vagueness" here is indicative of the anxiety the subject feels when faced with lack or absence at the subjective core, and MacNeice's acknowledgement that he can only "try" to fill it out certainly suggests that he was aware of the impossibility of finally fulfilling this desire. He articulated in "Poetry To-day" this ambivalent attitude concerning the ability of language via poetic form to realize the self: "The poem, like the idol, is a kind of Alter Ego. But the Alter Ego is another polarized concept. As Ego it is self-expression; as Alter it is escape from Self" (SLC 12). The desire to articulate the self is therefore confounded by the necessity of encountering the other (through language, memory, history and place, for example), and what is meant to be self-expression – the impulse to self-consciousness noted by Žižek – turns out to be an escape from self that is both rewarding and frustrating. The subject finds through the other new subjective configurations, but the lack at the core of being remains. It is difficult to understand how a critic such as Hugh Underhill in The Problem of Consciousness in Modern Poetry could conclude that MacNeice "doesn't seem troubled by the division in self, or the difficulty in controlling subjective life" (234). One of MacNeice's primary intellectual concerns in his poetry is negotiating this very division and seeking ways to express subjective life in a way that at once attempts to control it and acknowledges this control as an impossibility.

In a poem such as "London Rain," MacNeice envisions escaping the frustration of
monotonous existence through violent fantasy, the poet's desire focusing on the
constraints of geography and thought as obstacles to self-realization:

My wishes turn to violent

Horses black as coal—

The randy mares of fancy,

The stallions of the soul—

Eager to take the fences

That fence about my soul. (CP 161, 7-12)

The imagery here is self-consciously sexual and animalistic, and the repetitions of "soul" and "fence" indicate that the speaker is particularly aware of the internal and external forces that divide him, restraining the self from an imagined freedom beyond these bounds. Thus he avers that "My lust goes riding horseback / To ravish where I choose" (162, 33-34), giving full rein to the fantasy of escape from self through "ravishing" the other, housed in the "turret of beauty." Sexual "lust" rides the "wishes" that are "horses," indicating the poet's awareness of how desire transforms the self from passive to active. Personal desire and fantasy, indicated by the wild horses, are "reinforced by logic / As having nothing to lose" (31-32), but they cannot be sustained because "The argument was wilful, / The alternatives untrue" (43-44). It is the desire of the anarchic self, employing logic after the fact, that functions as both the expressive source and repression of desire, as the vision of freedom gives way to a bleak reality: "Logic and lust together / Come dimly tumbling down" (39-40). Finally, the speaker's lustful desire for freedom at rest, he adds almost regretfully:
The world is what was given,

The world is what we make

And we can only discover

Life in the life we make.  

Fantasy and aggressive desire are undercut by the knowledge of a dual world, coming to
the speaker as “given” in the form of nature and society, and “made” through language
and action, neither of which are controlled by a coherent self. The only possible harmony
is to be found in “discovery” through creation, or “what we make.” The recognition of
the lack of a coherent self opens up the possibilities of remaking life in alternative images
whose source is the unconscious of the individual (here symbolized by the horses) but
which are enacted against the background imposed by external reality, in this case the
“London rain” that inevitably colours the speaker’s imaginative world.

MacNeice recognizes the complications of the fact that the imaginary boundaries
of the self are invested with a desire that is nostalgic, and that desire finds its temporal
coordinates further fracturing and alienating the self’s need to transcend such boundaries.

He illustrates this by conjuring up the pastoral world of Horace in “Visitations” as a
spectral presence at once repellent and hypnotic:

    Never so lithe in the green dingle,

    Never so ripe in the grown hay,

    The ghosts of pastoral tease and mingle

    With darker ghosts from that dark day

    Which means our own.  

    (CP 464, 1-5)
Undercutting the traditional ease and simplicity of the pastoral, MacNeice struggles with the multiplicity of self that engenders this desire for harmony and unity:

How can you prove your minds are single

Or, muted words from worlds away

Setting both ears and nerves a-tingle,

Tell what your ears and nerves obey? (6-9)

The unconscious, source of desire, erupts into the poem, dislocating the speaker from the reverie in which the pastoral topos of harmony and unity focuses his desire on “lands unknown” where he could boast “we had not always lived alone” (27). The pastoral world is held out as a dream – the desiring agent has the power to dream, and thence escape the self – but this desire possesses the subject and signifies its lack, inscribing the speaker's loneliness as the cause of this need to escape self. This is a motif picked up in Canto II of “Autumn Journal,” where loneliness inspires a desire for death – “Not-Being” – as the only escape from dreams and the disturbing reality of human desire:

There are nights when I am lonely and long for love

But to-night is quintessential dark forbidding

Anyone beside or below me; only above

Pile high the tumulus, good-bye to starlight.

Good-bye the Platonic sieve of the Carnal Man

But good-bye also Plato's philosophising;

I have a better plan

To hit the target straight without circumlocution.
If you can equate Being in its purest form

With denial of all appearance,

Then let me disappear—the scent grows warm

For pure Not-Being, Nirvana.

Only the spider spinning out his reams

Of colourless thread says Only there are always

Interlopers, dreams,

Who let no dead dog lie nor death be final.       \textit{(CP 104, 21-37)}

The invocation of Plato elicits a sympathetic response from the speaker, the desire to transcend the limits of the divided self and find pure form. The mediation (or “circumlocution”) of consciousness and language is envisioned as repressive, and the speaker wants to be empowered to defy these limitations and find the unitary subjectivity of Not-Being, yet it is proved a chimerical wish by the “interlopers,” those other selves that demand attention and come to the subject through the symbolic order of unconscious dreams. The problem is put succinctly by Goodheart: “How can desire represent authentic being, if it also represents what the self lacks?” (17).

MacNeice approaches this paradox again without final conclusion in “Nostalgia,” in which the isolation of the self leads to an intense spiritual yearning for a beautiful but inhuman existence, but which is sobered by the realization that this desire can never be fulfilled:

    when the dagger

    Points again of longing

165
For what was never home
We needs must turn away
From the voices that cry ‘Come’.  (CP 205, 2-6)

As in “Visitations” the speaker recognizes that this lost “home” is an imaginative
construction elicited by the subject’s desire to return to a stable consciousness which is at
one with the world. Vergote analyzes this desire for a return to a “primal,” unitary state
in terms of a mystical impulse: “words of love will speak promises that seem to hearken
back to an indelible memory of a primal happiness. Desire launches an odyssey:
propelled by the hope of returning to our native soil, it projects us forward toward a new
future. It is in this desire that religious mysticism finds its spring” (viii). The “words of
love” in “Nostalgia” come from “that under-sea ding-donging” of the voices, enticing the
homesick speaker with a possible universe in which the various strands of memory, place
and human history are united:

These are the times at which
Aloneness is too ripe
When homesick for the hollow
Heart of the Milky Way
The soundless clapper calls
And we would follow
But earth and will are stronger
And nearer—and we stay.  (206, 16-23)

Ironically the “heart” of the galaxy itself is “hollow,” paralleling the condition of the
speaker, but unaffected by the consciousness of desire, which reasserts itself for the
speaker in the form of “earth and will.” The “new future” Vergote speaks of is an
impossible one for the speaker in “Nostalgia,” and he is forced to conceive the self as
“the wasp circling the honey” (10), desire’s fulfillment endlessly deferred.

If an imaginary, or primal, unity of the subject remains beyond psychological or
ontological possibility, if not the poetic imagination, then the subject is forced to look for
identity in the object as other, or what Lacan terms the objet petit a. The element of
fantasy in desire that I have noted at work in some of MacNeice’s poems is part of the
process whereby the objet petit a is formulated: “Fantasy thus conjures forth a fictive
object for a fundamentally a-objectal desire. It translates the desire for nothing into the
desire for something. However, we must not forget that the objet a exists in a mirroring
relation to the moi; it is ‘one’s own ego that one loves in love, one’s own ego made real
on the imaginary level’” (Silverman 4). MacNeice sometimes inscribes this element of
narcissistic desire directly in his poetry, as in Canto XVII of “Autumn Journal”:

A point here and a point there: the current
Jumps the gaps, the ego cannot live
Without becoming other for the Other
Has got yourself to give. (CP 135, 49-52)

The “gap” between subject (in this case moi) and other is not elided, but the fantasy
projection of self onto other is the only route the subject can take in order to delimit
him/herself. The speaker goes on, though, to state that this is a process that has no end,
and therefore “discontent is eternal” because
Our virtue is invested, the self put out at interest,
The returns are never enough, the fact compares
So badly with the fancy yet fancy itself is only
A divination of fact. (63-66)

The curious circularity of the logic here (employing capitalist terminology with the
Coleridgean concept of “fancy”), where the “fact” of subjective absence in the face of a
fully-articulated fantasy subject position can only be derived from that fantasy itself,
indicates MacNeice’s awareness of the mutual relationship that the desire for the self-as-
other and the identity which is founded on lack have. Silverman articulates this
relationship in terms of fixity and free-play:

Identity and desire are so completely imbricated that neither can be
explained without recourse to the other. Furthermore, although those
constitutive features of subjectivity are never entirely ‘fixed’, neither are
they in a state of absolute flux or ‘free-play’; on the contrary, they are
synonymous with the compulsion to repeat certain images and
personalities, which are relinquished only with difficulty. (6)

Fixity and free play are the poles between which the subject oscillates. Thus in “Autumn
Sequel” when the “eye demands the light at the risk of blindness,” insisting on the fixity
of a subject position that is real only insofar as the subject identifies with the objet petit a
– the image of the self as other – the speaker only reluctantly acknowledges the
emptiness of this identification.

During the war MacNeice wrote a poem titled “Schizophren” that took on
directly the “compulsion” to which Silverman refers, taken to the level of a psychological

disorder where the woman described is at the mercy of instant identification with noises.

Each stanza represents an episode where reality and its images become invested with the

quality of a compelling nightmare:

Hearing offstage the taps filling the bath

The set dissolves to childhood—in her cot

Hearing that ominous relentless noise

Which the grown-ups have started, who are not,

She knows, aware of what it means; it means

The Dark, the Flood, the Malice. It destroys

All other meanings—dolls or gingerbread;

It means a Will that wills all children dead. \((CP 207, 1-8)\)

The other here (identified as an alien “Will”) becomes an uncontrollable force, chaotic

and primeval, destroying individuality and difference, even life itself. The apparent
detachment of the third-person voice works as an echo of this destructive force, reducing

and analyzing the woman who is powerless before it. On this level MacNeice brings an
indictment not only of the analytic process, but of the force of ideology itself which seeks
to fix and contain the eruptive fantasies of the female subject. The woman undergoes a
radical decentering in which even her body becomes other: “she lifts / A soapstone hand
to smooth her hair and feels / The hand is someone else’s” \((9-11)\). Once again MacNeice
runs the poem forward into contradiction, for the self that is frozen by division is at the

mercy of energetic, chaotic impulses:
These bells are disembodied, they express
The claims of frozen Chaos and will clang
Till this and every other world shall melt
And Chaos be itself and nothing felt. (29-32)

It is the erasure of difference and excessive object identification that lead the woman to this state where “frozen Chaos,” permanent flux that destroys the psyche, wears identity away completely. The woman's response is a compulsion to “deny, deny, deny,” although what she is denying remains ambiguous: her self and her fantasy projection onto the other collapse, what Lacan refers to as the “aggressive disintegration [of] the individual” (4).

This psychological disintegration can often be traced to feelings of guilt, an emotion bound up in intricate ways with desire, which MacNeice details in nightmare fashion at the end of “Autumn Sequel” while describing a train journey:

The wrongs that I have done, thought, said,
Stare back at me. Some of them should be men,
But why are their hands like claws, their eyes an acrid red?
Must I now run this gauntlet over again? (CP 437, XXVI 79-82)

Here the speaker desires atonement, the relegation of his past selves to an ordered perspective, yet guilt insists on repeating its litany of sins as surely as the sounds of the wheels on the tracks, the rhythm of which begins to saturate the poem’s language:

Each meanness, blight, spite, doubt, guilt, hate, remorse, fear
Fills carriage after carriage. Blank-eyed refugees,
Starved children, faceless freaks, appear and reappear,

Each window sweats with horror and disease. \[(438, 91-94)\]

The desire for absolution, not only of individual but communal sins, forces the speaker to relive each one, projecting them onto the everyday faces and things around him. This episode does not last long, however, and as the speaker regains a positive sense of the future (albeit by evading the emotional entanglement of such pervasive guilt), he contrives a more balanced perspective in which guilt becomes bound up with the desire to create a better life:

To discern

The future is not easy since those fires

That warm us are the selfsame fires that burn

Our guts, and since the wood of our desires

Consists of single yet entangled trees

Which maybe form a wood the world requires

But yet a wood which none distinctly sees

Or fully finds his way in. \[(439, 121-128)\]

Here desire is envisioned as single-yet-plural, abstract and specific in the way a single tree can imply a forest, and the driving force behind revisioning the subject and world, but which is bound up with guilt, the fire that burns the guts and urges the need to account for desire. Yet the workings of desire are nebulous, “entangled,” and the
meaning of the word "requires" is ambivalent: the world may need human desire to
instigate change, yet it also imposes these desires as a command, the compulsion to seek
absolution that is embedded in confessional discourse and which modifies and fixes
desire.

In contemporary society the modification of desire has often been specified as the
commodification of desire, wherein subjects are compelled to identify not with one image
or identity but a ceaselessly changing range of them. Žižek avers quite plainly that "the
fear of 'excessive' [ie. single-minded] identification is...the fundamental feature of the
late-capitalist ideology" (216). In twentieth-century commercialist society the dispersed
subject is "prone to particular, inconsistent modes of enjoyment," and therefore he
identifies this epoch as one "in which the traditional fixity of ideological positions
(patriarchal authority, fixed sexual roles, etc.) becomes an obstacle to the unbridled
commodification of everyday life" (216). While the undermining of these fixed
ideological roles has become an apparent necessity in contemporary social and
intellectual life, the resulting plethora of subject positions (MacNeice's "variousness" in
one sense being symptomatic of this) can lead to the commodification of desire itself,
with the result that pluralism can become fetishistic. MacNeice's poem "Bagpipe Music"
takes on the materialistic debasement of desire in what Edna Longley calls an "escapist
extravaganza" (72), where the "satirical rhythms...underline the dissonance between
contemporary forms of greed and traditional culture" (49). The merely individualistic
desire for escape into commodification and possession of objects of monetary value
denies any sense of community.
It's no go the merrygoround, it's no go the rickshaw,
All we want is a limousine and a ticket for the peepshow.
Their knickers are made of crêpe de chine, their shoes are made of python,
Their halls are lined with tiger rugs and their walls with heads of bison.

(CP 96, 1-4)

By replacing and comparing the objects and experiences of traditional culture (which are invested with lasting cultural values) with expensive, often ridiculous items, MacNeice subverts the ways in which capitalism seeks to expose desire through de-stabilizing it, but then re-directing it into socially “normal” activities that increase consumption. Deferred desire is displaced by immediate satisfactions, and becomes a communal compulsion.
The poem's angry humour derives its force from the injustice of compelling the poor and marginalized to desire that which they cannot afford, and which would be of little benefit to them anyway, as the final two stanzas ironically state:

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

It's no go my honey love, it's no go my poppet;
Work your hands from day to day, the winds will blow the profit.
The glass is falling hour by hour, the glass will fall for ever,
But if you break the bloody glass you won't hold up the weather.

(\textit{CP} 97, 28-36)

While nominally a satirical elegy for the Gaelic districts of Scotland, this poem also demonstrates the extreme dislocation of the subject when desire is modified by an ideological system such as capitalism. While capitalism liberates the self from the re-direction of desire onto single objects (such as Jesus in the Christian faith), the unbalanced emphasis on plurality of choice destroys the subject's ability to conceive of him or her self in any way other than as the commercialized subject, and is on a par with the excessive identification MacNeice examined in "Schizophren." 

The desiring subject for MacNeice, in whatever form it takes in a particular poem, remains an indicator of a relentless pursuit of the self that will ultimately be frustrated, the subject being forced to fall back on distance and division as its permanent nature. Perhaps the most succinct articulation of this divided subjectivity comes in one of his earliest published works, the 1931 poem "Circe." The fantasized object of desire in the poem is Circe herself; the goddess who temporarily turned Odysseus' men into swine, and she is envisioned as an ultimate object, cold and distant and mesmerizing:

\begin{quote}
Something of glass about her, of dead water,
Chills and holds us,
Far more fatal than painted flesh or the lodestone of live hair
This despair of crystal brilliance. \hspace{1cm} (\textit{CP} 19, 1-4)
\end{quote}

The comparison with Medusa, an image of evil and destructive power, is instructive: the "petrifaction and sterility" (McDonald 63) that Circe represents seems to collect the
speaker's desire and immobilize it, whereas the Medusa stimulates the imagination and re-routes desire onto new images. The contemplation of Circe leads the speaker to the knowledge that it is not “her,” the object of his gaze, that is deadening:

Narcissus' error

Enfolds and kills us—

Dazed with gazing on that unfertile beauty

Which is our own heart's thought. (4-8)

The speaker finds himself deployed in a subjective nexus of narcissistic desire, compelled to acknowledge that Circe is but his own desire for a self beyond desire, and even beyond the flux of life. The divided subject becomes aware of an inner sexual tension between desire of the self as other (Circe) and desire of the other (projected ego) for self, a hermetic relationship that underscores the workings of desire and the inevitability of it being founded on an inner absence: “Be brave, my ego, look into your glass / And realise that that never-to-be-touched / Vision is your mistress” (20, 17-19). Here we see a poetic equivalent of Lacan's statement “the self is other,” the division of the self into each gender indicating where narcissistic desire splits the subject and maps out an enclosed symbolic position from which the subject negotiates all further encounters with desired objects.

The sexual desire evoked in “Circe” is cold and infertile, yet in terms of sexuality the desiring subject can be provoked to a variety of libidinal and subjective responses, as MacNeice's love poetry bears out. The experience of lack we have been outlining as the primary cause of desire, formulated in the post-natal experience, imprints itself on sexual
desire in a similar way as narcissism. As Vergote has observed the initial encounter with
the mother “imprints upon the psychic apparatus the whole matrix of desires and
strengths that support a subject’s ideals of happiness and his sexual fantasies” (125).
Oedipal “normalization,” however, is not the inevitable conclusion to this matrix, and the
subject is capable of identifying with any number of eroticized subject positions. Sexual
difference, as Copjec points out, is not a symbolic difference, and therefore is “unlike
racial, class, or ethnic differences” (207), because “it is always a sexed subject who
assumes each racial, class, or ethnic identity” (208). Despite Traub’s assertion that “we
have no unmediated access to our bodies,” she too realizes that “sexuality is not a mere
effect of cultural determinations” (6-7). Eroticized desire, predicated on lack, becomes
entangled with these determinations when it enters into language, and therefore the
construction of the “loved object” in love poetry becomes yet another strategy whereby a
poet such as MacNeice can examine and re-organize sexual interpellations. MacNeice’s
poems in which sexuality is explicitly encountered are grounded in a heterosexual
masculinity that is keenly self-aware, and they are often overtly directed at undermining
the biases that such a position produces, while inevitably re-inscribing and thus
perpetuating them. More importantly, MacNeice’s vision of sexuality retains the tension
we have noticed in other aspects of his poetry, where desire is frustrated by the inability
of the subject to consummate it, and thus regenerates itself.

In the tandem poems “Bad Dream” and “Good Dream” (which complement each
other through a good/bad dialectic), the poet utilizes the imagery of nightmare to situate
the speaker in an ambivalent relationship with the beloved. The domestic surroundings in
“Bad Dream” are hideous, infected with “bears the size of flies” and “flies the size of men,” while “the floor was riddled with holes with men phutscuttering down them / Into the jaws of mice” (CP 509, 1-6). This bleak and disturbing interior scene is paralleled by that outside, with

bedizened hoardings

With panties dancing on them

And an endless file of chromium-plated lamp posts

With corpses dangling from them. (7-10)

The aura of sex and violence pervades this place where “the young man came who wanted to eat and drink, / To play, pray, make love” (13-14). The vision of the sexual encounter that the young man anticipated quickly turns to further horror when a girl's tiny hand reaches out of the floor:

The arm grew and the fingers groped for help, the voice

That had grown with the arm, the voice

That was now a woman's about to be saved or lost was calling

For help. He could not move. (510, 33-36)

Here the young man experiences a primal terror born of his sexual desire; the house is inundated with images of fear, the external world is chaotic and oppressive, and the self is paralysed. Samuel R. Delaney describes this traumatic moment in the subject's sexuality: “The difference between ordinary fear and terror is the difference between the social fear of sexual rejection and the totality of the universe-obliterating failure of both the self and the other that homes among desire's ancient and hideously deep foundations.”
(Delaney 248). The sexual intensity of the dream is derived from this almost metaphysical terror of both the desiring subject and desired object being subsumed in darkness, a vision into which the dreamer is locked in the final stanza:

Then everything buzzed and boomed. The chaps outside on the lamp posts
Hooted, broke wind, and wept,
Men the size of flies dropped down his neck while the mansized flies gave just three cheers
And he could not move. The darkness under the floor gave just one shriek. The arm was gone. (37-42)

Here the “girl” or “woman” is equated with “the darkness under the floor,” the other which the subject desires but which reflects back his own inner emptiness. The dream stems from this deep sexual anxiety at the core of the poet’s specific, historically-located masculine orthodoxy, while the fragmented body of the woman comes to symbolize the darkness/emptiness of the fragmented subjectivity upon which this orthodoxy is founded.

The dynamics in “Good Dream” are, not surprisingly, much more positive, the poem’s imagery focusing on dislocation rather than utter alienation and fear, and in which the female figure is found rather than lost. The fabulous and the everyday interact in a benign way that is reminiscent of a Biblical awakening:

Completely awake

He gropes for the switch and finds the book
He left in the dark but what is a book
Left in the dark? He feels the book
Suddenly gently taken away
By someone's hand and a warm voice
Begins, beginneth, aloud in the dark:

*Here beginneth the first chapter.* (CP 510, 5-12)

As Marsack has observed, “the dream voice is the truth, socratically leading the dreamer to revelation” (133), and significantly it is this feminine dream voice that re-directs the speaker's attention from the book. The darkness in which the dreamer awakes is not the disturbing dark of nullity, but a space inhabited by a feminine teacher that awakens him to a new, fuller reality:

...in the beginning

*Is darkness upon the face of the earth*

*In which you must wait for me till I*

*Show you the place not half way through*

*But just begun, the place you never*

*Knew was here.* (22-27)

The feminine object of desire in this poem is encountered as a distinct subjectivity, and therefore is not saturated with the lack that characterized the specular and fantasy objects. This distinct quality is undermined, though, by the idealization of this powerful female, and her perceived perfection comes to function as an imperative for the dreamer as she gently commands him to row across the river to her: “*Pull on your oars. I am here*” (70). This need for the dreamer to open himself up to the other, to the newness of
objects, and the desire to expand the knowable world, is named by Freud the Eros drive, which often has as its end idealization, which is “a process that concerns the object; by it that object, without any alteration in its nature, is aggrandized and exalted in the subject’s mind” (Vergote 138). Thus elements of fantasy and narcissism re-enter the subject’s desire, but whereas in “Bad Dream” they focused on lack, in this poem they are directed towards subsuming the object of desire within the larger configurations of the dreamer’s idealized, and specifically feminine projection. The erotics of this gaze do not “offer opportunities for knowledge of the other,” as they do in a relationship where the power politics are muted, which Susan Bordo points out, as opposed to a relationship where “the subjectivity of the other is experienced neither as threatening [as in “Bad Dream”] nor as essential to the validation of the self” (301). This self-validation is at work in “Good Dream,” and the closing lines are thus tinged with irony:

His usual room

Has lost its usual walls and found

Four walls of sky, incredible blue

Enclosing incredible green enclosing

Her, none other.

The idealized woman here is still “enclosed” within the framework the male dreamer imposes, and any sense of her difference, sexual or otherwise, is elided in the phrase “none other.” The erasure of sexual difference in “Good Dream” is the outcome of a sexual desire that posits as its end an identity with the other that encloses the subject just at the point where the “four walls of sky” had seemed to open up a new subjective
position.

This process of elision through idealization can be found in a number of poems charged with eroticism, an example being “All Over Again,” which runs headlong without punctuation through its twenty-four lines in order to reproduce the giddiness of the speaker’s emotion and the imagined timelessness of the love he discovers. Even the poem’s title, however, suggests that time has already swept this moment into an idealized past that can only be imagined “again” through monotonous repetition. The syntax and diction of the opening lines reflect this ambivalence, most notably in the qualifying “ifs”:

As if I had known you for years drink to me only if
Those frontiers had never changed on the mad map of the years
And all our tears were earned and this were the first cliff
From which we embraced the sea. (CP 513, 1-4)

The idealization of the beloved here is nostalgic, past-directed, and symbolizes an attempt by the speaker to freeze in time the moment of ecstasy and keep lover and loved one from the realization of loss, an attempt dependent on but undercut by the numerous “as if” clauses. Henry Staten describes this need for desire to “aim at the continued possession of or proximity to what is desired, such that the loss of the loved thing, or even the anticipation of its loss, is necessarily the destruction of the happiness of the desiring subject” (2). It is the element of time the speaker tries to avoid in the poem, signalling as it always does the fall from bliss: thus the numerous references to stopping time, such as “where still time stands” (9), “the ripe moment tugs yet declines to fall” (10) and “to preserve today one kiss in this skybound timeless cup” (19). The final
image reinforces this anti-temporal desire: "as if/ This one Between were All and we in
love for years" (23-24). Here it is not particularly the beloved that is idealized, but time
itself, as though "the lover's ecstasy [is] not merely an interlude but the dominant reality"
(Longley 129). This temporal disruption, signifying desire, is nevertheless another
element of the subject's fantasy, the "as ifs" a constant reminder of the deflection and
deferral of the sexual moment of fulfillment.

The barring of fulfillment when it is symbolized in poetry is often a function of the
poet's awareness of time, the field in which desire is enacted and repressed, and for this
reason S.H. Clark argues that the "representation of the sexual is as intimately bound up
with negative as well as positive images, with satiric humiliation as well as rhapsodic
elevation" (2). Two such poems in MacNeice's corpus are "The Libertine" and "The
Introduction." In the former a middle-aged man who "once felt himself a gay dog"
relapses into the sullen refrain, "O leave me easy, leave me alone" (CP 209), his ability to
engage in personal/sexual relationships decaying into torpor and regret:

Voluptuary in his 'teens and cynic in his twenties,

He ran through women like a child through growing hay

Looking for a lost toy whose capture might atone

For his own guilt and the cosmic disarray. (6-9)

The notion of immersing the self in sexual encounters in order to cover over guilt and
chaos is not a new one, but since the desolation of the self can no longer be escaped, the
lack that stimulates desire becomes a focus of desire itself:

So now, in middle age, his erotic programme
Torn in two, if after such a delay
An accident should offer him his own
Fulfillment in a woman, still he would say:
O leave me easy, leave me alone.  (21-25)
The bitter knowledge of lack that the libertine has gained through his numerous sexual
dalliances enforces an exile from sexuality. This theme is picked up in “The
Introduction,” in which the proposal that love is a way of sidestepping temporality and
the inevitable decay and transmutations it brings is brushed aside with the crass avowal of
“bad timing”: “They were introduced in a grave glade / And she frightened him because
she was young / And thus too late” (CP 531, 1-3). The yoking of life and death in the
image of the “grave glade” parallels the difference in the would-be lovers’ ages, as well as
indicating the dark awareness of what lurks beneath the surface of their desire:

Crawly crawly
Went the twigs above their heads and beneath
The grass beneath their feet the larvae
Split themselves laughing.  (3-6)
The irony of time and death setting the boundaries for this “timeless” love indicates the
romance has been cheated of its possible fulfillment. This irony is cemented by the
reversal of the man’s fright in the opening lines, transposed onto the young woman:

Crawly crawly
Went the cloud above the treetops reaching
For a sun that lacked the nerve to set

183
And he frightened her because he was old
And thus too early. (10-13)

We can see here the poem operates as an allegory, with the old man as the sun and the young woman a plant that has budded out of season, and they allegorize the "seasonal" differences between the man and woman. The closing image is therefore appropriately one that ties together life and death, images of desire and absence enclosed tightly in paradox that echoes the poem's opening: "They were introduced in a green grave" (16).

Death is the ultimate limit and horizon of desire; just as physical energy must finally expend itself so too does the energy of desire, as Marlon Ross summarizes in The Contours of Masculine Desire: "Desire moves inexorably towards death, not as an objective or destination, but merely as the end of itself" (8). The nullity of death can itself become the object of desire, mirroring the core of absence within subjectivity itself. As "The Introduction" demonstrates, the conflict between desire and death informs much of MacNeice's poetry, which we see in Canto V of "Autumn Sequel," where the poet reflects on the sea as a symbol of the subject's awareness of life and death and an agent of the satiation of desire:

Our flesh goes gooseflesh and our earlobes tingle
Because he speaks of us; his long hair leaks
Into our minds and his great web-feet plash
Over our graves, making our bones antiques,
Our names as lost as flotsam. (CP 351, 90-94)

Often an image of human longing, the role of the sea is inverted here, quashing desire and
covering over all difference and destroying even the remnant evidence of human activity.

The personified sea in this section of the poem addresses the poet directly, savagely summarizing the fact of death as the defining moment of the human subject, towards which all energy is finally directed:

Through the gash

And crumble of his mouth his words make sport
Of all that sinks or drowns, to each complaint
He blows his conch and flings a salt retort:

‘You do not want to drown? It makes you faint?
Lose breath? Lose heart? Lose life? But, my good man—
For man you are, whether hero, sage or saint—

Such things were made to be lost. Live as you can
On land, your body is water, the earth you tread
Condemned to end in the puddle where it began,

Your mother's childbed was the ocean bed,
Your hands are unravelled flippers. What you wish
Is not what you think you wish but to be dead,
To be dissolved.‘ (96-109)

The “gash / And crumble of his mouth” suggests a wound, an eruption of counterdesire within the poetic discourse, and the sea functions as we noticed ideology doing earlier, channeling the flux and change of desire. The speaker’s fear of drowning, of total immersion in the other, is ironically the inevitable outcome of life which desire can defer but never overcome. An opposition is established between land and water, the former signifying the earthly pursuits of love and life, the latter the protean matter from which such life emerges and into which it must finally retreat. The sea is also the source of desire, the “mother’s childhood” of post-natal identification, and thus it comes to symbolize the other, the source of authority and power which desire solicits and deflects.

In the end, death as wish-fulfillment, as the dissolution of individual difference, is portrayed as the final object, the siren song towards which all subjective awareness is impelled, and which Freud labelled “a ‘death instinct’ which cannot fail to be present in every vital process” (133).

MacNeice frequently uses the sea as a symbol of death, closure, and the end (in both senses of the word) of desire. In “The Death-Wish” the sea represents the cessation of conscious thought that awaits all the stratified hopes and desires of the human subject, those “dead / Habits, hopes, beliefs, anything not alive” (CP 183, 3-4), that people accumulate in order to control the eruptive forces of sexuality (as we saw in “Bad Dream”) and excessive object identification (“The Schizophrene”). Eventually these controlling ideologies are subsumed by the convoluted workings of desire and absence, and “all this ballast of unreality sinks / The boat and all our thinking gurgles down / Into
the deep sea that never thinks” (5-7). As a symbol of the end of desire, the sea represents the eradication of consciousness. In another poem titled “Passage Steamer” the sea is the grey, flat expanse upon which the speaker's hopes and desires wither:

Back from a journey I require

Some new desire, desire, desire

But I find in the open sea and sun

None, none, none, none. (CP 72, 8-11)

The sea's erasure of desire is echoed in the dull monotony of repetition and full rhymes, and the speaker has a concomitant lack of energy that leads inexorably to considerations of death: “The spray no longer gilds the wave, / The sea looks nothing more nor less than a grave / And the world and the day are grey and that is all” (19-21). Another poem, “Troll's Courtship,” picks up on the image of the conch noticed in the passage from “Autumn Sequel,” where it becomes an inhuman echo of loss -- in this case by the desired lover -- strangely enough, of the Blitz fires that raged in London: “All I can catch is a gurgle as of the sea in shells / But not Her voice—for She is always somewhere else” (CP 199, 34-35). The accumulation of these images of the sea as nullity and death marks a tendency in MacNeice's thought to invest desire with its temporal element, that which makes it possible and destroys it. Henry Staten makes the case that this sensibility is that of the “profound, and profoundly anxious, philosophical mind [that] understands that the snare is set for the soul everywhere it turns, that the movement toward death proceeds by minute, almost imperceptible, gradations of libidinal investment” (8). The inscription and re-inscription of desire thus spirals the subject towards that which is its limit and source,
the sea that finally drowns "the voice of broken bells" (CP 199, 31).

Death is not simply a bleak end to all human hopes and desires, however, as MacNeice acknowledges in Section VII of "The Stygian Banks," the epigraph to which is taken from *Troilus and Cressida*: "Like a strange soul upon the Stygian banks / Staying for waftage" (CP 257). At the border of death, this notion of "waftage," of being transported from the realm of desire into boundless Non-Being, is taken up in Section VII, where the value of desire, "in sex or elsewhere" (CP 266, 14), is equated with an ability to imagine transcending the limit of death, if only momentarily:

Troilus

Patrols the Stygian banks, eager to cross,
But the value is not on the further side of the river,
The value lies in his eagerness. No communion
In sex or elsewhere can be reached and kept
Perfectly or for ever. The closed window,
The river of Styx, the wall of limitation
Beyond which the word beyond loses its meaning,
Are the fertilizing paradox, the grille
That, severing, joins, the end to make us begin
Again and again, the infinite dark that sanctions
Our growing flowers in the light, our having children;
The silence behind our music. (266-267, 10-22)

The speaker recognizes that the consummation of desire, couched here in the religious

188
term of “communion,” must always slide away back into renewed desire, and the value thus lies in the attempt, the sense of purpose rather than the outcome. If, as Stroud suggests, “desire is a passion for the infinite, larger than needs or wants, omnivorous” (7), then it is a desire that is logically impossible to realize, for a place “where beyond loses its meaning” and all referents are conflated. Yet this leads the poet to the “fertilizing paradox,” the contradictions of space and enclosure, life and death, wherein the subject can constantly refashion and redirect his or her desire. Marc Blanchard sees in this the result of “a specific pleasure of description [which] would be in the attempt to thwart, or to delay the combination of Eros and Death” (214), and thus the “infinite dark” sanctions those eruptions and signs of desire – growing flowers, having children – that although it will take them into its “silence” in the end, nevertheless are the only realities that the individual’s desire can leave in the wake of an inevitable demise. MacNeice’s belief in stasis and self-unity as the end of all desire and attendant conviction that desire is inevitably in flux provide an imaginative and poetic dialectic through which the subject in a poem can access the integrative, creative energies generated by lack, the object, and death itself:

No, sooner let the dark engulf us. Sooner
Let the black horses, spluttering fire, stampede
Through home and office, let the fierce hands feed
Our dying values to the undying furnace.
The watch will stop and mark the red cross on the door
And cry ‘Bring out your dead!’ at any and every moment,
Unless we can be ourselves—ourselves or more.

(taken from "Dreams in Middle Age," *CP* 444-445, 15-21)
Chapter Six

"Rapping with an impertinent precision": MacNeice and alienation

"With the other masquerades
That time resumes,
One thinks of all the hands
That are raising dingy shades
In a thousand furnished rooms."
T.S. Eliot – "Preludes"

"A starlit or a moonlit dome disdains
All that man is,
All mere complexities,
The fury and the mire of human veins."
W.B. Yeats – "Byzantium"

The many facets and causes of fragmented and divided subjectivity, some of which have been outlined earlier, have given rise to a modern conception of alienation that situates the subject as estranged both from social life and from the self. The ancient and medieval understanding of the concept, however, signifies the transition to a state of being beyond the self. The Greek origins of the word in alloiosis (translated as alienato in Latin) corresponds with ekstasis, which "connotes the state of being transported or rapt out of one's self" (Rotenstrech 3). The Platonic and Neo-Platonic traditions identify this state of being as one of merging with a higher realm of existence and thought that is unified in the One, and alienation was therefore not a distortion of the human condition, as it has come to be known in the past two centuries. For thinkers such as Plotinus and Augustine alienation is the goal of human existence, the transcendence of the separation
between subject and object, knower and known. This vein of thought is picked up by Hegel, who considered alienation to be "a state of division subservient to the end of unity" (7). The common goal is, until the nineteenth century and the advent of the Industrial Revolution, the use of the concept as a marker for self-transcendence. With Marx the concept underwent a radical reversal; he posited alienation as a phenomenon confined to the limits of human relations, particularly economic ones. In Marx's terms, humans are alienated from each other and the products of their labour by the historically determining processes of capitalism and commodification: the subject's essence and existence are at odds, and only in a communist society will this contradiction be resolved.

In this teleological aspect of Marx's thought we see a similarity in his conception of alienation with that posited by Hegel: it is a divided state of human existence that will be resolved into unity, either through philosophical contemplation or historically determined utopia.

Through Marx alienation has come to occupy a central place in modern social theory but, as Bernard Murchland argues, the term has come to signify many "disorders," such as "loss of self, anxiety states, anomie, despair, depersonalization, rootlessness, meaninglessness, isolation, pessimism and lack of community" (4). The broad applicability of the term does not belie the fact that this condition of being is an estrangement of the subject from both society and subjectivity itself that has its roots in each, whatever symptoms it may specifically manifest. It is through the interaction between self and society that alienation becomes discernible as both source and symptom of a divided or dispersed subjectivity, as Murchland goes on to note: "Alienation from
society and alienation from self are the two limiting points of the same continuum” (23). The modern understanding of alienation is thus quite different from that posited by the Platonic, Augustinian and Hegelian traditions, since it is specifically a state experienced by humans as reality, constructed socially and individually. The contemporary experience is marked by a radical disbelief in the teleologies offered by these traditions, and by situating the condition as a particularly human and social ill, Marx opened the way for a conception of the human being as permanently estranged. People are no longer seen as experiencing an intermediate stage, soon to be submerged in transcendent unity, but as struggling through a complex web of alienation that is a source of desire and deep anxiety. It has therefore become a symbol of men’s and women’s historicity, of individual and social deracination.

The reification of the alienated subject takes on three central aspects: alienation from the social world of commodified objects (economic, political and social life), from the natural world, and from individual consciousness itself. Public/social disintegration is mirrored by private/individual estrangement, a process that has become a central occupation of western thought and experience, and which finds its way into much of the art and literature of modern times. Being a part of the world and committed to participating in it, humans can yet realize and imagine the infinite and the One, and the friction that is caused by competing ideologies of social utility and metaphysical abstraction becomes a source of inspiration and anxiety for many artists. The alienated artist as hero found particular expression in the works of writers such as Flaubert and Emerson, whose attempts to sever art from life came to symbolize the rejection of
modern mechanization and commodification. The cultural isolation and marginalization of artists only exacerbates this preoccupation, a state mirrored by the emerging identities of marginalized races and classes that find no reflection of their own cultural traditions and concerns in mainstream western civilization. The individual artist must therefore negotiate the social and personal effects of alienation as they impact on the modern conception of the subject as other, and as a basic estrangement from reality. MacNeice attests to these various states of alienation throughout his poetry in an attempt to work out the relationships between self and society, self and other, and self and natural world, and this chapter will address each in turn.

Social alienation occupied MacNeice's mind throughout his career, undoubtedly spurred on by the socialist rhetoric of the thirties and his awareness that poetry must in some way serve and reflect the social situation in which he lived, while at the same time retaining an independence of vision. MacNeice outlines the seeming contradiction in this position in *Modern Poetry*:

> The modern poet…is often both a ‘rebel’ against and a parasite upon his community. He makes it his pride to have different values and beliefs from those of his community, while at the same time he demands that the community shall support him and his poetry for their own sake in the same way that an appreciative oyster might support the pearl that grows in it. The poet seems no longer organic to the community. (*MP* 2)

The characterization of poetry as the “pearl” and the community as the nurturing, creating “oyster,” underlines MacNeice’s insistence on the value of poetic work, turning
social irritations into works of symmetry and beauty. This leads MacNeice to conclude that contemporary poets “are working back from luxury-writing and trying once more to become functional” (MP 3), and so MacNeice composed poetry of attachment and alienation rather than stark realism or abstract fantasy. The notion of poetry being “functional” is certainly provocative; it seems clear from his work that MacNeice uses this term in a broad sense, implying that poetry should be recognizable (i.e. use form and language that is accessible) and responsible (analyzing society from an informed, critical perspective), both points being aptly addressed in the previously-quoted introduction to “Autumn Journal.” That social alienation remains a consistent current throughout his poetry is not surprising, considering the divisions MacNeice experienced in his own life through religious crisis, his Protestant Irish heritage, the effects of industrialization, and a problematic self-identity. His divided internal conversations, such as those in the eclogues, are mirrored by an ongoing dialogue with the social realities surrounding MacNeice, in particular examining the proliferation of commodified objects in capitalist society and the disjunction between his personal values and those of the society in which he was immersed.

Often MacNeice sets up what seems like a fairly straightforward dichotomy between a reassuring past and a disorienting present in order to investigate the different ways individuals become alienated from their society, as in his 1935 “Homage to Clichés,” which is not so ironically titled as it first appears. In it the speaker, sitting in a pub (a rather clichéd location itself), entertains the false comfort (but comfort nonetheless) that he experiences in the habitual, especially as a refuge from a world that
seems increasingly unstable, as we see in the opening lines: “With all this clamour for progress / This hammering out of new phrases and gadgets, new trinkets and phrases / I prefer the automatic, the reflex, the cliché of velvet” (CP 59). Our addiction to habit is envisioned here as a reaction to fear of the chaotic, crowded and commodified life around us, as well as an integral element of the individual's socialization into the community, as the speaker goes on to note:

Watch how your flattery logic seduction or wit
Elicit the expected response
Each tiny hammer of the abbey chime
Beating on the outer shell of the eternal bell
Which hangs like a Rameses, does not deign to move. (21-25)

Here the “expected response” leads the speaker to an unsettling comparison of this inexorable social logic with a disturbing abbey bell, which as in “Troll’s Courtship” and “Nostalgia” functions as a remote but persistent reminder of the eternal. The speaker's awareness that the enclosed space of the pub is specifically an enclosed social space brings with it the realization of a reality outside the social, and “that everything is not true to type,” and all things “are superseded in the end” (35-37). The imagery of the poem darkens at this point as the speaker's invocation of eternity in the church bells gives way to a meditation on finality:

I see eight bells hanging alone.
Eight black panthers, eight silences
On the outer shell of which our fingers via hammers
Rapping with an impertinent precision

Have made believe that this was the final music. (CP 60, 41-45)

The speaker is at home neither in the automatic conversation of the pub, nor the eerie, final silence external to it, and thus wary of the poem's refrain, "What will you have, my dear? The same again?" as he is of the threat the "impertinent precision" of the bells poses to his isolation.

The speaker plays with clichés and the notion of repetition ironically as they signal the isolation of the self from the other, and imply the deferral of the finality he experiences hearing the bells. Yet his simple awareness of an outside, timeless existence estranges the speaker from his social setting, and the final lines of the poem echo the confusion and even paranoia that this engenders:

Count up our fag-ends
This year next year sometime never
Next year is this year, sometime is next time, never is sometime
Never is the Bell, Never is the Panther, Never is Rameses
Oh the cold stone panic of Never—
The ringers are taking off their coats, the panther crouches
The granite sceptre is very slightly inclining
As our shoes tap against the bar and our glasses
Make two new rings of wet upon the counter
Somewhere behind us stands a man, a counter
A timekeeper with a watch and a pistol
Ready to shoot and with his shot destroy

This whole delightful world of cliché and refrain—

What will you have, my dear? The same again? (70-83)

Here the conception of time becomes fluid for the speaker because of his need to be grounded in the real (and even the mundane and predictable), yet the ominous repetition of “never” subverts his attempt to block out the isolating finality it represents. The poem then shifts to the threatening movement of these seemingly frozen images of the bell ringers, panther, and statue of Rameses, yet the speaker remains deliberately focused on the reassuring, mundane activities of tapping shoes and drinking. This is undercut yet again, however, by the spectral presence of the man who is counting and keeping time, while the recurrence of the word “counter” in this context shifts the word’s meaning from the ordinary to the ominous. The alternation between the speaker as a bar patron ironically revelling in predictable banter and as an individual acutely aware of the spaces beyond the social arena adds dramatic tension to the piece and undermines the “delightful world of cliché and refrain.” The “timekeeper” adds a further dimension to the poem, calling (perhaps imperatively) the speaker back from the world of the pub, which in its static seclusion stands halfway between the everyday world of work and the grim finality of the bells, panther and Rameses. The bells and the counter stand in the poem as timepieces, representations of the mechanical world that parallel the “refrain,” replacing the organic pulse of life with the artificial metronome. The clock, symbolizing the world of labour, is for the speaker the true symbol of his alienation from the social games of the pub and his obverse need for isolation, its ceaseless movement belying the truth of any
“never” and its association with routine clichés signifying stagnation.

MacNeice returns to the alienating world of clock-punching in a 1961 poem titled “The Suicide,” in which an “unusually non-directive commentator” (Longley 164) takes people on a tour through the office of a recent suicide who comes to function as a kind of everyman, through his lack of a clear identity and individuality: “And this, ladies and gentlemen, whom I am not in fact / Conducting, was his office all those minutes ago, / This man you never heard of” (CP 518, 1-3). The coy speaker denies his role as “conductor” through this man's work space in order to highlight the poem's possibilities as parable, setting up the piece for allegorical interpretation, yet this effect is undercut by the immediacy of the events being described, “all those minutes ago.” This gives the poem a combination of universality and specific individuality that enmeshes the reader in the suicide's life while pointing out the general relevance of his dilemma. He is surrounded by the usual office paraphernalia, yet in light of the man's suicide they take on an accusing, judgmental reality:

There are the bills

In the intray, the ash in the ashtray, the grey memoranda stacked

Against him, the serried ranks of the box-files, the packed

Jury of his unanswered correspondence

Nodding under the paperweight in the breeze

From the window by which he left. (3-8)

The repetitive and monotonous diction in these lines (“ash,” “ashtray,” “serried ranks,” “grey memoranda”) are Kafkaesque reminders of the world of habit and repetition that
such labour implies, reinforced by the piles of paper that testify to the suicide’s inability to conform to it.

The objects symbolizing the mechanization of human life remain unmoved by their owner’s sudden departure, yet his suicide comes as a kind of victory over what they represent. As Montagu and Matson have argued, in the world of commodified labour “the last refuge of the secret self, the deepest hidden recess of spontaneity and freedom, must be infiltrated, subjugated, and recycled into conformity with the technological society” (xxix). The man’s suicide is thus a rebellion against this world, a final act of denial, and the only evidence of his rebellion left behind is “the jotter / With his last doodle which might be his own digestive tract / Ulcer and all” (9-11). There is another possible interpretation of this last doodle that the speaker entertains, however:

[it] might be the flowery maze

Through which he had wandered deliciously till he stumbled

Suddenly finally conscious of all he lacked

On a manhole under the hollyhocks. (11-14)

In one sense, this flowery maze or doodle leads to an awareness of lack, or subjective emptiness, and the understanding poetry itself provides of the mechanized world, which reasserts itself treacherously through the disguised manhole. The man’s epiphany, instigated by this symbol of modernity with its subterranean depths and maze-like lack of direction, forces him out of the habit and cliché of everyday life into an awareness of his limited freedom of resistance. The act of suicide becomes a mute but powerful protest against the regimentation of daily life. The doodle retains an aura of mystery, a parable
in its own right:

The pencil

Point had obviously broken, yet, when he left this room

By catdrop sleight-of-foot or simple vanishing act,

To those who knew him for all that mess in the street

This man with the shy smile has left behind

Something that was intact. (14-19)

Terence Brown interprets the suicide as “one who has suddenly become aware of the void of nihilism” (Brown 57), thus ending his life in despair, yet the poem retains a related possibility wherein the nihilism of which he becomes aware is not his own, but that of the society which has so strictly regimented his life without giving it a definable, individual purpose.

The desire to escape this regimentation finds voice in the 1933 poem “Sunday Morning,” where the speaker revels in a Sunday drive as a moment of freedom snatched from the hands of the work week. The common experience of anxiety over the work that awaits on Monday causes the speaker to try to vanish like the musical notes and fishes he describes:

Down the road someone is practising scales,

The notes like little fishes vanish with a wink of tails,

Man’s heart expands to tinker with his car

For this is Sunday morning, Fate’s great bazaar. (CP 23, 1-4)

The joy of weekend freedom is undercut, however, by the routine predictability of
tinkering with the car and the inevitability of Fate, which the speaker unconsciously
acknowledges in the closing lines of the opening stanza:

    Regard these means as ends, concentrate on this Now,
    And you may grow to music or drive beyond Hindhead anyhow,
    Take corners on two wheels until you go so fast
    That you can clutch a fringe or two of the windy past,
    That you can abstract this day and make it to the week of time
    A small eternity, a sonnet self-contained in rhyme.  (5-10)

The moment of freedom is fleeting, a temporary "means" of escaping the regimented
work of the week. Glenn Tinder identifies this need for escape as a symptom of a de-
humanized culture: "What distinguishes contemporary social relations is that systematic
order has tended, to a far greater degree than in most past societies, to lose its
subordination to humane ends" (83). The speaker's need to "clutch a fringe or two of the
windy past" (8) connotes his desire for the imagined freedom and natural rhythm of an
earlier society, but which he acknowledges is only an abstraction, as is the Sunday
holiday, and even the "small" perfection of poetic escape does not deflect the
interpalliative force of alienated labour. MacNeice's revisioning of the Petrarchan sonnet
form (the poem has fourteen lines, but the turn occurs between the tenth and eleventh
lines rather than after the octave, and it is written in couplets), echoes this desire to break
free from externally imposed constraints, yet remains as a persistent reminder of that
form. Drained of spontaneity, the speaker returns in the closing stanza to sinister images
that remind him of time's oppressing urgency, notably using the "eight bells" that re-
surface in "Homage to Clichés," while the diction becomes halting and insecure:

    But listen, up the road, something gulps, the church spire
    Opens its eight bells out, skulls' mouths which will not tire
    To tell how there is no music or movement which secures
    Escape from the weekday time. Which deadens and endures. (11-14)

With identifiably modernist diction and imagery, the melancholy church bells of his childhood return to MacNeice as signals of the routine of modern life, and also of the deadening time of church, which he admits in "Experiences with Images": "In this example [final four lines quoted above] (where I was thinking of the Birmingham suburbs), I have rationalized or twisted my original association which would have suggested rather 'escape from the Sunday time', i.e. from that stony, joyless anti-time of the church" (SC 159). Thus the memory-image is reversed and it is the alienating "anti-time" of the work week that seems unreasonable in this poem, and the church bells are a grim reminder of the socially constructed prison from which any escape is merely temporary.

The idealistic belief in a past, both historical and in memories of childhood, in which human beings were not socially alienated finds expression again in Canto XVIII of "Autumn Journal" where MacNeice reflects on the spiritual malaise that modernity has seemed to create:

    Things were different when men felt their programme
    In the bones and pulse, not only in the brain,
    Born to a trade, a belief, a set of affections;
That instinct for belief may sprout again,

There are some who have never lost it

And some who foster or force it into growth

But most of us lack the right discontent, contented

Merely to cavil. \((CP\ 137,\ 29-36)\)

There are differing senses of subjectivity in this passage, ranging from the naturalized “programme” that “sprouts” in which the subject of previous times was invariably cerned socially (“born to a trade”), resulting in a lack of personal freedom but with a compensating feeling of belonging to a social order, and the contemporary, enervating (“merely to cavil”) alienation from immersion of the self in such culturally constructed identities. The poem details how some subjects become merely observers, unable to do more than go through the motions of everyday life, a psychic state that Carolyn Porter identifies as a defining element of “an alienated consciousness which can only contemplate this independent and autonomous process” (25). The speaker acknowledges this passive detachment as “spiritual sloth,” a state in which only hope of change in the future alleviates this debilitating alienation: “All we can do at most / Is press an anxious ear against the keyhole / To hear the Future breathing” (44-46). The needs of the disenfranchised (who due to their marginalization have a different sense of subjectivity), however, provide the speaker with the opportunity to criticize a capitalist society that sees human beings as useful only in labour, and always in terms of an ideology of civilization:

The blind man's stick goes tapping on the pavement

204
For endless glittering miles
Beneath the standard lights; the paralytic winding
His barrel-organ sprays the passers-by
With April music; the many-ribboned hero
With half a lung or a leg waits his turn to die.
God forbid an Indian acquiescence,
The apotheosis of the status quo.  \(CP 137-138, 59-66\)

The argument that routine, monotonous labour is the price of civilization and empire was a forceful cliché in its own right at the time, and the ethnocentricity of this conception of society was not lost on MacNeice. As John Laffey summarizes, “civilization provided a handy shorthand by which to judge aboriginal peoples, the working classes, criminals and lunatics, children and women, who were perceived as residing at the margins or beyond the borders of civilization” (153). We see here that MacNeice conceived of social alienation not only as an individual response to commodification and routine, but also as the inevitable result of a capitalist and imperialist ideology that enforced conformity as the price of inclusion. The blind man, paralytic, maimed hero, and the supposed “Indian” attitude of acquiescence are therefore rigorously repressed and marginalized through the powerful centralizing force of western civilization itself.

In his early poem “Turf-stacks” MacNeice extends this consideration of marginalization to the peasantry, setting up an opposition between the bourgeois conception of peasant life as in tune with the natural, comforting rhythms of country life with the mechanized, alienating urban existence. Although, as Robyn Marsack has
pointed out, in this poem he “comes closest to the stereotype of the thirties, praising the proletariat and prophesying the millennium” (7), this effect is leavened by a sardonic self awareness which emerges from the poet’s knowledge of the peasants’, and as a poet his own, social obsolescence. The opening stanza compares the physical and intellectual realities of city and country, and where the former is mechanized and impersonal (symbolized by trains, the “iron horses” of civilization that penetrate the countryside), the latter seems wayward but free:

Among these turf-stacks graze no iron horses

Such as stalk, such as champ in towns and the soul of crowds,

Here is no mass-production of neat thoughts

No canvas shrouds for the mind nor any black hearses:

The peasant shambles on his boots like hooves

Without thinking at all or wanting to run in grooves. (CP 18)

The city embodies the mass production and crowds of industrial civilization which the poet links with a kind of intellectual death through the “canvas shrouds” and “black hearses,” while the “neat thoughts” clearly presage his preoccupation with cliché and repetition, symbolized by the inexorable noise of a train on the tracks. The peasant’s motion, on the other hand, is stereotyped as languid and bestial, unreflective and in its own way automatic. The dialectic here is oversimplified so that MacNeice can set up a tenuous third subject position at a critical distance from peasant and urban reality, and although the speaker identifies himself with the peasant against the mass production of contemporary society, he knows that an idealized rural escapism cannot deflect the
mechanized order of civilization:

But those who lack the peasant's conspirators,

The tawny mountain, the unregarded buttress,

Will feel the need of a fortress against ideas and against the

Shuddering insidious shock of the theory-vendors,

The little sardine men crammed in a monster toy

Who tilt their aggregate beast at our crumbling Troy. (7-12)

Estranged from traditional “country” modes of existence that have been relegated to the past, the speaker feels compelled to erect reactionary theories of his own to defend himself against the modernist predicament elaborated by poets such as Eliot and Pound: mechanization and the competing, determining ideologies that have sprung up around it. Ideas are envisioned as products of the marketplace that compel and demean the individual, while the image of the “sardine men” and their “aggregate beast” cynically undermines any pretense of such ideologies to uniformity and meaning. The speaker acknowledges that the worlds of the peasant and classical scholar, each a “crumbling Troy,” are continually being destabilized, however, and although he seeks desperately to find a new way of life outside these forces, there is no escape from this social reality:

For we are obsolete who like the lesser things

Who play in corners with looking-glasses and beads;

It is better we should go quickly, go into Asia

Or any other tunnel where the world recedes,

Or turn blind wantons like the gulls who scream

207
And rip the edge off any ideal or dream. (13-18)

Although he identifies his perspective with the peasant and natural destructiveness in the closing simile, his position is trivialized by liking “lesser things” and playing in corners, and the poet’s predilection for narcissism and brightly-coloured things (“looking-glasses and beads” indicative of an ideology of orientalism) plays into the hands of the theory vendors, as he can be dismissed as ineffectual and reactionary. The speaker’s reaction to the alienating effects of contemporary existence is thus a blend of revolutionary anger and reactionary escapism, and he is unable to resolve this conflict without either giving in to the “mass-production of neat thoughts” or retreat into “any other tunnel.”

The poem that most forcefully conveys MacNeice’s concern over the inevitable social alienation of the individual is the 1944 piece “Prayer Before Birth,” in which the speaker is an unborn child who fears the destruction of his individuality by the forces of nature and society. Herman Berger has noted the connection between the dependency of infancy and alienation: “To discover the forms in which the alienation primarily occurs we must realize that the ego should develop in freedom toward its own form, but that the starting point of this process is determined by the typical situation of helplessness” (105). The unborn speaker, however, is not imagined as being under the impression he is free to develop, and his prayer is a plea to escape the rigid confines of social conformity and the painful results of disobedience, as we see in the second stanza:

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,
on black racks rack me, in blood-baths roll me. (CP 193)

The unborn child foresees that he will not be able to control the social field in which he exists, and that it will in turn control or destroy him. As Edna Longley notes, "like war, the perspective of the unborn highlights the powerful imperatives which mock our belief in individual autonomy" (86), and the poet imagines that the unborn child goes on to place blame for all his future sins on the social formation that moulds and controls him:

I am not yet born; forgive me

For the sins that in me the world shall commit, my words

when they speak me, my thoughts when they think me,

my treason engendered by traitors beyond me,

my life when they murder by means of my

hands, my death when they live me. (12-17)

This passage envisions multiple selves for which the speaker takes no responsibility, and his evasive plea seems to deny the possibility of agency, blaming all the possible evils of life on his socialization and the manipulation of others. The resistant human will that the voice embodies cannot deflect the violent control exerted by others, with the result that the speaker becomes self-alienated, unable to connect self with actions. This process resembles that which Marx outlines in The German Ideology, and while for Marx this kind of alienation is a result of the modes of production, it can fruitfully be extended to the psychological state of the unborn child: "Man's own deed becomes an alien power opposed to him, which enslaves him instead of being controlled by him" (23). In this way social and self-alienation become intertwined: where the social forces beyond

209
individual control dominate mental, emotional, and even physical growth, the separation between the subject as resisting agent and the objectification of his/her actions even further dissociates the self from conceiving an active role in the individual historical process. It is the awareness of this doubly alienating existence that makes “Prayer Before Birth” so disturbing.

Although the unborn child resists the inevitability of socialization, in the fifth stanza he shifts his plea to one for help in becoming accustomed to the clichés, refrains, and roles he will have to enact in life:

I am not yet born; rehearse me
In the parts I must play and the cues I must take when
old men lecture me, bureaucrats hector me, mountains
frown at me, lovers laugh at me, the white
waves call me to folly and the desert calls
me to doom and the beggar refuses
my gift and my children curse me. (18-24)

The old men and bureaucrats here represent the force of tradition and the imposed order of civilization which the unborn child rails against, yet even nature itself is envisioned as an interpellative force, with mountains frowning and the waves and desert calling him to his death. This section represents the low-point of the poem for the speaking subject in which there is no refuge in which a unified self-awareness can exist. Yet in the final two stanzas resistance to this encompassing alienation returns as a humanistic hope in the possibility of saving at least a part of the self from the cold machine of bureaucratized
I am not yet born; O fill me
With strength against those who would freeze my
humanity, would dragoon me into a lethal automaton,
would make me a cog in a machine, a thing with
one face, a thing, and against all those
who would dissipate my entirety, would
blow me like thistledown hither and
thither or hither and thither
like water held in the
hands would spill me.

Let them not make me a stone and let them not spill me.

Otherwise kill me. (28-39)

The influence of the war in this poem is particularly noticeable here with the invocation of "lethal automaton," but the most terrifying prospect of human social existence for the unborn child is the concept of merely becoming a "thing," a bureaucratic statistic and/or cannon fodder for a totalitarian regime, rather than an individual capable of choosing between multiple social identities. There is also a fear of losing his "entirety" (the multiplicity of selves), of being made incomplete through the process of socialization, and having the variety of the self leak away from consciousness until only the automatic responses of a cog remain: the narrowing of potential that enables the construction of a
subjective identity is characterized as a process like death. Thus the poem undermines
our belief in individual autonomy by asserting the powerful imperatives of contemporary
society and industrial culture (as in “Turf-stacks”), while pointing to a deeper alienating
division resulting from the subject’s awareness of a lost wholeness and unity
(paradoxically ensured by the multiplicity of possible subject positions) that cannot be
regained, unless in death.

If contemporary social alienation is the result of industrialization and capitalist
ideology, self-alienation is equally a relatively recent phenomenon of subjective life, and
signals a very real break from traditions of the ancient and medieval worlds that focused
on the duties and responsibilities of the individual as geared towards a transcendent state
of wholeness, as in the cases of Plotinus and Augustine. Montagu and Matson determine
that “the discovery of the individual, the creation or invention of ‘modern man,’ was also
paradoxically the source of the first portent of alienation, the first sense of peril to the
integrity and dignity of the human person” (xx). This newly-defined sense of the
consciousness of the individual as distinct from the familial, political and religious
identities into which he or she was born, they note, was simultaneous with the birth of a
“consciousness of opposing forces bent upon the destruction of the personality” (xx).
This certainly remained a primary focus of the intellectual bent in MacNeice’s poetry. In
“An Eclogue for Christmas,” for example, the “jazz-weary” city dweller “A” ruminates
on the determinate ways it seems that his life and actions have been socially pre-ordained,
and how this has affected his self-perception:

I who was Harlequin in the childhood of the century,
Posed by Picasso beside an endless opaque sea,
Have seen myself sifted and splintered in broken facets,
Tentative pencillings, endless liabilities, no assets,
Abstractions scalpel with a palette-knife
Without reference to this particular life.
And so it has gone on; I have not been allowed to be
Myself in flesh or face, but abstracting and dissecting me
They have made of me pure form, a symbol or a pastiche,
Stylised profile, anything but soul and flesh:
And that is why I turn this jaded music on
To forswear thought and become an automaton.  

(CP 33, 26-37)

Here the speaker hearkens back to a lost childhood and youth full of mystery and vigour, recognizing the splitting off of his personality into myriad pieces, a confused, stylized pastiche without any grounding other than the pure form that he must assume as a social individual. Even the “tentative pencillings” of poetry cannot cover over the gaps and voids this psychic alienation has created, and “A” can only find a coherent identity as an automaton – paralleled by what is surely a contradiction through the “jaded music” of jazz, which emphasizes free form and improvisation – devoid of individuality and content. Nathan Rotenstreich delineates the central aspects of this psychical state as “the loss of personal identity or a fargoing change of personality, and loneliness, self-isolation from, or loss of contact with, others and society, as well as the replacement of emotional reactions and relations by a callous, mechanical attitude” (78). This is precisely the
psychological predicament that MacNeice conceives trapping “A,” and he feels he must
turn to the “jaded music” which for him represents the submersion of thought into form,
because in this alienated state “the individual can express himself only through a medium
which is not his own” (Rotenstreich 80).

An even darker evocation of the despair and nihilism that this kind of alienation
induces is made in the 1962 poem “Greyness is All,” in which the speaker reflects upon
the lack even of a clearly definable enemy to the self, symbolized by black, which would
imply the existence of white, or a positive, self-fulfilling existence:

If black were truly black not grey
It might provide some depth to pray
Against and we could hope that white
Would reach a corresponding height. (CP 535, 1-4)

The subject’s intense desire to break free from the monotony of an isolated existence in
the third stanza finds an outlet in the forlorn hope of a radical change in selfhood, even if
it is dark and chaotic:

If only some black demon would
Infuse our small grey souls we could
At least attempt to break the wire
That bounds the Gadarene hens’ desire. (9-12)

The prospect of this “infusion” of colour and life is balanced by the image of the
Gadarene hens¹, whose headlong, suicidal flight (reminiscent of “The Suicide”) the

¹ see Matthew 8:28-32. This original reference is to the “Gadarene swine.”
speaker envies. Yet the tight diction and rhyming of the quatrains reinforces the self's experience of monotonous repetition, and only the possibilities of an afterlife or radically revisioned society provide an outlet for the speaker's nihilistic despair, as we see in the closing stanzas:

But, as it is, we needs must wait
Not for some demon but some fate
Contrived by men and never known
Until the final switch is thrown

To black out all the worlds of men
And demons too but even then
Whether that black will not prove grey
No one may wait around to say. (13-20)

Even the apocalyptic tone is deadened by the drained and monotonous spirit of the speaker. History is envisioned here as moving into nothingness rather than the culmination of society and/or evolution, and Terence Brown aptly names this conception of permanent alienation "cosmic nihilism" (70), a negative perception of human consciousness as a source of deep despair.

More often in his poetry that addresses self-alienation, MacNeice employs less negative spatial metaphors, which in a poem such as "Conversation" he combines with the social designation of the vagrant in order to convey the psychic distance that the alienated self places between it and others, and even within itself:
Ordinary people are peculiar too:

Watch the vagrant in their eyes

Who sneaks away while they are talking with you

Into some back wood behind the skull,

Following un-, or other, realities,

Fishing for shadows in a pool.  

(CP 184, 1-6)

The retreat into the imagination is explicitly compared to vagrancy, with all its implications of rejection of, or by, a society founded upon private property and family, and its eruption into the minds of “ordinary people” denotes a resistance to the alienating effects of daily life and “conversation.” Rather than presenting, as expected, a rational, unitary identity, people are constantly experiencing alternate identities in the mind, perhaps a defensive reflex conditioned by an unconscious knowledge that the socially derived, conscious self-perception is only one of many possibilities. In The Poetry of W.B. Yeats MacNeice points out this multiplicity of identities in himself: “As far as I can make out, I not only have many different selves but I am often, as they say, not myself at all” (166). This lightheartedly points to the possession of repertories of alternative being, which is complicated by the ontological fact that through the need to escape into multiple or alternative identities, the subject becomes estranged from being itself. Perhaps this is why “vagrancy is forbidden,” yet such people “by mistake interpolate / Swear-words like roses in their talk” (17-18). The vagrant self remains as a semiotic interruption of normalcy, and while forced by interaction with others to “put up a barrage of common sense” (CP 184, 16), this decentred subject remains as a marginal psychical presence that
desires a wholeness and freedom that language and society simultaneously arouse and forbid.

Individual alienation from the external world finds new voice in “Solitary Travel,” in which the speaker meditates on the sameness of each new place he visits and the impossibility of escape from routine. Julia Kristeva discusses the “freedom” of the foreigner, stating that “nevertheless, the consummate name of such a freedom is solitude....Available, freed of everything, the foreigner has nothing, he is nothing” (12).

This solitude makes itself felt in the opening stanza of the poem, where the traveller lists a number of exotic places only to be worn down by being perpetually thrown back on himself:

Breakfasting alone in Karachi, Delhi, Calcutta,

Dacca, Singapore, Kuala Lumpur, Colombo, Cape Town,

But always under water or glass, I find

Such a beginning makes the day seem blind. \( CP 500 \)

Here travel is not an opening of the self to the other (since “the hotels are all the same”), and the speaker’s need for society, confounded by alienation from the external world, simply becomes exacerbated to the point that all movement seems fated to futility:

And taking coffee alone in the indistinguishable airports,

Though the land outside be empty or man-crammed, oven or icebox,

I feel the futility of moving on

To what, though not a conclusion, stays foregone. \( 9-12 \)

Even the future is devoid of meaning and movement, “foregone” in the sense of “what
has gone by,” in time past. In the final stanza the isolation felt at the beginning of the poem is magnified, and the experience of travel does not bring the self out of the loneliness that memory and repetition create:

Time and the will lie sidestepped. If I could only
Escape into icebox or oven, escape among people
Before tomorrow from this neutral zone
Where all tomorrows must be faced alone.… (19-22)

Of course, the speaker could easily escape into the outside (“icebox or oven” providing the relief, at least, of extremes) physically, but it is the psychic enclosure of an encapsulated, hermetic self that cannot be deflected, even “among people.” As Peter McDonald argues, time and the will remain, “as the sequence of ‘tomorrows’ suggested by the final couplet imply” (189), but they no longer hold out the promise of an escape from loneliness, which itself becomes a powerful instrument of personal alienation from one’s own existence.

The conflict between exterior and interior, mirroring that between object and subject, often finds articulation for MacNeice through images comparing the natural world and the enclosed spaces that signify the human consciousness. In a poem such as “House on a Cliff,” this self-awareness is signified by the title itself, which uses the house as a metaphor for the hermetic, even narcissistic psychic space that mimics and deflects the reality of the world, suspended between land and sea:

Indoors the tang of a tiny oil lamp. Outdoors
The winking signal on the waste of sea.
Indoors the sound of the wind. Outdoors the wind.

Indoors the locked heart and the lost key.  

(5-8)

There is an element of Platonism in the indoor images, reflecting pale shadows of an external reality to which the subject has only mediated access, leading to a response in which the nightmare images of the "locked heart" and "lost key" represent what may or may not be a self-induced retreat from nature. The imagery hardens in the second stanza, reversing the roles of nature and humanity, the former symbolizing timelessness and power, the latter the place in which time and decay follow their course, albeit erratically:

Outdoors the chill, the void, the siren. Indoors

The strong man pained to find his red blood cools,

While the blind clock grows louder, faster. Outdoors

The silent moon, the garrulous tides she rules.  

The powerful isolation of this man, and the intimations of his mortality in the cooling blood and increasingly swift "blind clock," can have no impact on the external world, of which he seems oblivious. This awareness of alienation from reality and life itself grows so deep in the final stanza that it evokes extreme subjective confusion and even the "empty" release provided by the "ancestral curse-cum-blessing" that is death:

Indoors the ancestral curse-cum-blessing. Outdoors

The empty bowl of heaven, the empty deep.

Indoors a purposeful man who talks at cross

Purposes, to himself, in a broken sleep.  

(9-12)

The idea of the self is confused and fragmentary, devoid of the empty but unified

219
existence of the “deep” and “heaven.” Without the illusory but comforting refrain of cliché in social interaction, divided within himself and estranged from the natural world, the subject is left with a fragmentary consciousness that only finds expression in a “broken sleep.”

Alienation from nature finds a more subtle expression in MacNeice's early poem "Nocturne," where the wind which haunts the house on the cliff is personified, and the dark night comes alive as strange elements of sea and blood:

The dark blood of night-time
Foams among the ivy,
And leaps toward the lunelet
Of sea-chawn ivory,
And nowhere finds an outlet. (CP 7, 1-5)

Disturbed by the experience of nature as separate from the self, the speaker tries to invest the nighttime scene with human attributes and preoccupations. The need to endow the natural world with humanized meaning derives from the fear the subject experiences when confronted by an alien external world which the isolated consciousness cannot control, as Herman Berger has observed: “the strange and hostile character of reality evokes a feeling of separation, division and estrangement. Man doesn't recognize himself in reality, he feels lost; reality doesn't have a human shape” (96). In this opening stanza the night becomes fluid, a dark blood whose quest to escape the confines of the garden and join the moon reflects the human desire for freedom from the constraints of one's solitude. In the second stanza the wind appears as a lost wanderer seeking refuge from
the night:

The wind goes fingering

His lantern. The wind goes

In his glistening oil-cape

Knocking at the windows,

Slouching round the landscape.  (6-10)

In this poem it is the wind that has been invested with the qualities of a vagrant – both icons of release from subjective boundaries for MacNeice – who, like the trapped night itself, seeks comfort and companionship. The simple, compelling execution of the poem undergoes a disturbing metamorphosis in the final stanza, where the night and wind give birth to an eerie fog:

Sinisterly bend and dip

Those hulks of cloud canvas,

Probing through the elm-trees,

Past the house; and then pass

To a larger emptiness.  (11-15)

The hidden insecurities of the elusive speaker of the poem surface here, especially in the final clause which can be read as both simply descriptive, and as a command or wish for the disturbingly free nightly elements to leave his awareness at peace. The overall effect of the poem is muted, yet it conveys a similar message of estrangement to “House on a Cliff,” positing an external world which, however the speaker may personify it, remains elusive, mysterious, and threatening, but also compelling as a source of images for
freedom from the psychological constraints symbolized by the house.

MacNeice often conveys his sense of subjective life as decentred and sequestered from nature by setting up a positive interaction between the human and natural worlds, only to infuse it with a vision of the emptiness and loneliness an extended meditation on their relationship engenders. His vision of daily life merely covering over an inevitable void is conveyed in *The Strings are False* in just such a way through the metaphor of the pool table: “And the globe keeps rolling towards a pocket without a bottom although on the way the green cloth field is smooth” (SF 198). Similarly, his poem “Morning Sun” sets up a joyously plural urban scene upon which the energizing and connecting sun shines benevolently, only to find that without the sun all becomes lifeless and grey: the bottom falls out of the subject’s pre-conceived notions of the benevolence of nature. The opening two stanzas celebrate the flux and community of social life on a beautiful day with “Crowds of people all in the vocative” and “the haze of the morning shot with words” (CP 26). The “yellow sun” glances benevolently off of the myriad objects in the street:

Filleted sun streaks the purple mist,

Everything is kissed and reticulated with sun

Scooped-up and cupped in the open fronts of shops

And bouncing on the traffic which never stops. (9-12)

Even the internal rhyming in this passage conveys a sense of buoyant expectancy, a union between man and nature that is blessed by the sun. The final two stanzas, however, enact a curious inversion, where the first continues the celebratory tone only to give way to a
radically different subjective perception of reality in the second:

And the street fountain blown across the square
Rainbow-trellises the air and sunlight blazons
The red butcher's and scrolls of fish on marble slabs,
Whistled bars of music crossing silver sprays
And horns of cars, touché, touché, rapiers' retort, a moving cage,
A turning page of shine and sound, the day's maze.

But when the sun goes out, the streets go cold, the hanging meat
And tiers of fish are colourless and merely dead,
And the hoots of cars neurotically repeat and the tiptoed feet
Of women hurry and falter whose faces are dead;
And I see in the air but not belonging there
The blown grey powder of the fountain grey as ash
That forming on a cigarette covers the red.  \(13-25\)

The abrupt change brought about by the disappearance of the sun is, on one level, the
cause of a physical change in the landscape that the speaker's sensitive eye records
accurately, yet the removal of nature's blessing of, even its collusion with, human society
has a deeper, more disturbing resonance for the poet. The honking cars which moments
before reminded him of swordsmen are revealed as "neurotic," the butcher's shop is
transformed from a rich tapestry to a scene of vulgar death, and the light and colour of
the fountain is perverted into cigarette ash, merely because the illusion of life,
community, and vitality was bound up with the speaker's perception of the sun; it is a vision of a bi-polar world. The sun, and by extension nature, are revealed as controlling human subjectivity similarly to social convention and ideology, and the speaker becomes acutely aware of his total lack of mastery over external reality. His subjective impressions, bound up with the cycles of light and dark, day and night, life and death, are irrevocably enmeshed with these forces, subject to them, and yet strangely apart.

The resulting sense of individual isolation that MacNeice conveys through these poems does not find any resolution in the benignity of nature (as it often did for the Romantics, in a poem such as Coleridge’s “This Lime-Tree Bower, My Prison,” for example), and it is rather envisioned as indifferently cruel by the poet's modern sensibility. Withdrawn from traditional objects of reverence, such as social order, nature, or even the unitary self, this modern subject does not celebrate release from fixed boundaries (even while this remains inscribed as a constant longing), but undergoes a process of alienation that further divides consciousness, which paradoxically is itself the cause of this estrangement. If thought and awareness of self lead to the rather grim conclusion that humans are capable of seeing themselves as alien in their own world (estranged from their natural and social realities and self-divided), they also are indicators of the imagination through which each individual can transcend the immediate moment. The problem of alienation becomes therefore a problem of being, an ontological dilemma which MacNeice felt compelled to return to time and again in his poetry, for as Walter Weisskopf states: “This transcendence of the immediately given experience is the source and the cause of existential alienation. Through his consciousness man is alienated from
his world and his world is alienated from him” (19). The related modes of alienation I have discussed both bind and liberate; the individual subject is constrained by estrangement from self and other to conceive of the consciousness of subjectivity, or self-awareness, as an impenetrable ontological condition, yet this estrangement also makes the assumption of multiple subjective modes – which imply a limited freedom from over-determined notions of self – possible. Alienation binds and liberates. The philosophical, emotional and moral implications of a specifically existentialist response to this state of consciousness will occupy the next chapter, since for MacNeice as for the rest of us the question remains: what can I do about it?

Beni Hasan

It came to me on the Nile my passport lied

Calling me dark who am grey. In the brown cliff

A row of tombs, of portholes, stared and stared as if

They were the long-dead eyes of beasts inside

Time’s cage, black eyes on eyes that stared away

Lion-like focused on some different day

On which, on a long-term view, it was I, not they, had died. (CP 453)
Chapter Seven

"For we are unique": MacNeice and anomaly

"We have art in order not to die of the truth."
Friedrich Nietzsche – Beyond Good and Evil

"I don't know whether this world has a meaning that transcends it. But I know that I do not know that meaning and that it is impossible for me just now to know it. What can a meaning outside my condition mean to me? I can understand only in human terms. What I touch, what resists me – that is what I understand. And these two certainties – my appetite for the absolute and for unity and the impossibility of reducing this world to a rational and reasonable principle – I also know that I cannot reconcile them."
Albert Camus – The Myth of Sisyphus

The various threads of the subjective experience I have been outlining demonstrate ways in which the individual is subject to both external interpellative forces and the internal construction of consciousness itself, yet the multiplicity of possible subject positions and the ability to negotiate and recombine them deliberately points to the existence of human agency and a provisional freedom for the self. The state of alienation described in the previous chapter finds its roots in human mortality and social conditioning, yet as MacNeice demonstrates in his poetry these factors can be reorganized through various forms of consciousness such as language, memory, imagination and creativity itself. Aware of the possibility of transcendence, the subject is nevertheless limited by ontological isolation and by death, and thus through awareness of self and other is alienated from the world, and the world conversely seems removed and inaccessible to the subject. This unique human perspective makes the individual an anomaly, an irregularity that defies easy schematization and is
fundamentally separated from the universe in which he or she exists. MacNeice’s repeated inquiries into the causes and nature of this anomalous state of being and his refusal to retreat into teleological stances that ignore the flux of experience and finitude of the self place him in the continental tradition of philosophy commonly referred to as existentialism. I will examine MacNeice’s preoccupation with the human subject as anomaly from the perspective of two notions central to that tradition: authenticity and the absurd.

One of the central beliefs in the existentialist system, as Sartre describes it, is that “man is nothing else but that which he makes of himself” (Kaufman 290). The subject’s existence precedes essence, and does not deny the force that socialization has on being, but rather places the responsibility for the choices that each person has to make during that process on the individual. Sartre’s definition of subjectivism sheds further light on the ontological dilemma to which this conception of consciousness gives rise: “Subjectivism means, on the one hand, the freedom of the individual subject and, on the other, that man cannot pass beyond human subjectivity. It is the latter which is the deeper meaning of existentialism” (Ibid. 291). Confined within a perception of self and world which has no direct access to unmediated reality, yet subjectively located within specific historical and cultural spaces and times, the human subject is forced either continually to reinvent the self or to identify with and become subservient to an ideology that enforces an intellectual stasis and reflects an unjustifiable transcendence, through belief in an afterlife, a utopian future, or a political expediency. Like the
existentialists,¹ MacNeice refused this latter course, aware that such levelling processes disregard the flux and impermanence that are an intrinsic element of the human experience. What MacNeice brings to this perspective is an awareness of how flux and impermanence are constructed through the various narratives of the self, and the belief that flux itself constitutes a subjective ontology. The lack of a coherent body of externally imposed moral principles and beliefs, however, is a direct cause of existential alienation, the only practical alternative to which is to act in bad faith, or willingly accept a single, unitary identity.

The existentialist conception of the subject is therefore a kind of humanism, although not that which traditionally posited humanity as at the centre of the universe, and “the grandiose metaphysical idea of the Absolute or Universal Self” is undermined by the insistence that the self is “not a fixed entity or abstract essence, but an existence that precedes any essence and determination” (Golomb 11). With their claims of God’s death thinkers such as Nietzsche, Sartre, de Beauvoir and Camus establish the right for each individual to create continuously a self out of the myriad possibilities offered by consciousness and society. For Sartre, “man is still to be determined,” but since the individual can only find a provisional, fluctuating essence through the never-ending pursuit of transcendent aims, this determination is perpetually deferred. Implicit in this denial of a pre-existing human essence and the resulting emphasis placed on the capacity of the individual to create being is the realization that “there is no other universe except the human universe, the universe of human subjectivity” (Kaufman

¹ Although he never refers directly to any existentialist writers other than Nietzsche, it is clear from a number of his poems that MacNeice shared similar preoccupations with Camus, such as the myth of Sisyphus, as in “Prospect”: “Though the stone grows and grows / That we roll up the hill / And the hill grows and grows / And gravity conquers still” (CP 213, 9-12).
Self-creation becomes both an ethical right and necessity, as de Beauvoir points out, noting that values emerge from "the plurality of concrete, particular men projecting themselves towards their ends on the basis of situations whose particularity is as radical and irreducible as subjectivity itself" (de Beauvoir 17-18). This train of thought is echoed by other existentialist philosophers, stressing the fact of existence as experience, "a process of sustained becoming" (Bedford 71) which never reaches a conclusion. The resulting subjective experience is therefore one filled with tension, as Camus elucidates: "Between the certainty I have of my existence and the content I try to give to that assurance, the gap will never be filled. For ever I shall be a stranger to myself" (MS 24).

The subject is driven by the desire for self-identity and sure objective knowledge about self and world, but because of this ontological gap the existentialists insist on the permanent impossibility of conceiving the self as whole and contiguous, a response which we have seen MacNeice shares. Camus concludes that the inevitable result of this state of consciousness is paradox:

You give me the choice between a description that is sure but that teaches me nothing and hypotheses that claim to teach me but that are not sure.

A stranger to myself and to the world, armed solely with a thought that negates itself as soon as it asserts, what is this condition in which I can have peace only by refusing to know and to live, in which the appetite for conquest bumps into walls that defy its assaults? To will is to stir up paradoxes. (25)

The question for the individual, faced with the impossibility of seeing in the world a human element that is contiguous with consciousness, or of transcending the self, thus
becomes one of how to live authentically in what seems an ethical vacuum. Refusing to submerge the self in specific social and/or intellectual systems carries with it the danger of solipsism, and the ethical, or authentic, subject must negotiate each in order to create continuously the self anew.

Authenticity in this existentialist sense derives its force and meaning from the basic paradox of the human experience between death as an absolute limit of knowledge and the desire for transcendence of the self. Peter Koestenbaum summarizes the way in which an authentic choice or solution relies on this paradox: “A solution to the paradox of the human situation is authentic if it rests on the clear recognition that the paradox exists and on the understanding of the dynamics of the paradox. In other words, a solution implies acceptance of paradox as an inevitable dialectical structure of life, even of consciousness itself” (108). Since paradox lies at the heart of conscious thought, the concept of authenticity is less concerned “with a specific concrete content, a ‘what’, than with some particular path, with a ‘how’” (Golomb 33). The ideal of authenticity is therefore a mobile, personal ethics which critically investigates systematized beliefs and blindly accepted ethical norms, and which stresses the fluidity of human history and creativity itself. As Golomb summarizes, “authenticity requires an incessant movement of becoming, self-transcendence and self-creation” (9), and so the authentic subject must constantly realign, recombine, and even reject those socially imposed identities which generate a static mask for the self and which elicit a “passive subordination to one particular ethic” (12). Since individuals must create their own authentic self rather than having it delivered to them by a higher authority, the authentic subject only finds expression in the created products of consciousness. However, the authentic subject is
not the hermetic, self-referential entity to be found in Heidegger's thought, but rather an agent capable of action which only finds meaning in the intersubjective world, since it must by nature lack reference to any overarching ideal. The act of creation becomes a call “to live a committed and active life – not in a social void or underground, but within a community” (201). Since creativity is impossible without both negative and positive interaction within social and cultural contexts, the task of the authentic subject is continuously to overcome, change or assimilate these forces without succumbing to a static identity.

MacNeice recognized this challenge to subjectivity, and responded not only by stressing the multifarious nature of experience, but also directly confronting the prevailing ideologies of the day, less on the grounds that they were somehow wrong in themselves, but because they demean and alienate the individual. In a poem such as “Leaving Barra”, in which the poet addresses an absent lover, the speaker decides he must “deny any system which denigrates the world of fact, our world” (Brown 79), which is saturated with human longing:

For fretful even in leisure
I fidget for different values,
Restless as a gull and haunted
By a hankering after Atlantis. (CP 87, 13-16)

The tone here is somewhat frivolous, with the speaker “fidgeting” and “hankering” for an undefined, “lost” world, this desire becoming a cause for disillusionment which he clearly would rather ignore:

If only I could crush the hunger
If only I could lay the phantom

Then I should no doubt be happy

Like a fool or a dog or a buddha. (21-24)

The poet realizes that this hungry desire for identification with the world, a kind of self-transcendence marked by relinquishing awareness of the paradox of consciousness noted above, denies the very immersion in and involvement with reality which originally sparked this desire:

O the self-abnegation of Buddha

The belief that is disbelieving

The denial of chiaroscuro

Not giving a damn about existence!

But I would cherish existence

Loving the beast and the bubble

Loving the rain and the rainbow,

Considering philosophy alien.

For all the religions are alien

That allege that life is a fiction,

And when we agree in denial

The cock crows in the morning. (25-36)

Here the submergence of the self in systems, master-narratives or “religions,” which impose transcendent principles is descried as inauthentic, even nihilistic, and their denial
of lived reality (which inevitably reasserts itself, here with the cock crowing) is always defied by a natural world immune to it. MacNeice counters by “alleging” his own “fiction” of life wherein the desire for completion in something beyond the self is balanced by a denial of the transcendent claim to truth. The poem’s closing lines, in which the refutation of such systems is immediately followed by the reassertion of reality, demonstrate this immunity. Golomb outlines how power structures and teleologies, far from reconciling the individual to an alienated life and the reality of death, actually cause the subject to be permanently estranged from being itself. “Those who believe in religions, transcendent principles, objective reason, political and messianic ideologies and the other ‘isms’, are the genuine outsiders in our world, which becomes, for them, merely a transitory stage, a narrow corridor to the other world or to personal or political salvation” (184). While the notion of a “genuine” outsider is problematic, it indicates the difference between the subjective life that is deliberately appropriated by the individual and that which is enforced by a particular ideology. The speaker recognizes that his desire for identification with a schema that denies the world devalues experience, and his closing address to his absent lover affirms the value of a fluctuating identity:

    I thank you, my dear, for the example
    Of living like a fugue and moving.
    For few are able to keep moving,
    They drag and flag in the traffic;
    While you are alive beyond question
    Like the dazzle on the sea, my darling.      (47-52)
Love, like life, is conceived as a dynamic force that may only be circumscribed by the subject’s willing submersion in those ways of thinking which abdicate the individual’s responsibility to change.

This responsibility lies at the heart of how MacNeice envisioned the authentic voice, and the valid response to the ontological dilemma at the heart of consciousness. Despite the various interpellative forces which partially constitute the self, the mere fact that consciousness is free to choose and thus change its self-perception and understanding of the world defies the alienating schematization of ideologies. Being and consciousness are mutually determining, and excessive emphasis on either leads to over-identification and “bad faith.” Alain Renaut elaborates on the necessity of understanding human consciousness in terms of this fluidity: “Our ability, our need, to occupy various roles, to belong to various groups…to be, in a word, complex, is sufficient to allow us to criticize and to ‘transcend’ particular roles, groups or standards. All that we need in order not to be defined by one role is our ability to occupy another role” (xvii). This kind of transcendence, to be strictly separated from that which posits an escape from subjectivity or selfhood into static identification, allows the individual to conceive of the self as a source of continual renewal and exploration. MacNeice investigates this dynamism of choice often in “Autumn Journal,” as in the closing passages of Canto XI, once more addressed to an absent beloved

Whose eagerness to live

A many-sided life might be deplored as fickle,

Unpractical, or merely inquisitive.

---

2 This is the basis of Sartre’s conception of the free être pour-soi, since consciousness must to some extent at least be free of external determination or it would simply be an object.

234
A superficial comment; for your instinct
Sanctions all you do,
Who know that truth is nothing in abstraction,
That action makes both wish and principle come true;
Whose changes have the logic of a prism,
Whose moods create,
Who never linger haggling on the threshold,
To weigh the pros and cons until it is too late. (CP 122, 42-52)

The speaker reserves his praise for his lover’s acceptance of and immersion in reality, as opposed to the sterile philosophies of “truth in abstraction,” and for the “sanction” of “instinct” which makes identification with abstract truth superfluous. The image of the prism, a symbol of the interaction between inner and outer structures, causes, and effects in the way it turns plain white light into a multitude of colours and forms, serves also as a metaphor for the authentic life, creating and pluralizing rather than subtracting and destroying. What the speaker admires in his lover is not the expected intangibles of beauty and intellect, but the ability to reflect her surroundings by multiplying them, a woman “whose kaleidoscopic ways are all authentic, / Whose truth is not of a statement but of a dance” (61-62). The didacticism of “statements” is opposed to the alternative structure of dance and movement, celebrations of energy. While it could be suggested that here MacNeice is formulating a vision of femininity that simply promulgates stereotypical notions of women as non-logical, he clearly admires these traits and uses them as valid alternatives to the linear reasoning and prevailing ideologies of his culture.
This kaleidoscopic vision of subjectivity can bring with it the responsibility of choice and action, for it is often not enough merely to adorn the world with reconfigurations, but the authentic subject must continually provide concrete acts of self-authentication that affirm the complexity of lived experience. For MacNeice this involved making poetry that dramatized choices which undermine the “Concrete Universal” (CP 126, 41), no matter how attractive it appears to an alienated and fragmented subjectivity. In the closing lines of Canto XVII of “Autumn Journal” MacNeice combines the stifling of creativity and experience concomitant with adherence to a particular system of thought or persona with the force and persuasion of the prophet:

And if we confine the world to the prophet’s tripod
The subjects of our prophecy contract.
Open the world wide, open the senses,
Let the soul stretch its blind enormous arms,
There is vision in the fingers only needing waking,
Ready for light’s alarms. (CP 136, 69-74)

In this passage the speaker uses the “prophet’s tripod” not merely to mimic the Trinity or undercut teleologically oriented ideologies, but in a deeper sense to demonstrate the inapplicability of such “prophecies” to adequately account for human experience, and the detrimental effects of focussing consciousness too closely on a single vision of the world. Consciousness, though “blind” (especially in the sense that it cannot see past its 3 Throughout “Autumn Journal” MacNeice frequently uses Plato and Aristotle to illustrate the tension between the desire for a transcendent universal and the necessity of immersing the self in the lived world of experience.

236
own end) can provide an alternative way of experiencing the world which, although filled with angst, allows for a more human, and specifically more tactile ("fingers only needing waking") interaction with reality. This does not lead to an easy dualism of isolated individualism as opposed to submergence of the self in collective action, however, as for example Mitchell Bedford, following Kierkegaard's lead, suggests in *Existentialism and Creativity*: "The individual who chooses to stand for 'truth' must oppose all levelling processes and therefore must stand apart from any collective activity" (75). While MacNeice acknowledges the need to oppose levelling processes, he does not see this as an impediment to collective action:

Aristotle was right to think of man-in-action

As the essential and really existent man

And man means men in action; try and confine your

Self to yourself if you can.

Nothing is self-sufficient, pleasure implies hunger

But hunger implies hope. (83-88)

Here the subject is envisioned as finding an authentic mode of living only through specific action – which is very rarely simply an individual project – and it is only through the hope for the fulfillment of desires and the need for collaboration with others this implies that it may be achieved. Even the enjambment of "your/Self" reinforces the speaker's contention that however isolated the individual may be from his or her community, and however wary one must be to avoid over-identifying with particular beliefs or causes, the only way to find and express real selfhood is through acceptance of the other and participation in social life.
In Canto XXI of "Autumn Journal" MacNeice refers to this need to find true self-expression within a community, one of the sources of the desire to be complete, as the "hope to live / A life beyond the self but self-completing" (CP 144, 69-70), yet this state is always deferred to the future, a goal towards which one must strive but which by its, and our, very nature is unattainable. The closing section of "Autumn Journal" finds new expression for the seemingly antagonistic desires for a whole, self-determined and active selfhood and for active participation in the larger social issues which confront the subject at every turn, a society in which

the individual, no longer squandered

In self-assertion, works with the rest, endowed

With the split vision of a juggler and the quick lock of a taxi,

Where the people are more than a crowd. (CP 152, 77-80)

Caught between the desire to be self-completing and to find wholeness within the community, the speaker longs for an almost utopian society, the poet therefore envisions the individual as the juggler, keeping multiple identities and commitments aloft, and capable, like a taxi, of taking on many "passengers" or identities, assuming mobile subjective modes to fit the shifting needs of self and society. Raymond Williams's comments on this aspect of the existentialist perspective are germane to the argument for blending the process of self-creation with socialization: "the real crisis of the "authentic" and the "unauthentic" is both an individual and a social process. The valuable element in the existentialist emphasis is in the insistence on choice and commitment" (86). Indeed MacNeice goes on to assert the centrality of choice as an integral element in the creation of an authentic individual capable of action:
So sleep in hope of this—but only for a little;
Your hope must wake
While the choice is yours to make,
The mortgage not foreclosed, the offer open. (81-84)

There is an urgency here that momentarily lies dormant beneath the speaker’s doubts as to the efficacy of community-oriented action, an awareness that inaction will impose every bit as static a selfhood as submergence in ideological commitment.4 As Charles Taylor points out, “if authenticity is being true to ourselves, is recovering our own sentiment de l’existence, then perhaps we can only achieve it integrally if we recognize that this sentiment connects us to a wider whole” (91). The speaker of “Autumn Journal” echoes this conviction that the self only exists in the context of others in the closing lines of the poem, where balanced on the brink of a war (which he despises but which is nonetheless justified by inaction being worse), he retains a hope in the future for both his own selfhood and the good of the community:

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

---

4 The notion of the authentic community as one of free individuals exercising individual choice finds its most potent expression in “Donegal Tryptich”: “Once more having entered solitude once more to find communion / With other solitary beings, with the whole race of men” (CP 448, III 20-21).

239
And the equation will come out at last. (97-104)

The outbreak of war serves as a crucial, defining moment through which MacNeice can more accurately gauge the "authentic" response of the self to social upheaval and injustice, and far from adopting an easy slogan or passive subjectivism, he clearly defines the role of the authentic subject as one of decisive action and political obligation – "the die is cast." By choosing personal freedom for himself, the speaker chooses it for all humanity,¹ and must therefore be willing to cross the Rubicon into unknown social and political territory to defend it.

The only real guarantor of personal freedom for MacNeice is the flux of experience, yet this too is fraught with tension and paradox, and requires a shifting response. In "Variation on Heraclitus" MacNeice employs the form of two long sentences with each clause reeling after the other in order to mimic how static systems invariably are unable to keep up with the ebb and flow of life. As Edna Longley points out, "the syntax shaping the poem's form helps to establish a new angle on how the positives of flux might outweigh the negatives, on how the self might escape into its own Becoming" (129). It is precisely the preoccupation with "becoming" an authentic subject which MacNeice addresses in the poem, and one can detect in the opening lines an eschewal of systems reminiscent of the styles of continental existentialists such as Camus and Sartre:

Even the walls are flowing, even the ceiling,

Nor only in terms of physics; the pictures

---

¹ Here we see Sartre's argument for the universality of every human choice working itself out in the poem: "When a man commits himself to anything, fully realizing that he is not only choosing what he will be, but is thereby at the same time a legislator deciding for the whole of mankind—in such a moment a man cannot escape from the sense of complete and profound responsibility" (Kaufman 292).
Bob on each picture rail like floats on a line
While the books on the shelves keep reeling
Their titles out into space. (CP 502, 1-5)

Even the speaker’s self-assurance is sorely tested by the immediacy of this constant flux: “Nor can this now be the chair—the chairplane of a chair— / That I sat in the day that I thought I had made up my mind” (9-10). The dynamic view of the subject’s perception of the world and self which gives rise to MacNeice’s insistence on mirroring flux formally in this poem is also a source of deep anxiety, giving way to a vision of a world where “nothing is standard / And lights are but lit to be drowned in honour and spite of some dark / And vanishing goddess” (12-13). The poem turns at this point into its second sentence, and the speaker assumes a more positive tone, referring to the experience of flux as a liberation from static systems of thought:

No, whatever you say,
Reappearance presumes disappearance, it may not be nice
Or proper or easily analysed not to be static
But none of your slide rules can catch what is sliding so fast. (14-17)

“Nice” and “proper,” the measuring sticks of acceptable conduct, are insufficient reasons to avoid confronting the subject’s ontological dilemma of “none of your slide rules can catch what is sliding so fast.” Reality escapes measurement and analysis, and if the experience of reality and selfhood is an anxious one because of the relentless change surrounding the subject, it must at least be acknowledged since any other method of description fails through systematization:

I just do not want your advice
Nor need you be troubled to pin me down in my room
Since the room and I will escape for I tell you flat:
One cannot live in the same room twice. (19-23)
The closure of these final lines is deliberately “flat” (a pun on “room,” signifier of enervation, and indication of rejection) intimating MacNeice’s belief that the self, although in a constant state of becoming due to context shifts, is never fully realized, and may finally become untenable as a concept. If the individual can find no stable context in which self-definition takes place (“one cannot live in the same room twice”), he or she certainly can avoid interpellation, but only at the cost of accepting instability as a basic feature of consciousness. The response is therefore that of the authentic existential subject, committed to creating a vision of the self fluctuating between the permanence of change and the desire for transcendence, forced to re-create itself at every juncture.

If the authentic subject must reside within this paradoxical situation, then the pressures of ethical responsibility for thoughts and actions attain a primary importance in the individual’s life. Contrary to traditional ethical practice, the subject must create his or her own values out of the myriad possibilities offered by social conventions and individual experience, and then act accordingly. Golomb draws out the implications of this existential ethics: “Authenticity reigns ‘beyond good and evil’; it does not require, nor can it have, ethical rules for the rational justification of actions. Authenticity is a personal, intuitive morality that springs from freedom and spontaneity without any external a priori dictates of Reason, God, or History” (179). Golomb correctly concludes that in the absence of transcendent systems for guidance the subject moves
beyond fixed rules of behaviour, but the assertion that this absence implies an “intuitive morality” ignores the interaction between subject and community influences. Although he recognizes the interpellative force of socialized ethical behaviour, MacNeice pointedly eschews the reductive processes of codified behaviour and understanding in Section III of “The Stygian Banks”:

Yes, let the teacher of ethics
Reduce all acts to selfishness, let the economist
Confuse conditions and causes and the psychologist
Prove and disprove the rose from manure and the scientist
Explain all value away by material fact—
What do I care? It is Spring and it always will be
However the blossoms fall; and however impure
Our human motives, we can sheer off sometimes
On the purity of a tangent. (CP 261, III, 43-51)

MacNeice’s attraction to both pure and “impure” poetry finds new expression in the notion of impure motives, connoting the necessity of recognizing that no single, unadulterated view of the world and self can encompass the rich texture of life, or account for the spontaneous creativity of the pure “tangent,” the decisive break from the narrow rationality of the teacher of ethics, economist, psychologist and scientist. For MacNeice the only viable ethics is one which recognizes and celebrates difference, but which does not embrace an absolute relativism: “Fill your glasses; / There is a distinction between vintages / And heretics must have courage” (55-57). It is through the resistance of the heretic, the practical and philosophical assumption of unorthodoxy,
that an authentic response to the contradictions of conscious life can be made, although this recognition brings with it a despair at ever finding a stable identity able to withstand the angst created by despair of transcending the mortal condition:

There is a despair

Which the animals do not know, it is chiefly exhaustion

When the bull kneels down in the ring; but our despair

Need not exhaust, it is our privilege—

Our paradox—to recognize the insoluble

And going up with an outstretched hand salute it. (57-62)

Despair, for the conscious mind, is envisioned as an enabling force in this passage, a result of the subject’s awareness of the self as unique and mortal. As Golomb points out, “only things-in-themselves are wholly subject to the law of identity...for humans, identity is always something yet to be achieved” (154), and thus this despair is an indicator of hope generated by the process of becoming rather than its end, a source of desire and courage in the face of an indifferent universe. The speaker implies that acknowledging this paradox is the only authentic response to the human condition, and must therefore be the basis for all ethical action undertaken either individually or collectively, since all human beings are subject to it.

MacNeice revisits the concept of the heretic as an authentic ethical agent in the closing lines of the poem, expanding the concept to include all human beings and thus making it a function of consciousness itself:

heretics all

Who unlike anything else that breathes in the world
When feeling pain can be lyrical and despairing
Can choose what we despair of. Glory is what?
We cannot answer in words though every verb is a hint of it
And even Die is a live word. Nor can we answer
In any particular action for each is adulterate coin
However much we may buy with it. \textit{(CP 267, VII, 41-48)}

The element of individual choice is once again present here, and although all human beings must feel pain and experience despair, value is attached to the mode of response and the conception of the cause of this despair. With the stress on “every verb” as an indicator of what “Glory” might mean, the speaker clearly envisions, as in Section III, the elusive “answer” that defies mortality and paradox, however inevitable, as the compelling drive behind existential anguish. Because each “particular action,” like each motive, is impure (“adulterate”), the response of the “free” individual must acknowledge by choosing what he or she despairs of (be it success, immortality, even authentic existence itself) the inevitability of never finding a transcending answer or solution.

This possibility of choice lies at the heart of MacNeice’s vision of freedom for the self, and parallels Sartre’s understanding of relinquishing this ethical responsibility as an act of bad faith, “which consists in being or putting oneself under the illusion that one is not free and cannot do other than one in fact does” (Donnelly 81). The speaker moves on to establish a Platonic response to this ontological dilemma, although it is one qualified by historical change, an understanding that unlike Plato he can only hope for an existence transcending doubt and despair, never realize it:

No answer
Is ours—yet we are unique
In putting the question at all and a false coin
Presumes a true mint somewhere. Your child’s hoop,
Though far from a perfect circle, holds the road
And the road is far from straight, yet like a bee
Can pollinate the towns for the towns though ugly
Have blossom in them somewhere. Far from perfect
Presumes perfection where? A catechism the drums
Asseverate day-long, night-long: Glory is what?
A question!...Now it is Spring. (48-58)

Unlike the exemplars of reason and certainty listed in Section III of the poem, the
speaker uses reason to establish the necessity of accepting existence as an unanswerable
question which, although it “presumes” an answer, can only posit the desire for
perfection (such as Plato’s forms). The authentic response (and this is certainly in the
existentialist tradition) to the question of “where” such perfection could exist is the
paradoxical “catechism” which like spring constantly returns; an awareness of the
 provisionality of all individual and interpersonal formulations of subjectivity and their
 relationship with nature must underlie this authentic response to the paradox of
transcendence/finitude. What escapes this cycle is the endless possibility contextually
mediated by lived experience and the human consciousness of self as imperfect,
fragmented, and unique, a possibility which must be accepted and acted upon by the
ethical agent.
This brings us to the second existentialist concept which resonates throughout MacNeice’s poetry: the absurd. This concept became an enabling one for a number of writers of the period: “To a generation which saw no reason for hope it offered hope without reason. It offered a category—the absurd—in which logical, psychological, philosophical and even social and political difficulties could be encapsulated and it allowed the joy of being alive, in the presence of death, to emerge” (Podhoretz 36). The cynical nihilism exacerbated by the Second World War acted on MacNeice, as it did on Camus, as a catalyst for discovering a conception of the self which did not give in either to individualistic despair or determining ideology. What Terence Brown identifies as MacNeice’s “sceptical vision” is more accurately an expression of the epistemological nihilism\(^6\) prevalent in existentialist thought, while the ethical nihilism I have been tracing – which denies the possibility or authenticity of objective validation of one’s values – allows both writers to embrace the absurd as a valid and productive alternative to such enervating despair. Camus envisions the fundamental split between self and world as the cause of the feeling of absurdity, which is exacerbated by the awareness of an imagined unity: “In a universe suddenly divested of illusions and lights, man feels an alien, a stranger. His exile is without remedy since he is deprived of the memory of a lost home or the hope of a promised land. This divorce between man and his life, the actor and his setting, is properly the feeling of absurdity” (\textit{MS} 13). He makes it clear that the absurd resides neither in human consciousness nor external reality, but in their interaction: “what is absurd is the confrontation of the irrational and the wild longing for clarity whose call echoes in the human heart. The absurd depends as much on man as

\(^6\) Best defined as the impossibility of attaining objective knowledge of the self and/or world.
on the world. For the moment it is all that links them together” (26). The absurd is
generated by the interaction of self and world, and since reality is unresponsive to the
human need for meaning, the feeling of absurdity cannot be overcome. It is founded on
that disbelief in the ability of reason to account for experience and provide stability to
the self which occasioned the crisis of understanding in the first place.

MacNeice’s most elaborate (and prosaic) treatment of the theme of absurdity and
its philosophical ramifications comes in the 1940 poem “Plurality” which
“accommodates abstruse metaphysics (or rather repudiations of metaphysics)” in an
attempt to “salvage value in a philosophical system where flux is paramount and a static
universal impossible” (McDonald 111). Written almost as a formal argument, the poem
nevertheless swings through its rhetoric with a balance and cohesiveness (grounded in
hexameter couplets) that at once ironically mimics the static theorizing he attacks and
encodes the inability of the conscious mind to conceive of a viable alternative: “It is
patent to the eye that cannot face the sun / The smug philosophers lie who say the world
is one; / World is other and other, world is here and there” (CP 243, 1-3). In these
opening lines the speaker posits an existentialist view of the world as incorrigibly other,
“an incongruous universe devoid of the harmony and meaning that ordinarily dwell in
things through the power of an ordering principle allegedly external to our world”
(Golomb 169). This is the recognition of the absurd, intuiting the lack of harmony
between one’s expectation of an ordered, accessible world and the indifference of the
universe. The poem uses Parmenides’ philosophy7 as a negative example of reducing

---

7 Parmenides founded the Eleatic school of philosophers and was noted for the idea that the apparent
motion and changing forms of the universe are in fact manifestations of an unchanging and indivisible
reality.
the flux of life to a suffocating vision in which there is "no movement and no breath"
(6), and difference is reduced to the uniformity of "the modern monist." The attack on
unifying metaphysics continues with a liberal use of identifiably existentialist
terminology:

Eternity is now
And Now is therefore numb, a fact he does not see
Postulating a dumb static identity
Of Essence and Existence which could not fuse without
Banishing to a distance belief along with doubt,
Action along with error, growth along with gaps;
If man is a mere mirror of God, the gods collapse. (18-24)

The intellectual argument here points to the reductive elements of metaphysical
philosophies which make the self a unitary concept, either as a subjective whole or in a
future, transformed state, denying the multiplicity of subjective life and de Beauvoir’s
understanding of ambiguity which posits that "each human being is both an object
among other objects, and at the same time a privileged object in its possession of a
cognizance of its situation" (Mahon 1997, 35). This awareness defines the need for
"belief along with doubt," and the recognition that "the formula fails that fails to make it
clear / That only change prevails" (25-26). The poem moves on to posit a more
positive, constructive vision of how the self, "not to be merged in world" (30), finds
definition against a backdrop of ceaseless change:

World is not like that, world is full of blind
Gulfs across the flat, jags against the mind,
Swollen or diminished according to the dice,

Foaming, never finished, never the same twice.   (37-40)

Here random chance (the dice) rules in a universe that escapes the subject even as he or she attempts to define it, and just as in “Variation on Heraclitus” reality itself is “never the same twice”; there is no stable subject position from which it may be judged. Once again this is the absurd, “the lack of harmony between one’s expectations and behaviour on the one hand, and an indifferent world on the other” (Golomb 182).

The speaker recognizes the allure of metaphysical conceptions of the self, since they hold out the promise of self-transcendence and a higher union for the isolated individual; the rare moments of insight into the possible reality of this state cannot be maintained, however, and remain elusive goals, universals that “must be made and sought but cannot be maintained, / Lost as soon as caught, always to be regained, /

Mainspring of our striving towards perfection” (CP 244, 43-45). Perfection, in view of the ceaseless flux of existence, may be established as a concept by which that existence may be judged, but always remains tantalizingly out of reach:

No, perfection means

Something but must fall unless there intervenes

Between that meaning and the matter it should fill

Time’s revolving hand that never can be still.   (49-52)

If perfection stands as an objective but an unattainable goal, then the goal itself becomes meaningless, and in an immanent world the subject must focus on the way or means as the end: “Which being so and life a ferment, you and I / Can only live by strife in that the living die” (53-54). Thus the speaker acknowledges the desire to “forget / The
means within the end” (63-64), as do the metaphysicians and ideologues, who insist they must “transcend and flout the human span” (64). The only authentic response to this absurd situation, the speaker suggests, is to hold the consciousness of mortality and alienation constantly in view:

Man is surely mad with discontent, he is hurled
By lovely hopes or bad dreams against the world,
Raising a frail scaffold in never-ending flux,
Stubbornly when baffled fumbling the stubborn crux
And so he must continue, raiding the abyss
With aching bone and sinew, conscious of things amiss,
Conscious of guilt and vast inadequacy and the sick
Ego and the broken past and the clock that goes too quick.  (67-74)

This raising of the “frail scaffold in never-ending flux,” in one sense ana logical to the imposition on language of narrative and/or poetic form, resonates noticeably with Camus’ insistence that the absurd hero must face the “constant tension that keeps man face to face with the world, the ordered delirium that urges him to be receptive to everything” (MS 86-87). The blending of strict form and argument with such disturbing phrases as “raiding the abyss” and “aching bone and sinew” illustrates this “ordered delirium” to which the poet submits, while the discrepancy between what he is and what he wishes to be establishes an ontological guilt that cannot be refuted: “Man is guilty because his knowledge and aspirations surpass his actual powers concerning his own existence in particular and all existence in general” (Morano 47). The poem ends on a
cautiously optimistic note, stating that with this awareness of lack comes an attendant ability to perceive joy:

But conscious also of love and the joy of things and the power
Of going beyond and above the limits of the lagging hour,
Conscious of sunlight, conscious of death's inveigling touch,
Not completely conscious but partly—and that is much. (77-80)

To be conscious of one's inability to transcend the self brings with it a power to understand the world from the peculiarly human perspective which accepts finitude and draws strength and joy from the inveterate multiplicity of experience.

In moments of heightened awareness this isolation of the self can be momentarily broken down, as in the poem "Snow," which blends a keen awareness of the separation of the conscious, seeing mind from external reality with the richness of experience and zest for the particular this separation can engender:

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. (CP 30, 1-4)

The poem opens on an epiphanic moment in which the external world viewed at and through the window emblematizes paradox itself ("collateral and incompatible"), a perception engendered by the sudden combination in the speaker's view/awareness of snow and roses. Camus describes this kind of experience in *The Myth of Sisyphus* in a passage that echoes this central experience in "Snow":

252
A step lower and strangeness creeps in: perceiving that the world is 'dense', sensing to what degree a stone is foreign and irreducible to us, with what intensity nature or a landscape can negate us. At the heart of all beauty lies something inhuman, and these hills, the softness of the sky, the outline of these trees at this very minute lose the illusory meaning with which we had clothed them, henceforth more remote than a lost paradise. The primitive hostility of the world rises up to face us across millennia. For a second we cease to understand in it solely the images and designs we had attributed to it beforehand, because henceforth we lack the power to make use of that artifice. The world evades us because it becomes itself again. (20)

It is through the "sudden" contradiction of the snow and roses that the speaker of the poem experiences this strangeness of the world, but whereas Camus' tone is rather disturbing, in "Snow" the experience is one of delight and potential in a world that has been opened up.

The second stanza moves into a further acknowledgement of the world's split from the conscious self, where even the tactile experience of eating a tangerine brings the newly liberated sensation of variety:

World is crazier and more of it than we think,
Incorrigibly plural. I peel and portion
A tangerine and spit the pips and feel
The drunkennesss of things being various. (5-8)
The joy the speaker feels at this new awareness of "things being various" is tempered by the subtly framed knowledge that this alien reality is "crazier than we think" and "incorrigible," beyond the measure of human awareness. Simone de Beauvoir details this type of experience: "My contemplation is an excruciation only because it is also a joy. I cannot appropriate the snow field where I slide. It remains foreign, forbidden, but I take delight in this very effort towards an impossible possession. I experience it as a triumph, not as a defeat" (Mahon 1997, 37). The final stanza continues this delight in the particular, while introducing more explicitly the gulf between the observing consciousness and irreducible particularity of the experience:

And the fire flames with a bubbling sound for world
Is more spiteful and gay than one supposes—
On the tongue on the eyes on the ears in the palms of one's hands—
There is more than glass between the snow and the huge roses. (9-12)

The self becomes physically and intellectually immersed in this experience of plurality, yet the split between self and world remains every bit as irreducible, and the window pane separating the snow and roses comes to signify the mediation of consciousness itself, suggesting an inevitable lapse from heightened awareness and self-transcendence into consciousness of self as isolated and individual. The joy of the experience, and the act of creating the poem itself, however, implies that this isolation of self from world, and the inevitable distance between things, provides the subject immersed in the heightened experience with the ability to understand his alienation from reality as an inspirational, creative aspect of human life.
The tone of surprise emanating from the speaker in "Snow" is taken up in "Mutations," in which the inevitability and desirability of change find expression through the notion of evolutionary, or devolutionary, leaps:

If there has been no spiritual change of kind
Within our species since Cro-Magnon Man
And none is looked for now while the millennia cool,
Yet each of us has known mutations in the mind
When the world jumped and what had been a plan
Dissolved and rivers gushed from what had seemed a pool.

(CP 195, 1-6)

The anthropological diction with which the poem opens, suggesting the evolutionary nature of the subjective, or spiritual, existence of humanity, is undermined by the idea of the quick jump, the tangential reconfiguration of awareness suggested by "mutations in the mind" that signifies personal and historical transformation, and even devolution through the notion of "a plan dissolved." This is envisioned as an experience particular to the individual, yet common to all people as a subjective phenomenon ("yet each of us has known"). The second stanza reaffirms MacNeice's typical mistrust of the a priori and immobile ideals:

For every static world that you or I impose
Upon the real one must crack at times and new
Patterns from new disorders open like a rose
And old assumptions yield to new sensation;
The Stranger in the wings is waiting for his cue,
The fuse is always laid to some annunciation. (7-12)

The "new disorders" arise from the old, each brought together in the symbolism of the rose, paralleling the "cue" of a previously defined narrative and the new prayer of the "annunciation," and binding together the common world of shared experience and tradition with the tangential break that can arise from it. The awareness that reality will always impinge upon the self with an urgency and immediacy that should not be ignored brings with it the "Stranger," the other through whom the subject can effect self-transformation. The annunciation thus takes on a dual aspect: it is used ironically to undermine the belief in any transcendent ideal or redemption which will seal the breach at the core of subjectivity, and as a provisional pronouncement, or creative act, which will necessarily be superseded, and yet retains value through the necessity of its articulation as an element in the process of life. When the third stanza opens with the statement that "surprises keep us living," the speaker is articulating the belief that despite the absurdity inherent in the contradiction between final pronouncements and the relativity of each stage in understanding, the gap between them can be the source of hope which impels desire and change. Surprise itself is fraught with contradiction—"For it is true, surprises break and make"—but it is the transformative power of such mutations that endows being with meaning. Michael Slote argues that this experience of the absurd is "a manifestation of our most advanced and interesting characteristics" and that "it is possible only because we possess a certain kind of insight—the capacity to transcend ourselves in thought" (Donnelly 114). When in the closing lines "the scholar suddenly understands / What he has thought for years" and "the inveterate rake / Finds
for once that his lust is becoming love,” they have undergone the transformation, or
mutation, that is a fundamental part of recognizing the absurd.

Embracing the absurd is also one way in which the subject can avoid solipsism
in order to affirm a more complex view of the relationship between self and world.
Rather than retreating into a vision of subjective experience as wholly internal,
MacNeice uses the lyrical imagery and cryptic syntax of a poem such as “Plant and
Phantom” to express the sheer vigour of the individual’s simultaneous immersion in and
alienation from the world:

Man: a flutter of pages,
Leaves in the Sybil’s cave,
Shadow changing from dawn to twilight,
Murmuration of corn in the wind,
A shaking of hands with hallucinations,
Hobnobbing with ghosts, a pump of blood,
Mirage, a spider dangling
Over chaos and man a chaos. \((CP 159, 1-8)\)

Here the essence of the subject is defined as a riddle, enigmatic to the point that only
chaos and hallucination provide glimpses of the reality of subjectivity. The second
stanza “accepts the logic of solipsism” (Brown 91), suggesting that only through the
conscious will can meaning be established in a detached, “pawky” universe:

Who cheats the pawky Fates
By what he does, not is,
By what he makes, imposing
On flux an architectonic—
Cone of marble, calyx of ice,
Spandrel and buttress, iron
Loops across the void,
Stepping stones in the random. (9-16)

The necessity of “imposing” a narrative of the self on “the void” reflects the existentialist insistence on existence preceding essence, man creating the self through action and the imposition on reality of a tenuous architectural system of knowledge ("architectonic") which, although belied by the void, nevertheless provides the only possible anchor in perpetual flux. The ensuing three stanzas continue to define “man” as a contradiction,

whose life if a bluff, professing
To follow the laws of Nature,
In fact a mad revolt, a mad
Conspiracy and usurpation. (25-28)

The conclusion to the poem posits a rather different conception of the human being as a rebel or desiring subject, however, suggesting that a value which consciousness tries to construct or envelop, symbolized by the transcendent “Word,” is conceived as hidden in the world of fact with which the subject so desperately tries to merge:

Who felt with his hands in empty
Air for the Word and did not
Find it but felt the aura,
Dew on the skin, could not forget it.
Ever since has fumbled, intrigued,
Clambered behind and beyond, and learnt
Words of blessing and cursing, hoping
To find in the end the Word itself. (41-48)

The experience of almost grasping a transcendent principle inherent in life to which the subject has access (such as the heightened awareness of the speaker in “Snow”) is delineated here, a haunting memory or trace of the future that may explain the insatiable desire that human beings feel for the absolute. Recognition of this paradox is the moment of the absurd, held together at the instant when despair and hope merge, and the subject is tantalized by the image of an undivided self.

The emotional commitment to attaining the ideal in “Plant and Phantom” finds a counterbalance in “Explorations,” which compares the ordered, patterned, instinctual lives of animals to the restless flux of the human experience from a more stoic perspective. We are given in the opening stanza “the whale butting through scarps of moving marble, / The tapeworm probing the intestinal darkness, / The swallows drawn collectively to their magnet” (CP 194, 1-3), yet despite humanity’s relation to these creatures there is a fundamental difference brought about by consciousness itself:

“These are our prototypes and yet, / Though we may envy them still, they are merely patterns / To wonder at—and forget” (4-6). The speaker refuses to see any potential transformations in these “patterns,” which can be understood in human terms but from which the subject is alienated. The following three stanzas, which examine the particular ontological situations of the whale, worm and birds in turn, emphasize the fact that their freedom is really servitude to instinct. The whale, for instance, has only
instinct to “plot his graph,” and is thus “merely an appanage of the sea,” while the worm is unable to ascertain its lowly station since it has no consciousness of self: even when given a human pattern and understood in human terms, the instinctual life of animals remains at odds with the speaker’s self-consciousness. Therefore the birds, “enfranchised / citizens of the sky and never at odds with / The season or out of line” (20-21), are nevertheless “no model to us” since “their imputed purpose / Is a foregone design” (24-25). Since the human subject is fundamentally alienated through consciousness from the world, “the strange and hostile character of reality evokes a feeling of separation, division and estrangement” (Berger 96). Once again, however, the recognition of the absurdity of this ontological paradox is not simply enervating, but enables the human individual to establish a coherent yet fluid identity capable of ethical action and independence from instinct or interpellation, never a foregone design, but one to be won as an act of will:

    And ours is not. For we are unique, a conscious
    Hoping and therefore despairing creature, the final
    Anomaly of the world, we can learn no method
    From whales or birds or worms;
    Our end is our own to be won by our own endeavour
    And held on our own terms. (25-30)

Confined to a cycle of desire through an awareness of hope and despair, the human subject is envisioned as an explorer (of both self and other) caught up in an anomalous state of being in which only the act of the individual will establishes the “unique” and “conscious” identity the subject longs for. This poem stands as MacNeice’s most
forceful articulation of the possibility of human independence from ideology, religion
and physical reality itself, positing the human subject as creator, the only true ethical
judge, and ultimately unique in his/her ability to endure both hope and despair, not in
the name of transcending the self, but in the service of life with which the self is
intricately meshed.

I know that you think these phrases highfalutin
And, when not happy, see no claim or use
For staying alive; the quiet hands seduce
Of the god who is god of nothing.

And while I sympathise

With the wish to quit, to make the great refusal,

I feel that such a defeat is also treason,

That deaths like these are lies.

A fire should be left burning

Till it burns itself out:

We shan’t have another chance to dance and shout

Once the flames are silent.

(from “Autumn Journal,” CP 145, XXI 123-134)
Conclusion

"Language destroyed by irrational negation becomes lost in verbal delirium; subject to determinist ideology, it is summed up in the slogan. Halfway between the two lies art."

Albert Camus – The Rebel

By a high star our course is set,
Our end is Life. Put out to sea.

Louis MacNeice – “Thalassa”

It should be clear by now that the process of contextualizing MacNeice’s poetry in terms of its social, intellectual and poetic elements is an open-ended practice from which naught but the most arbitrary closure can be elicited. As Bergonzi has recognized, “the contextualizing of even the simplest poem has no obvious point to end at, once begun” (186). The methodological blending I have utilized in the preceding chapters, characterized by the use of both New Critical and New Historicism approaches, derives in part from the recognition that while texts and writers must be examined with such contexts in mind, the poetry itself inevitably resists systematization and reduction to a mere cultural relativism in which the human subject is no more than an effect of interpellative and historical forces. The critical approach should achieve a balance between sensitivity to the historical/social milieu of the writer in question and attention to the formal characteristics which express these conditions. The various keywords and intellectual contexts I have used as avenues into MacNeice’s poetry are by no means exhaustive, and in combination inevitably lead to those positive disruptions (and even sometimes contradictions) I have noted as an integral feature of his vision of the self and

262
of the social role of the artist. The argument for MacNeice as an existentialist in the preceding chapter does not invalidate the many other ways in which his poetry intersects with various theoretical perspectives, but rather provides the underpinnings of MacNeice's interrogation of subjectivity, and a philosophical grounding. A poet can entertain and elucidate these multiple perspectives,¹ not merely as examples of mystified subject positions to be set aside for the greater claim, but as necessary elements in the formation of a synoptic vision of the world and the possibilities of agency for the human subject.

My analysis reflects the process MacNeice defines as the role of the poet, which can be extended to that of the critic: “The poet does not give you a full and accurate picture of the world nor a full and accurate picture of himself, but he gives you an amalgam which, if successful, represents truthfully his own relation to the world” (MP 197). The success of this “amalgam” is reflected by the balance of emphasis between the perspective of a particular work and its interaction with specific cultural contexts. My critical approach to MacNeice’s work reflects this attitude, both in order to analyze the various modes of expressing selfhood that he employs and to open up a dialogue between the cultural contexts in which he writes and our own. For this reason I have, for instance, allowed certain poems and passages to speak for themselves at the close of each chapter, allowing for a more open-ended critical approach in which my analysis is complemented by the original works being studied. MacNeice himself advocated a more elastic critical method: “Writing about poetry often becomes a parlour game. The critic is more interested in producing a water-tight system of criticism than in the objects

¹ As I noted, for instance, in the chapters on history and politics which at times rely on Marxist interpretation, or those on memory and desire which utilize, among other theories, psychoanalysis.
which are his data" (MP 197). This certainly does not relieve the critic of the duty to produce a coherent, organized argument, but does suggest that any critical approach should expand the possibilities of interpretation rather than bringing to the literature in question (or cultural artifact of any kind) a single, unifying theoretical perspective. The complicated ways in which MacNeice’s poems mesh with and interrogate the culture in which they were produced require an analysis that acknowledges these complexities while, as I have argued, providing a new vision of their philosophical bases. The vigorous self-examination that runs throughout these poems remains to be finalized, just as the subject – whether a social product, free agent, or uneasy blend of each, as I have argued – can never find psychological and social unity or the consummation of desire.

This understanding of how MacNeice envisioned subjective existence, far from asserting the primacy of the individual as the seat of meaning and self-awareness, insists on the constant, fluctuating interaction between social systems and ideologies and the self as agent. MacNeice specifically states his awareness of the necessity of this “compromise” in Modern Poetry:

I have already maintained that major poetry usually implies a belief.
Therefore the fact that beliefs are increasing among poets should conduce to a wider, more fertile, and possibly a major poetry. But, for the poet, any belief, any creed (and beliefs and creeds tend to be a priori) should be compromised with his own individual observation. (201)

Of course, he acknowledges that in order to be of any use to its readers, poetry must “add something to the experience of its public” (200), and so those subjects through which the poet examines the nature of the self and its relationships with the world must

264
establish common ground with a variety of perspectives. The topics I have chosen for each chapter reflect this: memory, history, politics, desire, place, alienation and anomaly are in distinct yet connected ways some of the common sources and symptoms of the formation of the human subject. They also inform much of our poetic and philosophical tradition in the west. MacNeice undoubtedly sought to innovate within these traditions, as he acknowledges in “Poetry To-day”: “All the experimenting poets turned their backs on mummified and theorized tradition, but the more intelligent realized that living tradition is essential to all art, is one of the poles. A poem, to be recognizable, must be traditional; but to be worth recognizing, it must be something new” (SLC 12). So too I hope this examination of his work draws on traditional critical practice in a fresh, provocative fashion, providing multiple avenues into MacNeice’s poetry while retaining the clear vision of the flux and impermanence of the subject that he envisioned as at once a cause of anxiety and the only possibility for human agency.

Tracing the fragmentation and splitting of the speaking and enounced subject as an effect of how we narrativize ourselves forces both poet and critic to examine a nexus of possibilities which are impossible to integrate without oversimplification and reduction. Yet the attempt needs to be made, if only to reaffirm the belief that re-configuring the self is a process through which one can remain an active, fluid subject while deflecting the various pressures towards conformity and bad faith. Interpellation, whether we envision it as a function of memory, history, desire, politics or place, must be acknowledged as a force in the formation of the self. Yet the very existence of change, flux and impermanence in all these areas defines the human being as capable of
resistance and multiple subjective configurations, as MacNeice implies in Canto XXIII of “Autumn Sequel”:

While we—we express ourselves. Ourselves in vain;

Who lose those selves by finding them, it seems,

And lose the others too, in our thick mists

Of introspection or in our own schemes

For their own good. We turn philanthropists

Forgetting human beings. But, although

We do our best, humanity resists. (CP 425, 51-57)

If final truth about the self is inaccessible, then this resistance to the authority of historical images and conceptions of the self is all that the individual has to shield him/herself from over-identification, with either a unitary self or a particular social view. Bringing together incongruous elements (such as individual memory and political history) is, as I have argued, a legitimate, even necessary response to the realization of the relativity of truth itself. As Herman Berger has noted, “the authentic man is one who dares to face the fact that there is no established path for him…. But the authentic man is not a solitary individual who rejects his fellowman. Because of his attitude he cannot avoid conflict with his fellowman, but he accepts this risk because he knows that this conflict is fruitful” (112). Conflict and tension, never resolved in MacNeice’s poetry, are not only the process through which the subject constantly realigns him/herself, but also become a legitimate goal in themselves as accurate reflections of
the human condition, and as the impetus for that constant change and flux without which human societies become stagnant, even totalitarian.

The compelling forces of desire and history certainly imbue the modern subject with the longing for the unity once represented by a Christian heaven, but in MacNeice’s thoroughly agnostic world-view this passion necessarily goes unfulfilled. He therefore advises in “The Stygian Banks” that we must “renounce the temptation / To imbue the world with self and thus blaspheme / All other selves by merging them” (CP 259, II 41-41). This ethical (rather than moral) principle of respecting both the fundamental difference of others and the inevitable alienation of self from world reflects MacNeice’s existentialist point of view. The paradox of desiring unity in the midst of flux and fragmentation is a basic feature of the poet’s vision, and is echoed by Camus in The Rebel: “This passion which lifts the mind above the commonplaces of a dispersed world, from which it nevertheless cannot free itself, is the passion for unity” (262). The emotional and intellectual commitments MacNeice felt for this “passion for unity” deeply affected the forms, styles and contents of his poems, but unable to believe in a system of thought imbrued with teleological claims, he redirected it into “a marriage of light reflected” (CP 259, II 48), a shifting series of often conflicting allegiances and self-definitions. The desire to blend such seemingly inharmonious forces as history, memory, agnosticism and social commitment leads him, at times, simply to replace systemic thought with the multifariousness of experience, erecting another god to worship in its place. MacNeice’s poetry, however, exemplifies so thorough a self-examination that no stable identity, even in the midst of intense social pressures, remains for long, and the Pyrrhic victory of establishing a formal pattern and unity in
language gives way to delight in the knowledge that the self can never, and should never, be wholly inscribed: “Our life being so episodic we are always wanting to hitch our wagons to stars. Which cannot be done. This romantic self-indulgence is in fact a self-abdication, and the Christian paradox — Whoso saveth his life shall lose it — still holds good, in politics and social life, in art, in personal relationships” (SF 21).

As I have demonstrated, MacNeice believed that the “incorrigible” pluralism of things, while constituting subjective fragmentation, enables the subject to participate in a process of interaction (social and individual) that is only limited by death. John Lachs’ comments parallel those MacNeice makes in many of his poems: “The important thing to keep in mind is that personality, like the body, is an active unity, a unity within a constant flux” (96).² It is only through the constant absorption of new ideas, perspectives and stimuli that the poet can retain a paradoxically stable/fluid sense of self, and I would argue that MacNeice’s complex interrogation of the various modes of subjectivity (whatever the context) actually provides the stability through which the flux of experience is filtered. In other words, the means simply become the end. In this way the subject can find a limited freedom from interpellative forces without indulging in narcissistic egotism. This freedom brings with it the responsibility for “purposive intervention(s) into social formations” without “reference to presignifying theories of historical inevitability” (Smith 5). That MacNeice eschewed as much as possible the overarching claims of subjective unity in such theories is evident, since the particularity of every human existence “Cannot be generalized away, / Reduced to bleak analysis / To pointers demonstrating laws” (CP 223, 29-31). He does not imply that such

² Paul Smith echoes this position: “The singular is not necessarily to be conceived of as a unity: to think of it as such would be to posit it as purely the effect of the ideological processes in which it lives” (6).
generalizing laws do not exist or impact the formation of the human subject in various ways, merely the necessity of questioning and undermining at every opportunity modes of hegemony and resistance, especially those obeyed by oneself. This theoretical perspective is echoed by many contemporary critics and social theorists, particularly feminists such as Jane Gallop whose offensive against rigid, socially imposed identities embraces the “alien and constraining” nature of selfhood as not only inevitable, but enabling for the active subject: “I do not seek some liberation from identity. That would lead to another form of paralysis – the oceanic passivity of undifferentiation. Identity must be continually assumed and immediately called into question” (xii). Thus when MacNeice insists that people are “Not mere effects of a crude cause / But of themselves significant” (CP 224, 33-34), he marks out the continual surge towards a stable identity as the right of every human being. To understand the human subject merely in terms of his or her socialization and/or psychology is to convert both the self and other into mere objects or effects.

In a century rife with political violence and social intolerance, MacNeice’s voice stands out as one of those which defied the rigorous systematization of authority, seeking a more humane balance between the desires of the self for unity (and often submergence in ideology) and the isolation inherent in the immersion of the self in fragmentation. His reference to Pontius Pilate in the opening lines of The Strings Are False iterates the anxiety the poet (and many others) felt at recognizing the fundamental shift in perception of self and world attendant with disbelief in religion and all other socially imposed systems: “So what? This modern equivalent of Pilate’s ‘What is truth?’ comes often now to our lips and only too pathy, we too being much of the time
cynical and with as good reason as any old procurator” (17). It is not this cynicism which permeates MacNeice’s poetry, however, and the cultural significance of his vision of subjectivity resides less in diagnosing the malady than in celebrating the possibilities of perception which fluidity and relativity open up. Thus in the dedicatory poem to *Holes in the Sky* he answers the forces of cynicism, time, death and authority with a belief in the legitimacy of various perspectives:

What is truth? Says Pilate,

Waits for no answer;

Double your stakes, says the clock

To the ageing dancer;

Double the guard, says Authority,

Treble the bars;

Holes in the sky, says the child

Scanning the stars.  (CP 215)

One of MacNeice’s legacies in his poetry is the necessity of belief in the possibilities of agency for the subject through which socially directed action can be achieved, and the necessity also of integrating beliefs into his poetry, not in order to convince or instruct, but to connect with the larger social arena shared by his readers: “It is not the absolute, or objective, validity of a belief that vindicates poetry; it is a gross over-simplification to maintain that a right belief makes a poem good and a wrong belief makes a poem bad” (*PWBY* 231). As I have argued in the previous chapter, MacNeice’s beliefs are more akin with existentialism than the liberal humanism or disenchanted classicism with which he has most often been identified. His “faith” resides more in the journey the
individual takes in life rather than the purity of a logical summary, as he suggests in "Autumn Sequel": "The Quest goes on and we must still ask why / We are alive, though no one man has met / A full or lucid answer" (CP 395, XVI 39-41). The use of "we" is significant, for as Camus points out in The Rebel, "the first progressive step for a mind overwhelmed by the strangeness of things is to realize that this feeling of strangeness is shared with all men [and women] and that human reality, in its entirety, suffers from the distance which separates it from the rest of the universe" (22). For this reason alone continuing to read and revise our understanding of MacNeice's poetry is important — especially in a culture such as our own that is increasingly permeated by political, social, and intellectual balkanization — since it demonstrates the possibility of solidarity without the degradation of specific human beings into mere objects.

Perhaps this is why MacNeice insisted that poetry remains "one of the chief embodiments of human dignity" (MP 205), as it can symbolize both the freedom of the human subject and his or her concomitant need to participate in the lives of various others: those constructed within the individual's psyche and those real others through whom the value of all communication is mediated. The celebration of flux and the multiplicity of experience, the acknowledgement of the complex influences on the formation of the human subject of personal and social history, and the ethical determination to resist interpellation but continue to interact in the social life of the community remain MacNeice's testament to posterity.

Coda

Maybe we knew each other better

When the night was young and unrepeated

271
And the moon stood still over Jericho.

So much for the past; in the present
There are moments caught between heart-beats
When maybe we know each other better.

But what is that clinking in the darkness?
Maybe we shall know each other better
When the tunnels meet beneath the mountain.    (CP 546)
Bibliography


278


