



THE UNIVERSITY *of* EDINBURGH

Edinburgh Research Explorer

Any Dark Saying

Citation for published version:

Gillis, A 2012, 'Any Dark Saying: Louis MacNeice in the Nineteen Fifties' Irish University Review, vol 42, no. 1, pp. 105-123.

Link:

[Link to publication record in Edinburgh Research Explorer](#)

Document Version:

Publisher final version (usually the publisher pdf)

Published In:

Irish University Review

Publisher Rights Statement:

© Gillis, A. (2012). Any Dark Saying: Louis MacNeice in the Nineteen Fifties. Irish University Review, 42(1), 105-123

General rights

Copyright for the publications made accessible via the Edinburgh Research Explorer is retained by the author(s) and / or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing these publications that users recognise and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

Take down policy

The University of Edinburgh has made every reasonable effort to ensure that Edinburgh Research Explorer content complies with UK legislation. If you believe that the public display of this file breaches copyright please contact openaccess@ed.ac.uk providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.



'Any Dark Saying': Louis MacNeice in the Nineteen Fifties

The three most canonical Irish poets of the mid century each experienced a new lease of life in the nineteen fifties. In certain respects this was one of the few things they shared. Austin Clarke's *Ancient Lights* (1955) broke a long poetic silence. His first collection for seventeen years, it heralded a new confidence and a prolific era, for him, which would last until the early nineteen seventies.¹ Patrick Kavanagh ultimately regarded the 'noo pomes' he wrote in the second half of 1957 as his finest work. Having recovered from an operation for lung cancer in 1955, he'd spent the first half of 1957 in New York, where he evidently enjoyed – and felt affiliated with – much new American poetry. Lithe with improvisatory energy, his 'noo pomes' are abundant with a sense of rejuvenation and new-found freedom.² Meanwhile, the contours of Louis MacNeice's career are rarely contested: from the high point of his nineteen thirties work, reaching a crescendo with *Autumn Journal* (1939), he drifted into a slump after the Second World War, reaching a nadir with two collections from the early nineteen fifties, *Ten Burnt Offerings* (1952) and *Autumn Sequel* (1954), before reviving to develop a startling new style in the late nineteen fifties. The dream-logic parable poems in *Solstices* (1961) and *The Burning Perch* (1963) are compelling in their warped isolation, electric in their pessimism. The latter was published a week after his early death.

The Irish mid-twentieth century is, of course, inseparable from stereotypes of stagnation and conservatism. It is almost a given that the imaginative task of Irish writers of the era precluded an aesthetic confrontation with the cultural stasis in which they found themselves. Whatever way one contextualizes it, the historical moment necessitated stylistic renegotiation, and the shared experience of Clarke (1896–1974), Kavanagh (1904–67), and MacNeice (1907–63) suggests this was no easy task. But in comparison with the new styles developed coterminously by Clarke and Kavanagh, MacNeice's late

work is stark, suggestive of nightmarish solipsism and a breakdown of social cohesion.³ MacNeice's influence on later Irish poetry, especially from the North, and on contemporary British poetry, from Larkin onwards, is widely recognized;⁴ yet his late verse also has affinities with European poetry (Zbigniew Herbert, Vasko Popa and Miroslav Holub spring to mind), and with a writer such as J.G. Ballard.

MacNeice's late style strikes a sombre note in comparison to his work of the Thirties, which was marked by its social commitment and refusal to surrender to broken individualism. By contrast, in his late work, the sense of both self and society has become morbidly phantasmagorical. It is easy, and commonplace, to relate this to his outsider status as a Northern Irishman in England. Given that he did not 'feel at home on either island', as Michael Longley claims, it might be unsurprising that he ended up a laureate of homelessness and alienation.⁵ But beyond biography, his later stylistic shift is of much broader consequence to our understanding of Irish and British mid-century literature.

His late work might best be understood as symptomatic of an encroaching dissolution of communality that would clearly and profoundly affect the cultures of both islands as the twentieth century ground onwards. As a poet based in England, MacNeice's late work indicates how, especially in the nineteen fifties, he bore witness to a loss of collective energy in the aftermath of the Second World War, as a newly disempowered culture, fractured by the breakup of empire, floundered in its uncertain way towards a consumerist society. At the very least, MacNeice's work during the Fifties is stretched between a residual communality that was increasingly felt to be moribund, and an emergent trajectory of diminishing social cohesion.

In turn, this is an increasingly apt way to view the Irish nineteen fifties. The cultural effects of late capitalism have had a similarly flattening impact upon both Irish and British culture. Of course, the colossal transformations wrought by globalization came suddenly and late to Ireland, in the guise of the Celtic Tiger. But we should not ignore the slower, uncertain, deeply uneven cultural and economic mutations engendered in Ireland by free-market capitalism prior to the seismic boom of the nineteen nineties. To be sure, it would be simplistic to suggest that the economic policies synonymous with T.K. Whitaker and Seán Lemass, which first began to take effect around 1958, would directly and inevitably lead to the Celtic Tiger, and to our current post-crash doldrums. But outside of Ireland, it is par for the course to locate a gearshift in the inexorable rise of multinational capitalism somewhere around the nineteen fifties. In short, it might be crude and dubious to streamline modern Irish

history into an overarching narrative that leads straight from communality to deracinated globalization. But broad perspectives are as necessary as historical specificity, and, at the time of writing, it would seem remiss not to be guided by some such perspective, no matter how generalized.

The Irish mid-century seems caught between a rock and a hard place: stretched between a declining nationalistic communality, and an historical trajectory that would bring liberal energies and freedoms, but also new and vast difficulties. MacNeice, Kavanagh and Clarke approached this inherent crux of the nineteen fifties in differing ways. The careers of all three poets exemplify how the unclear shifts of historical change demand stylistic vigilance and aesthetic evolution, but MacNeice's transformation during the decade is particularly striking. In the Fifties he was, in certain respects, a poet haunted by his poetic past in the Thirties. While *Autumn Journal* exemplified the apparently easeful way in which he fused the personal and the communal in a poetics of social awareness and commitment, the failure of *Autumn Sequel* indicated a loss of adequate style. His subsequent reinvigoration hinged on an intense lyric re-examination of self, culture and form, in a style that graphically laid bare and examined the symbolic breakdown between poetic subjectivity and society.

By the nineteen fifties, MacNeice had mostly given up his vexed animus with Ireland, even if he had not quite come to peace with the place. He also gave up sharply differentiating between North and South and submitting each to trenchant cultural analysis – manoeuvres that distinguished his verse in the Thirties. It would not be accurate to say that Irish references lose their specificity entirely in his late verse; nonetheless, Ireland broadly becomes an impressionistic-symbolic landscape and a parable-site of origins; both aspects increasingly rendered in a vivid yet unstable and dreamlike manner. And since all of his poetry becomes progressively more parabolic or dreamlike, any attempt to differentiate between Ireland – North or South – and Britain, becomes difficult and, indeed, of questionable relevance. For example, MacNeice's biographer Jon Stallworthy traces 'House on a Cliff' to a holiday home in Dorset which MacNeice rented in July 1955, but immediately points to its powerful echoes of, and symbolic kinship with, earlier poems about his childhood home in Carrickfergus.⁶ In such ways, as he developed his late style, Britain and Ireland become steadily intermeshed, transfused into a hallucinatory realm that clamours with uncanny clarity while offering less and less to cling on to.⁷

However, it took a while for MacNeice to achieve his late high style. Most critics have implicitly accepted that there is little to be gained from dwelling on the dolorous and dispiriting *Ten Burnt Offerings* and

Autumn Sequel. Outwardly, MacNeice was bullish. Of *Ten Burnt Offerings* he wrote: 'Personally I think that this book breaks new ground, these poems being more architectural – or perhaps I should say symphonic – than what I was doing before.'⁸ He also described the book as 'ten long poems which were experiments in dialectical structure'.⁹ But these experiments resulted in a dialectic that produced no tension, no drama, no imaginative engagement, no development, and no authentic sense of structure. One of his most committed advocates, Edna Longley, has written that the style 'betrays its own desperation as abstraction in pursuit of image, image in pursuit of point, humanism in pursuit of validation, technique in pursuit of inspiration, colour in pursuit of meaning'.¹⁰ A few years before the book's composition, MacNeice had argued: 'Verse is a precision instrument and owes its precision very largely to the many and subtle differences which an ordinary word can acquire from its place in a rhythmical scheme.'¹¹ This hits the nail on the head: there can be no true precision without a point of pressure, and, lacking this, despite MacNeice's resourceful lexicon and bombardment of rhetorical technique, the rhythm in *Ten Burnt Offerings* is leaden, the words fail to animate, and the verse remains stubbornly flat-lined.

Autumn Sequel is beset by the same lumpish verbosity, at greater length. MacNeice wrote: 'What I think myself should be most interesting about this work is the balance I have tried to achieve between the realistic and the contemporary on the one hand and the mythical or historical on the other.'¹² In the book's 'attempt to marry myth to "actuality"',¹³ the hubris of clambering on in a humdrum terza rima at such length is amply matched by the conceit of mythologizing actuality by means of dressing up friends and acquaintances in bizarrely inane pseudonyms, then assuming they have the gravitas of communal consequence. The balance between the contemporary and mythical is sorely misjudged. It's not just that the poem, as Peter McDonald argues, makes 'the concrete abstract in a world too overtly symbolic to seem real'¹⁴ – a more pressing problem is the abject hollowness of the symbolic world that it presumes to ramble through so exhaustively. Its lack of pressure and lifeless rhythm ensure that neither myth nor actuality takes hold. In producing such a zombification of the lithe, coiled, tensile, swooping, elastic and loaded line of *Autumn Journal*, the former poem's searching and energized embroiling of self and society is dispelled. Edna Longley writes: '*Autumn Sequel* remains largely self-paraphrase or self-parody: a translation of MacNeice's poetry into less than his prose.'¹⁵

A defining impetus of *Autumn Journal*, and perhaps of MacNeice's output as a Thirties poet generally, was crystallized in his book on Yeats: 'History for the artist is something which is evolving and he

himself is aiding and abetting it.¹⁶ In broad terms, the stylistic failure of *Ten Burnt Offerings* and *Autumn Sequel* implied a severance in this dynamic. It should be stressed that MacNeice remained defiant in defending both books unreservedly, and Peter McDonald argues that, without them, his late, great style would not have been possible.¹⁷ But if they were a crucial stepping stone, this is at least partially because, deep down, the late verse must have stemmed from a stung awareness of, and a reaction to, their failure. Al Alvarez's review of *Autumn Sequel* in *The New Statesman* reads like a virtual epitaph for Thirties poetry, dismissing both MacNeice and Auden: 'they have become weary and knowing and bored with it all. All we can do is, with them, lament the makers they might have been'.¹⁸ Stallworthy narrates a trip to Edinburgh in 1955, where a dismal MacNeice, morose in his whisky, insisted 'he was finished as a poet'.¹⁹

In fairness, however, both books had been partially about poetic failure; or, at least, about the difficulty of finding symbolic resonance in changed times. Some of this, of course, was simply linked to the poet getting older: 'This middle stretch / Of life is bad for poets'.²⁰ But to entirely blame his mid-career slump on middle age seems questionable. *Autumn Sequel* places the poem's own lack of content centre-stage: 'Actors' careers go on and I sometimes think / That I am an actor too, that the Muse has defaulted // And left me an apparatus, rivet or link, / With nothing to link or rivet'.²¹ Soon enough, he would make such intimations the authentic provenance of his art.

One of the more telling passages in *Autumn Sequel* is Canto IV, which deals with MacNeice's experiences of working for the BBC in London during the Second World War. Clair Wills in *That Neutral Island: A Cultural History of Ireland During World War II* (2007) discusses MacNeice's choice to commit himself to London during the war. She finds it likely that, before making the decision, he contemplated basing himself in neutral Ireland, as much as he gave serious consideration to life in the US. Eventually, she recounts, MacNeice wrote: 'I felt that I was not justified in supporting the war verbally unless I were prepared to suffer from it in the way that the unprivileged must suffer'.²² And his choice to live in London was honourably self-consistent, although the 'what might have been' element of a possible life in America very probably contributed to the haunted, conflicted nature of his verse thereafter. By default, of course, the war brought the question of poetry's role vis-à-vis social reality to an insurmountable crisis point. MacNeice certainly wrote lasting and affective verse about London during the war, from 'London Rain' to 'Homage to Wren'.²³ But understandably and, I think, clearly, the war damaged his faith in art's agency, in liberalism, and in 'the value of living', thereby altering the foundations of his aesthetic.²⁴

In Canto IV of *Autumn Sequel*, MacNeice gives a disconsolate account of the frustration of a writer swallowed whole by administrative emptiness: 'We hack and hack', reduced to producing propaganda, 'miles on miles / Of carbon copies rippling through the waste / Of office hours'.²⁵ The wartime trope of labyrinthine bureaucracy, of abject imprisonment within a fathomless administrative machine, might now be well-worn, but MacNeice renders it with something like culture shock. Given his previous writing's committed examination of the social obligations and political effectiveness of poetry, and given the symbolic momentousness of his decision to commit himself to London throughout the war, this utterly banal experience of the writer's disempowerment is made to seem, in *Autumn Sequel*, like having one's nose rubbed in it.

The redundancy of a culture dominated by deadening bureaucracy becomes an abiding motif in MacNeice's work, reaching a zenith in 'The Suicide' from *The Burning Perch*: 'These are the bills / In the intray, the ash in the ashtray, the grey memoranda stacked / Against him' . . . 'and here is the cracked / Receiver that never got mended and here is the jotter / With his last doodle which might be his own digestive tract / Ulcer'.²⁶ Earlier, in the title poem of *Visitations* (1957), MacNeice proffered a vision of God: 'he sat in his office with in-tray and out-tray / While nobody, nothing, came in but typed memoranda'.²⁷ Moreover, this cosmic bureaucratic vacuity becomes steadily more fused with a sense of consumerism and reification. In 'The Tree of Guilt' we read of 'the purchasable loves / which . . . were purveyed / On credit through the slinking shade'.²⁸ In 'Jigsaws', MacNeice writes:

Property! Property! Let us extend
Soul and body without end:
A box to live in, with airs and graces,
A box on wheels that shows its paces,
A box that talks or that makes faces,
And curtains and fences as good as the neighbours'
To keep out the neighbours and keep us immured
Enjoying the cold canned fruit of our labours
In a sterilized cell, unshared, insured.²⁹

Terence Brown has commented on MacNeice's changing attitude towards consumerism:

MacNeice's impulse to delight in the presence of objects, things, sensations, to relish common life, coexists with a slowly intensifying distaste for mass production. More and more in the

post-war period (as the consumer society replaced the austerity of the war economy and the welfarism of socialist reconstruction under Labour), he becomes assailed by a sense of meaning, vitality, being drained from things as they proliferate in the endless repetitive availability which is the motor of modern commerce. The alienation that he expressed with increasing bitterness as he grew older may have its psychological, religious and metaphysical anxieties, but its significant social context must not be disregarded'.³⁰

In one respect, MacNeice's poetic turnaround in the Fifties was related to the increasing aptness and control with which he dramatized an escalating sense of this draining of vitality.

As early as 1927, he had complained in a letter: 'Language is at first a help but at last a hindrance. When you first name a dog a "dog", it helps you get at its entity but in a little time the word "dog" becomes a cliché and helps little towards the visualisation of dog. The essence of dog is lost while the symbol remains.'³¹ By and large, his verse throughout his career explored this inherent problem, but in the late Fifties, an abiding sense develops that all words, grammatical constructions and poetic tropes have been infected by the emptiness of cliché. Prosodic and rhetorical conventions supply forms which are inescapable and necessary, but which are also insubstantial and unreal, as MacNeice's poetic becomes haunted by an inner absence.

His poetry had always been drawn to repetition, but this becomes a pivotal means of exploring emptiness and destabilization in the late Fifties. In particular, his verse is increasingly dominated by chiasmus and chiasmic-like effects, as MacNeice becomes 'a purposeful man who talks at cross / Purposes'.³² Interestingly, *Ten Burnt Offerings* is full of such repetitive riffs: 'Such is water, such are we / World's most variables, constant in our variability'; 'Blessed are those ... / Who whatever the weight on the heart have the heart to wait'.³³ But such riddling twists and inversions within a repetitive echo-structure are the cleverly worked constructions of unruffled analytic control, describing metaphysical discombobulation rather than enacting it. In *Ten Burnt Offerings*, the rhetorical tintinnabulations are safe and sure of their place in the scheme of things, drably expressing a dialectic between 'something' (sound, colour, being) and 'nothing' (silence, monotone, negation): 'The windblown web in which we live / Presumes a yawning negative, / A nothing which cries out to see / A something flout its vacancy'.³⁴ The verse is too assured in presuming that what it discerns in India is pervasive through all reality: 'Monochrome under her motley, monolith under her flimflam'.³⁵ Lacking edge and an imaginative pulse, MacNeice's late Fifties

renaissance entailed finding a style to make this dialectic newly dramatic.

Superficially, if the failure of *Ten Burnt Offerings* and *Autumn Journal* suggested a symbolic breakdown between self and society, his subsequent poetry's inward turn, fuelled by dream logic, might be understood as MacNeice's broad reaction. Feeling adrift, cut off from the pulse of contemporary culture, he returns in the late Fifties to the self as the ground of lyric poetry. In the Clark lectures of 1963, posthumously published as *Varieties of Parable* (1967), MacNeice would say: 'People who have grown up since the war just cannot see the point of much poetry of the 1930s.'³⁶ He would also claim: 'when writing for a mass audience, it is unlikely that a writer today will share the necessary moral framework with them'.³⁷ Of course, he never quite wrote his verse for a 'mass audience', yet the sense of an irreparable gulf between artist and society is increasingly pervasive. Quoting from Edwin Honig's *Dark Conceit: The Making of Allegory*, MacNeice properly contextualizes the monadic individualism of modernity as having its roots in the cultural disruptions of Protestantism: 'Some explanation for the elusive pattern and the increasing ambiguity in modern allegories may be found in the destruction of the rigid base of cultural authority upon which allegory traditionally depended, and in the relatively greater stress put upon the autonomy of the artist since the Reformation.'³⁸

Fast-forward to the mid-twentieth century, and the rise of monadic individualism and concomitant dispersal of culture as a continuous communal space establishes parable as the contemporary successor to allegory. Parable is to allegory what Imagism is to Symbolism: an established fixity of associations gives way to something at once more concrete and more indefinite. MacNeice's own most compelling definition of parable is his most open-ended: 'any kind of enigmatical or dark saying'.³⁹ Peter McDonald, with a nod to the failures of the early Fifties, writes: 'Parable, for MacNeice, came increasingly to imply incompleteness in its execution, and, with this incompleteness, its incorporation into lyric poetry became more feasible. Indeterminate parable is the basis of the poetry's achievement in *Solstices* and *The Burning Perch*'.⁴⁰

Although the change in tenor of MacNeice's inner turn, fuelled by indeterminate parable, is distinct, it would be wrong to suggest it was an absolute recantation of art's communal reach. Rather, it provided a more ambivalent framework better suited to changed times. 'In the 1930's', he writes, 'we used to say that the poet should contain the journalist; now I would tend more often to use "contain" in the sense of control or limit. I still hold that a poet should look at, feel about and think about the world around him, but he should not suppose his job

consists merely in reporting it. What the poet is far more concerned with is that "inner conflict".⁴¹ Yet this 'inner conflict' still entails the social and symbolic contexts within which individuality experiences its crises. MacNeice claims: 'Given the same historical and geographical background, many people's privacies tend to overlap.'⁴² And so, first and foremost, dream logic and parable suggest the discarnate isolation of the dead-ended contemporary: 'He slept aloft on a sarsen stone / Dreaming to, dreaming fro, / And the more he dreamt was the more alone'.⁴³ Yet, at the same time, the inward turn is necessary to reconceive the aesthetic connections between self and society. In 'Donegal Triptych' MacNeice writes of 'Once more having entered solitude once more to find communion / With other solitary beings, with the whole race of men'.⁴⁴ This idea he takes from the Marxist critic Christopher Caudwell, whom he also cites in *Varieties of Parable*, and who wrote of 'that paradox of art – man withdrawing from his fellows into the world of art, only to enter more closely into communion with history'.⁴⁵

Clearly, in the best of the late poems, such communion takes a distorted and sometimes desperate path. Our privacies overlap, but only deep within an endless, distorting web of shared isolation. But nonetheless, as Caudwell's paradox suggests, the late verse remains inherently dialectic. And despite the magnitude of the transformation wrought in MacNeice's late verse, in this respect it shares the same source of poetic energy with his Thirties poetry, which was itself dialectically fired by scepticism and self-doubt. MacNeice was a foppishly solipsistic modernist in his juvenilia. Like Auden, he willed his art away from overt alienation as the Thirties wore on; but sensitivity to the reification, automation and heightening vacuity of culture pervades even the most socially committed poetry of both. While Auden, after the Second World War, became and remained loose-lined and verbose, MacNeice's reaction to his own dull spell of discursiveness was to revisit the disjointed and strange-toned atmosphere of early Auden – the kind of diagnostic estrangement from which generic Thirties poetry arose in the first place. In the Thirties, MacNeice mostly turned from negation to focus on the positive, while in the Fifties he increasingly reversed this direction. Yet his best work of each decade ultimately gains poetic life from a sprung dialectic, which MacNeice had lost in the drift of the early Fifties.

MacNeice's repetitions and chiastic-like effects, for example, create a paradox of movement and stasis. But the technique is variable. In the best of his late verse he can make it convey how things are both singular and multiple at the same time. It can imply the imprisonment of the ever-same, a reality monotonous and fixed. Or it can suggest

how the slightest change within sameness might be all-important and liberating: 'For the last blossom is the first blossom / And the first blossom is the best blossom / And when from Eden we take our way / The morning after is the first day'.⁴⁶ The need to reiterate in order to express sameness opens up a potentially redemptive chink of freedom:

And what was nowhere now was here
 And here was all and all was good;
 Between the lines the words were strange
 Yet not to be misunderstood.
 The glad flowers talked with tongues of flame
 And who was he was not the same.⁴⁷

Yet at the same time, the inverse can be true, and the transitions within repetitions can be abysses, destroying what should seemingly be stable. As 'Variation on Heraclitus' puts it: 'Reappearance presumes disappearance'.⁴⁸ Essentially, MacNeice's late-Fifties poetry comes to jolting life when the variability inherent within repetition is endowed with an authentic sense of unpredictability: when it becomes a hinge for the unexpected, when the positive and negative aspects of the trope are in competition. In turn, this animation depends upon matters of rhythm, syntax and structure; but also upon the extent to which MacNeice would use the trope to radically challenge his poetry's sense of self.

His poetry's repetitions truly come into their own in exploring the paradox of the self as it is perceived in differing times, places, contexts, moods: always the same, always different. In MacNeice's late verse, the self's ability to remember or imagine itself otherwise becomes, at times, virtually psychotropic. The ability to control reflexively shifting self-perceptions is lost; the stable centre that can normally keep shifting perspectives in perspective vanishes, with the result that they are experienced as full-scale metamorphoses and displacements. The idea is planted in *Autumn Sequel*, in a childhood memory where the family's cook says at bedtime: 'Aye, you are here now – but you never know / Where you will be when you wake up'. (It is telling, of course, that the privileged Protestant's dislocation is helped along by 'A Catholic farmer's daughter from Fivemiletown' employed by his family.)⁴⁹ In *Visitations* the motif begins to recur with frequency. In 'The Tree of Guilt': 'he finds later, waking cold, / ... his craved heart, though vastly grown, / Not recognizably his own'.⁵⁰ More black-humoured, in 'Jigsaws', after surgery:

Fresh from the knife and coming to,
 I asked myself could this be I

They had just cut up. 'Oh no, not you,
Certainly not!' came the reply⁵¹

Such disorientations are, of course, commensurate with the dream logic that increasingly informs the poems from *Visitations* onwards. But what is striking is the way in which the poetry's dysmorphic hallucinations are propelled by the difference-in-identity dialectic of MacNeice's rhetorical and prosodic repetitions, as poetic form itself gives shaping force to increasingly bad trips.

This charged formal intensity distinguishes MacNeice's late verse. The poetry vividly explores the sense that 'I is another', but registers this as a disaster; it memorably proffers an experience of reality as unstable, but does so with alarm and nausea; it effectively warps conventional poetic form, but does so with taut and innovative prosodic skill. In such ways, it faces the shifting cultural coordinates of history with genuine bite. For example, the dislocation between interior and exterior realms is acute, precisely because the verse doesn't vacuously turn its back on their troubled coexistence. The continued juxtaposition of 'Indoors' and 'Outdoors' in 'House on a Cliff', and the continuities between the two, makes the poem's atmosphere of isolation, stasis and breakdown all the more desolate: 'Indoors the tang of a tiny oil lamp. Outdoors / The winking signal on the waste of the sea. / Indoors the sound of the wind. Outdoors the wind'.⁵² Rather than a merely indulgent introversion, the continual juxtapositions mean that both realms effectively taunt one another, giving rise to a vast futility, here generated by asyndeton (the omission of conjunctions), which Edna Longley has noted as a key device of late MacNeice. Asyndeton, she explains, creates effects of compression and fragmentation: 'It suggests that there are black holes rather than cosmic links between phenomena.'⁵³ Thus the poem brings the two realms together, while suggesting an incommensurability that exists within and through their interrelation.

Such antinomian workings are everywhere. The utter disintegration of 'Reflections' is generated from controlled precision and accuracy: 'The standard / Lamp comes thrice in my mirror, twice in my window, / The fire in the mirror lies two rooms away through the window, / The fire in the window lies one room away down the terrace, / My actual room stands sandwiched between confections / Of night and lights and glass'.⁵⁴ The late verse creates haunting effects of disembodiment, but this works best when the poems are at their most concrete. In sum, the dialectical technique ensures that, while the vision of the poetry is uncompromising, within its bleakness it also conveys a sense of how things might be otherwise – the conditions for

resolution are implied in the articulation of dissolution – which gives the verse force and consequence, a dramatic intimation that something fundamental is at stake.

Much has been made of MacNeice's idea of poetic structure, in relation to the parable-like verse. In his essay 'Experiences with Images', he explained that, since *Autumn Journal*:

I have been eschewing the news-reel and attempting a stricter kind of drama which largely depends upon structure. On analysis . . . this structural tightening-up seems to involve four things: (1) the selection of – or perhaps the being selected by – a single theme which itself is a strong symbol, (2) a rhythmical pattern which holds that theme together, (3) syntax (a more careful ordering of sentences, especially in relation to the verse pattern), and (4) a more structural use of imagery.⁵⁵

This emphasis on 'structural tightening-up' can, I think, distract from how brilliantly irregular much of the late poetry is. In itself, MacNeice's statement arguably describes an overly smooth, controlled and thus potentially boring sense of poetic structure. Indeed, 'Experience with Images' was published in 1949, and therefore partially explains the diffuse flatness of the early Fifties long poems. But then again, the tight structure of the successful late, short lyrics is unquestionably central to their all-important compression and tautness. It would seem that this focused regulation of structure comes to life when it embraces disorder.

Writing about MacNeice's 'non-structural imagery', Terence Brown argues:

Images float free from poems, bright, particular, unrelated to the structures which they fracture, to suggest the independence, the nominal nature, of the sense impressions they capture. The poems' structures fragment to suggest a sceptical distrust of even those poems' own organisation. Such poems suggest the plural disorganisation of an experience which refuses to be captured completely in a poem, in a structural form'.⁵⁶

What seems fascinating is how, in the tightly structured late poems, a similar effect is registered. The poems are coherently, even meticulously, organized yet their careful arrangement serves to generate derangement: their organisation is firmly given but troublesome; their structural form captures precisely a plural disorganisation of experience which remains beyond rational comprehension. The late style reaches its peak when MacNeice's line,

rhythm, syntax, rhymes and repetitions work in concert, but more so, when their extraordinary orchestration bewilders with purposive glitches and dissonance.

It therefore seems pertinent to end by looking closer at this uncanny prosody in action. 'All Over Again', written in 1959 and placed as the last poem in *Solstices*, is in many ways the crown of MacNeice's work from the Fifties. Counterpointing the darkness of much of the book, it brings things to a close with a strikingly bright shift in tone, while, unpunctuated and in long, loosely hexameter lines, it also brings the book's formal adventurousness to a rousing climax. In many ways, 'All Over Again' is a summation of MacNeice's many haunted love poems. Its opening lines are saturated with nostalgic enchantment. And yet, the poem's rhythmic swoon is not sustained throughout the poem. What begins almost as song becomes difficult to read aloud:

As if I had known you for years drink to me only if
Those frontiers had never changed on the mad map of the years
And all our tears were earned and this were the first cliff
From which we embraced the sea and these were the first words
We spread to lure the birds that nested in our day
As if it were always morning their dawn-song theirs and ours
And waking no one else me and you only now
Under the brow of a blue and imperturbable hill
Where still time stands and plays his bland and hemlock pipe
And the ripe moment tugs yet declines to fall and all
The years we had not met forget themselves in this
One kiss ingathered world and outward rippling bell
To the rim of the cup of the sky and leave it only there
Near into far blue into blue all over again
Notwithstanding unique all over all again
Of which to speak requires new fires of the tongue some trick
Of the light in the dark of the muted voice of the turning wild
World yet calm in her storm gay in her ancient rocks
To preserve today one kiss in this skybound timeless cup
Nor now shall I ask for anything more of future or past
This being last and first sound sight on eyes and ears
And each long then and there suspended on this cliff
Shining and slicing edge that reflects the sun as if
This one Between were All and we in love for years.⁵⁷

MacNeice has planted some kinks and wrinkles to trouble the tongue. The poem's song-like cadence becomes de-tuned: it seems to pick up radio static halfway through.

To be sure, an ardent sonority presides. And yet, the buckling of its flow subtly distorts the overall tone and timbre. MacNeice makes heavy use of enjambment, so that many of the clauses of the poem's long lines are spooled over into the next. This is sometimes done with super-sinuuous fluency but, at times, it is disjunctive. Meanwhile, on several occasions, there is a tongue-tripping rhythmic breakdown mid-line. And these two factors are at the nub of the poem: why it takes a degree of will and effort to hold it together. MacNeice has created a beguiling but subjective experience for the reader. As one begins to re-read 'All Over Again', it is difficult to know how it is going to run. The experience is different on each reading. Sometimes it seems to unravel, but at other times it almost burns with resplendence.

Throughout his career, MacNeice constantly manipulated rhyme as a motor of rhythm, and 'All Over Again' constitutes a high point in this regard. The poem repeatedly rhymes over the point of enjambment, so that an end-word frequently rhymes with a word near the beginning of the next line. And this gives a wave-like momentum to the lines, creating the poem's crucial 'he's lost it; oh, no, he's got it back again' sensation. Meanwhile, the end-rhyme 'cliff' / 'if' over the penultimate two lines creates a reversed echo of the 'if' / 'cliff' end-rhyme from the poem's beginning, while the end-rhyme of 'ears' and 'years' at the poem's conclusion further echo back to the 'years' and 'tears' of its opening, adding to the poem's 'back to where we started only different' effect.

While such devices create fluency, this becomes distorted, here and there, by a slow spondee over the caesura: 'World yet calm in her storm gay in her ancient rocks'. In other places, an iambic trot at the end of a line crashes into two trochees at the beginning of the next ('voice of the turning wild / World yet calm in her storm'). This is particularly noticeable because, elsewhere, the poem's rhyming has set up an expectation of flow precisely at the point of enjambment. Other lines are slightly skewed by bearing the weight of an extra stress, creating a wobble in the rhythmic continuity, for example: 'Notwithstanding unique all over all again', and 'This being last and first sound sight on eyes and ears'. Then again, this has been clearly manipulated to occur at some of the poem's crucial moments.

By such prosodic means, the poem creates its double effect of sonority and elusive malformation. In many ways, this is a poem of clichés, especially within the context of MacNeice's own oeuvre. As such, the poem seems to be playing a game with its own generic phrasing, as if searching out the limits of what it can get away with. There can be little doubt that a large part of its appeal stems from its atmosphere of wistful entrancement. And instant recognition is crucial to its nostalgic ambience, partially secured by the opening echo of Ben

Jonson's 'Song To Celia' ('Drink to me only with thine eyes / And I will pledge with mine; / Or leave a kiss within the cup, / And I'll not ask for wine), itself made popular when set to music in the eighteenth century.⁵⁸ But familiarity also comes to 'All Over Again' from a dizzying remix of images from MacNeice's own earlier lyrics. It practically reads as a sequel to 'Meeting Point': its 'rippling bell' finally lets the bell that was 'silent in the air', in the earlier poem, ring out.⁵⁹ The poem also echoes 'The Heated Minutes' ('If you were only here / Among these rocks'),⁶⁰ as well as 'The Brandy Glass' ('Only let it form within his hands once more - / The moment cradled like a brandy glass').⁶¹

This return to archetypes makes 'All Over Again' sound like a coda to all MacNeice's love poems. And it is in this context that the opening two words prove most potent: 'As if'. On the 'As if' effect, Edna Longley argues that, as the poem's clauses swell out, 'we are seduced into accepting the conditional as the truly indicative'. This, Longley suggests, is key to the dreamlike quality of the poem: 'Suspension of the laws of time is dramatized by virtual suspension of that rule of grammar which requires a main statement.'⁶² But the 'As if' effect also creates a subtle edge of scepticism, which adds to the poem's faint aura of disturbance. In this sense, the 'As if' clause is potentially devastating: 'As if I had known you' will always suggest, deep down, 'Although I have never known you'.

In many of MacNeice's last poems, the future recedes and the present breaks down into a mortuary of empty signs and the labyrinthine phantoms of the past. 'All Over Again' seems to be subtly, structurally infected by this imprisonment within an endless process of recycling. The poem's bright warmth is softly pallid by the self-diminishment of its conditional nature. The manner in which MacNeice's 'Again' shatters the finality of his 'Over' underlines his kinship with Samuel Beckett. But nevertheless, to the extent that formal circularity becomes one of MacNeice's central tropes, the swooping fervour of 'All Over Again' provides one of his most redemptive takes on it.

In certain respects, 'All Over Again' echoes MacNeice's 'Snow': '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'.⁶³ 'All Over Again' similarly opens out to multiple senses towards its conclusion: 'last and first sound sight on eyes and ears'. Moreover, just as 'Snow' ends 'between', 'All Over Again' ends imagining 'This one Between were All'. Writing on 'Snow', Edna Longley locates its sense of being 'between' at the heart of MacNeice's poetic, in what she calls his 'dialectic between conjunction and disjunction'.⁶⁴ And one might say that the deregulated order, the oddly skewed balance, of 'All Over

Again', constitutes one of MacNeice's most vivid and indelible soundings-out of this knife-edged simultaneity of connection and separation, completion and negation. The poem attempts to make the moment of meeting between lovers all consuming. But, of course, this is still precluded by the (repeated) 'as if'; and the two states, the two words, remain apart: 'Between' and 'All' forever riven by difference. As such, a cold irony is coated in affirmative colour. Yet 'All Over Again' stands as one of MacNeice's most abiding attempts to let emotive musicality drown out irony, as the poem attempts to hoodwink sense through sound, attempting to create the illusion of consummation through the sensual animation of its own moment, its own poetic performance.

As in other parable style poems, MacNeice here pares language and imagery down to an archetypal core, so that a sly surface simplicity belies an undertow of complexity. Each image or clause in 'All Over Again' has little particularized depth. Instead, the poem's propulsive prosody sweeps forward so that the meaning or message is almost drowned out by the sound, as the language becomes a vessel of driven energy. However, the poem's Edenic motifs and Romantic rhetoric also create a kind of aura, along with instant recognizability. As such, the nature of the poem's dreamtime language is aesthetically compelling: bearing at once a film-like haze and insubstantiality, but also a core of deeply charged emotive content, which is at once fuelled with personal intensity, yet which is also oddly de-individuated to take on an emblematic power. But the poem's ultimate balance comes from its marriage of form and sentiment, as MacNeice pushes the State of One-ness and the State of Between-ness preternaturally close. As if by magic, in the moment of the poem's performance, they seem to interweave. Yet, of course, in the poem's aftermath they remain apart. That momentary illusion of their fleeting fusion, both a beginning and an end, utterly depends upon the musicality of the entire poem. And to relive the moment, we must begin all over again.

In such ways, MacNeice's late poems emphatically mess around with one's sense of time, and thus, ultimately, with one's sense of the fabric and texture, the solidity and stability, of reality. The following quotation gives an insightful analysis of their style:

[T]he breakdown of temporality suddenly releases this present of time from all the activities and intentionalities that might focus it and make it a space of praxis; thereby isolated, that present suddenly engulfs the subject with indescribable vividness, a materiality of perception properly overwhelming. . . . This present of the world or material signifier comes before the subject with heightened intensity, bearing a mysterious charge of

affect, here described in the negative terms of anxiety and loss of reality, but which one could just as well imagine in the positive terms of euphoria, a high, an intoxicatory or hallucinogenic intensity.⁶⁵

While this passage, I think, illuminates the 'dark sayings' of MacNeice's parable poems, it is in fact taken from Fredric Jameson's essay 'The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism'. In turn, this suggests how MacNeice's late poetry represents to us, in vivid form, Jameson's sense of the realities of our contemporary culture, which, he claims:

has finally succeeded in transcending the capacities of the individual human body to locate itself, to organize its immediate surroundings perceptually, and cognitively to map its position in a mappable external world. It may now be suggested that this alarming disjunction point between the body and its built environment . . . can itself stand as the symbol and analogon of that even sharper dilemma which is the incapacity of our minds, at least at present, to map the great global multinational and decentered communicational network in which we find ourselves caught as individual subjects.⁶⁶

Of course, it is a push to claim MacNeice as a prophet of postmodernity, but the intoxicating and troubling force of his late verse nonetheless vibrates loudly through our deeply vexed present.

NOTES

1. Austin Clarke, *Collected Poems* (Manchester: Carcanet, 2008).
2. Patrick Kavanagh, *Collected Poems* (London: Penguin, 2005). For a recent discussion of the 'noo pomes', see John Goodby, "'In Blinking Blankness": The Last Poems', in *Patrick Kavanagh*, ed. by Stan Smith (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 2009), pp.145–62.
3. For a comparison of Kavanagh and MacNeice, see Alan Gillis, "'Ireland is Small Enough": Louis MacNeice and Patrick Kavanagh', in *A Companion to Irish Literature, Volume Two*, ed. Judith M. Wright (Oxford: Blackwell, 2010), pp.159–75.
4. The influence of MacNeice on Larkin is newly discussed by Stephen Regan, "'Coming up England by a different line": Louis MacNeice and Philip Larkin', in *Incorrigibly Plural: Louis MacNeice and his Influence*, ed. by Fran Brearton and Edna Longley (Manchester: Carcanet, 2012).
5. Michael Longley, 'Introduction', *Louis MacNeice: Poems Selected by Michael Longley* (London: Faber and Faber, 2001), p.x.
6. Jon Stallworthy, *Louis MacNeice*, new ed. (London: Faber and Faber, 1996), p.415.
7. Michael Longley, 'Introduction', *Louis MacNeice: Poems Selected by Michael Longley* (London: Faber and Faber, 2001), p.x.
8. Louis MacNeice, *Selected Letters of Louis MacNeice*, ed. by Jonathan Allison (London: Faber and Faber, 2010), pp.561–2.
9. Louis MacNeice, *Collected Poems*, ed. by Peter McDonald (London: Faber and Faber, 2007), p.793.

10. Edna Longley, *Louis MacNeice: A Study* (London: Faber and Faber, 1988), p.115.
11. Louis MacNeice, 'An Alphabet of Literary Prejudices' (1948), in *Selected Literary Criticism of Louis MacNeice*, ed. by Alan Heuser (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1987), p.143.
12. MacNeice, *Selected Letters*, p.572.
13. MacNeice, *Collected Poems*, p.793.
14. Peter McDonald, *Louis MacNeice: The Poet in His Contexts* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991), p.171.
15. Longley, *Louis MacNeice: A Study*, p.117.
16. Louis MacNeice, *The Poetry of W. B. Yeats* (1941), 2nd edn (London: Faber and Faber, 1967), p.26.
17. McDonald, *Louis MacNeice: The Poet in His Contexts*, p.153.
18. Al Alvarez, 'Lament for a Maker', *The New Statesman*, 11 December 1954, 794. Cited in Stallworthy, *Louis MacNeice*, p.411.
19. Stallworthy, *Louis MacNeice*, p.414.
20. MacNeice, 'Day of Renewal', *Collected Poems*, p.349.
21. MacNeice, *Collected Poems*, p.392.
22. Clair Wills, *That Neutral Island: A Cultural History of Ireland During World War II* (London: Faber and Faber, 2007), p.77.
23. MacNeice, *Collected Poems*, p.172, p.536.
24. In *The Poetry of W. B. Yeats*, MacNeice had declared: 'The faith in the *value* of living is a mystical faith. The pleasure in bathing or dancing, in colour or shape, is a mystical experience ...', p.16.
25. MacNeice, *Collected Poems*, p.388.
26. MacNeice, *Collected Poems*, p.579.
27. MacNeice, *Collected Poems*, p.523.
28. MacNeice, *Collected Poems*, p.515.
29. MacNeice, *Collected Poems*, p.509.
30. Terence Brown, *The Literature of Ireland: Culture and Criticism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), pp.163–4.
31. MacNeice, *Selected Letters*, p.176.
32. MacNeice, 'House on a Cliff', *Collected Poems*, p.516.
33. MacNeice, *Collected Poems*, p.342, p.335.
34. MacNeice, *Collected Poems*, p.318.
35. MacNeice, *Collected Poems*, p.332.
36. Louis MacNeice, *Varieties of Parable* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1965), p.22.
37. MacNeice, *Varieties of Parable*, p.9.
38. MacNeice, *Varieties of Parable*, p.28.
39. MacNeice, *Varieties of Parable*, p.2.
40. McDonald, *Louis MacNeice: The Poet in His Contexts*, p.171.
41. MacNeice, *Varieties of Parable*, p.8.
42. MacNeice, *Varieties of Parable*, p.27.
43. MacNeice, 'The Burnt Bridge', *Collected Poems*, p.514.
44. MacNeice, *Collected Poems*, p.501.
45. Christopher Caudwell, *Illusion and Reality: A Study of the Sources of Poetry* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1946), p.155.
46. MacNeice, 'Apple Blossom', *Collected Poems*, p.527.
47. MacNeice, 'Solstice', *Collected Poems*, p.544.
48. MacNeice, *Collected Poems*, p.560.
49. MacNeice, *Collected Poems*, pp.447–8.
50. MacNeice, *Collected Poems*, p.515.

51. MacNeice, *Collected Poems*, p.511.
52. MacNeice, *Collected Poems*, p.516.
53. Edna Longley, *Louis MacNeice: A Study*, p.127.
54. MacNeice, *Collected Poems*, p.561.
55. MacNeice, *Selected Literary Criticism*, pp.161–2.
56. Terence Brown, *Louis MacNeice: Sceptical Vision* (Dublin: Macmillan, 1975), p.129.
57. MacNeice, *Collected Poems*, pp.572–3.
58. Ben Jonson, 'Song to Celia', *The Complete Poems* (London: Penguin, 1981), p.106.
59. MacNeice, *Collected Poems*, p.183.
60. MacNeice, *Collected Poems*, p.59.
61. MacNeice, *Collected Poems*, p.92.
62. MacNeice, *Collected Poems*, pp.219–20.
63. MacNeice, *Collected Poems*, p.24.
64. Edna Longley, *The Living Stream: Literature and Revisionism in Ireland* (Newcastle: Bloodaxe, 1994), pp.258–62.
65. Fredric Jameson, 'Postmodernism, or The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism', *The Jameson Reader*, ed. by Michael Hardt and Kathi Weeks (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000), p.210.
66. Fredric Jameson, 'The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism', p.223.