

Irish Neutrality: Louis MacNeice's Poetic Politics at the Outset of "The Emergency"

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Abstract: *This article builds upon previous scholarship attuned to Ireland's complex position as a neutral state during the Second World War ("The Emergency"), and which points out Louis MacNeice's hostility towards the Irish government's official stance. It does so by looking at "The Closing Album" as a political lyric critiquing Irish neutrality's isolationist and damaging effects and shows how the poem – in the act of critiquing neutrality – asserts the modern poet's position as an emotionally invested political spokesman. I argue that the nation's political goals were irreconcilable with postcolonial artistic aims: Irish writers were intent on constructing an image of Irishness that was not dictated by British coloring and was exportable through the medium of their art, while the government aimed at becoming a self-sufficient, sovereign nation. This split between politician and artist during The Emergency ushers in a modern Irish poetry that is at once political and aesthetic.*

"No man is an island, entire of itself; every man is a piece of the continent, a part of the main; if a clod be washed away by the sea, Europe is the less...any man's death diminishes me, because I am involved in mankind [...]"

– John Donne, "Meditation XVII"

"Ireland affirms its devotion to the ideal of peace and friendly co-operation amongst nations founded on international justice and morality."

– Bunreacht na hÉireann (Constitution of Ireland) 1937

Article 29.1

In 1893, W.B. Yeats published a lecture titled "Nationality and Literature." In it he highlighted the distinctions between "epic" and "lyric" cultures, suggesting that Ireland leaned towards the epic. David Dwan (2004) explains Ireland's position according to Yeats's distinctions, "Fundamentally at odds with its own epoch, modern Ireland stood poised to restore a classical integrity to experience, introducing a social, moral and aesthetic coherence that had been lost to modernity." (201) Essentially Yeats was objectifying Ireland as part of a larger epic culture that took shape from connections to

earlier Gaelic and Celtic traditions; whereas a lyric culture would be significantly more subjective, allowing for a politicized poet. Forty-six years later, in 1939, Louis MacNeice published “The Closing Album,” which coincided with the year of Yeats’s death, the inauguration of World War II, and Ireland’s declaration of neutrality. At the time of publication, Ireland was still struggling to establish itself as a sovereign nation when revolutionary and statesman Eamonn de Valera’s declaration of neutrality created a decisive break from Britain. 1939 marks a shift from epic to lyric in Irish culture and modern poetry. Yeats, until about 1914, saw Ireland as a nation of various peoples and scattered folklore which he, the heroic poet-genius, had gathered into an objective national identity. MacNeice and other poets of the 1930s, who became known as “The Tragic Generation,” insisted that lyric and epic traditions coalesce in the modern poet: a common man who invoked personal emotion and intellectual awareness to aid society.

Although critics have previously explored Ireland’s complex position as a neutral state during the Second World War, and pointed out MacNeice’s hostility towards the Irish government’s official stance, they have not yet looked at “The Closing Album” as a political lyric critiquing Irish neutrality’s isolationist and damaging effects or shown how the poem, in the act of critiquing neutrality, asserts the modern poet’s position as an emotionally invested political spokesman – thus realizing the role of the lyric poem in the heightened awareness of modern intellectual poetry. I argue that the nation’s political goals were irreconcilable with postcolonial artistic aims: Irish writers were intent on constructing an image of Irishness that was not dictated by British coloring and was exportable through the medium of their art, while the government aimed at becoming a self-sufficient, sovereign nation. Finally, I argue that the split between politician and artist ushers in a modern Irish poetry that is at once political and aesthetic.

In 1946 Arthur Griffith argued in a public address recorded by *Irish Times* editor R.M. Smyllie, “The British had built a paper wall around Ireland; on the inside they painted what they wanted the Irish to know about the rest of the world, on the outside what they wanted the rest of the world to know about Ireland.” (317)

At the outset of the Second World War, Eamon de Valera’s foreign policy reinforced the paper wall when the state declared its official, neutral position. Ireland installed censorship laws that forbade any mention of the War in Irish news and masked any global implications of the war by calling it “The Emergency.” Surely Ireland’s recently won independence from the British Empire influenced the government to divorce its foreign policy from that of Britain to suggest independence and sovereignty, and as Patrick Keating (1984) points out, “A policy of neutrality embeds nationalism and self-determination, that is, the desire of the nation to assert its separate cultural identity, independent statehood, and sovereignty against a hostile international environment.” (7) Problems arose when Ireland’s position in this global conflict became a domestic conflict: a *tête à tête* between politicians and poets, each group focused on two different halves of the same precarious whole. De Valera’s government (Fianna Fáil) was mainly interested in creating a sovereign nation that could sustain itself on domestic products thus ceasing to rely on

British imports, and “Irish politicians never lost sight of the vital importance of establishing sovereignty by maintaining neutrality.” (Foster 560). If politicians were blinded to the bleak picture of Ireland’s position in the post-war community, the mid-century Irish poets – commonly referred to as “the tragic generation” – clearly saw that domestic agricultural, economic, and political crises loomed. Patrick Kavanagh, a contemporary of MacNeice, who was “acutely conscious of the realities of Irish life, overwhelms the reader of [his] work with a sense of desolation of a rural existence in Ireland.” (Brown 175).

Ireland’s tenuous situation during the Second World War could be described in both geographic and cultural/political terms: as an island – disastrously close to the conflict (and the possibility of invasion), yet protected by its placement west of England – and as a postcolonial state. The government’s constant fear was reappropriation into the United Kingdom. De Valera (1946) confirmed, “In a sense, the Government of a nation that proposes to be neutral in a war of this sort, has problems much more delicate and much more difficult of solution even than the problems that arise for a belligerent.” (8). For de Valera, Irish neutrality was less an act of isolationism than an attempt to establish national sovereignty; as Elizabeth Bowen called it, “Éire’s first *free* self-assertion” (italics original). (Lane and Clifford 12). But opposing such “free self-assertion” was article 29.1 of the Bunreacht na hÉireann (the majority of which was penned by de Valera himself), which argued that Ireland’s foreign policy should be devoted to international peace, justice, and morality.

In “The Aesthetics of Irish Neutrality,” Clair Wills (2004) points to why these ideas are opposed, noting that a declaration of neutrality explicitly rejects article 29.1. She writes, “One of the most striking aspects of [‘The Emergency’], and the most damaging in the long run, was de Valera’s refusal to acknowledge – publicly, at any rate – the moral dimensions of the war. He never appeared to see the war in broad terms of European morality but concentrated on Ireland’s destiny within a domestic framework far removed from the struggle against Nazi Germany.” (123). Willis also argues that de Valera’s stance suggests that “Ireland should be neutral, but individuals don’t need to be, as though public and private aspects of the self can be neatly disentangled.” (124). De Valera most forcefully articulated this split on September 2, 1939 in an address to the Dail:

We, like other peoples, have, as individuals, each one of us, our sympathies in struggles of a kind like the present. In fact, as war is a great human tragedy, as wars are initiated usually for no slight reason, there is generally some fundamental cause of sufficient magnitude to make nations resort to the arbitrament of force, and so it is only natural that, as human beings, we should judge the situation, each one of us, and, having formed a judgment, sympathise with one side or the other. I know that in this country there are sympathies, very strong sympathies, in regard to the present issues, but I do not think that anybody, no matter what his feelings might be, would suggest that the Government policy, the official policy of the State, should be other than what the Government suggests. (De Valera 9)

This declaration of neutrality, despite individual sympathies, was a product of what I will refer to as island syndrome: the island community perceives itself as impervious to outside observation. In his 1946 article “Unneutral Neutral Éire,” R. M. Smyllie noted, “Éire was nonbelligerent – that is to say, she was not officially concerned in the war, although so many of her children served the Allied cause; but she was never neutral in the generally accepted sense of the term. Government and people alike realized from the start that the country’s fate was linked up inextricably with that of Great Britain....” (324). Why then the show of neutrality?

Some have suggested that Ireland actually helped the Allied forces more as a neutral country than she could have as a belligerent. Ireland’s neutrality took two forms: what Patrick Keating has called “disarmed neutrality” and what Karin Gilland has labeled “military neutrality.” Neal Jesse (2006) explains, “Ireland’s neutrality is peculiar in two aspects. First, Ireland has not in the past nor does it now employ a credible defense of its territory. Second, Ireland has not historically been impartial. During World War II... Ireland was clearly pro-western.” (15). Ireland was in no position to declare allegiance to the Allies because it would have been more susceptible to German invasion. The picture on the inside of the wall was split between an inward-looking identity construction by the government and individuals trying their best to “see” what was going on beyond the Irish shores. On the outside of the wall, across the channel, and later across the Atlantic, friends of Ireland were becoming increasingly frustrated with Ireland’s seeming lack of concern. Ireland’s position in the post-war world was taken up by “the tragic generation” and the poet’s role in modern politics became MacNeice’s obsession.

His version of the modern poet with an emotional and intellectual agenda engaged with the political realities of the state. “Man is a political animal,” he writes in “The Poet in England To-day: A Reassessment.”² What MacNeice reassesses is his pre-war view (which appeared in his 1938 essay *Modern Poetry*) that “The writer / to-day should be not so much the mouthpiece of a / community (for then he will only tell it what it knows / already) as its conscience, its critical faculty, its / generous instinct.” (*MP* iii). However, “recent events having suggested that there are too many slips between certain means and certain ends, the poet is tending to fall back on his *own* conscience” (emphasis added). (113).³ MacNeice, by 1940, seemed to champion the aesthetic, emotional, socially detached “everydayness” of the lyric form over the practical, politically-minded principles of the epic. Not so, in fact, as Ben Howard (1991) offers, “Like any sensitive writer of the thirties, MacNeice felt the pressure to bring poetic imagination to bear upon social and political realities.” (68). MacNeice amalgamates emotion and intellect by allowing the individual voice of the common man to penetrate political theory as is evident in poems like: “The Closing Album,” “Neutrality,” “Bottleneck,” “Babel,” “Autumn Journal,” “Snow,” and “Carrickfergus.”

As an Northern Irish poet living abroad (mainly in London where he was hired by the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) in 1941 to produce radio programs supporting the Allied Forces in the war effort) he essentially occupies a liminal position as an Irishman beyond the pale of Irish neutrality. He writes in the final line of

“Snow”(1935), “there is more than glass between the snow and the huge roses,” MacNeice occupied this space as a politically-minded lyric poet critiquing Ireland’s use of neutrality to gain sovereignty. “The Closing Album” is an emotionally-charged criticism of de Valera’s government that argues for Ireland’s need to focus on its place in international politics. That poem is the maturation of his 1938 “Autumn Journal XXIII” which suggests MacNeice’s opposition to the neutrality proposed by de Valera as early as 1927:⁴ “Now I must make amends.../ I have thrown away the roots of will and conscience, / Now I must look for both.../ Soon or late the delights of self-pity must pall.../ When doing nothing we find we have gained nothing” (ll. 80-100). MacNeice employs the personal pronoun as a stepping stone to the more important first person plural, which suggests a move from the personal meditation of lyric to a collective emotional understanding of Ireland’s situation. He asserts that yes, the Irish must look inward for a self-image, and that they should find a moral conscience concerned with international justice and global cooperation, who should – in effect – pull them off the fence of neutrality. “The Closing Album” is that very process. MacNeice divided “The Closing Album” into five sections: “Dublin,” “Cushendun,” “Sligo and Mayo,” “Galway,” and “V.”

*Dublin*⁵

Like the autobiographical “Carrickfergus,” (1936) a poem that calls attention to the speaker’s sense of alienation, *Dublin* positions MacNeice as an outsider. He begins with a catalogue of Irish heroes, the bronze statues of whom bear testament to domestic heroes who agitated for Catholic emancipation and repeal of the union and set the domestic tone of the poem. Admiral, Lord Nelson watches Ireland assert her independence from atop his pillar in the middle of O’Connell Street:

Grey brick upon brick,
 Declamatory bronze
 On somber pedestals –
 O’Connell, Grattan, Moore –
 And the brewery tugs and the swans
 On the balustraded stream
 And the bare bones of a fanlight
 Over a hungry door
 And the air soft on the cheek
 And porter running from the taps
 With a head of yellow cream
 And Nelson on his pillar
 Watching his world collapse. (13)

Here the Irish eye looks inward and uncovers MacNeice's bitter attitudes towards Irish politics. Whereas the first stanza presents the landscape of past heroes and domestic hardship, MacNeice quickly paints a different picture on Dublin's paper-walled boundary: "This was never my town, / I was not born nor bred / Nor schooled here and she will not / Have me alive or dead" (14-17). As the poem continues, Dublin is depicted as isolationist, segregated from the rest of rural Ireland as an uncaring urban space with its own history, its own problems:

But yet she holds my mind
With her seedy elegance,
With her gentle veils of rain
And all her ghosts that walk
And all that hide behind
Her Georgian façades –
The catcalls and the pain,
The glamour of her squalor,
The bravado of her talk. (18-26)

Domestic heroes in the first stanza gives way to domestic defeat in the image of the once great Georgian mansions that have been transformed into glamorized façades that hide tenement housing. Dublin is the microcosm of Ireland – at once Irish and English, glamorous and steeped in squalor. It is a city of boundaries and domestic problems. But just as Dublin cannot forget its national connections, Ireland cannot forget her international responsibilities. In the following lines MacNeice reminds his readers of the nineteenth-century land acts, the War for Independence, and the Civil-War – the internal conflicts served to invoke terror. The image of war should persuade MacNeice's audience that they have a moral responsibility as a nation to help defend the rights of their European neighbors:

...the mist on the Wicklow hills
Is close, as close
As the peasantry were to the landlord,
As the Irish to the Anglo-Irish,
As the killer is close one moment
To the man he kills,
Or as the moment itself
Is close to the next moment. (31-38)

MacNeice has laid the foundation of his anxiety: the closeness of war. Unconvinced by the Irish nation's opinion that the war was not their affair, he has set out as a rhetorician pleading to the emotional and intelligent capacities of his contemporaries. He sets his stage – props as close "as one moment to the next" – to illustrate that Ireland is not as far removed from the war as it likes to consider itself, and "the poet is once again to make his

response as a whole,” “reacting with both intelligence and emotion...to experiences.” (MP 29-30).

But O the days are soft,
Soft enough to forget
The lesson better learnt,
The bullet on the wet
Streets, the crooked deal,
The steel behind the laugh,
The Four Courts burnt. (45-51)

Again *Dublin* asks the reader to remember the internal conflicts of not so long ago when days were hard, when the conflict engulfed their own streets. Remember the Easter Rising, the War for Independence, the Civil-War; remember the ancient conquests of Dane and Saxon – now beware of the Germans who are poised on the doorstep.

The section ends, “O greyness run to flower, / Grey stone, grey water / And brick upon grey brick” (61-63). Greyness will run throughout the poem as a “neutral” leitmotif. It is neither white nor black (read Allied forces or Axis of power) – nor is it void of either, but rather an amalgamation; neutrality is a dangerous position because of this very fact. It occupies a state of betweenness that was detrimental to Ireland’s foreign policy objectives in the immediate postwar era: “The ending of partition was clearly preeminent, closely followed by Ireland’s need to restore favourable economic relations with the United Kingdom. The third objective was the restoration of friendly relations with the United States, and the fourth and final was membership of the United Nations.” (Raymond 35) Had Ireland remained purely and completely neutral (a seemingly impossible task given their history, proximity, and moral investments) perhaps there would have been fewer fences to mend and initiation into the UN would have been a smoother process.⁶ MacNeice’s poem points to the damaging effects of neutrality, and subsequently asserts the new role of the modern poet “as informer, critic, and entertainer, who ‘uses with precision, tools which lie ready to everyone’s hand.’ The new poet should be ‘synoptic and elastic in his sympathies,’ and he should cultivate social awareness, allowing himself to be ‘penetrated by great events.’” (Howard 66).

Cushendun

Issues of veiling and secrecy arise in the second section of “The Closing Album.” MacNeice employs words that suggest opacity: “clouds,” “night,” “walled,” “forgetfulness,” “curtains,” and “box,” all of which go into the construction of a wall that blocks the outsider’s gaze in and the insider’s gaze out:

Limestone and basalt and a whitewashed house
With passages of great stone flags

And a walled garden with plums on the wall
And a bird piping in the night. (68-71)

This wall represents the neutrality wall built around Ireland during the second World War and suggests that de Valera – author of article 29.1 – forgot his devotion to international justice and morality as MacNeice reminds the reader in the closing stanzas of *Cushendun*:

Forgetfulness: brass lamps and copper jugs
And home-made bread and the smell of turf or flax
And the air a glove and the water lathering easy
And convolvulus in the hedge.

Only in the dark green room beside the fire
With the curtains drawn against the winds and waves
There is a little box with a well-bred voice:
What a place to talk of War. (72-79)

The walled garden and the secret room suggest an individualism and nationalism that is critiqued by the section's concluding line, "What a place to talk of War." As "The Closing Album" asserts, "a war of this sort" should not be locked behind shuttered windows in a "little box." Of the four geographical areas covered in "The Closing Album," *Cushendun* is the only location of Northern Ireland – an Allied force fighting under the British Flag. MacNeice is agitated that this beautiful, simple town must fear the blitz and invasion, but "dear, dirty, Dublin" exists in ignorant bliss.

During "The Emergency," the Irish Republic enforced censorship through the office of Mr. Frank Aiken, Minister for Coordination of Defensive Measures. Smyllie writes in 1946, "the lengths to which the Irish censorship went to maintain a completely colorless neutrality often made its activities ludicrous...Everybody agreed that some form of censorship was necessary in order to preserve neutrality and the security of the state; but nobody except Mr. Aiken and his staff ever expected that such depths of absurdity would be plumbed." (322-3). In fact, enlistment numbers, obituary notices, and the ethnicity of prominent leaders were withheld by the Irish press.⁷

Cushendun recalls the forgetfulness of *Dublin*, stanza IV of "The Closing Album." Instead of calling forth memories of deception and destruction, MacNeice summons the hearth: sights of copper and brass, the taste of home-made bread, the smell of turf or flax, and the sounds of the wind and of the waves. Serenity juxtaposed with violence predicts "the toppling hour." In *Dublin* war is remembered through statues and landmark battles; in *Cushendun* war is predicted to cover Ireland because the statues of *Dublin* have been forgotten, domestic politics have taken their place. *Sligo* and *Mayo* sees war's approach; *Galway* feels its physical presence, and the concluding Section "V" exposes neutrality's faults. Through each section MacNeice maintains the modern poet's position of "informer, critic, and entertainer."

Sligo and Mayo

In his article, "Neutrality and Commitment," Richard Brown (2005) writes: "While MacNeice never abandoned the notion that (in the words of the much later *Autumn Sequel*) 'Everydayness is good,' the events of 1939 were a significant challenge to the assumption that it was the business of poets to dwell in the everyday. As 'The Coming of War' relates, MacNeice felt September 1939 as a shock to his complacency." (116). The first line of the *Sligo and Mayo* section repeats that "the country was soft" first proposed in *Dublin*, "But O the days are soft, / Soft enough to forget." What follows are five stanzas of an "everydayness" that is ultimately challenged by the imminent "coming of war" in the final stanza of the section. MacNeice presents a Sligo farm scene complete with "turkeys gobbling under sycamore trees," "little distant fields [] sprigged with haycocks," a "roadside cottage," "And pullets pecking the flies from around the eyes of heifers / Sitting in farmyard mud / Among hydrangeas and the falling ear-rings / Of fuchsias red as blood" (1-12). The blood-red flower falling around a complacent barnyard scene casually points toward the coming war; this indirect reference to war is replaced in the final stanza with direct implications of "disarmed neutrality:" "And when the night came down upon the bogland / With all-enveloping wings / The coal-black turfstacks rose against the darkness / Like the tombs of nameless kings" (100-3). MacNeice may be referencing Joyce's Mr. Deasy in *Ulysses* who specifies exactly what nameless kings will lie in those tombs: every Irishman, for "We are all Irish, all kings' sons." (Joyce 31). Night's darkness (the darkness of war) completely envelops the Irish landscape, it does not contain itself to the continent or England nor to Northern Ireland – neutrality, MacNeice suggests, will not protect the Republic; it will make graves for kings.

It may seem as though "The Closing Album" is the sort of pro-Ally propaganda that MacNeice produced for the BBC in the 1940s, however; his position concerning the role of the English poet in the Spanish civil War is analogous to his implicit argument here about the Irish poet's role in the Second World War, suggesting that the poem is less propaganda and more an examination of MacNeice's own moral self-conscience which is apparent in *Modern Poetry*:

Art, though as much conditioned by material factors as anything else, is a manifestation of human freedom. The artist's freedom connotes honesty because a lie, however useful in politics, hampers artistic vision. Systematic propaganda is therefore foreign to the artist in so far as it involves the condoning of lies.

Thus, in the Spanish Civil War some English poets were torn between writing good propaganda (dishonest poetry) and honest poetry (poor propaganda). I believe firmly that in Spain *the balance of right* was on the side of the government; propaganda, however, demands either angels or devils. This means that in the long run a poet must choose between being politically ineffectual and poetically false. For the younger English poets the choice has now been simplified. A poet

adopts a political creed merely as a means to an end. Recent events having suggested that there are too many slips between certain means and certain ends, the poet is tending to fall back on his own conscience. (113)

For the modern Irish poet (as defined by MacNeice) interested in constructing an image of Irishness to use in repainting the paper walls erected by the British Empire, poetry has become less outright propaganda – or a falsification of image – and more scaffolding for identity construction. The modern poet seeks an understanding of his own ideals, which, in the case of MacNeice, align with article 29.1 of the Bunreacht na hÉireann. “The Closing Album” is the medium through which MacNeice’s emotional and intellectual connections to Irish – and international – politics “inform, criticize, and entertain” the reader. Toward the end of *Modern Poetry* MacNeice reinforces the “everydayness” of the artist: “I would have a poet able-bodied, fond of talking, a reader of newspapers, capable of pity and laughter, informed in economics, appreciative of women, involved in personal relationships, actively interested in politics, susceptible to physical impressions.” (*MP* 201). In other words, the poet is an active participant in humanity; he is not merely emotional or strictly intellectual. He is both; he is modern, because the society that the poet represents is both lyric and epic. The final two sections of “The Closing Album,” *Galway* and *V*, will stress the interconnections between the lyric and the epic, the personal and the global.

Galway

Galway presents an image of the Irish landscape, beautiful in its rural simplicity yet already ruined by conflict. The presence of the war is felt here among the Irish peasants, and it is here that the economic fallout between the Irish and Britain will affect the most lives. De Valera, in attempts to make the country self-sufficient, had dictated government funds so that a multitude of vocations were forced to be employed rather than focusing on Ireland’s strengths – oats, barley, and grass for cattle and horse breeding.⁸ Stephen Gwynn (1940) states:

Mr. de Valera’s gravest problem will be that of employment; he has dotted the country with little factories of various kinds, and most of these depend on imports for their raw materials. Will he continue to get these imports so the factories can carry on? That is his agonizing question. Widespread unemployment would mean not only great expense but discontent, and discontent spells danger. (312)

Galway’s opening stanza points toward economic fallout with the UK and the US because of Ireland’s neutral position in the war, “O the crossbones of Galway, / The hollow grey houses, / The rubbish and sewage, / The grass-grown pier, / And the dredger grumbling / All night in the harbour: / The war came down on us here” (104-110). Hollow houses and the rubbish and sewage suggest families and workers had to move on in order to find

employment. The pier is overgrown with grass because of disuse; there were no products to ship. MacNeice is sure to make it clear that Galway's problems are directly connected to the problems of war; it was not physical acts of war (blitz, invasion) that hollowed houses and closed factories, it was policy – a problem brought on by the Irish themselves.

The second stanza of *Galway*, seemingly before stanza one chronologically, shows the reader the quiet simplicity of postcolonial, pre-Emergency Ireland, “Salmon in the Corrib / Gently swaying / And the water combed out / Over the weir / And a hundred swans / Dreaming on the harbour: / The war came down on us here” (111-117). By moving backward through time from the “rubbish and sewage” of stanza one to the “hundred swans dreaming on the harbour” of stanza two, MacNeice stresses the implications of war: this is the fallout, now here is what was affected. The chronologic reversal creates a greater impact because the dark images of war's effects are already in the reader's mind as the second stanza unfolds: presenting “the crossbones of Galway” at the outset allows that image to permeate the entire section.

In “Louis MacNeice: Irony and Responsibility,” Peter McDonald (2003) points to MacNeice's tendency to “undermin[e] the self to complicate and qualify the myth of ‘Ireland.’” (127-8). McDonald's reading of MacNeice is in dialogue with Brown's assertion that, “[MacNeice] reacts against precisely the isolationist nationalism of later Yeats, who supported De Valera's policy of appeasement in the autumn of 1938”. (122-3). I agree that MacNeice was ultimately interested in the image Ireland projects, but I do not think he undermines the self in order to react against Ireland's “isolationist nationalism.” Just as stanza three of *Galway* warns that Ireland is *not* isolated, readers should recall Donne's “Meditation XVII,” “No man is an island, entire of itself.” Ireland will be affected by the war because the war is in England, indeed it is in Northern Ireland, and soon it will spread from county to county and house to house until the entire island is nothing but “rubbish and sewage:” MacNeice thus ends *Galway*, “The night was gay / With the moon's music / But Mars was angry / On the hills of Clare / And September dawned / Upon willows and ruins: / The war came down on us here” (118-124). MacNeice's warning against a political philosophy which argued that neutrality created imperviousness to outside observation (and ostensibly German penetration) leads into section V, which asks questions about the individual as *part of* humanity, the lyric as *part of* the epic.

V

MacNeice's conclusion of “The Closing Album” – the untitled section V – consists of four stanzas, each posing a question. The questions serve to engage the reader, to lift her out of a neutral state as passive observer. The four stanzas of the final section align with the four previous sections of “The Closing Album,” alluding to the inter-connections between individual and society, and between Ireland and international justice: no man, nation, or stanza is an island, entire in itself.

The first two questions ask why “everydayness” should continue:

Why, now it has happened,
Should the clock go on striking to the firedogs
And why should the rooks be blown upon the evening
Like burnt paper in a chimney?

And why should the sea maintain its turbulence,
Its elegance,
And draw a film of muslin down the sand
With each receding wave? (125-132)

Dublin and *Cushendun* juxtapose everyday softness with impending conflict, in both cases illuminating Ireland’s closeness geographically, economically, and morally to the war. Here “everydayness” is juxtaposed with conflict (“now it has happened”). And these two questions stress the urgency and anxiety of the poem’s speaker as the Ireland decided how to deal with a global war that has arrived, suggesting that everydayness had no place in such an “emergency.”

The third stanza addresses the consequences of ignoring the conflict – (re)colonization:

And why, now it has happened,
Should the atlas still be full of the maps of countries
We never shall see again? (133-135)

This question should remind the Irish of the social implications of colonialism. It suggests that Ireland’s neutrality opens the island to invasion from either side: The British thought about invading to regain access to Irish ports, and the Germans were tempted to capture Ireland to use as a staging area for attacks on England. Either invasion could have resulted in recolonization under the British *or* German empire.

With the refrain of *Galway* still fresh in the reader’s mind (“The war came down on us here.”), the final stanza of “The Closing Album” asks:

And why, now it has happened,
And doom all night is lapping at the door,
Should I remember that I ever met you –
Once in another world? (136-139)

The most logical answer is that this is a global conflict that humanity itself has a stake in, there is no “other world.” This final question changes the face of modern war, modern neutrality, and modern poetry. It blurs distinctions between poet and politician; it reveals

the individual in humanity, amalgamating the lyric with the epic; it stresses the role of all nations in global policy, land-locking all islands under the flag of humankind.

The questions that follow my study ask if Louis MacNeice's views on modern poetry and neutrality are still relevant today. Sean O'Faoláin, in an editorial piece from *The Bell* in 1945, remarked on Ireland's post-war relationships with Britain and the United States, "We emerge a little dulled, bewildered, deflated. There is a great leeway to make up, many lessons to be learned, problems to be solved which, in those six years of silence, we did not even allow ourselves to state." (288). But MacNeice did state the problem, and if the final question posed by "The Closing Album" did effectively blur the dichotomies of lyric and epic, individual and collective, artist and politician, then what is the contemporary product? Who is the contemporary producer? It seems that MacNeice's "common man" poet with the heroic quality of calling people to action with words alone is no longer a force in today's global society, but MacNeice has opened the door to the celebrity activist who uses the personal spotlight to illuminate global causes. He states that, "[The modern poet] is grinding an axe or showing off, telling tales about his enemies, flattering his friends. His object is not merely to record a fact but to record a fact *plus and therefore modified* by his own emotional reaction to it..." (MP 197). MacNeice goes on to explain that the "record of a fact" – and the emotional modification of the fact – are necessary components for the modern poet who takes for his subject the political situation of common men. He writes, "...the younger poets today are becoming more direct, focusing their aim on some ideal from the practical world which is also the ideal of many ordinary men." (MP 200). MacNeice's bitterness toward Irish neutrality in the Second World War critiques isolationism and promotes a worldwide community where the individual is responsible to the whole.

Notes

- 1 Terence Brown summarizes the cultural/political divide in *Ireland: A Social and Cultural History* in this manner: "The period 1939-1945, therefore, for most Irish men and women, was not experienced simply as a time when Ireland opted out of history but when her own history and the maintenance of her recently won independence were of primary concern. The cultural isolation of the preceding twenty years was perhaps deepened, but the healing effects on Civil War division in Irish society of a genuine external threat might be set against that in any overall evaluation. For many, the years of the war were simply a continuation of prewar experience, in economically straitened circumstances, with the language, national sovereignty, religion, and protection of Irish distinctiveness as the dominant topics of intellectual and cultural concern in a society still moulded by its essential conservatism, with talk, drink, sport, and other local activities absorbing energies spared from the rigours of daily life" (168).
- 2 *New Republic* 102: 13 (25 March 1940), 412-13; subtitle added from the holograph manuscript (Humanities Research Center Library, University of Texas, Austin).
- 3 This and subsequent references to MacNeice poems are taken from Louis MacNeice, *Collected Poems 1925-1948* (London: Faber and Faber, 1949), 113.
- 4 "In the first debate on foreign policy after Fianna Fail's entry to the Dáil in autumn 1927, De Valera strongly criticized the Cosgrave government's equivocal position on neutrality. But however

much De Valera believed in neutrality, he was equally determined that Ireland should never be used as a base from which any foreign power could attack the United Kingdom. Thus, as early as 1927, he had established the two principles upon which his wartime policy was to be based” (Raymond, 32).

- 5 Hereafter, italicized *Dublin, Cushendun, Sligo, Mayo, and Galway* will refer to the sections of “The Closing Album,” not the actual cities/counties.
- 6 See the Ronan Fanning article, “The Evolution of Irish Foreign Policy,” in *Irish Foreign Policy: “Pandit Nehru, the Prime Minister of another newly independent Dominion, asked the Indian parliament: ‘what does independence consist of? It consists fundamentally and basically of foreign relations. That is the test of independence.’ World War II was the moment when Ireland, like so many other states, had to sit that test, for only then did the British perceive the exercise of Irish independence as a potential threat to their own national interest”* (315).
- 7 See Eunan O’Halpin’s article, “Irish neutrality in the Second World War,” in *European Neutrals and Non-belligerents During the Second World War*: “Ireland’s adherence to neutrality in September 1939 was domestically highly popular. No significant political figure in any party argued against it, and even de Valera’s bitterest enemies saw neutrality both as the litmus test of sovereignty and as the only way of avoiding a civil war. Once the war began, public debate on neutrality and on the course of military affairs abroad was almost completely stifled by the imposition of a remarkably inelastic and thorough press censorship, far stricter than that applied in other neutral states, which made it difficult to publish even the most anodyne remarks in support of one set of belligerents or the other or to question the moral or pragmatic basis of neutrality, which was also used to suppress discussion of domestic economic problems on the grounds that to air such matters would be to imperil national morale, and which even made it impossible for sports reporters to describe the weather conditions at the events they were covering” (290).
- 8 See Gerard Keown’s article, “Creating an Irish Foreign Policy in the 1920s,” in *Irish Foreign Policy*: “Ireland’s insistence on status was not a narrow nationalist preoccupation, however; practical benefits of an economic, political and security nature flowed from the assertion of full sovereignty. For example, the power to conclude separate commercial treaties and appoint trade and diplomatic representatives abroad was seen as being central to the development of a more balanced economy. Government departments did not believe that British embassies would adequately promote the country’s economic interests abroad” (28).

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