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**The Poetics of Impurity:
Louis MacNeice, Writing and the Thirties.**

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Summary of Thesis.

The Poetics of Impurity: Louis MacNeice, Writing and the Thirties.

This thesis argues that the notion of 'impurity' may be taken as a model for paradigms in MacNeice's texts which are subjected to undercutting and transgression, by virtue of their presumed identity, their context, and by the workings of the text. This impurity challenges notions of MacNeice as an exponent of 'common-sense' empiricism.

Chapter One examines notions of purity and impurity as promoted by MacNeice in the thirties. MacNeice's exposition in *Modern Poetry* is shown to be contradictory. Comparison with the figure of Orwell indicates that *Modern Poetry*, and its promotion of common-sense 'experience' or 'life', is an unreliable guide to MacNeice's thirties work.

Chapter Two examines notions of 'History' in the thirties, and of MacNeice's treatment of time in a number of poems. MacNeice's poems demonstrate a conception of time-as-difference, which is shown to be historically constructed within 'static' or 'imaginary' frames of reference. These frames of reference are seen to be imperiled by historical circumstances

Chapter Three analyses MacNeice's presentation of representation in, and of, society in the thirties. Attention is paid to poems dealing with problems of representation and of observation within a given social context, particularly that of consumer culture.

Chapter Four examines MacNeice's examination of the subject or 'I' of the thirties. I argue that MacNeice evidences a scepticism towards the claims of the thinking, acting, subject, inhabited as it is by the dominance of text or 'writing' within history, and the indeterminacies this engenders.

Chapter Five offers a reading of *Autumn Journal* which emphasises MacNeice's attention to the processes of the construction of 'unreliable' fictions. Rather than *asserting* the values of liberal humanism in the poem, it is seen to question the implications of such an act itself. The poem is shown to question the notion of the possibility of the 'honesty' of the subject which is often attributed to MacNeice.

Chapter Six argues for the necessity of further re-examination of 'Louis MacNeice, writing and the thirties' and the wider implications of 'impurity'.

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Chapter One

Introduction: Impurity and the Thirties.

'My generation was brought up to regard luxury from an aesthetic standpoint. Since the War, people don't seem to feel that any more. Too often they are merely gross. They take their pleasures coarsely, don't you find? At times, one feels guilty, oneself, with so much unemployment and distress everywhere'.

Christopher Isherwood¹

'Oh I do hope they'll make a revolution!' Isabel exclaimed. 'I should delight in seeing a revolution.' 'Let me see,' said her uncle, with humorous intention; 'I forget whether you're on the side of the old or on the side of the new. I've heard you take such opposite views.'

'I'm on the side of both. I guess I'm a little on the side of everything. In a revolution...I think I should be a high, proud loyalist. One sympathizes more with them, and they've a chance to behave so exquisitely. I mean so picturesquely.'

Henry James²

My friends had been writing for years about guns and frontiers and factories, about the 'facts' of psychology, politics, science, economics, but the fact of war made their writing seem as remote as the pleasure dome in Xanadu. For war spares neither the poetry of Xanadu nor the poetry of pylons...both these kinds of poetry stand or fall together.

Louis MacNeice³

In 1938 Louis MacNeice made 'a plea for *impure* poetry, that is, for poetry conditioned by the poet's life and the world around him'.⁴ This study seeks to analyse the implications of such a declaration, its consequences for the reading of MacNeice's texts, and for the assessment of his response to the thirties. In particular, it will examine how different notions of 'impurity' can be found in, and applied to, MacNeice's work. As a consequence, it will examine how different meanings can be assigned to the notion of 'writing', and how this may modify our sense of the literature of the thirties.

Perhaps the most obvious meaning which is suggested by 'a poetry conditioned by the poet's life and the world around him' is an attitude which distrusts various kinds of artifice, style or form in preference to a poetry which is in vivid contact with the real via communication or reference. This is a poetry fully informed by the importance of 'experience'; it is relevant, above all, to 'life'. Here, 'purity' is associated with form, its opposite with 'content' and by extension 'the world'. As we shall see, these categories of purity and impurity are not as stable as one might think or, perhaps, wish. Moreover, this association of the categories of 'purity' and 'form', 'impurity' and 'content' only complicates such categories further. In examining these various complications this study does not aim to recuperate some notion of 'purity' in the reading of MacNeice's texts. In fact it seeks the reverse, in arguing for the continuing importance of the category of 'impurity' in an understanding of MacNeice's work of the thirties. However, in making this extension I will argue for the importance of aspects of the text which might be associated with 'purity' of various kinds, which have been underrated in existing studies of MacNeice's work. This project will necessarily involve consideration of certain areas which MacNeice is often thought to have ignored or rejected. One consequence of this examination, I will argue, is the problematization of a sense of impurity as a kind of unmediated formlessness which can be easily equated with raw 'experience'. Equally, the notion of MacNeice as a writer who unequivocally embraces the role of 'ordinary-man-in-the-street', and endorses the perspective of commonsense-empiricism will be questioned. Such an identity, I will argue, significantly damages our understanding of MacNeice's involvement in the thirties. However, since it is this

persona which is most often associated with 'impurity' in MacNeice's work, this is the identity with which we will begin our examination.

Perspectives: Writing the Thirties.

Perhaps the best way of understanding the various meanings of 'impurity' is through what may be meant by 'purity' and its implications for attendant notions of 'artifice', 'style', or most productively 'form', and their opposites. Immediately, however, we run into difficulties, as the following remarks by Christopher Norris indicate:

Except in the most obvious aspect - the shape of the words on the page - it is hard to attach any clear meaning to the idea of poetic 'form'. This concept may indeed be a species of enabling fiction, having more to do with the interpretative rage for order than with anything objectively 'there' in the text. Or it may be the product...of a close 'dialectic interplay' between poem and reading, such that the poem takes on a precarious unity of form in answer to the subtle teasing-out of unifying themes and figures. Criticism would then be caught up in a process of aesthetic mystification whereby its own desire for unity and closure was ceaselessly confirmed in the act of reading.⁵

To this one should add that the elusive 'idea of poetic form' is itself subject to change over literary periods. 'Form' is defined and interpreted differently, awarded different degrees of importance, placed within different conceptual oppositions, as it figures within different frameworks of reading and writing. It is, perhaps, this instability, rather than its status as 'enabling fiction' which must lead always and necessarily towards notions of 'unity', 'coherence' and 'closure', as Norris suggests, which accounts for the elusive quality of the concept. In beginning our discussion, therefore, it is necessary to consider some of the ways in which such a concept was seen to operate within the literary context of the thirties.

It seems almost inevitable that among the many features of the literary text, and its production, undergoing modification by new British writers in the thirties were ideas about literary form. Such changes appear all the more pronounced by the attention given to this issue by the period's immediate forbears. Comparing work in the thirties with the daring innovations of modernism would indicate that thirties writers began to grant 'form' a different status in their writing, moreover that they began to think of it

differently, perhaps less adequately. If an important aspect of modernism was a re-examination of the possibilities adhering in the formal properties of the text, thirties writers became concerned with what seemed to lie 'outside' it. Many concluded, of course, that any properly valid text must have a significance beyond the playground of the signifier, or what Peter Widdowson has called 'the impact of modernist formal experimentation'.⁶ Instead, it must allow for the 'strict and adult' conditions of the individual sanctioned by involvement in 'the great without' of society, politics, and history.⁷ This is this sense which informs, for instance, David Lodge's description of a thirties 'mode' of writing as 'characteristically, antimodernist, realistic, readerly and metonymic'.⁸ For Terry Eagleton, too, the concern with what seemed to be the 'outside' of literature in the period of 'Auden and Orwell' put 'realism...firmly back in the saddle'. He continues: 'what Marxist criticism England could produce occurred in this period following the missed moment of modernism, when the heights of criticism had already been largely captured by the political right or liberal centre'.⁹ With the thirties, it seems, in came history, realism and discursive writing, and out went form.

But history, literary and otherwise, imposes many kinds of limitations, not all of which need be immediately apparent. It can now be suggested that modernism should not be read, as it often was, as the last ditch affirmation of bourgeois individualism, but the radical disruption and exposure of the assumptions underlying bourgeois ideology.¹⁰ In their apparent rejection of modernism, therefore, many thirties writers now run the risk of being visited by a literary-historical irony. Should we read the thirties as a period in which essentially bourgeois literary conventions were re-settled and re-asserted, we might well be tempted to view vulgar Marxism, realism, cumbersome political allegory, quasi-surrealism, as signs of the British bourgeoisie labouring anew to come to terms with its own contradictions, and patching itself up in ideological closure. Consequently, those writers who hoped to diagnose capitalism's, or western civilization's, crisis may now in one sense seem to have been writing against themselves. Any authentic challenge they hoped to make against this system was timidly contained within the ideological conventions that underwrote it. Clearly this analysis assumes that all

thirties writers were blind to the innovations of modernism and its implications. In addition, it assumes that the only effective way of accommodating any socio-political reality is that prescribed by modernist writing, high modernist writing at that. Both these notions, of course, can be challenged. The critique, however, is useful if it calls into question the validity of the declared aims of the thirties in dismissing modernism in favour of 'history' and social consciousness, and the resultant espousal of an unsophisticated approach to this newly self-appointed role.

In making this critique, we should be cautious of accepting easy 'exceptions' to the rule. Take Auden, for instance, a central figure of the decade, yet often assumed to transcend the limitations and excesses of this cultural environment. Whatever the merits of Auden's texts, they cannot wholly escape the charge of complicity with the naiveties of the period, as the following remarks by Bernard Bergonzi indicate:

At a time of world economic depression there was something re-assuring in Auden's calm demonstration, mediated as much by style as by content, that reality was intelligible, and could be studied like a map or a catalogue, or seen in temporal terms as an inexorable historical process. Hence the instant appeal of the classificatory vision, the reliance on definite articles and precise if unexpected adjectives, which placed and limited their subjects.¹¹

Again, whatever the merits of Auden's texts, one could argue that they contributed forcefully to the period's anomalies, in its reading and imitation of these texts. This is to sketch a cultural phenomenon, suggesting that in writing out of and 'to' his period Auden was gravely *periodized*. And rather than seeing his work as just encouraging a view which artificially 'limited' or allowed some comforting but illusory control over the historical moment, one could argue that readers and imitators of these texts committed themselves to what Walter Benjamin considered the characteristic feature of, in fact, a *fascist* cultural politics: instead of politicizing the aesthetic, they aestheticized the political.¹²

Perhaps, however, we can offer a real exception to these difficulties in the figure of Louis MacNeice. Here is a writer who overtly eschewed the programmes of high modernism, yet always steered clear of wholesale submission to the necessities of the period. As Samuel Hynes puts it:

Of the poets of his generation, MacNeice was the most isolated, and the least political. He was never involved in movements, and he remained outside the political-literary cohorts of the period...Living in the time that he did, he accepted left politics as necessary, but commitment went against his nature.¹³

Because of this stealthy avoidance, MacNeice was able to become 'a celebrant of ordinary things', a proponent of 'the pleasure of simply living', in which 'his self-proclaimed role of common man was a kind of substitute for political commitment, a way of being a-political with a good heart' (p. 295). This strategy, one might argue, paid off. MacNeice evaded the traps of politically-motivated writing, and its naive dismissal of literary form. In its place he presents something much more valuable - a celebration of the ordinary, the authentic, the honest. This achievement also stands against the obfuscations and obscurities of modernist formalism, providing a middle-ground in touch with the richness and complexity of 'life' and 'experience'. This is all the more rich because it is an experience informed by a wider public world of history and citizenship, always firmly anchored in the perspective of the empirical subject. Moreover, it is always, however painful to the subject and others, honest.

It is, perhaps, this quality of honesty which lies behind Hynes's coupling of MacNeice with Orwell towards the end of his study (p. 367). In this light Eagleton's Auden-Orwell couple might be replaced by MacNeice-Orwell, in a way which pays more attention and accords reverence to this redemptive sincerity. This is a sincerity which does not depend on the political motivations of a communicative 'realism' but is a straightforward empiricism, a lonely truth-telling, grown more valuable with the course of the years. Certainly this is a view endorsed by another commentator on MacNeice:

He [MacNeice] was not only amused, but, like Orwell, frightened by the surrender of the intellectual to totalitarian habits of mind, to strategic imperatives.

MacNeice, like Orwell, honestly faces the difficulty of eliminating bourgeois reflexes.

MacNeice's retrospect on Spain [like Orwell's] fastens on the gap between the perceptions of idealistic or prejudiced outsiders and the actual complexity of the conflict.

Just as Orwell...sees Spain as a violent reproach to the 'deep sleep' of England, so MacNeice's refrain proclaims the need to wake up, and to admit the voice of conscience!¹⁴

To the other affinities he finds between MacNeice and Orwell, Hynes might have added outrage at the propagandist violation of language.

MacNeice frankly acknowledges his class status, Orwell's *sine qua non*:

Autumn Journal strikes an Orwellian blow 'for democratic socialism', or at least for the political wing of liberal humanism...¹⁵

These remarks, from Edna Longley's recent work on MacNeice, cast MacNeice as prominent poetic equivalent to Orwell. That is, as one who in resisting an imputed 'surrender of the intellect' to totalitarianism 'honestly faces' the 'actual complexity' of 'frankly acknowledging' his 'outrage at the propagandist violation' of 'Orwellian democratic Socialism'. This is a view of MacNeice which I want to challenge. It is not the comparison *per se* that I want to dispute, so much as the sense of MacNeice's poems which allow it. This is a sense of MacNeice as a writer embracing and promoting, above all, a deeply held empiricism. It is manifested, in the simplest terms, through a supposed commitment to 'experience', and its honest description. This commitment is assumed to demand a subordination of 'form' or 'textuality' within a view of language and the text as a more or less transparent vehicle of a more or less unmediated experience. Paradoxically, in arguing for a different view of MacNeice I can best begin with a brief analysis of the figure of Orwell, and the limitations to which such a figure is subject.

Honest Louis? MacNeice, *Modern Poetry*, and 'Aestheticism'.

In a discussion of George Orwell's experience in the thirties Raymond Williams has offered some particularly instructive insights into the problems of writing during the period. Williams presents Orwell as a figure expelled from his class by conscience, yet still adhering to many of the values inscribed within that class. The task of constructing a new social identity 'outside' the dominant ideology is complicated by the absence of clearly defined principles for doing so. It is, moreover, complicated by the need to reconcile this new position with the wish to be 'a writer', indeed to use writing as part

of this self-definition, together with the necessary consideration of what kind of texts such a writer should produce. This last concern is the most interesting for our discussion.

In Orwell's musings on this new role the issue of 'Aestheticism', Williams argues, featured prominently, as the following extract from the retrospective piece 'Writers and Leviathan' demonstrates:

The invasion of literature by politics was bound to happen. It must have happened...because we have developed a sort of compunction which our grandparents did not have, an awareness of the enormous injustice and misery of the world, and a guilt-stricken feeling that one ought to be doing something about it, which makes a purely aesthetic attitude to life impossible.¹⁶

The notion presented in this piece of the 'invasion' by politics into a 'natural' pre-political self is sometimes seen as a definitive one among thirties writers, both during and after the period.¹⁷ However, the odd thing about this passage, as Williams points out, is the assumption that this situation is original:

Reading Orwell's account quickly, one might never remember the English novelists from Dickens and Elizabeth Gaskell to George Eliot and Hardy: those contemporaries of 'our grandparents' who were indeed aware of 'the enormous injustice and misery of the world' and who in different ways made literature from just this experience. There is nothing especially new about social awareness in writers, and indeed in the nineteenth century it had been widespread and growing, especially among the novelists. (pp. 35-36)

Williams implies, indeed, that the gap between the 'aesthetic' and the 'socially aware' was not solely the product of the thirties burgeoning social conscience, but had its roots in the 'important quarrel between James and Wells - between a composed, pure, essentially passive art, and new kinds of projected, committed, essentially purposive writing'. Within this 'pure' art, Williams notes disapprovingly:

Not only was social experience seen as content and literature as form; also, and more dangerously, social experience was seen as only general and abstract, with the result that the definition of literary content was itself narrowed to an emphasis on abstracted 'personal relationships'. (p. 36)

Within this model, literature is removed from the abstract 'content' of social experience, but is not itself entirely 'formal'. Instead it supplies its own kind of content, distinct from that of social experience. This content finds its best expression in the valorization

of asocial 'personal relationships'. This situation, Williams argues, had important parallels in Orwell's sense of the writing which preceded the thirties. Orwell identified this 'Jamesian' concept of literature as an abnegation of responsibility, even a kind of complicity by default. As Williams puts it:

The 'aesthetic attitude towards life' was a displaced consciousness relating to one of many possible artistic decisions but above all related to a version of society: not an artistic consciousness but a disguised social consciousness, in which the real connections and involvements with others could be plausibly overlooked and then in effect ratified: a definition of 'being a writer' which excluded social experience and social concern. (p. 37)

Williams's identification and discussion of the division between the 'aesthetic' and the 'purposeful', or the *dulce* versus the *utile*, is an acute criticism of the obvious tendency for thirties writers to think and write as though this difficult relation between the text and social reality existed for their age exclusively. It is as though 'politics' was their own discovery, or invention. In fact, Williams's analysis of the problem could be traced as least as far back as the preface to the *Lyrical Ballads*, leading up through Arnold's 'The Study of Poetry', even allowing, that is, for the particular configuration of the problem that Williams finds in the 'James/Wells debate'.

But the perspective should also be narrowed, for if this debate can be seen as one such configuration of a larger literary and historical contest, so too can the particular problems and analyses of the thirties. Here Orwell's self-enclosed myopia is itself significant. One might be tempted to identify the specificity of such problems primarily in terms of the particular social pressures that thirties writers encountered: the General Strike, the Slump, the rise of Hitler, the Spanish Civil war. Although such issues were certainly sometimes agonizingly pressing, such an identification would make us subject to a myopia more damaging than thirties writers were ever guilty of. It assumes, on the one hand, that the issues generated by such historical conditions (Class conflict, Fascism as the last stage of Capitalism, for instance) were such that events like the Great War and its two million British dead were relegated to minor historical hiccups, which no one really had to worry over too much - a prelude, as it were, to the big problems. Modernism, of course, took sharp notice of this occurrence, and thirties

writers remained determinedly conscious of it.¹⁸ It also assumes that the precursors to thirties writers were of slight interest. This would obscure the propensity of writers like Orwell, who lacked a clear sense of literary direction, to define themselves *against* what had gone before. Faced with the need to 'make it new' from a new point of view, 'Aestheticism' became an icon or cultural marker, even an argumentative strategy, in the hope of defining this sense of direction. Unsure about what precisely was to be done, one could at least be comparatively sure about what should *not* be done, as a means to sketching out new projects and values. The paradox of this situation, however, is that in their identification, and in the nature of their understanding of certain aspects of modernism, some thirties writers had already marked out a position. It was a position inhabited by various assumptions and commitments which led inevitably to a misunderstanding of the project and possibilities of modernism, which in turn limited their sense of its importance.

As indicated, this identification paid close attention to the status given to form, also to the precedence granted to language and its relation to experience. Form, it was assumed, had been grossly over-valued. The obscure, indulgent, incomprehensible preoccupations of what had gone before needed to be replaced by new priorities. To return to Williams: 'Language, characteristically, is taken to be an agent rather than a source of experience. Or...content is taken to precede language, and the writer can then choose whether to reveal content directly or to work with words for their own sake' (p. 30). Thus stated, there cannot be much of a choice. These assumptions find their fullest expression in Orwell's egregious 'Politics and the English Language'.¹⁹ In 'Why I Write' he describes the dangerous aberration in childhood and adolescence from 'a mere description of what I was doing and the things I saw' to the risky 'joy of mere words, i.e. the sounds and associations of words'.²⁰ Later he accused certain writers of never progressing beyond this indulgence: 'In "cultured" circles art-for-arts-saking extended practically to a worship of the meaningless. Literature was supposed to consist solely in the manipulation of words'.²¹ In this analysis, any formal innovation, or break with the paradigms of classic realism, is simply a kind of foolish play.²² We

can assume that Orwell saw himself breaking out of these circumstances. In doing so, he sought a kind of mimeticism where writing was meaningful because its words were pulled out of, and re-submitted to, a social and political context. Words are charged with meaning (an unOrwellian sentiment, granted) by the way in which they faithfully represent, act in and contribute to this context.

What Orwell failed to appreciate, however, was the complexity of the relation between his writing and this world.²² Examining his 'observation' of northern working class communities, Williams notes:

Here the political point *is* the literary point. What is created in the book is an isolated independent observer and the objects of his observation. Intermediate characters and experiences which do not form part of this world - this structure of feeling - are simply omitted. What is left in is 'documentary' enough, but the process of selection and organization is a literary act: the character of the observer is as real, and yet created, as the real and yet created world he so powerfully describes.

All of Orwell's writing until 1937 is, then, a series of works and experiments around a common problem. Instead of dividing them into 'fiction' and 'documentaries' we should see them as sketches towards the creation of his most successful character, 'Orwell'. (p. 52)

This 'Orwell' is the 'successful impersonation of the plain man who bumps into experience in an unmediated way and is simply telling the truth about it'.²³ Authentic, Common-sensical, rigourously empirical: the ordinary-man-in-the-street, or in Bolton, or Spain, or Burma, or Oceania offering us the truths of an uninspected experience through a transparent text; 'Honest George' as he has been dubbed - the real thing.²⁴ The point for our discussion is not how Orwell, within his discourse, consciously omits or suppresses information in a deliberate attempt to mislead or misinform in his degree-zero style. On this score one should say that although Orwell was among the most successful, or unsuccessful if you like, of such writers, he was by no means alone in this role during the thirties, and by no means consciously duplicitous, having important truths to tell, even though we might now say that such truths could be no more than partial. Neither was Orwell exclusively a 'documentary' or 'realist' writer. Instead, we should consider the discourse which the character 'Orwell' practised as containing inevitable limitations, obfuscations, disguises, of which both writer and reader can be unaware. What Williams's comments imply, of course, is that in seeking

unproblematically to escape what seemed like the sterile and unproductive space of 'mere words' writers like Orwell only led themselves more deeply into the conditions of language and of discourses within history. It's not just that Orwell was so wrong about form, but that this led him to be significantly wrong about history, and the problems of writing about history. If 'Aestheticism' was a 'displaced consciousness...above all related to a version of society' one might venture to say that this kind of social writing, with its unintended entrapment in the conditions of language and of the text, was a displaced aestheticism.

In this account, Orwell seems less an uncompromising maverick of the thirties than a writer sharing with others some of the period's worst oversimplifications and mystifications. True, he resisted many of the naive political formulas of the period. However, in his commitment to this rugged empiricism, precisely that feature which is cited as a countermeasure to these formulas, he demonstrates a lack of awareness of the conditions of the text which is just as damaging. The text, that is to say, infiltrates those areas where Orwell assumes it to be all but absent. At the same time a fuller knowledge of the activity of the text is withheld, because this knowledge lies in an area always outside the scope of his investigation, even though it remains crucial to this investigation.

Clearly in such a discussion one should be cautious of lumping together writers of one period in an attempt to mark out general conditions of literary production.

However, as Valentine Cunningham has pointed out, a sense of a rigid 'either/or' separation between form and content did make a come-back during the thirties:

They held more or less conventional and commonsensical views of language, and so of texts, as being simply mirrors on to reality. The world was antecedent to, and more important than, the word, and words had better not stand too much in the light. The plainer, the more revelatory the linguistic medium and the more like the most naturalistic of nineteenth-century fiction the novel, the better. Eugene Jolas's 'revolution of the word' was just 'mumbo-jumbo', an irrationalist's racket.²⁵

Surprisingly, the 'they' that Cunningham describes is not Spender, Auden, Orwell, MacNeice. It is orthodox Marxist criticism, rejecting a set of practices which, he notes,

can be traced back to Mallarmé and Rimbaud. In many ways Cunningham's work is concerned with challenging readings of the thirties which rely on this kind of oversimplification, and which identify it as the characteristic feature of the period. Instead of a rigid separation of signifier and signified, text and context, he argues for attention to (con)texts within the writing of the period, where 'all texts and contexts [are] thought of as tending to lose their separate identities, collapsing purposefully into each other' (p. 1). This contention is supported by the notion that 'a period of history and its literature are, like a language, most realistically to be seen as a sign-system, or set of sign-systems, of signifying practices, composing a structural and structured whole' (p. 1). This is, without question, an exciting way of reading the thirties, indeed of any literary period. However, what it can obscure is the propensity of thirties writers to accept these communal sign-systems during the period without any recognition that they *were* sign-systems. This myopia extends as much to the political mythologies of the thirties as it does to the empiricism of Orwell. It is not necessarily that they employed the same kind of sign system, but that both remained unaware of their world-view *as* sign-system. This lack of awareness can be gleaned from the fact that the purposeful collapsing of form and content for which Cunningham argues, where neither is subordinated to the other, is precisely that which Orwell resists. In Orwell's conception of the text and its execution 'form' is subordinated to, not mixed in with, content. This subordination as 'an agent of experience' aims at the elimination of form, rather than its exploitation. A particular sign-system emerges it seems (empiricism); which is in part committed to notions that forbid any sense of something like a 'sign-system' existing. Indeed, views are promoted which militate against the recognition of any such system.

It is at this point that I would argue for the crucial difference of MacNeice from Orwell, and the strain in thirties thinking and writing that he might be taken to represent. My contention is that although MacNeice did enter into these debates with a kind of 'Orwellian' character, this character forms only part of his poetic project during the thirties. The remainder of this project is concerned, first, with the *rigorous* inspection of such a character by attention to issues which are commonly assumed to lie outside

its scope; and secondly, with attention to these issues (representation, textuality, temporality, subjectivity) in their own right. MacNeice's attention, however, cannot be examined without first understanding its provenance, particularly since such a provenance must be established before it, and its assumptions, can be understood to be under attack. It would be wrong to suggest, therefore, that the identification of MacNeice as a poet of 'common-sense' is entirely groundless. First, because this identification has been made since the earliest commentaries.²⁶ Second, because it was a role that MacNeice himself consciously promoted in the thirties. But it would be equally wrong to argue that MacNeice is *only* a poet of common-sense. To do so is to miss half the story, to miss the most important half, which, for example, has been hinted at by George Fraser's acute sense of MacNeice's 'evasive honesty'.²⁷ Yet because the latter half depends on the former, and because necessary and important clues to this 'other' MacNeice can only be found in this first MacNeice, we must take account of this character, and his promotion by MacNeice.

'When *Modern Poetry* was first published in 1938' Walter Allen has written, 'it had all the appearances of a manifesto, even of propaganda'.²⁸ The thirties, as we are well aware, was a time for the reading and writing of manifestos, literary and otherwise.²⁹ But unlike the previously cocksure, brashly cryptic statements of purpose by, say, the Imagists or Surrealists, MacNeice's text offers itself as a level-headed, democratically demystifying assertion of the values, and value, of the ordinary citizen: a citizen to be represented *in* a poetry written *for* this ideal reader. True, there are some obvious divisions within the essay: between, for instance, a desire to break with the apparently exclusive, elitist and self-absorbed canons of the literary text, whilst maintaining the authority invested in such canons. Primarily though, the argument seeks a 'going over' of the privileged, capable intelligence from the confinements of class to the voice of contemporary society, and the voicing of its concerns. A man speaking to men, in fact; but also a man speaking *against* his own class identity. In this speech the critical faculty bred for the support of such an identity is turned against the privileges and limitations of this class: Hence the classic wisdom of the Greeks is turned upon the

aberrations of nineteenth and early twentieth century 'aestheticism': 'The greek poet of the fifth century B.C. wrote his poems as a member of a city-state who took as much part as most people in the activities of the community and who shared with that community a certain morality, a certain number of social and aesthetic preferences, a nucleus of religious belief'.³⁰ Such an awareness can be seen in certain critical values, MacNeice goes on to argue: 'none would have denied that it is part of a poet's legitimate business to say what he thinks are the best or the next best goods for man, or, in Matthew Arnold's words, to criticize life' (p. 2). Behind such an assertion is, of course, both a tacit rejection of aestheticism, and an attempt to legitimate a discursive, mimetic, and didactic verse where there might be doubt as to whether such writing could be allowed the status of poetry, or whether it was not in fact just 'propaganda'. However, also written into such a paradigm is a social programme: the poet was part of an 'organic' community because there was an organic community for him to be part of - citizenship is presented as a shared activity as opposed to the pursuits of atomistic fragmentary individuals, the social waste land of an isolated selfhood. Hence MacNeice's double tale of social and textual alienation, deriving from the poet's estrangement from this lost organic social body:

For this reason poets and artists developed the doctrine of Art for Art's sake. The community did not appear to need them, so, tit for tat, they did not need the community. This being granted, it was no longer necessary or even desirable to make one's poetry intelligible to the community...Ignoring the fact that all words are products of human life but recognizing that all life is essentially life within communities, they set out to exclude as much as possible of this life from their poetry, hoping that the words remaining would not betray their origin. Parnassianism and Symbolism in France, the poetry of the nineties in England, and, later, Imagism in America, were all attempts to divorce art from life - unsuccessful attempts because their poems still represented life, but successful in so far as this life was whittled away to a shadow of a portion of itself - the make-believe life of aesthetes, the life of dreams, a life divorced from morals or the reason or community values, a parasite, a luxury. (p. 3)

The attempts of thirties writers 'once more to become functional' is, then, a movement away from this sense of poetry as discrete, transcendent, realm of beauty or abstraction - a state obtained whether the poem is viewed as transcendent 'reality' or pure stylistic 'ornament'. It is a gesture towards reclaiming, or re-inventing, that lost social

consciousness by embodying it, or reflecting it, within a sympathetic poetic text.' The gap established between 'man' and 'society' (a gap inhabited by both man and poet) will thus be healed, providing the justification for this mimesis and its attendant truths.

Equally, such poetry is a gesture, or socially justified action, on the part of the writer as citizen, in presenting a social artefact which aims, by persuasion, or education of the faculties, to bring such a society into being via a redeployment of this happy social consciousness.

MacNeice's assertion that 'every word is a community product' and that 'words are essentially vehicles of communication and so *ipso facto* have intellectual, emotional, or moral connotations' (p. 5), forms an important part of this socializing gesture. But we should not be misled into thinking that this attention to the sociality of language gives anyone who 'plays with words' the immediate social justification of providing some kind of formal service to the community. On the contrary, such purely formal activity is seen by MacNeice to rob language of its properly referential role. Attempts to distance language from this arena are therefore not simply perverse or wrong-headed, but seem socially aberrant. In this context, all language can do for MacNeice is *refer*, or refer and connote by virtue of its communion with the warm humanity of the social, which authenticates the text by its presence: 'for the poet's first business is *mentioning* things' (p. 5). Hence, in response, 'The poets of *New Signatures* have swung back...to the Greek preference for information or statement' (p. 21). Any modification of the text must take place within this framework of mimesis, since 'style without content' is, for MacNeice, 'bad style' (p. 6). Thereby lies the foundation of MacNeice's notable description of the citizen-poet:

My own prejudice...is in favour of poets whose worlds are not too esoteric. I would have a poet able-bodied, fond of talking, a reader of the newspapers, capable of pity and laughter, informed in economics, appreciative of women, involved in personal relationships, actively interested in politics, susceptible to physical impressions. (p. 198)

This being the embodiment of the writer of '*impure* poetry, that is...poetry conditioned by the poet's life and the world around him'.

MacNeice's sense of 'impurity', thus stated, implies more than Orwell's 'telling the truth', in that it provides a sense of the conditions, and the purpose, of such truth. Moreover, it implies not so much a situation where a choice is available between the pure and the impure, but a perpetual condition of impurity, which finds its dynamic in the embracing of the consciousness and representation of, 'life'. This consists of the messy, the circumstantial, contingent, and contradictory; it is lived as much as it can be by the poem's creator, represented in its fullness and diversity, or at least as full, diverse, and substantial, within the poem. Describing impurity as a condition, therefore, is to imply that the purity of the aesthetes was in fact no kind of purity at all. Already MacNeice has presented a situation where the pure state was betrayed by the referential properties of language, and where that to which reference was made was, within the context of 'life', thin and neurotic. Pure poetry is, therefore, either not poetry, since it becomes simply sound; or not pure, since it will always present an element of reference, and never adequately transcend the vitiating discourses it seeks to reject. But in an equally important way, a pure poetry divorced from any entanglements with ethical or other discourses can never be achieved since, once valued, they can be ignored or transgressed but never shown to be non-existent. If life were this non-dynamic, always-given entity there could be no point in hoping to represent it. MacNeice implies that the aesthetes tried to achieve a position of pure transcendence through art, but that the condition they hoped to be freed of could never actually be relinquished: nothing which is ever that pure, static, given.

'However novel MacNeice's theory and practice may have seemed thirty five years ago'; Walter Allen wrote in 1974, 'they related to the oldest traditions of poetry'.³¹ It may seem that there is little particularly novel in such theories, and that they relate not so much to the oldest traditions of poetry as to Arnoldian conceptions of these traditions, and their use as a kind of spiritual-social engineering.³² Orwell's somewhat misplaced sense of the 'novelty' of his own position has already been noted. However, in addition to arguing *for* something which was far from new, MacNeice is arguing *against* cultural trends which might now be less obvious. This notion of

'impurity', then, would have had a number of cultural resonances which are perhaps less well established. Moreover, such resonances indicate a cultural vocabulary considerably wider and more sophisticated than that of Orwell. I have already mentioned, as MacNeice does, the names of Mallarmé and Rimbaud. In addition, the 'pure' poetry of Edith Sitwell, the Oxford aestheticism of Harold Acton, Eliot's 'Auditory Imagination' and Henri Bremond's *La Poésie Pure* (1926) spring to mind. Yet the period immediately before the thirties was also marked by a growing interest in, for instance, the work of the Italian Neo-idealists, and their followers in Britain. Douglas Ainslie's full translation of Benedetto Croce's *Aesthetic* was not available until 1922, a key statement of which was that 'the aesthetic fact...is form and nothing but form', in making available the non-pragmatic aesthetic-as-intuition.³³ Croce's theory found careful application in *The Romantic Theory of Poetry: An Examination in the Light of Croce's Aesthetic* (1926) by A. E. Powell, wife of MacNeice's friend and mentor E. R. Dodds. 1922 also marked the first English translation of *Theory of Mind as Pure Act* by Giovanni Gentile, who one year later joined the Italian fascist party to begin a prominent career as the 'philosopher of fascism' and proponent of 'fascist culture' in Italian education. Two books on Gentile's work were published in England in 1937.³⁴ R. G. Collingwood, the main proponent of this branch of idealism in Britain, and indeed outside Italy, published the results of his various studies in *Principles of Art* (1938), one year before partially dissociating himself from these thinkers in his widely read *Autobiography*, which ended with the following declaration:

I am writing a description of the way in which...events impinged upon myself and broke up my pose of a detached professional thinker. I know now that the minute philosophers of my youth, for all their profession of a purely scientific detachment from practical affairs, were the propagandists of a coming Fascism. I know that Fascism means the end of clear thinking and the triumph of irrationalism. I know that all my life I have been engaged unawares in a political struggle, fighting against these things in the dark. Henceforth I shall fight in the daylight.³⁵

In *The Strings are False* MacNeice acknowledges the influence of, and his rejection of, Croce, together with his one time adherence to the 'dynamic flashy idealism' of Gentile, whom he cites in 'Poetry To-day', a prototype essay for *Modern Poetry*, as late as

1935.³⁶ He makes reference to Collingwood's *Autobiography* in this book and in *The Poetry of W. B. Yeats* (1940), where the logic of 'Question and Answer', the key term in Collingwood's attack on Oxford Realism, is applied in a discussion of Yeats's aestheticism.³⁷ There were and are important differences between all these thinkers, in their work in philosophy and aesthetics. What they did share, however, was a rejection of the mimetic and the instrumental as criteria for the artwork in favour of a 'pure' state of expression, in which form played a major part. It is not, therefore, a notion of 'form' as pure ornament, but as a principle of transcendence, that MacNeice seems to stand against.

By far the most influential doctrine of aestheticism, however, for MacNeice and others, was presented in Clive Bell's *Art*, with the theory of the artwork as Significant Form.³⁸ For Bell, 'the representative element in painting may or may not be harmful, always it is irrelevant. For, to appreciate a work of art, one need bring nothing from life, no knowledge of its ideas and affairs, no familiarity with its emotion' (p. 27). This realm of Significant Form is a 'world of aesthetic emotion', with 'an intense and peculiar significance of its own that is unrelated to the significance of life' (p. 28). This is the cornerstone of Bell's theory, which is at once abstract, transcendental, and committed to defining the artwork in terms of the 'emotional' capacities of the perceiving subject. Within this theory, the aesthetic is that which occasions a unique emotion by way of 'relations and combinations of light and colours...aesthetically moving forms I call "Significant Form"' (p. 17-18). Certain material forms are 'significant' in that they are distinct from the forms of ordinary non-transcendent reality; in the fact that a self-contained and unique kind of signification is seen to operate within this distinct realm; and, more colloquially, in their importance. Iconic, mimetic or what Bell calls 'descriptive' forms (for example Frith's *Paddington Station*) cannot be considered 'Art' since 'they leave untouched our aesthetic emotions because it is not their forms but the ideas or information suggested or conveyed by their forms that affect us' (p. 22). Hence, Pure Form: the art-work renders a reality uncontaminated by everyday forms (*Pure Form*), in an artwork constituted not by mimetic representation, but by line and

colour (*Pure Form*). Bell urges the perceiver, then, to see form as an end in itself, both in material reality and in the specific *instance* of this reality that is the artwork:

To see objects as pure forms is to see them as ends in themselves...they are not a means to anything except [aesthetic] emotion...who has not, once at least in his life, had a sudden vision of landscape as pure form? For once, instead of seeing it as fields and cottages, he has felt it as lines and colours.

[W]hat is the significance of anything as an end in itself...but that which the philosophers used to call 'the thing in itself' and now call 'ultimate reality'? (p. 45)

Frank Lentricchia has pointed to similarities between Bell's renunciation of the referential function of art, together with the pragmatic world and feelings of the subject within this world, with the 'bracketing' of the historical subject in the work of Flaubert, Mallarmé, Husserl, and Saussure.³⁹ Such an analogy is revealing in an unexpected manner. Viewed in this way, Bell's adherence to pure form as transcendent principle can be seen less as an adherence to form as end-in-itself than to the free-floating formlessness of an intentioned interiority of 'consciousness'. This manifests itself as 'aesthetic emotion', emotions freed from the coarse emotions of exteriority in everyday life. What Significant Form amounts to, in Bell's account, is less an appreciation of materiality as end-in-itself, than an adherence to it as a means for the transmission of these 'aesthetic' emotions from one subject to another:

When we consider anything as an end in itself we become aware of that in it which is of greater moment than any qualities it may have acquired by keeping company with human beings. Instead of recognising its accidental and conditioned importance, we become aware of its essential reality, of the God in everything, of the universal in the particular, of the all-pervading rhythm. Call it what you will; the thing that I am talking about is that which lies behind the appearance of all things - that which gives to all things their individual significance...And if a more or less unconscious apprehension of this latent reality of material things be, indeed, the cause of that strange emotion, a passion to express which is the inspiration of many artists, it seems reasonable to suppose that those who, unaided by material objects, experience the same emotion have come by another road to the same country. (pp. 69-70)

And here we can gain a sense of the circularity of Bell's argument if one tries to define the qualities of the aesthetic emotion and the aesthetic object; for he is unable to define such an emotion, as opposed to other emotions, without reference to its inspiration in the 'aesthetic object', yet he is unable to define this object, in relation to other objects

or usage of pictorial form, without deploying its capacity to create or express aesthetic emotion.

Hence, implicit in MacNeice's manifesto is, as well as a commitment to 'life' in impurity, a rejection of a number of theoretical positions which would base the artwork on formal mediation, where this formal mediation figures as a means to non-referential transcendence. This is not, therefore, Orwell's limited and uncomprehending rejection of 'formalism' as excessive interest in decorative style, or purposeless verbal play. But MacNeice, with this knowledge, still commits himself to a more or less referential view of the literary text, still comes out in favour of 'life', 'content' and 'experience'. Does not that mark a far greater commitment to these notions and categories, a commitment far exceeding that of Orwell? On the face of it, yes. But there are a number of problems in MacNeice's presentation of these categories in *Modern Poetry*, which pose even greater problems if we were to apply them to his poems.

Modern Poetry is, in fact, marked with contradictions and inconsistencies. In the first paragraph, for instance, where a division is marked (on the grounds of subject matter) between the poet conscious of himself as a *poet* and conscious of himself as a *man*: 'The poet...in a sense is man at his most self-conscious, but this means conscious of himself as a man, not conscious of himself as a poet'. The distinction seems clear enough until one begins to ask how this former kind of self-consciousness is manifested in the text. What is the 'self' of which the text is conscious? What does it entail to be conscious of oneself 'as a man'? If it is the 'whole' man, would the poem then not have to include the activity of writing, and if so, how would writing portray that act, inscribe its own inscription? Equally, would not this portrayal include the concerns of writing, i.e. the writer or poet, as poet? The upshot is this. MacNeice has established an opposition between poet and man, and has pointed to the artificiality of those representing themselves as 'poets', in order to slip over into the implication that the full representation of the 'man' is an unproblematic activity. In doing so, he ignores and effaces the necessary artifice of the text, its status as *writing*, and the fact that any subject present within the text can be there only by virtue of being *written*.

In fact MacNeice himself, seemingly unwittingly, problematizes these distinctions of Pure : Impure :: Poet : Man shortly afterwards:

The poet is often not completely sure what he is trying to say until he has said it. He works up his meaning by a dialectic of purification. There is the thing A and his own reaction to it B, but as he is a poet (and, as a poet, only properly or fully existent when making a poem) his poet's reaction to A is not realized till the thing A has been transported (a mysterious process) right into his poem, when it is no longer A but α , and with this α is fused his own poetic reaction to it - β . Or, more strictly, instead of the still segregated A and B there is now only the resulting poetic unity $\alpha\beta$. (p. 21)

Within this model MacNeice reinstates the divisions between 'men' and 'the poet' which he expressly hoped to dismiss. He does this, paradoxically, by collapsing the distinction between 'man' and 'poet' within the text itself. Any sense we can achieve of 'the man', that is to say, can come only through his representation in the poem. Instead of man conscious of himself as man we now have the poem presenting a particularly poetic reaction, or at least a reaction occasioned by, or presented within, the particular scene of the poem or its writing. Instead of the poem being created from, and representing, the man, now man, or the poet, is created for the reader from the poem. One might well ask how this 'dialectic of purification' can operate within an avowedly impure poetry. This is not simply the 'unity of form and content' in which it is implied that form can act simply as the vehicle for 'experience'. One clue is in MacNeice's reference to the 'mysterious' transposition from the human response to the poetic, where 'thing' and 'reaction' are unified within the concrete unity of the poem. For what MacNeice is really getting at here is the notion of the unity of the poem, as distinct from other discourses, coming about through the unification of form and content in the representation, or embodiment, of the subject, and of the poem as presenting the speaking subject, presenting *voice*. The poet's role is, then, 'not merely to record a fact but to record a fact *plus and therefore modified by* his own emotional reaction to it; this involves mannerism in its presentation - hence the tricks of poetry' (p. 197). In MacNeice's analysis form (or poetic tricks) operate to make available this emotional, speaking subject which, as an individual absorbed in 'life', forces the poem away from abstraction or transcendence towards mimetic justification. At the same time this

To describe the situation thus is to argue for a different, but more thoroughgoing, sense of 'impurity'. We might see this instance of an impurity of form and content as an enabling example of other (related) situations which exploit questions of transgression, contamination, the breaking of borders. It is because of the importance of *this* sense of impurity, present only covertly in *Modern Poetry*, that the term is crucial to an understanding of MacNeice's engagement with the thirties. At the same time, it is because of this sense of impurity that one is tempted to make the overstatement that, read quickly, *Modern Poetry* is no better a guide to the poetry of MacNeice than it is to the poetry of Mallarmé or Rimbaud. This overstatement would be unhelpful because it would ignore the real necessity of the consideration of, say, history during the thirties, as well as the critical limitations that this consideration can impose, which are illustrated in the above comments from Valentine Cunningham. A necessary result of taking account of these limitations, however, is an awareness on our part of how MacNeice himself, in his poems, demonstrated a comparable self-awareness, which accepted the crucial importance of history, and which, although ignored or underemphasised, is where his most important responses to the questions of the thirties lie.

The Subject of Impurity: 'To a Communist', 'Now that the shapes of mist', 'Snow'.

One way into these responses is to consider a poem where MacNeice seems to argue for the favourable effects of the empirical, experiencing subject against, for example, the contaminating effects of propaganda, or 'ideology':

To a Communist

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.⁴⁰

This 1933 poem is often cited as 'self-explanatory' evidence of MacNeice's views on the invading qualities of thirties Marxism.⁴¹ The implied reading might be something like: Marxism operates by the artificial imposition of an unnaturally unified

and unifying system upon history. As snow covers a diverse landscape, Marxism 'covers' history, 'engrossing' difference within a seamless discourse. Perceived entities are allowed to register only within the terms of this transforming and self-repeating discourse. All signifiers, then, lead to and are reduced to a single signified, the class struggle perhaps. Since this kind of activity is rendered as a process ('your thoughts make shape') we have the distinct implication that it is not only the landscape 'engrossed' in this system, but the observer. Perception, consciousness, are reduced and subordinated to the application of a system which then expands to 'cover' history and 'absorb' the observing, thinking, individual. However, the Marxist's attempts to bring history to an end in the perceived 'millennium' ignores the fact that it is itself historical. If interpretation is made 'of' the world, this interpretation is also *in* the world - it too is subject to time, and the change it seeks to make over for itself.

The problems in this reading need not stem from one's knowledge of thirties Marxism, or indeed from one's agreement with or objections to MacNeice's treatment. Rather the poem is problematic in the strategic positions it at once seems to uphold and refute. For instance: the injunction to 'Consult the Barometer'. A thirties Marxist might well have questioned where this privileged access to history or historiography derives from, and on what assumptions it relies. However, we should be aware of how such an injunction problematizes the sense of Marxism as an 'engrossing', subordinating, mind-controlling imposition. Injunction implies the possibility of dialogue: here the speaker asks the addressee to step outside the self-enclosed, self-repeating discourse and inspect its conditions and limitations. But one of the conditions of such a discourse would be the inability to step outside in this way. The injunction, then, operates as a device towards showing limitation; yet these limitations are simultaneously asserted and denied as the addressee is asked to relinquish the discourse, whilst the previous lines assert the impossibility of so doing. If we allow dialogue, therefore, we must allow some 'distance' between thinker and system - the interpretation makes shape; now that the shape is made the thinker can be addressed. His or her interpretation exists independently 'there'.

Much of the strength of this poem relies on its use of the metaphor of 'snow' in talking about thought; thought is thus turned into an 'object'. The speaker can then both share in the kind of perception that such thought produces, and distance himself from it. 'Snow' indicates the activity of thought, the kind of interpretation that the Marxist system introduces, and the effects it has on its user. As an object, it can also indicate a position for the speaker, standing 'outside' of the thought processes of the addressee. However, this privileged position is not quite as free from that of the Marxist as one might suppose. The fault of the Marxist is that s/he both unifies and implies stasis through this unification. But there is no reason why a system that unifies in this way should be subject to change in this way. Quite the reverse in fact: one of the reasons why dogma announces itself as dogma is that it endures the truth-telling effects of time, absorbs the otherwise valued 'pettiness' of evidence within its own falsehood. The success of the metaphor must rest, then, not on access to the innocent and transparent 'perception' of an ordered, pre-given world versus the unnatural contamination of an interpretative 'system', but on the consciousness of time, and the effects of time on thought *from without*. The thought of both addressee and speaker becomes more and more 'objecty' in that it is subjected to forces, or rather conditions, which lie outside itself and its own internal laws. If the poem is properly to lay claims to the conditions of time, its own discourse must be included within these conditions; it too must be subject to the 'other' of time. As noted earlier, the Marxist's error is not just unifying-in-time, but assuming that time will stop, that the discourse and poise, or historical hiatus, is not 'for one day only', but forever. In time, might not the speaker's 'perception' of 'particular pettiness / Of stones and grasses' be seen as a particular *interpretation*, subject to the destabilizing effects? My point is that a wholly innocent and timeless 'perception' of the world which Marxism may be seen to depart from, or obscure, or contaminate, is nowhere asserted in the poem. The Marxist's error is not interpretation, or 'shape making' in thought, but a particular *kind* of shape making. The error, certainly, is in making a rhetoric which would seek to efface difference, yet also to deny its own status as rhetoric, and the timely conditions of that rhetoricity. To say

that a fallacious kind of mediation is imposed upon the mind is not the same as saying that mind exists in some pure unmediated state. It is this recognition of time, therefore, of which the addressee becomes aware, and which allows the addressee to step outside his/her 'engrossing' discourse. But this is not an entry into a pristine, stable position. Rather it is a recognition of the instabilities of time, which must include the speaker's perceptions and categories as much as it does the addressee's.

What, then, is the status of that perception which Marxism supplements and obscures, but which is nevertheless subject to the same destabilizing conditions as Marxism? Does MacNeice elsewhere grant it more validity, more of an 'innocence' than that which can be inferred merely from its difference from the rigidities and closures of thirties Marxism?

Two poems can serve as examples of MacNeice's attention to the details of perception together with their consequences for notions of the subject. 'Now that the shapes of mist' (*CP*, p. 76) concerns itself with the question of 'shape' in the world, and its apprehension, as the first two stanzas easily testify:

Now that the shapes of mist like hooded beggar-children
Slink quickly along the middle of the road
And the lamps draw trails of milk in ponds of lustrous lead
I am decidedly pleased not to be dead.

Or when wet roads at night reflect the clutching
Importunate fingers of trees and windy shadows
Lunge and flounce on the windscreen as I drive
I am glad of the accident of being alive.

We find here the description of a marginal, defamiliarizing, and defamiliarized environment, thick with partial observation, personification, and metaphor. Mist slinks, like an animate object, light in water appears as milk in lead, trees possess fingers, shadows lunge and flounce, seemingly of their own accord. In many ways it's a vividly realized scene. The poem is, however, usually neglected or criticized by commentators. Terence Brown, in particular, cites it as an example of 'disorganised use of imagery. The images lack coherence. The poem disintegrates as a total, formal artifact'.⁴² Moreover, he reads it as symptomatic of 'what Michael Longley has called MacNeice's "impatience, that refusal to let his ideas settle to a depth, which in lesser poems results

in surfaces made brilliant in order to cover up imaginative inconsistencies" (pp. 132-33). The question immediately provoked is whether such criticism misses the mark in its demand for 'depth' and 'imaginative consistency', in a poem which seems from the start, to be *about* instabilities, and about perception in, and through, various kinds of surfaces.

Our first instability is movement. Travel, the journey, is a recurrent preoccupation of thirties writers, as commentators are quick to point out.⁴³ We can read in journeys to the frontier, the border, to Iceland or to China, re-statement of quest myths in, to name but two, psychoanalytic or socio-political terms. We read of journeys back to the lost origin of the womb, or out of the confines of the English Bourgeoisie, to the good country of individual rebirth in the new social relations of Socialism.⁴⁴ The poem's opening, then, is a nicely bathetic re-statement of these codes, not so untypical of the period. Yet MacNeice's traveller is seemingly without direction or obvious goal - going nowhere. Rather than reading this as a realist recuperation of these allegorical codes, we might analyse the poem as a departure from them into a journey of its own, as a journey, or allegory, of perception. Such an investigation gives purpose to those areas of the poem which Brown, for instance, finds 'difficult to construe'.⁴⁵ The narration of a particular experience - night driving - allows a testing, or exploration, of experience (a quest in itself, perhaps); and of perception and its objects.

Thus stated, the metaphor of motor-travel might tempt us to introduce into our discussion questions such as 'do the mists slink, or are they made to slink, is the world moving or is the speaker?'. The actual substance of the poem, though, is far less arbitrarily speculative than this. The perception of shapes in mist foreground, from the beginning, the search for order within an indistinct environment. Their status as 'hooded beggar-children' exploits this situation, through its suggestion of a recognizable social entity, albeit somewhat mythical, which, though identifiable, seems to withhold its true identity. The figures are both substantial and intangible: they appear, but do so fleetingly, in mist; they are like beggars, and like children in their appearance and motion, but, as 'hooded' creatures, any identity lying outside this classification, the

'person' behind the 'mask', so to speak, is simultaneously insinuated and withheld. In this situation, the speaker is thrown back upon his own resources. Rather than simply rendering this event, the poem exploits its allegorical potential in foregrounding, within this 'ungrounded' framework, the place of metaphor in perception: light as milk, together with the above mentioned details, signify a thoroughgoing anthropomorphism in the 'resources' of the speaker. The poem, then, does not merely represent a particular event of perception, but calls the nature of that perception into question. Such an analysis helps to make sense of the two lines: 'I am decidedly pleased not to be dead', 'I am glad of the accident of being alive'. On the one hand these lines seem colloquially banal - a common response to any unusual, but pleasing, experience or event. Or, indeed, we can read them as exorbitant, incongruous. Why should driving through a misty night prompt, unannounced, pleasure at not being dead? Who said anything about death? These statements are themselves ambiguous and different from one another. It is unclear whether this situation, this 'Now', is distinct from common experience as a result of the speaker feeling pleasure at being alive, or whether the speaker feels more fully 'alive' than usual at this point. Pleasure may arise as a consequence of an insight into what life is always like, but never discerned; or the condition of 'life' may be privileged since it can, at times, present such moments of pleasure. Equally, the statement 'not being dead', poised as it is on the fulcrum of a posited but undefinable existential condition (death) and an unspecified negation of this condition (not being dead, but not being anything specifically other than dead), is not the same as 'being alive', a statement implying some supporting definition of what this state involves. I would suggest that these lines require the recognition that problems are being posed as to the nature of pleasure, and perception within the subject. What these lines require is our consideration of a marginal, or unusual, event as revealing the conditions of the typical, or the usual, and that this revelation offers pleasure both in itself, and for the insight it provides into 'normal' perception.

What kind of insight might the event provide? It is significant that practically all of the narrated detail is shown to be mediated in one way or another. The lamps of the

vehicle are seen in pools of water. Similarly trees are reflected in the road, shadows appear on the windscreen. Explicitly foregrounded, therefore, is the perception of objects through various kinds of media; indeed, much of the speaker's 'pleasure' might be seen to derive from the multiplicity that this provides. 'Lamps' which 'draw trails' suggest an appropriation of the Yeatsian antinomy of the lamp and the mirror as emblems of the artwork and/or perceiving subject.⁴⁶ In this instance, of course, the two are conflated - the lamp appears in the mirror of reflecting water, and is transformed into 'milk'. A 'trail' implies a track previously marked out by another traveller, or one being marked by the present one. 'Draw' can be used to suggest 'pulling, dragging' or 'composing, sketching, laying out'. Which way is the traveller moving, backwards or forwards? Do the lights mark out a trail, or follow one? If the latter, how does the traveller 'follow' the trail that he himself is laying down? This figure invites us to consider that the imaginative path suggested by the image of the lamp in this poem is wholly dependent on its mediation through the 'mirrors' of established discourse and, crucially, that these mirrors do not simply reflect a preexistent reality, but that they reflect the conceptions of the perceiving 'lamp-like' subject. The shift from 'light' to 'milk' is, of course, a shift from an independent illuminating transparent source, to a self-contained opaque agent of perception. This manoeuvre is repeated in the second stanza, when the transparent medium of the vehicle's windscreen becomes the opaque ground for the apprehension of projected images - windy shadows. Images, we might say, twice removed from their source - by their status as shadows, and by their appearance on the mediating agent of glass; moving glass at that. In short, then, the traveller is, most significantly, a perceiver, one making shape within purblind circumstances, dependent on various mediating vehicles (motor cars, mirrors, windows), which draw out, or construct, the trails of their own making, follow the paths of their own logic; furthermore, it is implied, life is like that.

To describe such a situation as 'accidental' in any other than a colloquial way is to deny the perceiving subject any transcendental, authenticating origin or source. The traveller is 'not dead' in that, moving in a potentially hazardous environment, it hasn't

met with an accident, an accident which continually suggests itself. Hence, the speaker is 'not dead', rather than 'alive', because the possibility of death is made present by these conditions. But by the time the speaker gets to 'being alive' we perceive that he has already met with his accident, already become acquainted with his decentring dependence on mediating agents, together with the possibility that this 'life' of the self is inhabited by the conditions of radical contingency, or accident. Both circumstances conspire to undermine notions of the subject as sovereign and autonomous.

The remainder of the poem continues to exploit the potential for exploration of perception and the self contained in the above analysis:

There are so many nights with stars or closely
interleaved with battleship-grey or plum,
So many visitors whose Buddha-like palms are pressed
Against the windowpanes where people take their rest.

Whose favour now is yours to screen your sleep -
You need not hear the strings that are tuning for the dawn -
Mingling, my dear, your breath with the quiet breath
Of sleep whom the old writers called the brother of Death.

In these stanzas the previously narrated events are contrasted with notions of the 'norms' of night-time perception. The enjambment of the first two lines allows a sense of received, easily described detail. Nights have stars, or are overcast, dominated by an undifferentiated mass of colour, grey and plum. The 'interleaving' of this dense mass sets up a marked contrast to the previous 'interleaving' of the shadows of trees. The focalization, or breadth of vision, in the poem is thus expanded from the closely observed detail of the journey. But the detail we are now confronted with in this perspective is, in a sense, opaque. This is because the detail is perceived transparently, 'as it is'. In this sense the mediating vehicles of perception remain out of sight, invisible, where in the previous stanzas they were laid bare, the opaque character of their mediation open for the speaker to see. This perspective forbids the knowledge which allows penetration into a realm of the real which is concealed. We may read the 'so many nights' as referring to previous nights experienced by the speaker and, of course, to nights experienced by other people. But we have, furthermore, an additional kind of perception within this situation - the windscreen of the car replaced by the

'windowpanes' of home, or domesticity. 'Rest', in this context, figures both as 'stasis', as opposed to the movement of the traveller, and to 'sleep' or recreation. In this situation the windowpanes act as blocks or barriers to the presence of undomestic, prohibited 'visitors'. They are there to be seen, if one cared to look, yet their character is distorted by their representation in glass - palms are pressed up against glass, deformed in the process. Clearly we can read 'windowpanes' as metaphor for the vision of the individual in sleep - these are 'new' perspectives, different representations, yet since they are still 'windowed' they are intimately connected to the old. In this kind of sleep we see new or extraneous things but, it is implied, we are still contained in, and see through, the lenses of the conventional.

We might assume, therefore, that the speaker has achieved some position 'outside' this kind of perspective - in gaining insight into the nature of perception in the journey, he has gained similar insight into what these conventional perceptions of reality, including the reality of sleep, lack. In sleep the 'visitors' bestow the favour of 'screening' (protect, enclose, filter) the outside world. But a 'favour' is also bestowed by the windows of domesticity, which can 'screen' in the cinematic sense of 'display'. We have a sense, then, of yet another aspect of the observing self - that of the unconscious, which resides in the 'rest' (remainder, left-over) of the self in sleep. In observing this, the speaker thus gains a further privileged insight into the perceiver. Sleep is the 'brother of Death' (a Greek euphemism, upper case indicating received conception) in that it reveals the 'death' of the individual in unreflective mediocrity, together with the dissolving of the autonomous, rational subject, which is assumed to be independent of the agents of perception. There is, however, a less comforting sense in the last line which undercuts this newly privileged position - namely that there is a kind of 'Death' which can implicate this speaker as much as the modes of perception he attacks. For the 'breath' of this speaker is 'mingled' with that of sleep as personified object. It exists within the self, among those areas of the self which are concealed, yet it is also somehow independent of, other to, the self. It seems to possess a 'breath' or voice of its own. 'Death' characterizes this condition precisely because of this invasion

of the self by this other. Where previously the mediating agents of perception were externally 'there', to be observed and reflected upon by a speaker who is pleased to be alive, this kind of mediation, these kinds of representations, are both internal to the self, and beyond the self's control. It's not, then, merely that a new area of the self (say, the unconscious) is disclosed, which implies the death of a previous conscious self which we assumed to be complete, but the means by which such an area is disclosed, and how its representations operate - internal to the subject, and with a 'breath' of its own. Quietly, the voice of the speaker is here being usurped and dissolved by the breath of sleep and its representations. This breath is within the speaker, or his addressee, but it is alien to him. This quality of otherness, of something which lies not only concealed within the self but beyond the self's authority and control might be described as a kind of *writing*. It is a seemingly authorless - hence deathly - text at the heart of the self, representing the self to itself.

In describing this kind of representation as a kind of *writing* in this poem we can draw on a discussion by Jacques Derrida of a similar confusion of inside and outside in the work of Edmund Husserl. In considering the ('absolute') distinction between 'body' and 'soul' in Husserl Derrida notes:

Writing is a body that expresses something only if an actual intention animates it and makes it pass from the state of inert sonority (*Körper*) to that of an animated body (*Leib*). This body proper to words expresses something only if it is animated (*sinnbelebt*) by an act of meaning (*bedeuten*) which transforms it into a spiritual flesh (*geistige Leiblichkeit*).⁴⁷

However, Derrida argues that for intention to animate speech, which is internal to the subject, this speech must in some sense be 'within' the subject, the 'outside' of the 'signifier' existing inside of the subject, undermining this intention from within. Speech is possible only 'because the possibility of writing dwelt within speech, which was itself at work in the inwardness of thought' (p. 82). This is a sense of writing which is at once intimately connected to the subject, but is other to it, contaminating its purity from within. For our purposes, this otherness, internal to the subject or not, is important for this sense of undermining: writing implies the absence of the subject, a mode of

signification in which the author's control over meaning is erased, but which, as in 'Now that the shapes of mist', exists within the subject as a condition of this subjectivity. It is this which most fully characterizes the quality of 'death' in the poem, which, it is implied, exists not merely within the representations of sleep, but covertly, invisibly, with the conscious perceiving subject.

In a different, though related, manner 'Snow' (CP, p. 30) is intimately concerned with perception and its mediation. A claim for 'mediation' in the poem is more contentious than one might immediately suppose, since the poem may well be taken as evidence of MacNeice's commitment to the rendering of unmediated experience through the text - a concrete, present, palpable experience centred firmly in the life and experience of the empirical subject:

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.

World is crazier and more of it than we think,
 Incurably plural. I peel and portion
 A tangerine and spit the pips and feel
 The drunkenness of things being various.

Though rooted in the life of the senses, and of experience, this rendering of a privileged incident, carefully read, militates *against*, rather than for, the unity of the subject it is sometimes taken to assert and defend. The moment is privileged because of its difference from those of the empirical subject, rather than its elevation, intensification or continuities with this subject.

The experience is taken to be significant both for its immediacy ('the room was *suddenly* rich') and its diversity (incurably *plural*). In addition, such a perception offers itself as almost wholly distinct from conventional perception and conception: the world is suddener than we 'fancy' it; it's crazier and more of it than we 'think'. Perception is, therefore, intimately linked to conception in the poem. However, the difficulty encountered in this experience is the tension between the richness of the scene as a result of the immediacy of objects, and the pleasure encountered at their diversity. For the more the speaker becomes aware of the palpability of objects, the snow, the roses,

the tangerine, the more a sense is generated that this palpability is predicated on their difference from other objects. As much as the palpability of object and things, the poem examines the relations between things, and the consequences for this sense of palpability. In addition to being 'incompatible' as self-contained objects, they are 'collateral', or parallel, existing together. Hence, each object is inhabited in what it is by the trace of what it is not. And the more this 'objectness' is intensified, the more this trace, or absence, is apparent. Hence the world is given to be *incorrigibly* plural; the structure of difference exists as a defect, and one which operates against the perceiver's conventional ordering of the world (crazier), undermining the appearance of the object like a concealed, unmanageable, secret. The objects can never be fully themselves, yet the absence which prohibits this identity is embedded in such identity as they have. The totality of this structure; therefore, is always 'beyond', always deferred and resistant to assimilation. Hence, 'The drunkenness of things being various': the drunkenness, or disruption of the order of things *as things* within a structure of difference, by virtue of the fact that they are 'various'; the fact that such things are 'in process', they are 'being' various, in the sense that any perception of one object involves a movement or shift to another in response to the trace of the other; in addition, of course to the inebriation of the subject apprehending things in this way, who is also 'being various', divided, dislodged by the consequences of his new conception. It's a conception which involves both the condition of variousness as difference between, or in, objects together with the split between such a condition viewed as pleurably multiple, or intolerably intangible:

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.

Clearly the 'spitefulness' of the world implies a kind of intractable childish malevolence, fully compatible with the sense of the withholding of the object which continually means to suggest itself as present in itself. Equally, that sense of the 'gayness' of the world invites a carnivalesque abandonment to the deferral of presence which seems

concomitant with the fragmentation of the speaker into sensual perception - the disruption of the perceiving ego into a chaos or flux of sensation. There is 'more than glass' between these two phenomena because there is more to them than their existence in empirical reality; in addition, there is more to be considered in their nature than the fact that they can be viewed as self-contained objects which just happen to be 'side by side'. And of course the reference to 'glass' invites comparison with the previously discussed metaphor of the window as the vision of the conventional or quotidian, the seemingly transparent medium which in fact conceals its mediating status, together with the possibilities for the exploration of the 'self-evident', which it seems so faithfully to represent.

In these poems, therefore, we find less of an emphasis on pure experience of an unmediated external world than an inspection of this experience which insists on both the impurity of the subject and the perception of this experience. The impurity of 'Now that the shapes of mist' is that of the subject, where the contaminating agents of perception of the outside world are seen also to exist within. In 'Snow' these mediating agents are augmented by the instability of the identity of objects when seen in relation to one another. In the poem's assertion that this variousness, this instability between categories, is a function of time, we can better understand the attack made on the closure of time that was attacked in 'To a Communist'. The understanding of time here performs an ideological function. But this feature of 'closing' time, stabilizing it within a particular frame of reference, is also a feature of the speaker's discourse, even if this discourse is aware of the difference inherent in 'stones and grasses'. If we are properly to understand how the 'variousness' of perception seen in a poem like 'Snow' operates in MacNeice's poetry, and how this can be seen to undermine types of closure, which may be ideological or not, we should investigate this operation of time more closely.

Notes.

(Place of publication is London unless otherwise indicated).

- 1 Christopher Isherwood, *Mr. Norris Changes Trains* (1977; first published 1935), p. 15.
- 2 Henry James, *The Portrait of a Lady* (Harmondsworth, 1984), p. 61.
- 3 Louis MacNeice, *The Poetry of W. B. Yeats*, second edition, foreword by Richard Ellmann (Oxford, 1967; first edition Oxford, 1941), p. 18.
- 4 Louis MacNeice, *Modern Poetry: A Personal Essay*, second edition, introduction by Walter Allen (Oxford, 1968; first edition 1938), p. xxi.
- 5 Christopher Norris, 'Pope Among the Formalists: Textual Politics and "The Rape of the Lock"' in *Post-Structuralist Readings of English Poetry*, edited by Richard Machin and Christopher Norris (Cambridge, 1987), pp. 134-61 (p. 134).
- 6 Peter Widdowson, 'Between the Acts? English Fiction in the Thirties', in *Culture and Crisis in Britain in the the 1930s*, edited by Jon Clark, Margot Heinemann, and others (1979), pp. 133-164 (p. 133).
- 7 W. H. Auden, *The English Auden: Poems, Essays, and Dramatic Writings 1927-1939*, edited by Edward Mendelson (1977), p. 157; Stephen Spender, 'The Great Without', in *The Destructive Element: A Study of Modern Writers and Beliefs* (1935), pp. 201-16.
- 8 David Lodge, *The Modes of Modern Writing: Metaphor, Metonymy, and the Typology of Modern Literature* (1977), p. 212.
- 9 Terry Eagleton, *Walter Benjamin, or Towards a Revolutionary Criticism* (1981), p. 95.
- 10 See Theodor Adorno, 'Reconciliation under Duress', in *Aesthetics and Politics*, edited and translated by Ronald Taylor (1977), pp. 151-76 (pp. 158-63) for a definitive articulation of this position.
- 11 Bernard Bergonzi, *Reading the Thirties: Texts and Contexts* (1978), pp. 51-52.
- 12 Walter Benjamin, 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction', in *Illuminations*, edited by Hannah Arendt, translated by Harry Zohn (New York, 1969), pp. 217-51 (p. 242).
- 13 Samuel Hynes, *The Auden Generation: Literature and Politics in England in the 1930s* (1976), p. 333.
- 14 Edna Longley, *Louis MacNeice: A Study* (1988), pp. 40, 66, 72, 72.
- 15 Edna Longley, *Poetry in the Wars* (Newcastle-upon-Tyne, 1986), pp. 84, 87, 88.
- 16 George Orwell, 'Writers and Leviathan', in *The Collected Essays, Journalism and Letters of George Orwell*, edited by Sonia Orwell and Ian Angus, 4 vols, (1968), IV, *In Front of Your Nose: 1945-1950*, pp. 407-14 (p. 408-9); cited in Raymond Williams, *Orwell*, second edition (1984), pp. 34-35.
- 17 See, for instance, Stephen Spender: 'Critics like Virginia Woolf, who reproached our generation for writing too directly out of a sense of public duty, failed to see that public

events had swamped our personal lives and usurped our personal experience', *World Within World* (1951), p. 191.

18 See Paul Fussell, *The Great War and Modern Memory* (1975); Hynes, pp. 17-37.

19 George Orwell, 'Politics and the English Language', in *Collected Essays*, IV, pp. 127-40.

20 'Why I Write', in Orwell, *Collected Essays*, I, *An Age Like This: 1920-1940*, pp. 1-7 (p.2); cited in Williams, p. 30.

21 Orwell, 'Inside the Whale', in *Collected Essays*, I, pp. 493-527 (p. 508); cited in Williams, p. 32.

22 I take the term 'classic realism' from Catherine Belsey, *Critical Practice* (1980), pp. 67-84, 112-17.

23 Raymond Williams, *Politics and Letters: Interviews with the New Left Review* (1979), p. 392.

24 See Christopher Norris, 'Introduction', in *Inside the Myth: Orwell, Views from the Left*, edited by Christopher Norris (1984), pp. 7-11 (p.9).

25 Valentine Cunningham, *British Writers of the Thirties* (Oxford, 1988), p. 5.

26 See Francis Scarfe, *Auden and After: The Liberation of Poetry 1930-1941* (1942), pp. 53-67.

27 George Fraser, 'Evasive Honesty: The Poetry of Louis MacNeice', in *Essays on Twentieth Century Poets* (Leicester, 1977), pp. 152-61 (p. 153).

28 Walter Allen, 'Introduction', in Louis MacNeice, *Modern Poetry: A Personal Essay*, second edition (1968; first edition 1938), pp. i-xix (p. i).

29 See Spender, 'Writers and Manifestos', in *The Destructive Element: A Study of Modern Writers and Beliefs* (1936), p. 222-35.

30 MacNeice, *Modern Poetry*, p. 1.

31 Allen, p. xviii.

32 see Terry Eagleton, *Criticism and Ideology: A Study in Marxist Literary Theory* (1976), pp. 104-10.

33 Benedetto Croce, *Aesthetic: As Science of Expression and General Linguistics*, translated by Douglas Ainslie (1922), p. 16.

34 R. Holmes, *The Idealism of G. Gentile* (1937); P. Romanell, *Croce Versus Gentile* (1937), cited in John Passmore, *A Hundred Years of Philosophy*, second edition (Harmondsworth, 1968), p. 570. Passmore erroneously dates Romanell's volume as 1947.

35 R. G. Collingwood, *An Autobiography* (1939), p. 167.

36 Louis MacNeice, *The Strings are False: An Unfinished Autobiography* (1965), p. 126; 'Poetry Today', in *Selected Literary Criticism of Louis MacNeice*, edited by Alan Heuser (Oxford, 1987), pp. 10-44 (p. 12).

- 37 MacNeice, *Poetry of W. B. Yeats*, pp. 26-27.
- 38 Clive Bell, *Art* second edition (New York, 1949; first published 1914), p. 18.
- 39 Frank Lentricchia, *After the New Criticism* (1980), p. 114.
- 40 *Louis MacNeice: Collected Poems*, second edition, edited by E. R. Dodds (1979; first published 1966), p. 22. Hereafter *CP*.
- 41 D. B. Moore, for example, suggests that in this poem an 'anti-utopianism' is set against 'tough common-sense', *The Poetry of Louis MacNeice* (Leicester, 1972), p. 53.
- 42 Terence Brown, *Louis MacNeice: Sceptical Vision* (Dublin, 1975), p. 132.
- 43 See Cunningham, pp. 377-418.
- 44 See for instance Cecil Day Lewis 'The Magnetic Mountain' (1933), *Collected Poems of C. Day Lewis* (1954), pp. 79-121; or Rex Warner, *The Wild Goose Chase* (1937).
- 45 Brown, p. 132.
- 46 See Paul de Man, *Blindness and Insight: Essays in the Rhetoric of Contemporary Criticism*, second edition (1983), pp. 170-71; M. H. Abrams, *The Mirror and the Lamp: Romantic Theory and the Critical Tradition* (1953).
- 47 Jacques Derrida, *Speech and Phenomena and Other Essays on Husserl's Theory of Signs*, translated by David B. Allison (Evanston, Illinois, 1973), p. 81.

Chapter Two

In Our Time: Temporality and Representation In the Thirties.

Temporality is evidently an organized structure. The three so-called 'elements' of time, past, present and future, should not be considered as a collection of 'givens' for us to sum up - for example, as an infinite series of 'nows' in which some are not yet and others are no longer - but rather as the structured moments of an original synthesis.

Jean-Paul Sartre.¹

The danger of the method of the interior monologue...is that it may fall completely into chaos. For the unconscious is the chaos of unexpressed and uncontrolled desires and emotions, and the danger is that of simply reflecting the unexpressed.

Stephen Spender.²

In *The Strings are False* MacNeice offers the following account of his painfully divided experience of the early thirties:

That spring Mariette and I visited Cambridge and were entertained by Anthony [Blunt], playing charades with an assortment of Cambridge dons and undergraduates and Bloomsbury intellectuals. A charade was good if it was risqué or blasphemous, and I felt I was back at Marlborough. The same private gossip and tittering, the same disregard for everyone not ourselves. Perhaps it was better to live among the characters. But is it a fact that no-body ever gets anywhere?

[Sometimes in the nights I woke and wondered where we were going, but most of the time I was doped and happy, most of the time except when I thought about time that most of the time is waste but whose is not? When I started again to write poems they were all about time. We had an old record of 'The Blue Room', one of the most out-and-out jazz sentimentalizations of domestic felicity - far away upstairs but the blue began to suffocate] (MacNeice's parentheses).³

Valentine Cunningham has detailed at some length preoccupations with various figures of 'enclosure' among thirties writers.⁴ MacNeice's account of this period is heavy with such figures. He notes that, when at Birmingham University 'I felt that the halo of Wilamowitz was not for me. I did not want to be a scholar; I wanted to 'write'. The trouble is that you cannot write in a hothouse...To write poems expressing doubt or melancholy, an anarchist conception of freedom or nostalgia for the open spaces (and these were things that I wanted to express), seemed disloyal to Mariette' (p. 137). Part of the distinction of MacNeice's account is the rigour with which he outlines the problems of writing oneself out of 'the hothouse' of bourgeois domesticity. 'I found no reassurance in the intelligentsia', as he puts it, 'I remembered how under the Roman Empire intellectuals spent their time practising rhetoric although they would never use it for any practical purpose; they swam gracefully around in rhetoric like fish in an aquarium tank' (p. 145). Professed Communists, although finally intellectually indefensible for MacNeice, had their attractions: 'I joined them however in their hatred of the *status quo*, I wanted to smash the aquarium' (p. 146).

It is difficult to say, however, whether this desire to move out of the hothouse, to smash the aquarium, could, or did, allow him a position properly outside of these enclosures, or whether it was symptomatic of his inescapable immersion within them, or, indeed, within the wider enclosure of bourgeois reality. Equally, it is hard to say

whether MacNeice's dissenting musings on time - about time which is wasted; about *our* time, which is mostly waste - should be read as an effective challenge to the '*status quo*': The musings could equally well be read as an ironic reflection on a further containment within such a status quo. One which, like the Cambridge charades, proffers a *faux* rebellion symptomatic, more than anything else, of MacNeice's inability to come into contact with anything outside this world. We would then have to see him as moving to another place in the discursive aquarium, but still visibly inside its frame. This would be all the more pernicious, we might add, in the self-congratulatory assumption that such a position *had* been reached. One might guess at some thirties writers, freshly 'outside' these enclosures, arguing that it was about time people like MacNeice started thinking about things other than 'time'. In other words, arguing that intellectual rigour lay not in the abstractions of speculation on temporality and the individual, but in the consideration of history and the citizen, or the Citizen and History.

History and the Undefeated:

In the previous chapter we noted that when thirties writers began to consciously (re)establish themselves and their writing within a social context, they began to become pre-occupied with what at times seems like a new discovery: History. As Auden's 'Spain 1937' has it: 'And the poor in their fireless lodgings dropping the sheets / Of the evening paper: "Our day is our loss, O show us / History the operator, the / Organizer, Time the refreshing river"⁵ Auden's poem seems simultaneously to introduce the awareness, or possibility, of history as a structural agent, a tangible process, and to deny that such an agent could have any genuine force outside its concrete embodiment within concrete historical subjects:

And the life, if it answers at all, replies from the heart
 And the eyes and the lungs, from the shops and the squares of the city:
 'O no, I am not the Mover,
 Not to-day, not to you. To you I'm the
 'Yes-man, the bar-companion, the easily duped:
 I am whatever you do.

If history is whatever we do, it is also what other people do, or have done. Pointedly, for Auden's poem, it is whatever is being done in the Spanish War, a specific set of events invested with significance because of their historical importance, and because they grant concrete substance to what otherwise might appear to be an abstraction:

'Our thoughts have bodies; the menacing shapes of our fever // Are precise and alive'.

The Spanish War offers to demonstrate, then, that we live in history, and such a habitation is of prime importance, not least because history lives nowhere so much as in *us*. Interestingly, the poem does not really offer any new metaphor for this situation. Primarily, it operates within what one might call a synecdochic structure.⁶ It seeks to link individual experience to a historical process as a part operating within a larger whole, located in a more or less realist presentation of this situation. Such a view can be seen quite clearly in Edward Upward's short story 'Sunday', published in the *New Country* (1933) anthology.⁷ 'Don't flatter yourself', his narrator argues, 'that history will die or hibernate with you; history will be as vigorous as ever but will have gone to live elsewhere'. In answer to the question 'then where is living and how can you get to it?', together with the fear that an 'abstract generalisation' is being mistaken for a 'concrete thing', he replies:

History is here in the park, in the town. It is in the offices, the duplicators, the traffic, the nursemaids wheeling prams, the airmen, the aviary, the new viaduct over the valley. It was once in the castle on the cliff, in the sooty churches, in your mind; but it is abandoning them, leaving with them only the failing energy of desperation, going to live elsewhere. It is already living elsewhere. It is living in the oppression and hustle of your work, in the sordid isolation of your lodgings, in the vulgarity and shallowness of the town's attempts at art and entertainment, in the apprehensive dreariness of your Sunday leisure. History is living here, and you aren't able to die and you can't go mad. (pp. 187-88)

Here we find one of those thirties lists which are described as metonymic by a number of commentators.⁸ In this instance, a metonymic-realist rhetorical structure works to establish a sense of historical *position* as synecdochic - we are a *part* of history within the quotidian, the everyday, world. Presentation of this relation requires the realistic presentation of this world, and of this world-as-history.

Bernard Bergonzi has pointed out how subsequent writers used metaphoric figures for history which differed from this presentation of a synecdochic relation to history: 'references to "History" were as frequent as ever, but that entity was no longer a godlike force directing the course of human development; it seemed, now, the very embodiment of the irrational and the destructive'.⁹ Hence Roy Fuller: 'History inflicts no wound / But explodes what it began / And with its enormous lust / For division splits the dust'; Herbert Corby: 'History rears before us like a wave, Its high white head poised while we catch a breath'; Randall Swingler: '...And are the dead rewarded / With a bearer bond on history's doubtful balance?' (p. 56). Here, the observer is distanced from, not a part of, a history which is characterised by disorder (metonymy) rather than a relation of clearly defined continuity (synecdoche).

Bergonzi's discussion neglects to mention what I would argue is an important application of this will to discover, describe, and locate the subject within such 'force', namely John Cornford's 'Full Moon at Tierz: Before the Storming of Huesca':

Time present is a cataract whose force
Breaks down the banks even at its source
And history forming in our hand's
Not plasticine but roaring sands
Yet we must swing it to its final course.

The intersecting lines that cross both ways,
Time future, has no image in space,
Crooked as the road we must tread,
Straight as our bullets fly ahead.
We are the future. The last fight let us face.¹⁰

I single out these two stanzas not for their perspicacious analysis of the Spanish Conflict, nor in wholesale endorsement of their thirties Marxist rhetoric, but because of their connections with the previous attempts to find tropes for history and the historical process, and for their illustration of a tendency implicit in all the strategies mentioned above. This is a desire to see history as an object, to use figural devices to describe this object and one's relation to it; to see history as something one can almost *touch*. It's one thing to discern a pattern or teleological design in human affairs, and to seek devices to describe such a process. It's another thing to point to concrete literal events located within such a design. What these lines do, however, is conflate this

synecdochic impulse with the literal observer or speaker, one in action within history. Rhetoric here, with history as plasticine or roaring sands, asserts an equivalence based on contact, through activity; rather than just illustrating an abstract process with a concrete trope and then moving out of this design to real events within Europe. The poem maintains itself within a rhetorical structure which locates the situation of the subject, the activist, within that structure.

In doing so, it forces an important question we might overlook in the previous tropes, namely the status of such a subject. At the same time as it asserts the subject's wholesale involvement in history the poem assumes a curious, though not untypical, detachment. History is something upon which a conscious, pre-formed individual goes to work. But what 'work' does history do on such a subject? What work has it already done on that subject, in its construction or otherwise? Rather than showing an individual entirely in history, don't these lines offer us instead a subject acting *with* history, where the full implications of this cherished, invigorating and iconoclastic concept are held at bay? Such a line of inquiry involves the following questions: who, or what, is the 'we' or 'I' that is involved with history? In turn, how is history involved in that 'we' or 'I'? If history is here, like an object which you can almost touch, what kind of object is it? One might argue that these were questions largely ignored by thirties writers, lying outside their historical vocabulary - these weren't the questions generated by their (sometimes agonizing) experience of history, and to expect answers to them within this historical and literary context is, really, to expect too much, or to miss the point. Such an approach, however, relegates thirties writing to a more or less commonsensical consideration of their circumstances, which sells some writers short. I do not deny that consideration of the context was often second-hand, naive, and commonsensical. But, I would argue, not all of it was so, and MacNeice's texts of the thirties are one example where this is the case. The complexity of his analysis is intimately related to the questions posed above: Paradoxically, the easiest point of entry into this complex negotiation with 'History' and its many questions can be seen through consideration of time, and the subject.

Killing Time: 'August'.

In 'August' (*CP*, p. 23) we can find one expression of MacNeice's preoccupation with time, and the situation of the subject:

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

At first glance, we might read in these lines an awareness of a sense of absence as a result of the passage of time, concomitant with a desire for stasis. The moment, and the 'gay months' of summer were there, now they are gone, swept away by temporality, 'eluding' the self that would retain them as a permanence. As the poem develops, however, this sense of 'elusion' or evasion is complicated:

For the mind, by nature stagey, welds its frame
Tomb-like around each little world of a day;
We jump from picture to picture and cannot follow
The living curve that is breathlessly the same.

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

Garlands at a set angle that do not slip,
Theatrically (and as if for ever) grace
You and me and the stone god in the garden
And Time who also is shown with a stone face.

In these stanzas there is a growing sense of an 'elusion' of the moment occasioned less by temporality *per se* but as a consequence of a desire for stasis which is successfully fulfilled in conception. The moment is 'lost' not by change, but by a desire for stasis.

This desire is related to, though not identical with, a desire for stasis as permanence, and will bear close examination.

In outlining this desire MacNeice is pre-occupied with conventional, instrumental methods of ordering time. Using the metaphor of the film-reel, the poem suggests that the supposed 'impermanence' of time masks its conception as moments of stasis. Temporality is understood as a continuous succession of present, self-identical images, 'frozen' as they are within film stock. The operation of time within this

'frame', or collection of frames, provides only the illusion of change. The 'shutter of time', analogous to the succession of day and night can therefore be seen as a 'projection', or representation. The mind is 'stagey' in that it works by dividing temporality, if nothing else, into self-identical 'stages'. Equally, what we might call 'mind-time' is a collective, conventional site of fiction and performance. Such a stage governs the 'world' of those working within this fiction. The phrase 'each little world' implies the following: each individual subjectivity enabled by this representation; each single day/night as an autonomous, static, self-contained 'world' of its own; and, in an infinitely anatomizing sense, the possibility of breaking down this static unit into smaller and smaller worlds of stasis, and units of presence. Hence the speaker, like Poussin, in an ekphrastic reference to what must be *Dance to the Music of Time*, forms an avowedly static representation of time (as static), fixes or 'binds' the moment as still, or within a 'still' (the connotation for cinema-going thirties readers would not have gone unnoticed), or still moments, as a principle of order and continuity.¹¹

All of which, we are told, is delusive:

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

Initially, we may hold that the freezing of temporality within mind-time, or Poussin's *Dance*, is a lie for two reasons. Most obviously, because in time the moment is always already lost or passed, always and irretrievably. Representation of the moment can provide us with only signification; the sign is not the thing, but works on the level of the imaginary. Secondly, and more importantly, because any representation which does not take account of the passage of time, within its 'still' frame so to speak, cannot be deemed felicitous. Both these readings, however, point mainly to a reading of 'elusion' as impermanence, a reading which, in the assertion of mind-time as stasis (and presence), is contradictory: the loss of a stasis through change; what was once permanent is no more. If mind-time is a collection of static moments, and any change within this collection is illusory, what can be left? Underlying permanence? The

reference to a 'living curve that is breathlessly the same' would seem to suggest something of this nature.⁹ But how 'breathless'? Within MacNeice's analogy of mind-time with death, how can something outside this system be without breath, dead? A reading more in keeping with the presentation of mind-time is that it deceives in its assertions not because the moment is thought to be permanent, or thought incorrectly to pass, but because the moment is, or was, never authentically there to begin with. Clearly we should focus attention further on this sense of mind-time, and the type of elusions, or evasions that it engenders.

In Jacques Derrida's re-statement of Saussure's theory of language as a system of 'differences *without positive terms*' as *différance*, of meaning as differential and infinitely deferred, we find the following assertion:

- Essentially and lawfully, every concept is inscribed in a chain or in a system within which it refers to the other, to other concepts, by means of the systematic play of differences. Such a play, *différance*, is no longer simply a concept, but rather the possibility of conceptuality, of a conceptual process and system in general.¹²

We are familiar with the two senses of *différance* as spacing (different from, discernible, distinct) and temporalization (deferred, put off, in reserve) and with notions that teach us that 'there is no breach without difference and no difference without trace'¹³. Identity, of the sign or whatever, is predicated on difference; each and all is inhabited by an absence which is the trace of the other; where full presence is continually inscribed, yet withheld. Later in his discussion Derrida proposes the following analysis of the trace, in relation to an 'unconscious':

- [C]ontrary to the terms of an old debate full of metaphysical investments that it has always assumed, the 'unconscious' is no more a 'thing' than it is any other thing, is no more a thing than it is a virtual or masked consciousness. This radical alterity as concerns every possible mode of presence is marked by the irreducibility of the aftereffect, the delay. In order to describe traces, in order to read the traces of 'unconscious' traces (there are no 'conscious' traces), the language of presence and absence, the metaphysical discourse of phenomenology, is inadequate... [T]he alterity of the 'unconscious' makes us concerned not with horizons of modified - past or future - presents, but with a 'past' that has never been present, and which never will be, whose future to come will never be a *production* or a reproduction in the form of presence. Therefore the conception of the trace is incompatible with the concept of retention, of the becoming-past of what has been present. One cannot

think of the trace - and therefore *différance* - on the basis of the present, or of the presence of the present. (p. 21)

I quote at length from this passage not, primarily, to introduce a discussion of the unconscious or traces of the unconscious as it functions in *différance* or time, but to consider time in terms of the trace, and *différance*. Not to consider time in the unconscious, but the unconscious of time, and of the trace in time.

This formulation, I would suggest, is particularly useful in an analysis of mind-time as 'lie' in 'August', since it allows a more focussed sense of the implications of 'stasis' within this time consciousness, and of the implied alternatives to this conception. For, where mind time casts time in terms of the moment, and of the moment as present and self identical, Derrida's formulation allows us to consider the 'structure' of time as differential. Instead of difference and change (the illusion of movement) being predicated on identity (the moment), identity is predicated on difference. Each moment, in process, is inhabited by the trace of that which preceded it, and the one which will follow. Inhabited, that is, by an absence of the other - a conclusion absolutely necessary if we are to think of time as movement, and to avoid the notion of the moment as static. To see, in other words, time *passing through* each moment. Indeed, to speak of 'the moment' at all is to risk prejudging the matter, for we might feel it more appropriate to discuss time as a negotiation between past and future, what MacNeice elsewhere calls 'the embankments / Of past and future' ('An April Manifesto', *CP*, p. 25) where 'the moment' holds a conventional, instrumental, reality. Hence, the sense in 'August' of the moment as a lie, where the 'stasis' of the moment fails to account for its position in a system, or in process, as continually subject to absence and change. Again, this is not the same as saying that the moment changes or departs, for inhabited by this absence it was never there autonomously, or as presence, to begin with. Hence, also, the sense that 'we cannot catch hold of things'; we cannot fully apprehend the thing *as autonomous thing* since its identity is always predicated on absence in difference - the other - in addition to the process or system which lies outside our grasp. Equally, we, as subjects, cannot apprehend the system as a whole, we cannot see the trace, so bound up are we in mind-time. The 'living curve' we are

told, which we cannot follow, is 'breathlessly the same'. Difference is always the same where identity is predicated on difference; difference is not the same when it is predicated on identity, when it is an established self-sameness that, in succession, is different. Yet it is 'breathless' because it is neither living nor dead in terms of the empirical 'breathing' subject; as Derrida puts it, '*différance* is not' (p. 21).

But if, as the poem says, we cannot catch hold of things, what can we catch hold of? To be more precise, in what way are we made aware of this inability in view of the trace? A problem emerges in the poem if we try to ascertain the precise nature of the 'elusion' narrated in the first stanza. It is unclear whether we should see the speaker as being 'outside' the frame of mind-time, where the 'thing' he hopes to lay claim to is always already undone by absence, where the speaker is articulating the recognition of this absence. Conversely, it is unclear whether the speaker speaks from a position 'within' the frame, implying the inability of the subject to think empirically outside mind-time, where the 'gay months' are constrained to be understood as present and, consequently, it is the fact of the trace which is absent - within mistaken, or illusory presence. What eludes, paradoxically, is the elusion, the trace. In addition, we have a problem with the tone of the piece. Does the speaker suggest something like 'I thought that the gay months were present, now, with my perspective on mind-time, I find that they were not'; or does the stanza mean to suggest 'these months have eluded me, when I thought they would, at some point, come (to me)'. Equally, whether the speaker is inside or outside the frame, a sense of 'elusion' implies a search, a hope for a presence which is deferred (as Derrida has taught us), but which nevertheless inscribes the speaker as in some sense subject to the same desire for presence which inhabits mind-time, even if he is attempting to negotiate some reflective distance from this position. Further, it is possible to say that the subject, although accepting *différance* in conceptuality, or time-as-difference, is instituting, for all the recognition of absence and trace, a different kind of presence. This would attempt to reinstate a transcendental signified, which supplements the 'lack' of motion in time-as-stasis, instituting a kind of dynamic time in place of the moment, an animated time in contrast

to the 'dead' time of the mind. It might be something along the lines of Bergson's *durée réel*, which is all the more transcendent because it is 'beyond' the horizon of mind-time.

In view of this, we might be tempted, had we not been before, following Derrida, to place those terms 'the moment', 'presence', and now 'time-as-*différance*' *sous rature* (*sous-rature*) where 'since the word is inaccurate it is crossed out. Since it is necessary, it remains legible'.¹⁴ This would, however, be dishonest for the following reasons. Not the least of these would be the claims of this discussion for high theoretical stakes unsupported by a reading of one poem only. More importantly, to attempt such a manoeuvre within the domain of commentary would be dishonest to this text, in implying that such strategies lie solely in the hands of the reader. In implying, in fact, that we are presented with a 'closed' and stable text. It is the case, conversely, that the strategy we have been describing is carried out by the text itself. Rather than the poem offering a solution to the ambiguities mentioned above, such ambiguities are dramatized within its very operations:

We can gain a sense of this operation by attending more closely to the ekphrastic citation of Poussin, and his *Dance to the Music of Time*, concentrating on the manner of this intertextual moment, as well as the matter. Previously, we considered the narrated detail of this moment: of the painting as representation, what is represented, together with its status as a product of mind-time, and as a metaphor for it. In addition, however, the poem invites us to consider the *narrating* of this moment. If the Narrated 'I' in the poem forms a representation of the temporal moment, so too does the Narrating 'I' of the poem itself. We might usefully recall here the distinction in linguistic theory between the subject of *l'énoncé* (or subject of the enounced, the subject as signified within a given enunciation as signifier) and subject of *l'énonciation* (or enunciating subject, the subject as agent of the enunciation).¹⁵ Within this poem, a 'still-bound fête' is said to be made by Poussin, by the enounced speaker, and, crucially, by the enunciating 'I', the poem itself. All are representors, functioning within the discourses in which mind-time works. The ambivalence of this position is augmented by the line 'But all this is a dilettante's lie'. Initially, the line attacks the deceit of mind-

time. However, within this established position of complicity with the representative strategies of mind-time, the line augments the complicity of the enunciating subject with the subject of the enounced. Any position you or I hoped to achieve 'outside' mind-time as representation, objectifying it or setting oneself at a distance from it, is denounced. All this is a lie; yet we are within the lie; we must be in it to call it a lie; we must make use of it to call it a lie; hence our wholesale denunciation of this enunciation is a lie also.

We can go further in the implications of this statement: 'a// this is a lie - all of it, even the statement 'this is a lie'? Jacques Lacan has made much of the implications of the paradoxical nature of the statement 'I am lying', which means one must be telling the truth, etc.¹⁶ In this poem, the statement effectively encapsulates the position of the subject in mind-time, where it is caught with the position of double-bind within representation - to tell the truth about representation you must represent, i.e. you must lie, which means in some way telling a different kind of truth, which is, in its own way, a kind of lying. Given this, we can say that the poem forbids any position, any presence, 'outside' mind-time, and those related discourses for which it serves as metaphor. All one can do is articulate its inauthenticity; but, as Paul de Man has written, 'to know inauthenticity is not the same as to be authentic' - particularly, we might add, when in the very act of knowing, one must make use of that inauthenticity one claims to identify as inauthentic.¹⁷

This is as good an articulation as any of a particular use of irony, similar in design to the processes of discursivity described in the following passage by Roland Barthes:

It is because language is not dialectical (does not allow the third term other than as pure oratorical flourish rhetorical assertion, pious hope) that discourse (discursivity) moves, in its historical impetus, by *clashes*. A new discourse can only emerge as the *paradox* which goes against (and often goes for) the surrounding or preceding *doxa*, can only see the day as difference, distinction, working loose *against* what sticks to it.¹⁸

This is a sense of irony which forbids silence, yet is infused with the inaccuracy of its own enunciation; at the same time, and vitally, it forbids a position outside this speech which can be arrived at uncomplicatedly. To remodel a previous phrase, since the word

is necessary, it is legible; since it is inaccurate, it is crossed out. In outlining such a position, it is useful to recall the ambiguity in MacNeice's position which begun this discussion.² From a Marxist position (oratorical?) there was little to choose between Charades at self-regarding Cambridge and ungrounded reflections on time. In the light of the previous discussion, we can perhaps re-orientate this notion, and suggest that there may have been little to choose between Cambridge blasphemy and Marxist blasphemy; both were delusively assumed to occupy a position outside the discourse they hoped to challenge or counteract. If nothing else, MacNeice's position on time, representation, and textuality is without these delusions. It is, perhaps, about time we examined this 'without' more thoroughly.

Time, Change, History: 'The brandy glass', 'The glacier', 'Meeting point', 'Train to Dublin'.

In order to proceed with this discussion it is necessary to examine our terms once again, and take stock of what has been called 'MacNeice's obsession with flux and stasis'.¹⁹ Although frequently referred to in discussions of MacNeice's work, these terms are often insufficiently examined by commentators. On the one hand, there has been a tendency to reify concepts such as 'flux' without a supporting definition of this principle, or adequate discrimination between types of flux or, indeed, of stasis. Such a tendency leads to a less than useful abstraction in terms which might already be considered abstract enough. From this follows the second insufficiently explored area: the relation of time, flux, stasis to other issues, equally 'obsessive' for MacNeice: representation, society, subjectivity. As our discussion of 'August' shows, neither of these areas of discussion are as straightforward as they might initially suggest. We must consider the complexity of the issues themselves - in isolation and in relation to one another - the sometimes difficult relation of these to other thirties issues, and, perhaps most important of all, the considerable ambivalence, the refusal to rest with or condone any one position, that characterizes MacNeice's examination.

In a valuable recent discussion, Peter McDonald has gone some way in considering these terms, recognizing this ambivalence, and exploring its implications. In

particular, a notion of 'Time' is seen to continually undermine a period identification with, and championing of, 'History':

In *Poems* MacNeice had used the idea of the present tense as a manifestation of uncontrollable temporal flux in ways that undermined familiar *New Country* patterns of 'historical' coherence. The poet's preoccupation with time may be traced back to some of his very early work, and in the late thirties this concern became absolutely central to MacNeice's work, the present tense growing more urgent and subversive than before.²⁰

As the thirties progressed, McDonald argues, the 'subversive' nature of this concern became more and more disquieting:

...his writing later in the thirties acknowledges more openly the desire for coherence, for the cold comforts of history as well as the hectic rush of time. Even then, MacNeice realized that 'History' would still be trumped by time, in the same way as the self's coherence could be disrupted by the other outside it. (p. 67)

Although this distinction between a purposeful, coherent process and its destabilizing 'other' is undoubtedly useful, it requires modification in a number of ways. The simplest observation would be that thirties writers were not always so fully optimistic, so sure that history was without its destructive force.²¹ More importantly, one is tempted to say that McDonald is here dealing with two concepts of history, rather than with distinct realms of history and time. One, as he implies, understands history as coherent, knowable and amenable to control. This is an essentially optimistic belief. The other sees history as incoherent, resistant to understanding, and chaotic in a way which grants few favours to the subject immersed in it. However, to make this distinction one between notions of history rather than between time and history too glibly is really to risk causing more problems than one solves. One such problem would be the daunting prospect of offering a new definition of 'time', distinct from these two senses of history. Another, more important, would be to miss McDonald's sense that MacNeice subverts the notions of other thirties writers by a different understanding of change in human affairs. In place of a 'historical' perspective, which hopes to identify a non-personal agency and then relate the personal to this agency, we have what we might call a 'temporal' understanding. This privileges the perspective of the personal, of the subject, without necessarily granting it any security or stability. So as much as the

'hectic rush of time' allows a sense of bright multiplicity, it risks a sense of unknowable chaos, to which notions of 'history' can act as 'cold comfort', but which are always 'trumped by time'.

However, our reading of 'August', with its sense of the understanding of temporality as a shared collective activity, might imply that, wishes to the contrary, the categories of 'history' and 'time' have a tendency to merge. Instead of two discrete types of understanding, each with its own object (public; private) and perspective (stable; unstable), it is possible to discern notions of personal life being stabilized within a historical ('*New Country*') frame of reference, and of history giving way to a hectic rush for which only a certain *kind* of historical understanding can act as cold comfort. Hence, if the *New Country* writers were guilty of a sense of stability and optimism unwarranted by the facts, MacNeice might have been guilty of displacing an essentially subject-based mode of understanding on agencies to which it was inappropriate. Historical and temporal modes of understanding do in fact shade into different views, and different priorities, about this same non-personal entity. But if one consequence of this would be, in MacNeice's case, to make hopelessly chaotic what some might argue is in part understandable by other means, another would be to introduce a different kind of stability, a curiously disguised sense of order. This sense of stability and order proceeds from the way time itself might be conceived within a particular historical context. McDonald's juxtaposition of thirties 'history' with 'time' implies the juxtaposition of an artificial system with a concrete, unavoidable condition of experience, which is assumed to be 'given'. Without question, time is a condition of history. 'August', however, shows that although time does seem to work as a 'given', it is nevertheless subject to construction. This construction does not only work against a sense of temporality as some natural condition which can be taken for granted. In addition, it points to an understanding of temporality in which the subject's own sense of time is produced by forces which can be described as non-individual, and is in fact potentially *historical*.

From this we might draw the following conclusions. If time in its entirety, time as *difference* is something we cannot entirely get hold of, one way in which we attempt to get hold of it is through the imposition of a construct, which is in fact marked by stability. Change within this construct cannot be more than a shadow of real change, and is rather best understood as an agent for the assertion of presence (what was here is now gone) than a means of grasping the full instability of time as difference. If, therefore, *New Country* writers introduced a sense of stability that was factitious, we should be equally cautious of introducing new stabilities in place of them. One such stability might be this notion of 'time'. 'August' shows how the apparently unstable can mask notions of presence which efface the action of time as difference, covertly introducing notions reliant on stability and presence. To contrast a notion of time with that of history runs the risk of repeating this manoeuvre. Furthermore, it takes as natural condition what is in fact an artificial construct. In addition, it privileges the perspective of the subject, unstable or otherwise, as the ground for understanding of the non-personal force of history. In making a claim for the historicity of MacNeice's position my aim is not to recuperate a sense of history as a necessarily understandable force, from which stable point we should base our understanding of the subject. Rather it is the reverse. The notion of time as historical, and of this historicity of 'mind time' as stabilizing, must give way to a sense of time as difference. But this is not to propose a realm beyond history, or an instability which can be contrasted with the stability of (historical) mind-time. This instability through difference is the instability of history. Similarly, though the subject is destabilized here, this destabilization cannot be deemed a-historical, any more than time can be considered a fixed, definable, given 'condition' against which to define, in turn history. Here absolute instability is absolute historicity, and vice-versa. This is not merely a different way of saying that history is unstable. Previously, it was the perspective of the subject which posited this assertion. Here the subject is destabilized because of the instabilities within history, of the making over of (historical) mind-time to difference.

To gain a full sense of this historical sense of time, together with the importance of construction and instability, we should consider the ambivalence engendered in MacNeice's presentation of temporality, as well as his concern with notions of temporality as stable. One of the most intriguing qualities of 'August' is that for all its subtle de-mystifying force regarding change and stasis within notions of time, the poem finally reinstates what it claims to dismiss. First, by its activity within a double-bind of truth/lie. Second, by returning to a sense of lack (albeit in a different form) that the poem began with. For instance, in answer to an assumed presence within, or of, the moment we are told that 'we cannot catch hold of things'. But do we not still want to do so? We might assume that the closure of the moment in an illusory, or imaginary, stasis is motivated by a sense of desire, or lack, culminating in this false presence. But does the disclosure of the imaginary nature of this stasis do away with this sense of lack, or merely reinstate it in a more explicit and thoroughgoing manner? Before, we were aware that we could not 'hold' the past, now its absence inhabits the present too. Does this mean that one is liberated from the past, and a sense of deprivation and nostalgic yearning, since we need no longer mourn the passing of something which never was to begin with? Or, indeed, does the absence which now inhabits the present lead us to yearn for some as yet unformulated presence, much in the manner of what post-structuralist theory calls the transcendental signified: the point within a structure of pure difference which transcends this structure, the one item possessed of a self-sufficient identity which gives meaning to all the others. Such a position may lead us far from the usual notion of MacNeice as a 'nostalgic' poet.²² If this is a nostalgia it is not for qualities of the past, but, to use a postmodernist catch-phrase, a nostalgia for the future. Here, the conventional yearnings of the nostalgic for the past are displaced, in full awareness of lack and desire for presence, upon the future. Desire is not diminished, but is now relocated within the horizon of the future.

We have, moreover, gone some way from the notion of MacNeice as unquestioningly endorsing the bright multiplicity and variety of flux. To be sure, 'August' is full of images which render stasis as a kind of stagnation, petrification and

death. However, it is much quieter about the alternatives: 'breathlessly the same' might imply a sense of brilliant exhilaration. It can equally well imply, as in 'Now that the shapes of mist' a state or entity devoid of the breath of human presence, the authenticating 'voice' or speech of the subject replaced, or put in the context of, the ego-less 'writing' of the text. Added to which, of course, is the notion of this state of difference carrying this new sense of absence, or lack, mentioned above. And can the absence of 'tomb-like' qualities immediately imply a liberating sense of life for the subject? To describe a state of petrification does not automatically imply that the alternative is a condition of 'life' which the subject can easily achieve or inhabit. Is s/he able to conceive of or inhabit any position fully outside the imaginary time which the poem inhabits? Or is the subject constrained to inhabit the realm of the imaginary with only the knowledge of the inauthenticity of this position as comfort? So, 'stasis' could be read in terms dominated by petrification or by stability, depending on whether we read 'flux' as multiplicity, chaos, or as inhabited by a paining absence.

At this point it may be useful to replace what we have known as 'mind-time' with another term. Lacanian theory has given us the category of the 'Imaginary' as a site of identification of the subject with an 'Ideal "I"' during the 'Mirror stage'. The image is 'ideal' in its coherence and stability. Yet this image is undermined by the creation of the unconscious, which is identified with lack, and desire. The image is not the thing, but a 'stand-in,' or signifier, for the thing. The unconscious works to remedy this deficiency through the processes of desire, producing in its turn a subject in process.²³ For the remainder of this discussion I will use the term 'Imaginary time' to denote that structure of temporality described in 'August', using the term to imply notions of stasis, stability, identification by the subject, in addition to the 'undermining' of this identification by the operations of difference.

The notion of nostalgia, often invoked in relation to MacNeice, requires clarification here. Ordinarily, the nostalgic yearns for the return of something which is now lost, leaving a discerned absence, or a poorer version of a past reality. Given our sense of imaginary time in which the nostalgic operates, we can conclude that it is not

only his sense of a presence which departs (since, by departing, it cannot be a presence) which is contradictory. In addition, by virtue of the fact that he inhabits imaginary time, we must conclude that his sense of a lost presence is replaced by another moment in some way inhabited by presence, even though the contents of this moment, so to speak, are inferior to that of the past. The perspective of time as difference shares a sense of absence, in that it admits the trace of the absent other in asserting time as passage. It is, though, a very different kind of absence, which is *subversively part* of the structure of imaginary time, undermining it rather than replacing some imputed presence now wholly lost. It cannot admit that the moment ever existed as presence. MacNeice hints at this perspective in the later poem 'Nostalgia' (CP, p. 205; written 1942). The nostalgic is described as 'longing / For what was never home', as 'homesick for the hollow / Heart of the Milky way'. Both these statements assert a desire for something which holds an illusory fullness which in reality is inhabited by absence. MacNeice here departs from a sense of nostalgia as a falsification of a state of affairs, to a sense of the nostalgic in some way dealing with the stuff of time itself. In the thirties MacNeice provides one example which is fully nostalgic in this sense, and in the sense that nostalgia, as a product of imaginary time, does not only posit a lost presence, but can achieve an illusory replacement of this lost presence in the imagined present.

It is 'The brandy glass' which (CP, p. 84) is fully informed by a sense of nostalgia, in a manner which is significant for our analysis of time as stasis or passage/flux, and the ambivalence which this engenders: 'Only let it form within his hands once more - / The moment cradled like a brandy glass. / Sitting alone in the empty dining hall...'. As in 'August' the relation of the subject to time, and to temporal relations, is described in terms of *touch*. This will recur later in our discussion. Here we can emphasize the notion of the moment being present, palpably *there* for the subject, that the subject stands outside this moment, yet remains in full contact with it, and that the moment is 'caught' or captured, held as a permanence by the subject. The subject, therefore, involved in temporal relations, hopes to transcend them: the moment, if held,

would give pleasure because of the overwhelming sense of departure and loss. Yet the belief that this can be accomplished is undercut by the narrative progression of the poem itself:

From the chandeliers the snow begins to fall
 Piling around carafes and table legs
 And chokes the passage of the revolving door.
 The last diner, like a ventriloquist's doll
 Left by his master, gazes before him, begs:
 'Only let it form within my hands once more.'

It is important to note that time is not depicted here as a 'hectic rush', a dissolving hail of data and discordant impressions. Instead we have figures suggestive of fixity and stasis, a quiet negotiation of beginnings and endings. In 'To a Communist' we saw snow offering a sense of imaginary stasis, to be undercut by temporal progression. Here the image implies burying, freezing preservation. The passage or movement of the door is 'choked' by what follows. The speaker yearns for the reappearance of a lost moment of plenitude and presence; one which, perhaps, will differ from its last appearance in that it will now be permanent. As in 'August' we can say that if the moment is now lost, then it was never properly there - as presence - in the first place. Two consequences emerge from this desired transcendence of the self, and of the moment, in time. The desire is shown to be fallacious in its assumption of presence, and that the lost moment can ever return as anything other than a memory or sign. More importantly, however, the desire for permanence is served by an onerous sense of desolation, isolation, and petrification. Instead of holding time, the speaker is himself held by time. On the one hand, time is an inescapable condition, on the other, by attempting to transcend this condition the speaker renders himself bereft of its capacity for change. Instead of permanence one enters death. Hence the reference to the 'ventriloquist's doll'. It is the speaker who is the doll, controlled by time, animated by it albeit in a deterministic fashion. The attempt to overthrow this determination, and its conditions of loss and absence, in redemption and presence render the speaker deserted by the controlling, mastering force. Rather than emancipation, the speaker encounters desertion.

We have, then, a sense that time is an inescapable burden for the subject. Yet the loss of time in an attempt to transcend or control it is even more terrible. From this position comes an essential ambivalence in the poem, which is formulated much more forcibly than in 'August'. The speaker 'begs' for the moment. From this the desire is not simply demythologized, becoming an illusion exposed. The illusion is shown to have grounds in denial and lack, and in the disquieting consequences of the alternative. You can't have the moment, and if this wasn't bad enough, the moment was never here. Hence, the nostalgic wants to make time stop in three ways. First, by desiring that an irretrievably lost moment return. Secondly, by having it return as presence. Thirdly, in the assumption that it was available as presence to begin with: that it did ever indeed 'form within his hands' as presence or totality. In this last detail, therefore, his activity typifies conventional means of ordering time, rather than deviating from them. As in 'August' perceptions of the past are used to reveal attitudes towards the present moment. Again, it is in the loss of the moment, that which should render its quality of *passage* most exactly, that the presence of the moment is asserted. In this poem the speaker is 'absorbed' in time irretrievably. But he is also absorbed in, or by, his identification with time as stasis or presence, to the extent that it stops, and he is trapped within it.

In 'The glacier' (CP, p. 24) MacNeice also shows a deviation from conventional time-consciousness where he applies the cinematic metaphor for time-conception to reveal a sense of time dominated by stasis. The poem sets the grounds for 'tampering with time' in a suggestive manner: 'Just as those who gaze get higher than those who climb / A paradox unfolds on any who can tamper with time'. The poem carries the implication that the 'gaze' can disrupt notions of time because such notions are themselves constituted through the gaze in connection with 'representation' of temporal progression, a representative frame. By gazing, instead of climbing, one achieves a reflective, self-conscious, position in relation to this framing, in contradistinction to climbing or 'working' through time in a unreflective empirical activity. Looking at the gaze provides more insight than using the gaze as an end to further activity, since the

instrumental nature of this gaze in relation to this activity can thereby be discovered or 'unfolded':

Where bus encumbers upon bus and fills its slot
 Speed up the traffic in a quick motion film of thought
 Till bus succeeds bus so identically sliding through
 That you cannot catch the fraction of a chink between the two,
 But they all go so fast, bus after bus, day after day,
 Year after year, that you cannot mark any headway,
 But the whole stream of traffic seems to crawl
 Carrying its dead boulders down a glacier wall
 And we who have always been haunted by the fear of becoming stone
 Cannot bear to watch that catafalque creep down.

As in 'August' we have a sense here that linear, or imaginary, time is a type of change which disguises its actual reliance on notions of stasis and presence. This reliance is revealed when its essence of change is intensified, when it is speeded up. The patterns or elements of stasis reveal themselves, or 'unfold', like a secret code suddenly disclosed. The key to this notion of underlying 'stone' in a process apparently given to change and fluidity is that reference to 'bus succeed[ing] bus so identically sliding through'. What the 'quick motion film of thought' relies on is a notion of difference, the difference between one moment and the next, being predicated on identity, rather than the other way round. When speeded up, this identity, the poem suggests, continually repeats itself ceaselessly. In addition to the evident notion of one bus looking identical to another, therefore, we have a sense of the 'frame' (to use the cinematic metaphor) being identical, in that it relies on identity for its functioning within consciousness. It thus reveals its resistance to a sense of time conceived as fully in passage, as difference, where, presumably, instead of identity, an intensification of time-as-passage would reveal this structure of difference. In addition, the identity of the discontinuous moment would be revealed to be the result of its multiplicitous difference from all other moments, in the same way that signs are within a signifying system 'without positive terms'. The poem is far from explicit, however, in how this might be achieved. Here, in contrast to 'The Brandy glass', it is the one whose gaze shifts from the imaginary progression of linear time, who disrupts time by moving against it in memory, or its remnants, or signs, who achieves a liberation. Those who fear becoming stone:

...turn away to seemingly slower things
 And rejoice there to have found the speed of fins and wings
 In the minnow-twisting of the latinist who alone
 Nibbles and darts through the shallows of the lexicon
 Or among plate-glass cases in sombre rooms where
 Eyes appraise the glazen life of majolica ware
 Or where a gardener with trowel and rheumatic pains
 Pumps up the roaring sap of vegetables through their veins.

It would appear that the only way out of this underlying structure of stasis within linear time is to disrupt its process by looking backwards, as it were. This, we should note is not the same as the backward gaze of the nostalgic. The poem explicitly refuses the notion of any achieved 'depth' or full reinstating of the past. The latinist moves through the 'shallows of the lexicon', he has the signs and not the things. Moreover, he has the *shallows* of the lexicon rather than its depths. Even the language suffers from its absence in time. Equally, the 'life' of the majolica is 'glazen', or removed from full existence. In addition, that is, to being a sign or fragment of a past civilization, rather than the civilization itself as a whole. We can here gain a sense of identity through difference, in that it is through the difference from linear time and current civilization that the majolica ware gathers its significance. This denial of depth seems to be contradicted by the organicist metaphor which ends the poem. We should, however, recognize its metaphoricity within the defamiliarizing structure of the poem - instead of this image granting depth to the others, it describes their nature *when contrasted* with the stasis of imaginary time. In any event, it is not so much 'nature' which is described in the final image of the gardener, but the appropriation of nature through culture. The figure remains indeterminately poised, then, between nature and culture.

There are, therefore, two conflicting features in these last lines. It is unclear whether the speaker is assumed to have 'got among' the past through this activity, actually broken the rules of linear time in the appreciation of the past, or is simply disrupting it. The sense of the 'shallows' of the latinist, both caught within a system like a 'minnow' and denying that system depth, would seem to suggest that there is no 'depth' to this movement, but that it can still be read as a liberating influence; particularly, it seems, if we must associate depth with the horizons of stable, illusory, imaginary.

Given this attachment to flux as a welcome multiplicity after the illusory closure of imaginary time - which concentrate on notions of seeming impermanence or desired stability, both of which mask a reliance on assumed presence - the following lines must strike us as incongruous:

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

And they were neither up nor down;
 The stream's music did not stop
 Flowing through heather, limpid brown,
 Although they sat in a coffee shop
 And they were neither up nor down.

The bell was silent in the air
 Holding its inverted poise -
 Between the clang and clang a flower,
 A brazen calyx of no noise:
 The bell was silent in the air.

John Montague has written that this poem ('Meeting point'; *CP*, p. 167) is among those constituting 'testimonies to the power of time to efface love. Love, indeed, can only exist outside time'.²⁴ This view is supported by E. R. Dodds, who comments that 'always the stairs would move again; time would return, and the melancholy with it'.²⁵ In an important sense we cannot dispute this. Time cannot momentarily stop in any literal sense. It either stops or it doesn't. And as much as the poem exhibits and celebrates a figural end to time, it implies the illusory nature of this ceasing, together with the melancholy which will follow. But what should concern us here, in the context of our discussion, is the apparent reversal of a previous position. The melancholy burden of temporality in previous poems has been noted. But here the moment of stasis, contesting with this melancholy, is celebrated. What, if anything, distinguishes this moment from others, so that the implication of stagnation or petrification does not follow? What, in this situation, are the implications for our sense of time as difference? To this, I would add: how seriously should we take this moment of supposed transcendence, possessed as it is of details such as:

The camels crossed the miles of sand

That stretched around the cups and plates;
 The desert was their own, they planned
 To portion out the stars and dates:
 The camels crossed the miles of sand.

Time was away and somewhere else.
 The waiter did not come, the clock
 Forgot them and the radio waltz
 Came out like water from a rock:
 Time was away and somewhere else.

It is hard to resist the implication of bathos in the time-defying lines. They are so reminiscent of details from an exotic 1930s Hollywood classic, something in the manner of *East Meets West* (1936), with irreverent puns on 'stars', and (in this desert scene) 'dates', biblical recounting of 'radio waltzes' in addition to the poem's chiming nursery-rhyme metre.²⁶ This is a reading which, perhaps, must lie in wait when considering other angles.

Initially, however, we can say that this presentation of stasis differs from others in two significant respects. First, in contrast to 'The brandy glass' the moment is not presented as one 'in' time, where time itself is made to stop, or the attempt is made to make it stop. Time here is 'away': using a spatial metaphor this incident, or this moment, takes place outside time, rather than commanding it from within. Secondly, for the first time in our discussion we are presented with the palpable entrance of the other: 'two people with the one pulse'. Later: 'time was away and she was here'. This detail adds significance to the position outside time, since it alerts us to the felt need for presence which, it is implied, time will deny. And moreover, a presence which time will destroy. So, time is not 'stopped' by the will or desire of the isolated subject acting upon it, or within conceptions of it; rather it stops through the apprehension of a presence external to it, and which counteracts it.

Moreover, what we find in this position of stasis outside of time is a presence with a variety of its own ('two people with the one pulse'). A presence endowed, moreover with a sense of difference which contributes to unity, rather than unspecified variety:

Her fingers flicked away the ash
 That bloomed again in tropic trees:
 Not caring if the markets crash

When they had forests such as these,
Her fingers flicked away the ash.

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

The absence of time imparts a vividness to the scene, and one which transforms figures previously suggestive of death into organicist metaphors for creation and life: the tolling bell becomes (momentarily) a flower, or 'brazen calyx', water flows from a rock, ash on a cigarette 'blossoms' again. We have a presence, therefore, which time cannot supply, and one which is not artificial or coercive, possessed of an illusory closure or stasis, because of the presence of the other. The reference to 'God or whatever means the Good', alerts us to the transcendental quality of this moment, calling as it does on notions of Platonic ideals and, we should add, a plenitude of meaning ('whatever *means* the good').

However, as we have noted, time does not stop like this, and certainly not the time as difference with which we have become acquainted. The implication that time can begin again should infiltrate this moment as it has done in other presentations of stasis. Yet to argue for this in this poem is really to miss the point. Because it is in the nature of the presence exhibited in this poem that the absence endured within temporality is understood. The fuller the presence of this transcendental moment, the greater the absence of the moment within temporality. It is this which undercuts the poem, the presence felt is to be substituted by the destruction of this moment, and by the structure of absence and lack which inhabits all inspected temporality. The presence of the other can serve as a metaphor for this presence - what was lacking within time is found outside it, and by another means (in intersubjectivity). Yet all the way through the poem the suggestion runs that there is no outside of time, that the transcendental ideal can only tell us of the cold temporal reality - a reality to which this ideal is a response, and one by which this response must be qualified and muted.

'Meeting point' is not, however, the only poem to endorse a movement towards the defeat of time. Indeed, it is possible to see this poem itself as a response to the

earlier 'Train to Dublin' (CP, p. 27). If 'Meeting point' seeks to examine a position outside of time, 'Train to Dublin' stays resolutely within, yet seeks to offer a sense of presence which comes through the *progression* of time - a presence achieved *through*, rather than *in*, time:

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

The poem's opening focuses on a notion of subjectivity as incomplete. Thoughts are 'half-thought', and are then made to divide by the action of the train. We start, then, from a position of flux and deferment. Although apprehended by the speaker, experience is always beyond him, intangible. The familiar figure of 'holding' ('gather my mind up in my fist') is here used to resist any sense of full apprehension and control by the speaker. In this context the line 'this is the way that animal's lives pass' seems odd. We are, perhaps more used to considering this kind of self-consciousness as a uniquely human feature, one that distinguishes consciousness from the mental activities of animals. It is precisely because animals do not possess this capacity for self-reflection that they are distinct from humans. But this stanza forms its meaning by focusing on the limits of this distinguishing *cogito*. It suggests that, although there is indeed this capacity for self-examination, this examination will always remain incomplete. Full self knowledge, in other words, will always be beyond the thinker. As such, this distinguishing feature, when examined in itself, is an illusion. If animals lack this capacity, so do humans. Paradoxically, it is through the exercising of this capacity that its claims to completion can be challenged. Through thought, the incompleteness of thought is discovered.

It should come as no surprise that consideration of temporality is not far behind this analysis. 'The train's rhythm never relents', we are told, 'the telephone posts / Go striding back like the legs of time'. As in 'Now that the shapes of mist', the metaphor of a vehicle for the processes of consciousness is of vital importance. This poem is far more explicit about this figural device:

The train keeps moving and the rain holds off,
 I count the buttons on the seat, I hear a shell
 Held hollow to the ear, the mere
 Reiteration of integers, the bell
 That tolls and tolls, the monotony of fear.

At times we are doctrinaire, at times we are frivolous,
 Plastering over the cracks, a gesture making good,
 But the strength of us does not come out of us.
 It is we, I think, are the idols and it is God
 Has set us up as men who are painted wood,

And the trains carry us about...

A number of recurrent features should be noted here. If we take the train as metaphor for conventional ordering or reality - a vehicle which 'carries us about', we should note the repetition of the notion of stasis mixed with that of movement. The train moves, but the traveller is aware of stability, stasis, within the train itself. From this position 'inside' the vehicle come the observations of what is occurring 'outside'. As we shall see, the poem finally confuses and disrupts this sense of 'inside' and 'outside'. For the moment, however, we should be aware of the indications of repetition - those features which will later reappear in 'The glacier'. Here the 'monotony of fear' allows a sense both of fear as a constant companion to this traveller, together with the 'fear' which is induced by the repetition of the one, the identical, seeking to generate from itself a structure of differentiation in identity, rather than being the product of such a structure. This is, as we might guess, presented as an illusion. This 'one' is in fact the 'reiteration of integers' - items characterised by their relation to death (the tolling of the bell) and their hollowness, or absence.

How might we characterize this fear more fully? What is the fear of? The reference to the doctrinaire and the frivolous allows a sense of this being the fear of leaving the train, of breaking with the conventions and procedures of established discourses. The sense of the doctrinaire and the frivolous indicates different positions within these discourses; they do not allow for any position outside it however. The strength does not come out of us. Any strength which *does* come out of us is not our own, but that of the discourses in which the subject exists. In addition, what potential for strength that the individual does possess lies dormant and useless. Hence the

inversion of the Idol/Man relation. This reversal at first glance appears to be presenting a conservative comment on the disruptions to this relation proposed by, say, Nietzsche.²⁷ In fact this is not the case. In considering the 'twilight of the idols' thinkers like Nietzsche provided a sense of the characterizing qualities of idols, as the result of human desires and, of course, fear. Against this revolt of the slaves should come the encounter of these idols with the *Urbmensch*. But MacNeice's poem offers no such resolution. Instead of considering the origins of the idols, and their demise with a new originating moment, the overthrowal of the ethics of fear, 'Train to Dublin' shows the previous genealogy of these discourses. Whether the idols are the invention of human will or not, subsequent human will is the invention of the idols. The 'men' who follow in the path of the idols live, in their identification with these idols, in their image, by following them, or by being subject to the will of which such idols are a metonym. And the effect of such an identification is the creation of a 'wooden' or inauthentic being - inauthentic both by its identification with this representation, image or figure, and by the content of such a representation.

The poem's own break with these discourses is different in character:

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

All over the world people are toasting the King,
 Red lozenges of light as each one lifts his glass,
 But I will not give you any idol or idea, creed or king,
 I give you the incidental things which pass
 Outward through space exactly as each was.

The mode of departure here is to concentrate on and render up the 'things themselves', rather than the things as they appear within established discourses. Such an enterprise implies that the discourse which conventionally represents things obscures their true nature. If we are the product of our own creations, so are the things which this production sees. Notably, the things are represented in this new light as being *in passage*, or underwritten by their membership of a structure of difference. In this case the structure is both temporal and spatial:

I give you the disproportion between labour spent
 And joy at random; the laughter of the Galway sea
 Juggling with spars and bones irresponsibly,
 I give you the toy Liffey and the vast gulls,
 I give you fuschia hedges and whitewashed walls.

I give you the smell of Norman stone, the squelch
 Of bog beneath your boots, the red bog-grass.

This detail is vividly rendered. But there is a problem with this presentation which undercuts this plenitude and multiplicity. MacNeice's use of the format of the toast ('I give you') introduces a moment which is both social and celebratory. The king is presented and given approval by a consensus ('The King!'). These performative and ritualistic linguistic moments recur in MacNeice's work. In this instance it is the communicative transaction between the speaker and implied reader to which our attention is directed. The detail is presented as a toast, to which we should assent. But it is presented also as a gift - the detail is rendered, given, by speaker to reader. Yet, we are forced to conclude, we are not given the things, but signification of the things. And we are not given access to pure signs so much as to their representation in the speaker's discourse. And, moreover, this detail is not provided to us when we are freely 'not on trains', it is observed, and passed on to us, from the train. Thus, the very detail which is supposed to liberate us from this vehicle is a product of it:

I would like to give you more but I cannot hold
 This stuff within my hands and the train goes on;
 I know that there are further syntheses to which,
 As you have perhaps, people at last attain
 And find that they are rich and breathing gold.

Within the rhetorical structure of the poem, the 'outside' of the train, where things appear both as presence and as themselves is an impossible ideal. We can only see within the train; the train of time is always moving, the mistake we should not make is to see things as identities rather than as difference.

History and Difference: 'The heated minutes', 'The sunlight on the garden'.

MacNeice's movement, in 'Meeting point' and 'Train to Dublin', towards attention to communication and the other raises a significant issue. Previously we noted the possibility of seeing time conceived in terms of presence not as a natural phenomenon,

but as a historical, social, or ideological one. Time is characterised as the function of a particular social situation. MacNeice is far less explicit about precisely *how* a notion of presence or closure might interact with a particular social situation of which it is a product. Previously we have noted various departures from socially constructed closures within imaginary personal time into areas of time as difference which produce either a disturbing flux or a welcome multiplicity. To see this multiplicity as something to be welcomed assumes a relatively stable subject position both to welcome it, and to have no fears of being overwhelmed by it. As the decade progressed, MacNeice's sense of this changed. Multiplicity gives over to flux when it threatens the subject. To see history entering this flux is, crucially, not to view it within the terms of subject, pleased or otherwise, but to see history entering this flux in its own terms. It is history which allowed the subject's departure into time as difference, but when history itself enters this realm, it is not the perspective of subject which is privileged, since this very subject position, marked out and constructed by history, is imperiled. Thus, the conclusion to lack, deferment, through time is not so much a completion in a final goal or 'synthesis', but the radical destabilization of this subject within a structure of difference.

This historical quality of time, and its consequences for the subject, can be approached through 'The heated minutes' (*CP*, p. 86):

The heated minutes climb
 The anxious hill,
 The tills fill up with cash,
 The tiny hammers chime
 The bells of good and ill,
 And the world piles with ash
 From fingers killing time.

If you were only here
 Among these rocks,
 I should not feel the dull
 The taut and ticking fear
 That hides in all the clocks
 And creeps inside the skull -
 If you were here, my dear.

The now-familiar images for MacNeice's rendering of time-consciousness recur here:

bells, ash, clocks, as in 'Meeting Point'. Indeed, the presence of the other is clearly-

important in this poem too, exploring as it does a point in time when the other is not 'there' in a moment outside time. She is away, we might say, and time is here. A sense of approaching doom pervades the poem. The nature of this doom, or the anxiety related to it, is unstated. We cannot be sure whether it is the result of some past aberration, known or unknown; or, indeed what the precise fate of the speaker is, and how the other could offer a solution to this problem. Instead, we have a fragment, without identifiable beginning or end, allowing a sense of groundless, or unexplained, anxiety. What this allows is the chance to consider a state of anxiety produced not solely by what is to occur, but by what is occurring at the present. A fear not of what time will produce, so much as the very stuff of time itself; the vehicle in which this 'production' will take place. Such a production may be related to this condition, though not necessarily so.

What characterizes this anxiety is the segmentation, martialling, or 'parcelling' of time. The filling of the 'tills with cash', the 'tiny hammers' with 'the bells of good and ill', both produce a sense of temporal progression noted in terms of the market. Time is both packaged and commodified in the terms of this poem. Fingers which 'kill time' suggests a nervous, but purposeless activity. We have a metonymic image of a cigarette smoker. They could equally be those of the till-operator, however, 'killing time' by imposing a certain type of closure upon it as in 'August', consuming it ('the world piles with ash') within an economy of expenditure. This enforced power over time, it would appear, is cause in itself for anxiety or unease. 'The taut and ticking fear / That hides in all the clocks' suggests a sense of tension and tense control. What the poem presents, therefore, is less a sense of an entirely 'temperate zone' being invaded by a destructive force from without, than a disruption from *within*. The anxiety of the moment implies that the apparently calm surface of this temporality which these devices martialled masked an *enforced* closure, a process of force or repression. This repressed 'other' is now revealing itself, as the 'fear which hides inside the clocks', exacting a force in turn, or simply revealing that the apparent serenity and stability of imaginary time *is* maintained by tension or control, in the closure of identity. Given this closure,

and the assumption of identity which characterized previous poems; it would not be too far-fetched to suggest that this 'other' consists of the knowledge that this stable identity is not self-originating, but predicated on difference; and that difference now threatens to reveal itself and engulf this identity. This aspect takes on a sinister edge as it 'creeps inside the skull' - enters the subject; and enters as a predator against the identity which is now struggling so hard to defend itself. This is not an act of human perception or will, as in 'August' or 'Train to Dublin'. This is a motion of time itself, conceived synchronically, or impersonal history, if conceived diachronically. Imaginary time is revealed to be incomplete in its notions of presence. This excluded other is now re-emerging in its own right to circumscribe identity in difference.

It is this sense which should lead us to re-examine one of MacNeice's most famous thirties poems, 'The sunlight on the garden' (*CP*, p. 84). The poem is concerned, from the start, with the dynamics of temporal progression:

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

We have the now familiar sense of time passing here. Initially we might feel that the poem reports nothing but the passing of a moment, the movement from daylight into night. Clearly this sense cannot be overlooked, particularly since it manages to place the action of the poem so effectively. But we should also direct our attention to the nature of the closing of the scene, with its mixture of a sense of stasis and progression, together with the sense of the intangibility of the moment. Hence, the moment 'hardens' as daylight moves into the cool of the evening. Yet, we should note, it also 'hardens' within the apprehension of the speaker, rendered as a presence within the perception of the present, and, of course, as a 'hard' and fast image within memory. With the image of the day fixed thus in consciousness, however, the speaker is also aware that this is merely the apprehension of the moment, and the sunlight, not necessarily the moment itself. 'We cannot cage the minute / Within its nets of gold' -

we cannot fix or hold a passing moment; what we do fix and hold is not the moment but a representation of it. And, furthermore, this is a representation which, by its nature as static, reifies and falsifies the nature of the moment as passage or process. To this we should add, of course, the poem's own status as representation, which 'cages' the moment at the same time as it denies that this can be achieved. Again, we are made aware that we have the sign and not the thing, and one of the qualities which imposes this gap between being and signification is the passage of the moment (where it is emptied of being) and the moment *as passage*, which representation for or in the mind cannot render. Previously, images of 'hardening', in for instance 'August' and 'The Brandy glass', were associated with the 'stoppage' of temporality that occurs within imaginary time. Here, it becomes a feature of its passing. Of course, imaginary time always made room for a *type* of passing, but failed to acknowledge that this passage had any effect on the moment as presence. Instead, this change was either generated by identity, or used (nostalgically) to imply a presence now lost. The difference in this poem is that in 'August' the moment was, within imaginary time, 'hardened' as presence and the denial of passage or difference, from the beginning. An identity was established, and further moments engendered by such a moment. Here, the moment is felt to be in passage, and the 'hardening' which occurs is that of memory. The moment 'grows cold' within the operations of memory, its 'freezing' is that of a remnant, or sign, emptied of being. Hence, the 'coldness' of such a memory serves to indicate the passage of the moment, rather than its continued, or past, presence. The speaker is under no illusion that the memory is to be mistaken for the thing itself or, indeed, that such a representation can offer us a sense of the moment *as passage*. It cannot offer us a full sense of the totality of time, or give a 'full' awareness of the 'full' moment, inhabited as this moment is by absence, and a place in a structure which eludes apprehension. It is this sense of the partial, illusory, and static nature of the representation in memory which distinguishes this 'hard' moment from that of the speaker in 'The brandy glass', where the identification was made by the speaker with an arrested representation of time, which he mistook for time itself. Here, there is no

expressed wish for the moment to return; the speaker knows it cannot. This does not mean that the relic is valueless. But with the value of this relic or sign goes the knowledge that it *is* a sign, its nature designated by the loss of the moment, and thus at a distance from this moment as passage.

A further difference in this poem is the shift to an ethical, and by extension social and historical, basis for this time-consciousness: 'When all is told / We cannot beg for pardon'. That mention of 'pardon' raises the immediate question: pardon for what? Two responses suggest themselves - exoneration for a previously committed transgression or omission; exemption from a fate which is to befall the speaker. Both these senses are important for the poem, set up as they are as inevitable and threatening. Time is here moving forward with an inexorable and destructive momentum in which the representations of the speaker - as images or communicative, social, gestures, carry no power. The movement of time, and the impending fate, exceeds the explanatory capacities of the speaker ('when all is told...'), and circumvents their human force:

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

The 'end' of the free lances offers a sense both of the closure of this freedom, and of its destiny - an end written-in to its beginning, or the nature of its existence. Again, we need not impute some organicist sense to this, so much as recognizing *that* the fate awaiting the speaker is not that which awaits a 'temperate zone' of calm and stasis, but one which reveals what this appearance of calm excludes and represses, and what will inevitably return - the end is unavoidable, it is the earth, not human intention or will which compels this. And *what* it compels is intimately linked to the situation of the speaker. On the one hand, he and his addressee are intimately bound up in this closure and its impending consequences. But he is also at odds with such a position, and has been before. The earth compels a certain fate, causing all to 'descend' into it. But the

reason that these figures are air-borne to start with is their rejection of that which is now being destroyed in this compulsion:

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

The images of flight distance the speaker from the discourses of imaginary time that we encountered in 'August'. Yet the speaker is, whatever his previous position, fully imbricated in the destruction of this order. The quotation from *Antony and Cleopatra*, with its allusive capacities, only serves to ironically comment on this situation. Like the latinist in 'The glacier' this speaker has the capacity to dart around time in the shallows of the lexicon. Yet now this capacity can only be used towards elegy and the knowledge of destruction.

The final stanza of the poem fully encapsulates the speaker's imbrication in, rejection of, complicity with, and innocence of, the closures of imaginary time, together with the fate which befalls these closures:

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

This 'hardening in heart anew' may be read as an indication of a co-option into the structure of imaginary time, one 'hard' moment statically giving way to another in the perception of the present, rather than the past. But it could equally be read as a further, supplementary activity of memory, as the subject holds on to the memory because its passage, though acknowledged, has changed in character. Either way, this 'holding' is itself qualified by the 'gratitude' felt for the moment as passage - a gratitude which fully accepts this passage as unavoidable and necessary. Still, we need to have a sense of what the (unstated) end of the speaker might be. We have two indications of this. First, that time will not be separable, or observable by the speaker, so much as it will, as in 'The brandy glass', absorb him. Second, that the awaited fate indicates an

intensification of the structure of difference noted throughout this discussion. So much so, I think, that the notion of 'identity' recognised and enjoyed by the speaker within such a structure of difference, will be subsumed by absolute or pure difference. We have a threefold change in position, therefore. The speaker is circumscribed by a historical situation; this situation makes identity over to difference; this situation will absorb the speaker as subject. Hence, in this poem, history is not really 'trumped by time'. It is history which here does the trumping, absorbing the subject, together with the perceptions of time, as stable or unstable, equally. In this context, the refusal to retreat into the closures of imaginary time, to still be 'grateful' for the moment and its passage, marks a commitment to difference, and a rejection of inauthenticity, more complete than any we have so far seen. Here 'impurity', when set against the knowledge of 'pure' difference on the one hand, and the 'pure' presence of imaginary time on the other, becomes a commitment which is harrowing in its necessity.

Hence, MacNeice's presentation and critique of temporality can hardly be said to retreat from the issues of thirties writers. Rather he engages with them from a different, more exacting position. Time is presented as one of the essential conditions of subjectivity; yet this subjectivity cannot be dissociated from a social, historical, and ideological context. That MacNeice did not share the optimism or easy assumptions of the mastering of history by the subject that we see in Cornford's poem does not mean that his analysis was any less thoroughgoing. Equally, the concentration on temporality does not reflect a retreat into abstraction or purely individual experience divorced from this historical context. Rather, by exploring such issues he presents their fully historical nature, together with the nature of the struggle that any engagement with history has to encounter.

Notes.

(Place of publication is London unless otherwise indicated).

- 1 Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness: A Phenomenological Essay on Ontology*, translated by Hazel E. Barnes (New York, 1956), p. 159.
- 2 Stephen Spender, *The Destructive Element: A Study of Modern Writers and Beliefs* (1936), p. 81.
- 3 Louis MacNeice, *The Strings are False: An Unfinished Autobiography*, edited by E. R. Dodds (1965), p. 143.
- 4 See Valentine Cunningham, *British Writers of the Thirties*, pp. 71-105; Paul Fussel, *Abroad: British Literary Travelling Between the Wars* (Oxford, 1980), pp. 15-23.
- 5 *The English Auden: Poems, Essays and Dramatic Writings 1927-1939*, edited by Edward Mendelson (1977), p. 210.
- 6 Though they are sometimes understood as more or less equivalent terms, my own use of synecdoche and metonymy draws on that of Hayden White and Paul de Man. White identifies synecdoche as a fundamentally 'integrative' trope: 'in the manner of an *integration* within a whole that is *qualitatively* different from the sum of the parts and of which the parts are but *microscopic* replications' (*Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe* (1973) (p. 35). Where White identifies both synecdoche and metonymy as types of metaphor (p. 34), de Man notes a different classification, and makes an important distinction between 'necessity' (synecdoche) and 'contingency' (metonymy): 'Classical rhetoric generally classifies synecdoche as metonymy, which leads to difficulties characteristic of all attempts at establishing a taxonomy of tropes...The relationship between part and whole can be understood metaphorically...in the organic metaphors dear to Goethe...[By] its spatial nature [synecdoche] creates the illusion of a synthesis by totalization' (*Allegories of Reading: Figural Language in Rousseau, Nietzsche, Rilke and Proust* (1979), p. 63. This study adopts de Man's distinction, and associates synecdoche with metaphor. It can thus be distinguished from metonymy. But I assume that White's 'integrative' relation in identity between part and whole (thus metaphoric) in synecdoche is a necessary component of the trope's activity in the texts under discussion. This kind of integration is undone by the contingency implied in metonymic relations.
- 7 *New Country: Prose and Poetry by the Authors of New Signatures*, edited by Michael Roberts (1933), pp. 183-189.
- 8 Bernard Bergonzi, *Reading the Thirties: Texts and Contexts* (1978), p. 47; see also David Lodge, *The Modes of Modern Writing: Metaphor, Metonymy, and the Typology of Modern Literature* (1977), pp. 188-212.
- 9 Bergonzi, p. 56.
- 10 John Cornford, *Collected Writings*, edited by Jonathan Gallassi (Manchester, 1986), p. 38.
- 11 Reproduced in Anthony Blunt, *Poussin: The A. W. Mellen Lectures in Fine Arts*, 2 vols (1958), I, *Plates*, plate 127.
- 12 Jacques Derrida, *Margins of Philosophy*, translated by Alan Bass (Brighton, 1982), p. 11.

- 13 Derrida, pp. 9, 18; see also Jonathan Culler, *On Deconstruction: Theory and Criticism after Structuralism* (1983), pp. 95-97.
- 14 'Translator's Preface', in Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, translated by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (1976), pp. ix-lxxxvii (p. xiv).
- 15 These terms have become dangerously slippery, and are sometimes even interchangeable in different studies and applications. My usage draws on the applications of Emile Benveniste's categories to the literary text by Tzvetan Todorov, which identifies the subject of *énonciation* with *narrating* subject, *énoncé* with *narrated*. The translation of these categories into Saussurean terms follows that of Ronald Schleifer, *Rhetoric and Death: The Language of Modernism and Postmodern Discourse Theory* (Chicago, Illinois, 1990), pp. 180-81. Schleifer notes that *énonciation* may refer to both signifier and *act* of signification. The association of this term with *agent* of signification, a real person, in both Benveniste and Lacan has led to its confusion with the category of signified, and with *énoncé* as material signifier. In my analysis *énoncé* denotes a signified, which may admit the location of a further signified in the *énonciation*, who will remain different. See Emile Benveniste, *Problems in General Linguistics* (Coral Gables, Florida, 1971), pp. 218, 226-27; Jacques Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, edited by Jacques-Alain Miller, translated by Alan Sheridan (1977), pp. 138-139; Tzvetan Todorov, 'Les Catégories du Recits Littéraire', *Communications*, 8 (1966), pp. 125-47 (p. 146), and 'Language and Literature', in *The Languages of Criticism and the Sciences of Man: The Structuralist Controversy*, edited by Richard Macksey and Eugenio Donato (1970), pp. 125-33 (p.132).
- 16 Jacques Lacan, *Four Fundamental Concepts*, pp. 138-39.
- 17 Paul de Man, *Blindness and Insight: Essays in the Rhetoric of contemporary Criticism*, second edition (1983), p. 214.
- 18 Roland Barthes, *Image Music Text*, edited and translated by Stephen Heath (1979), p. 200.
- 19 Edna Longley, 'Louis MacNeice: Aspects of his Aesthetic Theory and Practice', in *Studies on Louis MacNeice*, edited by Jacqueline Genet and Wynne Hellegouarc'h (Caen, 1988), pp. 51-62 (p. 55).
- 20 Peter McDonald, *Louis MacNeice: The Poet in his Contexts* (Oxford, 1991), p. 66.
- 21 Auden's 'crumpling flood' of history, for instance, though it might 'need no pardon', offers this destructive force, *English Auden*, p. 138.
- 22 See Samuel Hynes, *The Auden Generation: Literature and Politics in England in the 1930s* (1976), p. 333.
- 23 Jacques Lacan, 'The Mirror Stage as Formative of the Function of the "I"', in *Ecrits: A Selection*, translated by Alan Sheridan (1977), pp. 1-7. I am aware that there are important differences between the relations implied in Derrida's *différance* and Lacan's 'Symbolic'. In distinguishing between relations of difference and the imaginary, however, I adopt both thinker's distinction between notions of presence and relations inhabited by difference. I do not mean to imply that *différance* is equivalent to the Symbolic, but point, in the context of my discussion, to similarities between Derridean 'presence' and the Lacanian 'Imaginary'. See Malcolm Bowie, *Lacan* (1991), pp. 91-2, 98-102.
- 24 John Montague, 'Despair and Delight', in *Time Was Away: The World fo Louis MacNeice*, edited by Terence Brown and Alec Reid (Dublin, 1974), pp. 123-27 (p. 125).

- 25 E. R. Dodds, 'Louis MacNeice at Birmingham', in Brown and Reid, pp. 35-38 (p. 37).
- 26 See Alfred Brockman, *The Movie Book: The 1930s* (New York, 1986), p. 333.
- 27 See Friedrich Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols* and *The Anti-Christ*, translated by R. J. Hollingdale (Harmondsworth, 1968), pp. 52-53.

Chapter Three

The Look of the People: MacNeice, Writing and Society (I).

I had never been to a communist meeting before, and what struck me was the fixed attention of the upturned rows of faces; faces of the Berlin working class, pale and prematurely lined, often haggard and ascetic, like the heads of scholars, with thin, fair hair brushing back from their broad foreheads. They had not come here to see each other or to be seen, or even to fulfil a social duty. They were attentive but not passive. They were not spectators. They participated, with a curious, restrained passion, in the speech made by the red-haired man. He spoke for them, he made their thoughts articulate. They were listening to their own collective voice...One day, perhaps, I should be with it, but never part of it.

Christopher Isherwood¹

In making external reality glow with our expression, art tells us about ourselves. No man can look directly at himself, but art makes of the Universe a mirror in which we catch glimpses of ourselves...as we are in active potentiality of becoming in relation to reality through society.

Christopher Caudwell²

Rodd McGinn

Dissecting correcting, peering, poking, analysing, revising, faking and falsifying - there you sit all day long goggling and giggling into your microscope. And there's one thing you always see when you look in your microscope. However long you look or however short you look, there's one thing you always see. You may have a thousand slides but you find it on every slide. It's infinitesimally small but you smile whenever you see it. That one thing's yourself. A little selfish self-deceiving bourgeois playing his tricks in the middle of a blob of scum.

Louis MacNeice³

One of the problems with modernism, it seemed to thirties writers, was that it looked like quietism. We have noted in the past that such an identification could be attributed to a misrecognition of modernism in an attempt to define an empirically-minded realist literary position, and to resist or ignore the challenges made to that position by modernism. Thirties writers, one might argue, thought modernism quietist because they didn't understand how it established a relationship between text and history. Nor did they understand how radically this relationship undermined their own. In the previous chapter we considered the relation between temporality and representation in MacNeice's texts, and how these two might in turn be related to historical context. In this chapter I will examine the question of representation and social context in its own right, so to speak. In this discussion I hope to take account of MacNeice as a thirties writer who nevertheless made productive use of modernist preoccupations - particularly the problem of representation - in his examination of text and history.

We might begin this examination by suggesting that there is a less obvious account of the swing to a dominantly realist sense of the literary text during the thirties than the one above. This account is linked to the charge of quietism, though not identical with it. High modernism, we have been taught, was fascinated by the links between myth - stories explaining and situating the subject in the world - and practice (the activity of the subject in the world).⁴ Confronted with a panorama of western civilization as '...an old bitch gone in the teeth, / ...a botched civilization', modernism placed itself at a distance from the dominant myths of such a civilization, whilst all the time remaining resolutely, sometimes joyfully, self-conscious of its own mythologizing.⁵ Fascination with the self-reflexive literary text, as a paradigm for all textual practices, stands as testimony to this. Instead of the old, failed, stories, we can have new good ones, which will remain conscious always that they *are* stories, unlike the older ones which mistook their illusions for the truth.⁶ In *The Sense of an Ending* Frank Kermode has offered a useful analysis of this project, using the term 'fiction' to describe what others have called 'myth':

We have to distinguish between myths and fictions. Fictions can degenerate into myths whenever they are not consciously held to be fictive. In this sense anti-Semitism is a degenerate fiction, a myth; and [King] Lear is a fiction. Myth operates within the diagrams of ritual, which presupposes total and adequate explanations of things as they are and were; or is a sequence of radically unchangeable gestures. Fictions are for finding things out, and they change as the needs of sense-making change. Myths are the agents of stability; fictions the agents of change.⁷

This dichotomy between the usefully fictive and the illusory truth has a parallel in I. A.

Richards's influential text for thirties writers, *Science and Poetry* (1926), which proposed a distinction between 'true' statements and 'pseudo-statements':

A pseudo-statement is a form of words which is justified entirely by its effects in releasing or organizing our impulses and attitudes (due regard being had for the better or worse of these *inter se*); a statement, on the other hand, is justified by its truth, i.e.. its correspondence, in a highly technical sense, with the fact to which it points.⁸

On the face of it Richards may seem to be allowing for an understanding of the self-awarely fictive only if we can also be sure of some sense of 'truth', existing 'in a highly technical sense'. Kermode's analysis would tend to doubt this sense. Richards's comments, however, do throw some light on the simultaneously de-mythologizing and fiction-building strategies of modernism, in a passage following the one above:

Statements true and false alike do of course constantly touch off attitudes and action. Our daily practical existence is largely guided by them. On the whole true statements are of more service to us than false ones. None the less we do not and, at present, cannot order our emotions and attitudes by true statements alone...Nor is there any probability that we ever shall contrive to do so. This is one of the dangers to which civilisation is exposed. Countless psuedo-statements - about God, about the universe, about human nature, the relations of mind to mind, about the soul, its ranks and destiny - pseudo-statements which are pivotal in the organization of the mind, vital to its well-being, have suddenly become, for sincere, honest and informal minds, impossible to believe. For centuries they have been believed; and the knowledge which has killed them is not of a kind upon which an equally fine organization of the mind can be based. (pp. 59-60)

Richards leaves unanswered the question whether these 'psuedo-statements' were believed as pseudo-statements, or as truth-statements, and whether they have been killed by enlightening truths, or by less useful pseudo-statements; or both. In either case they are at an end, and Richards feels the need for more psuedo-statements to replace them, in thinking and living.

The question of thinking and living is an important one. The presence of sense-making structures in action as well as thought was an important feature of 'mythology'. Studies, like those of Louis Althusser and Antonio Gramsci, which insist on the nature of ideology as *practice* have tended to illuminate the relevance of this strategy:

Accepting Croce's definition of religion as a conception of the world which has become the a norm of life (since the term norm of life is understood here not in a bookish sense but as being carried out in practical life) it follows that the majority of mankind are philosophers in so far as they engage in practical activity and in their practical activity (or their guiding lines of conduct) there is implicitly contained a conception of the world, a philosophy. The history of philosophy...is the history of attempts made and ideological initiatives undertaken by a specific class of people to change, correct, or perfect the conceptions of the world that exist in any particular age and thus to change the norms of conduct that go with them; in other words, to change practical activity as a whole.⁹

This passage from Antonio Gramsci's 'Study of Philosophy' nicely emphasises the perceived link between thinking and living. 'World view' or 'norms of life', the 'conception of the world' was nothing if it was not intimately bound up in practice, or indeed a practice in itself. Hence it could be argued that although placing itself at a distance from bourgeois literary practice, and any other practices for that matter, the mythopoeic position cannot be easily seen as contemplative or quietist, since this re-interpretation and re-invention of ideological structures is itself a practice, an activity of change. The problem comes when one fails to be self-conscious of this invention or mythologizing, in the way that the bourgeoisie is, or indeed, as one might argue, in the way that thirties writers were.

By this account, not only were thirties writers unable to assess the potency of fictions in life; in breaking with these practices, swinging back to 'realism', they merely placed themselves within a different mythology. A mythology that had, in fact, ceased to be aware that it *was* a mythology. But if thirties writers can be accused of naivety in this respect, as they have been, in this study and elsewhere, such a naivety can be seen perhaps, as a mistaken solution to a genuine problem in modernism. For if modernism maintains a self-reflexively ironic stance to established mythological practice - placing itself either within a space separate from dominant ideological currents, or at an ironic distance from them - what happens to modernism when something happens within such

ideological parameters, which seems to demand some kind of statement or action precisely from within such parameters? Something like, say, the rise of Fascism, mass unemployment, or the Spanish Civil War? Kermode makes the point that his 'fictions...are not myths, and they are not hypotheses; you neither rearrange the world to suit them, nor test them by experiment, for instance in the gas-chambers' (p. 41). The nature of the involvement of thirties writers within these causes could, it is true, be put down to their naivety. But equally, we might say that it was the failure of modernism to adequately theorise its own position in relation to such events which contributed to the swing to a naive social realism which dominated thirties writing. Ideology, mythology, fiction-making may definitely be conceived of as practices, and intimately bound up in all practices. But it is not always clear how the links between the practices of mythologizing and de-mythologizing and myths in (or of) practice can be established. Usually we make gestures in this direction, to something like 'a re-invention of social relations' and hope for the best. Or, like Kermode, we offer fictions as fictions precisely because they maintain some distance between themselves and the world, their fictive status guaranteed by their detachment from the impurities of actual action as much as by their rigorous self-awareness and self-interrogation.

We might, indeed, see modernism's failure to allow some bridge between theory and ideology, and the reinstatement of realism as the dominant literary mode during the thirties as a retreat from the questions which might have led modernism to establish its most urgent answers. This would be a retreat by modernism from new grounds of history, when history was entering with pressing urgency into the space of writing. The choice, in this instance, would not be between self-reflexivity and history, but *how* to examine self-reflexivity in history, admitting, in this instance, that there were powerful links to be made between the text (self-reflexive and otherwise) and history. Among thirties writers there were those who knew that such a choice existed, and that retreat was untenable.

Reflecting on the Thirties.

In a report by John Grierson on the growth of the Documentary Film Unit in Britain during the thirties we find one instance of the textual and the social coinciding in a most suggestive way. Grierson draws attention to accusations of 'subversion' which met the release of the first efforts of the fledgling unit:

Though the Minister of Health expressed publicly his gratitude for the Nutrition Film, it is wise to remember that, when the film was first made, it was branded by political busybodies as 'subversive'. Silly enough it sounds, but obstacle after obstacle was put in the way of the documentary film whenever it set itself to the adult task of performing a public service. Sometimes it came in the cry of the Censor that the screen was to be kept free of what was called 'controversy'.¹⁰

What, we might wonder, was the cause of this 'controversy'? Grierson offers a clue in another essay on the same period:

When the posters of the Buy British Campaign carried for the first time the figure of a working man as a national symbol, we were astonished at the Empire Marketing Board to hear from half a hundred Blimps that we were 'going Bolshevik'. The thought of making work an honoured theme, and a workman, of whatever kind, an honourable figure, is still liable to the charge of subversion.¹¹

Perhaps the charge was not entirely without grounds. We should not just consider here what or who was being represented in these films, but to whom this representation was being made. And of course to what ends::

There are proper limits...to freedom of speech which the cinema must regard. Its power is too great for irresponsible comment, when circulations like the March of Time has won the field for the elementary principles of public discussion. The world, our world, appears suddenly and brightly as an oyster for the opening: for film people - how strangely - worth living in, fighting in and making drama about. And more important still is the thought of a revitalized citizenship and of a democracy at long last in contact with itself. (p. 73)

Noble aims perhaps. Of primary interest for this study however, is the co-incidence of textual and social innovation in this cultural moment. It is hard to say whether the effect of portraying the lives and experiences of ordinary people here serves to democratize the effects of cinema, or to raise 'the people' to the status of film stars. The former would open up the cinema to the vibrant world of everyday experience; the latter would transform this experience, through the 'dream factory' of the cinema, into the status of myth. In both cases daily life is *valorized*. It can be seen as a subject worthy of the cinema-goers' attention in its genuine 'democratic' form; equally, it can be

seen as a subject worthy of being seen in the same terms as any other Hollywood artefact.

We can say that the position of the observer is of prime importance in this communicative transaction. 'The People', that's to say, are privileged to view representations of *themselves*; through this they are able to come 'into contact with themselves', recognizing this 'self' for the first time. And this mirror-image works in at least two ways. The 'worker' is presented individually, and as Grierson puts it, as a citizen, or a something entering into the space of citizenship. The viewed worker is in this space; the viewing worker is placed within it by identification with the viewed and, as Grierson puts it, by the very act of viewing. One comes into contact with one's citizenship simply by watching oneself. Or, crucially, by viewing oneself in a new light: part recognition, part construction, which in turn allows the creation of 'citizenship'. Documentary representation, in this account, could not 'present' the real without changing that reality and the perception of it by the viewer. Behind Grierson's account is the dim recognition that individuals are being represented as members of 'The People', and the audience is being interpellated as members of that same 'People'. It is, in fact, a strange mixture of construction and Narcissism, in which subject and object relations are re-defined as they are confused. It is not so much that the pre-existent 'citizen' is merely allowed wider contact with other citizens, but this very notion of citizenship is constructed from the raw material of subjective identification. It is, furthermore, a moment as powerfully textual as it is social. It is this admixture of the social with the textual which will, in different ways, occupy this discussion.

One of the things Grierson is conscious of in his essays is not just marking out new representations, but the position of these representations within a new textual space. Primarily this is a cultural space, specifically that of the mass audience - hence there is a need for directorial 'responsibility'. Grierson makes the following interesting point about the responsibility of 'Realism':

There are too many...cosmopolites of the world's cities, to whom Lancashire is only Gracie Fields's hundred-thousand a year and the Clyde

not even a whisper in consciousness...The West End Stage, for all the presence of Bridie and O'Casey, has lost the accent of the people. As for the literary men, half a dozen have the power together to blow the unreality to smithereens, but they are not so much in love with reality as to think the explosion worth their effort. (p. 81)

On the face of it, Grierson's comments rehearse the cliché of 'literary men' inhabiting the Ivory Tower, cut off from the vitality of the real. But Grierson is making a less obvious point here. Literary men are in touch with this reality, closely in touch to have the power and the insight to blow the unreality of film-life to smithereens if they so desired. What stops them doing so is not ignorance of the real, but a judgement on it. The real, he says, is 'not worth their effort'. Writing, we must assume, has the power to affect change, but at the same time engenders a bleak pessimism which renders such change, textual or social, superfluous. Far from leading to a state of blissful ignorance, writing is associated with a knowledge, or the construction of a knowledge, which puts into question the validity of Grierson's realist project. The aesthetic is not an escape from the real, but a judgement on it, or the construction of something which puts the real, its 'reality' or worth, in question. In this world, as we shall see, subject and object are similarly confused, the 'looking' of the people, together with the 'look' that would seek to constitute such a people, in addition to the implications of looking at that look, are all placed under examination.

Looking at Otherness: 'Circe'.

MacNeice's cryptic poem 'Circe' (*CP*, p. 19) may seem at first glance to be a long way from the concerns of Grierson and the DFU:

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.
Narcissus' error
Enfolds and kills us -
Dazed with gazing on that unfertile beauty
Which is our own heart's thought.

The poem seems initially to be working with the familiar themes of Circe as wildly different from her observers in one sense, in another fearfully the same. The mythologies of the witch-enchantress Circe had received recent attention in the chapter

dealing with this mythology in Joyce's *Ulysses*. Here the transformative power of the witch-as-whore, changing Bloom into something different from himself, but the same as a 'deeper' self, is emphasised.¹²

Prior to this articulation, the Circe myth had featured prominently in fin-de-siècle culture, as Bram Dijkstra has noted:

Given women's presumed regressive tendencies and their consequent interest in bestial relationships, it was...not surprising that the painters of the fin de siècle were especially eager to use Circe as a cautionary example of the eternal feminine. This Homeric witch's habit of turning men into swine was, after all, a clear indication of man's need to maintain his distance from the animal-woman.¹³

This analysis emphasises the difference between woman-beast and man. It is man's desire that implies some attraction to this beast, such desire is within him; but the myth shows that man can be transformed into something he is not, or indeed, what he never was.

In MacNeice's poem this position is confused. The fascination of Circe emerges because of her status as fantasized other. It is not so much that this desire is shown to exist, brought to the surface, and man is transformed into something that he didn't know he was. Rather, she exists because of this desire. In short, subject and object are interdependent in this poem. From the start, Circe's status as artifice, or representation, is emphasised. Circe possesses 'something of glass about her' (what kind of glass? opaque, transparent, reflective?), which in turn is associated with stagnation ('dead water'), freezing, and possession: 'Chills and holds us'. The following two lines serve to further the definition of the status of Circe. She is 'far more fatal' than the painted flesh of 'made-up' women, or of women as represented in painting, or indeed than the 'draw' where lodestone indicates some kind of essentialist compulsion of living hair. In singling out 'hair' as a synecdoche of women, or of women as construction or signifier of male desire, the poem does, in fact, confuse the elements of 'nature' and 'artifice', in 'normal' or 'real' desire and its objects. Circe is not so much different in kind from these objects, as in degree. Hence 'this despair of crystal brilliance' - Circe emerges almost as a perfected representation of the imperfectly

organic, as the image forced upon us by despair at the imperfection of other forms of artifice (the made-up, the painted), itself forced upon the organic. Additionally, of course, Circe is the source of its own despair. Despair at imperfection is confronted with a new despair once some kind of perfection is reached, in the dazzling brilliance of representation, by the fact that Circe is a representation - an image, a frozen surface, a meaning without being.

The particularly thirties sense of this poem might be seen as calling into question what Terry Eagleton has called 'the middle-class's pornographic appetite for the real'.¹⁴ Obviously all artifice is constructed, but not all artifice is overtly seen as wholly mirroring the desire of the subject. MacNeice's speaker seems to invent his Circe. In this he differs from, say, Bloom, who runs across her. This 'finding' of the self-sufficient object is forbidden in MacNeice's poem:

Narcissus' error
 Enfolds and kills us -
 Dazed with gazing on that unfertile beauty
 Which is our own heart's thought.

These lines should introduce to us a confusion which has been troubling our reading up to now. Who is this Circe? If our gaze is that of Narcissus, are we Circe? And who is the 'we' that is cast in this role? Of course we should note that MacNeice is here assimilating a number of myths. Circe was not Narcissus, nor Narcissus Circe. But such a collapsing has to be mutually illuminating, at first at least, if this intertextual moment is productive. Narcissus, as one critic has reminded us, 'drowned for not recognizing solitude was vacancy and seeking to become identical with himself, or more precisely with what Lacan would call his specular image'.¹⁵ This reference to specular image would seem to throw light on Circe's status as image or representation, as well as on the gaze, and the emphasis on death which pervades the poem. But still, how are we Narcissus? How can the otherness of Circe, which enthralls us, and which lies always beyond us in representation be the image of ourselves and our solitude?

Here we come to the crux of Circe's otherness, and her emptiness. For the 'other' of Circe, as our construction, and construction-as-other, tells us not so much

about the other as about ourselves and our desire. The 'glass' of Circe allows us a mirror-image of our desire, when initially we thought this was the clear glass of our perception seeing the other as it is. Hence it is an image which 'enfolds' us, turns us in upon ourselves at precisely the point at which we thought we were reaching out of ourselves to grasp lovingly at the other. 'That unfertile beauty', then, offers us 'our own heart's thought' - we don't see the other, since the other can only be seen through the lens or glass of ourselves, or as our own construction. The infertility of the image suggests a newly-recognized sense of claustrophobic enclosure. What seemed to lie freshly beyond the self is in fact a stale projection from within. We do not look upon the other, but on the other as it exists as constructed object of our desire as subject. Given this sense of self-enclosure, where self and other are misrecognized and confused, we might see parallels between the self's inability to come into contact with the 'real' other and the subject's inability to coincide with itself, as in the myth of Narcissus. Circe appears as representation, image emptied of being, in the same way that Narcissus's imaginary other did. However, here the inability of Narcissus to become identical with himself, to achieve full self-knowledge, unity of subject and object, is linked to the subject's inability to possess Circe, to come into contact with Circe as herself. But the gap between subject and object which prohibited full self-knowledge in the myth of Narcissus must here be restated. Here, what lies beyond the subject is not so much the unity of subject and object, nor even clear knowledge of the 'real' Circe, but the ability of the subject to come to knowledge of his own processes of construction, whereby the real other is known only as 'other'. This is his inability, in other words, to stand outside himself and fully look upon his gaze. The subject cannot look *at* what he looks *with*.

Paradoxically, this situation, where the subject is split irrevocably and inhabited by an unfulfillable desire for unity or coincidence induces a wish for self-forgetting. This unselfconsciousness is manifested by an identification with 'the beasts' - the very thing to be resisted in conventional renderings of the Circe myth. As such, we might read it as a motion towards authenticity of a kind. If Circe mirrors the desires of the subject in

disguised form, becoming a beast, becoming what one really is, at least avoids these disguises:

Fled away to the beasts
 One cannot stop thinking; Timon
 Kept on finding gold.
 In parrot-ridden forest or barren coast
 A more importunate voice than bird or wave
 Escutcheoned on the air with ice letters
 Seeks and, of course, finds us
 (Of course, being our echo).

However, the poem tells us that this hoped-for oblivion is impossible. The 'voice' which finds us out in our isolation, our being, in which we hope we will exist without thinking, will always be our own. The 'outside' will always be perceived through the lens of the 'inside'. The 'inside' will always be inhabited by a space in which the subject appears as object to itself, always appears in terms the same as the 'outside':

Be brave, my ego, look into your glass
 And realise that that never-to-be-touched
 Vision is your mistress.

The poem ends with a confirmation of the impossibility of healing this split within the subject. The vision which offers itself to be touched, brought into contact or unity with the self, must always remain out of reach. The object cannot coincide with subject in the self, one cannot 'know thyself', since this knowledge would have to include some perspective on that knowledge itself. However, this incomplete knowledge on the part of the subject must also include the way in which the self comes to know the other.

The poem mirrors the desire of the subject to coincide with itself with the desire of the self to come to knowledge of the other. The 'never-to-be-touched / Vision' is what is beyond the subject in both cases. Furthermore, what is beyond the subject is precisely that 'vision' (not merely the object of that vision) itself. 'Vision' appears in these lines as a means to looking at something else, but also as something which needs to be apprehended in its own right. The gaze can never complete itself since to do so would require it to look upon itself. The impossibility of this ever being achieved, the impossibility of the eye ever seeing itself, achieves its particular significance through the fact that the eye is an agent of construction. These processes of construction are

among those things hidden in that part of this object ('vision'), the entirety of which must always remain beyond our grasp.

This kind of attention to the paradoxes of subject and object may seem a long way from any recognizable sense of the social, or any historical context. And certainly the emphasis in 'Circe' on the nature of solitude does not imply a fully worked-out sense of the 'other' as social entity. However, in our examination of Grierson's account of the DFU we noted this kind of confusion between subject and object, which was intimately linked to questions of selfhood and otherness. It was, moreover, crucially linked to questions of construction within a social formation. The social implications of this poem, therefore, are that this kind of construction and incompleteness experienced by the subject in isolation may extend to the subject within a social context. We should remember, therefore, that in a quiet though totalizing way Auden saw the characteristic world-view of the age to be 'the interdependence of Observed and Observer' and that the interdependence of subject and object formed the main thesis of Caudwell's Illusion and Reality.¹⁶ Hence, the preoccupation with self and other, linked to the problem of observation and representation cannot but have significance for the period. In order to consider the full 'social' implications of these preoccupations, we must look at this question of representation and the other a little more closely.

Borders of Representation: 'Upon this beach'.

In 'Upon this beach' (CP, p. 19) the problem of representation takes centre-stage:

Upon this beach the falling wall of the sea
Explodes its drunken marble
Amid gulls' gaiety.

Which ever-crumbling masonry, cancelling sum,
No one by any device can represent
In any medium.

Turn therefore inland, tripper, foot on the sea-holly,
Forget those waves' monstrous fatuity
And boarding bus be jolly.

The poem establishes an opposition between the solitary romantic traveller, absorbed in a spiritual journey as much as an actual one, and the thirties tourist, or day-tripper. As we have seen in 'Now that the shapes of mist', the latter's journey is not without its metaphoric freight, and tropes of the frontier and journey are clearly relevant to this traveller's experience 'upon this beach'. But MacNeice's poem, obviously at odds with the romantic solitary, is not quite in keeping with the codes of the thirties day-tripper. What is striking about the poem is its contradictory affirmation of representation, and the simultaneous denial that such a representation can take place. The poem claims to represent what it says cannot be represented; it affirms what it denies and denies what it affirms. One way out of this paradox (or contradiction) is to see the poem offering some imaginative gesture towards a 'full' experience, which we share by identification with the figure in stanza one, but which is emptied by time, or by the representations of the text. We know that this is but a representation of experience, not experience itself; but since we are 'experienced' readers we can make an identification with this experience, and with its loss, even though it would be absurd to claim that the experience is available to us in any way other than through the text.

What this poem does, however, is to put this identification and shared knowledge into question. Such an identification is not merely hampered by the contamination of time or the text into unmediated subjectivity - we are not at a loss only because the moment is passed, or must be related by language. Rather in this poem the moment is privileged precisely because it *cannot* be narrated or communicated. Following this initial reading, therefore, we would have to assert that, not only can we come to this moment through the text, but that our identification is made possible because such an identification cannot be made. We do not wholly share in the moment and its loss, but we share in the impossibility of having such an act of sharing take place. Hence, by refusing an act of identification, but assuming that because we cannot know what we are identifying with we are able to understand it, we somehow smuggle this act of identification in through the back door.

Another reading might accept more rigorously the separation of the sign and meaning, or the sign and reference. We have the sign and not the thing. In the light of the injunction in stanza two that what is represented 'No one by any device can represent / In any medium' we might say that stanza one cannot *re-present* the falling wall of the sea, the gulls. What it does is to represent them in the sense that it gives us an image or figure of such things, never the things themselves. Meaning without being, in fact. However, we must then question the relation between these two elements. If this 'being' is always already absent or 'beyond' us, how can we speak of it? What can be the status of the 'it' which makes reference to something we cannot fully refer to? Doesn't the very awareness of this 'gap' imply some knowledge of the 'full' being, of which we have only the empty sign? Some privileged knowledge, that is, of the thing which our sign replaces or supplements?

At this point we might object that MacNeice really is writing about time rather than representation. The moment is absent because it is lost to time. Whatever MacNeice had to say elsewhere about time, here, at least it is used to suggest a moment which is irrecoverably lost because it was once there in its fullness. But we should note that this poem takes place entirely in the present. Our sense of the impossibility of 'representing' the scene must be infected by the sense of the impossibility of representation in the present, to the self as it were. Even if we were to allow this reading, it would not solve the problem of the nature of the 'it' to which we refer, which we cannot refer to, but speak of as though we can.

It is clear then, that rather than there being a 'something' which we cannot represent, we must conclude that there is *only representation*. It is not that the 'original' of which we have the 'copy' has been lost, but that we can only see this original through its representation. Yet we talk about this original as though we have some knowledge of it, even whilst stressing that the original is special precisely because such knowledge cannot be had. The poem offers only a text, and in frustrating our desire to see 'beyond' it, by denying that such a move can be made, yet all the while insisting that it in some way *has* been made, we are led to question our sense of the

status of this 'something', and are persuaded that we can come to it only through the text, or through representation.

The poem leads us, then, in two directions. On the one hand, as in 'August', we are left in the double-bind of a representation which must always question its own representative status. A fiction, to use Frank Kermode's phrase, that is always aware that it is fictive. For reference to be made, there must be some existential reality beyond the sign. Yet we can come at such a reality only through, or more accurately *in* the sign. The beyond must always, it seems, remain beyond us.

On the other hand, it is possible to see this 'beyond', not as a something, but as a nothing. What lies 'beyond' representation, apprehension, or contemplation, this 'ever-crumbling masonry, cancelling sum' cannot be represented because it would, by definition, put the whole status of that representation, apprehension, or contemplation into question. The speaker's object, the 'tripper', stands on the beach, Arnold-like, on the border between stability and instability, which would threaten to overwhelm him. The destructive energy of this sea would seem to indicate a force which cannot be represented by the speaker since it would itself absorb and cancel this speaker and his speech, and of course, the identification made within this reading.

Such a force would help to explain the dichotomy of beach/bus in the poem: individual perception of bitter truth versus social forgetfulness. It is impossible for the 'tripper' to speak of this nothingness. Therefore, to assume that such an act of speech can be made is to err. The tripper's bus journey is not made in ignorance of the solitary romantic's perception of nothingness. Rather it exposes the illusory notion that the solitary has come into contact with this nothingness and could still be there to tell the tale about it. Such tale of the 'monstrous fatuity' of the waves would only keep this fatuity at bay, since it cannot be contemplated. Hence the jollity of the communal traveller is partly that of forgetfulness. Yet it is not illusion, since this environment is always circumscribed by the existence of the 'border', of which the speaker remains aware. At the same time, it allows a space for joy, knowing that joy is always similarly circumscribed. The 'foot on sea-holly', poised as it is on the edge of land and sea neatly

encapsulates this position: It is one of existing within the closures of the imaginary, yet allowing for the recognition that this *is* the imaginary. What seems stable is liable to undercutting, and to change. To forget the absence of meaning is not to trust entirely in one's own meanings. The social nature of this situation must, therefore, raise questions about the social nature of this closure, these meanings, which the instability of waves would threaten to disrupt.

One way, therefore, in which this cryptic and densely packed poem would seem to raise questions about the social is through the interrogation of its own principles. It is aware of a 'beyond' to its knowledge, yet has no way of knowing such a beyond. In many ways this is similar to the speaker in 'Circe', questioning his Ego and gaze, yet being unable to stand outside that gaze, or to look at that look. In turn, we should note the similarity between this and Grierson's implied viewer - looking at the self, unable to look at that look.

Social Representation: 'Nature Morte', 'Birmingham', 'Christmas Shopping'.

This sense of representation as a stabilizing, yet fragile, phenomenon is given an explicitly social angle in 'Nature Morte' (CP, p. 21):

As those who are not athletic at breakfast day by day
Employ and enjoy the sinews of others vicariously,
Shielded by the upheld journal from their dream-puncturing wives
And finding in the printed word a multiplication of their lives,
So we whose senses give us things misfelt and misheard
Turn also, for our adjustment, to the pretentious word
Which stabilises the light on the sun-fondled trees.

Newspapers here allow both an escape from the quotidian in the vicarious fantasies of mass culture, and a further containment within it. The dream, which makes available a reality wider than the everyday, allows a vicarious enjoyment of this 'athletic' reality. In turn, this reality shields and protects the reader from the 'puncturing' of such dreams within the quotidian. But this text cannot help but be a 'shield' against the full force of this non-quotidian environment. The journal-reader is here caught. On the one hand he enters into a packaged imaginary 'other' world, which provides compensation for the absences contained in the quotidian. On the other, this identification forbids activity

within 'real' life and desire, forbidding in turn a proper appraisal of action within the quotidian, which is the only site for the application of these desires. The double-bind of 'employment/enjoyment' - a contract established with pleasure - serves to emphasise this situation. Equally, the 'multiplication' of life implies the adoption of a second vicarious life with identification with the athlete, which also promises a supplement or addition to 'life' in images of individualistic endeavour. But this identification is, in fact, mirrored by thousands of others making the same identification. Paradoxically, in striving for transcendence and individuality, the reader only increases his uniformity.

This is, perhaps, a familiar argument in the conjuncture of mass civilization and minority culture. Oddly, however, the category of language (a possible preserve of the 'aesthetic' transcendence) is taken to form some kind of continuity with this practice. Certainly the speaker is in contact with a wider 'aesthetic' environment - his domain is that of creative nature, the sun and trees. A nature, in fact, infused with life, activity and sense. The sun 'fondles' trees. However, this wider, perhaps solitary, and more creative, scene is itself caught with the stabilizing 'pretence' of language. Phenomena is here 'stabilised' by this linguistic force. Language appears as an abstraction.

The speaker is himself clearly caught within a double-bind. 'Outside' of language in a sensual domain the world is 'misfelt' or 'misheard'. It is unclear whether this deviation from some established 'norm' enjoys the approval of the speaker or not. The misrecognition might be a deviation from worn out conventions; or it may indeed be a kind of perception, outside language, which is indeed prone to indeterminacy and error. Equally, it is unclear whether a position fully outside language can be achieved. We can, however, be sure that one must abstract, within the 'pretence' of language, to make the world apprehendable. This, in fact, places us within the text, removed from vital experience, where language provides us with the 'ghost' of immediate experience. In its turn, the text provides us with the ghost of that text. The reference to 'photograph' as a figure for 'realist' representation is, in context, highly telling. Language is, however, an ordering which places us at ease, simply given, providing for our contentment. But how far can this critique of the 'pretensions' of language extend?

Newspapers, signifiers of mass culture, and the 'death' of concrete individual experience, are easy targets. Does this 'death' within the word (implied in the reference to 'ghosts') extend to deviantly 'aesthetic' productions, realist or otherwise? Certainly we cannot escape the implication that, dealing in language, these productions must in some way partake of the qualities existing in the lines '...no matter how solid and staid we contrive / Our reconstructions'. They suffer by the fact that they *are* reconstructions, and that they remain solid and fixed.

But of course this is not the whole story: '..even a still life is alive / And in your Chardin the appalling unrest of the soul / Exudes from the dried fish and the brown jug and ~~the bowl~~. The stability of the 'death' of the thing is here disrupted within the aesthetic object - what seems to be stable and 'held' within the construction of the 'still life' (where 'still' implies both 'stable' and 'as yet') is not what it appears. The homology of 'life/death' which controls the poem is confused in these lines. Although a stabilizing force in daily life, the text is shown to have a radically destabilizing life of its own. In the same way that the 'death' of representation occasioned by abstraction is coterminous with our sense of experience as 'life', so this 'life' of disruption is not associated with an exhilarating energy, but with a restlessness. It is an energy removed from the subject-guided energies of 'life'. Furthermore, it is not a return to immediate experience. The speaker remains firmly within the confines of the representation. What that representation presents, however, is the inadequacy of its construction, the 'unrest of the soul' through fish, jug and bowl. Desire is seen to characterize the accurate, accurate because 'aesthetic', representation of objects. A representation, that is, which resists its closure and 'freezing' of the object within the image, or meaning within sign. A representation which allows us to see not the object but the text, whose temporary closure gives way to instability.

What should also interest us in this poem is the sense that presumed deviations from certain norms are re-contained within other norms or substitutions. Deviation, it seems, might merely be an appearance. In this sense the category of 'aesthetic' as a form of liberation is under question in this poem. This must, of course, have important

consequences for a reading of the dominant pre-occupations of representation, and particularly realism, in the thirties. These consequences extend to our consideration of representation as social, of the representation of the social (in the literary text and otherwise). How might, for instance, a reading of 'Birmingham' (*CP*, 17) be influenced by this emphasis on the 'pretentious word'?:

Smoke from the train-gulf hid by hoardings blunders upward, the brakes of cars
Pipe as the policeman pivoting round raises his flat hand, bars
With his figure of a monolith Pharaoh the queue of fidgety machines
(Chromium dogs on the bonnet, faces behind the triplex screens).
Behind him the streets run away between the proud glass of shops,
Cubical scent-bottles artificial legs arctic foxes and electric mops,
But beyond this centre the slumward vista thins like a diagram:
There, unvisited, are Vulcan's forges who doesn't care a tinker's damn

Birmingham was, we know, a thirties city. Home-town of Auden, source of instruction for his austere classicism, the entirely un-exotic, it was used by other writers as a source of instruction. J. B. Priestley used it to shake the complacency of southern expectations about the city and about the condition of England: 'Did all this look like the entrance into the second city in England? It did. It looked like a dirty muddle.'¹⁷ Which is, in itself, a significant question: How can the 'muddle' of the second city of England, be consistent with its status as signifier of Englishness? Priestley's task, it would seem, is one of de-mythologizing, using a new, authentic realism to replace the myths of Englishness and of Birmingham, the new city for the new light-industrial Britain. MacNeice's task is different, namely to call into question the perception of this social entity, in the process drawing attention to the *social* nature of this perception.

The poem, in fact, plays with notions of the 'familiarity' of the social environment. This play includes received notions of what makes up such a landscape and of the observer within such an environment. The poem's initial negotiation is between Birmingham as familiar, and as phantasmagoria. The figures of smoke from the train, brakes of cars, traffic control serve as metonymies of the city, also of social realism. The characterizing quality is activity. This structure is then disrupted by the 'figure of a monolith Pharaoh'. In a Dickensian manoeuvre, the familiar is rendered strange. This trajectory is continued in the lists of chrome, unknown faces, arbitrary

commodities behind shop-faces. The material is recognizable, but conceived of as possessing an arbitrary, contingent quality. In turn this leads off into the remote, again phantasmagoric 'Vulcan's forges' - known of, but not known about, or entirely knowable; familiar but alien. It is not certain, therefore, whether this is the perspective of the outsider or insider. Use of definite articles ('the') establish a familiarity, but this perspective is then undercut by the phantasmagoria quality of the city-scape. As such, there is a move away from a perspective on a finally 'knowable community', to the city as unknowable.¹⁸

This is also a move away from the tenets of straightforward 'realism' which would assert that: 'seeing is knowing; description yields meaning; representation involves faithful mirroring of what is seen'.¹⁹ The jump into phantasy immediately marks a deviation from simple 'reflection' of a recognizable social scene. Even more vital to MacNeice's representation of the city is its domination by images of surface. The initial image offers us a sign for a train. Smoke from the train-gulf, obscured by the hoardings of mass-culture, allows a synecdochically aware clue-finding 'detective's' knowledge of the train. This is the sure-footed presence of heavy industry, palpably *there*. Yet this clue is followed only by images of surface. The policeman's 'flat hand' is mirrored by chromium dogs, faces (behind screens), the 'proud glass of shops', scent bottles, artificial legs, and a vista that 'thins like a diagram' - a flat map pretending to depth. This catalogue of surfaces implies that the city is without depth. In other words, we are not merely seeing the surface of the city, which will reveal depths of various kinds by a certain kind of inspection by the adept observer. Instead, this is a city of surfaces. The 'depth' which we would seek, which we hope to be revealed in one way or another is continually insinuated, but withheld. The phantastic quality of the detail is not simply evidence of a neurotic observer. The 'unvisited' Vulcan's forges might seem to owe their alien quality to ignorance. If they were visited and understood they would become less strange, perhaps. The seemingly arbitrary justice of this Vulcan 'who doesn't care a tinker's damn' might be explained or rationalized. Yet the constant reference to surface would seem to deny that such a depth, or explanatory knowledge,

can be found. The centre of Birmingham, characterized by surface, artifice and contingency seems to stand as the vacant centre of a centreless world.

This last detail most fully characterizes the perspective of 'Birmingham', where there is an element of familiarity, but where full knowledge of the totality is withheld. This withholding is caused, it is implied, by the absence of an explaining 'centre' or essence which would be vital for such an understanding. This is reinforced by the absence of a controlling understandable single 'power', which renders those determinants which are familiar (policeman or forge) alien, or unpredictable. They seem to be a law unto themselves, not in keeping with familiar ethical understandings, and therefore known only to be alien in their power.

It is this sense of the city which is developed as the poem develops, drawing attention to the centrifugal topology of the metropolis, and to its dominant social norms:

Splayed outwards through the suburbs houses, houses for rest
 Seducingly rigged by the builder, half-timbered houses with lips pressed
 So tightly and eyes staring at traffic through bleary haws
 And only a six-inch grip of the racing earth in their concrete claws;
 In these houses men as in a dream pursue the Platonic Forms
 With wireless and cairn terriers and gadgets approximating to the fickle norms
 And endeavour to find God and score one over the neighbour
 By climbing tentatively upward on jerry-built beauty and sweated labour.

The 'splaying' of the city, read in context of the chaotic and depth-less centre introduces this centrifugal force or momentum, which is then reinforced by mention of the 'racing-earth'. Paradoxically, this 'grounding' of the suburbs, or the artificial, on 'solid' earth only serves to compound this sense of decentring. The houses stand 'half-timbered' and artificial, but also 'seducing' in their operations, the seduction of the commodity. This seduction, we can assume, would make the inhabitants of the houses into commodities also. They too would be seduced into the kind of 'sight' that the houses themselves possess as they witness the movement of traffic outside. The ironic contradiction of the pursuit of 'Platonic Forms', the good beautiful and true, manifesting themselves within the 'fickle norms' of commodity capitalism is fully in keeping with this social environment. In view of the position of the speaker as insider, the implication is less that mass culture provides us with an impure, bastardized parody of these

transcendental entities. Rather, 'fickle norms', changing from time to time, and enwebbed within the reified economy of exchange, assume the qualities of absolutes or Forms, which disguise their transient character. The speaker attacks, therefore, not the travesty of these forms, believing they actually exist, but the misplaced notion that they exist at all, and that they are merely parodied in wireless, cairn terriers and gadgets. This attitude is clear in the contradiction of the search for God within the structure of competition ('score one over the neighbour'), which in fact disguises the contribution of 'jerry-built beauty and sweated labour'. God, beauty, truth cannot easily be used as sticks with which to beat this social structure; they themselves are too integral a part of this structure. All the speaker does is point out the contradictions.

'Birmingham' is in a sense, then, an epistemological poem. But its stress on the known, the knowable, and the familiar (but alien) cannot be divorced from its status as a social statement. Moreover, the sociality of the observation reflects not just on the subjects of the poem, but on the status of the observer:

The lunch hour: the shops empty, shopgirls' faces relax
 Diaphanous as green glass, empty as old almanacs
 As incoherent with ticketed gewgaws tiered behind their heads
 As the Burne-Jones windows in St. Philip's broken by crawling leads;
 Insipid colour, patches of emotion, Saturday thrills
 (This theatre is sprayed with 'June') - the gutter take our old playbills,
 Next week-end it is likely in the heart's funfair we shall pull
 Strong enough on the handle to get back our money; or at any rate it is possible.

The validity of the speaker is here called into question. Most obviously questionable is the patronizing note of superiority which seems to inhabit these lines. The equation of girl's faces with glass could be taken to imply a continuity between the subject and the commodity in consumer capitalism. Both are reduced to surface, as part of a city of surfaces. But people are not things. And such a reading would claim a privileged knowledge that the rest of the poem denies - that is, that there is nothing beyond the surface of the face, since the speaker has been there and knows such absence. Almost instinctively we can challenge the certainty of this position. The statement reflects not so much on what the speaker describes, but on the speaker itself. It is one thing to speak of a city, socially and ontologically composed of surface. It is another, however,

to extend this to people. Surely there is a figure behind the face, a depth that, however it can be challenged as unified self, at least exists. Or, indeed, a culture, that has to exist even within such a situation. The speaker, it seems, simply cannot see it. Hence, the poem appears guilty of mixing social with ontological judgements. This is all the more shameful if, based on this ignorance, the speaker assumes a tone of compassionate superiority. Frank Kermode has offered some pointed criticisms of this tendency in MacNeice, among other thirties writers. Commenting on a description in *The Strings are False* of 'bliss in a celluloid world where the roses are always red and the Danube is always blue' (p. 138) he notes:

You can tell from the tone that it was all the other people in the cinema who were experiencing this bogus solace and not the MacNeices, who were there with them, but not of them, almost nightly, being entertained, not seeking value where only the others could be deluded into thinking they might find it.²⁰

That reference to 'Burne-Jones' might here seem to reinforce this sense of privileged cultural awareness which, in context, compounds the speaker's distance and myopia. The speaker, in outlining a decrepit culture of thrills, insipid colour, patches of emotion, seeks to claim solidarity with the observed masses. This is *our* decrepitude. I, like you, am a part of it. Yet this jars with the implicit judgement on the shop-girl's faces, and the unavoidable implication that, really, this is *your* city, and *your* culture. Or, perhaps, if the truth be known, *their* city and their culture, or lack of it. Paradoxically, the very description implies distance - that these colours are insipid implies that ours are sometimes not, their emotions run in patches because ours sometimes don't, our visits to the Cinema are made out of choice, rather than necessity. 'Theirs' can be 'Ours': since, well, slumming is sometimes rather promiscuous anti-bourgeois fun; or because, in suitable liberal style, their fate is everyone's, or everyone's who has conscience to see it.

Such a reading, though far from irrelevant to our discussion, forgets however that the status of the speaker has already been thrown into question by the poem. Rather than a straightforward enunciation of such sentiments, tested on good or bad assumptions, these sentiments and these assumptions form an integral part of the

poem's activity. Rather than the object of the look, which we judge on its own terms, it is the look itself which is under question here. Equally, we can claim that it is precisely because of this rhetoric of distance that the speaker is placed 'within' the structure of feeling, or not feeling, that he describes. For what is missing in the poem is the alternative, describing discourse, which would provide the speaker with his assured position of superiority. It is this which is implied in Kermode's comments. But whenever the horizon of surface is crossed, the speaker is confronted with opacity. The 'depth' which would privilege his perspective on the surfaces of the city, recourse to real human values, real lives, real purpose (Marxist, liberal etc) is continually withheld. The imaginary discourse of identification, solidarity within the class struggle, or within the decency of liberal England, is of course implied in these lines. But, it is also implied, this discourse of depth, penetration, linked to a humanist and determining metanarrative, cannot be found within the poem. In keeping within the surfaces of city life - a subculture may be there, but it is unknowable, and cannot supply a revolutionary programme within such a structure - our sense of going 'behind' the surfaces of city life, of doing away with obstruction, entering the real 'within' from without is confused. The outsider, separated by class and background may be guilty of myopia in not being able to see beyond the surface. Yet such a judgement implies a judgement in turn on the nature of that surface, and the depth which it conceals. In this poem the surface is shown to be all-pervasive, and the assumed 'depth' thrown into question. We deceive ourselves if we imagine that such a depth can purposefully exist, ignoring the amount of surfaces and their power. Surface and surface is the look of the insider; surface and depth that of the outsider who doesn't know about the real power of surfaces. The insider is suspicious of the knowledge which would go beyond surface, and of the intelligence which would imply a distance between itself and the commodification of the city. Again, the implication that the perspective is maintained through ignorance is undercut by the insinuation and withholding of depth within the established urban environment. The city is known to be unknowable.

This paradox is developed in the poem's last stanza. The 'horizons' of perspective are examined:

On shining lines the trams like vast sarcophagi move
 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,
 Tell one to stop...

The presence of the skyline seems to betoken a movement to transcendence, to a movement at once beyond the confines of Birmingham and its discourses. The emphasis on the vacancy of sky should not deceive us into thinking that this is inevitably a movement towards further vacancy, further depthlessness. The intent of this perspective is to a heightened sense of being, a gathering of resources, which would have very concrete manifestations within the consciousness of the city-bound subject. What is more significant is that this moment of transcendence is blocked. The 'natural' givenness of plum, duck egg, mauve - both given, and making reference to natural sensibility - is 'barred with mauve Zeppelin clouds'. The perspective of the speaker is blocked not so much by the clouds, but by their appearance as 'Zeppelin clouds' - the consciousness of the city is re-inserted in the poem at the very moment when an attempt is made to transcend it. This aspect of control is reinforced by the message from traffic lights, themselves taking on the aspect of intoxicating commodities, by the engine 'breathing' with a life of its own, and by the call of pipe organs to work:

...like black pipes of organs in the frayed and fading zone
 Of the West the factory chimneys on sullen sentry will all night wait
 To call, in the harsh morning, sleep-stupid faces through the daily gate.

The movement from centre to margin, from glittering effect to bleak cause is a repetition of the 'jerry-built beauty and sweated labour' mentioned in stanza two. The glitter is paid for by exploitation, and our joy in it is therefore chastened. Yet, again, we have the appearance of faces. The moment of identification with the exploited is denied. We can see only the faces, not the people behind the faces. And, moreover, these faces are not driven into righteous rage at their exploitation, the energy of the Working classes threatening to sweep over the stagnation of the bourgeoisie. Rather they are driven into

submission. Sleep, leisure, the supposed 'other' to exploitation and submission, renders them 'stupid' - the conditions of work are displaced onto the space of leisure, absorbing it within its structure.

One way of explaining this preponderance of 'surface' in MacNeice's presentation is through the equal preponderance of the Commodity in his characterization of the urban environment. The Commodity, we have been taught, is robbed of immanent meaning, together with the connection with human endeavour present in its Use Value by its absorption within the structure of Exchange.²¹ The object's Value is thus present only in relation to other objects, as part of a wider structure whose ultimate meaning is always deferred. On the one hand a 'contingent' reality is absorbed in a organizing and homogenizing commodity structure; on the other, this very structure robs objects of whatever immanent qualities they may have, engendering a new kind of contingency, and a ceaseless search for this lost immanence, in a consciousness which does not accept the 'meaning' offered to the commodity as commodity. This situation has two main consequences for the subject. His or her relation to the object as commodity is always infected by this structure of exchange - objects assume importance, and a certain kind of importance. Equally, within this structure the subject is itself relegated to the level of the commodity, its essence prescribed by the buying and selling of Labour power. What is important in all of this is the existence of structure. Objects become signifiers of this system, and of other items within the system, including, of course, the subject whose very status as subject is put in question.

The consequences for the notion and experience of the subject have been explored by Terry Eagleton in a discussion of the work of Walter Benjamin. Writing of the circumstances of the 'modern subject' he notes that:

This period witnesses a turning away on all sides from the traditional philosophy of the subject of Kant, Hegel, and the younger Marx, troubledly conscious as it is of the individual as constituted to its roots by forces and processes utterly opaque to everyday consciousness. Whether one names such implacable powers Language or Being, Capital or the Unconscious, Tradition or the *élan vital*, Archetypes or the Destiny of the West, their effects is the open up a well-nigh unspannable gulf

between the waking life of the old befeathered ego and the true determinants of its identity, which are always covert and inscrutable.²²

What this situation offers then is a model of surface and depth in which the object is a surface or signifier, but the depth is not a thing but a structure which remains beyond conscious understanding. The problem comes when we have to decide whether this underlying structure has itself any determining and unifying element, or whether it can be best characterized by its absence. In such a situation the absence of depth would force us to conclude not that there are no surfaces, that the surface/depth model is useless, but as far as the subject goes, that there are *only* surfaces. This is the situation that Eagleton finds Benjamin articulating:

If a world of intricate symbolic correspondences is to be constructed, some kind of mechanism or switch-gear will be necessary by which any one element of reality can become a signifier of another; and there is clearly no natural stopping place to this play of allegorical signification, this endless metamorphosis in which anything can be alchemically converted into anything else. The symbolic system, in short, carries within it the forces of its own deconstruction - which is to say in a different idiom that it operates very much by the logic of that commodity form which is partly responsible for the chaos it hopes to transcend. It is the commodity form which at once fashions some spurious identity between disparate objects and generates an unstable, open-ended flux which threatens to outrun all such scrupulously imposed symmetry. (p. 320)

At first sight this looks a long way from MacNeice's kind of social writing, usually assumed to be a mix between a kind of urban Romanticism, demotic chattiness and, to use one of Edna Longley's phrases, 'condensed sociology'.²³ But as our analysis of 'Birmingham' showed, MacNeice cannot easily be straight-jacketed within the terms of social realism. His observation is peculiar, even neurotic. More importantly, the nature of the observation within the text is itself open to question. The kind of analysis which Eagleton introduces here can be applied usefully in MacNeice's rendering of social environments (surface/depth; commodity/structure; observer/observed):

Spending beyond their income on gifts for Christmas -
Swing doors and crowded lifts and draped jungles -
What shall we buy for our husbands and sons
Different from last year?

Foxes hang by their noses behind plate glass -
Scream of macaws across festoons of paper -
Only the faces on the boxes of chocolates are free
From boredom and crowsfeet.

Sometimes a chocolate-box girl escapes in the flesh,
 Lightly manoeuvres the crowd, trilling with laughter;
 After a couple of years her feet and her brain will
 Tire like the others.

These opening stanzas from 'Christmas Shopping' (*CP*, p. 95) seem to match the previous techniques of drawing attention to the familiar and unfamiliar - looking at the familiar in new ways, pointing to the unknowable in the known. The 'Swing doors and crowded lifts', signs of the known, are curiously mixed with the image of 'draperied jungles'. The familiar (fabric) is rendered unfamiliar or strange or unknowable or threatening with the references to 'jungle'. But far more interesting is the notion of the 'gift'. Every year the buying is the same, it's just the gift which is different. Or are the husbands and sons 'different' from last year? This ambiguity reveals that the gift, different but the same, is used as an indication of the difference in the people. The gift is always the same gift. That is, the gift forms an index of the sameness or difference of the person. Their continuity or change is signified, expressed, or marked out, by the commodity; the commodity, whatever object it might be is always a commodity. It is in this concrete relationship of giving and receiving that the commodity inserts itself; relations between people are defined in terms of the commodity. So, there is apparent difference, with hidden continuity - what is free is rendered static. But this apparent continuity is undermined by the fact that continuity is part of an abstraction, the uniformity gives way to change within the instability engendered by the contiguity of exchange.

The references to foxes and macaws displayed behind glass (site of representation, presentation and display, vehicles of the truth) offer a notion of this contingency, where disparate items are grouped together under the 'order' of the commodity. MacNeice's use of perspective seeks, by the presentation of these disparate images, to draw attention to its open-ended facticity. Most interesting about this passage, however, is its identification of the 'free' image on the chocolate box. Such an image is linked to the previous ordering. It is free in the sense that it is timeless; unfree in its status of representation. It is, of course, an aspirational image.

But once the aspiration 'escapes' its enclosures and takes on flesh, it is subject to time and will perish. The image is, therefore, a representation that cannot grow with time. 'Manoeuvring the crowd' the image keeps its distance from the living, whilst at the same time manipulating it. Equally, the image is perversely unobtainable, since the only way of achieving this commodity is through the very processes that produce its otherworldly appeal: labour. Hence, this culture grinds down the subject at the same time as it provides its own images of escape, transcendence or success. It is in pursuing those ideals, buying images of beauty through selling labour power, that the consumer is refused the promised goal of becoming the image. The image is refused by the very means by which it is to be achieved.

In 'Christmas Shopping' the characterization of a social world seems synonymous with a recognition of its various representations of, and to, itself. Among 'columns of ads' denoting 'the quickest way to riches' we learn that 'Christ is born'. Yet, birth of a saviour or not, this can lead only to the expectation of 'the accidental loot of a system'. It is perhaps this sense of *accident* which lies behind the description of a suburb which 'straggles like nervous handwriting, the margin / Blotted with smokestacks', whose 'welfare' is guarded by a lighthouse which 'Moves its arms like a giant at Swedish drill whose / Mind is a vacuum'. Here the social environment is described in terms of representation, of writing. It is, moreover, a kind of writing which gives no quarter to the conscious individual. It moves of its own accord, accidentally, without order. Its guardian is without consciousness, at its centre is an empty space. In these lines the subject can observe only its own erasure.

We began this chapter with questions of myth and practice. 'Christmas shopping' offers one incident of the link between representation and social practice. In one sense the representations we have seen in this last poem convince us of a sense of their artificiality. In another, we cannot avoid the conclusion that they partake in the construction of any social reality. If this construction involves the 'pretence' of stability which we witnessed in 'Nature Morte', it also contains its own variety of 'unrest', its own kind of instability. But it cannot be described as an 'unrest of the soul', since the

system responsible for this instability is also responsible for the disempowering of the 'soul' or the subject, within its representations. Thus we cannot help but be sceptical of the subject's ability to transcend this system, not least because of the rigorous self-questioning by the subject in previous poems which denied any stable, coherent position outside of the environment, and its conditions, that was described and represented.

But the power of the individual to affect change to one's environment might be described as one of the central preoccupations of the thirties. How can this sense of disempowerment before the text be consistent with such a conviction, with the necessity of the conscious individual to make change, to *act* within a particular environment? Questions of representation and history lead on, therefore, to related questions of the subject 'in action' within the world. It is, consequently, to these questions which we now turn.

Notes.

(Place of publication is London unless otherwise indicated).

- 1 Christopher Isherwood, *Mr. Norris Changes Trains* (1977; first published 1935), pp. 53-54.
- 2 Christopher Caudwell, *Illusion and Reality: A Study of the Sources of Poetry*, second edition (1946; first edition 1937), p. 290.
- 3 Louis MacNeice, *Blacklegs* (1939), p. 16, unpublished manuscript, Berg Collection, New York Public Library.
- 4 See for instance Christopher Nash, 'Myth and Modern Literature', in *The Context of English Literature: 1900-1930*, edited by Michael Bell (1980), pp. 160-85.
- 5 Ezra Pound, 'E. P. Ode pour l'election de son sepulchre', *Collected Shorter Poems* (1968), p. 191.
- 6 I have in mind a sense articulated by Richard Sheppard where 'Institutions from the past (including the institution of language) are felt to be magnificent but hollowed-out shells which give some semblance of continuity with the past but which in fact provide a beautiful surface for a repressive and pernicious reality', 'The Crisis of Language', in *Modernism: 1890-1930*, edited by Malcolm Bradbury and James McFarlane (Harmondsworth, 1974), pp. 323-36 (p. 327). The best description of joyful self-mythologizing is probably Nietzsche's: '...we have our highest dignity in our significance as works of art - for it is only as an *aesthetic phenomenon* that existence and the world are eternally *justified*... Thus all our knowledge of art is basically quite illusory, because as knowing beings we are not one and identical with that being which, as the sole author and spectator of this comedy of art, prepares a perpetual entertainment for itself', *The Birth of Tragedy and The Case of Wagner*, edited by Walter Kaufmann (New York, 1967), p. 52.
- 7 Frank Kermode, *The Sense of an Ending: Studies in the Theory of Fiction* (New York, 1967), p. 39.
- 8 I. A. Richards, *Science and Poetry* (1926), p. 59.
- 9 Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, edited and translated by Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell Smith (1971), p. 344. See also Louis Althusser, 'Ideology and the Ideological State Apparatus (Notes Towards an Investigation)', in *Essays on Ideology* (1984), pp. 1-60.
- 10 John Grierson, 'Battle for Authenticity', in *Grierson on Documentary*, edited by Forsyth Hardy, second edition (1966), pp. 83-85 (pp. 84-85).
- 11 'The Course of Realism', in Grierson, pp. 70-82 (p. 77).
- 12 James Joyce, *Ulysses*, corrected text edited by Hans Walter Gabler, Wolfhard Steppe, and Claus Melchior (New York, 1986), pp. 350-497.
- 13 Bram Dijkstra, *Idols of Perversity: Fantasies of Feminine Evil in Fin-de-Siecle Culture* (Oxford, 1986), pp. 320-21.
- 14 Terry Eagleton, *The Ideology of the Aesthetic* (Oxford, 1990), p. 371.

- 15 Tilottama Rajan, 'Romanticism and the Death of Lyric Consciousness', in *Lyric Poetry: Beyond New Criticism*, edited by Chviva Hosek and Patricia Parker (1985), pp. 194-207 (p. 200).
- 16 *English Auden*, p. 338; Caudwell, p. 154. For Caudwell's preoccupation with subject-object relations see Michael Draper, 'Christopher Caudwell's Illusions', in *The 1930s: A Challenge to Orthodoxy*, edited by John Lucas (Hassocks, 1978), pp. 78-102 (p.86).
- 17 J. B. Priestley, *English Journey* (1934), p. 79.
- 18 See Raymond Williams, *The English Novel: From Dickens to Lawrence* (St. Albans, 1974), pp. 11-12.
- 19 John Rignall, 'Benjamin's *Flâneur* and the Problem of Realism', in *The Problems of Modernity: Adorno and Benjamin*, edited by Andrew Benjamin (1989), pp. 112-21 (p. 116).
- 20 Frank Kermode, *History and Value: The Clarendon Lectures and the Northcote Lectures, 1987* (1988), p. 49.
- 21 See Jean Baudrillard, *Selected Writings*, edited by Mark Poster (Oxford, 1988), pp. 64-73.
- 22 Eagleton, p. 317.
- 23 Edna Longley, *Louis MacNeice: A Study* (1988), p. 47.

Chapter Four.

The Man of the People: MacNeice, Writing and Society (II).

Coming out of me living is always thinking,
Thinking changing and changing living,
Am feeling as it was seeing -
W. H. Auden¹

The Professor looked at the book on her lap and at the passage to which she was pointing with her finger. 'It is beautiful indeed,' he said. 'This is what it means.' He leant over her chair, and with his cheek close to her cheek began to translate, pressing his finger upon the paper by the side of her finger. 'No longer, maidens with throats of honey, voices of desire, are my limbs able to bear me. Oh would that I were a kerulos who over the wave's flower lies, having a careless heart, the sea-purple spring bird.'

'It is lovely,' she said, and there was a silence between them. Then with a smile she turned her head sideways to him and said, 'Is it escapism?'.
Rex Warner²

It is not fortuitous that the athesis is indefinitely suspended as concerns *life death*. It is not fortuitous that it speaks of the enigmatic death drive which disappears, appears to disappear, appears in order to disappear in *Beyond...* I call it *enigmatic* because it appears disappears while telling many stories and making many scenes, causing or permitting them to be told. Occasionally these are called myths or fables.
Jacques Derrida³

We could say, following Derrida, that in the literary text, the problem of representation, like that of language, 'has never been simply one problem among others'.⁴ The previous discussion has been occupied with how representation became a problem for MacNeice in the thirties, and the consequences for notions of a 'realist' text. It would be misleading, however, to suggest that the questions surrounding the issues of representation and writing can be read in isolation from other issues, some of which have traditionally occupied the 'realist' text: for instance, action within the world, the subject within society. What is important is that we recognize the changes to consideration of these issues attendant on the re-evaluation of writing, and how such changes featured in a specifically thirties context.

In this chapter I will examine the figure of the thirties 'I', of the subject represented as thinking and acting within society and within history. The preoccupation of thirties writers with action, political action for example, and with 'history' has been well documented and explored. Yet the category of the subject and representation is often reserved as an area of inspection featuring most prominently and complexly in modernist texts. I will show that, in MacNeice's texts at least, this is an oversight. It is, moreover, an oversight which obscures the contextual analysis of those very issues (action, history) which are supposed to most characterize thirties writing.

This is finally a question of meaning, of the subject within society also being within writing, or being-written. It is also a question of how the infiltration of representation into the subject throws into question that subject's relation to history. It is appropriate therefore to begin with the problems generated by notions in the thirties about the relation of writing to history, in particular, of the relationship between parabolic writing, its relation to the real, and of action within the real:

Parables for the Thirties.

In *The Strings are False* MacNeice tells the story of an almost mythical encounter between thirties figures. Driving up to Birmingham, hung-over from a drunken attempt to outrage 'Dialectical Materialism' in Oxford, MacNeice picks up three hitchhikers.

They consist of a would-be Oxford aesthete from Birmingham, a hard-headed Cambridge undergraduate, and John Cornford, who was:

[C]lever and communist and bristling with statistics...he was going to Birmingham to stand trial for causing an obstruction while distributing communist pamphlets in the Bull Ring (where the Chartist Movement had been launched in 1838)...

He and the other Cambridge undergraduate sat in the back seat and talked about Trade Unions; the Birmingham aesthete sat beside and talked about literary values. The Would-be Twenties and the Hard-Fact Thirties cross patterned in my mind as my forehead throbbed and the car swung wildly on the road; when we reached the Birmingham suburbs we found we had been driving for miles with a puncture. The Thirties at once jumped out, were cheerfully efficient; the Would-be Twenties stood listlessly by, composing his face to a deliberate disdain. This was the first and the last I saw of John Cornford. Later that year the war broke out in Spain and, being no careerist, he went out to fight there and was killed.⁵

The event seems almost too perfect to be true. MacNeice is the quixotic thirties traveller, his perspective spanning both the old and the new, encountering the archetypal figure of the 'hard fact' revolutionary, who is himself in opposition to the aestheticism of the twenties. Faced with a task in hand, the thirties man gets on with the job, leaving the aspiring aesthete helpless. It's a parable for the thirties, with aestheticism hopelessly unable to enter into the necessary and the real. The young revolutionary makes his entrance without question - an entrance which later leads to his death, and which also leads, of course, to his entry into myth, or the aesthetic.

Did this incident actually take place? In this way? It is difficult to say.

MacNeice's autobiography is sometimes untrustworthy. In the very same chapter it carries the claim that he began to 'feel free' after the departure of his wife. Period evidence suggests that this was not the whole story.⁶ Maybe this incident didn't happen quite the way MacNeice tells it. In an important sense it hardly matters, for this is a parable about parables, about two senses of the world, or two hermeneutic horizons, and their relation to history. In other words, it is about meaning and its relation to the world and to action within the world. The fact that the story itself seems poised on the border between literal and parabolic only seems to enact this distinction between the real (the world of action) and the aesthetic or mythical (the world of meaning).

The notion of parable was important for thirties writers, though the full implications of this concern have been curiously underrated. In *The Auden Generation* Samuel Hynes sees the parable form, in Auden's *Paid on Both Sides* for example, as crucial in defining the thirties generation:

Paid on Both Sides is the first important parable of a political decade... [The] play is a parable of growing up, which embodies but does not explain the feelings of a young man facing maturity and afraid of it. This is an historical subject insofar as the problem was an especially acute one for Auden's generation, entering life in a world that seemed to be running down, and entering it without the support of inherited values. And it is this historical aspect that makes the play important to the critic considering the characteristic modes and themes of the 'thirties, as it was important to the young men of Auden's time.⁷

Earlier in his discussion Hynes provides some other reasons for the play's importance:

[It] is a charade, to be played among friends, and Auden's friends are in it...Their presence makes the play another 'myth of themselves', like *Transitional Poem*. But Auden's charade is more than a private game, and a good deal more than a charade...there are other parabolic forms involved: the saga, and the boy's school story...the Mummings play, the dream vision, and the chorus of classical tragedy. What all these disparate literary forms have in common with each other and with a charade is that they are all conventionalized, non-realistic presentations of meaning in action. They lead the imagination away from private feelings and from literal reality, towards those stylizations that generalize experience and carry abstract meanings. Auden, groping for a new form, mixed these elements up a bit uncertainly, and created a mixed and uncertain play; nevertheless it is an important first attempt at what he called 'an altering speech for altering things', a parable of his generation in the post-war world. (pp. 51-52)

In many ways Hynes is at the heart of the matter here. He describes an emergent kind of writing intended to make sense of a public, or non-personal environment, in an attempt to find 'meaning in action'. Yet the problem with such a writing comes in the translation of such parables into action itself. The danger is that within the field of action they will become distorted or fallacious. But an equal problem is that they will remain separate from any given field of action, passive and untested, bearing no real relation to the actual. Hence the 'myth of themselves' (the term is MacNeice's, who was the first to recognize this trend in thirties writing) cuts both ways.⁸ On the one hand, the subject stands apart from the world, immensely meaningful but doing nothing; or s/he applies the myth to the world, where it can be changed, transformed into falsehood, de-mythologized in the cruellest of ways, diluted or contaminated by other

myths of practice, other structures of meaning already *in* practice. Auden's famous line, then, cuts both ways too, depending on whether we read 'altering' as 'changing with circumstances' or 'affecting change to circumstances'. If the former, the 'speech' lies passive, recording, making sense and order at some ideal distance from history. If the latter, it enters history, its context, and is subject to all the uncertainties, ambiguities and impurities inherent in that arena.

This condition, perennial of course, creates difficult problems for the literary text in general, and for thirties texts in particular. One of the oddest features of reading thirties writing is that it sometimes seems to depend on an absence. At another point in his discussion Hynes includes a list of what he considers to be fallacious, but commonplace, assumptions about the thirties:

The fact that it ended in war may... be considered as a deserved destiny, a just punishment for moral failure;
 Its writers were all of necessity politically motivated;
 Their efforts to make literature a mode of action failed, and their writing shared in that failure.⁹

These assumptions, it's true, do sound questionable. But the last, about the failure of efforts to make literature a 'mode of action' begs another question. What would be a *successful* fulfilment of this aim? How could we gauge that success? We might have a sense of literature informing action, instigating action, making 'action urgent and its nature clear' as Auden put it.¹⁰ But is this the same as literature, or any writing, being in itself a mode of action?

We can gain a sense of the difficulty of this issue by suggesting that the most successful text would be one which is an act in itself: a performance, repeatable or not, a pure action which, like all other actions can be described, invoked by historians - literary or otherwise - but not *read*. Hence the sense of absence in thirties writing, or in discussions of it, as though its function lay not in the rendering or interpretation of the real, but in the modification of the real itself. Such a writing, in its purest form, would amount to an erosion of the signifier within the space of such action. The text could *do*, but once done, it could not *mean*. In the space of pure action the text which took

action as its prime function could only exist afterwards as a pale fragment or sign - the signifier of a moment lost to time:

The problem was familiar to thirties writers, although it has never been fully explored. Such an exploration, I shall argue in this chapter, requires some examination of the question of parable. This consideration can be distinguished from the usual thirties-based discussion of what literature can 'do' whilst still maintaining its specificity as literature. The usual answers to the questions, that is, about whether writers should 'keep to their art', or go and fight in Spain, - usually resolved in some version of the affective fallacy - and whether such art can accommodate 'propaganda' or some external 'cause' and still remain art. For this is not just a question of the intended 'function' of art, but an issue involving (perhaps less obvious) questions of language and the text. As such, it is a question which can be seen as undergoing consideration within the text itself.

A recent discussion by J. Hillis Miller might make this aspect, and its relation to parable, clearer. In *The Linguistic Moment* Hillis Miller considers a problem raised by Kafka's short fragment 'On Parables'. The problem, Hillis Miller writes:

...turns on the question of whether following the sacred parables - for example when they tell man to 'cross over' - occurs in parable or in reality: 'concerning this a man once said: "why such reluctance? if you only followed the parables you yourselves would become parables and with that rid of all your daily cares." Is what the man once said literal or parabolic?'¹¹

This final question concentrates the problem of the relation of 'parable' to 'reality' in a way which places us in an insoluble double bind:

If you take the parable literally, then you must understand it as naming some literal crossing over from one place to another in reality, in which case you remain in reality...so following the parable does not make anything happen. If you take the parable parabolically, that means seeing it as merely figurative. In that case neither the parable itself nor following the parable makes anything happen, and so you have lost in parable. Winning in parable could only occur if the crossing over promised in the parable were to occur in reality. Either way you lose, since to win in reality is to lose in parable, and the one thing needful is to win in parable. (p. 25)

The distinction drawn is connected to two other oppositions: Between figurative and literal meaning, and between constative and performative language. The second

opposition is the most useful for our purposes: 'constative language names something. Performative language makes something happen' (p.25). Hillis Miller's point is that although we would like to think we can easily move between these nicely defined oppositions, in practice this is fraught with difficulty.

This difficulty comes as a result of the conceptual distinction between parable and reality either locking us irretrievably into one world or the other, or in practice undecidably merging, contaminating, the two types of discourse. A figure or parable hopes to explain and interpret the world. The literal and the performative (I promise, I bet, I declare) takes its function purely by context and by action in a context. One cannot promise except by saying 'I promise', yet such an act, this is the crucial point, is wholly empty outside this space of action. In contrast, naming, describing, interpreting the world establishes a space of meaning, but it does not do anything to change the world in any practical way. The distinction may be seen as a false one; the mutual exclusivity of the terms by no means certain. Contemporary language theory, for instance, stresses the performative quality of all 'speech acts', and has effectively collapsed the dichotomy of the constative/performative in favour of this notion of speech as act.¹² Hillis Miller introduces this opposition only in order to deconstruct it. But this deconstruction does not render it useless. Instead of seeing these oppositions as mutually exclusive, we should understand one as using and supposing the other. Any 'parable' or meaning is placed and interpreted in a real place; any real, material situation is subject to interpretation: 'Each opposition contaminates the other, crosses over the frontier into the region of the other, preventing clear understanding or a clear-headed option, just as the interpretation of the parables cannot be sharply distinguished from the knowledge they give or the action they instigate' (p. 25).

The discussion remains useful for the light it throws on the complications arising from the thirties preoccupation with action within history. Embedded in Hillis Miller's discussion are a number of questions of language, which require some unpacking. For the account in fact includes in its designation of the 'performative' or 'literal' a conflation of three linguistic elements which have figured prominently in language

theory: The pronominal, the performative, and the deictic (or the shifter).¹³ What proves fascinating about all these categories is that they seem to demonstrate in different ways, serve as parables if you like, for the notion that language is not a vehicle simply 'referring', one to one, to some pre-existent object. The pronoun, (I, You) does not refer to any classifiable and separate object in the world, like for instance a tree, but rather designates a subject position in relation to discourse.¹⁴ Put another way, it cannot refer to anything which precedes its utterance; in contrast, the object to which it refers is constituted precisely through this utterance. The performative (I promise, I declare) does not refer to anything, but performs a function entirely dependent on context. One cannot promise without saying 'I promise', and a promise cannot be referred to without it previously existing in context.¹⁵ Thirdly, the 'shifter' seems to refer to something in the world (Here, there), but such reference is wholly unstable (Where is 'here?'), and can refer to, or designate no constant 'thing'.¹⁶ The figure thus serves as a device for showing the fundamental instability of language itself. So, language does not refer to pre-existent things, it constitutes them and their meaning. There is no reference without meaning. Yet this meaning does not exist in some pristine Logos removed from the world, but is context-bound. This context, however, is radically unstable, given to ambiguity and change, impure. As Jonathan Culler puts it, 'meaning is context bound, but context is boundless'.¹⁷

Hillis Miller is thus producing an allegory of language, and of reading. For although we might like to believe in some pristine realm of meaning, or Logos, divorced from the world, meaning is always worldly. As such, it is inherently given to instability. At the same time, although we think of language referring to things in the world, this reference is always a product of meaning. Hence the analysis of parable. On the one hand, we think of parable as some pristine kind of meaning divorced from reality, operating in the ideal space of the 'figurative'. But such a realm can only function within the real, which inevitably modifies it. But this real is always imbued with meanings, which are inherently instable, yet given with certain circumstances to fixity and closure. In the simplest terms, one cannot ever 'become a parable' like the man in

Kafka's story urges us to. The figural is always finally out of reach of the literal, but can only be apprehended through the world of the literal. Furthermore, the literal, the real, is always in some respects imbued with the parabolic, the mythological or fictional, in representations within history.

The question, for our purposes, is not how this allegory might alter our reading of thirties texts as a whole (or whatever has become of them). Rather, it is how these questions of meaning, context (history), instability and closure, are themselves dramatized within MacNeice's texts of the thirties. In addition, the question is how this dramatization serves as a figure or trope for the activity of the subject involved with the impurities of history and writing.

The Subject of History: 'Carrickfergus', 'Belfast', 'Turf-stacks'.

'Carrickfergus' (*CP*, p. 69) is a good example of MacNeice's rendering of the individual within a social situation:

I was born in Belfast between the mountain and gantries
 To the hooting of the lost sirens and the clang of trams
 Thence to Smoky Carrick in County Antrim
 Where the bottle-neck harbour collects the mud which jams

The little boats beneath the Norman Castle,
 The pier shining with lumps of crystal salt;
 The Scotch Quarter was a line of residential houses
 But the Irish Quarter was a slum for the blind and halt.

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.

This is an effective piece of descriptive writing, in keeping with some of the 'realist' proclivities of the thirties. Mountains, Gantries, trams, houses - all are presented in stark detail, with a method which would seem aimed at demystifying the Irish landscape. Ireland, the poem implies, has its working industrial infrastructure as well as Britain. However, this is not only a poem about Ireland. It also dwells on living in Ireland, from a retrospective position. Autobiography, Virginia Woolf claimed, was a definitive mode for thirties writers, as they struggled to come to terms with class and

identity in a world where their upbringing rendered them culpable.¹⁸ MacNeice was to make more use of this genre in *Autumn Journal*, but in this poem the growing self is hardly very prominent. The opening line of the poem alerts us to its expected development; what we get is a series of industrial details. It is as if the self is somehow defined by such a landscape and its rendering, in a way which cannot provide any clear substance to this self. We expect the poem to talk about intellectual and spiritual development. Instead it talks about factories, chlorine and trams.

This is not a comforting environment. There is a good deal of sensual awareness evident in the poem - sights are complimented by sounds and smells. Yet they are harsh sights, the sounds eerie ('the hooting of lost sirens') and the smells unpleasant.¹⁹ As in much autobiographical writing, it is hard to tell the backward glance from the object of that glance. In *this* glance we should note the contingency of the represented detail. All scenic description is ⁱⁿ one sense metonymic, grounded in the associations of contiguity. Some writing attempts to locate some unifying metaphoric principle in such description. This might be in the subject's consciousness, or in the perception of order within the environment itself. In MacNeice's description there is no such unifying energy. Instead, as in 'Birmingham', we find discontinuity and surface. This is not the discontinuity of *The Waste Land*; we do not find chaos or radical disorder. What we do find is the absence of any stated significance. Any expectations of some conclusive meaning in this description will be disappointed. The detail is just *there*.

We can draw parallels between this scene and that of 'Birmingham'. There we saw that 'surface' was the look of the insider who resisted the establishing of unifying metaphors (History, class, revolution) in describing a social situation. 'Carrickfergus' continues this preoccupation:

The Norman walled this town against the country
 To stop his ears to the yelping of his slave
 And built a church in the form of a cross but denoting
 The list of Christ on the cross in the angle of the nave

I was the rector's son, born to the anglican order,
 Banned for ever from the candles of the Irish poor;

The Chichesters knelt in marble at the end of a transept
 With ruffs about their necks, their portion sure.

Here there does seem to be some explaining historical context for the scene. But it is the subject's exclusion from this context that is emphasised. The city of Carrickfergus is 'walled' by the Normans, ears 'stopped' against the slave. These details mirror the 'blind and halt' of the Irish Quarter. MacNeice characterizes his environment as being one of isolation. This is cultural as much as psychological. The speaker is implanted within a cultural identity - born to an order - which is significant mainly for what it forbids: the exclusion from the 'candles of the Irish poor'. Rather than reading this as just a synecdochic device we should be aware that this detail carries with it a good deal of social symbolism. The exclusion is that of a language - the 'anglican order' establishes an identity, but it is one which restricts, or delimits cultural meanings. The 'Anglican' detail, we might say, denotes. The Catholic detail, on the other hand, is understood to connote, to signify. Yet this signification remains silent. The reference to the Chichesters, static in marble, forms another indication of cultural understanding. But the stasis of these images, the fact that their 'portion' seems sure, only serves to highlight discrepancy. The speaker seems aware of a position for himself, implied by the statues, but this is hardly a 'portion', a clearly defined identity or destiny. Much less the portion than was the enabling and empowering 'lot' of the Chichesters. In contrast, he is aware of absence. This cultural heritage seems dead, unusable in its 'certainty' and stasis. We find several senses of stasis in the poem. First, in that the images remain lifelessly of the past; second, that these images provide no model for change in the present; third, that they serve to root the individual in an unchanging and unsatisfactory social position. Rather than explaining the cultural context, this reference to history provides images which refuse such an understanding. There are no lessons which can prompt a clear way forward. This is emphasised by the sense of unsettlement prompted by the war:

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

Would the weekly papers not have photos of sandbags
 And my governess not make bandages from moss

And people not have maps above the fireplace
 With flags on pins moving across and across -

Across the hawthorn hedge the noise of bugles,
 Flares across the night,
 Somewhere on the lough was a prison ship for Germans,
 A cage across their sight.

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.

The self is continually displaced in this poem. He is embedded in a cultural role that is alien to him, but which excludes him from other areas of social reality, as he moves from place to place within the role of son. He is exiled from a 'home' to which he never belonged, yet which continually works its influence on him. The only sense of the present provided by the poem is that it is 'not the war'. Instead of growing, the self encounters a developing sense of rootlessness as he is excluded from 'mill girls, salt mines' - features of his environment he had little real attachment to when there. The sense of school as 'contraction' of the adult world into the 'puppet world of sons' enforces the element of control and production in the poem. Sons exist in a site of performance, the strings held by the parents, or indeed by the authority of the school. We can read this in several ways: that the sons merely mimic the world of their parents, or mimic it covertly within their own terms; that the world of sons seems new, different from that of the parents, yet is still in the underlying control of the parents and their authority. We might even read these two lines as drawing some analogy between the world of sons and that of the parents - in that they are both the same, except for the fact that the 'puppet' world of sons reveals its strings more clearly. In any of these cases 'contract' can be used to imply 'shrinking, reduction', or 'agreed to, written in'. Both senses serve to emphasise a narrowing of horizons as the subject is inserted into a cultural environment described and defined by its use of significations which fail to locate the self in any meaningful and coherent relation to the world.

'Carrickfergus' is a relatively late thirties poem (1937). In 'Belfast' (1931; *CP*, p. 17) however we find the same fascination with social exclusion and the landscape of signification in cultural environments. The speaker is located amidst 'marble stores'

with 'celluloid, painted ware, glaring / Metal patents, parchment lampshades, harsh / attempts at buyable beauty'. This detail, similar to that of 'Birmingham', where the urban landscape is in part characterised by its commodities, is familiar by now. What we should note in this poem is its immediate contrast to a glimpsed, enclosed figure:

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.

Over which country of cowed 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.

MacNeice's relationship with his Irish background has been a source of controversy in readings of his work.²⁰ Important, however is the use in these lines (and in 'Carrickfergus') of Ireland as a set of significations. What is on trial here, as before, is the gaze. The woman is fascinating for us because of her status as cliché. For the speaker she holds a quality of otherness, and marginality. She lies 'as if shipwrecked there' without, it seems, any sense of place or purpose. The fact that she is only 'glimpsed', glanced at in passing, should alert us to the fact that we are not required to see this as an authoritative statement on the Irish environment. Rather she stands as an image telling us as much about the observer as the observed. The 'buoyant and glib' commentator is excluded from her realm of signification. He can only see it as signification. The women of Ireland, murdered by their men, are trapped inside a realm of signification, praying to the Madonna, which does not help them in their quest for 'oblivion'. We encounter a double-bind here. It is as if the prayer for oblivion is somehow engendered by the cultural order which the Madonna stands to signify. The culture of the Madonna produces both a death-wish, or desire for oblivion; at the same time it refuses to fulfil that wish. The desiring subject is therefore caught in a space of refusal between life and death. Life is denied; death is refused.

Clearly there must be problems here if we want to read this as a piece of social commentary. Is this the disaffected voice of 'Valediction' (*CP*, p. 52) ('This is what you have given me / Indifference and sentimentality')? But who is MacNeice to write in such

a voice? Is this writing off a whole culture? On what basis? And who is the 'us' that 'walk[s] in the street so buoyantly and glib'? One answer to these questions might be that although valid in a way, they rather miss the point. All of them can be included in a reading of the poem which in no way renders it unimportant. Rather they are questions that the poem established for itself, by interrogating its own look. The 'I' of the poem sets up no alternative standards to counter, legitimate, or distance himself from these observed details. In this sense, he, as much as anyone, is implicated in what he describes, albeit in a different way. He is not part of what he describes, but neither is he wholly apart.

It becomes increasingly difficult to misread all the attention in these poems to cultural signification as simply 'background' material for a piece of social realism. As 'realism', we could conclude, the poems are really quite unsuccessful, in their partiality, or even 'inaccuracy'. However this is to take a definition of the socially 'real' that would see the kind of detail upon which MacNeice focuses as being contingent in relation to some observing consciousness or self and its objects. These poems challenge such a position, noting that signification is not ancillary to culture and its products (one of which, we should note, is the self within such a culture) but is a fundamental part of it. What contingency there is can be seen as a function of such significations, either in their inability to produce the grounds for a coherent self, or by their exclusion and displacement of such a self. If this subjectivity is lacking in the culture under observation, it is also absent from the excluded, placeless, observing self.

Another early poem can be usefully considered here:

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.

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 against our crumbling Troy.

In 'Turf-Stacks' (*CP*, p. 18) we find a clear departure from any recognizable 'social realism' in the depiction of a social environment. We should be prepared to read this poem as a departure from the literal to the figurative, from the real to the parabolic. For MacNeice's peasant has more in keeping with Yeats's fisherman or Wordsworth's leech-gatherer than any concrete social individual or type. We have a figure who is profoundly *rooted*. His environment is characterized initially by its difference from the urban environment. The eyes of the poem are clearly those of a city-dweller; though interestingly the city is described as a kind of parodic pastoral environment. It is inhabited by 'iron horses' (of course, the stock Hollywood western phrases for trains), which form a parallel with horses of the country. Such horses, their intertext with film clearly marking the provenance of the speaker, are said to 'champ' (munch; trample underfoot - *OED*) in a way which sees them devouring the subject within the crowd, and a function of the crowd itself. The iron horse 'champs' the crowd. The crowd 'champs' itself and its other. Clearly there are other intertexts operating here - the Trojan horse, which makes an explicit entry in the later parts of the poem. Also Tennyson's 'Locksley Hall', and by extension, Auden's parody 'Get there if you can', published in his *Poems* (1930).²¹ These intertexts enter the poem through the preoccupation with the train which 'run[s] in grooves'. What we find, then, is a MacNeicean version of Auden's response to Tennyson's bourgeois optimism.

Plainly MacNeice views the city, or metropolis, as a vehicle for consumption, in more ways than one. As much as the city 'consumes' its inhabitants it produces them. 'Thought' within the city is 'mass-produced' - in bulk, produced by the masses, who are in turn produced by such 'neat thinking'. In no real way, then, is the city a domain of freedom or liberation from the rootedness of the rural environment. Instead it is characterized by death: shrouds for the mind, black hearses. The Cartesian 'thinking' subject or *cogito* is clearly under threat in such an environment. Here we get a different angle on the rootlessness which characterized previous discussions of the social environment. Where previously we might have considered the urban subject as a free-floating self, apart from both the stabilities of rural and cultural *doxa*, this comparison

with the peasant shows the absorption of such a subject within the domain of signification in the city.²² Here it is the peasant, rooted to his environment, who maintains freedom and life.

There is, however, a contradiction in the poem. On the one hand the peasant is described as 'not thinking at all', on the other, the urban environment is considered to be one where thought is killed, or at least 'produced' in a way which is inconsistent with the needs of the willing, intentional subject. What distinguishes these two positions is that the unthinking peasant is identified as being in touch with a creative principle in nature. In a natural habitat, he seems to occupy a space (a 'here') in which action is unified with being. His state is therefore the imaginary one of whole, pure, being. The speaker is, in contrast, resolutely fallen. But this fallen state, where thinking maintains itself at some distance from nature is not the same as the 'death' of thinking within the city. In the former, the mind achieves some degree of intentionality or will, some independence. In the latter, the mind is taken over by the 'thinking' of the city, giving the illusion or parody of free thought, when it is in fact the extinguishing of such thought. The paradox is that this separation from nature renders the speaker only too aware of his vulnerability to the false thinking of the city, only too aware of its distance from the being that the peasant enjoys in nature. So, not only is 'thinking' denied to the subject, but so too is the 'unthinking' life of the peasant which seems to reside in unreflective action.

The poem seems to offer, then, two choices. If thought is extinguished in the city, leaving only its ghost, so to speak, the figure of the peasant offers itself as an identified, imaginary alternative. At least the peasant is free from the death of thought within culture, the parody of active thinking which offers itself as thought. Indeed, his unthinking can claim some connection with natural processes - the movement of hooves offering at least some alternative to the prescribed 'grooves' of culture.

However, as the second stanza indicates, this is not a real alternative for the speaker. For he is a part of culture, and is therefore unable to move outside the processes of that culture. The peasant, we are told, is protected from this infiltration by

'tawny mountain' and 'unregarded buttress'. This protection seems to work in two ways. First, by not being an object of thought or contemplation for the peasant. Second, by eluding the gaze of the cultural 'eye'. The speaker, however, is in some need of a 'fortress against ideas'. It is as if the *cogito* has become unthinkable here when confronted with 'theory-vendors' (*theoros*, seeing). The thinking which made up such a *cogito* has been invaded by the commodity form, which, in its furthest manifestation operates as an 'aggregate beast'. What seemed as the gift to liberalism within capitalism (rational thinking) has within it the seeds of its destruction in a Trojan horse of the commodity-idea: Theory vending. Thinking and being seem hopelessly at odds in this environment. So what alternatives *are* open to the speaker?:

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
 And rip the edge off any ideal or dream.

MacNeice's alternative seems to be one of escape. The reference to 'looking glass' and 'beads' mark the speaker as possessed of a self-conscious *cogito* and of a predilection for ordering, abstract patterning. Even though these practices are seemingly marginal to real action (playing in corners), they are now rendered 'obsolete'. It is not clear whether this obsolescence comes as a result of lacking any social purpose, or whether they have been rendered obsolescent in their own terms: any kind of speculation, self-examination or 'play' is now either useless or impossible within the domain of the commodity-idea. Maurice Blanchot has commented on a similar situation, drawing on a comment made in the thirties by André Gide which may be usefully applied here:

In 1934 André Gide wrote, 'For a long time now, works of art will be out of the question.' And the fact that Hegel, a century earlier, at the beginning of his monumental course on esthetics [*sic*], pronounced this sentence, 'Art is for us a thing of the past,' constitutes a judgement upon art which must reflect and which it will by no means consider refuted simply because since that date literature, the plastic arts, and music have produced substantial works. For at the moment Hegel spoke, he knew full well that renewal called Romanticism. What did he mean, then, he who never spoke 'lightly'? This, precisely: that since the day when the absolute consciously became the active process *which is history, art* has no longer been able to satisfy the need for an absolute. Relegated within us, it has lost its reality and its necessity; everything that was

authentically true and alive in it now belongs to the world and the real, purposeful activity in the world.²³

Within this context, we can say that MacNeice's poem is indeed aware of the relegation of 'the absolute' in consciousness. But what the poem throws in doubt is the capacity for that which was 'authentically true and alive' to be displaced onto action. The peasant, we remember, acts within nature and is thus immune from the mental processes within history and culture. But this figural existence is not available to the speaker. And presumably the 'authentic' thinking of the *cogito* would not function in this way. Thinking is impossible in the city, the action of the peasant unavailable. The only possible activity for the subject is retreat. That is, to 'go'. The only positive action is in negation. In retreating from 'the world' to Asia or to 'some other tunnel where the world recedes' the speaker effectively exempts himself from action. In so doing the integrity of the self is maintained. By implication, any action within the city would fall short of this maintaining of integrity, though it is not clear whether action would be absorbed within the structure of the commodity-idea, or whether it would simply be dumb action. What the poem offers in return is a category of seemingly pure action: 'turn blind wanton like the gulls who scream / And rip the edge off any ideal or dream'. This is not quite the same position as the peasant, for at least two reasons. First, the speaker's identification with the gulls as 'wanton' represents a wholly destructive attitude. There is no natural 'support' for this activity as there is with the peasant. As such, the speaker is not returning to nature so much as establishing an anti-cultural position. He resists the false meanings of the city by identifying with a meaningless scream, which is closely tied to a form of action. Both of these relations of 'meaning'/meaninglessness and thinking/acting are crucial here. The Peasant does not contradict culture, so much as simply ignore it. Instead, the speaker's identification with the gulls is from a position within culture, or its commodity form. The second difference follows from this. The gull is not 'acting', but screaming. It is this which 'rips the edge' off ideals and dreams. A scream, we should note, is a verbal sign, an indexical sign to use C. S. Peirce's terminology.²⁴ Such a sign differs from the iconic, which resembles its referent in some respect, and from the symbolic, whose meaning is

established purely by convention, in 'pointing' to its object which is in some way contiguous. Smoke for instance, signifies fire; animal tracks indicate an animal, as does its scream. The scream, as this kind of sign, in itself means nothing; its meaning is wholly dependent on context, and on its function within that context (to warn; to express without semanticity). It refers, then, without meaning. Unlike a constative, a scream cannot 'name' or describe anything. Like a performative, its function is entirely bound by context. This provides us with a better idea of how the scream offers a challenge to the commodity-ideal, or to the commodity-dream. For it refuses their status of effective 'meaning', empties the sign of its semanticity, and grounds it in a context, like a deictic. At the same time it engenders a mode of doing which seems in itself to be a parody of the parodic 'meaning' of the city. This action is not only that of refusal. In addition, it returns to the sign some quality of performance, via its grounding in context, which it previously lacked. Moreover, it restores a quality of reference, even of the most basic form. But we should also note that this action is accomplished only at the cost of the extinction of the thinking, speaking, *cogito*. It is the linking of action with a parody of 'meaning' which gives the identification with the gull its significance or, in the context of the poem, its absence of significance.

This emphasis on meaning, therefore, would seem to engender a pessimism out of keeping with the times. This is not because of a questioning of meaning *per se*, but because there seems to be no alternative to the weightless commodification of ideas, or the agonized scream of the subject. This might seem a strange perspective for any who would want to argue for the new importance of the social. If there are such alternatives, they might lie in a view of the social which does not perceive it as this field of commodification, and which instead provide some purposeful space for the subject. If the stuff of 'Turf-stacks' is, by implication, language, we might consider an example of MacNeice's presentation of language as a social phenomenon as a means to establishing this middle-ground.

The Seduction of the Literal: 'Homage to Clichés'.

In 'Homage to clichés' (*CP*, p. 59) it is the apparently meaningless phrase which, initially at least, is cause for homage or celebration:

With all this clamour for progress
 This hammering out of new phases and gadgets, new trinkets and phrases
 I prefer the automatic, the reflex, the cliché of velvet,
 the foreseen smile, sexual, maternal, or hail-fellow-met,
 the cat's fur sparkling under your hand
 And the indolent delicacy of your hand
 These fish coming in to the net
 I can see them coming for yards
 The way that you answer, the way that you dangle your foot
 These fish that are rainbow and fat
 One can catch in the hand and caress and return to the pool.

The poem begins with an attack, as in 'Turf-stacks', on the new-fangled, the invented. Cliché seems to offer some alternative to this practice. Tom Paulin has written about MacNeice's own 'technique of setting clichés dancing to a hurdy-gurdy rhythm'; this poem might be seen as a justification, as well as an example, of this technique.²⁵ The cliché might seem to be, of course, a distinctly unpoetic medium, whether for Romantically derived explorations of consciousness, or simply in the description of any poetic space. 'A poem paying homage ('Acknowledgment of superiority; dutiful respect or honour shown' *OED*) to cliché could, therefore, strike us as containing something of a joke. Such an ironic play with the status of the poem is preferable to, say, a reading which would stress its democratic urge to acknowledge the importance of the commonplace or the ordinary over the elite. Although one could applaud the intentions of this reading, it is finally self-defeating, since the role of the cliché is to render this commonplace or ordinary a site of the banal. Clichés, in this case, muster the variety and multifacetedness of the everyday into pre-existent meanings and structures, forcing the user to re-orientate further action in line with these elements of the banal. In fact the poem is far less easy to pin down than this. Its perspective is continually shifting between commonplace settings, 'casual meetings', the discourses which define and enable these settings; and a dream-like 'other' environment, which is indefinite, gloomy, and unknowable. Throughout, it is hard to say which of these scenes is commenting on the other, to which one the speaker owes allegiance.

The speaker's defence of cliché comes in opposition to a 'clamour for progress' manifested in phases, gadgets, trinkets, phrases. We can easily read this as a straightforwardly reactionary aversion to the abrasively 'new' in favour of the banal. Certainly the poem plays with this voice. The lines might also read as a parodic comment on the nature of liberal 'progress', placing on the same level the classifying and explaining discourses of liberal thought (phases/phrases) and the trinkets and gadgets of consumer capitalism. This sense would accord with that of Jean Baudrillard, who notes:

[The] gadget is the emblem of post-industrial society. There is no rigorous definition of the gadget. But if we can agree that the object of consumption is defined by the relative definition of its objective function (as a tool) to the benefit of its function as a sign, and if we can agree that the object of consumption is characterised by a kind of *functional uselessness* (since what is consumed is precisely something other than the 'useful') then *the gadget is indeed the truth of the object in consumer society...*The definition of the gadget would be its potential uselessness and its ludic combinatory value.²⁶

Baudrillard's sense of the 'ludic' is of a scene wherein an object is robbed entirely of its actual use-value, and where it can function only as a sign or simulation of use, the truly purposeful. This authentic use is continually withheld in the domain of signification. MacNeice's lines seem to share a similar scepticism of the actual purposes served by 'phases/phrases'.

The speaker at first invokes cliché as a more reliable guide to the real. Cliché serves as a metaphor for the controlled, the familiar, predictable and, importantly, the communal. Such a space provides the subject with stability, and appreciation of the particular and sensual. Hence the speaker offers a sense of cliché as the control of nature, of 'fish coming into the net', a taming of the wild without the strained activity of the subject. The net is already made, the fish enter, observed by an almost passive figure who 'can see them coming for miles'. I say 'almost passive' because, in addition to the pleasures of such ordering of disorder, the accommodation of the world to human purposes, the speaker allows pleasure to arise from the contemplation or exploration of the 'caught'. The 'indolent delicacy of your hand': there is indolence, but there is also delicacy. This isolation of the hand, serving as a figure for the productive or active, the

useful, is mirrored in the hand of the speaker: 'These fish that are rainbow and fat / One can catch in the hand and return to the pool'. Cliché provides the speaker with the stability to explore, and by doing so enjoy, the familiar. It serves as a metaphor for the orientation of the subject in the world within existing discourses. Cliché here is not regarded as an escape into the banal, but as a forum for the speculation of order in the world, for the organising within society, and for the pleasure within this stability:

This is on me this time

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

For Mahomet comes to the mountain and the fish come to the bell.

What will you have now? The same again?

A finger can pull these ropes,

A gin and lime or a double Scotch -

Watch the response, the lifting wrist the clink and smile

The fish come in, the hammered notes come out

From a filigree gothic trap.

MacNeice here weaves around his various tropes, seeing one in terms of the other, mixing his metaphors. As such, the poem enacts the relaxed mode of its opening.

Cliché is a space in which discourse has a momentum of its own, the images of the poem seem to mingle of their own accord, yet always under the manipulating hand of the subject, safely in control of this pattern-making. The poem illustrates the double sense of cliché as a structure in place, lending stability to the speaker, but one which that same speaker can control and manipulate. Consequently, the speaker is relatively empowered by the activity of cliché. We have a number of images for this: the bell of an abbey, an 'eternal bell', the figure of Rameses, immortal in stone, the mountain to which Mahomet must travel, fish entering a bell. These are images for phrases such as 'this is on me', or 'the same again', the expected gesture, the foreseen smile. All serve to locate and order the subject's perspective, which he can control almost effortlessly ('a finger can pull these ropes'). These pre-given, ordered utterances operate like a bell, which is hit, sounding of their own accord. The place of the subject is indicated by the notions of 'tiny hammers' on such a bell, the 'filigree' or jewellery on a pre-existent object, and the reference to 'patina':

These are the moments that are anaplerotic, these are the gifts to be accepted
 Remembering the qualification
 That everything is not true to type like these
 That the pattern and the patina of these
 Are superseded in the end.

The 'anaplerosis' ('the filling up of a deficiency' *OED*) of the moments emphasises them as source of comfort. However, As the poem develops this notion of the subject acting on a pre-existent structure, the status of this structure is thrown into doubt. The fact that 'everything is not true to type like these' is a cleverly placed cliché in itself. We are to understand that the 'patterning' or ordering of cliché, on the surface of things (patina) is one type of stability or fixity in an otherwise incoherent environment. Stasis, we must remember, is not the whole story. Yet it is a cliché which tells us this. The choice that the poem provides, then, is seemingly the taking of the pleasures of cliché when they are needed. We accept that the cliché is not the whole reality, and that the subject can move out of these pleasures when they are exhausted. However, the poem suggests that the subject does not have this capacity as much as may be supposed. In fact, these orderings and movements of the structure, themselves clichés, are themselves subject to change, and to change in a way that gives the subject no kind of real control.

So, the supposedly useful qualification on the limits of cliché, that they only serve limited uses, that they are counterposed by something else, which is knowable and usable, is itself qualified by the remainder of the poem:

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.
 Final as if finality were the trend of fish
 That always seek the net
 As if finality were the obvious gag
 The audience laughing in anticipation
 As if finality were the angled smile
 Drawn from the dappled stream of casual meetings
 (Yet oh thank God for such)

The poem suggests that, instead of cliché providing only a respite from an otherwise active, inquiring discourse, the stabilities and pleasures of cliché in fact induce their own

logic, almost inevitably, which would persuade the user that such meanings, drawn from 'casual meetings' are final and unchanging. The discourse, that is to say, will not allow a knowledge that accounts for change. Hence the 'impertinent precision' of hammers on the bell are now dwarfed by the sense that the bell is not fixed and immutable, but may change of its own accord, or at least by powers which take no account of the self. The dream-logic of 'eight black panthers' gestures towards a foreboding of change, but the details are themselves seemingly arbitrary, and resistant to any meaningful interpretation - why black panthers? why eight? what are eight silences? We can suggest some reasons for this detail shortly; what we should note now is how this extra-ordinary detail modifies our sense of cliché that the poem has established. Finality, or the apparent finality of the cliché, is now 'the obvious gag / The audience laughing in anticipation', where the 'gag' is clearly a joke, which one can see coming for miles, and whose adumbration is part of its pleasure. It is also the 'gag' of the obvious - pleasurable in itself, but imposing severe restrictions on speech and knowledge. The 'gift to be accepted' now seems to be emerging as a 'given', something which is pre-supposed without authentic grounding or base, and which MacNeice satirizes in another thirties poem, 'Taken for granted' (*CP*, p. 83):

Taken for granted
 The household orbit in childhood
 The punctual sound of the gong
 The round of domestic service.

On the knees of bountiful gods
 We lived in the ease of acceptance
 Taking until we were twenty
 God's plenty for granted.

As a satirical poem this is certainly successful, drawing a witty parallel between the social 'givens', the sureties of early twentieth century bourgeois life, and the fact that these they were 'given', achieved, or as the poem implies, 'accepted' as the result of privilege, rather than through any personal endeavour or labour.

Given these modifications in 'Homage to clichés', one might argue that by challenging uses of cliché as guides to the world, the poem really only returns us to another cliché - the cliché about clichés not being very good guides to reality. There are

a number of qualifications we ourselves need to make here, however. First, although the speaker is powerfully aware of the limitations of the cliché, he still cannot reject its necessity or the pleasures of stability: 'yet oh thank god for such'. In a way which is now becoming typical, the self is divided between the recognition that an intellectual position is untenable, and the desire to remain within the certainties of that position. Clichés are lies, but they are nice lies, particularly when one considers the alternatives, which are not different positions for the self, but difficult and, more to the point, destructive ways of selflessness, or perhaps 'unselfness'. As ever, moving out of the conventional confines or positions of the self is a difficult, but necessary, task for MacNeice. The poem carries an implicit critique of notions which would claim to do so easily. The poem is distinctly unclear about what lies outside cliché. The 'eight black panthers' imply some kind of order, but one whose full explanatory meaning is withheld from the subject. Later in the poem we find that the bearer of cliché has 'shut up the gates under padlock / For fear of wild beasts'. The wild is what is outside culture. The irony of the lines should be that what is 'wild' to the user of cliché is only wild because that culture is so limiting in its ideological closures. But the poem provides no metalanguage to include such wildness - the 'eight black panthers' are just as wild to the explaining subject as they are to the cliché-user. In addition, the 'eight silences' are just as silent. Hence, although the poem is indeed aware of the shortcomings of cliché, it is by no means sure of the alternatives. As such, it carries the implication that all discourse draws upon cliché, or is itself a cliché, a kind of gadget, when confronted with an 'other' which threatens to dwarf or overwhelm the subject. Even, that is, the cliché about clichés.

In drawing this kind of analysis the poem robs clichés of their original pleasurable purpose. The notion of finality, when confronted with change, becomes an almost hysterical, desperate running together of commonplace meanings and certainties:

I have shut the little window that looks up the road
 Towards the tombs of the kings
 For I have heard that you meet people walking in granite
 I have shut up the gates under padlock
 For fear of wild beasts

And I have shut my ears to the possible peal of bells,
 Every precaution -
 What will you have, my dear? The same again?
 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 poem layers irony on irony, and we would do well to recapitulate. We know that the world of cliché has been singled out for praise because of the stability it allows the subject. This stability has been described in terms of an 'eternal bell', as fish entering a net, as the immutable and immortal figure of the Rameses. Such elements are supposed to carry the qualification that things are not as final or fixed as this. However, it is implied that cliché inevitably carries with it the assumption that a given stability, intended to be temporary, is final. We run into difficulties, however, when we attempt to imagine the change that cliché will not allow. Such a change will destroy the whole basis of cliché, yet it is itself seen only through the lens of cliché - the bell moving, the Rameses walking. However, this perspective is shared by the perspective which attempts to account for this change. What is 'beyond' is as mysterious to the figure who attempts to account for the limitations of cliché as it is to the cliché-user. This user is still seduced by the lure of cliché, still working within its closures.

Such a situation invites us to consider that there are fewer differences between the 'banal' orderings of cliché and those of the 'non-cliché'. The language of cliché 'the same again', 'this is on me', 'sometime', 'never', is a part of a non-clichéd critical discourse just as it is a part of cliché. The point is not that the cliché is counterposed with some definable position outside cliché, which is less preferable to the banal. Nor is it a simple parody of our propensity to use cliché when other alternatives are available. The poem is not arguing that the knowledge of cliché is a final knowledge, that all attempts to go beyond the banal are vain. Rather, it implies that the claims of discourse which are 'outside' such knowledge are themselves open to inspection, in their claims to a higher 'order', or in their attempts to avoid the contemplation of a nothingness which is quite capable of absorbing their truth-claims as such as it does the world of cliché. It is not that there is only cliché, but that any discourse partakes in a stabilizing of the

world. The point is to recognize this stabilization, and its ephemerality, without falling into the alternative trap of imagining, as in 'Upon this beach', that this instability can in some way be fully known, understood and martialled.

This situation is reinforced in the final lines of the poem:

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?

So the inability of cliché to adapt to change is the inability of all discourse to do the same. We know that clichés lie, but we still want to use them, still enjoy their illusory stability. Further, the language or discourse which we employ to distance ourselves from the limitations imposed by cliché may itself be open to question, relying on notions which have no final grounding, no superior knowledge of change. Indeed, it may even use the language of cliché to explain the inadequacy of cliché and the supposed distance between it and 'high' discourse.

We gain a sense here of the propensity for discourse to function with a momentum of its own, which pays no respect to the intentions of the subject. Indeed, the control of the subject over discourse is an illusion which is generated by that subject's interaction with language. This illusion is revealed by the assumption of stasis which does not allow for change, and which is only dimly apprehended, in arcane signs. These are not only unknowable, they actually seem to threaten the subject, both in his role of intentional, controlling being, and, in fact, completely - outside culture is wildness, which you may not control, and which may be wholly destructive.

Included in this attack must be the 'phases/phrases' of supposedly 'progressive' emergent discourse, but it must also include the metadiscourses of high culture with its own categorization of 'sometime', 'never', 'the same again', of what is 'on us'. The bell does not allow for change, yet the discourse which would point this out, and argue for this change, cannot do so either. This is not because such a discourse is absent, but

because of its growth out of the limited discourses of cliché - the 'womb of stone', the 'cold stone panic of Never'. As before, the language and imagery of cliché is used to indicate the limits of cliché, or to take account, from a supposedly higher position, of a reality which cliché cannot accommodate. The Rameses may move, but it is still a Rameses. The situation, then, is close to that described by Fredrick Jameson in commenting on the 'erosion of the...distinction between high culture and so-called mass or popular culture' in postmodern responses to the world:

...many of the newer postmodernisms have been fascinated precisely by that whole landscape of advertising and motels, of the Las Vegas strip, of the late show and Grade-B Hollywood film, of the so-called paraliterature with its airport categories of the gothic and the romance, the popular biography, the murder mystery and the science fiction or fantasy novel. They no longer 'quote' such 'texts' as Joyce might have done, or a Mahler; they incorporate them, to the point where the line between high art and commercial forms seems increasingly difficult to draw.²⁷

This is one of the most important elements of thirties writing, and one which is often obscured. Usually the incorporation of the 'demotic' in this writing is read as a faith in, to paraphrase Jameson, the clarity and communicative power of a linguistic norm, 'ordinary language' of the kind celebrated by Orwell, for instance (p. 16). In some cases this was of course true (Orwell, for instance). Read this way 'Homage to clichés' would seem to approach the most banal of poetic statements. In pointing out the deficiencies of cliché the poem cannot be seen to endorse such a programme. But it is in its refusal to accept the veracity of cliché, whilst at the same time 'refraining' to provide any higher discourse, that the poem achieves its most important effects. Equally, it is in involving its own ironic undercutting within the language of cliché, and by using cliché as a metaphor for techniques of ordering the subject and the world, that it raises questions about discourses which would claim to transcend the banal truths of the commonplace. These too, it is suggested, are agents of stability, where their stabilizing force may be disguised, and, indeed, where their claims to represent knowledge of change, and to be rigorously self-inspecting as such, is illusory.

We might say, then, that 'Homage to clichés' is less about the pros and cons of certain clichés, than about the propensity for all discourse to be, itself, a kind of cliché.

The poem reflects the kind of confusion that Jameson describes because of a scepticism about transcendence which is linked to a loss of faith in the ordinary powers of the subject. In a sense this *is* a compromise with 'Turf-stacks', or at least with the bleak alternatives which that poem offers. Here there is little faith in 'theory vending', but no screaming. If the poem avoids the impassioned horror of the subject that 'Turf-stacks' presents, it is perhaps because there is less confidence in the status of the subject who screams: 'Theory vending' might be cliché which does not recognize itself as such, but then so might certain discourses of selfhood. They too might be illusory forms of stasis placed over a finally unknowable flux. This flux might be the only thing truly outside the closures of cliché, or any ordering discourse. This conclusion must have consequences for notions of an originating, acting subject, whose status seems again hopelessly circumscribed by determining forms of illusory closure on the one hand, and destructive flux on the other. We should examine these consequences more closely.

The Death of the Subject: 'Eclogue for Christmas'.

We have so far discussed MacNeice's presentation of the social in terms of exclusion, of the location of the subject within a domain of cultural signification, of the limits of such signification, the threat to the subject within these limits, and the contradictions that can arise in attempts to distance oneself from such a situation. These are the features which inform MacNeice's long poem of 1933, 'Eclogue for Christmas'.

In his autobiographical work *World Within World* Stephen Spender wrote about the implications for certain kinds of generic writing in the mid-1930s:

The sense of political doom, pending in unemployment, Fascism, and the overwhelming threat of war, was by now so universal that even to ignore these things was in itself a political attitude. Just as the pacifist is political in refusing to participate in war, so the writer who refuses to recognize the political nature of our age must to some extent be refusing to deal with an experience in which he himself is involved. But why should he not refuse? No reason, except that the consciousness of excluded events would probably affect the scale of his writing. A pastoral poem in 1936 was not just a pastoral poem: it was also a non-political poem. A poem that rejected the modern consciousness of politics as a universal fate.²⁸

Spender, as he admits, is using politics here 'in a very wide sense' (p. 249). Other thirties writers were not always so eclectic in their definitions. Yet he is also perhaps using 'pastoral' in a very narrow sense, to denote the Georgian genteel tradition that thirties writers still sometimes saw themselves challenging.²⁹ Spender's view is essentially that of the *gran ceftib*, that the avoidance of politics is essentially a politics by default. In a sense, then, MacNeice's 'Eclogue', part of a series of such poems written in the thirties which explicitly drew on the pastoral tradition, might be seen as what Mikhail Bakhtin called a 'hidden polemic'. This has been described as a type of represented speech 'in which a speaker not only refers to an object in the world but simultaneously replies to, contests, or makes concessions to some other real or anticipated or hypothetical statement about the same object'.³⁰ In using a pastoral mode, then, we might see MacNeice as baulking against the emergent stress on 'political writing', participating in or initiating a counter-discourse. Whilst this contextual feature should not be ignored, it can be overstressed. For pastoral writing, from Virgil's *Eclogues* onwards, has often been used as a vehicle for political comment, direct or otherwise.³¹ In this sense MacNeice was not different, although he did employ a genre that avoided the excesses of Spender's neo-romantic expressive realism in poetics, together with the constraints of satirical verse. Instead, MacNeice allows himself a form marked by its artifice and rhetoricity, which can still offer a forum for comment without being bound by it.

Features of the MacNeicean social landscape clearly abound in the opening to

'An eclogue for Christmas' (*CP*, p. 33):

A. I meet you in an evil time.

B. The evil bells
Put out of our heads, I think, the thought of everything else.

A. The jaded calender revolves,
Its nuts need oil, carbon chokes the valves,
The excess sugar of a diabetic culture
Rotting the nerve of life and literature;
Therefore when we bring out the old tinsel and frills
To announce that Christ is born among the barbarous hills
I turn to you whom a morose routine
Saves from the mad vertigo of being what has been.

We are introduced to a melancholy conversation. The poem continues in the same way, with long lists of complaint and comment, in a long poem. This is not a poem which thrives on lyric intensity. This kind of intensity would seem oddly inappropriate, as if the speakers are attempting to account for its loss, its impossibility. Neither does it offer a sharp polemic critique, although this too is a voice which informs the poem. But this distinctly rhetorical poem connects with one characteristic gesture of the thirties, often misread as a simple variety of commonsensical realism, typified by the opening of Christopher Isherwood's *Goodbye to Berlin*:

From my window, the deep solemn massive street. Cellar-shops where the lamps burn all day, under the shadow of top-heavy balconied facades, dirty plaster frontages embossed with scrollwork and heraldic devices. The whole district is like this: street leading into street of houses like shabby monumental safes crammed with the tarnished valuables and second-hand furniture of a bankrupt middle class.

I am a camera with its shutter open, quite passive, recording, not thinking. Recording the man shaving and the woman in the kimono washing her hair. Some day, all this will have to be developed, carefully printed, fixed.³²

Roland Barthes has called this piling up of contingent detail, of the type used by Flaubert '*l'effet du réel*', in which the blank, meaningless detail is used to construct a code which emits the signal 'this is real', or 'this is realism'.³³ But we can also see such a depiction as a departure from the form-finding of nineteenth century realism - where 'seeing' was order and knowledge - into a less determinate mode. As in MacNeice's 'Carrickfergus', the detail is just *there*. It means nothing in and of itself. The observer, in much the same way as the thirties Mass Observer, is just observing, not imposing any form on his surroundings, resisting the impulse to 'think' - like the peasant in 'Turf-stacks'. Just recording, with no real hope that reality will somehow be revealed through this detail, in and of itself. Someday, as he puts it, this might become 'fixed'; but by someone else. And the slightest knowledge of photography tells us that a camera with its shutter open will reveal nothing but a formless blur, which would be hard to recognize as 'photographic realism'. In an important sense this is a condition of the speakers in 'An Eclogue for Christmas', as they lethargically reel off the facts of their predicament:

Jazz-weary of years of drums and Hawaiian guitar,
Pivoting on the parquet I seem to have moved far

From bombs and mud and gas, have stuttered on my feet
 Clinched to the streamlined and butter-smooth trulls of the élite,
 The lights irritating and gyrating and rotating in gauze -
 Pomade-dazzle, a slick beauty of gewgaws.

These lines would seem to offer a simple, if rather unimpressive, critique of twenties aestheticism, or modernism, from the standpoint of the thirties. We are familiar with this perspective: modernism is guilty of abstraction and formalism in art, aestheticism and stylization in life. The self is separated from itself; the subject, robbed of life, is therefore unable to 'be himself'. A kind of foppish weariness pervades these lines. It is as though the speaker has discovered too late the limits of style, the consequences of giving in to its seduction. He now realises the importance of 'being oneself', and how this is somehow now impossible. We should be wary, however, of identifying this foppishness as essentially characteristic of twenties aestheticism or dandyism. Martin Green has pointed out how the dandies of the twenties quite deliberately distanced themselves from *fin de siècle* lethargy, and associated their aestheticism with all that seemed bold and new.³⁴ But for this aesthete, at least, the party seems to be over. The fact that we can associate this voice with that of a class, of course, adds to its potency, and relevance for the thirties. One can imagine an Orwellian conscience nodding approvingly, if rather superciliously, at these lines. Style takes the form of a particular dance, of jazz and Hawaiian guitar - the new and the artificial, which has now almost inevitably exhausted itself, since it is ungrounded in the life of the self.

The artificiality of a class, indicative perhaps of the artificiality of a class system, is demonstrated in the artificiality of its cultural practices. Covert references, indicating the identity and cultural milieu of the speaker, abound in this poem. The mention of 'stuttering', identifies the speaker as a twenties Oxford aesthete, whose reputation Auden *et al.* had to deal with. One notorious stutterer was Brian Howard, whose stutter was mimicked by intending aesthetes, and who formed the basis of the character of Antony Blanche in *Brideshead Revisited*. Indeed the whole Eclogue shares a frame of reference with the sense of the deliberately purposeless play, the ethical wilderness and of the rather listless tragedy which Waugh presented in *Vile Bodies* (1930) and *A Handful of Dust* (1934).

What complicates this reading, however, is the final line of his speech. The cultural landscape contains within it a revelation. The Speaker is not wholly blind to his position. He can understand that what is, or was, wrong with bourgeois life is, or was, the absence of self. This is perfectly clear-cut; moreover it is potentially liberating. Why, knowing this, knowing the limitations of style and what should replace it (being oneself), does the speaker feel he must 'foreswear thought and become an automaton'? The statement reads as if it were the logical conclusion of both his life-as-style, and, crucially, of his understanding of the alternative perspective of a 'natural' self-fulfillment which challenges this artificial wilderness. However, the more reasonable conclusion would surely be the opposite - in a wholesale rejection of the tired conventions of aestheticism, and the embracing of the new life of the self.

One solution to this problem may be that this is the voice of a dying class. The speaker, individually and as part of a social group, quite simply lacks the energy or means to make this transformation. The forgetting of self in style has led to the situation where that self cannot be remembered. Or, if remembered, cannot be established in reality. 'Being oneself' was what they should have been doing. Now he realizes this restriction, and its consequences, but one of these very consequences is that there is no 'self' for him to be. Moreover, properly being oneself would mean taking on the identity of another, of one from another class or structure of feeling. This becoming someone else would be contingent on the death of this self and discourse of selfhood-as-style. Though this is not without interest, there is another, more suggestive reading possible, which grants more firmness to MacNeice's use of the critique of pure form/aestheticism in these lines, and the relation to the poem as a whole.

The poem tempts us to engage in an absurdity or aporia. We are encouraged, on the one hand to view the speaker as a wholesale tragic *victim* of aestheticism, whose selfhood has been totally extinguished. However, we must also suppose, on the other, some outraged alienated self which protests at its suppression, its own inability to be. This contradiction allows us to inspect this passage more closely. If 'pure form' is such a patent absurdity, such a self-evident denial of the privileges and practices of selfhood,

how does it manage to gain so much power over the self, to forbid this self from 'being'? The absurdity of 'abstraction' within pure form is contradicted by the seeming fragility of the self set against it. To put it another way, the 'self' which enables us to see pure form as *absurd*, which thus stands as a mark of value, is unable to defend itself against being undermined by this absurd phenomenon, together with the resulting absurdity of this undermining. This may well lead us to question, not so much the limitations of pure form, but the validity of the self which considers it absurd, but which cannot ground itself in defence against this absurdity. One could argue that the passage does not suggest the absurdity of this doctrine of abstraction (though this is implied throughout), but its insidiousness. Because something is absurd does not mean that it lacks power. Yet still the question must remain - if the speaker is properly aware of a sense of self, why is this selfhood relinquished in favour of 'automata'? This passage argues less for the absurdity of pure form than for its power; less for the strength of the self which would prove this absurdity than for its fragility. When reading this poem we must keep in mind that these conditions may apply to the voice, perspective, or self of a particular class. Yet they might equally well apply to the voice which hopes to distance itself from that class, and indeed to criticize it, but which still employs this discourse of selfhood, which can be challenged.

Hence, the sense that the imputed absurdity or paucity of the practice of aestheticism as artistic practice, when set against the claims of the self, is contradicted. If absurd, it would not threaten the self. If the self were so evidently robust, and it were this robustness which accounted for the absurdity of the doctrine of aestheticism, this doctrine could offer no threat. In this way the statement 'abstracting and dissecting me / They have made of me pure form, a symbol or pastiche...' reads at least two ways. The first, from the voice of the emergent or residually authentic self: 'they have made out of me, they have made from me, pure form'. Such form is both an abstraction, since it is a representation of the embodied self, and furthermore a representation which is fragmented. Such a reading holds the palpability of 'soul and flesh', the stability of the self, in full esteem. But, as stated, the fact that this 'thinking' self gives up the

struggle and renounces its power and claim to authentic will in 'becoming and automaton' suggests that this is not the whole story. A second reading, more in keeping with this sense would be: 'they have made me *into* pure form'. Here the abstraction of the artwork offers itself as the signifier of abstraction and reification - representation and fragmentation - within life, or within life as style. This second reading not only suggests a critique of the pure form aesthetics, but sees no defence against this process within the claims of the self. This process of reification is not made any more attractive, but its lack of appeal cannot be explained or condemned in the name of 'being oneself'. Again, this is not because of the essential insidiousness of such a doctrine, but because this doctrine effectively demonstrates the fragility of such a subject, and includes within this demonstration any discourse which would centre itself upon the claims and power of the subject. Rather than dismissing pure form in the name of a subject, these lines throw into question such a subjectivity, and discourses which offer themselves as defending such a subject. This questioning must include, of course, the standard thirties objection to aestheticism which these lines initially proposed.

Clearly one could argue that we are still here dealing with a class perspective - the death of this class is superseded by a new one, which will capitalize on this blindness, this inability to be oneself, and make this blindness its insight. The speaker cannot be himself because he doesn't know how, yet this does not stop other people, who do, from doing so. The above suggestion of the attack within the poem on all self-centred discourses would put this assertion in dispute. One discourse, however, which informs the poem powerfully, and informs the reading we are now questioning, is the subject-based discourse of life/death applied to a cultural context. This discourse is one of organicism. As such, the apparent discontinuity of the 'death' of a class issuing in a new beginning masks the notion that from the death of one class will emerge the life of another. In the rejection of 'pure form', modernism and aestheticism, thirties writers were in fact arguing for a continuity with 'being oneself'. The continuity with the previous order is therefore twofold: in maintaining the discourse of selfhood, and in

linking this discourse to modes of development which stress change through continuity, the life of the new contained within the death of the old. A distinction can be drawn, therefore, between organicist notions of history and progression, and its attendant subjectivity, and a notion which stresses discontinuity and negativity, and deconstructs such a subject. These two modes have been helpfully distinguished by Paul de Man in the following way:

[The opposition] resides in the nature of two movements confronting each other. The historical movement is that of becoming: *being* consciously created, whether as the work of art or historical deed in general, is unstable in its essence, and it denies itself to be reborn in another *being*. The two are separated by the abyss of a negation (in organic language: a death), and the passage from the one to the other is essentially discontinuous. The movement of the ancient tree, on the other hand, is a growth: its being remains immediately identical with itself, and its movement is only the extension of what is and always will be.³⁵

In the terms of this poem, the speaker's inability to 'be himself' may be due both to the usurping forms of abstract, and to the paucity of that selfhood. Both these are characterized as deathly. Out of this death, it is argued, come new forms of selfhood (since no self-respecting thirties Marxist really wanted members of the ruling class to really be themselves), and a newly invigorated sense of what being oneself can do. Both these notions rely on organic notions of change. Both are put into question in the poem, as are the terms of life/death which they rely on.

Speaker B's response to the above passage is also concerned with the question of consciousness and death, though in a slightly different way:

There are in the country also of whom I am afraid -
Men who put beer into a belly that is dead,
Women in the forties with terrier and setter who whistle and swank
Over down and plough and Roman road and daisied bank,
Half-conscious that these barriers over which they stride
Are nothing to the barbed wire that has grown around their pride.

Again, a seemingly innocuous, well intentioned, liberal criticism attacking the dangers of the sensibility of 'pride' in the name of communality and fellow-feeling can be put into question. Because the speaker's objects, swanking women, are 'half-conscious' about their pride. They are aware of an absence which, presumably, only intensifies their sense of enclosure in the failure to form links with anyone outside these enclosures of

pride. We take, that is to say, 'pride' as an index of a sense of self, which has closed off contact with the other and which, like the aestheticism of Speaker A, continues in a self-supporting manner in a claustrophobic re-confirmation of self, to the extent that 'pride' becomes synonymous with self. But this cannot be described as a unitary enclosure of the self, since the speaker suggests that they are 'half-conscious' and that such a situation is impoverishing. As well as this impurity within the self, which detracts from or negates the positive value of 'pride', we must also admit that to be fully conscious of this condition would, rather than introducing a state of pure consciousness, or of full communion with the other, introduce the demise of the subject of pride: the subject who has become, that is, synonymous with pride, with the hierarchic denigration of the other. Again, no alternative sense of selfhood, one that can resist these problems, is introduced. What should concern us now, therefore, is how such a self might be legitimately inferred in a reading, and whether, or how, it is inferred, only to be blocked-off by the poem's discursive and rhetorical forms.

The figures of the 'swanky' country dwellers are immediately paralleled by the city dweller:

And two there are, as I drive in the city, who suddenly perturb -
 The one sirening me to draw up by the kerb
 The other, as I lean back, my right leg stretched creating speed,
 Making me catch and stamp, the brakes shrieking, pull up dead:
 She wears silk stockings taunting the winter wind,
 He carries a white stick to mark that he is blind.

Like the 'evil bells' which introduced the poem, we are plainly being asked to consider these figures as signs of demise. In the light of the previous discussion, we cannot help but read these details as overdetermined. The image of the speaker 'creating speed', vividly portrayed in terms of cinematic-like montage, links him with the aestheticism he was previously describing. This is the sense of the driver 'creating speed', rather than simply making a car go faster. In this sense, it is the voice of aestheticism. It is, however, absolutely undecidable whether to locate this voice within the narrator or the narrated. The first would mark a distance between the 'aesthetic' driving, the second would support this aestheticism in describing it. Equally, the first would imply an

aestheticization of life in the pursuit of pure 'speed', the second in description, using a formalist rhetoric which allows making a car go faster to be seen as 'creating speed'. This sense of undecidability is matched by the details of siren (prostitute) and blind man. 'Sirening' mixes registers and meanings - classical mythology, images of seduction, signs for alarm. The speaker is, of course, describing himself as looking for signs, or even looking for signs in his description. The attempt fails in a most suggestive way. His figures, we should note, 'perturb and halt' - introduce a sense of crisis and alarm, yet fail to adequately describe that alarm. They point to commodification (prostitute) and lack of insight (blindness). As signs, therefore, they point to the demise or degradation of the self, or a lack of perception. What we perceive through these signs, that is to say, is the failure of the self, the failure of signification. The seduction of the commodity, so to speak, is a blind alley. This sense is quite in keeping with the hint of arbitrariness, foundness, in these signs - they are singled out, and as such significant, in marking out the failure of signification, yet they do not possess any special authority as signs, any access to a privileged controlling intelligence, or way forward for the subject:

...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 palaeolithic man
 Before some new Ice Age or Genghiz Khan.

This passage is thick with contemporary references: the Audenesque glacier, the paleolithic, whose recent importance for modernist writers has been noted by Hugh Kenner, and seems to fill out and locate the sense of dissolution.³⁶ Equally important, however, is the anthropomorphism in this passage. The sky indicates, forms an index of, death and barbarism, which is then linked to contemporary culture, and to a sense of a historical wisdom in the 'ancient air' frustrated by the moon gazing 'yokel-stubborn'. These details emphasise the reading of meaning into the landscape - but that reading of meaning, looking for signs, can only prophesy the loss of the self that does so.

Hence it should come as no surprise that the poem goes on to offer the most thoroughgoing discursive critique of the intentional subject that we have so far encountered:

A. It is time for some new coinage, people have got so old,
Hacked and handled and shiny from pocketing they have made bold
To think that each is himself through these accidents, being blind
To the fact that they are merely the counters of an unknown Mind.

B. A Mind that does not think, if such a thing can be,
Mechanical Reason, capricious Identity.
That I could be able to face this domination nor flinch -

A. The tin toys of the hawker move on the pavement inch by inch
Not knowing that they are wound up; it is better to be so
Than to be, like us, wound up and while running down to know -

B. But everywhere the pretence of individuality recurs -

Speaker A admits that it is time for change, but his means of doing so is more interesting than the sentiment itself. The figure of 'coin' suggests an arbitrary, socially agreed, token or sign. An abstraction, in fact. The notion of currency was, of course, an important one for modernist writers like Pound. Yet, later in the thirties Christopher Caudwell used the notion of money as part of his aim at describing the function of language:

The word is not fully realised except as a dynamic social act. We overlook this just as we overlook that a pound note only exists importantly as a social act, because the complexities produced by the division of labour delay the impact between producer and consumer by the interposition of the market. The pound note, like a word, is only the expression of a transfer between one man and another...but the conditions of commodity production give them a mysterious existence in their own right as concepts - the concept of 'value' in the one case, the concept of 'meaning' in the other. ³⁷

Caudwell's analysis is more interesting for its use of the figure of currency than the light it throws on language, or indeed on money and the commodity for that matter. The item operates as an abstraction, but one which is linked to human and social productive forces. Almost certainly Caudwell is using this as a metaphor for codes or signs produced by convention, if not by consensus. MacNeice, however, goes one stage further, and presents the dying social process as an abstraction which has been taken

for a concrete reality. Indeed, the sense in this poem is closer to the famous definition of 'truth' expressed by Nietzsche:

What, then, is truth? A mobile army of metaphors, metonyms, and anthropomorphisms - in short, a sum of human relations, which have been enhanced, transposed and embellished poetically and rhetorically, and which after long use seem firm, canonical, and obligatory to people: truths are illusions about which one has forgotten that this is what they are; metaphors which are worn out and without sensuous power; coins which have lost their pictures and now matter only as metal, no longer as coins. ³⁸

We encounter a double movement in the poem, therefore. The imputed concreteness of 'being oneself' is rendered ineluctably into an abstraction, this abstraction (the sign) is then taken for the concrete. As in the above extract from Nietzsche's discussion, the transformative power of metaphor is rendered static. Moreover, it is unrecognizable as construction, but poses (like the harlequin) as 'truth'. But again, MacNeice goes a stage further, in insisting within the poem that this 'truth' cannot maintain itself as a self-sufficient absolute. It must, in its turn, become commutable to exchange within a system beyond itself.

Here, we can profitably recall two points made in previous discussions. One, Raymond Williams's description of a Jamesian sense of fear of the social as an inherently 'abstract' construction. This fear would seem to have an equivalent in these lines. The second, Terry Eagleton's description of commodification as the introduction of a system in which objects are never properly themselves, but are always commutable to others within a structure of exchange. This is a system which is at once rigidly all-encompassing and radically contingent. Commodification inhabits everything, nothing is ever quite itself. These are the terms used to describe that subject in the above passage. It is the subject who is described as a counter, as part of a structure of exchange: people figure as cyphers. As in 'Now that the shapes of mist', life is described in terms of *accident*, thereby denying any self-originating sovereignty to the self. However, in this poem this 'accidental' quality is not the product of radical risk or contingency. Rather it is the contingency of the subject within a system of exchange, which diminishes this subjectivity - illusory or not - to replace it with a system which is

both radically unstable, and radically fixed. This is, in fact, the subject of the commodity - always different, yet always identical. This is not the sameness which can be described as a function of *différance*.³⁹ Instead of identity being predicated on difference, where the sameness of *différance* admits no sense of identity which is not subject to change, the sameness of the commodity works by absorbing all difference into the structure of the *identical*: everything is always a commodity. One must note, at this point, that there do, however, exist relations of difference within the commodity, a sense of identity in difference which the commodity exploits - one commodity which one does possess gains its identity by virtue of not being a commodity that one lacks. Such a system however, can only operate once the 'spurious identity' between objects as commodities has been established. To be different commodities, objects must first be commodities; for their identities to be predicated on difference, objects must first exist through relations of identity established by their commodification. For objects to appear identical as commodities, they must first appear identical with themselves. Hence, the commodity always *presents* itself as self-sufficient, which is how it is allowed to exploit its inherent absence within the structure of exchange. It posits an identity which must covertly be always held-off, but which does not admit this deferral. The speaker's sense of identity in terms of 'counter' represents the recognition of this structure, and the parody of identity (everything is identical to everything else) within it.

As a result, speaker A is aware, like the 'swanky' dweller of the country, of a diminution of the trust in, or powers of, thought. If thinking is overcome, it is also unthinkable that the thinking self could be fully aware of this. He is irrevocably trapped in a system of double-bind and aporia. One can describe one's misrecognition, offer some approximation of it, but one cannot think or know it, since doing so involves partaking of the powers of the 'unknown mind'. This sentiment is not that of the observer in 'Birmingham', who was keen to limit the powers of knowledge, eager to privilege the recognition of surface over depth. Conversely, this speaker sees not the absence of a determinant so much as one which is 'unknown', to which one must remain blind, even whilst attempting insight by describing this blindness. It is, we

should note, 'people' who suffer this affliction, not the speaker. Yet in describing this desire, as with his previous sense of 'pure form', he implies the need for a redemption of the conscious ego whilst all the time denying that such a redemption, such a saving, could take place.

It is hardly surprising, then, that B replies, half in agreement, half in rebuke, by suggesting that the 'thought' of this 'Mind' is hardly knowable by the conscious subject. It maintains itself at a distance - it does not '*think*', if that can '*be*', yet it contaminates thinking and being. It establishes itself as Reason and Identity. This capitalization imparts a fine Hegelian register in these lines. But what we find is not the power of consciousness, but its demise. We do not have reason but mechanical reason; not identity but *capricious* identity. We find the misrecognition of these things within the guise of the absolute: identity is not Identity since it is 'capricious', yet it still manifests itself as Identity. That is, the problem is not that identity is open to change, but that this changing entity always masks itself as an Absolute, a fixity. It always gives itself as unchanging whilst changing constantly. A's heroic injunction to 'face this domination' carries with it an irony that undermines his heroism. This heroism would, of course, be a function of the very 'I' which is under question. It comes as no surprise that he is interrupted. Interruptions pepper this poem, as though the speaker's discourse is exhausting itself - at once urgent and garrulous, but saying almost nothing - piling detail on detail and coming no nearer to the truth.

Indeed, we must conclude that finding any kind of coherent 'truth' must be unthinkable, as the analogy with the 'tin toys' of the 'hawker' (commodity) indicates. These toys are wound up but do not (cannot) know it. The speakers are similarly wound up, and do know it. But in what way? Only that they are wound, the implication goes, nothing else; not how or why, or where this could lead them. And this is much like their sense of 'the pretence of individuality', which carries with it a careful irony. On the one hand, the line implies that what they describe is the mere shadow of individualism, which cries out for an authentic form of the same in a newly rejuvenated form. On the other hand the line carries its opposite meaning, that individuality is itself

a pretence. First, because its functioning cannot be distinguished from the 'I' given by the unknown mind. Secondly, because the pretence is indistinguishable from the real thing, because its grounds for establishing any sense of authenticity have been eroded.

At this stage of the poem, therefore, we find a number of contradictory claims. These consist of a desire for identity, concomitant with the recognition that this wish is subject to both exploitation and undercutting by the structure of exchange, which is the structure of the commodity. For the commodity asserts ostensibly that each object within its structure is self-present, or self-identical. However, within its system of exchange, as Terry Eagleton puts it, it 'fashions some spurious identity between disparate objects', by making one object equivalent or commutable to another.⁴⁰ Hence, the logic of self-identity within an object, and identity between objects, is at once asserted and undercut. This undercutting occurs by the repressed structure of difference within the system: one object is not equivalent to another if the consumer does not possess it, and the desire to possess is articulated as desire within the commodity structure which is limitless. For if the hoped-for presence and self-identity of one commodity is implied, yet continually withheld, this is displaced metonymically on a chain of commodities, all of which, individually, would promise to cease this desire, offer themselves as the transcendental signified of this system of exchange. Yet all must fail in this promise. One cannot possess all commodities.

The alternative to this process might seem to be the return to the immanence of the object, its authentic self-identity, and an identity between objects which is never 'spurious'. However, this would only inscribe the structure of imputed presence and continual undercutting or denial of presence in exchange (one object is identical to another) that the commodity thrives on. So, instead of resisting the 'seeping' of meaning between objects which are endlessly commutable to one another by virtue of their self-identity which is then disrupted within a structure of imputed identity, one can assert the fundamental non-identity of objects, the impossibility of exchange by asserting a structure of identity by *difference*. Of course, this will not return us to an originary moment of the immanence of objects. The identity of the object will always be

inhabited by absence, never self-identical or self authenticating. It is tentative and subject to change, never existing as a presence. Yet it is precisely because it cannot exist as presence that it cannot then offer itself within an ostensible structure of difference predicated on identity, and the subsequent undercutting of this within the unconscious of identity within the structure of exchange. Hence the problem with 'capricious Identity' in the poem is not identity as such, or change as such, but the notion of self-same identity which is continually exploited within a structure of identity which, in fact, is one of difference, but which does not declare itself as such.

In addition to this attention to identity, there is also the contradiction of the need to comment on and explain the contemporary crisis, and the difficult sense that this description will always be redundant, apparently useless. This occurs in two ways. First, because the speakers are part of what they describe. Secondly, because relations of part to whole (synecdoche), and equivalence (metaphor, asserting motivation and necessary identity within systems) are disrupted. In describing their environment, the speakers present a sense of inadequacy, of falling short. Detail is placed upon detail, comment on comment, yet it seems to progress nowhere, to offer no satisfactory conclusion, explanatory system, or position to judge the contemporary, or the speaker's position in relation to it. So controlling metaphors fail; they fail in the failure of synecdoche, but not because the speakers can somehow distance themselves from what they describe, become apart from it, but because their place within their situation cannot offer any privileged insight, since relations of part to whole are disrupted and confused. Hence, when the speakers attempt to characterize their contemporary ills through the figures within it these details lead nowhere:

A. Old faces frosted with powder and choked in furs.

B. The jutlipped farmer gazing over the humpbacked wall.

A. The commercial traveller joking in the urinal.

They offer some characteristics of the conditions, they register a sense of disaffection and unease, but they can supply no clear cut system or way forward, no means of finding order or properly describing disorder. Hence, though this relation is necessarily

synecdochic in that the speakers are a part of what they describe, this synecdochic relationship is not one supplying order, but only describing the lack of it within the very attempt at its description.

This produces a sense of impurity between inside and outside, the resultant division within the speakers between recognition, strangeness, acceptance and rejection of what they perceive. But this sense of impurity and division is, quite logically, capable of perceiving scenes of beauty, albeit qualified and ambiguous, within the environment:

...not till the Goths again come swarming down the hill
 Will cease the clangour of the pneumatic drill.
 But yet there is beauty narcotic and deciduous
 In this vast organism grown out of us:
 On all the traffic-islands stand white globes like moons
 The city's haze is clouded amber that purrs and croons,
 And tilting by the noble curve bus after tall bus comes
 With an osculation of yellow light, with a glory like chrysanthemums.

This is a wonderful piece of city writing. It is also, and perhaps wonderful because of it, a piece which offers itself as writing, reveals its status as discourse, most immediately by the assertion of 'beauty' and by the attempts to describe this beauty. Moreover, the mixing of organic and non-organic register here invites questioning of this perception. Surely the city does not only 'grow out' of its citizens; they too grow out of it? Indeed, given the dislocated order which the speakers have hitherto been labouring to assimilate, is it appropriate to describe this in terms of 'growth'? Any beauty here is a hybrid, crossing the boundaries between country and city, culture and nature. In addition, it crosses the boundaries between the specificity of the bus as bus, concrete object and pragmatic vehicle, and bus as form: operating within the 'noble curve' of the road, presenting an 'osculation' - kissing, but also 'to have three or more coincident points in common...as two curves, two surfaces, or a surface and a curve' (*OED*). Buses aren't just buses, they are colour and light.

However, this mixing of response and discursive position cannot provide a straightforward enjoyment of spectacle. As we noted earlier, the speakers are - in part at least - a part of what they describe. At this point in the poem the problem becomes not simply the changing environment, but the inability of those within it to change:

The country gentry cannot change, they will die in their shoes
 From angry circumstance and moral self-abuse...
 ...they will prove their lives to be
 An ever-diluted drug, a spiritual tautology.

We can gain a sense of what this 'spiritual tautology' might be from MacNeice's later poem 'Plain speaking' (1940; *CP*, p. 187), where the commingling of clichés ('In the beginning and in the end the only decent / Definition is tautology: man is man...!') is skilfully manipulated to suggest the seeking of identity between disparate things and enunciations, and how this 'forged' identity can lead only to facile repetition and, indeed, inarticulacy in the face of death:

But dream was dream and love was love and what
 Happened happened - even if the judge said
 It should have been otherwise - and glitter glitters
 And I am I although the dead are dead.

The tautology of death here is distinct from the other repetitions, since it ruptures the complacent sense of self-identity within repetition, which will not allow things to be 'otherwise'. If death is death, that is to say, how does that complicate our sense of the 'I' which is always 'I', and which the country gentry 'find themselves to be'? We shall have more to say about this later. What is surprising here, however, is that although this poem is seven years later than the 'Eclogue', we find the same preoccupation with the question of identity, repetition, and the overriding question of 'what will happen?'. 'What will happen to us?' speaker A asks, 'who go to the theatre':

...where we feel
 That we know in advance all the jogtrot and the cake-walk jokes,
 All the bumfun and the gags of the comedians in boaters and toques,
 All the tricks of the virtuosos who invert the usual.

Theatre, it seems, simply provides more of the same, repetition of identity, or inversion of the same, without proper challenge or transgression. This stubborn holding to identity, when all around is given to change, renders the conditions of the speakers prone, on the one hand, to petrification, on the other to a condition of change which would attempt to maintain this identity, in the activities of the gangster and the totalitarian:

What will happen when the sniggering machine-guns in the hands of the young
 men
 Are trained on every flat and club and beauty parlour and Father's den.

In answer to this question, however, speaker (B) would seem to fall back on tautology: 'what will happen will happen'. He is then accused of 'being [his] own vulture' - employing the discourse of self-confirmation, which locates him within the historical moment he describes, yet by implication indicates the inadequacy of this tautological enunciation, forms its own commentary, in the wider context of the poem, on the failure of looking for affirmation in this self-identity. However, there is another sense in which this tautological statement has a ring of truth about it: Speaker A ends his comment on 'being one's own vulture' with the observation that 'over the rands of the theatre and cinema I hear songs / Unlike anything'. This would seem to beckon in a new direction, the ending of identity between objects: As such, the tautological phrase is a means of indicating this change, which undermines the reliance on identity, the kind of identity we assume in 'I am I', but lacks the capacity to predict what will happen. Speaker B has told us of a 'new regime', yet there is little authority to his description. It is possible to suggest therefore that the ending of the poem shows the decline of certain ways of thinking, and would see the continuation of this thinking in a new and perverse form (Fascism), or in newly formed versions of the same illusion (Stalinism). It also indicates a change which is, by definition, unpredictable. Robyn Marsak has noted how 'It is doubtful that 'An Eclogue for Christmas' offers potential for change, the speakers appear to accept their doom with a kind of morbid relish...In the end both speakers determine to indulge themselves in ways of life already established, finding refuge in living for the self'.⁴¹ In a sense this is true, although the poem has shown us that the idea of the self is open to question in a number of ways, one of which, perhaps, does provide some sense of change in the poem which is not that of utter demise, death, chaos or anarchy:

A: I will gorge myself to satiety with the oddities
 Of every artiste, official or amateur,
 Who has pleased me in my rôle of hero-worshipper
 Who has pleased me in my rôle of individual man-

B. Let us lie once more, say 'What we think, we can'
 The old idealist lie.

Certainly we have a sense here of an imperiled way of life, set of assumptions, way of thinking. However, the question still remains whether we should interpret this as a descent into chaos, the birth of a new form of idealism, new forms of individuality, or some other, less tangible, change or development, which although less tangible, is necessary for a full reading of the poem. Hence, we can read the lines above as a simple act of bad faith, a retreat into inauthentic activity because the alternatives are too terrible to contemplate. This terror may emerge as a result of the failure of the speakers to see beyond their own narrow circumstances in their sense of what it is to be an 'individual', or how this individuality might develop in more profitable ways not wholly in keeping with the current state of affairs, which includes their own privileged status. It is, however, possible to read in these lines a kind of departure from these values which is not a departure into, say, Fascism. Such a perspective involves a recognition of the reassessment of 'individual man' which has already taken place in the poem. With this in mind, we can say that these lines, for all their unavoidable implications of bad faith, do indeed recognize that 'individual man' is a role, and moreover, one quite compatible with that of 'hero worshipper'. That this role should be in place is in itself a contradiction - 'individual man' should be precisely the opposite of a role, it should be the expression of self. Furthermore, it is described as a general condition - it is one speaker's version of a role that offers the only ground for authenticity. Hence, the alternative to this is not the notion that some other sense of individuality is possible which is not a role, but that any form of existence necessitates the playing of roles. The proper conclusion of which is not to be under the illusion that this does not take place.

Moreover, it is surprising that the avowed intentions of the speakers are by no means absolutely in keeping with these declarations. Speaker B's desire to mount 'the bare and high / places of England' with feet on turf, eyelashes stinging in the wind, do indeed convey a popular sense of high romantic challenge, yet he is also aware of '...the sheep like grey stones / [which] humble my human pretensions'. Aware, that is, of a *materiality* his sense of 'idealism' must deal with, and which haunts this poem in a way which the final lines make more explicit:

- A. Let the saxophones and xylophones
 And the cult of every technical excellence, the miles of canvas in the galleries
 And the canvas of the rich man's yacht snapping and tacking on the seas
 And the perfection of a grilled steak -
- B. Let all these so ephemeral things
 Be somehow permanent like the swallow's tangent wings:
 Goodbye to you, this day remember is Christmas, this morn
 They say, interpret it your own way, Christ is born.

In a way this detail is quite in keeping with the sense of the commodity form which we have developed in the chapter. An abundance of apparently indiscriminate material (saxophones, xylophones) making up a cultural mode of production under the regulation of the identical: the canvas of art is that of the luxury yacht, perfection is measured in terms of a grilled steak. Everything is granted the identical measure of value by the terms of exchange. But there is also an important feature of these lines which is intimately related to the attack made on the 'idealism' of the *cogito*, the thinking subject, by the commodity, but is not identical to it. That is the *materiality* of all these items. Is there, then, some sense in which this materiality might challenge the activity of both the commodity and the *cogito*? One sense whereby this might be so is in the final very figure of a permanence within the ephemeral, which is hardly a permanence: 'like the swallow's tangent wings'? This is a permanence of difference - fleeting and context bound, always the same where it insists on the necessity of difference in establishing identity. The import of the final speech, then, is a recognition of the materiality of things - including the *cogito* - but a materiality which is capable of marking out specific and fleeting, accidental, transient, moments of value. This is a kind of value which is drawn out of the melancholy horizon of the pure matter, meaninglessly *there*, and the uniformity of the commodity.

It is possible to read an enactment of this sense of difference, the fundamental instability of this moment, its transitoriness and refusal of presence or prediction, in that statement 'this morn, / they say, interpret it your own way, Christ is born'. 'What 'they say' could be that Christ is born this morning, the word made flesh, the divine existing within the temporal, the *now*. Alternatively, the lines may read: 'this morning they say that Christ is born'. This is, of course, a matter for interpretation. In the same way,

we are told, that the birth of Christ is a matter for interpretation. Yet even *this* state of affairs is open to interpretation - whether challenge to the authority of the divine by making it a matter to be interpreted according to 'our own way' is a cause for liberatory analysis, or the secular relativizing of all that is important. These are, quite simply, undecidable within the poem, matters of context or interpretation. In this way the poem can enact the sense of radical indeterminacy it describes. This is an indeterminacy which proceeds from the materialization of the *cogito* within the commodity form, but works against this form in asserting the fundamental instability of identity in difference, rather than (commodity) difference through identity, be it that of the identity of the self-same, identity between objects, or the search for presence in difference

It is through this double sense of potential meaninglessness, and radical indeterminacy, that we can best understand MacNeice's presentation of subjectivity and action in the thirties. This meaninglessness itself is composed of two features - a given material world which is uninhabited by any pristine, immanent meaning; a world which is necessarily given meaning by the perceiving subject. But this subject is itself put under question by such materiality, its own reliance on interpretative systems, discourses, signifiers. It is contaminated by their impurity within its very constitution. Hence, death figures here both as a fact and as a value. Certainly the 'death of a class' was an important informing influence of MacNeice's response to the thirties.⁴² But such a notion also had to take account of the *fact* of death, the materiality of the essentially human, which puts in question the prerogatives and claims of the sovereign, autonomous self. As such, death figures as what Ronald Schleifer has called 'negative materiality': the potential for meaninglessness which is not the opposite of a self-sufficient condition of 'life'. Instead of an absolute negation, established *between* life and death, it is a condition *within* life, a negativity which inhabits the very conditions of subjectivity, forcing a reassessment of this subjectivity.⁴³ If the commodity forces the specificity and differences of objects into a particular relationship of difference under the

rule of identity, it also mounts an attack on subjectivity that can be carried out by other, different, means.

One such means returns us to the question of parable, and interpretation. For if we cannot see parables existing in some pure ideal space, but determining and constituting the activity of the subject, who in turn determines the meanings of various parables, neither can we grant either this subjectivity, or these parables, sovereign authority independent of their material circumstances, their context ('now'), their functioning within an environment which always renders them radically unstable, radically impure. This is the condition of writing, and the subject is placed firmly within this condition. As we have seen, MacNeice was to engage with this problem throughout the thirties. Perhaps it is not surprising, therefore, that it constitutes a substantial informing presence, and in turn is given substance, in his major thirties work, *Autumn Journal*.

Notes

(Place of publication is London unless otherwise indicated).

- 1 W. H. Auden, 'It was Easter as I walked out in the public gardens', *The English Auden, Poems, Essays, and Dramatic Writings 1927-1939*, edited by Edward Mendelson (1977), p. 37.
- 2 Rex Warner, *The Professor* (Harmondsworth, 1945; first published 1938), pp. 44-45.
- 3 Jacques Derrida, *The Post Card: From Socrates to Freud and Beyond*, translated by Alan Bass (1987), p. 262.
- 4 Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, translated by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (1976), p. 6.
- 5 *The Strings are False: An Unfinished Autobiography*, edited by E. R. Dodds (London, 1965), p. 157.
- 6 '...over a year ago I nearly had a breakdown over someone and I now regard myself as well out of it', Letter to E. R. Dodds, 6th November [1939], Bodleian Library, MS Eng Lett. c. 465, fol. 50-51 (51).
- 7 Samuel Hynes, *The Auden Generation: Literature and Politics in England in the 1930's* (London, 1976), p. 54.
- 8 Louis MacNeice, 'Poetry To-day', in *Selected Literary Criticism of Louis MacNeice*, edited by Alan Heuser (Oxford, 1987), pp. 10-45 (p. 35).
- 9 Hynes, p. 393.
- 10 W. H. Auden, *English Auden*, p. 157.
- 11 J. Hillis Miller, *The Linguistic Moment: From Wordsworth to Stevens* (Guilford, 1985), p. 24.
- 12 See 'Glossary', in *Language, Discourse and Literature: An Introductory Reader in Stylistics*, edited by Ronald Carter and Paul Simpson (1989), p. 279.
- 13 See Emile Benveniste, 'The Nature of Pronouns', and 'Subjectivity in Language', in *Problems in General Linguistics*, translated by Mary Elizabeth Meek (Coral Gables, Florida), pp. 217-22, 223-31.
- 14 Benveniste, p. 226.
- 15 See J. L. Austin, 'Conditions for Happy Performatives', in *How to Do Things with Words*, second edition (Oxford, 1975), pp. 12-24.
- 16 Benveniste, p. 218.
- 17 Jonathan Culler, *On Deconstruction: Theory and Criticism After Structuralism* (1983), p. 123
- 18 Virginia Woolf, 'The Leaning Tower', *Folios of New Writing 2* (1940), 11-33 (28).

- 19 Edna Longley makes a similar point on the sensuality of MacNeice's writing on Ireland. See *Louis MacNeice: A Study* (1988), p. 8.
- 20 See Denis Donoghue, 'Louis MacNeice and the Thrusting of Shakespeare into Touch', *London Review of Books*, 9, no. 8 (1987), 19; Peter McDonald, 'MacNeice and Ireland', *London Review of Books*, 9, no. 10 (1987), 4; Edna Longley, 'MacNeice and Ireland', *London Review of Books*, 9, no.11 (1987), 4; Denis Donoghue 'MacNeice and Ireland', *London Review of Books*, 9, no. 12 (1987), 4.
- 21 W. H. Auden, 'Get there if you can', *English Auden*, p. 48.
- 22 See chapter two, note 18 above.
- 23 Maurice Blanchot, *The Space of Literature*, translated by Ann Smock (1982), p. 214.
- 24 See Umberto Eco, *A Theory of Semiotics* (Bloomington, Indiana, 1979), 68.
- 25 Tom Paulin, 'The Man from No Part: Louis MacNeice', in *Ireland and the English Crisis* (Newcastle-upon-tyne, 1984), pp. 75-79 (p. 76).
- 26 Jean Baudrillard, *Revenge of the Crystal: Selected Writings on the Modern Object and its Destiny, 1968-1983* (London, 1990), p. 77.
- 27 Fredrick Jameson, 'Postmodernism and Consumer Society', in *Postmodernism and its Discontents: Theories, Practices*, edited by E. Ann Kaplan (London, 1988), p. 14.
- 28 *World Within World* (1951), pp. 249-50.
- 29 See for instance Cecil Day Lewis, 'Letter to a Young Revolutionary', in *New Country: Prose and Poetry by the Authors of New Signatures*, edited by Michael Roberts (1933), pp. 25-42 (p. 40).
- 30 David Lodge, *After Bakhtin: Essays on Fiction and Criticism* (1990), p. 33.
- 31 See Annabel Patterson, *Pastoral and Ideology: Virgil to Valéry* (Oxford, 1988).
- 32 *Goodbye to Berlin* (1977; first published 1938), p. 11.
- 33 See Fredrick Jameson, 'The Realist Floor-Plan', in *On Signs: A Semiotics Reader*, edited by Marshall Blonsky (Oxford, 1985), pp. 373-83, for a discussion of this code and its effects.
- 34 See for instance Martin Green on Brian Howard and Harold Acton: 'They wanted to associate dandyism with the modern, the expansive, the new', *Children of the Sun: A Narrative of 'Decadence' in England after 1918* (New York, 1977), p. 154.
- 35 Paul de Man, *The Resistance to Theory* (Minneapolis, Minnesota, 1986), p. 212. Quoted in Christopher Norris, *Paul de Man: Deconstruction and the Critique of Aesthetic Ideology* (1988), pp. 168-169.
- 36 Hugh Kenner, *The Pound Era* (Berkley, California, 1971), p. 29.
- 37 Christopher Caudwell, *Illusion and Reality: A Study of the Sources of Poetry*, second edition (1947, first published 1937), pp. 161-162.

38 Friedrich Nietzsche, 'On Truth and Lie in an Extra-Moral Sense', in *The Portable Nietzsche*, selected and translated by Walter Kaufmann (Harmondsworth, 1976), pp. 46-47.

39 In making this distinction between sameness (difference) and identity (the commodity) I draw on that made by Jacques Derrida, with reference to *différance*: '*différance* is also the element of the *same* (to be distinguished from the identical)' (*Positions*, translated by Alan Bass (1981), p. 9. As I noted in Chapter Two, difference is always the same where identity is predicated on difference. See also Richard Harland: 'In "*différance*", alternative meanings are not the same to the extent of being identified in a single meaning; they are the same to the extent that a single force passes through them, crosses the boundary between them', *Superstructuralism: The Philosophy of Structuralism and Post-structuralism* (1987) p. 138. In this case, that 'single force' would, of course, be difference.

40 Eagleton, *Ideology of the Aesthetic*, p. 320.

41 Robyn Marsack, *The Cave of Making: The Poetry of Louis MacNeice* (Oxford, 1982), p. 27.

42 W. H. Auden, *The Dance of Death* (1933), p. 7.

43 Ronald Schleifer, *Rhetoric and Death: The Language of Modernism and Postmodern Discourse Theory* (Chicago, Illinois, 1990), pp. 52-74.

Chapter Five.

Everyday Writing: Impurity in *Autumn Journal*.

With the alibi of a pulverised discourse...one arrives at the regular practice of the fragment: then from the fragment one slips to the "journal". At which point, is not the point of all this to entitle oneself to the "journal"?

Yet the (autobiographical) "journal" is, nowadays, discredited. Change partners: in the sixteenth century they were called a diary: diarrhoea...

Roland Barthes¹

Not so Mr. MacNeice, who remains a shadowy figure and stimulates speculation. He appears to wear a kind of beard and to have a taste for bilberry soup...He makes an intriguing contrast to the elaborately over-self-explanatory personality of Mr. Auden. I like to think that, all the time, he was keeping a little journal of his own, for he has a sly look in his photograph.

Evelyn Waugh²

The poet's first business is *mentioning* things.

Louis MacNeice³

Autumn Journal (CP, pp. 101-53) is often regarded as MacNeice's key statement of the thirties, sometimes as one of the key statements of the decade itself. Samuel Hynes has written that it is 'the best personal expression of the 'end-of-thirties mood', and as Edna Longley writes: 'All the currents of MacNeice's writing during the 1930s flow into *Autumn Journal* and find a new dynamic there: lyrics, eclogues, prose, the Audenesque play *Out of the Picture*, images, strategies, tones of voice. His entire creative kaleidoscope breaks up and reforms'.⁴ This is an exhilarating description, stressing change, disruption, re-examination. However, given the nature of MacNeice's attention to thirties problems examined in the previous chapters, the end result of MacNeice's 'creative kaleidoscope' might seem surprising: that the poem is based on, and fulfils itself, in statements of assertion of 'mood' and 'human values' in a poem which is essentially determinate and straightforward, and can be read in a more or less straightforward and determinate manner. As Hynes puts it: '*Autumn Journal* is, most simply, what its title says it is: a personal record of the period from August through December 1938'.⁵ The poem, these readings would suggest, means what it says. And what it says can be fairly and squarely placed within the assumptions and agendas of liberal humanism: 'Hatred of hatred, assertion of human values', the 'liberal-humanist agenda' which Edna Longley finds 'central to the assertions of *Autumn Journal*'.⁶ Even Longley's attention to 'self-referring' strategies in the poem confines this attention to such assumptions and agendas.⁷ What such readings ignore, I would suggest, is the way in which this poem, far from just 'asserting' various positions, works as a poem by questioning its own assertions and conditions, questioning the act and means of assertion, placing them in doubt in a manner which interrogates such assertions of 'human value' as constructions. This chapter will seek to explore this questioning activity, together with the implications for the poem as a thirties text, and its status as a statement of the values and strategies of liberal humanism.

MacNeice described his poem, among other things, as a 'confession of faith'.⁸ These two notions, 'confession', and 'faith', can be seen to have special significance for thirties writing, and for the poem as a thirties text. *Autumn Journal* is, certainly,

continually insistent on the questions of sin, guilt, omission and responsibility. The thirties ended with questions of guilt and re-examination, which MacNeice, perhaps surprisingly, attacked in a response to Virginia Woolf's 'The Leaning Tower'.⁹ One might sometimes have a sense of many thirties concerns being motivated, obscurely, by feelings of guilt.¹⁰ A confession might want to excuse these feelings, acknowledging responsibility and shame, making amends, asserting the need for a new faith.

It would be perverse to ignore the amount of attention within the poem to one form of assertion or another, the need for such a faith, something one can trust in. In this context, Paul de Man has written well on the links between confession and guilt:

To confess is to overcome guilt and shame in the name of truth: it is an epistemological use of language in which ethical values of good and evil are superseded by values of truth and falsehood, one of the implications being that vices such as concupiscence, envy, greed and the like are vices primarily because they compel one to lie. By stating things as they are, the economy of ethical balance is restored and redemption can start in a clarified atmosphere of a truth that does not hesitate to reveal the crime in all its horror.¹¹

This description is useful in that it reveals a connection between this interest in 'confession' and another preoccupation of the thirties: that of truth and lies. The notion of 'telling lies' might be re-stated in a number of ways, not all of them primarily linguistic: 'Telling lies to order' in favour of a political cause was certainly a problem, but so too was lying to yourself about your place in the world, pretending to be someone one wasn't, pretending things were fine when, for all kinds of reasons, they weren't.¹² *Autumn Journal* is as concerned with this kind of lying as any other: these crimes, their horror, and the circumstances of their horror. As such, it partakes of that part of a confession in which the necessities of the moment require the simple, straightforward telling of truth without fear of the consequences. *Credo* - not merely 'what I believe', but in this case 'that I believe'. As stated above, it would be perverse to ignore this aspect of the poem. Possible accusations of the poem's banality which one might hope to explain away by reference to the special circumstances of its composition (mounting crisis, Europe sliding into war), ignore therefore the way in which these circumstances enter the poem itself.¹³ In times of crisis, it is perhaps the simplest

truths that are the most telling. But such truths do not enter, I would argue, as statements to be taken purely at face value. This would ignore the performative aspect of the poem whereby various assertions are made only to be examined *as assertions* in various contexts. In this way, although the need to confess, own up, state the case clearly and effectively, is pressing in the poem, it is noticeably unconfident, as we shall see, about 'a clarified atmosphere of truth', which will grant such assertion unquestionable validity.

The obscuring of this self-questioning aspect of the text, or to be more precise the way in which it questions its own procedures, may be due in part to MacNeice's own, frequently cited comments about it:

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

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

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

It contains rapportage [*sic*], metaphysics, ethics, lyrical emotion, autobiography, nightmare...¹⁴

Such a description, from a 1938 letter to T. S. Eliot, is certainly appealing, and serves well enough the function of explaining the poem in the Faber Spring catalogue of 1939; but it will not do as an overall description of the poem's effects. Indeed, MacNeice's own unease about the poem would seem to be reflected in his desire to preface the poem with an explanatory 'Note', rather than let the poem speak for itself:

I am aware that there are overstatements in this poem...there are also inconsistencies. If I had been writing a didactic poem proper, it would have been my job to qualify or eliminate these overstatements and inconsistencies. But I was writing what I have called a Journal. In a journal or a personal letter a man writes what he feels at the moment; to attempt scientific truthfulness would be - paradoxically - dishonest. The truth of a lyric is different from the truths of science and this poem is something half-way between the lyric and the didactic poem...It is in 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. For this reason I shall probably be called a trimmer by some and a sentimental extremist by others. 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*, p. 101).

In this description MacNeice seems less concerned with the 'different parts of myself' politely waiting to be 'given their say in turn' than with the status of the poem as historical record. He suggests, that the poem should not be read as attempting an analytical description of 'how things were' during the months of its composition, but of 'how things looked'. Paradoxically, it is the very embroilment in history that tends to discount its status as reliable record. The poem itself does become part of a historical project in the sense that it is part of the historical scene to be viewed from the calm distance of the present. The poem is not concerned with merely reporting events and facts, but of how such events and facts were viewed and received within the private domain, and how such a domain was seen to be affected by them. All done, MacNeice claims, with attempts at impeccable honesty, holding nothing back, letting overstatement and bias remain overstatement and bias.

However, this deliberate departure from an 'objective' historical position cannot, in itself, be seen as unproblematic, nor can the assumption of 'honesty' fully explain the poem's effects. We are, we should note, dealing with a *poem*, not a court report or a signed confession. To be sure, the description does guard against interpretations of the poem which no serious reader might now feel inclined to make: that of 'misrepresenting' the Spanish Civil War, Oxford, Ireland. Equally, the notion of a space 'half-way between the lyric and the didactic poem' serves as a general indication of the wish to connect private concerns and public affairs, private and public discourses. But does this provide any real sense of the poem's activity as *poem*, rather than as a more or less 'honest' report on 'what went on and how I felt about it', the world as I found it, to be taken purely at face value? To look at it another way, if the poem cannot be read as a wholly reliable guide to historical events, should such events then be read only as reliable guides to the feelings of the individual subject? As MacNeice says, an individual in history 'feels'; s/he also observes, judges, reasons, reflects in and about history. MacNeice's description of the passages of the poem dealing with Ireland, Oxford and Barcelona emphasise not a retreat into lyrical space, with history somewhere in the

background, but a recognition that this writing partakes of the discourse we might recognise as 'didactic'. In this case, then, how are we to account for the supposed 'lyrical' qualities of the poem, of the values which distinguish it from 'scientific' or 'objective' truth?

This matter is significant because it concerns not merely the content of the poem, but its status as discourse, and our assumptions in reading this discourse.

Tilottama Rajan has offered an analysis which can be usefully applied here:

A semiotics of genre, to complement the structural study of genre begun by Aristotle and the thematics of genre completed by Frye, would see the pure lyric as using its proximity to song in order to mute the gaps between signifier and signified by conferring on the words the illusory unity of a single voice. By contrast, narrative, which dramatises the gaps between what is told and the telling of it, is always already within a world of textuality, of interpretation rather than origination. A more complex case is that of drama, which at first sight seems to share the lyric proximity to the order of voice. In fact drama deconstructs that order, and reveals the textuality even of voice. For...it discloses the unitary voice as an illusion and forces us to question the idea of the speaker as a unified person realizing himself through his language. Individual utterances are shown as enmeshed in a language world beyond them, the world of preexisting meanings and of differing intentions present in the other person in the dialogue. This larger language world, moreover, is already present within the individual utterance, because the latter is oriented toward the complexity of this world even as it seeks to minimize its interference.¹⁵

In view of Rajan's analysis, MacNeice would seem to be using categories to describe his poem which the poem itself puts in question, even as he claims such categories are valid, but merely require modification. For the description of the poem as a messy grab-bag of 'rapportage, metaphysics, ethics, lyrical emotion, autobiography, nightmare' implies a text in which the lyrical self is hardly a self-present 'unified voice' which then seeks to look out, anxiously or complacently, on a world beyond it. Rather the subject is always already constituted through 'a language world beyond [it], the world of preexisting meanings and of differing intentions present in the other person in the dialogue'. In attempting to describe this negotiation, therefore, MacNeice makes use of the very terms and categories which his poem seeks to question as valid or useful terms and categories.

of being dramatic, are *ironic*, in the old Greek sense of 'dramatic irony'); the poet and reader both know, consciously or unconsciously, the *rest* of the truth which lies behind the lines. And finally the lyric, which is thus dramatic and ironic, is also - it should go without saying - from the first and above all, *symbolic*.¹⁸

In fact the contrary would seem to be most likely: that *Autumn Journal* is not less dramatic than MacNeice's 1934/35 comments would indicate but more so, in at least two ways. First, in that the 'creeds' presented in the text are to be understood as ends in themselves, not as simple indications of a 'state of mind', emerging from a speaker whose very act of assertion can be inspected *as such* within a given context. This does not mean that it is simply to be read as one view among others. Rather the poem inspects the very constitutions and assumptions within various contexts, allowing us to inspect their status and truth value as constructions. Secondly, this process of construction takes place within a space which cannot allow for an autonomous lyrical 'self', but which is concerned to see subjectivity put under question within the space of text, signification, writing. Hence, rather than a simple enunciation of the terms and assumptions of liberal humanism, such assertions are placed, *cited* so to speak, 'mentioned' rather than 'used'. This distinction between 'mentioning' and 'using', which derives from Speech Act theory, has been helpfully described by Jonathan Culler in the following way: 'I use...expressions insofar as I seriously intend the meanings of the sign sequences I utter; I mention them when I reiterate some of the signs (within quotation marks, for example), without committing myself to the meaning they convey'.¹⁹ This accords with MacNeice's sense that 'poets...put facts and feelings in italics, which makes people think about them and such thinking may in the end have an outcome in action'.²⁰ However, rather than a straightforward path to action, in *Autumn Journal* utterances are placed within a context which calls into question such utterances as utterances, together with the subjectivity which would seek to define itself through them.

Autumn Journal begins, Edna Longley has noted, with 'two largely unpunctuated sentences [which] encompass a seasonal, geographic, historical and social transition', the first sentence being:²¹

Close and slow, summer is ending in Hampshire,
 Ebbing away down ramps of shaven lawn where close-clipped yew
 Insulates the lives of retired generals and admirals
 And the spyglasses hung in the hall and the prayer-books ready in the pew
 And August going out to the tin trumpets of nasturtiums
 And the sunflowers' Salvation Army blare of brass
 And the spinster sitting in a deck-chair picking up stitches
 Not raising her eyes to the noise of the 'planes that pass
 Northward from Lee-on-Solent.
 (CP, pp. 101-02)

But how might these various points of transition be related? In particular, how might they illuminate us to the ways in which the poem presents a commenting level, a 'cross-talk, backwash, come-back' on the speaker? From the beginning, the poem poses a difficulty in interpretation. Does that first line, dependent on the first word, read 'Close and slow' (the act of closing, conclusion, end) or 'Close and slow' (in immediate proximity, very near). Either meaning would suit the phonic patterning of this line - creating an assonance with 'slow'. The former meaning would imply a drawing to an end, literally the ending of a season, also conveying a sense of a period, a way of doing things, a decade. In the poem's historical context, the second meaning, suggesting proximity, would follow on quite neatly from this sense of ending. Events are near to, close by, compelling and involving everyone, including the 'retired generals and admirals' who would seek to insulate themselves from the world, whether they know it or not. But there is, of course, a second sense to 'close' (near to) which deviates from these meanings in an interesting way. This is the colloquial one of: hot, muggy, uncomfortable. Is the initial line, then, a statement about Hampshire, England, Europe, or is it about the weather? This disjunction between what might be called figurative and literal is itself unstable, since both uses of the word 'close' can carry literal or figural suggestions: close of summer, close of Europe; Europe's crisis is close, in concrete political terms, the weather is close - and is *that* literal or metaphoric? What these slippages should alert us to, therefore, is the propensity of the text to generate meanings which themselves thematize the distinction between figural and literal. On the one hand, we are aware of the end of a season, yet we are also aware of the end of a way of doing and interpreting, of explaining certain events and their significance within a historical context. To use a slightly different terminology, the text hints at becoming

self-conscious of its own textualizing, its own methods of description and observation, and, by implication, the defining discourses that these methods utilise.

This may seem an excessive amount of attention to pay to one line, particularly in such a long poem. It is, however, necessary to do so, because of the implications that this kind of analysis has for our sense of 'Summer', and by extension, 'Autumn'. The significance now available to us is to see a distinction between a mere reporting of events, and an attention to what, and how, such events are seen to signify. Already we have a question forming, perhaps one of the central questions of the poem, and indeed the thirties: 'what does all this *mean*?'. In addition to simply posing the question, *Autumn Journal* asks questions about this very act of posing, the devices employed in doing so, and the answers which can be supplied.

How can this kind of attention, then, be seen to link up to notions of 'discourse' within the poem? The stress on seasonal change and its meanings calls to mind the attention to mythic archetypes, meanings generated out of natural cycles and applied to other fields of human activity advanced by Northrop Frye, already mentioned by Rajan.²² However, in an analysis of a poem by Baudelaire by Fredric Jameson, we find a method of analysis which can be applied much more specifically here. In discussing the first part of 'Chant d'automne' Jameson notes:

[Two] 'experiences' lend their raw material to this text, and we must now register their banal, informing presence: these are, evidently, a season - fall, the approach of a dreary winter which is also and even more strongly the death of summer itself; and alongside that, a physical perception, an auditory event or experience, the hollow sound of logs and firewood being delivered in the inner courtyard of a Parisian dwelling. Nature on the one hand, the city, the Urban; on the other, and a moment in the interrelationship of these two great contraries in which the first, the archaic cyclical time of an older agriculture and an older countryside is still capable of being transmitted through what negates it, namely the social institutions of the City itself, the triumphantly un- or anti-natural.²³

Jameson goes on to argue that in this meeting of culture and nature within the poem, sound and bodily sensations (in this example it is the sound of chopped wood), form a space which is outside our usual sense of things as 'meaningful'. Sounds emerge as a bracketed referent, represented in language but always in some sense unnameable.

Within such a system the referent is produced by language and its referential properties, yet this production can never coincide with the object to which reference is made.

Bodily sensations, therefore, offer a resistance to the propensity of objects to 'mean' within language. Objects remain stubbornly meaningless, or at least possessed of qualities which always defy the sign's attempts to coincide with its referent.

Jameson's sense of the loss of the referent, the stubborn meaninglessness of the material world, suggested by the conjunction of nature and culture in this poem has parallels in *Autumn Journal*. However, our immediate insight can be attained by attending to an aspect of 'Autumn' which is implied in Jameson's discussion, but whose full implications are overlooked. Namely the potential of 'Summer' and 'Autumn' (and the change between the two) to mean something, and the opportunity for reflection upon this meaning by mentioning them in the text. In a sense this is an explanation which goes beyond Jameson's discussion, in a movement from the meaninglessness of objects to their absorption into the meaning-structures of the literal, which in turn develop into the figural. Thus, it is not a question of Autumn in Baudelaire's poem merely being the occasion of reflection on raw 'nature' entering 'culture' by the rudimentary practice of literal signification. One could argue that the poem draws attention to the potential of seasonal change itself to be understood in various ways. This change may be used figuratively for other areas of experience, and for the reflection on this aspect of meaning-production within a context which is itself subject to change and transformation. Moreover, this transformation may occur in a manner which exceeds the truth-value of this initial meaning-production. In presenting a notion of a change from older agricultural practices to high capitalism, therefore, Jameson overlooks his own use of the cultural apparatus he identifies in Baudelaire's poem, namely cultural understandings of material change. One reason for this, perhaps, is that it would put in question the hinted plenitude of a 'Summer' of social relations which stands distinct from the Winter of reification and late capitalism.

In *Autumn Journal*, however, 'Summer' signifies, as does Autumn. This opening passage alerts us to the sense of a season passing, together with the passage of a

particular political order. Additionally, of course, it questions the ordering of reality by such figures, the cultural allocation of meaning to natural processes. We can extend this further. What is the status of the speaker in all of this? Does he take the ending of the summer as the beginning of a new social order? Where are his loyalties? In this context, we might say, 'Autumn' is a space between an ending and a beginning, in addition, it is a space mapped out between sign and meaning, world and fiction, in which the production of meaning is cited only to be put into question as such.

This analysis helps to clarify the particular mixing of rural and urban, natural and cultural codes in these opening lines. As stated earlier, retired generals and admirals, owing their identity to social institutions, insulate themselves against the environment in which those institutions operate by the planting of 'close-clipped yew' - the cultivation of natural objects within an urban environment which acts as a shield against history. 'Spyglasses' and 'prayer-books' serve as signifiers of sight and cultural explanations. Lines of sight, observation, were never neutral terms in MacNeice's thirties work. Here they carry connotations of observation and knowledge without engagement - the view from afar, a privileged position of the bourgeois authorised by a supposed link with the divine. This position, we should note, may soon be untenable - its security imperiled, along with the culture which produced this class and its specious sense of detachment. Both, we remember, are cultural products reasserted in accusation of complicity and collusion, whose vengeance is the end of a historically situated class, its way of seeing and knowing.

This attention to the cultural and natural, and its conjunction within ideology, is implied in the mixing of register in the description of 'nasturtiums'. Natural objects form part of a cultural environment whose 'natural' properties are described in terms of objects from this man-made environment: 'tin trumpets' of nasturtiums, sunflowers 'Salvation Army blare of brass'. We have encountered this device before in 'Eclogue for Christmas'. Clearly we can take such devices as simply effective techniques of descriptive writing, yet it makes more sense to consider these details as devices which reveal their own rhetoricity. That is, the implementation, in pure 'description' and

observation, of culturally informed and informing meanings: nasturtiums seen as blasts from a Salvation Army band.

Before leaving this passage, we should consider the figure of the spinster, whose eyes follow the noise of a plane. This is cited as Summer 1938, a year after the aerial bombing of Guernica.²⁴ Within what one might call the rhetoric, or text, of the thirties, planes carry particular significance. They function as signifiers within the paradigms of travel, the journey - quest myths re-stated variously within political and cultural terms. Socialist progress is seen as the journey to the new country of re-invented social relations, the crossing of frontiers between classes and class identity. This is, of course, heavily metaphoric. Travel, crossing over, the establishing of identity in difference - of solidarity between one class and another - run parallel with the description of a political goal in terms of an actual 'journey'. Planes also function as signifiers of fear - bombing, annihilation, the destructive element.²⁵ MacNeice's spinster is, of course, following signs - her eyes are raised to the noise of a plane, not the plane itself. Looking, observing, she is a thirties figure in at least two ways. First, *the* (not *a*) spinster - the use of definite article indicates a shared, collective knowledge, in addition to implying the organisation of data within such knowledge.²⁶ Secondly, she can function as the inverse paradigm of Auden's 'helmeted airman' - seeing, yet seeing from below.²⁷

A further detail, of particular significance for this poem as thirties text, is the use of the place name: 'Lee-on-Solent'. On the one hand this is simply a naming of a real place in England. And place, where you speak from, geographically, socially, and politically, matters in the thirties. We have seen MacNeice's exploration of this in 'Birmingham', in which it is shown that where you speak from makes a difference to what you see. But here we can add another twist, related to this first notion, and to that of parable discussed in the previous chapter. For place names, like other proper names, are not merely locations in space, but in language. Jean-François Lyotard has commented on the fact that names, like deictics (there, here, now) are 'designators'. That is, they designate without describing, or as Geoffrey Bennington puts it: 'deictic

terms have the peculiarity of not having a stable and specifiable signification within the language system, and of depending on the immediate context in order to signify at all'.²⁸ However, unlike deictics, names are '*rigid* designators', hence: 'a word such as 'this' or 'that' changes its designation according to the sentence in which it is being used - a name does not. The name is like a deictic in that it designates, but unlike it in that it retains its value from sentence to sentence - only a name can specify the reference of a deictic and allow the 'same' thing to be referred to in different sentences, of different types'.²⁹ But, as Lyotard explains, this rigidity is the cause of an important degree of instability in signification:

[The] 'possible universes'...the proper name traverses without being altered by it are not merely those in which descriptions that can be attached to it are different: *Kant, the author of the Critique of Pure Reason; Kant, the author of the Critique of Judgement; Kant, whose dying days are recounted by Thomas de Quincey. . .* They are above all those phrase universes in which the proper name inhabits different situations among the instances: *I name you Kant; Dear Brother, I embrace you, signed Kant; It sounds like Kant; Kant was then writing the Observations on the Feelings of the Beautiful and the Sublime.*³⁰

In other words, because the designative force of a proper name is not emptied, like a deictic, within a particular instance of enunciation ('now' is always somewhere in particular, and not somewhere else), the signifier 'Kant' maintains its capacity to signify the 'real' Kant. However, the meaning of the 'real' Kant is liable to change, slippage, disruption, within different utterances, contexts, and between speakers. So, 'Lee-On-Solent', and 'Hampshire', 'Guernica', 'Spain', like 'Hitler', 'Stalin', whilst always designating real places and people, change their meanings according to different utterances between different speakers. This will have particular importance in *Autumn Journal*.

What I want to suggest, therefore, is that, as stated earlier, MacNeice is less 'using' particular thirties figures and tropes within these lines, as simple aids to his description, than 'mentioning' or 'citing' them. This citation draws attention, within the context established by the ambiguity of 'close', to the production of meanings within a particular context. The speaker is fundamentally reliant on such discourses and their

attendant meanings, even as they are cited and inspected as productions in context.

This attention to meanings in context, and the consequent role of the observing subject, is continued in the lines which follow:

...Macrocarpa and cypress
 And roses on a rustic trellis and mulberry trees
 And bacon and eggs in a silver dish for breakfast
 And all the inherited assets of bodily ease
 And all the inherited worries, rheumatism and taxes,
 And whether Stella will marry and what to do with Dick
 And the branch of the family that lost their money in Hatry
 And the passing of the *Morning Post* and of life's climacteric
 And the growth of vulgarity, cars that pass the gate-lodge
 And crowds undressing on the beach
 And the hiking cockney lovers with thoughts directed
 Neither to God nor Nation but each to each.
 But the home is still a sanctum under the pelmets,
 All quiet on the Family Front.
 (CP, p. 102)

This is a characteristic piece of thirties descriptive writing. What characterizes such writing is the synecdochic signification of class identity and social situation. The characterization of a particular social environment is juxtaposed in a panoramic sweep of other social groups and practices. The bourgeois are set against 'hiking cockney lovers' - thirties ramblers establishing a competing, active, reality to the 'insulated' private concerns of the bourgeois, and their attendant concerns of 'God' and 'Nation'. There is, of course, a sense in which connections are being made in these lines, for example in an ironic citation of Remarque's *All Quiet on the Western Front*. The citation draws parallels between bourgeois engagement in World War One and the subsequent attempts at isolation from history within the discourse of the family, which subtly introduces connections between private and public realities precisely at the point where such connections were to be repressed: at the 'front' or frontier between private and public worlds, between the individual and history. 'Home' is still a sanctum, but 'home' is defined among discourses which are historical through and through. The 'retired generals' who attempt to 'insulate' themselves from history draw their status precisely from their involvement with that history. Moreover, the connection between 'Home/God/Nation' within this ideological structure points to a way of seeing connections, of linking the private to the public, which may be under threat. To put it

another way, the suppressions which made possible the separation of 'home' from the public sphere, instead of it being seen as a space constituted by such a sphere, may be drawing to a close. At the same time, the ideological links between God, Nation, and home, which . . . mark out a connection between ^{both} the individual and history, only to then insulate it from real historical events, may also be drawing to a close. However, it may also be that the privileged space of the Rambler, deviating from established *doxa* in the life of leisure and the body, might also be subject to a similar closing by the closeness of history.

However, this subtle undercutting of middle-class divisions and connections is itself undercut by the description itself. The list, as is often pointed out, is a recurrent thirties trope.³¹ What *this* list does, however, is act against itself through the characterising of given social details with that paratactic 'And'. In our discussion of 'Eclogue for Christmas' we noted how detail was piled metonymically upon detail in a rhetoric which implied the prohibition of a unifying totality, controlling metaphor, or Ego. We are not quite in the domain of Isherwood's notorious opening of 'Berlin Diary' where connections and hierarchies within selected detail is prohibited. As was pointed out, connections are established in these lines which are suppressed elsewhere. However, there is no confidence that, with the making of connections otherwise denied within a historical context, any new order can be achieved through these connections. In a kind of parody of a Mass Observation report, detail is piled upon detail, implying that search for order and stability is doomed to failure, yet still proceeds. One reason for this might be that the narrator can only narrate the closing of particular modes of comprehension under the sign of 'history'. Once history is admitted, a necessary admission, which always deserves a mention, the subject is powerless to provide any discourse which will replace the certainties of the old.

MacNeice's lovers then, may be seen to enunciate a kind of private space which is outside the discourses of bourgeois Hampshire, like his own. As a field of action and the body, it is a space which is made up of precisely what is lacking in such an environment and its discourses, lying, by implication, outside its ken. The trippers, the

'rebels and young', we are told, 'Have taken the train to town or the two-seater / unravelling rails or road, / Losing the thread deliberately behind them - / Autumnal palinode'. The scene is one of forgetfulness in action, a mode of being which has interested MacNeice again and again ('Train to Dublin', 'Turf Stacks'). The description of such activity as 'Autumnal palinode' ('poem or song of retraction') encapsulates the attention both to change and the sites or production of meaning within the poem. The description applies both to the narrator and narrated. His discourse is one of retraction of older symbolic and cultural orders. The activity of the lovers, their commitment to action rather than thought, though like others neglectful of their position in history, lies outside both bourgeois Hampshire and passive observer. Yet the speaker cannot take on such a state of forgetfulness; cannot stop looking for signs of the end, nor stop his attempts to define the nature of the ending. Equally, he cannot avoid attempts to define his place within it:

My dog, a symbol of the abandoned order,
Lies on the carriage floor,
Her eyes inept and glamorous as a film star's,
Who wants to live, i.e. wants more
Presents, jewellery, furs, gadgets, solicitations
As if to live were not
Following the curve of a planet or controlled water
But a leap in the dark, a tangent, a stray shot.
(CP, p. 102)

These observations are described as being 'learnt after so many failures' - the discourse of loss again, of things which no longer make sense in the way they used to, but whose lack of sense can only be described within these failing discourses. The narrator's dog is a symbol of the abandoned order in two ways. First as a symbol of a way of living and knowing, where anything else might have done as well. Second, as a sign of a type of control in the taming of nature by culture, the supposedly harmonious co-existence with nature in 'following the curve of a planet', the control of flux in the control of water. Instead of this control there is the 'stray shot' of the film star. Her desires are simply to have 'more' of whatever. Here the structure of exchange, the making over of difference to identity within the commutability of exchange described in the previous chapter is associated with an 'icon' who is both the representation of the structuring of

desire within the commodification and a part of that commodification itself.³² The speaker's frame of reference (dog's eyes/film star's eyes) reflect his position within the structure of passive signification and desire which he denounces. Hence the rebel's 'palinode' is supplemented by one from the speaker, the retraction of previous songs in favour of new ones. This palinode, rather than marking out a pure privileged space in which to view the surrounding malaise, parody the singer and his desires, his 'fading airs of sexual attraction', as much as he parodies them:

I loved my love with a platform ticket,
 A jazz song,
 A handbag, a pair of stockings of Paris Sand -
 I loved her long...
 I loved her with peacock's eyes and the wares of Carthage
 With glass and gloves and gold and a powder puff
 With blasphemy, camaraderie, and bravado
 And lots of other stuff.
 (CP, p. 103)

This is a palinode which inscribes the desire for the commodity and the desire for the other in a common bond. It is, of course, the desire of the contingent, of the metonymic. That 'And' again: 'And lots of other stuff'.

But there is, of course, lots of other stuff in the poem. This is one voice, but it is far from being the only one. Perhaps one of the reasons for commentators to view this as straight parody, where the speaker exists somehow outside the structures he parodies, in some pure space of subjectivity, is the poem's apparent ability to insist on 'human values' which, properly asserted, can transcend the values of the above song. Where properly redefined, one might say, such values can help to provide signs of the new in the end of the old. Section II of the poem takes an important step in establishing the activity of this voice, and its assumptions:

Spider, spider, twisting tight -
 But the watch is wary beneath the pillow -
 I am afraid in the web of night
 When the window is fingered by the shadows of branches,
 When the lions roar beneath the hill
 And the meter clicks and the cistern bubbles
 And the gods are absent and the men are still -
Noli me tangere, my soul is forfeit. (CP, p. 103)

The speaker is here in a kind of negotiation with various intertexts: Blake's 'Tyger', the Gospel of St. John ('don't touch me'), and for that matter, Thomas Wyatt's 'Whoso list to hunt'.³³ Enwebbed in a powerful sense of isolation, he attacks, by inversion, Christian theology and classical mythology:

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.
 And I think of Persephone gone down to dark,
 No more a virgin, gone the garish meadow,
 But why must she come back, why must the snowdrop mark
 That life goes on for ever? (CP, p. 104)

His texts, or his interpretations of them, can reveal only reasons for not continuing to live. It is precisely those things which are supposed to grant meaning and explanation in dealing with these moments (the resurrection, the return of Persephone from Hades) that fail him: Tales of loss and redemption, higher authority, meaningfulness. From this perspective, we become aware of these texts as oddly self-reflexive. These are, of course, parables, and as such grant explanation, order and meaning to the world. But they are also texts *about* the presence of meaning within the world. The apparent indeterminacy of the snowdrop (why should it mean *that?*) does not merely imply that it might mean something else, though of course it might. Rather, the speaker is questioning whether it really means anything at all in and of itself. That's to say, what if it were simply meaningless, and that any meaning given to it, as an explanation of how the world works, or indeed that the world is essentially meaningful, is simply solipsistic? What if a snowdrop were just a snowdrop?

Thus the speaker's isolation from others is not merely physical, or emotional, but marks an isolation from human meaning. It is a kind of inverted self-enclosure, where the isolated subject's inward gaze discovers not self-justification, self-presence, but an absence. In fact, this sense will enter the passage later more forcefully. For now we should note the powerful sense of isolation which seems to transcend even loneliness. Loneliness implies need for the other. Here, any kind of contact, and specifically sexual contact, is rejected: 'there are nights when I am lonely and long for love / But to-night

is quintessential dark forbidding / Anyone beside or below me'. In a kind of semiotics of height, the speaker blocks any sense of a divine or expansive force 'above'. Tumulus is said to block any sight of 'starlight'.

The passage continues towards a near-suicidal sense of meaninglessness:

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.
 (CP, p. 104)

The notion of the carnal man as 'sieve' is to be found in *Gorgias*, where Socrates is debating with Calicles on the nature of pleasure.³⁴ Like the film-star in Section I Calicles argues for pleasure as a positive good, and that the aim of life is to 'have more' of it. Socrates points out that for there to be pleasure there must be pain, that the constant search for pleasure implies an unpleasure needing to be satisfied endlessly, like water falling through the sieve. The speaker would seem to agree with this, aware of a need to relinquish unpleasure. But it is not, one should note, in satisfaction or fulfilment, where 'enough' pleasure replaces the need for 'more'. The speaker locates pleasure in the release from unpleasure, like Socrates, rather than considering pleasure as good in itself. But like Freud, he associates this release from unpleasure with death, Nirvana.³⁵ Hence MacNeice's parody of Platonic notions of form applied to the self - the pure being of the self - finds its fullness in not being, in death. Equally, the self is, by working backward as it were, considered to be pure appearance, a mirage to the self which the self invents to mask this ultimate meaninglessness.

Within such a situation, the speaker forces his own parable out of the activity of the spider:

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.

The striking thing about the spider's tale is that it can cut both ways. On the one hand the spider's singlemindedness is seen to want to *confirm* the death drive. The Speaker identifies his will to death with the spider's will to accomplish his task of finishing the web. 'To want to die is to want 'only' to die, and it is only the spider who can say 'only'. In contrast, the speaker is aware of conflicting desires and situations, of 'interlopers, dreams'. On the other hand, by identification with the spider's will to *make* something, we can see the spider saying 'but there are also interlopers, dreams, which conflict with your single-minded will to death'. Hence the spider's activities simultaneously confirm the will to death (which is contradicted by the 'interlopers and dreams' which come from the speaker), and support these interlopers through its example of making. Is the spider a maker or destroyer?

In fact it is neither. The speaker's initial identification with the spider should alert us to is the fact that he finds there an equivalence to his sense of meaninglessness in both the singlemindedness of the spider and by its material place in nature. The 'tight' web of the spider may be seen as the speaker's sense of his own materiality, organism, will to death. But the speaker, from within his humanity, as it were, constructs his own parable, which is itself a parable of meaningfulness:

...to-morrow is also a day,
 That I must leave my bed and face the music.
 As all the others do who 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?
 (CP, p. 104)

MacNeice was not always so positive about work, as we have seen, yet this affirmation should not be read in a straightforward way as a kind of avoidance of reality - a hoped-for meaning in history which is simply the avoidance of awful truth. The sense here is that social activity is positioned as a positive good, rather than merely the avoidance of truth. This position is dependent on the paradoxes of the subject contemplating his own demise. The irony of the spider is various. One irony is that the spider's efforts are fragile and transitory. But, the poem can assert, they are nonetheless important for

that. That affirmation is tainted and impermanent, that it must partake of the uncertainties of 'becoming', rather than pristine, god-given 'being', is no argument for the affirmation not taking place. To suggest this would be to offer the certainties of absolute meaningfulness as the only alternative to absolute meaninglessness. Both trade in certainties which are untenable. Secondly, the demand for oblivion is, in the face of it, an intolerable arrogance. It implies a privileged insight into the horror of life which others do not share. This carries the irony that at the very moment one asserts one's worthlessness, one is asserting a position in superiority, banishing the courage of others as just so much illusion. Quite apart, that is, from proposing a single unified stable ego 'I - or I' which can demand the totality of death. As before, the death instinct is seen merely as the reverse image of the life-instinct, shrill optimism retranslated into another absolute, when it was precisely this absolutism which was supposed to be under attack. Thirdly, the activity of the spider allows the speaker to see that at precisely the point when he is affirming the desire to die he is, almost against his wishes, asserting qualities which are those of life: of desire, of sensitivity, of pain at a loss of meaning which only allows the necessity of meaning more importance. It is these ironies which can allow the affirmation and commitment which ends the section:

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

There is, however, a further irony that this reflection admits, and which undercuts these sentiments at the very point that they are most asserted.

The section began, we remember, with a loss of faith in dominant, explaining texts. These were not merely texts, but texts about significance, about the presence of meaning: the significance of the tyger, the return of Christ from the tomb, the necessity

of the impure Persephone returning from Hades. Given the impulse towards meaninglessness in this passage it would not be too far-fetched to suggest that it is more convincing about such nothingness than any alternatives. It is not that the speaker has reached the nadir, come to knowledge of it, and then found some imminent sense of meaning and truth to contradict this nothingness. Rather, such nothingness has been approached by the speaker, he has seen as much of it as he can, but he has resorted instead to a mode of explanation that he had initially held up to inspection, and found wanting. At the very point that the ultimate meaninglessness of matter was being contemplated the self-validating discourses of the self are employed. They grant meaning at precisely the point when it is this granting of meaning which is assumed to be under question. Meaningfulness is not found, it is produced. But not only does this activity of production slip by the speaker, it is misrecognized as its exact opposite. The speaker claims to have found already given proof of the necessity of making - in the activity of the spider, which is then seen as equivalent to 'the human animal's endless courage'. But we cannot grant the notion of the 'human animal's endless courage' any truth value other than that which it supplies for itself. One might say that the spider's final irony is, then, to remain beyond the speaker's perception right when it is assumed that some interior knowledge has been gained. The spider is just *there*. In this, its irony is to remain beyond the speaker's fallacious assumptions of coming to knowledge of his own nothingness and returning from the nadir, and crucially, of remaining beyond his assumptions of meaningfulness at precisely his point of identification of the 'human animal' and the 'animal' animal. What the passage shows therefore is not the discovery of meaning, but its making, or construction in an entirely self-grounding fashion, which is *then* taken to be natural, imminent, read from the book of nature. Throughout, the spider is silent.

Autumn Journal does not merely rely on the subject's own will to construct meaning, however, as we have seen in the citation of texts in the preceding passage. It abounds with intertexts, to the extent that one is sometimes unsure which text one is exactly reading. Sometimes, of course, the texts under question are thirties texts,

supplementing the poem's mention of thirties tropes quite explicitly, as in the following passage:

August is nearly over, the people
 Back from holiday are tanned
 With blistered thumbs as a wallet of snaps and a little
Joie de vivre which is contraband;
 Whose stamina is enough to face the annual
 Wait for the annual spree,
 Whose memories are stamped with specks of sunshine
 Like faded *fleurs de lys*.
 (CP, p. 105)

Clearly reference is here being made to Auden's 'August for the people', with its opening passage: 'August for the people and their favourite islands. / Daily the steamers sidle up to meet / The effusive welcome of the pier.'³⁶ MacNeice's use of this detail provides a sequel of sorts - a kind of description which narrates what happens when the 'long-weekend' is over. Equally, it locates the speaker as existing within an already-textual, already-written scene. This intertext transforms the mention of 'the people', meaning any old people who go on holiday, to 'the people' of political rhetoric. The people go on holiday, the people go back to work. MacNeice's trippers return with a 'wallet of snaps' and some '*joie de vivre* which is contraband'. Caudwell, we have noted, was fond of using the category of money to denote socially constructed meanings and values.³⁷ Here the 'currency' is one of snaps - collective, social representations of a collective, social activity. Trippers are inscribed, in this, within their photo-taking; they become 'the people'. Equally, their *joie de vivre*, is smuggled in, illegally, as though it comes from across the border, from the 'New Country' of carnival and free expression. There is a sense, however, that in this apparent transcendence of the mundane the trippers are only re-contained within a dominant social structure. The sense of 'spree', though forming an alternative reality to the quotidian, does not produce a will or desire to change it. Equally, whilst the notion of 'annual wait/annual spree' points to the numbing dreariness of everyday activity, it also suggests a kind of held-off desire in the trippers' activity - a taste of *joie* which is never quite complete, never met in its full character. *Joie* is never satisfied; all one holiday does is require another. This at least is how it is *lived*. It is, however, *remembered*, or represented to the self, quite

differently. The long list of 'specks of sunshine' that pepper the memory would persuade the subject that each is a moment of authentic, complete joy, 'stamped' or authenticated by this sunlight.

This type of containment is repeated in the lines which follow:

Now the till and the typewriter call the fingers,
 The workman gathers his tools
 For the eight-hour day but after that the solace
 Of films or football pools
 Or of the gossip or cuddle, the moments of self-glory
 Or self-indulgence, blinkers on the eyes of doubt,
 The blue smoke rising and the brown lace sinking
 In the empty glass of stout.
 (CP, p. 105)

Several features should be isolated here. In the past we have noted that the hand is a signifier for the action of the subject - changing, touching, holding/controlling. Here this potential for change - the 'fingers' of the typist, the 'tools' of the workman, are already seconded to a particular field of action. Here again is a reference to Auden's poem; 'history, that never sleeps or dies, / And, held one moment, burns the hand'.³⁸ Have the trippers who return with 'blistered thumbs' had their hands burnt through contact with history, or is this injury a parody of effective contact with history? Either way, the hands of history are bound, and the activity of leisure serves not as a final opportunity to 'be oneself', but to engage in self-delusion in the gossip and cuddle 'blinkers on the eyes of doubt'. We might remember Frank Kermode's comment here, implying a patronising approach to the people.³⁹ However, this description is heavily cinematic: the blue smoke rising, the brown lace sinking. Here the use of the definite article clearly assumes a shared body of knowledge, a shared identification. What this should alert us to, therefore, is the propensity to regard these features - the aspect of 'the people' that we met in Grierson's comments on film documentary, as part of this process of collective representation and identification. As much as the poem is considering people, it is considering 'the people' as representation, and the limits this imposes on activity, selfhood and action.

The people are, we are told, 'born and bred to harness', but does the speaker lie outside such harnesses? His notion that:

...some refusing harness and more who are refused it
 Would pray that another and a better Kingdom come,
 Which now is sketched in the air or travestied in slogans
 Written in chalk or tar on stucco or plaster-board
 But in time may find its body in men's bodies,
 Its law and order in their heart's accord.
 (CP, p. 105)

would seem to present a competing discourse. It uses the terms of the old ('kingdom come'), and may be travestied by so-called 'subversive' doctrine, but it manages to enshrine itself in action, in the body and its accord. This statement carries important future implications for notions of identity between intention and action.

At this point, however, we should note that the desire to locate discourse, to make it grounded in action is contrasted with two sides of the speaker's self in dramatic dialogue. One, the good-natured liberal; the other, who recognises the desire to 'snap your fingers or a whip', and to 'build with their degradation your self-esteem'. This is described as a matter of 'habit' which should be repressed. But 'habit' in this situation is a repressed, which inevitably returns in dreams where the speaker can 'play the gangster or the sheik, / Kill for the love of killing, make the world my sofa, / Unzip the women and insult the meek'. Such habits are thus filmic or textual representations and roles, which determine the desires of the subject in question as much as they do the people whom he observes. The solution to this double-bind, we are told, is not in analysis, but in action:

...a future of action , the will and fist
 Of those who abjure the luxury of self-pity
 And prefer to risk a movement without being sure
 If movement would be better or worse in a hundred
 Years or a thousand when their heart is pure.
 None of our hearts are pure, we always have mixed motives.
 Are self deceivers, but the worst of all
 Deceits is to murmur 'Lord I am not worthy'
 And, lying easy, turn your face to the wall.
 But may I cure that habit, look up and outwards
 And may my feet follow my wider glance
 First no doubt to stumble, then to walk with others
 And in the end - with time and luck - to dance.
 (CP, p. 106)

These lines have a number of elements which require unpacking. 'Will and fist' implies a pugilistic approach to the future, a willingness to take risks, and to break out of the

closures of established modes of representation in and through action. The purity of the bourgeois text, in its stability and its distance from effective action, must be broken in a practice which is open to contingency, indeterminacy. Yet in the very act of doing this the meaning of these lines is compromised. 'Fist' can be seen as a variety of the hand holding history which we met in Cornford's 'Full Moon' and in MacNeice's 'August'. But the 'fist' was also the symbol of the Communist movement, and of the republican force in Spain. MacNeice's hoped-for elusion of representation finds him once again in the field of representation which was only just derided as a 'travesty'. Equally, one cannot help but catch echoes in the final lines of Yeats's 'Among School Children' ('O body swayed to music, O brightening glance, / How can we know the dancer from the dance?').⁴⁰ Frank Kermode has noted that the figure of the 'dancer' in Yeats is the fundamental figure in which '[the dancer] and the dance are inconceivable apart, indivisible as body and soul, meaning and form, ought to be'.⁴¹ MacNeice's use of the figure draws on these associations, implying a unity of intention and act, of being and doing, which transcends his everyday activity. Like the figures of 'music' and 'voice' it is a recurrent figure in the poem. In this example it emerges as a wish, something to be desired. Thus stated, it is subject to modification as the poem progresses.

The grounds for this restatement can be perceived in the following lines:

To-day was a beautiful day, the sky was a brilliant
 Blue for the first time for weeks and weeks
 But posters flapping on the railings tell the fluttered
 World that Hitler speaks, that Hitler speaks
 And we cannot take it in and we go to our daily
 Jobs to the dull refrain of the caption 'War'
 Buzzing around us as from hidden insects.
 (CP, 108)

One might call this a piece within the mould of the thirties semiotics of 'invasion'.⁴² A pure, pre-political situation being taken over, usurped, to use Stephen Spender's word, by history.⁴³ In this way, the unmediated purity of the sky, and of course its beauty, are obscured and violated by newspaper posters, and their reporting of speech: 'Hitler speaks'. It's not, seemingly, what Hitler says that is important but *that* he speaks; or rather that the newspaper posters tell us that he speaks. Obviously this does not render

the content of Hitler's messages unimportant. But the line does two things. As a consequence of such omissions it persuade us that it is already known what he will say. The question is how much influence this is having, whether it is being brought to the light of day. Such publicity works as a signifier for the state of Europe, which grants importance, in a state of crisis, for whatever Hitler may have to tell us. Secondly it is the fact of *voice*, that Hitler *speaks* rather than invades Czechoslovakia, to which attention is drawn here. The first of these might seem a merely trivial point, yet cannot be overlooked. Hitler's voice is anxiously inspected as a sign of what is to come. It is also a sign of what is to happen - Hitler, making a threat or merely speaking out on something, makes something happen. Thus, it takes on a performative quality, but one which cannot be 'taken in'. It cannot be assimilated within an internal space which will continue to grant this internality precedence or reliable comprehension. One reason for this, we might suggest, is that the discourse itself is not 'complete' - its full meaning is contingent on its effects, and these are undisclosed.

However, in the two lines that follow, an intriguing double perspective is presented. On the level of narrated detail we recognise that the 'we' is located in a concrete space of selfhood and the world, wandering around when, outside, various kinds of enunciations with their own narrated detail are also to be found. These discourses are like 'insects' irritating and threatening the purity of self. However, and crucially, that use of the word 'caption' of 'War' as a 'dull refrain', something repeated within a text, serves to imply that, on a different level of the narrative, that of the narrator, the figures operate like characters in a comic strip or represented drama. They are in a 'fluttered' (not 'flustered') world. They are themselves part of a text from which they assume themselves to be absent. They assume that this text is somewhere 'out there'. The notion of a pure selfhood, threatened by contamination by the text and by history, yet always already constructed out of these impurities, relies on this exteriorization. The 'we' of the poem cannot 'take it in' because they themselves have already been 'taken in' by the text. They have already been absorbed within its structure of signification, and, moreover, deceived that their texts are nature and exist

outside the self, and that the self is itself not such a text. To use MacNeice's terminology, these characters are 'out of the picture' because the picture is precisely their provenance.

This sense of a lack of a guiding, grounding narrative, a kind of text without author or identifiable structure, is reflected in the perplexity revolving around the events - that all this has 'already happened', and thus, within a model of, say, progress, should not be happening again now. In this situation, the figures take refuge in one of MacNeice's favourite clichés that all of this is (self-referentially) 'on me':

...we laugh it off and go round town in the evening
 And this, we say, is on me...
 But did you see
 The latest? You mean whether Cobb has bust the record
 Or do you mean the Australians have lost their last by ten
 Wickets or do you mean that the autumn fashions -
No we don't mean anything like that again.
 No, what we mean is Hodza, Henlein, Hitler,
 The Maginot Line.
 (CP, p. 108)

The comforting communal reality given in cliché is replaced in these lines with the harsh context of European politics. But it is not merely history and the subject's involvement in it which are at stake here, but the subject's involvement with rhetoric and its contexts. The 'meaning' of 'the latest' has changed, in the simplest fashion, from sport to history - the world of leisure and pretend power-games to real power-games. However, this momentary instability of 'what we mean', matching in some sense the 'informative' function of the poem itself, is mirrored by an apparent change in, to use a thirties phrase, the meaning of meaning. What the addresser intends to say by the 'latest' is supplanted by something else. This change in context of meaning is itself reflected in the change of status of the 'we'. 'What we mean' implies what we intend to say, it also implies what our identity has become, what we mean as subjects in history, what we represent to ourselves and to others. And what we mean is a collection of proper and place names: 'Hodza, Henlein, Hitler, / The Maginot Line'. Proper names, as 'rigid designators', are at once stable and unstable, collecting a whole range of associations and meanings by the very emptiness of the sign. Hodza, the

Czech prime minister, Henlein, leader of the Sudetenland Nazis, and Hitler found themselves pitched on a 'little Maginot Line' around the Sudetenland in 1938.⁴⁴ What we mean (to say) by the 'Maginot line' depends on what happens to it, not by our intentions about it, or what we think it is. Equally, what we represent, in our role as *actants* in history, depends on what we see happen there, what we let happen there.

But do we, in fact, have any say in the matter, whether we mean it or not?:

And when we go out into Picadilly Circus
 They are selling and buying the late
 Special editions snatched and read abruptly
 Beneath the electric signs as crude as Fate.
 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, p. 109)

Again, we have the 'voice' of Europe distanced by the papers, and distanced once again by the narrator's reporting of this distance. Within this situation, it is not that the individual, with 'powers of will and choice' is cut off from history in a way which is solved by communication, information and consequent action. On the contrary, the individual is immersed in history as much as ever. But history does not depend on his powers of will and choice so much as his will and choice, his engagement, depends on the voice of someone else. The Speaker's activity as subject depends on meanings provided from elsewhere, that he cannot control, and which are in themselves radically unstable: What will Hitler say, what will it mean, for us? What will we mean? Hence the 'electric signs as crude as Fate' operate in two ways: By a 'fate' which lies beyond the control and intentions of the speaker, and as signs which, in their stability and unmovingness, show the inability of accepted meanings, styles of signification, to explain historical circumstances and the subject's relation to them. All the signs can reveal in their glaring intrusion is their inscrutability, the subject's reliance on them, and their indeterminacy.

The earlier parts of the poem, therefore, introduce us and call attention to various types of signification which are continued throughout the poem. It alerts us also to the existence of various explaining, organising discourses which are put in question

by the events that the poem narrates. Equally, the narrated subject of the poem is confronted with signs in a number of ways: certain events which demand interpretation, ordinary objects and practices which can stand both for certain assumptions and values, in addition to the inadequacy of these values in the face of history, and crucially, in the subject's own attempts at finding order within the various orders of signification. What this comes down to is a re-situation of the subject within the domain of the sign, a self-awareness of such a position, and a subsequent sense of uncertainty in the face of history. It is not merely that the subject is being redefined, but the various conditions for doing so are also subject to redefinition. This leads us to a two-fold position. The sense of activity and signification relying on notions of language which are now seen most clearly as 'Text' or 'Writing' rather than 'Voice'. In other words, a type of signification to which the intentional subject must be subjected, but which takes little account of that intentional subject. Moreover, a situation, in which the grammatical figure of the proper name and, by implication the deictic, the 'now' or 'zero hour of the day' (*CP*, p. 110) as MacNeice calls it, is at once palpable, real, pressing, and radically indeterminate.

With the exception of the 'Spider' discussion, we have, up until now, been concerned with what might be regarded as the 'public' aspects of the poem: consideration of the functioning of meaning within the public domain, and its attendant instabilities. Within the rhetoric of the thirties, where the necessary evil of public discourse was accepted, if not entirely trusted, we might be tempted to look to the domain of the private for a respite from this incessant slippage of meaning. In fact, this manoeuvre has already been anticipated. Hence, in Section IV, following the reflection on the dance, and the people, we find the following introduction:

September has come and I wake
 And I think with joy how whatever, now or in future, the system
 Nothing whatever can take
 The people away, there will always be people
 For friends or for lovers though perhaps
 The conditions of love will be changed and its vices diminished
 And affection not lapse
 To narrow possessiveness, jealousy founded on vanity. (*CP*, 106)

In these lines 'The people' have been returned to 'people', to the level of 'friends' and 'lovers', in an almost palinodic gesture in response to the classification within the preceding passage. Equally, we have an impeccably good-willed gesture towards standards of love and friendship which honours the necessity of purifying these relationships of possession and self-regard. However, the lines which follow turn out to be less of a straightforward assertion of the rejection of possession (owning, controlling), jealousy (desiring what the other has, or is) and vanity (self-regard) than a close meditation upon it:

September has come, it is *hers*
 Whose vitality leaps in the autumn,
 Whose nature prefers
 Trees without leaves and a fire in the fire-place;
 So I give her this month and the next
 Though the whole of my year should be hers who has rendered already
 So many of its days intolerable or perplexed
 But so many more happy.
 (CP, pp. 106-7)

This passage presents an interesting variation on the presentation of structures of meaning in the previous discussion. September is 'hers' because its significance, its ability to signify, is entirely associated with memories and associations connected with the beloved. Indeed, this initial assertion is quite in keeping with the sense that it may belong to some other body - its significance created out of other frames of reference, other concerns. This gesture is slightly ambiguous. It is unclear whether the assertion indicates an act of giving on the part of the speaker, or a recognition of prior ownership. In fact, it is both, yet the donation is not wholly in the speaker's control:

So I give her this month and the next
 Though the whole of my year should be hers...
 Who has left a scent on my life and left my walls
 Dancing over and over with her shadow,
 Whose hair is twined in all my waterfalls
 And all of London littered with remembered kisses.
 (CP, p. 107)

It should be clear now what this 'gift' involves. The speaker allows, in the face of other competing meanings, 'September' and 'London' to signify not only the remembered relationship, but its assumed value. This pattern of association is, of course, in part metonymic; London is 'littered with remembered kisses' in associations which we must

assume to be the product of contiguity. However, there are strong elements of metaphor here too: in an important sense, London 'is' the beloved.

The significance of 'her' London is that it presents a distinct alternative to the various meanings placed upon it by history:

...her moods and moments
 More shifting and more transient than I had
 Yet thought of as being integral to beauty...
 Whose eyes are candour,
 And assurance in her feet
 Like a homing pigeon never by doubt diverted. (CP, 107)

The beloved, whose real model was Nancy Sharp, serves as a model for all that is authentic, sincere, honest.⁴⁵ 'Cant', we are told, 'can never corrupt' her, 'Nor', in another trope of possession, 'argument disinherit'. As such, she seems to lie beyond discourse, beyond the artifice of language and representation:

...I shall remember how your words could hurt
 Because they were so honest
 And even your lies were able to assert
 Integrity of purpose.
 And it is on the strength of knowing you
 I reckon generous feeling more important
 Than the mere deliberating what to do
 When neither the pros nor cons affect the pulses.
 And though I have suffered from your special strength
 Who never flatter for points nor fake responses
 I should be proud if I could evolve at length
 An equal thrust and pattern.
 (CP, p. 108)

Integrity of purpose, it seems, emerges as inviolate in the beloved. Like Yeats's dancer, she has the capacity to translate being into action. In the context of the thirties, this is no mean feat, particularly, as we have seen, with the indeterminacy of action in history which preoccupies the poem. Yet one might argue that it is precisely this assumed unity of being which should make us suspicious about this figure. For we have already noted her capacity, through the speaker, to make 'London' and 'September' signify. What it seemed to signify was not merely certain contiguous details, but a whole frame of reference, set against numerous others (the state of Europe, perhaps). This frame was not asserted to be merely one amongst others, but to be meaningfulness *as such*. What previously was a street of 'cyphers' becomes 'ranks of men'. The status of the beloved

depends, we might say, on a state of pure being. But it is a sphere which is entirely limited to private activity, private purposes. That this is a state to be achieved, given the violent usurpations and insecurities that the poem deals with, is hardly surprising. Yet we have to ask, again given these circumstances, whether this 'honesty' and 'authenticity' *can* be translated into the wider fields of action. And, if not, just how valid is this state of authenticity? 'London' may be hers for a while, but 'London', after all, names lots of other things.

In dealing with these other things, the poem, almost as if it is following the example of the beloved, immediately attempts to ground itself in a way which is not prone to the indeterminacies of history and its attendant discourses:

...on Sunday protest
 Meetings assemble not, as so often, now
 Merely to advertise some patent panacea
 But simply to avow
 The need to hold the ditch; a bare avowal
 That may perhaps imply
 Death at the doors in a week but in the long run
 Exposure of the lie.
 (CP, p. 113)

This is boldly said. We have a sense of circumstances removing cant, getting down to brass tacks - a 'holding the ditch', in which the ditch is clarified as it is imperiled. 'Patent panaceas', like the 'theories' bought in 'Turf Stacks', are superseded by a recognition that the roots of civilisation need to be protected, and are as such assumed to be valuable. Through this, it is suggested, the 'lie', a kind of generalised lie which seems to mirror its inauthenticity in its weightlessness, as opposed to a 'grounded' truth, may itself be exposed. Thus the longed-for solution to inauthenticity which 'patent panaceas' hoped to provide is brought about by means which are themselves authentic. However, this sense of grounded realism is accompanied by a distinct sense of insecurity. It is not merely that 'the lie' may not be exposed, or that the ditch may not be held, but that the ditch itself can provide no certainties to be relied on:

Think of a number, double it, treble it, square it,
 And sponge it out
 And repeat *ad lib.* and mark the slate with crosses;
 There is no time to doubt
 If the puzzle really has an answer. Hitler yells on the wireless...

They are cutting down the trees on Primrose Hill.
(CP, p 113)

Paradoxically, the groundedness of the 'ditch', set in contrast to 'Flights in the air, castles in the air, / The autopsy of treaties', is itself subject to a kind of inflation, a kind of weightlessness. That there is no time to doubt if the puzzle really has an answer is not the same as being sure that it does, or of having complete confidence in one's path of action. Doubt exists, but it must be put aside. But the fact that it *does* exist must throw this course of action, whatever the reasons for, or necessity of, taking it, into question:

...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.
(CP, p. 114)

The generalised 'one' is brought to 'I', in a gesture which would seem to doubt the universality of feeling. The sense that 'principle' must give way, inevitably, to 'panic and self-deception' puts an ironic twist on that 'in fact', implying that the world of fact may itself be factitious. And there are, it seems, good reasons for this self-questioning, a questioning which involved not merely a difference in course of action, but a scepticism as to the very conditions of such a course:

...we who have been brought up to think of 'Gallant Belgium'
As so much blague
Are now preparing again to essay good through evil
For the sake of Prague;
And must, we suppose, become uncritical, vindictive,
And must, in order to beat
The enemy, model ourselves upon the enemy,
A howling radio for our paraclete. (p. 114)

The point here is that although the speaker is sceptical about the truth value of the 'howling radio', he has little faith in the value of the discourses which are supposed to replace it. And this for two reasons. First, that they can provide no satisfactory answer for what must happen, what will happen, why it has happened. Second, because, in the realm of practical necessity, the one thing one can be sure of is that these discourses must be replaced by others, or they will perish. As such, Hitler's voice, which is not just the voice of a fascist, but a voice of the *radio*, must become our own.

That such a strategy may end in the enemy's defeat does not quite hold at bay the implication that the subject has changed in this manoeuvre, his voice been supplanted by text, disembodied, working without a will of its own.

This sense of insecurity can be traced back to the section dealing with the Spanish Civil war. A pivotal point for the decade, incomparable focus for the 'public' issues of the period, such an encounter cannot but have special significance. But it is not, as we shall see, unrelated to the previous concern with the 'private' world of the beloved. Initially, however, memories of Spain prompt a meditation on the inauthenticity that a private vision can produce, and how these must be chastened by authentic knowledge of the historical:

And I remember Spain
 At Easter ripe as an egg for revolt and ruin
 Though for a tripper the rain
 Was worse than the surly or worried or the haunted faces
 With writings on the walls -
 Hammer and sickle, Boicot, Viva, Muerra;
 With café-au-lait brimming the waterfalls,
 With sherry, shellfish, omelettes.
 With fretted stone the Moor
 Had chiselled for effects of sun and shadow.
 (CP, p. 110)

The speaker's memories are truly shameful. He demonstrates a blame-worthy failure to read the messages behind the writing on the wall. MacNeice's clever mixing of the literal and figural in this description compounds his blindness. The writing on the wall *is* writing on the wall. It is not concealed in recondite signs which the speaker might have excused himself for not noticing. The meanings of these statements elude him, confronting them as he does as a tourist. Much more significant for this tourist are the significant forms of Moorish architecture and the pleasures of food. It is not that the details of Spain elude the observer, in that they do not mean anything, but that they do not mean anything other than those things to be observed within the gaze of the tourist. In an important sense this tells us far more about the gaze than the place itself, although this gaze cannot be dissociated from the historical context in which it was produced. Within such a gaze, everything emerges as a spectacle, a representation:

And the standard of living was low

But that, we thought to ourselves, was not our business;
 All that the tripper wants is the *status quo*
 Cut and dried for trippers.
 (CP, p. 112)

But it is not that the 'status quo' is seen in Spain only. What the tripper wants is the status quo of his culture, to see 'Spain' rather than any real place. The reason this is shameful is then twofold - both for acceptance of the myth rather than the real place, or any place approximating the real, and for the avoidance of politics, the self-deception which effectively prevents the speaker from realising his own place in what is happening:

We heard the blood-lust of a drunkard pile
 His heaven high with curses;
 And next day took the boat
 For home, forgetting Spain, not realising
 That Spain would soon denote
 Our grief, our aspirations;
 Not knowing that our blunt
 Ideals would find their whetstone, that our spirit
 Would find its frontier on the Spanish front,
 Its body in a rag-tag army.
 (CP, p. 112)

Hence, the name 'Spain' changes its function from tourist attraction to a place of hope and aspiration. But it remains, we should note, a scene of representation, a word with no identifiable referent, which is fundamentally indeterminate. 'Spain' presents a real frontier, to be sure, but it also presents a frontier of representation. Although this is, in a sense, a passage concerned with coming to knowledge of the inauthenticity of the tourist from the privileged position of the present, it also alerts us to the possibility of such a state of inauthenticity reasserting itself. 'Spain' denotes (designates, then perhaps connotes) grief and aspiration, but what *are* our aspirations? How can they avoid being infected by 'mixed motives' and 'self deception'? One might also ask who that 'we' is. On the one hand it is a collective political body, also extending in a gesture of solidarity to the 'they' of 'Spain'. But if MacNeice gives us good reason for thinking that some kind of truer perspective has been reached in these lines, he also alerts us to the possibility that, through this process of denotation, and the impurity of the subject who employs such designations, the gaze of the tourist, albeit perhaps a different kind of tourist, may be reinstated in a different fashion.

Autumn Journal is full of refutations of states of inauthenticity - the errors, self-delusions and suppressions of school-life, Oxford, teaching in Birmingham, Ireland. What the poem seeks to achieve through these strategies of re-examination, re-interpretation and exposing of lies is some position of authenticity, some values which can be unequivocally asserted; to be, in other words, like 'her'. However, as the poem progresses we come to realise that not only is this position unachievable outside the domain of the private, but that it may itself be the product of a misrecognition, a deluded hope. In providing a model for authenticity, the reexamination of the beloved, and the speaker's response to her, this position of authenticity is similarly examined. Certainly the beloved does return to the poem with almost obsessive regularity:

Knowing perfectly well in the mind, on paper,
 How wasteful and absurd
 Are personal fixations but yet the pulse keeps thrumming
 And her voice is faintly heard
 Through walls and walls of indifference and abstraction.
 (CP, p. 121)

The continual reevaluation of the beloved is, to be sure, partly a result of 'personal fixation'. However, the terms used to describe her suggest that there is more to it than that:

Given to over-statement, careless of caution,
 Quick to sound the chimes
 Of delicate intention, at times malicious
 And generous at times.
 Whose kaleidoscopic ways are all authentic,
 Whose truth is not of a statement but of a dance
 So that even when you deceive your deceits are merely
 Technical and of no significance.
 (CP, p. 123)

This quality of 'authenticity' is seemingly transcendent, rising above the 'indifference and abstraction' of ordinary discourse. On the one hand this helps to establish how these discourses operate as abstractions, and to point to the ways in which they do so. The kind of authenticity which we find is 'of a dance' rather than a statement. As we have noted previously, the figure of the dancer encapsulates a unity of form and meaning, which can extend to a unity between being and doing, or intention and action. Even though she is 'given to over-statement', sometimes 'malicious', the beloved is

never less than herself, able to transcend the 'merely technical' activities of deception. This kind of self-presence is enviable. As was stated, it gains its importance from the lack of self presence of the speaker, vitiated as he is by self-deception, the necessities of history, and of writing. The fact that 'hungry love' is feared to be an '(im)proper analyst' does not, at this stage anyway, automatically invalidate the identity of the beloved - it is not merely that the speaker feels her lack that makes her appear in this way, but the conditions which motivated him to make this identification, namely his own sense of vitiation in history. Moreover, the speaker finds in the beloved both a goal of self-presence, and, indeed, a desire to achieve this goal through unity of identity and action: 'I see the future glinting with your presence / Like moon on a slate roof' as he puts it, 'the fire', he is capable of asserting, 'will always burn'.

However, as the poem progresses the speaker feels a change of heart towards his lover, and seems less keen to grant her this idealised status of transcendence. In fact, he suspects, the beloved may have been more of a signifier of his own desire than something with any authentic existence:

Now I could see her come
 Around the corner without the pulse responding,
 The flowery orator in the heart is dumb,
 His bag of tricks is empty, his over-statements,
 Those rainbow bubbles, have burst:
 When we meet, she need not feel embarrassed,
 The cad with the golden tongue has done his worst
 And has no orders from me to mix his phrases rich,
 To make the air a carpet
 For her to walk on.
 (CP, p. 140)

This is a paradoxical position. Where previously the beloved stood for an authenticity that transcended discourse, she now appears as an invention of that very discourse. Language, it seems, presented the authentic when it was precisely the transcendence of language that this authenticity was to achieve. It is not simply that the signified was discovered only through language, but that this linguistic mediation was denied precisely where it did its most work.

Despite assertions to the contrary, therefore, the speaker is in grave doubt about his own sense of what is authentic and inauthentic, about the distinction between truth

and lies. It is, however, part of the distinction of the poem that it continues to argue for a resolution to this insecurity, for a 'joy whose grounds are true' to use Hillis Miller's phrase.⁴⁶ Previous to this discussion of the beloved, we are told that the insecurity engaged with here is not purely that of the speaker, but is a general condition. With 'the devil quoting scripture, the traitor, the coward, the thug / Eating dinner in the name of peace and progress' it is:

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 -
 Lies on the air endlessly repeated
 Turning the air to fog.
 (CP, p. 139)

'The sun' is said to shine 'cryptically' on this scene. As in 'Eclogue for Christmas' it functions as a sign always suggesting meaning, but withholding it. Against the shrill optimism of the assertion that 'the sun will always shine', a gesture of optimism that is self-grounding in assuming not only that the sun will shine, but that the meanings which associate sunlight with human good, the speaker asserts: 'but how many people / Will see it with their eyes in Nineteen-Thirty-Nine?' (p. 139). In a sense this is not to doubt that the sun *is* good, but that this structure of meaning, and its attendant 'humane' values, may be drawing to a close:

Yes, the earlier days had their music,
 We still have some still to-day,
 But the orchestra is due for the bonfire
 If things go on this way.
 Still there are the seeds of energy and choice
 Still alive even if forbidden, hidden,
 And while man has voice
 He may recover music.
 (CP, p. 139)

It is possible to see a pattern of figural language emerging here. The usurping 'voice' of the wireless is, although constitutive of the subject's position in history, anonymous and authorless. Where previously this kind of 'written' voice is countered by the dance, here this countering is associated with music. Both these figures can themselves be used as metaphors for self-presence, intentionality, unity of form and meaning, of signifier and signified. The threat to these notions of self-presence is the threat to the subject that

Autumn Journal is encountering, with the added sense that, given the imminence of the death of the liberal subject, 'the god of nothing', meaning the god of death, has its appeal:

...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.
 (CP, p. 145)

As in 'Now that the shapes of mist', MacNeice is considering a position where the 'accidental' subject, born out of 'all that waste of sperm', cannot claim any kind of sovereign authority. However, this cannot entirely rid that subject of value. Fire is here used as a figure for a kind of self-grounding of value which, without any recourse to higher authority, claims its own self-supporting right to be. The fact that it may be an illusion is countered by the fact that to make the 'great refusal' in death is merely giving in to another lie, that despair at the meaninglessness of matter only reveals a kind of disguised humanism in that the only reasons for living are those sanctioned by some kind of determinate authority. Thus MacNeice's concern with 'this make-belief of standing on a brink' (p. 134), of the temptation to 'enjoy hating / The world to which I ever belong' (p. 147). The speaker is, therefore, caught within a tissue of lies. To maintain the authority of the stable, self-present autonomous self is a lie, yet to denounce it from a position which would see all as meaningless is a lie, moreover one which utilises the discourse of meaning which it claims to refute. The subject is bound to construct parables, find meaning even where that meaning is said to be absent.

In line with the times, this situation has a social, and political, bearing which not only locates the problems of truth and lies within a historical context, but prompts questions of how such truths and lies affect the subject who must live and act within history. The focus of this *situating* is Spain:

The road ran downhill into Spain,
 The wind blew fresh on bamboo grasses,
 The white plane-trees were bone-naked

And the issues plain:
 We have come to a place in space where shortly
 All of us may be forced to camp in time.
 (p. 148)

We have spoken previously of the indeterminacy of the name, the 'rigid designator' that is 'Spain'. In this passage we see the simultaneous construction of a meaning, a denotation of Spain at precisely the moment when it is said to be revealed in all its truth. Telling the truth, that is, about the place which hopes to reveal the truth under the surface of lies, and distortions. Since for all the 'plainness' of the issues in Spain, that 'human values remain, purged in the fire, / And it appears that every man's desire / Is life rather than victuals', this is a piece of writing stubbornly entrenched within the codes of thirties *reportage*. The discourse has been placed, so to speak, after all the dispute on the unreliability of language, the lies of the papers, the usurpation of voice by text, within the very codes that the poem denounces, at the very moment that some position outside such codes is thought to be found. In its simplest terms, the speaker is speaking in a voice not his own. It is writing, the text, which announces:

May God, if there is one, send
 As much courage again and greater vision
 And resolve the antinomies in which we live
 Where man must be either safe because he is negative
 Or free on the edge of the razor.
 (CP, p. 149)

The poem is mentioning this speech rather than using it, in a manner which renders it radically indeterminate. In short, we cannot — tell if what the poem is saying is true or not, and how this should influence our actions:

The stubborn heirs of freedom
 Whose matter-of-fact faith and courage shame
 Our niggling equivocations -
 We who play for safety,
 A safety only in name.
 Whereas these people contain truth, whatever
 Their nominal façade.
 Listen: a whirr, a challenge, an aubade -
 It is the cock crowing in Barcelona.
 (CP, p. 150)

'Man can embody truth', as Yeats put it, 'but he cannot know it'.⁴⁷ The people of Spain may indeed embody something of truth about them, but we can come to that truth only through the contaminating influence of language, of writing. It is a space

which is radically indeterminate, and radically impure, lying about its own mediating status at precisely the moment at which it would seek to deny such a status in offering us a single, stable 'truth'. The assumed 'safety' of these lines may indeed be only in name, with no grounding in truth. But at the same time we cannot get beyond the 'nominal facade', the instabilities of naming, that the people of Spain ('Spain') represent.

That cock crowing returns us to the indeterminacy of signs that begun our discussion: 'Is it the heart's reveille or the sour / Reproach of Simon Peter?'. It is impossible to say, since a clear answer would depend on a clarity of action which the poem forbids. We cannot say what such a sign means, since the discourses in which it is situated have themselves been put in question by the poem. Hence 'the sharp annunciation of the *Pyrenees*' (p. 148) which would seek to provide us with a 'clarified atmosphere of truth' is shown to be delusive. The 'reproach of Simon Peter', that the subject has been guilty of betrayal, of sins of omission, cannot find any 'excuse' within the poem, since the clarity of 'truth' which would enable such an excuse, via the honest confession, is forbidden.

In this way MacNeice is most honest in revealing the impossibility of honesty, where such honesty is enabled by the self-presence of an intentional subject that pre-exists its linguistic construction ('I - or I'). Equally, he does not hesitate to expose the mediating effects of language, its effects on notions of 'truth', of truth in language, of 'truths' about language, most particularly when the truth about its very mediating status, its own indeterminacy is suppressed within a perspective which is stable, determinate, transparent. MacNeice is thus at his most honest when he is honest about his impurity, and the impurities of writing. It is entirely appropriate, therefore, that the poem ends with an assertion of 'human' values within an injunction to 'sleep'. For at the same time that the faith in the human subject is asserted, the ability of the subject to attain such values by the activity of conscious *will* is denied. 'Voice' gives over to the text of sleep as its only redeemer, as a means of achieving its final goal of self-presence. The injunction remains a hope that exposes its own hopelessness. It is a wish, an assertion of a wish, that forbids such a wish ever being fulfilled. It is a

journey, in other words, which can never have an end, because the technique for travelling and discovery, vitiates, renders impure, this goal from the beginning:

Sleep to the noise of running water
To-morrow to be crossed, however deep;
This is no river of the dead or Lethe,
To-night we sleep
On the banks of Rubicon - the die is cast;
There will be time to audit
The accounts later, there will be sunlight later
And the equation will come out at last.
(CP, p. 153)

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(Place of publication is London unless otherwise indicated).

- 1 Roland Barthes, *Roland Barthes*, translated by Richard Howard (1977), p. 95.
- 2 Evelyn Waugh, 'Bloomsbury's Farthest North', *Night and Day*, edited by Christopher Hawtree (1985), p. 82.
- 3 Louis MacNeice, *Modern Poetry: A Personal Essay*, second edition, introduction by Walter Allen (Oxford, 1968; first edition, 1938). p. 5.
- 4 Samuel Hynes, *The Auden Generation: Literature and Politics in England in the 1930s* (1976), p. 373; Edna Longley, *Louis MacNeice: A Study*, (1988), p. 56.
- 5 Hynes, p. 367.
- 6 Edna Longley, *Poetry in the Wars* (Newcastle-upon-Tyne, 1986), p. 79.
- 7 Longley notes that 'the phrase " a core / Of fact in a pulp of verbiage' might be a joke against the poem itself', *Louis MacNeice: A Study*, p.67
- 8 Quoted in Robyn Marsak, *The Cave of Making: The Poetry of Louis MacNeice* (Oxford, 1982), p. 43.
- 9 Virginia Woolf, 'The Leaning Tower', *Folios of New Writing*, 2 (1940), 11-33; Louis MacNeice, 'The Tower that Once', *Selected Literary Criticism of Louis MacNeice*, edited by Alan Heuser (Oxford, 1987), pp. 119-24.
- 10 See Chapter One, note 1 above.
- 11 Paul de Man, *Allegories of Reading: Figural Language in Rousseau, Nietzsche, Rilke, and Proust* (1979), p. 279.
- 12 Louis MacNeice, *Modern Poetry: A Personal Essay* (1968; first published 1938), p. xxi.
- 13 John Lehmann, for example, described the poem as 'rambling, facile, prosy at times, never very deep or certain in thought, rather too conspicuously elaborating the picture of an easy-going but attractive personality'. Quoted in Marsak, p. 43.
- 14 Quoted in Marsak, p. 43.
- 15 Tilottama Rajan, 'Romanticism and the Death of Lyric Consciousness', in *Lyric Poetry: Beyond New Criticism*, edited by Chaviva Hosek and Patricia Parker (1985), pp. 194-207 (197-98).
- 16 Letter in *Bodleian* ms don c. 153/1, fols. 85-86.
- 17 Longley, *Louis MacNeice: A Study*, p. xi.
- 18 Louis MacNeice 'Experiences with Images', in Heuser, pp. 153-164 (pp. 154-55).
- 19 Jonathan Culler, *On Deconstruction: Theory and Criticism after Structuralism* (1983), pp. 119-20.
- 20 Louis MacNeice, 'Letter to W. H. Auden', in *Selected Literary Criticism of Louis MacNeice*, edited by Alan Heuser (Oxford, 1987), pp. 83-86 (p. 83).

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- 24 See Hugh Thomas, *The Spanish Civil War*, third edition (Harmondsworth, 1977), p. 624-5.
- 25 See Valentine Cunnigham, *British Writers of the Thirties* (Oxford, 1988), pp. 186-87.
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- 28 Geoffrey Bennington, *Lyotard: Writing the Event* (Manchester, 1988), p. 120.
- 29 Bennington, p. 120.
- 30 Jean-Francois Lyotard, *The Differend: Phrases in Dispute*, translated by Georges Van Den Abbeele (Manchester, 1988), p. 39.
- 31 See Bergonzi, p. 52.
- 32 See Bergonzi, pp. pp. 127-33 for an analysis of the figure of Greta Garbo as 'icon'.
- 33 St. John, 20:17.
- 34 Plato, *Gorgias*, translated by W. Hamilton (Harmondsworth, 1960), pp. 94-97.
- 35 Freud 'Beyond the Pleasure Principle', in *On Metapsychology: The Theory of Psychoanalysis*, edited and translated by Angela Richards, Pelican Freud Library, XI (Harmondsworth, 1984), pp. 269-338 (p. 329).
- 36 *English Auden*, p. 157.
- 37 Christopher Caudwell, *Illusion and Reality: A Study of the Source of Poetry*, second edition (1947, first published 1937), pp. 161-62.
- 38 *English Auden*, p. 157.
- 39 Frank Kermode, *History and Value: The Clarendon Lectures and the Northcote Lectures, 1987* (1988), pp. 49, 67.
- 40 *The Collected Poems of W. B. Yeats*, edited by Richard J. Finneran (New York, 1989), p. 217.
- 41 Frank Kermode, *Romantic Image* (1957), p. 99.
- 42 Raymond Williams, *Orwell*, second edition (1984), p. 35.
- 43 Stephen Spender, *World Within World* (1951), p. 191.

44 See A. J. P. Taylor, *The Origins of the Second World War* (Harmondsworth, 1964), pp. 192, 202-03.

45 Nancy Spender (Sharp), Radio interview, B. B. C. Radio 3, 2nd November 1990.

46 J. Hillis Miller, *The Linguistic Moment: From Wordsworth to Stevens* (Guilford, 1985), p. 25.

47 Quoted in Kermode, p. 62.

Chapter Six

A Poetics of Impurity: Louis MacNeice, Writing, the Thirties.

This is an impure age, so it follows that much of its poetry, if it is honest - and poetry must be honest even before it is beautiful - must be impure.
Louis MacNeice¹

I don't believe in pure form, I don't believe in pure anything. Anything pure is an abstraction.
Louis MacNeice²

[B]efore jeering at the Aesthetes for their triviality, we should do well to remember that at least they avoided the intellectualist error which the modern world inherited from the Greeks and which still vitiates literary criticism, viz. that it is the *thought* that dominates a poem and gives its value.... There is something in a suggestion made by Hermann Broch in his novel, *The Sleepwalkers*, where he wonders 'whether even the thought of an epoch is not a vehicle for its style...'.
Louis MacNeice³

This study began with a notion of purity, in its simplest terms, as an indication of form, style, artifice, removed from the rough and messy impurities of 'experience' or 'life'. However, MacNeice's poems of the thirties, closely inspected, reveal that rather than unmediated 'experience' which complicates the purities of the autotelic, formalist text, it makes more sense to see formal elements (the mediating agents in consciousness, the mediation of consciousness) as elements which, again and again, render 'experience' impure. This kind of impurity is connected to others: the impurity of the relation between one object and another, between one moment and another, between representation and the subject, between text and history. MacNeice's world in the thirties is one characterized by contradiction, variety, flux, incompleteness and, crucially, their necessary opposites. These features take us some way from what might be considered the prevalent view of MacNeice which began this study: the 'honest Louis', in the mould of a thirties empiricist, who 'bumps into experience in an unmediated way and is simply telling the truth about it', in service of an uninspected liberal humanism.⁴ These senses of transgression, violation, or contamination were always implicit in an 'impure' poetry, where the emphasis would be on a breaching of borders, a breaking of frontiers. But their implications must be ignored in a reading of MacNeice in the thirties which relies on the assumption and valorization of a pure state of subjectivity or experience, a pure consciousness for which form serves only as a ~~posteriori~~ vehicle: a supplementary, transparent medium of a pre-formed subjectivity and world.

Autumn Journal marks the culmination of the examination of the threat to priorities given to the subject during the thirties. These privileges of the subject were seen to be under threat by historical crisis: an external threat in itself, in forcing the subject to take account of history, in addition to what this threat contained. There is nothing new in such a reading. But MacNeice's response to this threat, widely seen within figures of invasion, where the claims of the self are often thought to be most asserted *because* most under threat, is in fact to assert that this invasion, this undermining, has already taken place. The self which would offer itself as autonomous, placed against its dissolution in history, is already undermined from within. The

supposedly external 'others' of text and history are the causes of this undermining, which in turn pose significant questions about the problems of acting in history, about the dependence of the subject on undependable means. This sense is at odds with one which would see the invading force of history as separable from the formation of the subject, even if this subject argued for an apparently rigorous attention to history. A text which reveals the contaminating effects of form therefore, is nevertheless crucially located in history. This sense of impurity as contamination *from within*, a paradigm which forbids a sense of one autonomous and self-contained entity existing 'side by side' with another, is of course the sense of impurity which we have explored in a number of ways. We might suggest a difference, then, between types of impurity, ways of questioning notions of the impure. One might see impurity as a *mixing* of pre-formed, separable, previously autonomous entities, made necessary by circumstance, which strive for co-existence, or where one is subordinated to another. On the other hand one might see impurity as more in keeping with a sense of identity predicated on difference, where one entity requires and supposes the other as a fundamental condition, where this relation is indeterminately without grounding privilege ('I - or I'), where identity is consequently unstable. This is the sense of impurity for which I have argued in this discussion. If this condition of impurity is not in keeping with some canonical views of MacNeice, it is perhaps necessary to consider in conclusion what alternative perspectives it can offer on 'MacNeice, writing, and the thirties'.

If, from the previous discussion, it is clear that the straightforward characterization of MacNeice as 'Anglo-Irish poet liberal humanist' during the thirties needs reconsideration, how else might we characterize him and his work?⁵ As I have argued in the previous chapter, and indeed implied throughout this study, this identity cannot be entirely dismissed. MacNeice's poetic project is undeniably formidably informed by the values and agendas of the liberal humanist tradition. However, in challenging the identity of MacNeice as straightforward 'liberal humanist', I have been less concerned with denying this influence, or indeed MacNeice's mediation of it, than with resituating it. Certainly it cannot simply be displaced purely by some 'other'

MacNeice, who is wholly outside the confines of liberal humanism. In line with the previous discussion, however, I would argue the liberal humanism attributed to MacNeice carries with it a kind of commenting intelligence which is infused with the inaccuracy, the error, of this persona. This intelligence cannot prohibit this identity, nor can it propose another identity to be arrived at uncomplicatedly. This position is implied in MacNeice's scepticism towards the established 'literary-political' movements of the thirties. However, such scepticism should not be misunderstood as a retreat into a pure a-political or a-historical space of personal quietism. On the contrary, MacNeice's attention to both the necessity and the nature of his historical context has been noted throughout. By way of illustration, one might see a parallel between this impurity, between two worlds of liberal humanism and its other, in MacNeice's presentation of time discussed in Chapter Two, where 'Imaginary' time was seen as a necessary error, which MacNeice infused with the knowledge of this error, but a knowledge which could not provide any grounds wholly outside this realm of error. It might be best summed up in the consciousness of a 'dramatic irony', where a necessary enunciation is inhabited by its own inadequacy in the face of this error, and where the subject must play the role of both ironizer and ironized. Rejecting a certain environment, that of the bourgeois, rejecting the same identity, wanting to 'smash the aquarium' of middle-class domesticity, yet always remaining complicit with this identity, neither the priorities of liberal nor Marxist positions were finally acceptable.⁶ Yet instead of positing a well-reasoned golden mean between antinomies, MacNeice entered on a process of rigorous self-inspection and interrogation, culminating in the hopelessly impure perspective of *Autumn Journal*. The 'dramatic' quality of this situation may be understood as a kind of performative dimension to this persona: dramatic because certain assumptions and assertions ('honesty', 'the struggle') are placed within invisible quotation marks, seen as 'enunciated' as if by a distanced persona, received as scripted, as written. Ironic because we, and the speaker, witness both the distance of the speaker from these assertions, and their function in forming the very interior of this subject, constituting its value through the contamination of text. Furthermore, we should consider the necessity

of such utterances within a particular historical context, the earth compelling, which runs parallel with the indeterminacies of this context which will always undermine the stabilizing closures of language and the self.

The Hynes-Longley notion of the thirties as exclusively and most interestingly a decade for a more or less straightforward 'empirical' and realist-political writing was contrasted at the beginning of this study with that of Cunningham-Bergonzi. This second camp, it was seen, conceived the thirties more as a period regulated by a set of signs, constructs, systems of signification. The perils of writing in such a context are obvious in practice, if not in theory. On the one hand, an intense empiricism which lies beyond analysis as construct, on the other the adoption of a communal text, consciously or not, to be windily repeated without recognition that it was a received communal text. In MacNeice's work this mixing of concerns seems to me to be different. Inevitably, MacNeice entered into the communal text of the thirties, indeed the notion of impurity might be seen as a variant on the major thirties trope of the frontier: on the border, between two worlds, transgression, contamination of and by two worlds. However, the attention we have seen in this study to the mediating agents of the self, to history, to the construction of the self in social context, the place of representation in this construction, of action within the already-written, is hardly the attention of an 'adjunct'. If adjacent to the terms of the thirties, MacNeice's work forms a rigorous inspection of these terms, of this text, which is nevertheless certainly conscious of the ethical and historical imperatives behind it. It is this ability to hold this communal thirties text up to inspection, consider it *as text*, relate it to other signifying systems, to signification in itself, and in relation to the subject involved in history that we might read MacNeice's most significant contribution to thirties writing. Where MacNeice shared preoccupations with fellow thirties writers, he dealt with them on his own terms; where he entered into the communal text of the thirties, he did so to open this text to rigorous inspection.

This attention to text and signification, part of that which 'invades' the subject in history, represented most prominently in this study by the notion of 'parable', of the

figural, the making of meaning, demonstrates the wider implications of 'writing' in this study. This is not mere 'literal' writing of graphic representation (although it of course includes this definition), but a condition of the subject, involved in the making of meaning, in interaction with meaning which precedes and orientates him/her within history. As such, this writing is seen to be radically indeterminate within the impure context of history. The seemingly 'autonomous' self is, of necessity, immersed in this contaminated and contaminating realm, which is itself open to the indeterminacies of history, and of action within history.

This is an appropriate point to return to the original concern of purity/impurity :: form/content that began this study. In view of this notion of impurity, the MacNeice of *Modern Poetry* can be seen to share a similarity with the practitioners of 'Aestheticism' in forcing a separation between 'form' and 'content' in a floating autotelicism, or a transparent world of experience. The mixing of these categories within an impurity of 'reference' cannot provide an alternative to this, since it offers form as subordinate, merely as a transparent communicative vehicle for this pure experience. Hence, the 'impurity' of *Modern Poetry* borrows from the structures of purity which it claims to reject. This borrowing is, however, undone in the practice of the poetry, which borrows in a different way the category of form, mixing it with content in a way which is radically impure. In this sense of impurity, every content is inhabited by form; where form might attempt to pass itself off as content, the reverse is not the case. This is not then to reverse the previous valorization of form, but to relocate it, as the impurities of form and content, each trespassing on the other, are relocated within the impure contexts of history, and of the subject in history. It is within these conditions that the further impurities of the previously pure terms of 'honesty' and 'integrity' must be examined. In making this examination, arguing for both their necessity and the conditions of their error, MacNeice made the closest approximation to the values associated with these now impure terms.

Notes.

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2. Louis MacNeice, Letter to Anthony Blunt, 25 September 1926. Quoted in William T. McKinnon, *Apollo's Blended Dream: A Study of the Poetry of Louis MacNeice* (1975), pp. 95-96; Peter McDonald, *Louis MacNeice: The Poet in his Contexts* (Oxford, 1991), p. 49
3. Louis MacNeice, *The Poetry of W. B. Yeats*, second edition, foreword by Richard Ellmann (Oxford, 1967; first published Oxford, 1941), p. 199.
4. See Chapter One, note 23 above.
- 5 Alan Heuser, 'Introduction', *Selected Literary Criticism of Louis MacNeice*, edited by Alan Heuser (Oxford, 1987), pp. xv-xxiii (p. xv).
6. See Chapter Two, note 3 above.

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