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.Louis MacNeice and his influence on contemporary Northern Irish  
poetry

Dave Coates

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## Abstract:

This thesis examines in close detail the influence of Louis MacNeice's work – primarily his poetry but also his critical prose and radio plays – in the poetry of Derek Mahon, Michael Longley, Paul Muldoon and Ciaran Carson. Rather than following a fixed, unified theory of influence, the thesis explores how individual poems contain echoes – either formally, rhythmically, tonally or imagistically – of the elder poet's work.

The thesis shows how the example of a single, shared creative ancestor may manifest in many different ways. For Derek Mahon, MacNeice is present in the question of how an artist may be of use to their community, even (perhaps especially) in a community or society in which the artist is not valued. Mahon's poetry also explores similar existential questions, through a shared interest in the work of Samuel Beckett. For Michael Longley, MacNeice presents a vital example for his war poetry through the poem 'The Casualty', and for his love poetry through 'Mayfly'. As single poems of Longley's reverberate and evolve throughout his oeuvre, so specific poems by MacNeice become touchstones throughout Longley's poetry.

Muldoon's writing seems interested in MacNeice as a symbol as well as an artistic forebear: MacNeice appears as a dramatic persona in one poem, and remnants of his own poems, particularly 'Snow', ghost many of Muldoon's collections. Carson has had a turbulent relationship with MacNeice through his career, and in his early collections this relationship is defined in negative as much as positive: Carson's 'Bagpipe Music' seems a response to and a rebuke of MacNeice's poem of the same name. Later, the creative potential of MacNeice's determination to remain creatively unanchored seems to have been an empowering example.

The thesis considers the matter of influence as far more subtle and contextually sensitive than the psychologically fraught, highly combative depiction in many existing theoretical models. Instead, it is interested in how influence works in practice, in individual case studies.

## Signed Declaration:

This is a signed declaration, that I, Dave Coates, the undersigned, am the author of the thesis; that, unless otherwise stated, all references cited have been consulted by me; that the work of which the thesis is a record has been done by the me, and that it has not been previously accepted for a higher degree.

Signature:

## Dedication and Acknowledgements

*i.m. Donna Jane Coates 1955-2006*

This thesis has happened with the work and support of a humbling number of people.

Omissions are many but necessary, and I hope everyone not specifically named here knows how grateful I am.

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## One: Introduction

This thesis will explore the influence of Louis MacNeice in the work of four contemporary Northern Irish poets: Michael Longley, Derek Mahon, Paul Muldoon and Ciaran Carson. I believe it would make a fair amount of sense to walk the boundaries of these terms before embarking on the thesis proper; the matter of literary influence is no settled thing, and far from uncontroversial. My own conception of influence in these pages does not intend to place MacNeice in an uncomplicated role as forerunner or ancestor, partly because of a belief that art does not benefit from hierarchical systems of authority, and, more mundanely, because I do not believe that this is the lived reality of poems and makers of poems. The four studies that comprise this thesis aim to think of literary influence as a process that takes many forms, and is only rarely easily identified, and that in practice that often the least enlightening examples of literary influence are those which signal themselves openly. In the chapter on Mahon, for instance, the obvious place to start is with Mahon's elegy for MacNeice, 'In Carrowdore Churchyard'<sup>1</sup>. What I found in close study, both of the poem and of Mahon's work at large, is that it is something of an aesthetic outlier. Certainly the poem itself is a conscious, perhaps self-conscious, engagement with, homage to, and imitation of MacNeice's style and content, but how much does that tell us about either poet's aesthetics when it embodies something like an artistic cul-de-sac? A substantial, sustaining relationship between one poet's work and another's may begin with such clear signals and gestures, but an influence that might open to the reader new perspectives and approaches to both the elder poet and the younger, as this study demonstrates, takes forms far more idiosyncratic and difficult to systematise.

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<sup>1</sup> Mahon, *Selected Poems*, 11.

It may also be beneficial to briefly explore a few key attempts to do just that. A great deal has been written, often quite colourfully, in response to Harold Bloom's *The Anxiety of Influence*, which for all its flaws remains a major touchstone in discussions of literary influence, as such worth exploring, however cautiously: as this study will examine in detail, particularly in regards to Ciaran Carson's relationship to MacNeice, not all influence is uncomplicatedly positive. In *The Anxiety of Influence*, Bloom, under the influence of Freud and Nietzsche, outlines an understanding of poetry inextricable from the processes of history:

Poetic history, in this book's argument, is held to be indistinguishable from poetic influence, since strong poets make that history by misreading one another, so as to clear imaginative space for themselves.<sup>2</sup>

Later, he expands upon this conception of strength and individualism:

[E]very poet begins (however "unconsciously") by rebelling more strongly against the consciousness of death's necessity than all other men and women do. [...] The death of poetry will not be hastened by any reader's broodings, yet it seems just to assume that poetry in our tradition, when it dies, will be self-slain, murdered by its own past strength.<sup>3</sup>

In his analysis, poetry that transcends its own anxiety must first mortally overcome its own lineage, before it can truly be itself, however much he acknowledges that 'poetic influence need not make poets less original; as often it makes them more original, though not therefore necessarily better'<sup>4</sup>. Bloom goes on to formalise the six stages of poetic influence

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<sup>2</sup> Bloom, *The Anxiety of Influence*, 5.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid*, 10.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid*, 7.



using Greek terminology: *clinamen* (a swerve away from the strong precursor), *tessera* (a completion or advancement of the precursor's work), *kenosis* (an ostensible emptying-out of the precursor's influence), *daemonizathion* (a creation of an imaginative world ostensibly independent from the precursor's), *askesis* (self-purgation or curtailment to better distance oneself from the precursor), and *apophrades* or return of the dead (consciously opening oneself up to the precursor, 'as though the later poet himself had written the precursor's characteristic work'<sup>5</sup>). In a study of MacNeice's influence on Michael Longley, Terence Brown described this schema as 'an agonistic thing, compact of oedipal stress and straining ambition', a 'heavy-breathing, forced psychodrama'<sup>6</sup>; perhaps successive generations of influence scholars are merely swerving well clear of an overly *strong* precursor. What is most obviously lacking in Bloom's analysis is the possibility that one's forerunners are not merely patriarchs to be toppled, but mentors, colleagues and friends, and that chronology might not be hierarchy. In a study of Yeats, T.S. Eliot explored Yeats' intuition regarding the fluidity of intergenerational affinity and empowerment, noting that 'after becoming unquestionably a master', Yeats remained 'always a contemporary'<sup>7</sup>. Although much fun has been made, quite justifiably, about the melodrama and machismo of *The Anxiety of Influence*, what a student of influence can most gainfully observe about Bloom's work is its over-reliance on systemisation, its ambitions toward a totalising system of legitimate responses to art, and its obsessive placing of theoretical carts before practical horses<sup>8</sup>.

Among more recent studies of influence, Christopher Ricks' *Allusion to the Poets* offers altogether more practically minded explanations for the prevalence of allusion and

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid, 14-6.

<sup>6</sup> Brown, *The Literature of Ireland*, 181.

<sup>7</sup> Eliot, *Selected Prose of T.S. Eliot*, 249.

<sup>88</sup> I acknowledge that this thesis is rather closer to Bloom than I would like in its entirely male cast: should the opportunity arise to turn it into a book, chapters on Leontia Flynn and Sinéad Morrissey will be included.

father-anxiety in, for example, the work of Dryden and Pope. It is noticeable that Ricks' study is not prefaced by a grand manifesto, like Bloom's, but finds its definition in practice, in the very particular circumstances of various poets in their various unique contexts. Ricks notes that, despite Bloom's depiction of Milton as 'the great Inhibitor', both Dryden and Pope found a way to be uninhibited, and that way included their acknowledgement of, and empowerment through, allusion to Milton. Ricks argues that:

By an open recognition of the predicament of the poet as heir, and of the burden of the past, by embracing rather than merely failing to evade the predicament, the poet can be saved by allusion, by being an alert and independent dependant.<sup>9</sup>

Ricks is also insightful in discussing the competing substances and surfaces in the work of Robert Burns, or Rabbie Burns or Robbie Burness, depending on which version of the poet one examines, or which version of the poet has chosen to present. Ricks gives a series of examples of Burns' contemporary critics taking him at face value, such as Thomas Carlyle's 'he is ever clear, simple, true, and glitters with no lustre but his own'<sup>10</sup>, while Allan Cunningham argued:

Burns read Young, Thomson, Shenstone, and Shakespeare; yet there is nothing of Young, Thomson, Shenstone, or Shakespeare about him; nor is there much of the old ballad. His light is of nature, like sunshine, and not reflected.<sup>11</sup>

Ricks retorts:

True, there is about Burns nothing of Young, Thomson, Shenstone, or Shakespeare if by this we mean that no poem by Burns has quite the taste, the smack, of his

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<sup>9</sup> Ricks, *Allusion to the Poets*, 33.

<sup>10</sup> quoted in Ricks, 49.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid*, 48.

predecessors; but there is much of these and other poets about him if we have in mind all that he can call up from them and bring to mind.<sup>12</sup>

Ricks differentiates between what the critic detects in their immediate responses to poetry, in terms of a poem's rhythms, tones, subject matter, and what is revealed by a closer and more sensitive analysis, such as what Ricks provides in his own study. Under his close attention, the presence of Burns' great learning, his deep and grateful sense of indebtedness to peers and predecessors alike, and his instinct that the creation of poetry was not an act of individual but communal achievement, are given their full importance. Ricks implicitly opens up possibilities for a critical understanding of conscious allusion and deeply held influence – one might call it creative empowerment – that values and takes into account the practicalities of living and working as one artist among many.

This will toward openness and alertness, of course, must have its own limits and boundaries, beyond which are factors of diminishing value to understanding the poets under study. Ricks anticipates this in his preface to *Allusion to the Poets*:

[A]lthough to speak of an allusion is always to predicate a source (and you cannot call into play something of which you have never heard), a source may not be an allusion, for it may not be called into play; it may be scaffolding such as went to the building but does not constitute any part of the building.<sup>13</sup>

Paul Muldoon has made something of a habit of pushing precisely such boundaries to breaking point, however, and by a useful coincidence, has written an essay exploring the influences, coincidences and spillages between MacNeice and two of his own predecessors, W.B. Yeats and Robert Frost. In his essay "The Perring Birch: Yeats, Frost and MacNeice",

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid, 48.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid, 3.

he argues that MacNeice's 'The Lake in the Park'<sup>14</sup> is substantially engaged with Yeats' 'Leda and the Swan'<sup>15</sup>, given that MacNeice's 'small clerk':

Sculls on the lake in the park while bosomy  
Trees indifferently droop above him

while Yeats asks of the violent encounter between god and mortal:

Did she put on his knowledge with his power  
Before the indifferent beak could let her drop?

Muldoon's argument rests on the similarity of 'drop' and 'droop', and the connection between 'bosomy' and Yeats' line 'her helpless breast upon his breast'<sup>16</sup>. Millennial perspectives are arguably present in both, in that MacNeice's brooding office worker thinks back to 'Stone Age echoes', and ducks 'arrowheading', but Muldoon's reading focuses primarily on the significance of individual words, despite the radically distinct tone and subject matter. While Muldoon's analysis of shared language and philosophy is dazzling and acrobatic on a paragraph by paragraph basis, demonstrating an encyclopaedic knowledge of the three poets' work and of fascinating etymological threads that connect them, what it reveals substantially about each is open to debate. He has referred to this approach in *The End of the Poem* as 'stunt-reading'<sup>17</sup>, a way of opening up connections between poems, and in doing so proposing new possibilities for one's creative reading, by showing just how far one can leap as the 'first reader' before critical consensus has settled. Later in the book he acknowledges how easily such a critical acrobat 'falls off the horse'<sup>18</sup>. Muldoon's arguments in these essays move more by asyndeton than conjoined syntax, and the reader's comprehension of the poems under discussion seems secondary to the spectacle of the

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<sup>14</sup> MacNeice, *Collected Poems*, 495.

<sup>15</sup> Yeats, *Selected Poems*, 149.

<sup>16</sup> Muldoon, *Incorrigibly Plural*, 139.

<sup>17</sup> Muldoon, *The End of the Poem*, 192.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid*, 367.

critic's performance. To borrow his own terms, the camera repeatedly cuts away moments before the stunt-rider touches the ground; the connections between Yeats, Frost and MacNeice may well be there, but the reader cannot quite confirm whether Muldoon has stuck one landing before the next begins. His criticism is enjoyable on its own terms as a unique example of what a reader with Muldoon's resources and skill might conjure up. Few critics share his talents, however, and *The End of the Poem* is perhaps most useful as a warning against reaching too far for evidence of allusion.

This thesis considers the process of literary influence as a complex and deeply idiosyncratic process, not only between one poet and another but between one poem and another. It is not concerned with arriving at an all-encompassing blueprint by which every stage of every poetic relationship may be traced, not only because of the deeply exclusionary politics that animate and are animated by such blueprints, but simply because it is a poor reflection of the practical, quotidian factors in the creation of art. A direct quotation is clear-cut, a shared formal shape or rhyme scheme may be identified with little controversy; as mentioned above, however, these surface details, while valuable in terms of understanding a poem's formal scaffolding, pales in comparison to significant shared philosophical or linguistic concerns, even shared socio-cultural experiences and contexts, that sink to the poem's foundations and their reasons for being in the first place. As explored in the chapter on Derek Mahon, even a quotation from MacNeice does not necessarily signal a thoughtful engagement with the complexities of the source material. In the chapter on Muldoon, the presence of MacNeice as a speaking character is not necessarily an uncomplicated endorsement of MacNeice's critical thinking. The fact that several of Carson's poems share titles with MacNeice's is not necessarily evidence of positive homages: more often it is precisely the opposite. This thesis hopes to demonstrate in action that literary influence is not necessarily antagonistic, in Bloom's rendering, though

it can be; it hopes to demonstrate that it is as often a local, intimate, deeply personal process as a grand historical one, as Ricks insightfully explores. Poems do not exist in isolation, either from other poems or other makers of poems, and often reading one in the light of another provides new means of understanding both.

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Having established in principle why one might study a group of poets' shared affinities, it may be worth examining the logic behind selecting these five specific poets. In prosaic terms, there is critical precedent: each of the four contemporary poets have been previously studied in relationship to MacNeice; for example, Terence Brown's study of Michael Longley and MacNeice in *The Literature of Ireland: Culture and Criticism*<sup>19</sup> or Edna Longley's readings of Mahon, Muldoon and Carson's various rewritings of 'Snow' in her essay "Out of Ulster 1: Louis MacNeice and His Influence"<sup>20</sup>. This vital groundwork may be productively built upon, allowing this study to spend relatively little time arguing whether MacNeice's work is present in each oeuvre and more analysing how it manifests, and the deeper artistic implications of those manifestations. In somewhat less prosaic terms, MacNeice's first creative peak came in the late 1930s as an unaligned sceptic in a time of massive political upheaval seems to have been a vital touchstone for a generation of poets writing through the civil conflict in the north of Ireland. MacNeice showed that remaining true to one's artistic principles did not preclude, but was, in fact, a vital factor in remaining true to one's political beliefs. Over the five years of writing this thesis, the necessity of

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<sup>19</sup> Brown, "Michael Longley and the Irish poetic tradition", *The Literature of Ireland*, 178-89.

<sup>20</sup> Longley, *Irish Poetry Since Kavanagh*, 52-9.

embodying a principled stand, as MacNeice did, against rising fascism at home and abroad, has only increased in urgency. MacNeice, of course, recognised that principles alone would not be enough, little more than the ‘minute gesture’ outlined in ‘Eclogue from Iceland’<sup>21</sup>, that it was, nonetheless, his ‘only duty. / And, it may be added, [his] only chance’.

The four contemporary poets’ connections to MacNeice are diverse in form and context, and each chapter examines in close detail how the four contemporary poets have approached his various and idiosyncratic oeuvre. For Longley, this incorporates aspects of shared biography – both he and MacNeice have complicated relationships with their own Irishness, personal connections to London, Belfast, and the west of Ireland, and a grounding in classical literature, for example – in addition to their artistic affinities. Given Longley’s editorship of MacNeice’s 1988 *Selected Poems*, his example is perhaps uncommonly close to Eliot’s now axiomatic theory that one should ‘not find it preposterous that the past should be altered by the present as much as the present is directed by the past’<sup>22</sup>. MacNeice’s work is sufficiently heterogeneous to offer a range of viable selections, and it is perfectly understandable that Longley’s provides some idea of his preferences and tastes. His *Selected* showcases the lyrical, small ‘r’ romantic MacNeice, giving primacy to the complexities of his love poetry, while his few major omissions, such as ‘Budgie’ and ‘Memoranda to Horace’<sup>23</sup>, are among the poet’s more disillusioned, perhaps even cynical, pieces. Longley’s relationship with MacNeice is perhaps the least antagonistic of the four studied here, and as such seems a favourable place to start.

Derek Mahon’s relationship with MacNeice is not easily summarised, and discussions to-date of his connections to the elder poet have often been over-determined by analysis of

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<sup>21</sup> MacNeice, *Collected Poems*, 40.

<sup>22</sup> Eliot, *Selected Prose of T.S. Eliot*, 39.

<sup>23</sup> MacNeice, *Collected Poems*, both 539.

'In Carrowdore Churchyard'<sup>24</sup>, Mahon's elegy for the elder poet which opens his first collection and his *Selected Poems*. The concern which unites the two poets most clearly is their preoccupation with the artist's role in society, particularly a society in which they are at least ostensibly outsiders. These questions are particularly concentrated in MacNeice's 1930s work and in Mahon's early collections, ever more so as the realities of civil conflict in Belfast come to exert ever increasing pressure on his writing. Both poets explore the spaces in between regarding these issues, spaces of calm in which the poet might create the necessary time and space to carry out their function as commentators and thinkers; in practical terms, this manifests in their negotiation with escape fantasies, or in dreams of fatally embracing the rhetoric of power and domination. In few places is this struggle more keenly felt than in the friction created between their internationalist tendencies and their Irish backgrounds, their desire to belong to a society while experiencing acute awareness of its shortcomings. Formally and philosophically, MacNeice and Mahon conflict as often as they concur, but the depth of their dialogue is hard to overstate.

Few things about Paul Muldoon's career and aesthetics are straightforward, and the substantial influence of MacNeice in his work is somewhat obscured by MacNeice's appearance as character or speaker in Muldoon's creative and critical work. The elder poet appears in the poem 'History'<sup>25</sup>, as the speaker quibbles with a partner about their sexual experiences 'in the room where MacNeice wrote 'Snow''; in a speaking role among the inhabitants of '7, Middagh Street'<sup>26</sup>; and, perhaps most significantly from a literary-historical perspective, as one of the participants in a dialogue that serves in lieu of a written introduction to Muldoon's *Faber Book of Contemporary Irish Poetry*. In the latter, MacNeice

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<sup>24</sup> Mahon, *Selected Poems*, 11.

<sup>25</sup> Muldoon, *Why Brownlee Left*, 27.

<sup>26</sup> Muldoon, *Meeting the British*, 55.



is in discussion with fellow critic F.R. Higgins, whose ‘potentially fascistic’<sup>27</sup> definitions of national identity and ‘blood music’ MacNeice is loath to humour. On each occasion, MacNeice’s presence is surface-level; there is nothing necessarily ‘MacNeicean’ about referencing another poet directly in one’s work, the thin veils of *Autumn Sequel* aside. It is clear, however, that at the very least his presence as a symbol or an exemplary forerunner is an empowering one for Muldoon; his elision of simplistic ideas about nationhood permit his *Faber Book* to be a more curious and expansive selection as a result, while his robust scepticism provides a vital counterpoint to Auden’s utopianism in the sonnet sequence ‘7, Middagh Street’. Aesthetically, Fran Brearton notes that ‘The closer one gets to the poetic texture in Muldoon, the less other poets [...] are present there’<sup>28</sup>, and to speak too confidently about Muldoon’s process is setting oneself up for a fall; though any discussion must be suitably hedged, there are notable echoes in the two poets’ priorities. Both are fascinated by the subversion and reclamation of rote language and cliché, both revel in circular or repeated forms, both have extensive work in the domain of parable, both are concerned with the indeterminacy of their origins, and base their discussions of the artist’s role in national society through a personal lens; this is to name just a few of their points of affinity. Though the texture of his work might be more idiosyncratic than any of his peers, there are aesthetic patterns and processes that make Muldoon’s relationship to MacNeice a vital and empowering one.

The connection between MacNeice and Ciaran Carson is unique among the four poets in this study, given that for long stretches of his career Carson was directly critical of MacNeice as a poet, stating in an interview: ‘I haven’t read that much MacNeice. And of the

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<sup>27</sup> Corcoran, *Poets of Modern Ireland*, 64.

<sup>28</sup> Brearton, ‘Muldoon’s Antecedents’, *Paul Muldoon: Critical Essays*, 56.

bits I have read, I sometimes suspect his ear<sup>29</sup>. Though he would go on to become a vocal advocate of MacNeice's work, this early indifference is itself worth exploring, and the slow process of assimilation of the elder poet's oeuvre is evident in Carson's careful, self-critical practice over the course of his career. Like Muldoon, Carson's work often revolves around the desire for and impossibility of escape, either in local, literal context of evading the armed forces in Troubles Belfast, or in terms of the historical narratives that facilitate those forces in the first instance. MacNeice's discussions of the constructed nature of nationhood and the fine divisions between their empowering and entrapping definitions of self are valuable exemplars. Particular to Carson, however, is his interest in the semi-fictional figure of the aesthete, the free-roaming artist whose priorities are at a remove from the daily grind. MacNeice stands in as one such figure, with his access to the literati and the BBC in the 1940s and 1950s, his life in London and New York. In a more directly literary domain, Carson's poems 'Snow'<sup>30</sup> and 'Bagpipe Music'<sup>31</sup> share titles with two MacNeice poems, and seem to be in direct response to them; in the case of the later, less a response and more a rebuke. For all their fractious encounters, MacNeice appears as a valuable forerunner for some of Carson's most powerful writing, including his many extended explorations of parable, their fated heroes and doomed adventures.

There is the question of why these four poets are under study in this thesis, and not a group of equally viable candidates, namely Tom Paulin or Frank Ormsby from the same generation as Longley, Mahon et al, or poets whose careers began in the 1990s and 2000s, such as Sinéad Morrissey, Leontia Flynn, Alan Gillis or Nick Laird. The answer is partly a mundane one: to study all of the above would reduce the space and resources available to

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<sup>29</sup> Brown, *In the Chair: Interviews with Poets from the North of Ireland*, 149.

<sup>30</sup> Carson, *Belfast Confetti*, 20.

<sup>31</sup> Carson, *First Language*, 55.

the poets already included in this thesis. There is certainly space and due cause for analysing each in full, and their viability as case studies, I hope, is further evidence of MacNeice's value as an exemplar or enabling force for successive generations of Northern Irish poets. For the more recent poets, there is also the issue of a relatively small, and continually adapting and evolving oeuvre from which to draw potentially deep aesthetic and philosophical conclusions. While it would have been far from impossible to do so, it seemed to make more sense to focus on the relatively large bodies of writing by Longley, Mahon, Muldoon and Carson. For Paulin and Ormsby, the relatively smaller body of criticism on their work was also a factor, however minor, that tipped the decision against them. As for the four poets included, my study focuses primarily on their earlier collections: for Longley this focus is largely, though not exclusively, on collections up to and including *The Echo Gate* (1979); for Mahon *The Yellow Book* (1997); for Muldoon *Horse Latitudes* (2006); for Carson, *For All We Know* (2004). Although MacNeice is an abiding presence in the collections after those studied here, by restricting each chapter I have aimed to pay sufficient attention to the material included; for Longley, Mahon and Muldoon, the earlier collections are where MacNeice's influence is most powerfully felt, and, given the limits of this thesis' remit, I felt it prudent to place restrictions on its focus.

One other noteworthy exclusion warrants individual examination. In interviews throughout his career, Seamus Heaney has cited Patrick Kavanagh as an originary, enabling figure; if Mahon heard Beckett and MacNeice as 'familiar voices whispering', Kavanagh filled a similar role for the rural County Derry-born Heaney. When asked in an interview with James Randall about his first influences as a young poet, Heaney recalled reading Kavanagh's *The Great Hunger* from his collection *A Soul for Sale* at the age of twenty-three, when he began to teach poetry: 'that was a thrill to me. Suddenly my own background was

appearing in a book I was reading'<sup>32</sup>. In the essay 'The Sense of Place' (1977), Heaney describes how:

Kavanagh's fidelity to the unpromising, unspectacular countryside of Monaghan and his rendering of the authentic speech of those parts gave the majority of the Irish people, for whom the experience of life on the land was perhaps the most formative, an image of themselves<sup>33</sup>

Heaney finds a reflection of his experiences in Kavanagh's work, both as an individual and as a citizen of an Ireland rarely seen in literature, but also a kind of mysticism that chimes with his ideas about the wellspring of creative writing. In the essay 'From Monaghan to the Grand Canal' (1975) Heaney identifies Kavanagh's poetry as 'more a conductor than a crucible', and argues that *The Great Hunger*, a poem crucial to his own development as an artist:

is not about growing up and away but about growing down and in. Its symbol is the potato rather than the potato blossom, [...] its theme is consciousness moulded in and to the dark rather than opening to the light.<sup>34</sup>

These are qualities far from MacNeice's dazzling early lyrics, or the existential crises of the later work, for example: MacNeice would almost certainly have queried Heaney's definition of 'poetry as divination'<sup>35</sup>. In that same interview with Randall, Heaney indicates MacNeice only as a reference point for what estrangement he felt with the experiences and literary groundedness enjoyed by Mahon and Michael Longley, who 'were more sophisticated about what to do. They had read Louis MacNeice, they had met MacNeice,

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<sup>32</sup> Randall, "Interview with Seamus Heaney", *Ploughshares*, reprinted in 37:1 (Spring 2011), 180.

<sup>33</sup> Heaney, *Preoccupations*, 137.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid*, 123.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid*, 60.

and they had met other poets. I had never met anybody<sup>36</sup>. By 1988's *The Government of the Tongue*, Heaney examines Kavanagh and MacNeice in stark contrast, almost emblems of the literature in which the poet is at home and that from which he feels barred:

When I opened [MacNeice's *Collected Poems*], I still came up against the window-pane of literature. His poems arose from a mind-stuff and existed in a cultural setting which were at one remove from me and what I came from. I envied them, of course, their security in the big world of history and poetry [...] but I was not taken over by them the way I was taken over by Kavanagh.<sup>37</sup>

His comments elsewhere are polite at best, praising MacNeice's eclogues or his ambivalence towards sectarian divides, his 'original sense of complication and ambivalence as a consciousness with a Western Irish dream life and a West British intellectual life'<sup>38</sup>. Few Irish people would consider this a compliment. Nevertheless, by the end of Heaney's Oxford Lectures in 1994, collected under the title *The Redress of Poetry*, MacNeice has come to inhabit or embody a vital position in Heaney's 'quincunx', a five-pointed figure intending 'to bring the frontiers of the country into alignment with the frontiers of writing, an attempt to sketch the shape of an integrated literary tradition'<sup>39</sup>. The south point is Kilcoman Castle, representing or represented by Edmund Spenser, 'the tower of English conquest and the Anglicisation of Ireland'; to the west, Yeats' Thoor Ballylee, and the attempt to revitalise a magical or spiritual world-view lost to that conquest; to the east, Joyce's Martello tower, and his attempt to incorporate an international literary inheritance in opposition to the Anglocentric Protestant tradition. MacNeice's presence in the north of

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<sup>36</sup> Randall, 181.

<sup>37</sup> Heaney, *The Government of the Tongue*, 8.

<sup>38</sup> Heaney, "The Pre-Natal Mountain: Vision and Irony in Recent Irish Poetry", *The Georgia Review*, 42: 3 (Fall 1988), 472.

<sup>39</sup> Heaney, *The Redress of Poetry*, 199.

the diagram, at Carrickfergus Castle, 'where William of Orange once landed [...] and where the British Army was garrisoned for generations', permits:

a way in and a way out not only for the northern Unionist imagination in relation to some sort of integral Ireland but also for the southern Irish imagination in relation to the partitioned north.<sup>40</sup>

By remaining true to his Ulster roots and, unlike John Hewitt, by refusing to let the new border have a meaningful impact on his imagination, MacNeice provides a model for a northern 'two-mindedness', the ability to draw cultural sustenance from multiple sources, that Heaney identifies as crucial to a more fluid and whole Irish culture, 'within – rather than beyond – the Irish element'<sup>41</sup>. While it's noteworthy that throughout this assignment of literary-historical duties MacNeice's literary qualities are somewhat absent from the discussion, it remains a significant gesture on Heaney's part to work so hard to include him in such rarefied company. If MacNeice did not provide an empowering textual precedent, Heaney still recognised his uncommon capacity for compassion and empathy, his willingness to embrace his own inherent complications and contradictions, and in doing so provide points of access to an Irish literary imagination that northern Protestant contemporaries did not.

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<sup>40</sup> Ibid, 200.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid, 202.

To fully articulate the nature of MacNeice's influence on the contemporary poets in this study, it would make sense to first establish, in brief, how MacNeice himself has been understood critically. Appropriately for a poet whose rejection of received literary narratives formed the heart of his working philosophy, the story of the various threads and interested parties in MacNeice's literary stock is resistant to straightforward telling. As a host of critics – predominantly from the north of Ireland – have brought to light, MacNeice's contemporaries repeatedly misplaced or misread him, judged him by his proximity to Auden or even to his previous poetic selves. Terence Brown, for example, notes that by the Clark Lectures on parable and allegory in 1963, MacNeice was still struggling to shake the popular conception of his work, established in the 1930s and early 1940s, as primarily journalistic<sup>42</sup>. In *Louis MacNeice: A Critical Study*, Edna Longley suggests that this tendency to wrong-foot the canon-makers manifested first in England. Longley posits that chief among the explanations for MacNeice's unevenly developed reputation is:

the tendency to brand one of his literary contexts with the name of another poet. The very titles of the following books marginalize MacNeice: Francis Scarfe's *Auden and After* (1942), Samuel Hynes's *The Auden Generation* (1976), the Macmillan Casebook *Thirties Poets: 'The Auden Group'* (1984)<sup>43</sup>. Similarly, MacNeice's refusal to put his philosophical cart before the poetic horse partly account for 'the line broadly taken, for instance, by G.S. Fraser's 'Evasive Honesty: The Poetry of Louis MacNeice', Ian Hamilton's essay in *A Poetry Chronicle*, and Stephen Wall's 'Louis MacNeice and the Line of Least Resistance'.<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> Brown, Terence, "Louis MacNeice and the Dark Conceit", *Ariel*, Vol. 3, No.4, (October 1972), 16.

<sup>43</sup> Longley, Edna, *Louis MacNeice: A Critical Study*, ix.

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

In Ireland, his poor showing in John Montague's *Faber Book of Irish Verse* (1974) and Thomas Kinsella's *New Oxford Book of Irish Verse* (1986), are offered by Peter McDonald as evidence of Irish poetry's hesitance to admit him to their society, along with Seamus Deane's wariness of his 'mixed alienation and attachment', describing him as 'One of the most potent of Irish exiles'<sup>45</sup>. In 2018, these reservations might seem like academic curiosities, testament to the essential mutability of the canonical stock-market, particularly after McDonald's new edition of MacNeice's *Collected Poems* in 2007, the publication of *Incorrigibly Plural: Louis MacNeice and his Legacy* in 2012 and one-off events like 'BBC MacNeice Week'<sup>46</sup> in September 2013, on the fiftieth anniversary of his passing. But the work undertaken by consecutive generations of poets and critics to revise a canonical oversight should not be underestimated. In 1999 Neil Corcoran expressed this rehabilitation process as a unique and mutually empowering phenomenon:

The reappropriation of MacNeice has [...] been virtually coterminous with the development of the poetry of Northern Ireland since the mid-1960s; and it represents a concerted and strategically successful form of accommodation and recuperation of a kind for which I can think of no contemporary parallel, making a strong case for what Edna Longley pleads as the 'special, living sense' of the term 'intertextuality' in relation to Northern Irish poetry.<sup>47</sup>

In this instance 'intertextuality' might mean something as prosaic as poets physically living and working in close proximity. For Mahon and Longley, a proximity that led to often heated debates (as their correspondences bear witness), but in practical terms, as Fran Brearton notes, 'The drafts that ended up in the fireplace of their Merrion Square flat

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<sup>45</sup> McDonald, Peter, *Louis MacNeice: Poet in his Contexts*, 5-6.

<sup>46</sup> <http://www.qub.ac.uk/schools/media/Media,412260,en.pdf>, retrieved 15.01.2015.

<sup>47</sup> Corcoran, Neil, *Poets of Modern Ireland*, 57.



ended up there in part because their stringently critical friendship encouraged a more ruthless self-editing than might otherwise have been the case'<sup>48</sup>. Although a trip to the grave of an immediate predecessor might have piqued the interest of Harold Bloom, Mahon, Longley and Heaney's visit in 1965 to MacNeice's grave in Carrowdore, a village on the Ards peninsula, and subsequent competition to write the best elegy for the late poet, did not result in any of Bloom's prescribed swerves or conquests. Indeed, it all seemed to play out with remarkable good grace and encouragement, as the quality of Mahon's response prompted his friends to give him due credit for a fully achieved work. As Longley tells it, 'a few weeks later' he and Heaney abandoned their attempts, as Mahon 'had written the definitive elegy for Louis MacNeice'<sup>49</sup>. Where the Bloomian agonism crumbles, slightly, is that in 1965 MacNeice could hardly be called a strong, unavoidably influential presence. In Hedli MacNeice's remarkable elegy, 'The House that Louis Built'<sup>50</sup>, the poet's widow gives an insightful portrait of an artist whose legacy was accessible by design, however closed off it might become the closer one moved toward its heart. In a sensitive reading, Corcoran suggests such a house, with its panoramic views of Connemara, Dorset, Iceland and India, might provide:

a good home for the imagination, but also, it may be, a good place for a younger generation to inhabit, offering possibility without foreclosure, invitation without domination.'<sup>51</sup>

Corcoran generously argues that MacNeice's much-maligned middle period might have made him a much more inviting forerunner than the magisterial Yeats; as opposed to the

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<sup>48</sup> Brearton, Fran, *Modern Irish and Scottish Poetry*, 266.

<sup>49</sup> quoted in Drummond, Gavin 'The Difficulty of We: The Epistolary Poems of Michael Longley and Derek Mahon', *The Yearbook of English Studies*, Vol. 35 (2005), 34.

<sup>50</sup> reproduced in full in Stallworthy, *Louis MacNeice*, 481-2.

<sup>51</sup> Corcoran, 63

gyre-turning, almost mythical figure, MacNeice's work presented a more relatable, approachable figure, a familiar voice.

In Edna Longley's astute review of *Night-Crossing*, she identifies Mahon as 'heir and disinheritor of MacNeice'<sup>52</sup>, the disinheriting impulse manifesting in his 'definitive elegy', 'In Carrowdore Churchyard'<sup>53</sup>. The poem is indeed kind to the elder poet, markedly more sentimental than the majority of poems in Mahon's clear-eyed, often existentially bleak first collection. The poem features MacNeicean twists of cliché, the gravely witty 'suits you down to the ground', and the extended metaphor of 'these hills are hard / as nails, yet soft and feminine in their turn / When fingers open and the hedges burn'. Yet these figures of playfulness and of softness and natural fruitfulness, are outliers in Mahon's writing, which tends more commonly towards 'the grave / Grey of the sea' in 'Day Trip to Donegal'<sup>54</sup>, 'A cold day breaking on silent stones' in 'Four Walks in the Country Near Saint-Brieuc'<sup>55</sup> or 'the nacreous sand' of 'Aran'<sup>56</sup>. That these notes are picked out so clearly in the poem through which Mahon 'found his voice'<sup>57</sup> and so rarely subsequently, may also hint at an unreconciled tension between his own work and MacNeice's. Certainly 'In Carrowdore Churchyard', with its emphasis that MacNeice's residual creative power – 'Rinsing the choked mud, keeping the colours new' – functions under the condition that these colours remain 'consecrated, for your sake, / To what lies in the future tense', puts conceptual distance between, perhaps suggests Mahon's pushing off from, the completed work of the elder poet and the new work of Mahon. Heather Clark has remarked on the poem's presentation of 'a passive and inactive version of the poet', giving 'the curious effect of

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<sup>52</sup> Longley, "Review of *Night-Crossing*", *Honest Ulsterman* Vol.8, (Dec 1968), 29.

<sup>53</sup> Mahon, *Selected Poems*, 11.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid*, 21.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid*, 16.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid*, 31.

<sup>57</sup> quoted in Haughton, *The Poetry of Derek Mahon*, 32.

undermining MacNeice's immortality while at the same time assuring it<sup>58</sup>. If the poem's kindness and respect is unmistakable, so too is its eagerness to move on.

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A distinctly less fraught dynamic is in play in Michael Longley's essay "A Misrepresented Poet"<sup>59</sup>, published two years later in *Dublin Magazine*. Here, Terence Brown sees 'a remarkably assured, insightful piece of critical writing from the hand of a twenty-seven-year-old. It displays a keen eye for the strengths and weaknesses of individual poems [...]' Longley's essay on MacNeice is also notable for the way it accurately establishes the overall shape of MacNeice's career<sup>60</sup>, its early and late bloomings, the flat middle stretch; this shape is affirmed by successive critical studies, whose estimations chime with Longley's assessment. It is also a rare show of partisanship from a poet whose forays into direct criticism are few and far between, as it opens with the bullishness and clarity of a dedicated fan of a misunderstood artist:

A number of damaging prejudices come to mind at once:

- (1) His first volume, *Blind Fireworks*, is best forgotten.
- (2) His finest book is the volume published posthumously, *The Burning Perch*.
- (3) His fatal Cleopatra was the long poem.
- (4) He was a 'thirties poet.
- (5) He is a poor man's Auden (or, to quote Cyril Connolly, 'The tortoise to Auden's

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<sup>58</sup> Clark, *The Ulster Renaissance: Poetry in Belfast 1962-1972*, 131.

<sup>59</sup> Longley, "A Misrepresented Poet", *Dublin Magazine*, Vol.6, No.1, (Spring 1967), pp 68-74.

<sup>60</sup> Brown, *Literature of Ireland: Culture and Criticism*, 179-80.

hare'<sup>61</sup>).

(6) He was a poet-cum-journalist.

(7) His most anthologisable poems are 'Bagpipe Music', 'Prayer Before Birth', 'Sunday Morning' (I don't need to name the rest!).

(8) His poetry is the direct reflection of an ironic Northern Irish personality.<sup>62</sup>

The individual poems Longley singles out for attention – 'Mayfly', 'Death of an Actress', 'The Casualty', 'Day of Returning', Canto XX (the elegy for Dylan Thomas) from *Autumn Sequel*<sup>63</sup> – are now central to critical appreciation of MacNeice's oeuvre, but their selection also sheds light on Longley's own poetic practice. Unlike Mahon's gentle pushing away from the elder poet, Longley makes his aesthetic priorities coterminous with MacNeice's own. Terence Brown has noted how Longley's description of 'Mayfly' ('two beautiful lines [which] disclose the nucleus of his imagination'<sup>64</sup>), in its 'slightly plush eroticism with an intimation of decadent satiation is a very unusual note, a Longleyan note indeed, in MacNeice's work'<sup>65</sup>. Longley has adapted and expanded on this essay on several occasions, and excerpts from it appear in *Causeway: The Arts in Ulster* (1971), "The Neolithic Night: A Note on the Irishness of Louis MacNeice"<sup>66</sup> (1975), and his introduction to *Louis MacNeice: Selected Poems* (1988). Over the decades Longley added nuance and complexity to his reading of the elder poet, but the foundational insights remained intact. Compare the lines from "A Misrepresented Poet": 'The hub of his work is his love poetry, and from it branch out like spokes his poems on people, Ireland, friendship and childhood. MacNeice played his tunes round about Middle C, on the central octaves of human experience'<sup>67</sup>, to those

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<sup>61</sup> Connolly, *Previous Convictions*, 320-3.

<sup>62</sup> Longley, 68.

<sup>63</sup> MacNeice, *Collected Poems*, 13, 177, 245, 314, 410.

<sup>64</sup> Longley, "Introduction", *Louis MacNeice: Selected Poems*, xxii.

<sup>65</sup> Brown, *Literature of Ireland*, 182.

<sup>66</sup> in Dunn, Douglas, ed., *Two Decades of Irish Writing: A Critical Survey*, 98-104.

<sup>67</sup> Longley, "A Misrepresented Poet", 70.

from his 1988 Introduction: 'There are many 'spirals' in his work. One way of tracing its genetic coding is to examine his love poetry'<sup>68</sup>. The image develops from spokes and piano keys to the double helix, from linear causality to complex encoding, but the centrality (for Longley) of MacNeice's love poetry is an inextricable constant.

Where "A Misrepresented Poet" illuminates individual poems in context of MacNeice's completed career, Longley's essay in *Causeway* positions the whole career into broader cultural dynamics, arguing 'Judgements would be more precise and just, I think, if the Northern Irish context were taken more into account'<sup>69</sup>. Similarly, he takes on contemporary critics like Samuel Hynes, who was content to lean on judgements that '[MacNeice] was not a thinker, and his efforts to think in verse [...] are his dullest poems', or D.B. Moore's evaluation that he 'lacked, in the last analysis, the moral fibre, the capacity for intellectual achievement, or the single-mindedness, to attain belief, even in disbelief'<sup>70</sup>. Longley fills in the gaps between Hynes and Moore's dismissal of MacNeice's perceived philosophical failures and Mahon's famous rebuttal that the poet was, in fact, '*profoundly superficial [...] the surface was the core*'<sup>71</sup>. Longley is keen to frame the poems written by MacNeice in terms of the life MacNeice lived, alert to the ostensible friction between his grounding in classical literature and philosophy on one hand, and his creation of sharply contemporary worlds and extravagant verbal textures on the other:

The dizzy word play and the riot of imagery might well tempt a casual reader to suspect that MacNeice lacks depth and penetration, that he is really not much more than a professional entertainer. A proper consideration of his background, however, should help us to understand that all the gaudy paraphernalia of his

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<sup>68</sup> Longley, "Introduction", xxii.

<sup>69</sup> Longley, *Causeway*, 97.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid, 97.

<sup>71</sup> Mahon, "MacNeice in England and Ireland", *Time Was Away*, 115.

poetry is finally a reply to darkness, to 'the fear of becoming stone'. His games are funeral games: the bright patterns he conjures from the external world and the pleasures of being alive are not fairy light and bauble but searchlight and icon.<sup>72</sup>

Longley also picks up from the title of MacNeice's penultimate collection, *Solstices*: 'He was a poet of the solstice, of the uneven and unbalancing pull, at his best in his twenties and thirties, and again towards the end of his life'<sup>73</sup>. Though perhaps a neat excuse for MacNeice's weaker work in the 1940s and 1950s, depicting these largely failed experiments as part of a grander, astronomical -tidal scheme does lend weight to the useful perception of MacNeice's oeuvre as an interconnected unity. This idea seems to have great significance for Longley, who has said in an interview:

I hope by the time I die, my work will look like four really long poems. A very long love poem; a very long meditation on war and death; a very long nature poem and a playful poem on the art of poetry.<sup>74</sup>

That Longley's few forays into criticism have featured MacNeice suggests an uncommon depth of engagement and respect for the elder poet. That the substance of those essays comprise such regular and meaningful echoes of Longley's own life and aesthetics – their Anglo-Irishness, their immersion in classical literature, their conception of poems not as discrete entities but of a single, complicated unity, for a few salient examples – suggests that Longley's own connection to MacNeice might begin, though absolutely not end, through identifying with his predecessor. Though a study of influence through biography alone would be a thin and flimsy one, it would make little sense to ignore that poets are

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<sup>72</sup> Longley, *Causeway*, 97.

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid*, 98.

<sup>74</sup> McCrum, Robert, "As English as Irish Can Be: Interview with Michael Longley", *Observer*, 28 October 2006, 22.

human, and MacNeice's 'familiar voice whispering in my ear'<sup>75</sup> experienced by Mahon, with all its connotations of locating oneself within an existing literature, just as vital an aspect of empowering influence as the text itself. Longley ends his essay in *Causeway* by affirming his faith in MacNeice's return to form: 'This dark collection does not form a climax. It looks, as I have said, to the future, to 'green improbable fields'. MacNeice with new-found powers was half-way to reshaping the lyric [...] His early death is an immeasurable loss'<sup>76</sup>. This conception of MacNeice's work as tragically unfinished is not only a dynamic and hopeful interpretation of a book rife with existential anxiety – MacNeice himself admitted to being 'taken aback by the high proportion of sombre pieces, ranging from bleak observations to thumbnail nightmares'<sup>77</sup> – but lays down an implicit challenge to those who would pick up where the elder poet was cut off. Longley, too, is looking to the future, positing the green fields beyond the night terrors.

In 1971 and 1972 respectively, William T. McKinnon and D.B. Moore published the first two book-length studies of MacNeice's work. Regarding Moore's *The Poetry of Louis MacNeice*, Samuel Hynes argued that 'Moore has written a modest, trustworthy book about a man of flawed and limited gifts', agreeing with the book's conclusion that 'Just occasionally when this [technical skill] is married to deeper feelings, [...] we salute the high genius of his poetry'<sup>78</sup>. McKinnon's study, *Apollo's Blended Dream*, has aged better, exploring first and foremost the deep philosophical and metaphysical grounding of MacNeice's work as a rebuff to a critical consensus that dismissed him as a brilliant wordsmith but shallow thinker. As Brown notes, MacNeice himself felt his work deeply misunderstood, 'since he considered it much more metaphysical than [his critics] seemed

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<sup>75</sup> Brown, "Interview with Derek Mahon", *Poetry Ireland Review*, No. 14 (Autumn, 1985), 18.

<sup>76</sup> Longley, 98.

<sup>77</sup> MacNeice, *PBS Bulletin*, no.38, September 1963.

<sup>78</sup> Hynes, *The Auden Generation*, 383.

aware<sup>79</sup>. MacNeice himself has stated that this grounding was not casual curiosity: ‘Metaphysics for me was not something cold and abstract; it was an account of reality, but an artistic account, not a scientific one’<sup>80</sup>. In the crucial chapter ‘Poetry and Belief’, McKinnon argues that charges against MacNeice of his lack of a ‘unifying belief’<sup>81</sup> touch on a matter that had deeply disturbed him ever since his arrival at Oxford without a ‘world view (and any such view is implicitly moral) which could give me a hierarchy, however approximate, of good and evil’<sup>82</sup>. McKinnon then traces MacNeice’s revolt against his tutors’ promotion of a Hegelian absolute, arguing that his quest for a system to understand the universe was consistently checked by a hostility towards any that ‘implied a division between the actual world of phenomenal time, space and experience, and any transcendental principle, where the former was regarded as a mere reflection of the latter’. McKinnon identifies a crucial tension in the poetry in MacNeice’s awareness of ‘the apparent existence of a gulf between the two, however much he may have hoped that the gulf was illusory’<sup>83</sup>. This hope for a synthesis between the physical and the metaphysical in the face of its ultimate failure provides the philosophical dynamism for some of MacNeice’s most powerful, time-resisting and space-distorting work.

*Apollo’s Blended Dream* formally divides aspects of MacNeice’s work, however, and McKinnon himself acknowledges that the poet appears ‘as Metaphysician and Maker – whereas, of course, he is Metaphysician-and-Maker’<sup>84</sup>. This awareness of a structural inadequacy in the study, however, is in no small part redressed by McKinnon’s willingness to explore the multifariousness of MacNeice’s identity, to lend as much importance to his

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<sup>79</sup> Brown, *Sceptical Vision*, 3.

<sup>80</sup> MacNeice, *The Strings Are False*, 119.

<sup>81</sup> McKinnon, *Apollo’s Blended Dream*, 40.

<sup>82</sup> MacNeice, *Modern Poetry*, 94.

<sup>83</sup> McKinnon, 51.

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid*, 238.



childhood and background as the poet himself did. McKinnon gives a full chapter to an 'Outline of a Biography', following cues set by MacNeice in *The Strings are False*, and the young poet's playfulness with his own multifaceted identity, 'perpetually puzzled in face of the combination of factors composing the *I am*'<sup>85</sup>. The word 'puzzled' is key: MacNeice viewed this uncertainty and fluidity as a challenge to be explored and unspooled. In *Modern Poetry* he frames this difficult concept, as is his wont, in mundane terms, rendering himself as a 'mouthpiece' to an instrument or loudspeaker, with the poem as the air or words that fill it; the meaning of the latter cannot but be altered by the presence of the former.<sup>86</sup>

Among MacNeice's greatest qualities as a writer is his ability to locate himself, however unflatteringly, in the contexts from which he commentates, an ambition achieved with spectacular, era-defining success in 1938's *Autumn Journal*. MacNeice's book-length critical essay, *Modern Poetry*, published a few years earlier, articulates many of the same concerns about the artist's role in society: their responsibility to record life in the street with the same energy and integrity as the life of the mind. By endorsing MacNeice's beliefs about properly situating the poet in a broad social context, McKinnon lays the groundwork for a more nuanced understanding of his oeuvre; by insisting on the crucial imaginative role played by the poet's childhood in his mature work, he endorses Longley's reading of MacNeice's work as a multifaceted integrity. This impulse might also accord with McKinnon's suggestion on the importance of America in his life and poetry, citing the American publication of *Poems* (1937), *Autumn Journal* (1939) and *Poems 1925-1940* (1940), and the testimony of the reviewer Horace Gregory: 'The young Americans said they were imitating Auden, and then wrote a great number of ballades and villanelles in the manner of MacNeice [...] This meant that MacNeice's verses were in high fashion'<sup>87</sup>. Despite

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<sup>85</sup> Ibid, 4.

<sup>86</sup> MacNeice, *Modern Poetry*, 89.

<sup>87</sup> McKinnon, n.3, 28.

his fine work locating and analysing MacNeice's intellectual background, Ireland is at best a background presence in McKinnon's study, mostly in the biographical opening chapter, or in passing in a discussion of the role of 'Ulster fanaticism' in the 'Challenge of the Absolute'<sup>88</sup>. This aspect of his work and life would not find proper resolution for years to come.

Work by a generation of critics like Terence Brown in the 1970s were working to make MacNeice's Irish contexts harder to ignore, however. In an essay in *Studies* in 1970, Brown published his own brief retrospective on MacNeice's career, and left no confusion about the centrality of this difficult and often embittered relationship with the country and society of his early life:

Spending most of his adult life abroad, MacNeice always viewed Ireland with a nostalgia, a love, which did not blind him to the crass awfulness of much in contemporary Irish society [...] His poems on Ireland have the bitter, disillusioned note of the genuine exile, anger and regret are mixed in equal proportions.<sup>89</sup>

According to Brown, Ireland was not only the place of the poet's first emotional trauma in his mother's early passing – 'Perhaps he could never trust experience again'<sup>90</sup> – but from the darkness of the gaslit rectory and the 'evil iron / Siren'<sup>91</sup> of the church bells. This became a wellspring for one of the most important dialectics in his work, which Brown describes here as poetry that 'capture[s] the very feel of existence, its surfaces and glitter, is also a poetry where images of death, nothingness, horrible fixed stasis and petrification,

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<sup>88</sup> Ibid, 87.

<sup>89</sup> Brown, "The Poetry of Louis MacNeice 1907-1963", *Studies: An Irish Quarterly Review*, Vol. 59, No. 239, (Autumn 1970), 254.

<sup>90</sup> Ibid, 254.

<sup>91</sup> MacNeice, *Collected Poems*, 84.

threaten to destroy or freeze the dynamic, free movement of the world'<sup>92</sup>. In MacNeice's poetry value is generated out of the very transience of sensory life, the knowledge that the huge roses stand so close to the snow's 'white radiance of eternal emptiness'<sup>93</sup>. Just as importantly, however, is Brown's recognition that the roses in 'Snow'<sup>94</sup> are not mere abstractions, the necessary busywork to the poem's true intellectual investigation. At a basic level, the shock of sensory overload provoked by the roses recreated by the poem's odd sentence structure and breathless syntax is the poem's punctum; drawing out ideas about transience and what it means to be an ambulatory sensorium is deeply encoded in the text, but it is not the final word in the reader's experience. Brown identifies this as a characteristic habit of MacNeice's aesthetic: present in the poem's foundations are the results of a lifetime of existential questioning about the nature of consciousness and the strangeness of perception, but the priority is the text, the pleasing object no amount of philosophising can supersede. As Muldoon noted by drawing Frost into MacNeice's orbit, neither poet valued a poem that existed solely in the mind.

Brown expands on the principles established in this essay in his book-length study *Sceptical Vision* in 1975. From the outset, Brown sets out to liberate MacNeice from the opinions and schools of thought of his contemporaries, beginning with Anthony Thwaite's evaluation: 'he is never boring, he is an excellent craftsman [...] But he seldom has much depth or penetration, and his general lightness of tone is more that of the professional entertainer'<sup>95</sup>. Like McKinnon, Brown also gives ample time to a discussion of MacNeice's childhood and early adulthood, exploring in particular the role played by his peer group at

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<sup>92</sup> Brown, 263-4.

<sup>93</sup> Ibid, 265.

<sup>94</sup> MacNeice, *Collected Poems*, 35.

<sup>95</sup> quoted in Brown, *Sceptical Vision*, 1.

Oxford. Brown critiques their political ideals as ultimately subject to the winds of fashion, where MacNeice's were more deeply embodied:

The roots of his scepticism were, it seems, deeper and more personal than they were for some of his contemporaries. [...] MacNeice's scepticism [...] was by the thirties too settled an element in his make-up to allow for any simplistic commitment to a teleology of history, or to a promised future of social bliss.<sup>96</sup>

Brown attributes the differences in attitude between MacNeice and his peers in no small part to the socially conscious non-conformism of the poet's father, John Frederick MacNeice, an Anglican rector (later Bishop of Down, Connor and Dromore) and Connemara-born supporter of Irish self-determination. *Sceptical Vision* affords great sympathy and dignity to an individual Brown seems to keenly admire, noting Bishop MacNeice's 'broad sympathies; he was intelligent, courageous, outspoken'; that '[h]is Nationalism was coherently intellectual as well as deeply felt', and '[his] direct strong-mindedness and blunt honesty [...] allowed him to cut through the sectarian self-interest of the Irish Churches with a controlled eloquence that established his position as a very remarkable Irish churchman indeed'<sup>97</sup>. Given such an imposing role model, one can hardly fault young Louis for living somewhat in awe, for assigning to his father the qualities of a symbol as well as a mundane parent. In crossing the Irish Sea MacNeice 'left one era for another', that the 'ostentatiously modern poetic surfaces'<sup>98</sup> in his work are a direct response to the lived experience of an older, bleaker and more puritan world; the roses, perhaps, of the modern and the snow of the totalising culture closer to home. Brown suggests this break, however necessary for the spiritual survival of a highly sensitive

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<sup>96</sup> Ibid, 17.

<sup>97</sup> Ibid, 18-9.

<sup>98</sup> Ibid, 20.

individual, would have been a profoundly serious and painful experience, one that seems to have taken the young MacNeice many years to fully comprehend and sublimate into a mature philosophy. In a passage quoted by Brown from *The Strings Are False*, MacNeice evinces something between envy and grudging respect:

I realised that his life, though not by any stretch of the imagination a life for me, was more all of a piece, more purposeful, more satisfactory to himself and perhaps to others than the lives of most people I knew<sup>99</sup>

This tension between a desire for the inner peace of moral certainty and the knowledge of its falsehood is present throughout MacNeice's work, not least Canto XVI of *Autumn*

*Journal*:

And I envy the intransigence of my own  
Countrymen who shoot to kill and never  
See the victim's face become their own  
Or find his motive sabotage their motives.<sup>100</sup>

As Brown notes, this specific dynamic between faith in the unseen and the observable world animates MacNeice's study, *The Poetry of W.B. Yeats*, the first to be published after Yeats' passing. Here, MacNeice explores the elder statesman's deeply idiosyncratic and personal mythology, its consciously artificial systems of belief, with respect and curiosity. He cannot quite put his faith in a system no less constructed and untenable than that followed so joyfully by his father, and the study concludes with the directive: 'Go thou and do otherwise'<sup>101</sup>. Though, like Yeats, the young MacNeice fabricated a pantheon to help explain himself, only partly ironically drawing on figures like Conchubar MacNessa and Saint Brandan<sup>102</sup>, he came to argue that Yeats 'misrepresented facts in order to square them with

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<sup>99</sup> MacNeice, *The Strings Are False*, 233, quoted in Brown, *Sceptical Vision*, 22.

<sup>100</sup> MacNeice, *Collected Poems*, 137.

<sup>101</sup> MacNeice, *The Poetry of W.B. Yeats*, 232.

<sup>102</sup> quoted in McKinnon, 5.

his belief<sup>103</sup>, putting his adopted genealogies away with other childish things. Crucially, however, MacNeice never considered nihilism a worthwhile, or even viable philosophical stance: given that, as he argued in the essay 'Broken Windows', in writing a poem a new thing is created, any created thing is essentially a positive gesture, therefore even 'a poem in praise of suicide is an act of homage to life'<sup>104</sup>. As Brown argues, 'Equally his mind could not deny the need for belief, in life and in art. A developed sense of duty, perhaps even guilt, would also have forbidden a retreat into a despairing nihilism'<sup>105</sup>. Brown here pulls on a fundamental thread in MacNeice's work, that even his most existentially anxious poems are underwritten by a certain indefatigability, if only in the joy of the sensory, or in the love poems that Michael Longley locates at the core of MacNeice's oeuvre. As in his radio plays, particularly *The Dark Tower*, knowledge that the quest will end in failure does not forbid the attempt; the attempt is everything.

The opening chapters of *Sceptical Vision* outline a Romantic sensibility subject to an uncommon amount of pressure to abide by the rules of lived reality. The apostrophe to mythical Ireland in 'Western Landscape'<sup>106</sup>, for example, is constrained by his fundamental understanding that such escapism is a 'false coin', that the ecstatic mysticism of Keats satirised in 'The Drunkard' is at some level 'temporary self-induced beatification'<sup>107</sup>. In the chapter 'The Modern Sensibility', Brown depicts this dynamic in reverse, an artist frustrated by the automation and mass-production of life under modern capitalism, and the failure of language to hold reality to account. Beckett is cited as a crucial influence in MacNeice's use of stock phrase and cliché, sometimes to revitalise language, as in 'Homage to Clichés'<sup>108</sup>,

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<sup>103</sup> Ibid, 231.

<sup>104</sup> MacNeice, *Selected Prose of Louis MacNeice*, 138.

<sup>105</sup> Brown, 26.

<sup>106</sup> MacNeice, *Collected Poems*, 255.

<sup>107</sup> Brown, 37.

<sup>108</sup> MacNeice, 59.

sometimes to dramatize its failure, as in the disturbing miscommunications of MacNeice's late work. This sense of isolation and dismay is framed by Brown in response to the mass-production and rapid urbanisation of the twentieth century, 'the contingency of the world and of the insurmountable duality in man's relation to his environment'<sup>109</sup>. Similarly, the proliferation of windows in MacNeice's work indicative of the observer's alienation from his surroundings, simultaneously within and removed from the natural world. Dismay about the caged self or the self behind glass can only hold dramatic tension if the poem considers true communion a possibility. With that in mind, Brown raises a valuable point when he discusses MacNeice's fear of time, that the terror in MacNeice's late work is unique among his peers. Brown contrasts Dylan Thomas' 'Do not go gentle into that good night' with MacNeice's 'The Slow Starter'<sup>110</sup>, 'Soap Suds'<sup>111</sup> or 'The Habits'<sup>112</sup>, concluding that 'few have written with the note of barely-controlled desperation that informs some of MacNeice's poems on time'<sup>113</sup>; though Thomas' villanelle explores similar ideas about doomed defiance in the face of death, it retains a lyrical posture, its orderly rhythms, fixed form and deeply emotive images, its 'sun in flight', 'blind eyes [that] blaze like meteors'. Brown argues that the suffocating pessimism in MacNeice's late work is partly due to his incapacity to be comforted by Romantic notions of oneness with the cycles of the natural world or uplifting flights of emotion, 'not because the poet is not tempted by their answers, but because he simply does not believe that the real, objective world can be re-created or dismissed so easily'. Even in the face of death MacNeice cannot turn away from the evidence of his senses, the 'crass ugliness of the world, the incredible folly of men'<sup>114</sup>.

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<sup>109</sup> Brown, 59.

<sup>110</sup> MacNeice, 478.

<sup>111</sup> Ibid, 571.

<sup>112</sup> Ibid, 534.

<sup>113</sup> Brown, 66.

<sup>114</sup> Ibid, 76.

Despite all this, MacNeice's final poem, 'Thalassa'<sup>115</sup>, is given the last word in the chapter, a stoical, hard-headed and ultimately life-affirming poem. The quest for perpetual questing in 'Thalassa' is a minor thread in McKinnon's work that Brown re-situates at the heart of MacNeice's work. In *Varieties of Parable* MacNeice discusses the transformative power of traditional forms of storytelling: '[t]he great majority of folk tales include journeys, sometimes on sea, more often on land, and the quest which in such stories is usually aimed at finding a fortune or a bride can become in other hands the Quest of the Grail or the City of Zion'<sup>116</sup>. This emphasis not only on the physical movement proscribed by the quest-journey, but the mutability of the quest itself; simply put, the thing sought in MacNeice's poetry is rarely the thing found. In *The Strings are False*, MacNeice distinguishes between these types of movement as '*energeia* (significant and absolute movement) and *kinesis* (movement which is merely relative)'<sup>117</sup>, and mentions Aristotle's supposition that the highest grade of *kinesis* is that in which the mind considers only itself, a kind of perfect solipsism. For MacNeice, this is 'Complete fusion of subject and object; a full stop; death'<sup>118</sup>, the petrification that he feared above all things. Brown traces the development of this idea via MacNeice's imagery: in his early career details have value in and of themselves, free of correspondence to the outside world and its contexts, which Brown argues 'suggests, and may be the result of, a scepticism of even the poem's ability to create order, pattern and meaning of the flux of experience'<sup>119</sup>. Later, this impulse to surprise and delight and disrupt (for example, 'the trams like vast sarcophagi move' in 'Birmingham'<sup>120</sup>) gives way to a more precise organisation, as Brown has it, 'by building a

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<sup>115</sup> MacNeice, 546.

<sup>116</sup> MacNeice, *Varieties of Parable*, 12.

<sup>117</sup> MacNeice, *The Strings are False*, 125-6.

<sup>118</sup> *Ibid*, 126.

<sup>119</sup> Brown, *Sceptical Vision*, 129.

<sup>120</sup> MacNeice, *Collected Poems*, 22.



poem round a central rational trope [...] by trying to organise the images of a poem with regard to the logic of the imagination, the strange yet unifying logic of dreams'<sup>121</sup>. At the same time, MacNeice is aware of the nature of the poem as a sculpted object, a subjective fiction; in MacNeice's own terms, 'the poem as special world directs the reader's attention away from the poem as communication about the real world'<sup>122</sup>. In this sense, the self-conscious artificiality of the poem is a direct response to MacNeice's pessimism about saying anything coherent about reality at large; by restricting 'reality' to the closed system of the poem's 'special world', both the poet's ambitions and limitations are contained, and a conditional, positive statement may, at least, be attempted.

Given this all-encompassing system of measures and counter-measures, it is perhaps understandable why so many of his detractors considered MacNeice 'uncommitted'. Even MacNeice's most politically minded work, *Autumn Journal*, was dismissed by Julian Symons as 'The Bourgeois's Progress', while Samuel Hynes critiqued MacNeice's claims to the role of 'common man' as 'a kind of substitute for political commitment'<sup>123</sup>. Brown argues that this is the reserve of a good lecturer, who 'has a wide command of his subject and [...] is trying to select his words honestly so as not to misrepresent the case'<sup>124</sup>; that if he is evasive, it suggests 'a poet who only rarely commits himself and who is always aware that there may be much else to said on a subject, that there are always at least two points of view'<sup>125</sup>. Interpreting the world as he did, MacNeice could never have arrogated the authority of Yeats or even Auden; his understanding of an endlessly changing and incomprehensible reality made any attempt at the final,

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<sup>121</sup> Brown, *Sceptical Vision*, 136.

<sup>122</sup> Ibid, 182.

<sup>123</sup> cited in Longley, *Louis MacNeice: A Critical Study*, 61.

<sup>124</sup> Ibid, 188.

<sup>125</sup> Ibid, 193.

authoritative statement a lost cause, and, perhaps more crucially, a dishonest venture. What MacNeice takes from Beckett is the ability to hardwire this failure into his aesthetic philosophy, to take as a given (even a prerequisite) the poem's ultimate shortcoming, and to draw great imaginative strength by defying such insurmountable odds. *Sceptical Vision* was a vital turning point in re-aligning critical understanding of MacNeice's work, of integrating his dazzling surfaces and their philosophical underpinnings into a coherent unity; it was the first study to regard him not as a failed 'major poet' but as one for whom the role of 'major poet' was fundamentally untenable, belonging as it did to a kind of dreamworld in which his art – which was grounded in and drew inspiration from the mundane, the everyday, the small anxieties of 'small clerks' – could not survive.

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By the time Edna Longley published *Poetry in the Wars*, MacNeice is presented as an 'organic' alternative to the 'mechanism' of the Marxist theories of historical and personal contexts given by Stan Smith; Longley approvingly quotes from MacNeice's *The Poetry of W.B. Yeats* for its provision of 'room for artistic manoeuvre':

[P]oetry is [...] a separate self; in the same way a living animal is an individual although it is on one hand conditioned by heredity and environment and the laws of nature in general and on the other hand has a function outside itself, is a link in a chain.<sup>126</sup>

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<sup>126</sup> quoted in Longley, Edna, *Poetry in the Wars*, 9-10.

Longley sketches links of political non-commitment (perhaps non-partisanship) from Edward Thomas to the first 'generation' of Northern Irish poets via the exemplary scepticism of MacNeice. Longley upholds the arguments of McKinnon and Brown by locating of the origins of the poet's philosophical scepticism in an aversion to 'Irish fanaticisms' and suggests his rejection of simple binaries had been successfully passed on to his 'successors'. Longley is firmly of the opinion that 'poets themselves carry out the task of "deconstruction" more rapidly and radically than critics'<sup>127</sup>; in accordance with her rejection of Marxism's capacity to describe the movements and evolutions of art, criticism is better suited for analysing existing art than attempting to foresee the unwritten. This is certainly consistent with the narrative of MacNeice's posthumous reputation, the generation of critics who undervalued his work; Longley elaborates on this process by examining the critics slow to acknowledge his belonging not only to the English canon but the Irish. In naming Mahon, Michael Longley and Muldoon as MacNeice's 'successors', a generation of Northern Irish poetry is linked to the canon of twentieth century poetry, in an implicitly non-conformist branch of that tradition. Muldoon's non-conformism is given special attention, perhaps due to his own contribution to MacNeice's legacy in *The Faber Book of Contemporary Irish Poetry*, which positions MacNeice as a founding father alongside Patrick Kavanagh. In lieu of an introductory essay, Muldoon features a transcript from an interview in which MacNeice rejects notions of 'blood'-based Irishness<sup>128</sup>, of systematised definitions of nationality; Muldoon's off-kilter editorship is examined in closer detail in the chapter focusing specifically on his work.

Imaginative conceptions and political sketches of Ireland are to the fore in *Poetry in The Wars'* chapter on *Autumn Journal*, originally published in *The Honest Ulsterman* in

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<sup>127</sup> Ibid, 14.

<sup>128</sup> Muldoon, *Faber Book of Contemporary Irish Poetry*, Introduction.

1983, and further explored in Longley's *Louis MacNeice: A Critical Study*. Here, Longley argues:

It is as if section XVI surfaces from the subconscious of *Autumn Journal* to interpret its whole political and moral stance. By embodying the deadly alternative to liberal or tragic 'doubt', MacNeice rescues it from charges of weakness.<sup>129</sup>

In *Autumn Journal*, Ireland serves as a case study on the kind of moralist and categorical thinking taking place in the time of the Munich Agreement, one that ties together the 'blank invective'<sup>130</sup>, the imperative of the 'howling radio' that:

[We] must, we suppose, become uncritical, vindictive,  
And must, in order to beat  
The enemy, model ourselves upon the enemy<sup>131</sup>

Here MacNeice, in the polite, respectable tones of the classically trained rhetorician, implicates the British demand for unity and obedience as the same species of totalitarianism it would defeat; the manner of the victory, the poem suggests, is as crucial as victory itself. Part of *Autumn Journal's* strength, however, is in MacNeice's ability to acknowledge and contextualise his role, responsibility and culpability in the system the poem so dynamically lays open to critical examination. As Longley notes:

MacNeice does not assume the Yeatsian character of the artist or 'solitary soul' as tragic hero. He inhabits – whether as citizen, common man, Everyman or individual – what he says Yeats avoids, 'flux, the sphere of the realist proper'.<sup>132</sup>

Expecting a public-schooled Oxbridge graduate and BBC employee to convincingly play the 'common man' is a stretch, and that the poem does achieve a remarkable level of sustained

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<sup>129</sup> Ibid, 90.

<sup>130</sup> MacNeice, *Collected Poems*, 113.

<sup>131</sup> Ibid, 116.

<sup>132</sup> Longley, *Poetry in the Wars*, 83.

empathy – the questionable assertion ‘If it were not for Lit. Hum. I might be climbing / A ladder with a hod’ aside –is testament to MacNeice’s frankness about his education and relative economic comfort, the acknowledgement of his distance from most ‘common’ citizens. Longley is astute, however, in indicating the somewhat unconvincing Utopianism that creeps into the final section:

Where life is a choice of instruments and none  
Is debarred his natural music [...]  
Where the altars of sheer power and mere profit  
Have fallen to disuse [...]  
Where the individual, no longer squandered  
In self-assertion, works with the rest<sup>133</sup>

In MacNeice’s defence, this passage is carefully framed as a dream sequence, and given its arrival at the close of one of poetry’s most unflinching contemporary social commentaries, a little Parnassianism could perhaps be excused. It is noticeable that the lines:

And sleep, may various and conflicting  
Selves I have so long endured,  
Sleep in Asclepius’ temple  
And wake cured

bear more than a passing resemblance to MacNeice’s ‘Thalassa’:

You know the worst: your wills are fickle,  
Your values blurred, your hearts impure  
And your past life a ruined church -  
But let your poison be your cure.<sup>134</sup>

If the tonal and imagistic similarities are intentional – if Asclepius’ temple is indeed a species of ruined church – the latter poem might be read as addressing MacNeice’s various ‘selves’ as much as the indeterminate ‘you’ of Canto XXIV’s poetic address. What the two pieces certainly share is a sense of departure, the crossing of one Rubicon or another. As Longley has it, ‘the process of growth that *Autumn Journal* recommends takes place within

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<sup>133</sup> MacNeice, *Collected Poems*, 164.

<sup>134</sup> *Ibid*, 783.

it [...] a mixture of responsiveness and activity: the poet being shaped and shaping, man-in-history and history-in-man'<sup>135</sup>. Longley's critiques of MacNeice's Irishness and of the political dynamics at work in his poems, which were never more salient than in *Autumn Journal*, further open up the points of entry into his oeuvre.

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In the introduction to 1988's *Louis MacNeice: A Critical Study*, Edna Longley gives a survey of MacNeice's critical reputation, rejecting the 1960s tendency of reading 'conflicts explored by the poetry as literal problems of the poet himself', and approving of McKinnon and Brown's efforts to 'make amends to the metaphysical seriousness of MacNeice's poetry'<sup>136</sup>. Longley builds on previous explorations of his Irishness, asserting that it is 'fundamental to his poetry, [and] has often been invisible to English and American critics, or regarded merely as a decorative Celtic fringe'<sup>137</sup>. The study begins with a chapter titled, 'Ireland, My Ireland', in which Longley follows the poet's lead in regarding his childhood in Carrickfergus as the wellspring of his mature poetry; as the first appendix in *The Strings Are False* attests, 'In the beginning was Irish rain and [...] the cemetery the other side of the hawthorn hedge'<sup>138</sup>. Longley argues that this dynamic image of the grave hiding behind the grove spans his entire career. Longley also locates here the origins of MacNeice's religious doubt, concurrent with his fear of his father's 'conspiracy with God'<sup>139</sup> and a precocious awareness of sin and guilt. In 1910, MacNeice's mother developed a 'gynaecological

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<sup>135</sup> Longley, *Poetry in the Wars*, 93.

<sup>136</sup> Longley, *Louis MacNeice: A Critical Study*, x.

<sup>137</sup> *Ibid*, xii.

<sup>138</sup> MacNeice, *The Strings Are False*, 216.

<sup>139</sup> *Ibid*, 38.

complaint which occasioned intermittent attacks of illness,' then after a successful operation developed 'an agitated melancholia'<sup>140</sup>, and left the family home for treatment. While in care she contracted tuberculosis and died in early 1914. According to his sister this sudden, disturbing and apparently arbitrary loss 'may have been the chief factor which caused Louis's memories of childhood to be so sad and sometimes so bitter'<sup>141</sup>. Longley connects these events to the persistent atmosphere of bereavement in MacNeice's work, which 'conditions the role not only of women and love [...] but also father-figures and religion', and the 'inability of prayers to mitigate sadness'<sup>142</sup>. Longley expands on Terence Brown's assertion that MacNeice's work thrives on dialectical tensions, and the physical and emotional darkness of the rectory is countered by the constantly changing light of his childhood landscapes:

An Irish landscape is capable of pantomimic transformation scenes; one moment it will be desolate, dead, unrelieved monotone, the next it will be an indescribably shifting pattern of prismatic light.<sup>143</sup>

This combination of light and flux (MacNeice's touchstone word denoting constant change), is embraced as an 'inclusive symbolism for all the positives'<sup>144</sup>, and the opposite of (perhaps antidote to) the stone obelisks of the rectory cemetery, the petrification that remained an emblem of fear throughout his work. Longley explores in depth the symbolic power light and darkness possess in MacNeice's work, the political and cultural evils they describe, and nowhere in MacNeice's work are these contrasts more keenly felt than in Ireland. It's noteworthy that the two pieces Longley draws attention to, a passage from 'Personal

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<sup>140</sup> Ibid, n.42.

<sup>141</sup> Ibid, n.43.

<sup>142</sup> Longley, *Louis MacNeice: A Critical Study*, 10.

<sup>143</sup> MacNeice, *The Poetry of W.B. Yeats*, 50.

<sup>144</sup> Longley, *Louis MacNeice: A Critical Study*, 11.

Digression' in *Zoo* and section XVI of *Autumn Journal*, are so preoccupied with light and its absence. In the former, the adult MacNeice is 'delighted but outraged' that the Belfast of his memory and imagination is not confirmed by reality, that the Black Mountain overlooking the west of the city was 'not black, but a luminous grey-blue'<sup>145</sup>. This reconfiguration of his visual memory coincides, a few sentences later, with his memory of the people of Ulster, who were not merely 'bigots, sadists [...] If they were lost, they were lost with a small 'l''<sup>146</sup>

In *Autumn Journal* XVI, the poet's home is figured as 'darkest Ulster', in which 'one read black where the other read white', in which 'the blots on the page are so black / That they cannot be covered with shamrock'. A section that begins 'Nightmare leaves fatigue' reaches a rhetorical fever pitch in its stress-dream of Orangism:

Drums on the haycock, drums on the harvest, *black*  
drums in the night shaking the windows:  
King William is riding his *white* horse back  
To the Boyne on a banner.  
Thousands of banners, thousands of *white*  
Horses, thousands of Williams  
Waving thousands of swords and ready to fight  
Till the *blue* sea turns to *orange*.<sup>147</sup> [emphasis mine]

The exact operation of colour in this passage is difficult to articulate, but what is clear is that it occupies key positions in the way these lines articulate their ideas. 'Black' and 'white' initiate their respective rhyming pairs, while the image of blue water bloodying into orange closes the scene. What is, perhaps, so powerful about these movements is how they toxify processes in MacNeice's writing that are usually positive. When one reads of darkness and the night, there is often a light source that partially counters it, as in 'Coda'<sup>148</sup> or

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<sup>145</sup> quoted in *Ibid*, 20.

<sup>146</sup> quoted in *ibid*, 21.

<sup>147</sup> MacNeice, *Collected Poems*, 132.

<sup>148</sup> *Ibid*, 546.



'Autobiography'<sup>149</sup>; the stars might be distant and the sun might be chilly, but they mark a turning point against overwhelming emptiness. Here, the literal night-mares are threatening, ghostly and monstrous, their whiteness a continuation of the evil drumming, not a refutation. Similarly, the kaleidoscopic movement of blue to orange via the unwritten blood red has nothing of the euphoric 'fuschia hedges', 'red bog-grass', 'vivid chequer of the Antrim hills' and 'breathing gold' of 'Train to Dublin'<sup>150</sup>. In section XVI, Longley identifies a point in which structural oppressions ('A culture built upon profit; / Free speech nipped in the bud, / The minority always guilty') constitute a spiritual failure. As Longley has it:

That indictment summarizes unemployment, inequality, an off-shore economy,  
irresponsible capitalism [...] emphasizes the gulf between 'minority' and majority<sup>151</sup>.

MacNeice's analyses are far from perfect, and it's clear from the section's onrushing syntax that precision is sometimes sacrificed for speed. In the text, righteous anger is occasionally directed at emblematic individuals ('The shawled woman weeping at the garish altar') rather than the larger forces directing patterns of behaviour. What is clear, Longley argues, is that MacNeice regards the problems of Orangeman and 'Kathleen ni Houlihan' to be a single, interlinked neurosis, 'Indeed his poetry unifies the country *de facto* by its panoramic method, its reiteration of shared sins'<sup>152</sup>. What goes some way toward salvaging the section's political value, however, is in MacNeice's characteristic recognition of his own complicity in the worst of these sins, in swallowing some of Ireland's in-house narratives:

partly because Ireland is small enough  
to still be thought of with a family feeling [...]  
that on this stage with luck a man

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<sup>149</sup> Ibid, 183.

<sup>150</sup> Ibid, 27.

<sup>151</sup> Longley, *Louis MacNeice: A Critical Study*, 21.

<sup>152</sup> Ibid, 22.

might see the end of one particular action.  
It is self-deception of course<sup>153</sup>

As Brown noted, the failure of language to accurately represent reality is a major philosophical concern in MacNeice's work. The section's examination of nation-building rhetoric is one of MacNeice's most salient dialogues with Yeats, in particular with his 'man of action' cited in the section's second line, and the question of political engagement that dogs *Autumn Journal* and much of MacNeice's poetry in the following years. Longley here contextualises MacNeice within the Irish poetic canon, as much as in relation to twentieth century poetry in general: 'his different brand of 'Anglo-Irish' hybridisation, his half-way house between the conditions of Anglo-Irishman and Ulster Protestant' putting him in a similar 'broad cultural orientation'<sup>154</sup> as Yeats himself. Longley also emphasises the poets' shared conception of ancestral western Ireland as a place which 'could represent, besides primordial unity, a clean slate where old conflicts might be resolved and new definitions founded'<sup>155</sup>. While an optimistic position the poet certainly seems to have shared, this formulation drew criticism for simplifying or mythologizing a real-world context. In a review of *Poetry in the Wars*, Hugh Maxton was disappointed by Longley's depiction of MacNeice's contemporary Ireland, that it 'is not established by any extensive enquiry into its social, political, economic or cultural actuality,' and that basic binarisms like 'North and South, Protestant and Catholic' present a 'small but systemic flaw'<sup>156</sup>. Maxton is correct to flag up this issue, and it is true that MacNeice himself, while a skilful observer of individuals or cultures, rarely incorporates what might be considered structural analysis into his work. Some of his lapses into essentialism may have been given a pass in Longley's study as their thematic import – in this case the recurrent narrative of escape from home and inevitable

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<sup>153</sup> MacNeice, *Collected Poems*, 139.

<sup>154</sup> Longley, *Louis MacNeice: A Critical Study*, 28.

<sup>155</sup> *Ibid*, 29.

<sup>156</sup> Maxton, Hugh, "Packaging MacNeice", *Books Ireland*, No. 136 (November 1989), 180.

return – is allowed to overshadow their social context. MacNeice’s poetry about Ireland, particularly ‘Western Landscape’<sup>157</sup>, ‘Valediction’<sup>158</sup> and to a large extent *Autumn Journal* XVI, Longley reads, in part, as covert versions of Saint Brandan’s quest narrative, its navigation out into the unknown and eventual circling back. Brandan’s voyages obsessed MacNeice<sup>159</sup>, and the saint’s setting forth in a stone boat metaphorically blends water-borne flux and stony petrification, two poles of MacNeice’s imagination. The tension in these poems is often drawn from precisely this dilemma: the viscerally felt lure of escapism and the ultimate responsibility of return. The question is discussed at length in ‘Eclogue from Iceland’<sup>160</sup>, where another ‘man of action’, the ‘doomed tough’ Grettir, advises Ryan and Craven (MacNeice and Auden’s lightly-veiled stand-ins) to return where they are needed, ‘Minute your gesture but it must be made - / Your hazard, your act of defiance and hymn of hate’<sup>161</sup>. Although far lighter and more self-effacing in tone than any of the self-quarrels of Yeats, Grettir is given the last word, itself a kind of ‘shooting straight’ to counter the ‘cause of crooked thinking’ Ryan is running from, ‘a nation / Built upon violence and morose vendettas’. The poem articulates a political position as clear as any in MacNeice’s oeuvre: unprincipled action must be countered with principled action, however doomed the attempt, however minute the gesture. Longley contextualises *Autumn Journal* within MacNeice’s ongoing artistic development, and frames the collection as an answer to Geoffrey Grigson’s call for ‘not the fanatic but the critical moralist’, characterised by ‘Rilke’s loneliness *surrounded by everything*, thorough, exact, without slovenliness, impressionable, and honest’<sup>162</sup>. *Autumn Journal* certainly seems to fit the bill. Longley praises MacNeice’s

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<sup>157</sup> MacNeice, *Collected Poems*, 255.

<sup>158</sup> *Ibid*, 52.

<sup>159</sup> Longley, *Louis MacNeice: A Critical Study*, 30.

<sup>160</sup> MacNeice, 40.

<sup>161</sup> *Ibid*, 81.

<sup>162</sup> Grigson, *New Verse*, (Autumn, 1938), quoted in Longley, *Louis MacNeice: A Critical Study*, 61.

poem for striking repeated blows to the moral prevarication of conservative *laissez-faire* as a manner of historical ignorance, and figures the book as a work of common-ground ethical humanism, an integration of the personal and the social, centred around the poet's ability to 'leave the poem in a state of both aesthetic equilibrium and historical transit'<sup>163</sup>. Though suspicious of 'the mere Utopia'<sup>164</sup>, MacNeice constructs a form sufficiently flexible to approach ideas about an ideal society without losing sight of the forces arrayed against it.

Longley is kind to MacNeice's mid-career 'attack of wordiness'<sup>165</sup> in the chapter 'Colour and Meaning', expanding on Brown's argument that this fallow period in the late forties and fifties was a vital one for MacNeice's working out of fundamental aesthetic questions, his drawn-out movement away from the documentarian and towards the oneiric, reversing the demands of *Modern Poetry* with his critical essays in *Varieties of Parable*:

In the 1930's 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<sup>166</sup>

Longley also stresses the importance of the essay 'Experiences with Images' (1949), in which MacNeice works out in prose what was struggling to bear fruit in verse. In this, MacNeice deconstructs some of the techniques that would leave his work meandering in search of a vital theme, or, as Longley has it: 'the thirties verbal mill goes on loosely grinding without its grist'<sup>167</sup>. MacNeice's essay suggests that the renewed lyrical force of his late work had its roots in principles forged much earlier:

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<sup>163</sup> Ibid, 76.

<sup>164</sup> MacNeice, *Collected Poems*, 134.

<sup>165</sup> Longley, *Louis MacNeice: A Critical Study*, 114.

<sup>166</sup> MacNeice, *Varieties of Parable*, 8.

<sup>167</sup> Longley, *Louis MacNeice: A Critical Study*, 114.

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.<sup>168</sup>

Ten years later, MacNeice would deal more successfully with ‘the fundamental metaphysical paradox that troubles the conscience of [his] poetry: how can pattern be achieved without stasis, without falsely systematizing, without doing violence to what a letter of 1930 calls ‘Lots of lovely particulars’?’<sup>169</sup>. In the closing chapter Longley reinforces the arguments of both McKinnon and Brown in her assertion that MacNeice was hostile to *a priori* systems of thought, but adds that ‘in a sense poetry was itself to the answer to the problem of monism versus pluralism or of the ideal versus the real’<sup>170</sup>. A descent into the fallible world of language is itself a kind of fulfilment of responsibility, as MacNeice understands of the clowns in Beckett’s plays: ‘to have failed in living implies certain values in living [...] As with any other blasphemy, the other side of the coin is an act of homage’<sup>171</sup>. Longley also stresses a career-spanning dialogue with Yeats, from the early poem ‘Death of a Prominent Business Man’ whose ‘soul had gone to taste the air / Away on the hills again’<sup>172</sup> to his championship of the Crazy Jane poems in *The Poetry of W.B. Yeats*. Longley’s study is a vital one in the narrative of MacNeice’s critical stature; besides its implicit positioning of the poet as being both in dialogue with Yeats and deserving of similar critical attention, it emphasises the specifically Irish contexts in which MacNeice’s oeuvre was

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<sup>168</sup> MacNeice, “Experiences with Images”, *Selected Literary Criticism*, 162.

<sup>169</sup> Longley, *Louis MacNeice: A Critical Study*, 143.

<sup>170</sup> *Ibid*, 144.

<sup>171</sup> MacNeice, *Varieties of Parable*, 142.

<sup>172</sup> quoted in Longley, *Louis MacNeice: A Critical Study*, 165.

created, builds on the work of previous critics in its interrogation of the power dynamics between the poet-as-social-commentator and the poet-within-society, and frames his career as a fluid, if inconsistent unity, rather than a series of discrete 'eras'. Though, like Maxton, revisiting and deconstructing some of Longley's ideas is crucial in forming nuanced responses to a deeply complex and conflicted oeuvre, her thinking about MacNeice's poetry remains the gold standard; even thirty years on from her study, her contributions to the field cannot be overestimated.

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This very petition for acceptance to the Irish canon, however, is challenged early and often in Peter McDonald's *Louis MacNeice: The Poet in his Contexts* (1991). McDonald rejects pigeonholing 'games of evaluation' which leave the poet hemmed in on one side by 'the English myth of the 1930s, with all its built-in parabolic meaning for the relation between artist and politics', and on the other by 'the Irish myth of Irishness, with its menacing, but ultimately empty, phantom of national 'identity'.'<sup>173</sup> What sets McDonald on edge is not a failure to gain acceptance within the poet's proper traditions, but the idea that he might be an exalted part of any tradition at all. MacNeice's canonical significance, argues McDonald, lies not in his admittance to this club or that, but to the distinctly anti-canonical forces within his work, the streak of anti-authoritarian thought and opposition to received systems. In this sense he agrees with Longley's bid to give 'the poet a stake in the country and the country a stake in the poet'<sup>174</sup>, by recognising that MacNeice endures, or perhaps

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<sup>173</sup> McDonald, *Poet in his Contexts*, 1.

<sup>174</sup> Longley, *Louis MacNeice: A Critical Study*, 34.

enjoys, 'at best a resident alien status in both'<sup>175</sup>. The poem 'Valediction'<sup>176</sup> is a case in point. Here, while spinning out MacNeice's personal attachment to his vision of Ireland, however unwilling or compromised it might be, McDonald rejects compartmentalising the poem as solely 'Irish' in theme. He argues that the poem functions 'as a kind of *exemplum* for the difficulties encountered in untangling past and present within a voice that aspires to individuality'<sup>177</sup>. While it is certainly true that there are no simple MacNeice poems after his juvenilia and so there should accordingly be no simple readings, this seems a move too far in the opposite direction, overlooking the poem's manifest content and the very clear, very specific issues that the poet explores, of Irish self-definition through:

Columba Kevin and briny Brandan the accepted names,  
Wolfe Tone and Grattan and Michael Collins the accepted names<sup>178</sup>

As Longley made clear, Brandan is a figure who obsessed MacNeice, and his presence in this list is a inwardly as well as outwardly directed rebuke; when he argues that 'the woven figure cannot undo its thread', the line has such power because it is a continuation of the thought that 'Ireland is / A gallery of fake tapestries'. If the nation's self is thinly manufactured then not only is the poet's but also the poet's attempt to disentangle himself from it. 'Valediction' can certainly be read as an opposition to hollow cultural movements at large, but to object to its categorisation as a poem specifically about Ireland leaves precious little besides.

The study is exceptional, however, when McDonald addresses the ways in which MacNeice's poems truly did stump his critics, analysing responses to MacNeice's *Poems* (1935) that range from praise for his 'anti-communism', and commitment only to 'pure

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<sup>175</sup> McDonald, 8.

<sup>176</sup> MacNeice, *Collected Poems*, 52.

<sup>177</sup> *Ibid*, 27.

<sup>178</sup> *Ibid*, 53.

poetry', to Geoffrey Grigson's somewhat more measured placement of MacNeice 'next in importance to Auden in spite of politicians in criticism who can only see merit under immediate flag-poles'<sup>179</sup>. This analysis of a critical culture eager for work that embodied rather than described its politics is vital scene-setting for McDonald's insightful reading of *Autumn Journal*. MacNeice's analysis both of the self in isolation and the self within society frames a federation of individuals as the ultimate political good, a plurality of attitudes in stark contrast to the monoliths the poet identified as rising amongst his own culture: '[We] must, we suppose, become uncritical, vindictive, / And must, in order to beat / The enemy, model ourselves upon the enemy'. McDonald argues:

This is a crucial distinction, for it rules out the 'pure' individual, who is defined simply in relation to what the self can control [...] The self relies upon otherness, and the blueprint for a just society is an enlargement of this openness, a socialized dialogue of self and soul in which one individual is incomplete without others<sup>180</sup>.

The invocation of Yeats' here (in 'self and soul'), whose social perspective McDonald later characterises as 'elevation of self over other'<sup>181</sup>, figures *Autumn Journal* as a powerful counterpoint.

In figuring this examination of the poetic self as MacNeice's central concern throughout the 1940s and 1950s, McDonald, like Longley before him, makes a convincing case for the thematic unity of the work of this period, suggesting that the 'painstakingly unlyrical poems'<sup>182</sup> of the middle stretch were an inevitable result of the poet's strategy of 'swing[ing] to and fro between descriptive or physical images (which are "correct" so far as

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<sup>179</sup> Quoted in McDonald, 11.

<sup>180</sup> Ibid, 83.

<sup>181</sup> Ibid, 102.

<sup>182</sup> Ibid, 130.



they go) and *faute de mieux* metaphysical, mythical or mystical images (which can never go far enough)' <sup>183</sup>. McDonald describes this process as testing the metaphysical question of the self against the thoroughly un-metaphysical conditions of social context. In the later poetry, McDonald divides MacNeice's parable writing into two 'shapes', the morality tale and the quest, arguing that many of the poems in *Solstices* and *The Burning Perch* contain fragments of both, but also that 'neither morality nor quest is capable any longer of the clear working-out in MacNeice's hands that the term 'parable' would suggest'<sup>184</sup>. The parable for MacNeice is 'both an unfinished idiom and one which is of itself unfinishable'<sup>185</sup>, the sheer phrasing of the question an achievement. Intriguingly, McDonald also draws attention to a proposition from Longley, that in MacNeice's late work, 'No absolute line can be drawn between the quest as search and the quest as self-pursuit'<sup>186</sup>, which McDonald renders as 'no distinction between 'personal' and 'abstract'; increasingly, each is implicit in the other'<sup>187</sup>. Both critical positions seem to weave in the work of contemporary poets, particularly Muldoon but also Michael Longley, figuring MacNeice as the forerunner of this integration of metaphysical self and physical society.

Given McDonald's earlier attitudes toward Irish elements in MacNeice's work, it's perhaps not surprising that the study's closing chapter, "The 'Ould Antimonies': Ireland", is not a satisfying conclusion. In a review, Terence Brown noted there was:

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<sup>183</sup> MacNeice, "Experiences with Images", *Selected Literary Criticism*, 156.

<sup>184</sup> McDonald, *Poet in his Contexts*, 163.

<sup>185</sup> *Ibid*, 176.

<sup>186</sup> Longley, *Poetry in the Wars*, 238, quoted in *Ibid*, 169.

<sup>187</sup> *Ibid*, 169.

something appendix-like about this final chapter as if the author is aware that the promise he makes in the Introduction that MacNeice will be read in 'the light of Irish poetry' has not been fully honoured<sup>188</sup>

The chapter is valuable, however, in its engagement with the question of what Ireland meant to MacNeice personally, and its call for a more complex understanding of this relationship than the binaries of 'exile' and 'belonging':

If images from childhood formed a matrix for much of the persistent imagery of his poetry, Ireland itself became for MacNeice an embodiment of the kinds of tension involved in writing, and of the problems posed by the projection of the self in the public otherness of a literary medium.<sup>189</sup>

Though this formulation again draws away from the precise realities of Ireland to which MacNeice was creatively responding towards far less compelling generalities, the chapter does important work in establishing Ireland as a locus of familial disquiet. If Carrickfergus rectory means the darkness of his mother's death, it also signifies the father's encroachment into the life of the child, with the poem 'Carrickfergus'<sup>190</sup> a key example. McDonald also argues at length for the importance of MacNeice's dialogue with Yeats, in which the 'Anima Mundi' is brought into close quarters with the social realities of the 1930s: 'the Yeatsian procedure is employed to produce results that are almost as distant as possible from Yeats's own ideas'<sup>191</sup>. Yeats' myth of the dominant self undermines its own finalities as MacNeice's self-defying poems complicate and qualify the myth of Ireland. McDonald's final word on Irish matters is this:

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<sup>188</sup> Brown, "Review of *Louis MacNeice: Poet in his Contexts* by Peter McDonald", *The Review of English Studies*, Vol.44, No. 176, (November 1993), 619.

<sup>189</sup> McDonald, *Poet in his Contexts*, 204.

<sup>190</sup> MacNeice, 69.

<sup>191</sup> McDonald, 224.

The principal difficulty that Ireland posed for the poet was that it both formed a fundamental level of the self and threatened to stifle other levels. MacNeice's nightmares of time are Irish nightmares, taking place in the imaginative domain of the rectory garden in Carrickfergus; any coherence of the self was achieved in the face of a disruptive chaos, an acute sense of loss located in Northern Ireland.<sup>192</sup>

Much like his attitudes to flux, it is possible to escape from this aspect of the self: "I will escape', perhaps, but, in escaping, 'I' will no longer remain 'I'"<sup>193</sup>.

McDonald's study adds to existing ideas around MacNeice's engagement with metaphysics established first by McKinnon, then Brown, then Longley, while missing or underplaying vital aspects of his writing. Perhaps his study suffers from following too closely on the heels of Longley's seminal work; as Robyn Marsack argues in a review, 'For all his strenuous combat with other critics, McDonald's map of MacNeice's career is not so very different from others sympathetic to the poetry'<sup>194</sup>. She also notes that the study distorts MacNeice's work by omission, particularly in overlooking his love poetry: 'Identity, individuality, the ravages of time: love cannot be considered without these notions, but MacNeice as love poet [...] scarcely earns a mention here'<sup>195</sup>. Between McDonald's study and the centenary publication of both MacNeice's *Collected Poems* and the anthology *Incorrigibly Plural* in 2007, there are precious few watershed moments to match those that this chapter has examined, save, perhaps for Jon Stallworthy's 1995 biography and an essay collection, *Louis MacNeice and his Influence*, edited by Kathleen Devine and Alan J. Peacock in 1998. As Longley and Fran Brearton argue in the introduction to *Incorrigibly Plural*, 'by

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<sup>192</sup> Ibid, 227.

<sup>193</sup> Ibid, 183.

<sup>194</sup> Marsack, "Review of *Louis MacNeice: Poet in his Contexts*", *The Modern Language Review*, Vol.88, No.2, (April 1993), 436.

<sup>195</sup> Ibid, 436-7.

2007, his centenary year, it was becoming clear that Louis MacNeice is central to modern poetry in the English language<sup>196</sup>, due in no small part to the work done by critics like Longley and Brearton. Perhaps it is the case that in the time after *The Poet in his Contexts*, MacNeice's legacy settled into a comfortable shape, his place in the canon confirmed, his portion, like the marble Chichesters in 'Carrickfergus', finally sure.

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<sup>196</sup> Longley and Brearton, *Incorrigibly Plural*, ix.

## Two: 'Searchlight and Icon': Michael Longley

Suggesting that the work of Louis MacNeice has had an influence on that of Michael Longley is among the less controversial assertions in Irish poetry. From Longley's early championing of the elder poet in *Dublin Magazine* in 1967 to his attentive and comprehensive edition of *Louis MacNeice: Selected Poems* in 1988, the depth of his engagement<sup>5</sup> has been well-documented; Edna Longley, the poet's wife, is among the most active MacNeice scholars, writing *Louis MacNeice: A Critical Study*, which was published by Faber alongside Michael's *Selected* in 1988, co-editing *Incorrigibly Plural: A Collection of Essays on Louis MacNeice* for MacNeice's centenary in 2012, and advocating for the poet throughout her long career. In Michael Longley's hands, what Terence Brown describes as 'the heavy-breathing, forced psycho-drama of Bloom's Freudian vision of influence'<sup>1</sup> is something far more fluid, a relationship in which – a regular occurrence in Longley's oeuvre – father might become son and vice versa; as MacNeice has guided Longley's approaches in his art, so Longley has shed light on hitherto overlooked aspects of MacNeice's work. This process of eliding rigid demarcations of the self, and its corollary permission to empathise with and understand destructive forces, becomes one of Longley's most powerful strategies, particularly as his poems formulate a generous and empathetic response to suffering and war; Grettir's statement in 'Eclogue from Iceland', 'Minute your gesture but it must be made – / Your hazard, your act of defiance'<sup>2</sup>, unobtrusively underwrites Longley's poetry throughout the Troubles. Longley's introductory essay to MacNeice's *Selected Poems*<sup>3</sup> is, as one might expect, somewhat revealing about what resonates most deeply in Longley's reading of his oeuvre. One can make a substantial list of facts from MacNeice's

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<sup>1</sup> Brown, Terence, *The Literature of Ireland*, 181.

<sup>2</sup> MacNeice, *Collected Poems*, 47.

<sup>3</sup> Longley, Michael, ed. *Louis MacNeice, Selected Poems*, xiii.

potted biography that are also true of Longley's: MacNeice's immersion in classical literature, 'impresario of the Ancient Greeks (Longley studied Classics at Trinity College Dublin); MacNeice's imagination being particularly 'obsessed' with the North and West of Ireland (Longley has lived in Belfast since the sixties, many of his poems are set in the Co. Mayo townlands); MacNeice's vexed relationship with his own Irishness, often underplayed by his contemporary critics (in the seventies Longley wrote of his struggles to locate and define his Irishness, while the occasional questioning of his Irish credentials<sup>4</sup> has long since ceased). While it's easy to overstate the importance of the biographical, it's perhaps no surprise to see Mahon's description of MacNeice as 'a familiar voice whispering in my ear'<sup>5</sup> in the closing paragraph of Longley's introduction to MacNeice's *Selected*; Longley had fair claim to feel likewise. In the essay 'Strife and the Ulster Poet', he explores how the particularities of his familial and cultural contexts set him at a remove from the 'solid hinterlands' he perceived in the work of his peers: 'Heaney the much publicised farm in County Derry, Mahon his working-class background and the shipyards'<sup>6</sup>. Though Heaney and Mahon regularly questioned what this solidity entailed in their poetry, it seems they stood for Longley as relatively fixed points by which to navigate a culture he found 'complex and confusing'. Despite this degree of removal, Longley maintained that his previous ambivalence to Ulster politics would not serve, that 'ironies have proved pusillanimous' in the face of the brutal suppression of civil rights protests. He continues:

If my writing is seldom Irish in its subject-matter, whatever virtues it may have were certainly born out of the unease of my Ulster background [...] I accept, as I must, the criticism of the slogan 'Malone Road fiddles while the Falls Road burns', the

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<sup>4</sup> Discussed at length in McDonald, *Mistaken Identities*, 115-6.

<sup>5</sup> Longley, Michael, ed. *Louis MacNeice, Selected Poems*, xxiii.

<sup>6</sup> Longley, "Strife and the Ulster Poet", *Hibernia*, vol. 33, no. 21, (7 Nov 1969), 11.

implication that the still and heartless centre of the hurricane is the civic inactivity of liberals like myself.<sup>7</sup>

Longley commits, in the earliest days of the civil conflict, to the idea that poetry not only has a political aspect, but embodies a necessary political act, and one that begins at home: 'my own poetry, if it is any good, will be of value in Ulster more than anywhere else'. In his 1936 book, *Modern Poetry*, MacNeice argued:

However much is known about the poet, the poem remains a thing distinct from him. But poetry being firstly communication, a certain knowledge of the poet's personal background will help us to understand him, for his language is to some extent personal. It may be true that any contemporary poet is a mouthpiece of the Zeitgeist, but, as mouthpieces alter what you put into them, it is helpful to consider the shape of the mouthpiece itself.<sup>8</sup>

Being in Ireland in the early days of a much wider conflict in 1940, MacNeice found himself 'tormented' by the ethics of war and neutrality. His Irish friends asked, 'What is it to you?', while those in England brushed off the invasion of Poland as mere 'power politics', and no reason to take serious notice. Against both stances MacNeice weighs an understanding that there is no being in the world without a full engagement with the world: 'Whoso saveth his life shall lose it – still holds good, in politics and social life, in art'<sup>9</sup>. MacNeice's own sense of dislocation happens somewhat in reverse from Longley's: his Irish parents move from Connemara to Belfast, and at the age of ten MacNeice travelled to public school in Dorset, a place he described in *The Strings are False*, simply, as 'not Belfast, it was foreign. And

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid, 11.

<sup>8</sup> MacNeice, *Modern Poetry*, 89.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid, 21.

foreign it has remained to me'<sup>10</sup>. In his poetry, MacNeice speaks eloquently of this dual dislocation, being at home on neither side of the Irish Sea but feeling beholden to both, experiencing Ireland as 'ringing like a bell / In an underwater belfry' in *Autumn Journal*<sup>11</sup>, 'I cannot deny my past to which my self is wed, / The woven figure cannot undo its thread' in 'Valediction'<sup>12</sup>. When Grettir demands the poets return to 'where you belong' to, finally, make a principled stand in 'Eclogue from Iceland'<sup>13</sup>, it could be either, or both. The two poets' personal experiences of rootlessness, or an uncommonly fluid relationship with home, seems to find echoes in their work, which proliferates with hybrid domestic spaces, borderlands, beaches and seascapes. As the above passages suggest, however, the lack of a personal affinity with a social or political 'solid hinterland' is by no means a reprieve from the highly specific social and political threats the poets encountered, in life and in art.

Such is the extent to which MacNeice is an abiding and affirming presence throughout Longley's work that, in the interests of giving each poem examined in this chapter sufficient space and nuance, I have restricted it to Longley's first four collections: *No Continuing City* (1969), *An Exploded View* (1973), *Man Lying on a Wall* (1976), and *The Echo Gate* (1979). As detailed in the introductory chapter, these readings do not come out of a unified theory of influence but in paying close attention to individual poems and finding instances where MacNeice provides a direct model for Longley's work, or, more commonly, where shared rhetorical shapes, formal constructions or imagery suggest that substantial lines may be drawn between the two poets' oeuvres. In examining his work on a book-by-book basis, it may be possible to discern the ways in which MacNeice's influence – or the two poets' shared affinities – is an active element in how Longley's poems articulate

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<sup>10</sup> MacNeice, *The Strings are False*, 221.

<sup>11</sup> MacNeice, *Collected Poems*, 132.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid*, 52.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid*, 40.



themselves. The specific configuration of this chapter, as opposed to those that follow, is in examining a poem by Longley first, followed by a poem by MacNeice in which the Longley poem seems to have roots. Given the unusually clear links between the two poets, it seems sensible to focus more on *how* MacNeice has influenced the younger poet, as opposed to *whether* he is a significant exemplar. Longley's introductory essay to MacNeice's *Selected* gives us a valuable starting point in outlining what is essentially MacNeicean through the lens of Longley: this chapter will be primarily concerned with what is essentially Longleyan using the lens of MacNeice.

A brief examination of that *Selected*, then, may be enlightening. Longley positions 'Thalassa' as a preface to his selection, where E.R. Dodds placed it at the end of his edition of MacNeice's *Collected*; Longley's promotion of the poem allows it to stand as emblematic of the oeuvre. 'Thalassa' is an archetypal MacNeice poem, or perhaps archetypal of what is Longleyan in MacNeice, in that it balances perfectly between the probably of imperfection, failure and death in the name of an abstractly noble cause, the necessity of 'Run[n]ing out the boat' in full knowledge of one's fate. The fact that in Greek myth Thalassa is gendered female and characterised as the primal spirit of the sea folds into the poem's internal drama a sexual element to which both MacNeice and Longley were highly attuned. In both poets' oeuvres sexual desire is often rendered in seafaring idioms: in MacNeice's 'Leaving Barra'<sup>14</sup>, the love poem's addressee is 'Like the dazzle on the sea', 'living like a fugue and moving'; in Longley's 'Leaving Inishmore'<sup>15</sup>, another poem set on a ferry, this time off the west coast of Ireland rather than Scotland, the central symbol of joy is 'girls singing on the upper deck / Whose hair took the light like a downpour'.

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<sup>14</sup> MacNeice, 86.

<sup>15</sup> Longley, *No Continuing City*, 52.

Particularly in Longley's early work, the framework of the *Odyssey* permits the poet a conceptual distance from which to write through his youthful dalliances. These poems are not among his finest, and 'En Route'<sup>16</sup> (later retitled 'Odyssey') in particular feels imaginatively lacking: its closing line, addressed to Odysseus' former lovers: 'Your bodies comprising the long way home', is metaphorically consistent with the book's narrative arc, but is one of the few times in Longley's work that the body is made to do metaphorical work without first being fully humanised. Perhaps in response to this shortcoming, 'Circe'<sup>17</sup>, a few pages later, is written entirely from the perspective of the deity; Odysseus is only figured insofar as he is among the 'husband after husband [...who] Wades ashore and puts in at my island'. Where 'Odysseus' is ineptly light-hearted – in its own words, 'strictly avuncular' – 'Circe' is among the most intensely realised works of imaginative empathy in *No Continuing City*; the goddess' tone is flat throughout, almost disengaged from her work of 'Catch[ing] the eye of each bridegroom forever'. In Longley's work at large, the places where female bodies and maritime imagery meet are almost always positive, empowering forces, perhaps most clearly in 'Sea Shanty'<sup>18</sup>, the opening poem of *Gorse Fires*, in which the seaside statue of Eros becomes an icon of creative inspiration. 'Circe' is unusual in Longley's work for figuring this nexus as only complicatedly benign, perhaps an outright threat. Brearton has noted the fear these poems articulate of 'the monstrous females who would literally devour him'<sup>19</sup>; though Circe's work is in some ways recuperative, providing shelter and intimacy for 'the irretrievable and capsized', the suggestion that this is a manner of death is inescapable.

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid, 23.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid, 30.

<sup>18</sup> Longley, *Collected Poems*, 165.

<sup>19</sup> Brearton, *Reading Michael Longley*, 36.

The sombre, measured testimony of Longley's *Circe* is far from her depiction in the *Odyssey* as the spirit of bodily pleasure, and the tone of the poem may be underwritten by MacNeice's exploration of the same scene in 'Day of Returning'<sup>20</sup>. Written in the early 1950s, it bears many of the hallmarks of MacNeice's work at the time, in its long, unhurried lines and discursive form; where it exceeds most of the work of the time is in making that loss of creative direction its organising metaphor. The poem is strongest in its third section, the section Longley includes in his *Selected* edition, in which MacNeice steers most carefully between mythic archetype and his own emotional situation. Posited around a notably Longleyan question, 'Who would be loved by a goddess for long?', Odysseus laments his year out of time as 'golden / But unreal hours, flowers which forget to fall', framing the mortal concerns of 'the bleat of my goats and [...] the dung of my cattle' as the true pleasures, fixed as they are in the natural cycles of death and rebirth. The poem's final lines figure the sea around Circe's island as 'that monstrous wall of water', connected to but separating him from his ideal life: 'even the sea / Is a different sea round Ithaca'; the sea imprisons him, but is his only means of reaching his true life. Perhaps this is why Longley's *Circe* could not mention Odysseus by name: he was the one among the 'irretrievable and capsized' who preferred goats, dung, and a partner to grow old with. Though she 'helped so many sailors off the sea', she also explains that 'I extend the sea, its idioms'; Longley's understanding of the sea in '*Circe*' is as a nowhere, a place between, the pleasures of Circe's island merely an extension of that state of unmeaning. In his introduction to MacNeice's *Selected*, Longley asserted that the closing lines of 'Mayfly' – 'when this summer is over let us die together, / I want always to be near your breasts' – 'disclose the nucleus of [MacNeice's] imagination'<sup>21</sup>; in '*Circe*', the implications of these lines are played

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<sup>20</sup> MacNeice, 314.

<sup>21</sup> Longley, Michael, ed. *Louis MacNeice: Selected Poems*, xxii.

out in full, both in Longley's exploration of the unnatural longevity of the lovers' summer, and in the acute awareness of mortality that accompanies moments of profound intimacy in both poets' work. Longley's conception of love cannot exist without its existence as a defiance of or counterweight to death; in his first collection, this dynamic is clearly bound up with MacNeice's metaphorical explorations of seafaring, and both poets' immersion in classical literature is a key enabling force.

It's worth noting that Peter McDonald has argued that the 'talismanic function' of 'Mayfly' in Longley's work may have led him to misrepresent elements of MacNeice's writing, particularly in his omission of poems like 'Memoranda to Horace' and 'Budgie'<sup>22</sup>: by extrapolating MacNeice's wish to perpetuate the blissful moment in 'Mayfly', Longley retroactively renders benign MacNeice's 'horrified posture in the face of posterity'<sup>23</sup>. Terence Brown argues that this 'slightly plush eroticism with an intimation of decadent satiation is a very unusual note, a Longleyan note indeed, in MacNeice's work'<sup>24</sup>. Longley's intentions are perhaps contextualised by his earliest examination of MacNeice's poetry, the 1967 essay 'A Misrepresented Poet', published in *The Dublin Magazine*. In an adept and insightful reading of the arc of MacNeice's career, Longley argues that *The Burning Perch* 'does not form a climax [...] it looks to the future, to 'green improbable fields'. MacNeice with new-found powers was half-way to reshaping the lyric'<sup>25</sup>. In a retrospective for *Causeway* in 1971, Longley reprised this understanding of the elder poet's work as essentially unfinished, his late perspectives a stopping point and not a terminus: 'His death is an immeasurable loss'<sup>26</sup>. Longley's selection does not present an uncomplicatedly rosy

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<sup>22</sup> Both MacNeice, 539.

<sup>23</sup> McDonald, *Serious Poetry*, 184.

<sup>24</sup> Brown, 182.

<sup>25</sup> Longley, Michael, "A Misrepresented Poet", *Dublin Magazine*, 6:1 (Spring 1967), 74.

<sup>26</sup> Longley, Michael, *Causeway: The Arts in Ulster*, 98.

version of MacNeice, with its extensive coverage of the ‘thumbnail nightmares’ of his late work, and though McDonald has good cause to advocate for the individual pieces he considered unjustly omitted, it doesn’t seem quite sufficient to merit claims of distortion.

In Longley’s poetry, MacNeice is an enabling force from page one. The two poets’ sense of homelessness, or a fluid sense of homefulness, manifests in *No Continuing City* in Longley’s several poems which nod toward the *Odyssey*, buoyed and directed by the uneasy in-betweenness of MacNeice’s own seafaring poems, such as ‘Thalassa’ and ‘Leaving Barra’. The latter of these intersects with another of the collection’s MacNeicean touchstones: Longley’s earliest poems are home to some of his finest love poems, pieces that provide rhetorical shapes to which he would return throughout his career. ‘Epithalamion’<sup>27</sup>, as Fran Brearton notes, ‘In celebrating the night, even as it anticipates the day, Longley’s first major love poem stands as archetype for the two modes for which he is perhaps now most celebrated – love poems and elegies.’<sup>28</sup> Consistent, perhaps, with Longley’s conception of a MacNeice who ultimately won out against his fear of the night, the speaker in ‘Epithalamion’ is at peace with the darkness, and his declaration of love is also a marker of the incipient dawn:

We have decided dark will be  
For ever like this and because,  
My love, already  
The dark is growing elderly

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<sup>27</sup> Longley, *No Continuing City*, 9.

<sup>28</sup> Brearton, *Reading Michael Longley*, 14.

'Epithalamion' is a poem that holds in contrast the ephemerality of the lovers and their insignificance on a cosmic scale. Unlike late MacNeice, Longley's speaker seems unfazed by how little is affected when 'The silent stars ignite, / Their aeons dwindling by a night'. MacNeice's 'Mayfly' is certainly at work in the poem, of which more later, but if another MacNeice poem at work here, it is 'Star-gazer'<sup>29</sup>, written only months before his passing, which holds in dramatic tension a childhood memory of watching stars in an empty train, and relating that memory as an older man. Although the two poems are very distinct formally – the neat, intricate stanzas of 'Epithalamion' compared to the loose, chatty rhythms of 'Star-gazer' – what MacNeice's poem passes on to be reconfigured by Longley is a philosophical situation governed by the play of light in darkness, the presence of mortality and cosmic insignificance within the speaker's embodied joy at the scope of the natural world. Given 'Epithalamion' was written in the early 1960s<sup>30</sup>, contemporaneously with 'Star-gazer', it's not that fanciful a leap to suggest the night train that 'Shoots from silence into silence', its 'loudly reprobate' passage incorporated seamlessly into the poem's quiet by the poem's complex syntax, is a direct echo of the weirdly deserted train on which the young MacNeice is conveyed from darkness into darkness. Where MacNeice's poem concludes with star-light arriving on a depopulated Earth, even the 'vain' attempt to conceive of its vastness by 'adding noughts' terminated, Longley's poem formally enacts a new beginning. The first six stanzas of 'Epithalamion' are formed of just two sentences, and the second concludes with the 'pandemonium [and] freight' of the night train passing on. A poem which only reiterated the philosophical position of 'Star-gazer' might end here, but Longley's conception of a continuing MacNeice demands that the sun should rise, and the poem's action continue. It is in this continuation that Longley's poem shifts away from the

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<sup>29</sup> MacNeice, 544.

<sup>30</sup> Brearton, 14.

gently resigned fatalism of 'Star-gazer' and toward the somewhat more hopeful fatalism of 'Mayfly'. The speaker in MacNeice's most successful juvenilia finally recognises that what passes is not the natural world but the human observing it, and while the mayflies are synonymous with ephemerality, their proximity to death makes their every moment 'taut and thin and ringing clear'. Longley takes on this line of thinking when his lovers wake to a moth 'that lies there littered', which the previous night had 'eyes like frantic stars', the flowers withered and the trees returned to 'their huge histories'. The moth and flowers are short-lived by their nature, while the tree reiterates in daylight the lovers' own relatively brief lives.

Michael Allen has noted<sup>31</sup> how the closing lines of 'Epithalamion', which leave the lovers held in tension, 'As remnant yet part raiment still, / Like flags that linger on / The sky when king and queen are gone', echo those of 'Mayfly', whose own lovers are not royalty but 'circus masters', their only heraldry the 'crests' of lapwings. Death is present in both conclusions, but rendered in colourful, fruitful terms, and through a deep vulnerability on the part of the speaker. Allen goes on to argue that 'Mayfly' 'doesn't lead forward in Longley's work [...] what is lost in the textual transaction is precisely that sense of the male lover's capacity for childlike vulnerability which is to be so inimitable a component of Longley's later love poetry'<sup>32</sup>. That ostensible lack of continuity, however, is not necessarily surprising: 'Epithalamion' formally and textually moves from the fatalism of late MacNeice, significantly a MacNeice nostalgic for the hopefulness of his adolescence, back into that same sexually and philosophically formative period embodied by 'Mayfly'. 'Epithalamion' is a completed dramatic movement, one which figures 'Mayfly' as a kind of pupation, a

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<sup>31</sup> Allen, *Louis MacNeice and his Influence*, 109.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid*, 109.

demand for 'new properties' the morning after the night's fantasy, in which 'everything seems bent / On robing in this evening you / And me'. As Longley argues in *Tuppenny Stung*, 'because [poets] should never completely grow up, must continually come of age'<sup>33</sup>. As much as 'Epithalamion' takes both 'Star-gazer' and 'Mayfly' as models and exemplars, it recognises the need to move on from both, the poet's past selves 'Like flags that linger on / The sky when king and queen are gone'. *No Continuing City* is marked by its conflation of mythic and domestic spaces. Taken as a whole, the collection is a kind of marriage-quest, in which the poet finds his way home; the title is from the biblical Book of Hebrews: 'for we have no continuing city, but we seek one to come'<sup>34</sup>. In this formulation, Longley frames his poems' quests for home as a pursuit of continuous reinvention, in which 'home' is an essentially contingent, irresolvable space, one determined as much by the route taken as by the destination. This line of thought aligns comfortably with MacNeice's writing in *Varieties of Parable*, in which he explicitly conflates the possibilities of the mythic and the domestic: 'the quest which [...] is usually aimed at finding a fortune or a bride can become in other hands the Quest of the Grail or of the City of Zion'<sup>35</sup>. This seems to grant Longley's own rendering of his marriage-quest – which, in narrative terms, has already been resolved by the conclusion of the book's first poem – permission to figure himself, only semi-parodically, as Odysseus, and to figure his previous affairs as the difficult, delaying waysides on the way home.

This conflation of the domestic and the mythic, of a simultaneous will to creativity and to self-destruction, echoes a network of tensions throughout MacNeice's work, which

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<sup>33</sup> Longley, *Tuppenny Stung*, 35.

<sup>34</sup> *New International Version*, Hebrews 13:4.

<sup>35</sup> MacNeice, *Varieties of Parable*, 12.



in *The Strings Are False* he brings together in the figure of the quest. In MacNeice's words: 'This adult make-believe is something we have foolishly ignored [...] Man is essentially weak and he wants power; essentially lonely, he creates familiar daemons, Impossible Shes, and bonds – of race or creed – where no bonds are. He cannot live by bread or Marx alone; he must always be after the Grail'<sup>36</sup>. As John Kerrigan has noted, MacNeice's turn to the quest-narrative 'sprang from his desire to reorient his imagination in relation to myth at a time when he was seeking to write a less documentary sort of poetry'<sup>37</sup>. This itself came from a return to the stories of MacNeice's childhood: '*The Mad Islands* I wrote because I have always been addicted to the legendary Ancient Irish voyages which suggested it'<sup>38</sup>. The quest in *The Mad Islands* is, much like the *Odyssey*, not ultimately for the grail but for home. The homecoming narratives in *No Continuing City* testify to the centrality of this trope in Longley's early poetry, who at the time of its publication spoke of his feeling that his contemporaries began their careers with something he lacked: the aforementioned 'recourse to solid hinterlands'<sup>39</sup>. Much like in MacNeice, these poems, with their almost compulsively recursive structures, suggest that the quest is itself an endlessly mobile home.

Given the complexity of his thinking, it is perhaps appropriate that 'Leaving Inishmore'<sup>40</sup> should, in Heather Clark's reading, present such immediate resistance to the simplistic Revivalist notion of the West as 'a return to the source, to an Ireland uncorrupted by colonialism and materialism'<sup>41</sup>. The poem is Longley's first engagement with the west of

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<sup>36</sup> MacNeice, *The Strings Are False*, 77-8.

<sup>37</sup> Kerrigan, *Modern Irish and Scottish Poetry*, 76.

<sup>38</sup> MacNeice, "Author's Introduction to *The Mad Islands* and *The Administrator* (1964)", quoted in Kerrigan, 78.

<sup>39</sup> Longley, *Strife and the Ulster Poet*, *Hibernia* (7 Nov. 1969), 11.

<sup>40</sup> Longley, *No Continuing City*, 52.

<sup>41</sup> Clark, *The Ulster Renaissance*, 164.

Ireland, which he would come to think of as a 'home from home'<sup>42</sup>, and by the end of the first self-contained stanza, the poem's sense of time and place is destabilised at the level of basic syntax: 'Rain and sunlight and the boat between them / Shifted whole hillsides through the afternoon'. The boat's uncertain progression strongly recalls the opening of MacNeice's 'Leaving Barra':

The dazzle on the sea, my darling  
Leads from the western channel,  
A carpet of brilliance taking  
My leave for ever of the island

MacNeice's self-contained stanza articulates a similar feeling of loss in which the poet's ability to control his departure is compromised; in a neat grammatical pirouette, the stock phrase 'taking my leave' twists into 'having my leave taken from me'. The proceeding stanzas look backward to the island's 'easy tempo' and the poet's 'hankering after Atlantis', a desire for the otherworld and a recognition of Barra's worldly refusal to stand in for anything but itself. The compulsive repetition of lines and line endings in 'Leaving Barra', which Longley echoes in the recursive ababa rhyme scheme of 'Leaving Inishmore', builds an atmosphere of stasis or precarious balance, a state of constant assertion and revision. The resolution of 'Leaving Barra' – insofar as it does resolve – is in its return to concrete principles, putting its faith in human beings, particularly the poem's addressee, whom MacNeice describes as 'alive beyond question / Like the dazzle on the sea, my darling'. 'Leaving Inishmore' is also a love poem, just not in the conventionally romantic sense, and Longley has stated that his poetic fellow travellers are Edna Longley and Derek Mahon<sup>43</sup>. What the two poems share is their search for a paradigm of the life well lived, dramatized

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<sup>42</sup> McDonald, *Mistaken Identities*, 112.

<sup>43</sup> Brearton, *Reading Michael Longley*, 44

by the passage of humans between islands; where they differ is in their rhetorical setting.

'Leaving Barra' takes the reality of seafaring as a conceit from which to discuss his ideas at a degree of abstraction:

I do not know that Atlantis  
Unseen and uncomprehended,  
Dimly divined but keenly  
Felt with a phantom hunger.

When he praises his beloved, it is through this abstract lens; that takes on symbolic import for 'The gay endurance of women' is an unavoidable consequence of the philosophizing that preceded her appearance. However positively symbolised she might be, her feet do not quite touch the ship's deck. 'Leaving Inishmore' also begins with a 'dazzle', but it is of 'Rain and sunlight and the boat between them': Longley's poem is keen to situate itself firmly in the physical here and now, a mizzly afternoon off the west coast, and though the poem briefly touches on the fanciful, it is 'the Atlantic's voices', not Atlantis. By reversing MacNeice's hierarchy, the 'girls singing' retain their humanity, the poem's inquiries remain fundamentally earthbound, and the 'broadcasts from our holiday' can remain precisely that. Though Peter McDonald has critiqued the poem, arguing that 'the poet's stance is perhaps too secure,' and 'Inishmore, in fact, merely provides Longley here with images of peace and escape'<sup>44</sup>, this overlooks the closing stanza's deliberate fixing of the episode in its place:

I shall name this the point of no return  
Lest that excursion out of light and heat  
Take on a January idiom –  
[...] the curriculum  
Vitae of sailors and the sick at heart.

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<sup>44</sup> McDonald, *Mistaken Identities*, 127.

'Sailors' clearly carries negative connotation here, as it did in 'Circe'; in both poems, sailor-ness is characterised as a kind of soul-sickness, an essential inability to find the settled life to which so many poems in *No Continuing City* seem to aspire. Inishmore is absolutely seen from 'the visitor's perspective, in McDonald's reading, but Longley diagnoses this fancifulness far better than MacNeice, and the closing stanza is a defence against this very impulse.

As any reader of the *Odyssey* knows, however, striving for home is not the same as reaching it, and Longley's first collection very clearly does not treat the matter lightly. MacNeice is an important touchstone in how Longley conceptualises literary Irishness, specifically in how the elder poet is empowered by his access to Irish and British literary cultures. In Longley's essay in *Causeway*, he asserts that 'deeper considerations [about MacNeice's Northern Irish context] make him a touchstone of what an Ulster poet might be'<sup>45</sup>. The following year, in a symposium on 'The State of Poetry', Longley characterised this state of being in psychological terms:

[T]he Irish psyche is being redefined in Ulster, and the poems are born – inevitably, one might say – out of a lively tension between the Irish and English traditions<sup>46</sup>.

His choice of vocabulary is no accident. Longley's first collection regularly deploys the language of unstable subjectivity, a rather literal unpacking of being 'in two minds' ('The Hebrides'<sup>47</sup>) or the Yeatsian dualism of Body and Mind in 'Personal Statement'<sup>48</sup>. In addition

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<sup>45</sup> Longley, Michael, *Causeway: The Arts in Ulster*, 97.

<sup>46</sup> Quoted in Brown, 185.

<sup>47</sup> Longley, Michael, *No Continuing City*, 26.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid*, 19.

to the references to minds, brains, heads and skulls that litter the collection, divided or hybrid selves are regular features. This occurs in the 'Difficult births' of 'The Freemartin'<sup>49</sup> (a freemartin being a calf born with indeterminate sexual characteristics, usually, as Longley himself is, the sibling of a male twin); the multiple lives in 'A Questionnaire for Walter Mitty'<sup>50</sup>; and 'Journey out of Essex'<sup>51</sup>, a poem in the voice of John Clare after his escape from an asylum in 1841, another man struggling to find his wife and his home. As McDonald has noted<sup>52</sup>, one means by which Longley wrestles with the boundaries of national and cultural identity is by destabilizing the very notion of stable identity on a basic, personal level.

In his essay in *Causeway*, Longley expressed clearly his resistance toward contemporary critics' prescriptiveness toward Ulster artists:

Too many critics seem to expect a harvest of paintings, poems, plays and novels to drop from the twisted branches of civil discord. [...] Rather, as Wilfred Owen stated over 50 years ago, it is the artist's duty to warn, to be tuned in before anyone else to the implications of a situation.<sup>53</sup>

This is by no means to suggest that Longley elided questions of local and national history, even in a collection written prior to the first outbreak of sectarian violence after the civil rights marches of 1968. His strategy of disarming and subverting the codification of identity in 1960s Ulster would become increasingly vital to Longley's imaginative project, an attempt to render the vocabulary necessary to imagine a society without such arbitrary

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<sup>49</sup> Ibid, 45.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid, 12.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid, 54.

<sup>52</sup> McDonald, Peter, *Mistaken Identities*, 121-2.

<sup>53</sup> Longley, Michael, *Causeway: The Arts in Ulster*, 8.

divisions. Longley's citation of Wilfred Owen is significant too: among the most powerful poems in *No Continuing City* is 'In Memoriam'<sup>54</sup>, Longley's first elegy for his war veteran father, which is as remarkable for its playfulness as its imaginative scope. The poem draws intimate connections between father and son, Richard Longley going to war as a teenager and his teenage son witnessing his death by cancer; Richard's intimate wounding rendering his potential son 'surely left for dead' on the battlefield. Though the cycles of history are echoed in this moment of synchronicity, these tragicomic touches prevent the poem from losing sight of the deeply personal relationship at its heart: in emphasising his father's earthy, unheroic response to surviving war, the poem enables Richard Longley to exist as more than a mere emblem. The experiences of Longley's father would come to form a vital thread in the poet's work, as the ultimately pointless violence of the Great War contextualises his thinking on the contemporary conflict in the North. What seems to underpin Longley's thinking through 'In Memoriam', as in his many poems reflecting on the humanity overwritten by the demands of warring nation states, is the belief in the basic salutary quality of art. Elegy may lack the power to raise the dead, but healing those who have survived is well within its ken. MacNeice's statement on the value of art in wartime seems to inform Longley's philosophy:

War does not prove that one [manner of poetry] is better or worse than the other; it attempts to disprove both. But poetry must not be disproved. If war is the test of reality, then all poetry is unreal; but in that case unreality is a virtue.<sup>55</sup>

For both poets, art in wartime is a fundamentally defiant gesture against the nullifying effects of violence. They recognise that, while gestures are not actions, gestures often

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<sup>54</sup> Longley, *No Continuing City*, 41.

<sup>55</sup> MacNeice, *The Poetry of W.B. Yeats*, 2.

inspire action, and at any rate poets will not be spared from the evil visited upon everyone else. Longley characterised 'In Memoriam' as 'some kind of descent from the ivory tower', and a response to the 'deadly danger of regarding the agony of others as raw material for your art, and your art as a solace for them in their suffering'<sup>56</sup>. Even within *No Continuing City* it stands out as something of an outlier, an evolutionary leap from the tightly bound, formalist reserve of many of the book's other achievements. The poem, as Terence Brown notes<sup>57</sup>, is explicit in the care it must take to 'resurrect familial memories' in the name of poetry:

My father, let no similes eclipse  
Where crosses like some forest simplified  
Sink into my mind, the slow sands  
Of your history delay till through your eyes  
I read you like a book

The poem begins with Longley's invocation of the memorialised, that the gravity of his subject matter not be erased by the tools of his art. The first line seems to echo the Lord's Prayer, with 'my', rather than 'our', earthly, rather than heavenly, father: in two words Longley removes the poem from the divine into the secular, refuses the consolations of ritual in favour of a performance of singular and personal grief. This is not, of course, the pejorative sense of 'performativity': by the stanza's closing lines, 'Let yours / And other heartbreaks play into my hands', the poem has drawn strength from foregrounding the artifices that enable the poem's very real emotional gestures. It is worth noting, too, the presence of Homer's invocation to the Muses in the *Odyssey*, the short preamble to another story of a soldier's romantic misadventures and long-delayed homecoming. Brearton argues convincingly that 'In Memoriam' should be considered part of the

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<sup>56</sup> Healy, "An Interview with Michael Longley", *Southern Review* 31:3 (July 1995), 560; quoted in Brearton, *The Great War in Irish Poetry*, 257.

<sup>57</sup> Brown, 84.

collection's group of Homeric poems due to its rendering of the father-son relationship in as complicated terms as either *The Odyssey* or Joyce's *Ulysses*<sup>58</sup>. The poem's austere, measured rhythms are profoundly undercut by the poem's consistently bawdy sense of humour, in which Longley names himself 'your most unlikely son', given his father's wounded genitals. In a further elaboration of an already multifaceted conceptual pun, Longley argues that 'As [his father's] voice is now locked inside my head, I yet was held secure': by the logic of the comparison, Longley's creative mind shares a metaphorical domain with those fateful testes. In the midst of warfare, 'between the corpses and the soup canteens', Longley the classics student finds space to pun on 'testimony' and 'testicle'; his father's story survives in one, the poet in the other. The poem's closing image, the dying father's 'lost wives' summoned by the poet to 'lift their skirts like blinds across your eyes', seems a quite literal burlesquing of the 'slow [...] drawing down of blinds' in Wilfred Owen's 'Anthem for Doomed Youth'<sup>59</sup>. It's easy to diminish the relevance of this aspect of the poem, but what's remarkable is that its tone does not waver: what is kept alive in the slow, graceful movement of 'In Memoriam' is its empathy and respect for a generation bewildered into military actions with implications beyond their understanding, a large-scale playing out of his father's misfiling as 'London Scottish' due to 'following the wrong queue at The Palace'. The 'subversion of some of the conventions of elegy'<sup>60</sup> identified by Brearton is achieved precisely by playing it tonally straight; the poem's homage to music hall comedy, as signalled by the reference to Mark Sheridan's 'Belgium put the Kibosh on the Kaiser', is as worthy a quality of memorial, the poem suggests, as any marble or bronze.

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<sup>58</sup> Brearton, *Reading Michael Longley*, 37-8.

<sup>59</sup> Owen, *The Poems of Wilfred Owen*, 74.

<sup>60</sup> Brearton, 39.



In his introduction to MacNeice's *Selected*, Longley forms a poetic human chain as he quotes the elder poet's summation of Yeats' attitude to death:

[W]hen MacNeice honours Yeats' 'zest', he betrays a kinship. We can say of Louis MacNeice's poetry too: 'there is nearly always a leaping vitality – the vitality of Cleopatra waiting for the asp'.<sup>61</sup>

This vitality in the face of death, which began with the Longleyan touchstone, 'Mayfly', is clearly at work in 'In Memoriam'. Longley's poem draws imaginative strength and a model for both participation in and subversion of a traditional poetic mode from MacNeice's 'The Casualty (*in memoriam G.H.S.*)'<sup>62</sup>; Graham Shepard was a friend of MacNeice since their schoolboy days and was killed in service on the *HMS Polyanthus* in 1943. In the poem, Shepard is presented as the embodiment of the 'descent from the ivory tower', in his energetic rejection of literary convention: "Damn!" you would say if I were to write the best / Tribute I could to you, 'All clichés". Opening with an admission of the near-impossibility of the task at hand feels a direct predecessor to Longley's; that MacNeice ends his opening stanza by, somewhat ironically, sending his friend 'shrugging to the misty West / Remembered out of Homer but now yours' may have informed some of Longley's rendering of the mythic into the mundane in his own elegy. Like Longley's father, Shepard is consistently characterised by his youth and innocence ('A small boy', 'imp', 'faun'), and by his deep investment in the things of the world, 'Bijoux and long-eared dogs and silken legs / And titivated rooms'. The music halls that inform so much of the sensibilities of 'In Memoriam' provide the setting for the only extended scene in 'The Casualty':

So now the concert is over, the seats vacated,  
Eels among the footlights, water up to the roof

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<sup>61</sup> Longley, *Louis MacNeice: Selected Poems*, xxiii.

<sup>62</sup> MacNeice, *Collected Poems*, 245.

And the gilded cherubs crumbling – and you come in  
Jaunty as ever but with a half-frustrated  
look on your face, you expect the show to begin  
But you are too late and cannot accept the proof

That you are too late because you have died too early  
And this is under sea. Puzzled but gay  
You still come in

The scene is set up like a Buster Keaton gag, the hapless protagonist unable to riddle out his predicament. MacNeice's gentleness toward his lost friend and the magnitude of his loss ('If ten / Winds were to shout you down [...] they will not sever // That thread of so articulate silence') shoot the scene through with bitter-sweetness. The poem wrestles throughout with the demarcations of 'high' and 'low' culture, and formally enacts, in the poem's restless leaping between scenes and cultural contexts, Shepard's comfort moving between them; he embodies, much like the addressee of 'Leaving Barra', the ability to live 'like a fugue', a constant self-reinventor as comfortable among Goya, Homer and classical music as the world of music halls and 'Punch-and-Judy shows'. That the poem should end, as Stephen Regan notes, with the magical 'faun' or 'imp' compelled to take his final form, is perhaps the only appropriate conclusion. Regan notes that the lines:

O did you  
Make one last integration, find a Form  
Grow out of formlessness when the Atlantic hid you?

are an invocation of Platonic Form (about which MacNeice read extensively at school) which 'conveniently bypasses any question of Christian Resurrection', and, by privileging 'popular cultural forms' over the rhetorical force of its generic predecessors, allows MacNeice to 'resist the temptation to glorify Shepard by association with other noble

deaths at sea'<sup>63</sup>. As Longley expands the genre to include discussion of his father's youthful affairs and the intimate nature of his wounds, MacNeice, too, makes room for Shepard's catholic tastes in art ('you [...] could laugh / With Rowlandson or Goya') and his sexual appetites. This particular blend of absurdity and sincerity, a kind of vaudeville tragedy, seems to animate both MacNeice's dramatization of Shepard befuddled at his own death and Longley's father laid to rest behind supernaturally raised skirts.

Written a few years earlier in 1940, MacNeice's 'Death of an Actress'<sup>64</sup> is another moment in which sensuality and mortality meet, and the poem seems a vital movement in MacNeice's own elegiac development, a precursor to 'The Casualty'. Here, MacNeice does not seem to have quite overcome his distaste for the music hall, given his only half-affectionate descriptions of the 'Old and huge and painted' Florrie Forde, with her 'elephantine shimmy', though one might consider this a step onward from his fundamentally dim view of popular culture in 'Bagpipe Music'<sup>65</sup> in 1937. The closing lines, of 'Death of an Actress', 'Let the wren and robin / Gently with leaves cover the Babes in the Wood' signal the death of an 'older England', a simpler, pre-war time in which 'Where's Bill Bailey?' did not yield an existential crisis for an audience 'Muddling through and glad to have no answer'. MacNeice's depiction of the world summoned up by Forde's performances touches on a series of recurring themes in MacNeice's work, reshaped by their wartime context:

a rainbow leading west  
To the home they never had, to the chocolate Sunday

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<sup>63</sup> Ibid, 590.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid, 177.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid, 97.

Of boy and girl, to cowslip time, to the never-  
Ending weekend Islands of the Blest.

In 1940 MacNeice was also writing *The Strings Are False*, an unfinished autobiography published shortly after his passing, in which he would describe the west of Ireland, home to his father's family, as a magical, untouchable, presence in his own childhood: 'The very name Connemara seemed too rich for any ordinary place'<sup>66</sup>. When he names an audience escaping 'the tea-leaves in the sink', MacNeice names himself, however subtextually; he is half-way to becoming the poet who would ultimately celebrate this same branch of the arts in his elegy for Graham Shepard. There is a shared emotional quality between the loss of Florrie Forde in 'Death of an Actress', the loss of Shepard in 'The Casualty', and the loss of Longley's father, or the youth of Longley's father in 'In Memoriam': a painful, hard-won recognition that there are aspects of innocence that cannot survive, or can no longer survive, given such evil times. That MacNeice should, on one level, ensure Shepard's immortality as a function of literature, represents what Regan views as the heart of both poets' endeavours in their rendering of elegy: the art that survives wartime must continually renew its capacity as a communal imaginative space for healing<sup>67</sup>. Longley's conception of 'a poetic sodality'<sup>68</sup>, a federation of individuals against mass violence, would form the imaginative core of his second collection, *An Exploded View*.

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<sup>66</sup> MacNeice, *The Strings are False*, 216-7.

<sup>67</sup> Regan, 592.

<sup>68</sup> Quoted in Brearton, 77.

If *No Continuing City* concerned itself with finding one's way home from war, *An Exploded View* questions how a community might be made and sustained when war has come home. This second book again finds in MacNeice an empowering example through his dedication, both in theory and in life, to rejecting the image of the poet as a free radical, aloof and removed from their immediate society. As Longley argued in his essay in *Causeway*, MacNeice's will to create art that resonated with a broad community is one of his most admirable qualities:

The hub of his work is his love poetry, and from it branch out like spokes his poems on people, Ireland, friendship and childhood. MacNeice played his tunes round about Middle C, on the central octaves of human experience.<sup>69</sup>

Longley wrestles far more deeply than in *No Continuing City* with the question of how a poet might be of value in a time of conflict that seems to ask more of the poet than they are capable of giving. Woven into this is the matter of coterie and collaboration, the relatively mundane questions of how artists working in community find mutual empowerment; MacNeice's overlapping professional and personal relationships seem a valuable exemplar for Longley's thinking in *An Exploded View*. As he explained in a letter to Paul Muldoon in 1972, from the title onwards the collection aimed to wrongfoot readers who might have anticipated a collection that made art directly from the matter of the Troubles:

The point about a title is that it should reveal its relevance after a complete reading of a collection and, in particular, the poem which suggested it [...] *An E.V.* will

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<sup>69</sup> Longley, *Causeway*, 70.

appear parasitic on the troubles until the relevant poem is read – sez he  
hopefully.<sup>70</sup>

This is consistent with Longley's assertion in *Causeway* that 'the artist needs time in which to allow the raw material of experience to settle to an imaginative depth where he can transform it'<sup>71</sup>; given that the collection's title appears in a poem called 'Skara Brae'<sup>72</sup>, that period of time might be five thousand years. The poem would be a quiet, unassuming piece, were it not eponymously highlighted; four unrhymed quatrains in a single, long sentence, barely an active verb to spare:

A window into the ground,  
The bumpy lawn in section,  
An exploded view  
Through middens, through lives,

The thatch of grass roots,  
The gravelly roof compounding  
Periwinkles, small bones,  
A calendar of meals,

The thread between sepulchre  
And home a broken necklace,  
Knuckles, dice scattering  
At the warren's core,

Pebbles the tide washes  
That conceded for so long  
Living room, the hard beds,  
The table made of stone.

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<sup>70</sup> Quoted in Brearton, 63-4.

<sup>71</sup> Longley, *Causeway*, 8.

<sup>72</sup> Longley, *An Exploded View*, 52.

The poem anticipates the catalogues of Longley's later collections and is paradigmatic of the formal evolution the poet has taken since the tightly woven pieces of his first book; what it clearly shares is its understanding of the fugitive nature of home. The few dozen inhabitants of Skara Brae are long gone, the only evidence of their existence their waste matter; what little there is between 'Living room' and the grave survives at the concession of the tide. It's possible to read 'Skara Brae' as, in part, a prototype for many of Longley's poems on war, which are characterised by their indifference toward the grand patterns of history. The fact that dice are among the few remaining artefacts in 'Skara Brae', perhaps a focal point of communal games or rituals, signals the poem's drive to define life as more than mere survival. At a stretch, this specific image of play in adversity, echoes MacNeice's line about playing cards in the Blitz: 'It occurs to me that even playing Rummy in London now is a kind of assertion of the Rights of Man, whereas in America it would be nothing but playing Rummy'<sup>73</sup>. The serious point MacNeice clearly understood in his poems, as in his elevation of Florrie Forde to an emblem of a lost age of innocence, is that wartime charges every small or mundane gesture with meaning: Longley's poem about a Neolithic settlement is, like Mahon's 'A Disused Shed' or Heaney's bog poems, precisely a means of addressing contemporary Ulster by a deliberate retreat to historical, in this case pre-historical, perspectives. The term 'exploded view' refers to an engineer's or architect's blueprints, in which overlapping components or features can be seen simultaneously; the poem combines the literally 'exploded', as in unearthed, levels of the underground Neolithic dwellings with their figurative counterpart, located, like Heaney's Scandinavian corpses, at a crossing point of Irish culture long since removed from contemporary

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<sup>73</sup> MacNeice, Letter to Mrs Dodds, 1941, quoted in McDonald, *Poet in His Contexts*, 122.

analyses. As in the dwellings themselves, there is a lot going on beneath the surface of 'Skara Brae'.

MacNeice's own 'The Hebrides'<sup>74</sup> shares a handful of strategies with 'Skara Brae' in its almost anthropological account of life in the Scottish islands. Where Longley's poem uses historical time as a distancing tool for commenting on contemporary politics, MacNeice situates his work at a geographical distance from the society he wishes to interrogate. Though 'The Hebrides' occasionally errs into the tones of 'the folk-fancier or friendly tourist' MacNeice identifies as 'spoiling' the islands' Gaelic traditions, the poem's comparison of the tight weave of community life to the incursion of bureaucracy and capitalism remains in the subtext until the last few lines. The poem is notable in MacNeice's late-thirties work for its relative formal simplicity, a series of grammatically uncomplicated sentences beginning with the refrain 'on those islands', followed by a series of cumulative statements, such as:

On those islands  
Where many live on the dole or on old-age pensions  
*And* many waste with consumption *and* some are drowned  
*And* some of the old stumble in the midst of sleep  
Into the pot-hole hitherto shunned in dreams [emphasis mine]

Though the ideas connecting these images are complex, taking in MacNeice's mixed feelings about the welfare state and the loss of traditional culture, the grammar is brutally simple: it is one thing relentlessly after another, with no conditional or subordinate clause to redirect the passage of time. This forms one key point of departure between the poems: situated in the midst of an irrevocably declining culture, MacNeice mourns what has been lost before it has truly disappeared. In contrast, set long after the community's time has

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<sup>74</sup> MacNeice, *Collected Poems*, 64.



decisively passed, Longley commemorates, perhaps celebrates, the remains of a home-life which has proven so profoundly durable. Though more obviously verbose than Longley's poem, both formally embody their conceptions of the movement of history: 'The Hebrides' by neglecting to create a grammatical loophole in which time's flow might be resisted, 'Skara Brae' by grammatically enfolding distant epochs into the same poetic moment. More prosaically, 'Skara Brae' seems to draw much of its atmosphere from a single passage in 'The Hebrides', in which the protagonists of MacNeice's poem slip off-stage, replaced by an altogether more pre-civilised scene:

Among the peat-smoke and the smells of dung  
That fill the felted room from the cave of the byre.  
No window opens of the windows sunk like eyes  
In a four-foot wall of stones casually picked  
From the knuckly hills on which these houses crawl  
Like black and legless beasts who breathe in their sleep

Between the sunken window, the knuckles and stones, the dwelling that remains one with the landscape, and the poem's sudden retreat to a pre-civilised atmosphere, this passage could have been an early, roomier draft of what became 'Skara Brae'. Given Longley's direct nod towards 'Leaving Barra' in *No Continuing City*, it's not too much of a reach to think he may have had MacNeice's island poems in mind when he first made the trip to the west coast of Orkney in 1966<sup>75</sup>. Both poems depict a way of life extinguished by external forces – the incrementally tightening grip of modernity and capitalism in 'The Hebrides' and the millennial forces of nature in 'Skara Brae' – and both demand that the reader take an imaginative step outside their contemporary contexts. As Brearton has it, '[ 'Skara Brae' ]

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<sup>75</sup> Brearton, 64.

does not so much signify something in ruins, or a vision shattered, as something seen – and therefore understood – more completely than ever before<sup>76</sup>.

What 'Skara Brae' holds in common with the collection's thinking on community is in its palpable longing for what has been erased, the 'hard beds' left empty, home no more than 'a broken necklace'. Elsewhere in *An Exploded View*, Longley makes explicit this deep need for a living community through his 'Letters' series, addressed to three of his peers. In a letter written but not sent to Marie Heaney, Longley stated that his second book was 'all about' his 'friendships, first with Mahon, then with Heaney'; *An Exploded View* 'explored the notion of an artistic community, a poetic sodality, though [...] this was probably a fiction because, frankly, there didn't seem to be any takers!<sup>77</sup> Longley is referring to the publication of 'To Derek Mahon'<sup>78</sup> in *The New Statesman* in December 1971, and Mahon's subsequent letter distancing himself from the lines 'The Catholics we'd scarcely loved' and 'Two poetic conservatives' specifically. Mahon explained: 'you saying [those lines] in a poem dedicated to me, with however much irony, looks like we have an agreed platform hewn out of Yeats and Robert Graves'<sup>79</sup>. As Brearton argues<sup>80</sup>, while the Auden/MacNeice parallel is appealing in the abstract, and their epistolary work a means of establishing shared values, they had long since established their individual careers by the publication of *Letters from Iceland* in 1936. Longley's optimism in drawing his friend into a similar creative model overlooked the impact it might have on a critical community only too ready to heap 'Northern poets' into a neat artistic pigeonhole. In the year before the poem's publication,

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<sup>76</sup> Ibid, 65.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid, 77.

<sup>78</sup> Longley, *An Exploded View*, 36.

<sup>79</sup> Brearton, 90.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid, 91.

the two poets began a correspondence in verse, in part to ease Longley's writer's block. Mahon expressed a certain self-consciousness about the enterprise and its 'precedents in kind / *Letters to Iceland* comes to mind', 'Though *Auden* and *MacNeice* themselves / had *Pope* and *Dryden* on their shelves'<sup>81</sup>. A witty enough note about how there is nothing new under the sun, Mahon is also clearly wary about stepping too confidently onto a well-beaten path toward posterity. It may well be that where Longley saw an opportunity to repurpose the form for another era of political turmoil (this correspondence began in 1970), Mahon saw a playful but played-out literary frippery. Mahon's complaint against 'To Derek Mahon', meanwhile, may be as much to do with the poem's assumption of the first person plural: as Heather Clark notes, a difficult question is 'to whom these poems are truly addressed: is Longley speaking to his fellow poets, or is he speaking for them? The answer is most likely both'<sup>82</sup>.

The poem itself is a stronger piece than its companions, 'To James Simmons' and 'To Seamus Heaney'; where 'To Derek Mahon' is clearly fixed by a shared history and its confidence in a relationship of greater emotional complexity, the others seem far more light-hearted and less urgent, less formally possessed by their themes. In 'To Derek Mahon', Longley does indeed try to make sense of his and Mahon's implication in the sectarian violence, the extent to which their 'muse and lexicon', their markers of educational privilege, were rendered useless in the face of concrete social unrest they had done little enough, the poem suggests, to oppose. The poem covers forty-eight lines in just four sentences, and the sheer grammatical distance between ordinary clauses and their outcomes seems a deliberate strategy. The question of whether the poets 'came into their

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<sup>81</sup> Houghton, *The Poetry of Derek Mahon*, 87.

<sup>82</sup> Clark, 147.

own' is syntactically inextricable from 'The stereophonic nightmare / Of the Shankill and the Falls', the match-lit 'back alleys of Belfast'. The third stanza complicates the scene further by having the speaker remain physically 'here' in Belfast while recounting a story set on an island elsewhere:

Why it mattered to have you here  
You who journeyed to Inisheer  
With me, years back, one Easter when  
With MacIntyre and the lone Dane  
Our footsteps lifted up the larks  
Echoing off those western rocks  
And down that darkening arcade  
Hung with the failures of our trade,

Will understand.

Having found themselves outsiders in their 'home' city, Longley recalls their being outsiders in the west of Ireland, in a sentence literally circumscribed by Mahon's ability to understand their lack of understanding. Their well-meaning 'Eavesdropp[ing] on conversations / With a Jesus who spoke Irish' leaves the poets making their Easter sacraments apparently by themselves, with deeply ambiguous success:

Dank blankets making up our Lent  
Till, islanders ourselves, we bent  
Out knees and cut the watery sod  
From the lazy-bed where slept a God  
We couldn't count among our friends

The shape of these lines suggests that their not being able to befriend Him was not for lack of trying. Brearton has noted that Longley considered this poem 'an attempt to define my

Irishness'<sup>83</sup>, and what is clearest about the poem's rendering of cultural belonging is that 'Irishness' is not easily defined, and, specific to Longley and (Longley's rendering of) Mahon, something not easily accessible to classically educated northern Protestants, to those 'poetic conservatives'. The poem deals with the poets' cultural shortcomings with a light touch, the lines 'Black tea with bacon and cabbage / For our sacraments and pottage' have notes of MacNeice's own disappointed visit to the Hebrides in *I Crossed the Minch*. There is something of a punchline in the poem's close, however serious the joke:

How persistent the undertow  
Slapped by currachs ferrying stones,  
Moonlight glossing the confusions  
Of its each bilingual wave – yes,  
We would have lingered there for less ...  
Six islanders for a ten-bob note  
Rowed us out to the anchored boat.

The frank flatness of the closing couplet is in direct opposition to the lyrical metaphorizing of the lines before; the dream of understanding in that beautiful double-meaning of 'gloss' as both a sheen and a translation tool is interrupted – almost rebuked – by the need to remain grounded in a world that is not served by high literary play. The final couplet has something of a punchline about it, and it's likely no coincidence that the penultimate line is grammatically constructed such that the direction in which the money travels is unclear: perhaps, Longley suggests, the islanders would happily pay to be rid of these tourists. This is not to overlook the seriousness of the 'anchored boat' however; a powerful symbol in Longley's work, it is a fitting, if not exactly desirable, place for one who feels neither rooted nor floating free.

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<sup>83</sup> Brearton, 89.

In its iambic tetrameter couplets, earnest, self-critical political awareness and somewhat comical depiction of bungling holidayers out of their depth, 'To Derek Mahon' owes much to MacNeice's 'Postscript to Iceland'<sup>84</sup>. In MacNeice's poem, himself and Auden are clearly figures of no small ridicule, a pair of 'dons' with highfalutin ideas about 'How the landscape of the north / Had educed the saga style / Plodding forward mile by mile', a mission they don't seem disappointed to let slide into an academia-flavoured jolly. As MacNeice establishes in the second stanza, however, their 'fancy turn' is 'Sandwiched in a graver show': like 'To Derek Mahon', the poem's levity is in sharp contrast to the violence happening in the places from which they have escaped, the 'Nations germinating hell', where 'the fog-bound sirens call / Ruin to the long sea-wall'. Both poems run along in rhyming couplets in roughly iambic tetrameter, though the differences are significant: Longley's rhythms are looser, and his six-line stanzas more discursively hefty than MacNeice's jaunty, end-stopped quatrains. The formal effect on 'Postscript from Iceland' is to highlight the anxiety the poet experiences when those holiday rhythms no longer fit a return to personal solitude ('Better were the northern skies / Than this desert in disguise') and impending fascism ('Still I drink your health before / The gun-butt raps upon the door'). There is a powerful dissonance in hearing lines about paramilitary rendition in the same rhythms as 'So we rode and joked and smoked / With no miracles evoked'. What both poems express most clearly is this exact sense of helplessness, of formal inadequacy, in the face of the social or international forces ranged against their 'matches struck on crumbling walls' ('To Derek Mahon'). And yet, both poems recognise and accept that returning to these political situations is a moral and artistic imperative. In 'Eclogue from Iceland'<sup>85</sup>, the

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<sup>84</sup> MacNeice, 73.

<sup>85</sup> Ibid, 40.

folk hero Grettir addresses the poem's faintly buffoonish stand-ins for Auden and

MacNeice:

Go back to where you belong. I could have fled  
To the Hebrides or Orkney, been rich and famous,  
Preferred to assert my rights in my own country,  
Mine which were hers [...]  
Minute your gesture but it must be made –  
Your hazard, your act of defiance and hymn of hate,  
Hatred of hatred, assertion of human values,  
Which is now your only duty [...]  
And, it may be added, it is your only chance.

The fact that the stakes in 'Eclogue from Iceland' are so high they can accommodate an only slightly parodied folk hero speaking in a folk hero register does set it apart from 'To Derek Mahon'; what unites them is Longley's recognition of the necessity of being 'Sisyphuses' in 'the city of guns and long knives', of risking personal safety in performing the artist's 'only duty'. That Longley (and, perhaps to a lesser extent, MacNeice) articulates such clear apprehensions about Grettir's unqualified 'where you belong', is the heart of the poem's inquiry. As Brearton notes<sup>86</sup>, of course, the ways Mahon and Longley separately interpret the poem's opening 'we' – as two individuals and two individuals who represent middle-class Protestant literature respectively – only demonstrates the uncertain ground on which these questions are explored.

Longley's focus on what the poets can and cannot comprehend is typical of his impulse to empathise, to attempt to understand how his own place in the world is affected by and relates to others. This principle is a vital aspect of his war poetry, his attempt to

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<sup>86</sup> Brearton, 90.

resist atrocity by understanding those who perpetrate it. Where MacNeice in 'Valediction'<sup>87</sup> and *Autumn Journal*<sup>88</sup> (and even Mahon in 'Ecclesiastes'<sup>89</sup>) uses his rhetorical skill to counter-punch and denounce the attitudes and behaviour of his peers, and in doing so put conceptual space between himself and his addressees, Longley attempts to inhabit their perspective, to explode his own view. In an interview with Dillon Johnston, Longley discusses the difficulty and value of 'imagin[ing] how one can be so brainwashed or so angry or in a sense perhaps even so innocent that one can drive in a car and go into somebody's house and shoot that person stone dead'<sup>90</sup>. 'Wounds'<sup>91</sup> is Longley's second elegy for his father, connecting threads between Richard Longley's experience of war and the contemporary conflict, specifically through the instrumentalised youth and innocence of the combatants. Brearton describes the poem as an 'exploded view of his earlier elegy'<sup>92</sup>, and it's clear that, beyond the surface subject matter, 'Wounds' aims to deepen its understanding of the psychological effects of war in light of contemporary atrocities in Ulster. The poem is composed of two long stanzas: the first is Longley Sr.'s testimony from the front lines of attritional warfare, the poet taking time, as he did in 'In Memoriam', to situate the poem's action in his father's witnessing: 'Here are two pictures from my father's head'; the second takes place among the murder victims of contemporary Ulster. This framework permits an oblique kind of reflection and reverberation between the two settings, which form an understated argument about the cultural narratives that motivate mass violence. The poem performs this through the physical movements of its protagonists: first, the Ulster Division at the Somme:

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<sup>87</sup> MacNeice, *Collected Poems*, 52

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid.*, 101.

<sup>89</sup> Mahon, *Lives*, 3.

<sup>90</sup> Quoted in Brearton, *Reading Michael Longley*, 99.

<sup>91</sup> Longley, *An Exploded View*, 40.

<sup>92</sup> Brearton, 100.



Going over the top with 'Fuck the Pope!'  
'No Surrender!': a boy about to die,  
Screaming 'Give 'em one for the Shankill!'

The depiction of the Ulstermen as 'Wilder than Gurkhas' harkens back to MacNeice's own ambivalences, describing in *Autumn Journal* 'the voodoo of the Orange bands', and 'the grocer drunk with the drum'. Where MacNeice's understanding is almost entirely hostile, however, Longley makes space for his father's more complex 'admiration and bewilderment'. In Longley's rendering, the 'brainwashing, anger and innocence' necessary to motivate teenagers to give away their lives is allowed to play out in all its heart-breaking confoundment. Neither the witnessing father nor the poet in recollection can comprehend it, even to the point at which MacNeice's bitter condemnation would entirely do it justice. The dying boys are followed, literally, by a 'London-Scottish padre', tending to their corpses, with Richard Longley in tow:

Resettling kilts with his swagger-stick,  
With a stylish backhand and a prayer.  
Over a landscape of dead buttocks  
My father followed him for fifty years.

Remembering 'In Memoriam', this substitution of the brides' raised skirts for the dead boys' kilts is deeply painful. Where the previous elegy found room for the vaudeville, 'Wounds' refuses to move past the blunt facts, the final indignities. The poem's closing lines maintain this flat descriptiveness, detailing the murder of a bus-conductor by the poem's final walker:

a shivering boy who wandered in  
Before they could turn the television down  
Or tidy away the supper dishes.

To the children, to a bewildered wife,  
I think 'Sorry Missus' was what he said.

This 'shivering boy' is ghosted by the 'boy about to die', the screamed slogans gone, the theatre of war stripped away, everything scaled down to the intimately domestic and personal. The word 'wandered' bears a huge amount of weight in the poem's final narrative movement: not the purposeful, idiomatic 'Going over the top' or the active 'followed', the last boy embodies uncertainty, purposelessness and loss of meaning. Heather Clark's analysis gets to the poem's heart; ['Wounds'] reveals that Longley was acutely aware of the fact that it was not so much the perpetrators of war who were to blame for the killing, but the momentum of war itself<sup>93</sup>. 'Bewildered' is the other key word: the bus-conductor's wife cannot understand what has happened any more than Richard Longley can in his 'admiration and bewilderment' at the boys at the Somme. The question of where poetry, and the poet, can be an active, restorative force in these scenes is notable in its uncertainty, and may be little more than the ritual acts Longley performs with and for his dying father at the end of its first stanza and the beginning of the second:

I touched his hand, his thin head I touched. [...]

I bury beside him  
Three teenage soldiers, bellies full of  
Bullets and Irish beer, their flies undone.  
A packet woodbines I throw in,  
A lucifer, the Sacred Heart of Jesus  
Paralysed as heavy guns put out  
The night-light in a nursery for ever

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<sup>93</sup> Clark, 17.

The precise position and tone of that 'for ever', its feeling of being tacked on to an already complete thought, calls back as 'In Memoriam' does to MacNeice's 'The Casualty'<sup>94</sup>, whose last line reads 'for you are out of / This life and cannot start any more hares for ever'. The loss of Graham Shepard is rendered so powerful in the poem through MacNeice's final inability to render it comprehensible; his death remains, in perhaps the poem's most striking image, 'Congealing the kaleidoscope at Now'. The mechanisms of war are, ultimately, too great to be encapsulated within the enclosed space of the poem, and both 'The Casualty' and 'Wounds' struggle with the attempt to contextualise a single loss within systems that engender little else. The connections between this poem and MacNeice's work can also be felt through the image of the night-light in the nursery:

it appears centrally in the poem 'Autobiography'<sup>95</sup>, another poem exploring the nature of loss, the destruction of childhood:

The dark was talking to the dead;  
The lamp was dark beside my bed.

'Autobiography' considers the loss of the poet's mother as a marker of the end of childhood, the death of his innocent inner life; though rarely considered alongside MacNeice's war poetry, it was composed in 1940, and its existential fear and grief seem of one mind with poems that more explicitly contemplate the fallout of war in the years that followed. The deeply personal, domestic feelings of loss articulated by 'Autobiography' and 'The Casualty' help define the texture of grieving in 'Wounds': Longley's poem embodies the knowledge that regardless of the scale of the conflict, the business of death will eventually find its way home.

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<sup>94</sup> MacNeice, 245.

<sup>95</sup> Ibid, 183.

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As Brearton notes, *Man Lying on a Wall* is a difficult, tightly-wound collection, home to four of the nine poems Longley excluded in his *Collected Poems*<sup>96</sup>, while two more which had been cut in *Poems: 1963-1983* were reinstated for the *Collected*. Even at a late stage of assembling his oeuvre, *Man Lying on a Wall* presented an element of discomfort Longley did not seem to feel elsewhere. Brearton notes that several critics had trouble getting to grips with the collection, some overwriting the latent tensions in the work, others misfiling it generically as ‘chiefly love poems’<sup>97</sup>. What Eavan Boland astutely identifies as both a key theme and point of continuity with previous collections is the disturbance of domestic spaces in *Man Lying on a Wall*, and how those private disturbances correspond with and complicate discussions of public conflict: ‘It is far, far harder to scrutinise such violences in private situations [...] than in the more accessible realities such as public violence and loss of life’<sup>98</sup>. Where poems like ‘To Derek Mahon’ and ‘Wounds’ were demonstrably public-facing, drawing their private conclusions out of the political realm, in *Man Lying on a Wall*, Longley tips the scale in the opposite direction; the book asserts that there is no simple distinction between violence on the street and behind closed doors.

As in *No Continuing City*, *Man Lying on a Wall* is noticeably preoccupied with states of psychological disorder. In the latter, however, the prevailing sense of exploration and

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<sup>96</sup> Longley, *Collected Poems*, v.

<sup>97</sup> Brearton, 107.

<sup>98</sup> Quoted in *ibid*, 107.

metamorphic possibility becomes introspective, self-dispersing rather than self-creating. In 'The Bat'<sup>99</sup>, for example, this disquiet is externalised in the eponymous creature, who provides an unsettling foil for the couple who have escaped their human companions and found not peace but a different kind of 'Singlemindedness, sheer insanity'. The poet and his partner have 'returned to the empty ballroom [...] to make love secretly', only to find:

a bat demented there, quite  
Out of its mind, flashing round and round  
Where earlier the dancers had moved

The bat's loss of direction is figured as a bleak echo of the departed dancers, a solitary figure in a scene of dancing and romantic partnerships. The bat's 'Singlemindedness' is contextualised as 'sheer insanity', whose only potential salvation is being jolted into 'a saving miscalculation' by the interloping humans. What happens when this attempt fails is complex and troubling, not only for the fate of a living creature but for one of Longley's most potent metaphors:

Suspended between floor and ceiling  
It would continue in our absence  
And drop exhausted, a full stop  
At the centre of the ballroom floor.

This figure in its in-betweenness does not carry the ambiguity it did in 'To Derek Mahon', or the notes of creative potential in Longley's later poems, such as the 'complicated vessels float[ing] free of moorings / In their actual mooring-places' in 'Homecoming'<sup>100</sup>. Here it is blunt in its clarity, an unsustainable state of being that leads to the bat's demise, and that 'full stop' connects it explicitly to creative processes. The bat feels less an observed animal

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<sup>99</sup> Longley, *Man Lying on a Wall*, 9.

<sup>100</sup> Longley, *Collected Poems*, 171.

in nature than a metaphor for an unbreakable creative rut, an obsessive artist fatally separated from the community of dancers and lovers. The poem's off-kilter logic – the protagonists go to an empty ballroom 'to make love secretly' and wind up exchanging weird facts about bats: 'anaesthetising teeth / How it clung to the night by its thumbs' – and inscription of deadly cycles is reminiscent of MacNeice's 'The Brandy Glass'<sup>101</sup>, another poem of solitude and thwarted connections. The poem is slightly briefer than 'The Bat', formed of a single, nine-line stanza with its tail in its mouth:

Only let it form within his hands once more –  
The moment cradled like a brandy glass.  
Sitting alone in the empty dining hall ...  
From the chandeliers the snow begins to fall [...]  
The last diner [...] gazes before him, begs:  
'Only let it form within my hands once more.'

Also set in a grand hall lately abandoned, the subject is not a 'singleminded' bat on infinite loop but a solitary human, 'The last diner' remaining long after all others have departed, compulsively turning a thought over in his mind. The poem's last line is near-identical to its first, a grammatical stasis from which the speaker cannot escape, however much he 'begs' for the memory of the moment to become the moment itself. The relationship between MacNeice's narrator and the protagonist/speaker of 'The Brandy Glass' is similar to how Longley's speaker looks at the bat: the former is described rather pitifully as 'like a ventriloquist's doll / Left by his master', while the bat is left to 'continue in our absence / And drop exhausted'. The flat affect of both narrators toward their subject's helplessness is not heartless, exactly. In both cases it feels like the poets recognise a kindred spirit. Although they may be reluctant to express sympathy, on a deep level both poems seem to express a sense of identification with bat and drinker, two self-destructive fanatics trapped

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<sup>101</sup> MacNeice, 84.

in their own cycles. 'The Bat' and 'The Brandy Glass' are unassuming pieces, but seem to draw on deep reserves of identification between observer and subject, even where that identification is none too flattering.

*Man Lying on a Wall* seems haunted by MacNeice's late lyrics, their nightmares of helplessness, of lost or destabilised selfhood. In the poem 'Man Lying on a Wall'<sup>102</sup> the eponymous man might also be considered alongside Longley's ubiquitous figures caught neither here nor there. Like 'The Bat', the man lying on a wall is held in place, like a museum exhibit or a butcher's carcass:

You could draw a straight line from the heels,  
Through calves, buttocks and shoulderblades  
To the back of the head: pressure points  
That bear the enormous weight of the sky.

The man is suspended at the hub of multiple debilitating pressures, between the obligations of work and home:

It is difficult to judge whether or not  
He is sleeping or merely disinclined  
To arrive punctually at the office  
Or to return home in time for his tea. [...]  
  
On the pavement  
Below him, [...] his briefcase  
  
With everybody's initials on it.

However much the poem pokes fun at the unnamed office worker, by comparing his expression to 'popes and kings in their final slumber', Longley has carefully arranged the

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<sup>102</sup> Longley, *Man Lying on a Wall*, 42.

scene so that every detail adds to the feeling of entrapment, of genteel claustrophobia. In the L.S. Lowry painting that lends the poem its name, the letters on that briefcase read 'L.S.L.', and there's an argument to be made for autobiographically reading a poem about an autobiographical painting. In *Tuppenny Stung*, Longley relates his travails as a ground-breaking advocate for literature in the Arts Council, and 'Man Lying on a Wall' is written at a time when its board 'had decreed that because it was practised by amateurs, literature did not come within its remit (so much for part-time scribblers like T.S. Eliot)'<sup>103</sup>. If the man on the wall is indeed Longley, his council briefcase 'like a relic' at his feet, what presses down from above might denote his obligations to literature, the life above documents and meetings: that it is a 'straight line' that bears this weight is suggestive enough. The poem, of course, punctures this positioning of literature as a space 'above' by its reference to dead 'popes and kings' in 'Their stiff, reluctant exits from this world / Above the shoulders of the multitude'. You certainly can raise yourself up above the common throng, the poem suggests, but you might not find much room to breathe. An optimistic interpretation of 'Man Lying on a Wall', might read the central act of inertia as a kind of last stand against irresistible forces, a refusal to be anywhere but the place he happens to be. In context with the book's other figures of immobility or fruitless mobility, however, 'Man Lying on a Wall' might be exactly what it appears to be: a study of an artist rendered powerless by a life 'With everybody's initials on it'.

MacNeice's 'The Suicide'<sup>104</sup>, a poem drawing from the elder poet's own experience working at another patron of the arts, the British Broadcasting Corporation, may well be a kindred spirit to 'Man Lying on a Wall'. The narrator of 'The Suicide' also gives a detailed,

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<sup>103</sup> Longley, *Tuppenny Stung*, 50.

<sup>104</sup> MacNeice, *Collected Poems*, 518.



somewhat tongue-in-cheek, museum curator's analysis of what seems a lot like the poet's real life circumstances. The deeply weird introduction, which instantly destabilises the relationship between the speaker and their audience, is full of rhetorical flourishes:

And this, ladies and gentlemen, whom I am not in fact  
Conducting, was his office all those minutes ago,  
This man you never heard of. There are the bills  
In the intray, the ash in the ashtray, the grey memoranda stacked  
Against him, the serried ranks of the box-files, the packed  
Jury of his unanswered correspondence  
Nodding under the paperweight in the breeze

The playfulness of these opening lines draw out the tension, given that this is a poem called 'The Suicide'; the following line is brutal in its understatement: 'From the window by which he left'. The poem slowly ratchets up a feeling of entrapment by compulsively returning to the first rhyme word – there are eight rhymes on 'fact' – and by removing all punctuation, removing the reader's instinct to slow down and re-evaluate:

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 and all or might be the flowery maze  
Through which he had wandered deliciously till he stumbled  
Suddenly finally conscious of all he lacked  
On a manhole under the hollyhocks.

The enjambement on 'tract / Ulcer' is so rhythmically wrongfooting as to be almost nauseating, while the conflation of the 'delicious' 'flowery maze' with a set of intestines is a lurid embodiment of the pleasures and terrors of MacNeice's arts administration post. When the man finally does leave the room permanently, it is by 'catdrop sleight-of-foot or simple vanishing act'; this seems a point of reference for Longley's own office worker, for whom 'The result would be a miracle or / An extremely clever conjuring trick'. Where 'The

Suicide' longs for a disintegration of self, a final abdication of responsibility, 'Man Lying on a Wall' cannot or will not do likewise. However much its protagonist might remain so fixed in place that his own mode of escape is to remove the rest of the world, 'the supporting structure', he recognises and accepts it as fantasy. Longley's poem may have its roots in MacNeice's, but 'Man Lying on a Wall' differs insofar as he recognises that leaving behind 'Something that was intact' is not sufficient; the briefcase on the pavement has not only his but everyone else's name on it, the responsibilities of the world have a hold on him, and only popes and kings exit the world well, however stiffly or reluctantly. 'Man Lying on a Wall' is a poem that holds a great many tensions in balance, not least among which is that between the struggles of the working world and the 'freedom' of the 'final slumber'.

On the opposite page to 'Man Lying on a Wall' is 'Fleance'<sup>105</sup>, another poem exploring the possibility of escape. Here, too, is the implication of unjust burdening of responsibility, the poet's elision of directly addressing or focusing on the civil conflict in a manner which Brearton frames within MacNeice's definition of parable<sup>106</sup>. Focusing a poem on a murdered child during the worst years of the Troubles seems a pointed strategy, particularly for a child whose only contribution to the narrative in which he features is to be brutally murdered off-stage. In Longley's poem, Fleance escapes, 'the two poetic murderers' only 'Pinned my silhouette to history', allowing the boy to 'lose myself' in 'The dusty warren beneath the stage', a kind of literary afterlife. Naming this space a 'warren' links the poem to many Longley poems featuring underground dwellings, such as 'Badger' or 'Skara Brae'. Given *Man Lying on a Wall's* fascination with psychological disorder, the same space in 'Fleance' seems distinctly less homely than its predecessors, a place it takes

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<sup>105</sup> Longley, *Man Lying on a Wall*, 43.

<sup>106</sup> Brearton, 120.

'a lifetime' to escape. The poem treats the division between the underground life and the real with no small amount of ambiguity, given that what happens 'above my head' is itself only a performance. This feeling of fleeing one nightmare only to emerge into another is deeply coloured by MacNeice's late lyrics: the poem's warping of time – 'It took me a lifetime to explore / The dusty warren beneath the stage' – also sets the poem's action at an uncomfortable angle to reality. The last stanza gives little cause for optimism:

In the empty auditorium I bowed  
To one preoccupied caretaker  
And, without removing my make-up,  
Hurried back to the digs where Banquo  
Sat up late with a hole in his head.

The grisly pun on 'digs', pitched somewhere between a home and an unfinished grave, and the appearance of Banquo, Fleance's father and a character better known for his own post-mortem affairs, create a similar atmosphere to MacNeice's 'Charon'<sup>107</sup>, in which deadly threats also pursue the speaker at each turn. Banquo's ghostly appearance, which in the uncanny realm of the poem could just as easily be the performer's make-up or reality, appears as suddenly and without fanfare as 'the ferryman just as Virgil / And Dante had seen him' in 'Charon'. Where Longley's poem stakes its own ground is in weaving Longley's recurrent concerns into the parabolic mood of MacNeice's late lyrics. 'Fleance' mourns the loss of childhood innocence and the impossibility of returning to a home safe from 'history', from the 'bullet with my initials on it'. The fact that the speaker comes home to find his ghostly, wounded father 'Sat up late' seems a deeply significant gesture in Longley's work, a buried metaphor that binds his own father into the network of contemporary violence.

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<sup>107</sup> MacNeice, 530.

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In *The Echo Gate*, Longley finds a dynamic balance between the broadly public emphasis of *An Exploded View* and the more domestic, private modes of *Man Lying on a Wall*. *The Echo Gate* might be read as closing a circle in the cycle of four collections that open Longley's career; here, he returns to the metaphysical and love poetry that characterised his first collection, though their textures are deeply altered. MacNeice's thumbnail nightmares have begun to filter into these poems, belying their increased formal control with an intensified feeling of psychological unease.

Though the prominence of poems like 'Wreaths'<sup>108</sup>, 'Bog Cotton'<sup>109</sup> and 'Dead Men's Fingers'<sup>110</sup> are ample evidence that death and oneiric anxiety have become vital aspects of the poet's palette,

*The Echo Gate* is an altogether more formally settled collection also, as Longley starts to inhabit with increased frequency the tidy, well-formed stanzas that would come to characterise his late poems. MacNeice's habit of letting a poem's syntax derange its sensibilities is almost completely absent here, and of Longley's first four collections, *The Echo Gate* is the least obviously inflected by the elder poet's strategies. Nevertheless, the points at which his influence is felt still cut to the core of Longley's enterprise.

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<sup>108</sup> Longley, *The Echo Gate*, 12.

<sup>109</sup> *Ibid*, 33.

<sup>110</sup> *Ibid*, 49.

Longley's thinking about love and death come full circle in 'The Linen Industry'<sup>111</sup>, picking up where, equally, 'Epithalamion' and MacNeice's 'Mayfly' leave off. Like Longley's earliest love poem, 'The Linen Industry' takes a long view of the lovers' relationship, and everywhere in the poem mortality and desire go hand in hand:

What's passion but a battering of stubborn stalks,  
Then a gentle combing out of fibres like hair  
And a weaving of these into christening robes,  
Into garments for a marriage or funeral?

Appropriately enough for a poem that is so focused on ritual, on manufacture and artifice, the poem is almost impossibly graceful, softly spoken, comparing the drying of flax to 'the skirts of an invisible dancer'. In 'Sulpicia'<sup>112</sup>, from the same collection, the eponymous poet describes her planned seduction of Mars in explicitly bodily, sensuous terms:

I will stumble behind him through the undergrowth  
Tracking his white legs, drawing about us both  
The hunters' circle: among twisted nets and snares

I will seduce him, tangle his hairs with my hairs

'The Linen Industry' by comparison barely acknowledges the presence of physical bodies at all, focusing instead on the various elaborate coverings composed out of linen. The exception, of course, is in the final stanza, which in its conflation of the female body and death weaves its way back to MacNeice's own first love poem:

Let flax be our matchmaker, our undertaker [...]

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<sup>111</sup> Ibid, 45.

<sup>112</sup> Ibid, 38.

And be shy of your breasts in the presence of death,  
Say that you look more beautiful in linen  
Wearing white petticoats, the bow on your bodice  
A butterfly attending the embroidered flowers.

McDonald has noted that 'The Linen Industry' renews and expands Longley's engagement with 'Mayfly': 'Longley often uses images of breasts to combine associations of eroticism and the maternal, both making sense within a context of mortality'<sup>113</sup>. Again, the slant on MacNeice's trope that makes it Longley's own is in making his symbol of delicate, ephemeral life itself part of the artifice within the poem; an imaginary garden with imaginary toads, to misquote Marianne Moore. In this turn Longley seems to subvert the construction of love as a passing thing in 'Mayfly', MacNeice's wish that 'when this summer is over let us die together': in making a butterfly out of linen, as Longley makes an intimate moment in an attic into a poem, the longevity of both is assured. The butterfly can attend the embroidered flowers as long as the linen lasts, perhaps, the poem seems to suggest, a lifetime. The suggestion in 'Mayfly' that 'the trouble with us mayflies / Is we never get the chance to grow up' is taken on in earnest, and it's remarkable how often Longley's poem touches on moments of transformation: the fields of flax 'compacted into window-boxes'; 'the whole meadow [...] turning white in the sun / As though snow reluctant to melt were our attire'; the whole drama of 'passion' played out in terms of converting stalks into cloth in the fourth stanza. Brearton suggests 'the redemptive potential [in Longley's work] lies in the capacity to transform; at the same time, the need for something solid to contest what may become dissolution and loss is present as a counter-impulse'<sup>114</sup>. The sacramental

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<sup>113</sup> McDonald, *Mistaken Identities*, 130.

<sup>114</sup> Brearton, *Reading Michael Longley*, 154.

atmosphere in 'The Linen Industry' points to the poem 'Wreaths' earlier in the collection, particularly the section titled *The Linen Workers*:

When they massacred the ten linen workers  
There fell on the road beside them spectacles,  
Wallets, small change, and a set of dentures:  
Blood, food particles, the bread, the wine.

A sort of cruel inverse of the creative and life-giving processes occurs in 'The Linen Industry'. This poem also ends with the preparation of a body for a funeral, Longley's father, making him appear as he did in life by giving him glasses, money, and his set of false teeth. By taking what fell from the murdered workers and restoring them to a more natural context, Longley is able to 'bury [his] father once again'. In Longley's poetry, grief is never a one-off, but part of an ongoing practice; like the renewal of bonds between the couple in 'The Linen Industry', ritual becomes part of the poetry's emotional labour, a form of perpetual caretaking, whether of a partner or of the dead. This highlights a fundamental point of departure between Longley and MacNeice's approaches to their love poems: where MacNeice's tendency is to celebrate a metaphysical distortion or outright cessation of time, as in 'Meeting Point'<sup>115</sup> and 'Trilogy for X'<sup>116</sup>, Longley often asserts the preservation or protection of the physical body. The goal in 'The Linen Industry' is not simply to acknowledge the unsalvageable moment as it passes forever, but to maintain it in the physical world by all practical means available, for as long as time permits.

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<sup>115</sup> MacNeice, *Collected Poems*, 167.

<sup>116</sup> *Ibid*, 88.

Metaphysical change is, however, at the heart of Longley's 'The War Poets'<sup>117</sup> a poem which covers a vast amount in an intensely compressed space. The full poem reads:

Unmarked were the bodies of the soldier-poets

For shrapnel opened up again the fontanel  
Like a hailstone melting towards deep water  
At the bottom of a well, or a mosquito  
Balancing its tiny shadow above the lip.

It was rushes of air that took the breath away  
As though curtains were drawn suddenly aside  
And darkness streamed into the dormitory  
Where everybody talked about the war ending  
And always it would be the last week of the war.

The image of darkness streaming in through a window instead of light is an unusual one for Longley, a cinematic special effect turning day into permanent night. The poem seems to draw on a thought from MacNeice's 'The Casualty', which renders the instant of death as when 'the shutter fell / Congealing the kaleidoscope at Now'. The chiasmic last lines of Longley's poem seem to preserve a wartime moment on loop. The specific location of this afterlife in a 'dormitory', perhaps at school, however, recalls lines from 'Carrickfergus'<sup>118</sup>:

I thought 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 –

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<sup>117</sup> Longley, 34.

<sup>118</sup> MacNeice, 69.



MacNeice was seven when the Great War broke out, and Longley was six when the Second World War ended. Both poems take a child's perspective on a conflict too vast to comprehend without the metaphor of flags on maps, and both create the uncanny halting of time grammatically, using a past imperfect tense to describe an incomplete moment. Longley's poem seems to revolve around the double meaning of its first word: 'unmarked' appears not only its primary meaning of lost, as in an unmarked grave, but also unharmed, as in 'not a mark on him'. The appearance of the mosquito may also be a way of connecting the recently killed back into the cycle of living: 'Balancing its tiny shadow' above the soldier's lip on the verge between life and death, between the fontanel and the shrapnel. Brearton notes that Keith Douglas, who is addressed in the next poem in the collection, 'Bog Cotton'<sup>119</sup>, inspects a mosquito in his poem 'How to Kill', which 'touches / her tiny shadow on the stone'<sup>120</sup>. The poem is, in part, a way of tapping into the life cycle of war poetry, connecting the living and the dead in literary terms, maintaining their rituals. The poem's second half, then, seems an altogether more easily legible, domestic scene, a way of returning those soldier-poets to a state of innocence, a childhood in a dormitory in which they are harmless and unharmed.

The 'hailstone melted towards deep water' in 'The War Poets', and the 'snow reluctant to melt' in 'The Linen Industry' appears once again in 'Frozen Rain'<sup>121</sup>. The latter picks up from both of the former in its assigning of healing properties to water, and in the

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<sup>119</sup> Longley, 33.

<sup>120</sup> Brearton, 148.

<sup>121</sup> Longley, 20.

lessons it takes from MacNeice's love poetry, particularly 'Meeting Point'<sup>122</sup>, regarding the imaginative manipulation of time:

I slow down the waterfall to a chandelier,  
Filaments of daylight, bones fleshed out by ice  
That recuperate in their bandages of glass  
And, where the lake behaves like a spirit-level,  
I save pockets of air for the otter to breathe.

I magnify each individual blade of grass  
With frozen rain, a crop of icicles and twigs,  
Fingers and thumbs that beckon towards the thaw  
And melt to the marrow between lip and tongue  
While the wind strikes the branches like a celeste.

'Meeting Point' also examines plant-life in close up, rendering a frozen bell as 'A brazen calyx of no noise', and imagines a waterfall as a 'radio waltz' which 'Came out like water from a rock'. Though the only music in 'Frozen Rain' is the tree in the wind, it also considers this imaginative pause as a manner of healing, 'the body's peace' in MacNeice's poem. The radical difference in Longley's approach is the fragility of everything the poem describes: though the ice's 'bones' recuperate under ice, they will still 'melt to the marrow' upon contact. This impulse is layered into two consecutive poems in *The Echo Gate*: the 'spring-clean' of 'Thaw', with its transformation of snow-flecked coal into a 'blackbird with one white feather', and 'The Echo Gate', in which the poet figures himself as 'A skull between two ears that reconstructs / Broken voices, broken stones, history // And the first words that come into my head', finding a way to balance past present and future in across a single stanza break.

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<sup>122</sup> MacNeice, 167.

Much like MacNeice, Longley's conception of the fluidity and malleability of time is not always rendered positively; it is given full, nightmarish rein in one of the most grimly uncanny poems in Longley's oeuvre, 'Dead Men's Fingers'<sup>123</sup>. The flower the poem is named after also appears in Hamlet, in the garland of flowers worn in death by Ophelia, and Longley's piece is full of foreboding, anxiety, confusion, and, ultimately, a conflation of romantic love and death. The poem itself is a kind of narrative circle, beginning with 'The second time we meet' and ending with 'The first time we meet is really the last time in reverse'. What happens in between is a blend of a very un-MacNeicean revulsion at highly feminine aspects of the body, and a highly MacNeicean psychodrama in which a plain-spoken narrator travels headlong through a series of time- and space-bending tableaux. Regarding the former, the poem's 'she' first appears:

Beside the cigarette machine. She is in her moons.  
A cat with a mouse's tail dangling out of its mouth  
Flashes from between her legs and escapes into my head.

Primarily, this passage establishes the weird, witchy tone of the poem at large, and the unnerving threat 'she' seems to represent, or accompany. That the poem specifies that she is 'in her moons', or menstruating, without any apparent context, is a strange note. The image that follows is stranger still, blurring the boundaries of the real and the imagined, and specifically erasing the integrity of the speaker's body. Later in the poem are the unsettling lines:

Then the conversational strolls in a forest of pines  
So that I can picture the invisible tree-creeper

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<sup>123</sup> Longley, 49.

Spiralling up her body to probe for such parasites  
As lurk where pink flowers seem to harden into cones.

The creepily sexual aspect of this deeply invasive imagining is hard to miss. In a poem in which the speaker's imagination has explicitly been invaded, it would probably be a mistake to read this passage too literally. It is clear that this body presents some hidden threat to be investigated, and the hostile plantlife that populates the poem seems to echo the 'Squidlike, phallic or vulvar, hypnotic, idiotic, oleaginous, / Fanged or whaleboned' monstrosities of MacNeice's 'Flower Show'<sup>124</sup>. In that poem the flowers are not invisible but synthetic, and in both cases seem to possess an uncanny consciousness, a will to destroy the speaker: 'their aims are one, the controlled / Aim of a firing party'. Where this seems to interact with MacNeice's late poetry at large is in its denial, within its first lines, of the agency of the poem's human protagonist. As in 'The Taxis'<sup>125</sup> or 'Charon'<sup>126</sup>, Longley's speaker has little control over the progression of the poem's drama: finding 'Feathers, shells, dune violets among the marram grass' for her, and 'boil[ing] a somnolent lobster in the ash bucket / And divid[ing] it between us', are his only active participations, and do little to affect the plot as it unspools in its highly disjunctive leaps and starts. The poem pivots tonally from the humdrum, 'that honeymoon weekend in a farflung cottage / Where we sit in silence', to the catastrophic, 'The tenth, eleventh, twelfth occasions melt together / Colourfully: a stained-glass window in a burning church', and back again: 'I find myself [...] putting my feet up on the mantelpiece / And talking to my shoes, with glances in her direction'. The poem does not move from the domestic to the luridly oneiric or vice versa: both seem to occupy the same time and space simultaneously. As mentioned earlier, the

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<sup>124</sup> MacNeice, 521.

<sup>125</sup> Ibid, 522.

<sup>126</sup> Ibid, 530.

poem is a formal loop, a favoured technique of MacNeice throughout his career, and particularly in his love poetry. In 'Dead Men's Fingers', however, this circle seems more like a trap than a renewable cycle. In MacNeice's 'All Over Again'<sup>127</sup>, the speaker euphorically imagines a single kiss metaphysically stretching throughout time and space, the poem enacting this movement formally over a single, huge sentence that begins and ends with almost identical phrasing: 'As if I had known you for years drink to me [...] as if / This one Between were All and we in love for years'. Where MacNeice's poem wishes 'To preserve today one kiss in this skybound timeless cup', Longley's concludes with a harrowing image that once again conflates death and the female body:

The first time we meet is really the last time in reverse.

We kiss for ever and I feel like the ghost of a child  
Visiting the mother who long ago aborted him.

Timelessness here, as opposed not only to 'All Over Again' but also Longley's own 'Epithalamion', is a kind of living death. The lovers' relationship until this point is characterised by physical or emotional distance: they do not touch at all, and what does pass between them is ghostly and intrusive, the witch's cat or the 'invisible tree-creeper', each of which violates the two protagonists' physical integrity. The deadpan narrator, meanwhile, and his affectless asides – 'She is in her moons', 'Our most memorable meal' – also carry echoes of MacNeice's late poetry, in which the fantastical is afforded no more attention than the mundane: 'He could hear the signals bounce / Back from the moon' ('After the Crash'<sup>128</sup>); 'We could see the pigeons through the glass but failed / To hear their rumours of wars' ('Charon'<sup>129</sup>). These poems, like Longley's 'Dead Men's Fingers', seem to

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<sup>127</sup> Ibid, 513.

<sup>128</sup> Ibid, 524.

<sup>129</sup> Ibid, 530.

explore disturbed or disturbing psychological states, and their refusal to abide by legible rules of causality seems a vital tool in expressing this disturbance.

Though there are elements of 'Dead Men's Fingers' that make more sense in their local contexts, such as *The Echo Gate's* recurring engagement with the corruption or contamination of domestic spaces, the poem's hyperreal imagery, narrative disjunctions and cold, unflinching speaker find corresponding figures in MacNeice's late work. Perhaps its closest relative is 'The Introduction'<sup>130</sup>, a poem in which the two existentially thwarted lovers find themselves temporally dislocated, the ill-fittingness of their relationship seeping into the natural world, from soil to sky. The poem opens:

They were introduced in a grave glade  
And she frightened him because she was young  
And thus too late. Crawly crawly  
Went the twigs above their heads and beneath  
The grass beneath their feet the larvae  
Split themselves laughing.

As in 'Dead Men's Fingers', everything in the poem is working to unsettle the reader. The weird grammar in the second line delays and displaces the poem's core tension: that, to put it bluntly, he is too old and she too young for the romantic intimacy one or both desire, but cannot bring themselves to contemplate. The crawly twigs, meanwhile, seem a slightly more passive, though no less threatening, presence than the 'invisible tree-creeper' in Longley's poem, and both appear in the context of psychosexual discomfort. Though the larvae's apparently mocking laughter is easy enough to connect to the poem's action – even

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<sup>130</sup> MacNeice, 531.

insects find their situation pitifully absurd – less easily parsed are the metaphorical elements that follow:

Crawly crawly  
Went the cloud above the treetops reaching  
For a sun that lacked the nerve to set [...] Crawly crawly  
Went the string quartet that was tuning up  
In the back of the mind.

A setting sun might put one in mind of a person in decline, perhaps the poem's elderly 'he', but 'lacking the nerve to set', to vanish or decline entirely, seems more readily comparable to the fearful lovers' incapacity to see each other fully in the here and now. The unsettling sun, meanwhile, has mutated from the 'skybound timeless cup' of 'All Over Again' to something weak, cowardly, unnatural. 'The Introduction' ends where it began, a mirror image of its opening line:

The string quartet in the back of the mind  
Was all tuned up with nowhere to go.  
They were introduced in a green grave.

The 'grave glade', a dour version of a fruitful and natural place, becomes a 'green grave', a weirdly fresh ('green' in the sense of new or untested) version of a dead place; they could easily be symbols of the poem's protagonists. In looping back on itself with a macabre twist, 'The Introduction' provides a formal blueprint for how 'Dead Men's Fingers' articulates its sense of temporal and sexual entrapment. Both do so through images of unnatural flora: the 'grave glade' of 'The Introduction' and Longley's eponymous toxin; formally, tonally, and in content, the poems share very similar roots.

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In his introduction to MacNeice's *Selected Poems*, Longley asks: 'What other twentieth-century poet writing in English explores with such persistence and brilliance all that being alive can mean?'<sup>131</sup>. The question, as Longley's essay illuminates, is double-edged. Though Longley celebrates what is celebratory in MacNeice and what connects the poet most intimately with his immediate community, the points through which the elder poet makes his presence known in his work are more often characterised by loss, fear, and disturbance. As several critics have noted, MacNeice's 'Mayfly' may well be a vital touchstone for Longley's love poetry, but the moments of the most profound intimacy in Longley's poetry draw their intensity from a substantial recognition of the proximity of grief and loss; in both poets' most powerful work, the two forces are inextricably linked. It is perhaps unsurprising, then, to see similar processes at work in other aspects of Longley's poetry. Longley clearly feels deeply a sense of the poet's responsibility to be aware of and engage with the world outside their door, his sense that 'saving ironies' are little more than a form of self-preservation. His struggle to create something substantial, to enact thinking that does more than perfunctorily recognise basic truths about loss and grief, seems inflected by his first philosophical principles played out by both 'Mayfly' and 'Epithalamion'. In these poems, in the face of destructive forces that seem to transcend the power of individual resistance, the most vital and valuable response is to be a source of love and understanding, however ultimately doomed the enterprise. Taken in this context, the psychological disturbances explored throughout these early collections may be taken as attempts to turn that understanding and acceptance inward, the better to project it outward; the vast number of poems in Longley's later work that centre around homecoming, connection, healing and love seems testament to the value of the work performed in his early career. These poems, embodying in their diminutiveness the fragility

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<sup>131</sup> Longley, *Louis MacNeice: Selected Poems*, xxiii.



and contingency of the healing they depict, are at the heart of Longley's enterprise. Their drive to recognise and record the unmarked and unremarked, in a tone at turns ironic, witty and deeply humane, recalls Longley's own opinion of MacNeice, and MacNeice's strategy in his exuberant love poetry: 'The bright patterns he conjures from the external world and the pleasures of being alive are not fairy light and bauble but searchlight and icon'<sup>132</sup>. Early in this chapter the significant positioning of 'Thalassa' at the fore of Longley's selection of MacNeice's work took the poem as emblematic of his oeuvre. The poem's final stanza, in its commitment to a doomed quest for redemption, its awareness of the certainty of death, its location of freedom in the fluid, shifting, never-finished homecoming of a life at sea, seems to embody a great deal of what in MacNeice's work is so empowering for Longley:

Put out to sea, ignoble comrades,  
Whose record shall be noble yet;  
Butting through scarps of moving marble  
The narwhal dares us to be free;  
By a high star our course is set,  
Our end is Life. Put out to sea.

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<sup>132</sup> Longley, *Two Decades of Irish Writing*, 104.

### Three: 'A Familiar Voice': Derek Mahon

The connections between the work of Derek Mahon and Louis MacNeice have been extensively documented and, in the case of the composition of "In Carrowdore Churchyard"<sup>1</sup>, somewhat romanticised. Though that poem certainly marked a watershed in the young Mahon's poetic development, it perhaps represents only a superficial engagement with the elder poet's work. Through her various readings of the poem, Edna Longley's first instinct, to describe Mahon's self-positioning as 'the heir and disinheritor of MacNeice – starting where MacNeice left off'<sup>2</sup>, may be closer to the mark than her later, more expansive and generous readings in *The Living Stream*. While perceptive on the poem's general atmosphere, Longley might be overplaying its intentions when she frames its closing lines as neatly encapsulating the wholeness of MacNeice's aesthetics; Longley argues that these lines 'not only represent poetry as a therapeutic process, and conflate MacNeice's imaginative worlds, but distil the processes of his poetry'<sup>3</sup>. The first stanza makes fairly clear, however subtextually, the young poet's intentions:

'Your ashes will not stir, even on this high ground,  
However the wind tugs, the headstones shake –  
This plot is consecrated, for your sake,  
To what lies in the future tense. You lie  
Past tension now, and spring is coming round  
Igniting flowers on the peninsula'<sup>4</sup>

MacNeice's fluid, musical stanza is present, the lush and playful rhymes ('lie/peninsula') suggest a debt to MacNeice's flair within form, and the unusual tenderness of the stanza is notable when considered alongside the caustic wit and wisdom of the rest of *Night-*

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<sup>1</sup> Mahon, *Night-crossing*, 3.

<sup>2</sup> Longley, "Review of *Night-crossing*", *Honest Ulsterman* 8, 27-8.

<sup>3</sup> Longley, *The Living Stream*, 261.

<sup>4</sup> Mahon, 3.

*crossing*. It seems fair to say that a genuine affection is being expressed here: the repeated sibilants conjure an air of reverent hush, a laying down to rest, an active role in the renewal of both art and organic life. The poem's reiteration of MacNeice's placement explicitly in the past tense, however, seems to put a firm boot on top of the coffin. The poet who understands that 'One part of my mind must learn to know its place'<sup>5</sup>, is also keen to keep the elder poet in his. It is imperative, however, to move swiftly on from this first, Bloomian-Freudian encounter of elder poet and scrappy upstart to the deeper, more durable and substantial ways in which MacNeice is an active influence on Mahon's oeuvre. As with the previous chapter on Michael Longley, this chapter will not focus on Mahon's whole oeuvre, which would require far more time and space than this thesis can afford to do it justice. This study includes work up to 1997's *The Yellow Book*, but, as with the previous chapter, it will focus primarily on the poet's work of the 1960s and 1970s, where, I believe, MacNeice's influence can be most powerfully read<sup>6</sup>.

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The question of the degree to which an artist bears some responsibility toward their larger community is one of the most persistent questions in the work of both poets. In his early career MacNeice was unimpressed by the easy affiliation of many of his Oxbridge peers with the Communist party, and responded with weary disdain for their shallow engagement with the movement's philosophy:

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid, 6.

<sup>6</sup> Mahon's career-long habit of self-revision is not under discussion in this chapter. I considered this a relatively less interesting aspect of Mahon's oeuvre, and, given limited space, decided that analysis of the originals would better serve this chapter's formulation of his relationship to MacNeice.

[The everyday communist] still keeps his faith in the magical value of slogans, still holds that if he repeats a statement often enough it will turn into a fact, and *at the same time* denies the practical value of any spiritual faith.<sup>7</sup>

MacNeice did not express his political beliefs in a public forum except where they intersected with his artistic practice and treated his peers likewise. It's notable that in the quote above that MacNeice's quibble is not with the *substance* of communism but the inconsistency with which some of its adherents abide by its principles. If MacNeice's writing on politics and art has a fulcrum on which all else hinges, it is here, the point where abstract concept meets the mess of reality. In *Modern Poetry* (1935) he disparages decadent poetry and 'art for art's sake' for its elitism and inability to cope with a world that steadfastly refused to remain within a narrow definition of 'poetic':

'They have felt that their expressed attitude to the world must be peculiarly the attitude of *poets*, that therefore much of the world was unfit subject for poetry because it was itself unpoetic.'<sup>8</sup>

This position is grounded with disdainful ease, the elitism of the fin-de-siècle lampooned with characteristic precision: 'it was no longer desirable to let the community intrude into the subject of one's work; if it was never going to call, one need not hang out its photograph'<sup>9</sup>. Though no less forceful in his rejection of them, MacNeice treats the Imagists with greater respect and deeper critical engagement as a necessary, if no longer positively generative, period in the recuperation of poetry's relationship to the communal, the social and the political. Via J.M. Synge, he asserts that 'before verse can be human again it must

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<sup>7</sup> MacNeice, *Poetry of W.B. Yeats*, 216.

<sup>8</sup> MacNeice, *Modern Poetry*, 1.

<sup>9</sup> *ibid*, 4.

learn to be brutal'<sup>10</sup>. Where Imagism and, later, Modernism failed, however, is in their treatment of real life subjects as mere pattern or décor; MacNeice is particularly critical of Eliot's aestheticisation of people living in poverty in London<sup>11</sup>. He calls instead for a recognition that a poet is also a human being responding in real time to real phenomena, a 'concrete poet' living concretely:

not just a conglomeration of animals or machines, mere flux, a dissolving hail of data, but a system of individuals determined by their circumstances [...] reacting with both intelligence and emotion (which is how we react to anything in ordinary life) to experiences.<sup>12</sup>

MacNeice's movement away from Eliot was a move toward poetry as an 'ordinary' experience, in which the poet is no further up the hierarchy than their subject, in which poetry is not intellectually rarefied but one in a constellation of verbal acts. As MacNeice notes, 'a poet is a specialist in something which every one practices'<sup>13</sup>, and 'every word is a community-product'<sup>14</sup>; on a philosophical level, the poet could not escape their community even if they wanted to, that language itself is a fundamentally communitarian phenomenon. Though MacNeice in *Modern Poetry* is clear about the theoretical basis on which poets ought to be engaged in public life, he was altogether more ambivalent in practice, particularly when it came to his relationship to Ireland, of which more later.

Though the question of the poet's public responsibilities becomes noticeably more pointed in Mahon's *Lives* (1972) and *The Snow Party* (1975), it is already clearly in play in his first full collection, *Night-crossing* (1968), composed mostly during Mahon's time in Dublin,

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<sup>10</sup> *ibid*, 9.

<sup>11</sup> *ibid*, 74.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid*, 29-30.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid*, 31.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid*, 2.

Paris, Massachusetts and Canada. This first book is more interested in the rights and responsibilities of the artist as an individual, over and above their relationship to audience or community. Speaking in an interview with Terence Brown about this period of his career, Mahon noted that 'I think it's a great plus for a poet 'of the native tradition' in Ireland that he has that kind of racial memory and so on at his disposal and he has his obvious ready-made audience there for him'<sup>15</sup>. Mahon's contrarian impulses and inclination toward solitude are well-documented, and, in his poetry, figures navigating the world at arm's length are too common not to be read as a feature of his aesthetics<sup>16</sup>. A poet whose poetically formative years were spent away from Ireland, furthermore, complicates the notion that Ireland is where he might find his 'community', and it's worth noting that when Brown pushes the question about Mahon's pre-conceived audience, he specifies 'a few friends'<sup>17</sup> and seems reluctant to elaborate.

While the argument could be made that this is merely typical of an artist who never met an idea he couldn't be sceptical of, the poems of *Night-crossing* bear up the idea that Mahon had been thinking deeply about an artist's role in society. 'Van Gogh among the Miners'<sup>18</sup> dramatises this tension between a creative mind that flourishes in solitude and the human world at his doorstep, the tension MacNeice recognises between 'men *qua* community' and 'men *qua* individuals'<sup>19</sup>. Here, the artist complains to his brother:

Theo, I am discharged for being  
Over-zealous, they call it,  
And not dressing the part.

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<sup>15</sup> Brown, Terence, "An Interview with Derek Mahon", *The Poetry Ireland Review*, 14 (Autumn, 1985), 11.

<sup>16</sup> In *Night-crossing* alone, 'De Quincy in Later Life', 'Four Walks in the Country Near Saint-Brieuc', 'The Forger', 'Van Gogh Among the Miners', 'Thinking of Inis Oirr in Cambridge, Mass.', feature individuals at (at least) one remove from conventional society.

<sup>17</sup> *ibid*, 13-4.

<sup>18</sup> Mahon, 21.

<sup>19</sup> MacNeice, 15-6.

The dramatic irony is straightforward. Mahon is, no doubt, sending up the self-serious painter-persona while gently critiquing a larger society that fails to accommodate his superficial differences. The poem concludes:

In time I shall go south  
And paint what I have seen –

A meteor of golden light  
On chairs, faces and old boots,  
Setting fierce fire to the eyes  
Of sun-flowers and fishing boats,  
Each one a miner in disguise.

The detail of heading south does not seem to have an in-poem significance, and it's tempting to see it as an echo of Mahon's own removal from Belfast to Dublin, itself a departure that permitted fuller artistic expression. From the gentle comedy of the previous stanza, this closure feels wholly sincere, the graceful, ecstatic 'meteor of golden light' and 'fierce fire' embodying Van Gogh's style in language. That this exuberant moment comes after the artist has escaped 'the darkness / Of pits, slag heaps, beetroot fields [...] Like a caged bird in spring-time' seems to validate the poem's drama: the artist could not mature among his immediate community, and the community could not be transubstantiated into art with the artist in their midst. The poem's closing rhymes, boots/boats and eyes/disguise, emphasise that regardless of what ostensible subject the painter takes on, it is inevitably ghosted by his time in the mines. Although the poem cannot reach an explicit connection between them, the 'caged bird' of the frustrated artist is echoed by the 'caged Belgian miners'. The affinity may be merely a conceptual pun, and may not stand up to much close analysis – the artist's own naivety may again be subtly shading matters here – but in the realm of the poem the connection is unmistakable, a full rhyme. The social dynamics in 'Van Gogh among the Miners' are complex and, crucially, destabilised by the

ironised self-righteousness of the artist in the lines, 'Theo, I am discharged'. Even in the light of his eventual artistic triumph, the poem quietly sees the miners' point of view.

A more direct approach to the question is taken in 'In Belfast'<sup>20</sup>. The poem opens with the speaker 'Walking among my own', though given the absence of human figures throughout, the line seems closer in meaning to 'walking *on* my own'. The piece feels overloaded with conflicting impulses, encapsulated in the first stanza's closing line, 'Once more, as before, I remember not to forget.' The poem continues:

There is a perverse pride in being on the side  
Of the fallen angels and refusing to get up.  
We could *all* be saved by keeping an eye on the hill  
At the top of every street, for there it is –  
Eternally, if irrelevantly, visible –  
  
But yield instead to the humorous formulae,  
The spurious mystery of the knowing nod.

The poem re-enacts the community's silences, drawing suddenly back from obvious, emancipatory truths in favour of what is comfortably 'known' in the relative safety of the non-verbal. The final stanza is a heart-breaking piece of unresolved self-examination, painful self-reproach:

One part of my mind must learn to know its place –  
The things that happen in the kitchen-houses  
And echoing back-streets of this desperate city  
Should engage more than my casual interest,  
Exact more interest than my casual pity.

The poet's ironic tone, of course, has not been wholly erased: the unvoiced 'and yet they do not' beyond the final line is all but audible, another silence alongside the poem's nods and winks. That the streets do not speak, only echo desperately, is a haunting detail, one that places the poet in an impossible bind. Everywhere in the poem is thwarted or

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<sup>20</sup> Mahon, 6.



inauthentic speech: 'my old conspiracy with the wet / Stone', 'sullen silence', 'humorous formulae', 'Rehearsing our astute salvations'. How can a poet speak on behalf of such a community, except in identifying its self-imposed silences? The colloquialism 'knowing one's place', with its two-way pull between censure and understanding, plays out the poem's tensions in miniature.

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*Odi atque amo* – what I hate, I love – is foundational to MacNeice's writing on Ireland, particularly on the North. As often as there is affection in his poems set in or concerning Ireland, there is a venom that few of his other politically engaged works demonstrate, particularly in section XVI of *Autumn Journal*, 'The Casualty' and 'Valediction'<sup>21</sup>. The latter is a rhetorically spectacular and emotionally strained missive against the failings of the poet's birthplace, both perceived and real, the gravest of which is its inability to find a place for MacNeice the modern, individualist truth-sayer. That the poem opens with the line 'Their verdure dare not show' is emblematic of the poem's concerns: the line is from 'The Wearing of the Green', a lament for the cultural silencing of Irish nationalism, the most popular version of which was written by Dion Boucicault, who, like MacNeice, was born in Ireland, educated in England and made his career between London and America. The dissonance between the song's popularity and its claims of marginality seem the punctum for 'Valediction', the way in to a discussion of the contradictions and hypocrisies he

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<sup>21</sup> MacNeice, *Collected Poems*, 131, 245, 52.

considered inherent to conceptions of Irishness. In its most critical passages, MacNeice takes the tone of the tourist brochure:

Park your car in the city of Dublin, see Sackville Street  
Without the sandbags in the old photos, meet  
The statues of the patriots, history never dies,  
At any rate in Ireland, arson and murder are legacies

A sharp reader might note that the Easter Rising took place seventeen years prior to the publication of 'Valediction', the Civil War barely a decade, more recent memory than history; though this passage leans toward historical-cultural analysis, it is still clearly coloured by the personal hurt expressed elsewhere in the poem. The question for the reader is to what extent is MacNeice dramatizing the cultural biases that inform these lines, to what extent giving voice to a subjective and barbed reading of the relatively recent past. One might, charitably, point out that at the very least the North takes it in the ear as well. Like Mahon, who described his own attitude to the civil conflict in Northern Ireland as 'a 'plague on both your houses' attitude'<sup>22</sup>, MacNeice is more than comfortable critiquing his homeland in turn:

Country of callous lava cooled to stone,  
Of minute sodden haycocks, of ship-sirens' moan,  
Of falling intonations – I would call you to book  
I would say to you, Look;  
I would say, This is what you have given me  
Indifference and sentimentality  
A metallic giggle, a fumbling hand,  
A heart that leaps to a fife band

In a poem that otherwise flows relentlessly from one hurt to the next, the syntactical trip or stutter over 'I would say ... I would say' enacts some of the poet's desperation. That these complaints are focused around inarticulacy – 'moan', 'falling intonations', 'giggle', that repeated conditional 'I would say' – seems to hint that little has changed in Belfast between

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<sup>22</sup> Grennan, Eamonn, "Derek Mahon: The Art of Poetry", *Paris Review* 154 (Spring 2000), 164.

MacNeice's 1934 and Mahon's 1968. And yet the poem returns, moth to flame, to the idea that the poet's very self is bound up in these material conditions, that what capacity for expression MacNeice retains has been seized from the jaws of the repressive culture that 'engendered' him. Perhaps the poem's most moving passage is not in its soaring vitriol, but a quieter, more absurd moment of self-reflection:

I would tot up my factors  
But who can stand in the way of his soul's steam-tractors?  
I can say Ireland is hooey, Ireland is  
A gallery of fake tapestries,  
But I cannot deny my past to which my self is wed,  
The woven figure cannot undo its thread.

The thudding rhyme of factors/tractors, as well as the glorious blend of sublime and mundane in 'soul's steam-tractors', sets the stage for a few lines that do the poem's most intense introspection. The last four lines – in which Ireland's phoniness is tied, via the same extended metaphor, to the quality and texture of the poet's own being – form an argument that compromises so much of what 'Valediction' appears to be reaching towards. Rather than representing the voice of a distanced, objective commentator, these lines expose the poem as the product of one inescapably shaped by these same hypocrisies. By suggesting at the level of syntax that the 'woven figure' is cut from the same cloth as the 'fake tapestries', MacNeice indicates that what he hates about Ireland, he first hates about his own self. In a purely politically minded reading, 'Valediction' addresses Ireland as little more than dual and duelling cultural monoliths, North and South. Once the rhetorical dust has settled, it is an uncharacteristically simple-minded critique of Ireland for its cultural simple-mindedness, and what remains is a poetic car crash, all jagged edges, open wounds and spectacle. The poem vents heart-sickness in the guise of cultural commentary, and yet is no less fascinating a document, no less moving an emotional experience, for all its unfairness, its wit, music and self-critical excoriations.

Though Mahon rarely, if ever, lays his own heart so vulnerably open as MacNeice, 'Ecclesiastes'<sup>23</sup>, in its blend of personal implication and cultural critique, is perhaps the closest relative to 'Valediction' in his early work. Here, the target is not Irish self-mythopoeia but Northern, Calvinist righteousness, yet the syntactical strategies are markedly MacNeicean:

God, you could grow to love it, God-fearing, God-  
chosen purist little puritan that,  
for all your wiles and smiles, you are (the  
dank churches, the empty streets,  
the shipyard silence, the tied-up swings)

The repetends in 'God-fearing, God- / chosen' and chiastic 'purist little puritan' take MacNeice's lessons in rhetoric and invest them with angry disdain, the spitting snarl of 'purist little puritan' a tiny musical masterclass. The internal rhyme 'wiles and smiles', followed by the piled-up catalogue of joyless images, similarly borrow from the MacNeice word-hoard: the lines' asyndeton effectively leaves the damp greyness of Ulster life at the puritan's door without the need to argue the logical connections between the two. As opposed to 'Valediction', in which the speaker only partially and on the level of metaphor acknowledges his own complicity in the culture under scrutiny, 'Ecclesiastes' takes this act of identification as its starting-point: the opening 'God, you could grow to love it' is a mixture of horror, disgust and, perhaps, sincerity. The poem's most powerful tension comes in the extent to which the speaker truly means the lines:

this is your  
country, close one eye and be king.  
Your people await you, their heavy washing  
flaps for you in the housing estates –  
a credulous people. God, you could do it, God  
help you, stand on a corner stiff  
with rhetoric, promising nothing under the sun.

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<sup>23</sup> Mahon, *Lives*, 3.

The critique of Northern Protestantism and the power held by its religious leaders is still thoroughly active here. At some point in the poem, however, the 'you' of its address seems to have turned from those leaders to the speaker himself. Like the 'woven figure' in 'Valediction', the poem has turned in upon itself, contextualising its own rhetorical ambitions as continuous with those it attempts to criticise. Returning to Mahon's somewhat tongue-in-cheek comments about Irish poets' 'racial memory' and 'obvious, ready-made audience'<sup>24</sup>, 'Ecclesiastes' seems like a half-parodic, half-serious consideration of how such a poet-reader relationship might play out in practice. Implicitly, it would be little better than the paternalism of the doom-saying preacher and his 'credulous' flock, hence the fearful, line-broken 'God / help you'. Mahon, in rhyming off the sacrifices the poet must make to embody the religious leader, only highlights the final, insurmountable distance between the strictures of hard-line Protestantism and the freedoms of art, however much the latter is parodied as little more than a 'red / bandana, stick and guitar'. The poem's closing line seems at least partly a self-indictment, questioning whether the poet of 'Ecclesiastes' himself promises anything more than the puritan, anything more than the Biblical writer's 'vanity, all is vanity'<sup>25</sup>. 'Ecclesiastes' takes to the pulpit to condemn condemnation, to preach against preaching, and seems to find something horrifically tempting about the rhetorical power it has to offer.

There is something in the image of a people patiently awaiting illumination in a land of 'dark doors' and 'heaped / graves' that feels like a precursor to the mushrooms of 'A Disused Shed in Co. Wexford'<sup>26</sup>, in which a clutch of mushrooms in the eponymous shed form a community in the dark, waiting for someone 'To do something, to speak on their

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<sup>24</sup> Brown, 11.

<sup>25</sup> Ecclesiastes 1; the *New International Version* renders this chapter as 'Everything is Meaningless'.

<sup>26</sup> Mahon, *The Snow Party*, 36.

behalf'. For decades after its publication, the poem has been read more or less straight – lines such as:

Save us, save us,' they seem to say,  
'Let the god not abandon us  
Who have come so far in darkness and in pain.

have been taken as sincere expressions of 'lost peoples' imploring the artist to take up their stories and bring them to the audience of the waking world. Matthew Campbell's reading in the *Cambridge Introduction to British Poetry* takes the time to hone in on just how strange an allegory is built in the poem's half-dozen stanzas:

Mahon continually stitches in details that remind the reader of the fact that he is still talking about mushrooms, but he also so flagrantly humanizes the mushrooms that it seems naïve to mention his dependence on the pathetic fallacy: the poem so fully and blatantly invests in the pathetic fallacy that it seems to come out the other side.<sup>27</sup>

Where other readings focus on the dynamism of Mahon's lyric panorama<sup>28</sup>, Campbell is ready to deal with Mahon's habitual irony, the extent to which the poet is loath to make the kinds of claims to universality or historical echoes that have been imposed on what is, ultimately, a very weird poem. Campbell identifies how the comparison between the victims of Treblinka and Pompeii are not just incomparable with each other, but also with either the metaphorized mushrooms or their most obvious signifiers, the victims of the conflict in the North. He cuts to the heart of the matter when he suggests, 'It is as though Mahon sets his allegory to fail'<sup>29</sup>; straight readings of 'A Disused Shed', in which the poem has

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<sup>27</sup> Campbell, "The North", *Cambridge Introduction to British Poetry*, 142.

<sup>28</sup> See Brown, Terence, *Cambridge Companion to Contemporary Irish Poetry*, 141, Clark, Heather, *Oxford Handbook of Modern Irish Poetry*, 446, for example.

<sup>29</sup> Campbell, 142.

the power to transcend local squabbles and historical specificity, in which the poet has not only the capacity but the duty to fill the mouths of the silenced, describe a poem totally at odds with the rest of Mahon's oeuvre. It feels highly unlikely that the poet who has so regularly expressed a vexed relationship with his own home and his own 'people', should suddenly fly the flag for the poet as spokesman for the dispossessed. The conclusion of 'Afterlives'<sup>30</sup>, pitched precisely between irony and sincerity, provides valuable illumination on the slippery tone of 'A Disused Shed':

Perhaps if I'd stayed behind  
And lived it bomb by bomb  
I might have grown up at last  
And learnt what is meant by home.

Perhaps, of course, *not*: the immortal lines, 'What middle-class cunts we are / To imagine for one second / That our privileged ideals / Are divine wisdom,' make the prospect of true enlightenment feel somewhat distant. If the poem is genuinely self-critical, a recognition of a missed or lost opportunity which the poet may only experience as aftermath, it is just as likely underwritten by his characteristic scepticism. Mahon seems unconvinced about how, exactly, one lives 'bomb by bomb', and about the maturity such a life implicitly affords. It is this attitude to the poet's role in their community, I think, that most convincingly informs the strange positioning of the speaker to the action of 'A Disused Shed' and allows its disparate components to take on a degree of coherence. As Campbell notes, Treblinka is not Pompeii is not Wexford is not India, and for all Mahon's lyric globetrotting (Van Gogh's Belgium, De Quincy's London, the hills of Ise, the courtyards in Delft), attempting to swing by each of these in an afternoon is rather pushing it. Mahon seems to rely on the reader's alertness to the absurdity of the narrator's premise, that these mushrooms really are capable of bearing the strain of representing the suffering of

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<sup>30</sup> Mahon, 50.

mankind, and that the speaker's breaking of the fourth wall in the first line of the last stanza is a clear indicator of some unreliability.

They are begging us, you see, in their wordless way,  
To do something, to speak on their behalf  
Or at least not to close the door again.

The metaphor creaks and slips: the latter of these lines brings the whole enterprise back to the literal, mundane shed, before setting off on its most disbelief-suspending comparison of the scene to Vesuvius' eruption and the Holocaust. The tone of 'you see' is paternal, teacherly, as if the reader only needs to be educated on an elementary point. As Campbell notes, the poem's date of publication is at the height of the violence in the North in 1973, a time when the British media had descended on the province en masse. The figure 'flash-bulb firing-squad' with its conflation of journalism and paramilitarism is another stripping-away of the mushrooms' (or mushroom-signified people's) ability to speak for themselves, responding as they do with only 'the ghost of a scream'. What comes across most clearly in 'A Disused Shed' is Mahon's scepticism, bordering on cynicism, about poetry's ability to provide a voice for the voiceless. In the final stanza, the reality of the mushroom's existence, so carefully and lovingly detailed in up to that point ('a foetor / Of vegetable sweat', 'a keyhole rusting gently after rain'), is replaced wholesale by the speaker's subjectivity, his desire to impose unfitting narratives upon his subject. The speaker's overreach, his need for journalistic theatricality, casts doubt backward through the poem: how much else has been warped to fit his narrative? 'A Disused Shed' is, indeed, Mahon's 'quintessential poem (and one of his finest works)'<sup>31</sup>, through the tension between its instinct to ironize poetic claims to historical authority, and the historical optimism more frequently credited to it.

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<sup>31</sup> Brown, 140.



Taking Mahon's advice, it is vital not to conflate the pressures of the Troubles on Northern Ireland's artists with the pressures of impending war MacNeice experienced in the last years of the 1930s; it is just as vital to note that MacNeice's blending of his social-political consciousness into his poetry was not just prompted by war, but was well underway by 1933, with 'An Eclogue for Christmas'<sup>32</sup>, in which the first of its unnamed dialogists announces 'I meet you in an evil time'. In rangy rhymed couplets, the two speakers lament the degradation of society:

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

Much like Mahon in 'Ecclesiastes', however, this cynicism about the power of the superficial is belied by the texture of the poetry. However much the speakers might rue the loss of some unnamed golden age of intellect, 'An eclogue for Christmas' is very clearly in love with the glitter of the new:

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 streamlines and butter-smooth trulls of the élite,  
The lights irritating and gyrating and rotating in gauze –  
Pomade-dazzle, a slick beauty of gewgaws –

Though this passage, in the context of the speakers' dialogue, forms a kind of critique of the artificiality of culture, it also very clearly recognises the import of its historical moment; far enough from the Great War to appreciate the dazzle of life, but sufficiently aware of the next looming catastrophe, 'We shall go down like paleolithic man / Before some new Ice Age or Genghiz Khan'. Given the virtuosity of the rhyme, however, it's difficult to invest this soothsaying with any great gravity; Alan Gillis' reading of the poem as the point 'where

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<sup>32</sup> MacNeice, 33.

MacNeice begins to set creative excitement up against ethical commitment<sup>33</sup> encapsulates this tension between sensation and sensationalism. True to form, the poem gradually permits the false light of the electrified world its true beauty:

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.

As Gillis argues, 'the poem's moral drive relies upon its stylistic showboating; its pyrotechnics dramatize implication and deep attachment'<sup>34</sup>. MacNeice frames these pyrotechnics as 'narcotic and deciduous'; though the primary meanings of 'toxic and temporary' are apt, they also frame the streetlights in the language of nature, of poisonous flora and the passing of the seasons. The mock-heroism of omnibuses on 'the noble curve' is balanced, if not totally overthrown, by the grandeur of 'osculation', the radiant flowers in the glare of electric light. As the poem recognises the incursion of 'machine-guns' and the ominous, censorious 'State', it begins to more sincerely celebrate the 'excess sugar' it so recently bemoaned:

B: The lady of the house poises the silver tongs  
And picks a lump of sugar, 'ne plus ultra' she says  
'I cannot do otherwise, even to prolong my days' –  
A: I cannot do otherwise either

A cloying culture is better than no culture at all, the poem protests, in the face of rising fascism, the 'sniggering machine-guns in the hands of the young men [...] trained on every flat and club and beauty parlour and Father's den'. The poem's climax, of 'saxophones and the xylophones' and 'the perfection of a grilled steak' are ultimately folded into a moment of lyric transcendence, the poem's closing prayer:

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<sup>33</sup> Gillis, *Irish Poetry of the 1930s*, 35.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid*, 35.

Let all these so ephemeral things  
Be somehow permanent like the swallow's tangent wings

This closure, of course, with its benedictory 'interpret it your own way, Christ is born', is far from straight-faced: swallows' wings have many qualities but permanence is hardly among them. 'An Eclogue for Christmas' is formally and substantially in two minds, and the poem embodies this in its compromised epiphany. The poem's significance in discussing a poet's responsibility to their community is that 'An Eclogue for Christmas' has not yet risen to the life-or-death stakes of *Autumn Journal*. Although the speakers acknowledge a kind of cultural degradation, the threat still has the vagueness of nightmare rather than the precision of social or political analysis. Here, MacNeice makes the movement from a hierarchised belief that 'high' art will enable the high-mindedness that will prevent catastrophe, to a more open-minded, however comically inflected, belief that art and beauty may be saved not in the 'soundproof library [with] a stable temperature', but by taking beauty where it comes, 'the saxophones and xylophones / And the cult of every technical excellence'. Of course, the poem maintains a healthy scepticism about investing any other kind of art with the faith recently lost in 'pure form, a symbol or a pastiche [...] anything but soul and flesh', 'the pitiless abstractions bald about the neck'. It is noticeable that the poem has little time for art that exists solely and coldly in the mind, and revels in the sensational, even as the sensational borders on the queasily lurid, a sort of forerunner to 'Bagpipe Music'<sup>35</sup>. 'The poet's first business is in *mentioning* things'<sup>36</sup>, MacNeice argued in *Modern Poetry*, and 'An Eclogue for Christmas' puts that theory into practice. The poet serves their community by observing that community with a clarity of vision, however 'poetic' or 'unpoetic'<sup>37</sup> that observation might be. A noteworthy aspect of the poem is that

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<sup>35</sup> *ibid*, 96.

<sup>36</sup> MacNeice, *Modern poetry*, 5.

<sup>37</sup> *ibid*, 1.

it does not assign moral value to, or draw equivalences between, 'refinement' of artistic taste and refinement of the soul.

MacNeice consistently used long-lined rhyming couplets for his social commentaries and satires in the 1930s, in 'Valediction', 'An Eclogue for Christmas' and 'Eclogue from Iceland'<sup>38</sup>, for a few salient examples. In the latter, the ghost of Icelandic folk hero Grettir implores the poets Ryan (MacNeice) and Craven (Auden):

Minute your gesture but it must be made –  
Your hazard, your act of defiance and hymn of hate,  
Hatred of hatred, assertion of human values,  
Which is now your only duty.

Though Mahon's circumstances differ fundamentally – a reader should hesitate to confidently rhyme, as the narrator of 'A Disused Shed' does, one conflict with another – there is a similar note of incumbent disaster in many of his poems of the 1970s, with literary truth the implicit, if faint, hope for salvation. Formally, echoes of the long, discursive lines, range of foci and rhyming couplets of MacNeice's eclogues recur in Mahon's long form poetry, most expansively in 'The Hudson Letter'<sup>39</sup> and *The Yellow Book*, but first in 'Beyond Howth Head'<sup>40</sup> the closing poem of his 1972 collection, *Lives*. Unlike MacNeice's eclogues, the addressee, the poet and critic Jeremy Lewis, is silent, his responses only suggested by the poem's parenthetical asides ('you thumbs a lift and takes your chance', 'booze is bourgeois, pot is not'), which manage to maintain the poem's steady iambic tetrameter while tonally shifting into the colloquial. Like 'An eclogue for Christmas', 'Beyond Howth Head' finds its moments of joy in the communal: the 'night music' from a dance, the "Lewde libertie", whose midnight work / disturbed the peace of

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<sup>38</sup> MacNeice, *Collected Poems*, 40.

<sup>39</sup> Mahon, *The Hudson Letter*, 35.

<sup>40</sup> Mahon, *Lives*, 33.

Co. Cork', and, in a gathering often depicted in Mahon's poems, 'to spin celestial globes of words / over a foaming pint in Ward's'. This latter meeting occasions:

Rehearsing for the *fin-de-siècle*  
gruff Jeremiads to redirect  
lost youth into the knacker's yard  
of humanistic self-regard;  
to praise what will be taken from us,  
the memory of Dylan Thomas

'Gruff Jeremiads' would be an apt subtitle for a collection of Mahon's epistolary poems.

Here, however, there is still space for playfulness: the note of theatricality and self-parody in 'Rehearsing [...] gruff Jeremiads' in a piece addressed to an actual Jeremy, the slightly goofy rhyme of 'from us' and 'Dylan Thomas'. Something of MacNeice's delight in the possibilities of language shoots through the poem's rhyming couplets, the virtuosity of:

The pros outweigh the cons that glow  
from Beckett's bleak reductio –

or:

the hebona behind the smile  
of grammar gets its brisk forensic  
smack in the *realpolitik*

outweighing the cons of the poem's own bleak reductios. It's here that the two poets diverge most sharply: MacNeice's ability to find new faith in the mutations of art and culture, Mahon's articulate expressions of an unstoppable decline and fall, 'Centripetal, the hot world draws / its children in with loving claws'. A more physical, socially engaged art might, with no little luck, still save the world in MacNeice's rendering; the same might only delay the inevitable for Mahon, but it might make for good entertainment along the way.

MacNeice's eclogue and 'Beyond Howth Head', however, do share a perspective on the poet's role among their community. For all his cynicism about his fellow citizens (on the beach the poet encounters 'contraceptives deftly tied / with best regards from

Merseyside'), Mahon here ultimately rejects the distant, reserved postures of Chomēi, Thoreau, 'like ice among the trees', and Spenser, 'farre from enemies'. For the former:

events in Kyōto [are] all grist  
to the mill of a harsh irony

which all 'might serve as models for a while / but to return in greater style'. Like the writer of Jeremiads earlier in the poem, there's an element of self-critique at work, as the poet recognises his own decision to retreat to the relative calm of Howth Head on the Co. Dublin coast, the better to gain a perspective on the violence that haunts the poem's borders. As in 'The Snow Party'<sup>41</sup>, Kyōto is partly deployed as an echo of his contemporary Belfast (marked by journalism's ghoulish euphemism, 'events'), the poets Chomēi and Bashō analogues for Mahon, permitted space and peace to compose harsh ironies and enjoy tea parties. Though the critique remains in the subtext, the fact that this anxiety endures in notably similar form across two collections speaks to how deeply the question of how literally the poet should abide among his people, living it, perhaps, 'bomb by bomb', occupied Mahon's imagination.

Ten pages earlier in the same collection as 'Beyond Howth Head' is 'Rage for Order'<sup>42</sup>, another piece that sets its action in a physical 'beyond', this time 'Somewhere beyond / The scorched gable end / And the burnt-out / Buses'; the safety of a Co. Dublin peninsula is far away. The ironic, witty aesthete who narrates 'Beyond Howth Head' has switched roles; in 'Rage for Order', he is left open to the poem's ironic focus. After establishing the setting in the lines above, the poem introduces its subject:

there is a poet indulging his  
Wretched rage for order –

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<sup>41</sup> *ibid*, 57.

<sup>42</sup> Mahon, *Lives*, 22.

Or not as the  
Case may be, for his  
Is a dying art,  
An eddy of semantic scruple  
In an unstructurable sea.

Though the sea of Wallace Stevens' 'An Idea of Order at Key West'<sup>43</sup> clearly informs the imagery and title in these opening stanzas, Mahon's concerns are far less abstract than those of its literary predecessor. Michael Allen argues that 'Rage for Order' is noteworthy for its 'halting earnestness' and hope for 'rapprochement between poet and Yeatsian man of action'<sup>44</sup>, though even this reading feels a little too heavily inflected by generalities. The poem seems more strongly bound to the granular cultural conditions examined in Mahon's 'Ecclesiastes' than either Yeats' thinking on an ideal society or Stevens' on ideal forms; 'Rage to Order' is, in no small part, a pragmatic, temporally and geographically specific self-critique, however sarcastic and self-deprecatory; it is an earnest, irresolvable conversation between the poem's speaker and his subject. There is a real precarity in this position, however, and no guarantee that resolution of this problem will be artistically fruitful.

Typically for Mahon, of course, the dynamic between the two figures is not easily untangled and does not find its full expression until the poem's final line. The opening exchanges paint the poet acting on his indulgences, detached, aloof and somewhat absurd:

He is far  
From his people,  
And the fitful glare  
Of his high window is as  
Nothing to our scattered glass.

His posture is  
Grandiloquent and  
Deprecating, like this,  
His diet ashes,  
His talk of justice and his mother

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<sup>43</sup> Stevens, *Selected Poems*, 77.

<sup>44</sup> Allen, *The Poetry of Derek Mahon*, 126.

The rhetorical  
Device of a Claudian emperor

It is easy to read this as an uncomplicated send-up – as in ‘Ecclesiastes’, Mahon’s relish for working where parody meets critique is palpable here – but for that odd, dangling clause, ‘like this’. The poem continues as it had before, as though ‘like this’ was a sneeze or involuntary twitch the narrator would sooner not acknowledge, but the goalposts have moved. The poem’s narrator is not omniscient but present on the poem’s stage, directly addressing the reader, and, crucially, implicating himself in the critique. The turn is completed not when the narrator finally uses a first-person pronoun (‘Now watch me / As I make history’), but in the line before, when the phrase ‘a dying art’ reappears, its meaning flipped. Where its first appearance is an indictment of the poet’s powerlessness in the face of uncontrollable historical pressures embodied by the sea, the second is something else entirely:

If he is silent  
It is the silence  
Of enforced humility,  
If anxious to be heard  
It is the anxiety of a last word

When the drums start –  
For his is a dying art.

The poem’s rhyme scheme to this point has been subtle and unintrusive: as / glass; this / ashes; emperor / poor. For two sets of full rhyme – not to mention the near-perfect ‘silent / silence’ that introduces these lines – to appear back to back feels like a rhetorical crescendo. That movement coincides with a radical shift in the poem’s estimation of the poet; he is no longer a puffed-up Roman dictator but a worried, chastened observer. This swerve is embodied by the alteration of that repeated phrase, ‘a dying art’, which turns from ‘an art form in terminal decline’ in the first instance to ‘an art form that thrives in evil



times' in the second. The speaker's anxieties are reminiscent of MacNeice's own about the arrival of war in 'Postscript to Iceland'<sup>45</sup>, their shape and music cut from the same cloth:

Still I drink your health before  
The gun-butt raps upon the door.

Though Mahon's lines are more relaxed in their composition, their rhythms more complex, the onomatopoeic 'drums start' find an echo in the 'gun-butt' in the middle of MacNeice's stricter iambs and similarly simplistic rhyme scheme. In both cases, a single, violent sound puts an end to the poem's mode of thinking, signals the acute necessity for a revision in attitude from the poet. It is also significant that the arrival of death in 'Rage for Order' is heralded not by guns but drums, an emblem of Protestant militarism that also haunted MacNeice: in 'Belfast', 'The sun goes down with a banging of Orange drums'<sup>46</sup>; and, in *Autumn Journal*, 'the voodoo of the Orange bands / Drawing an iron net through darkest Ulster [...] The grocer drunk with the drum'<sup>47</sup>. Just as 'A Disused Shed' exposes the folly of conflating one historical moment with another, 'Rage for Order' only ventures outside its immediate cultural contexts to add absurd elements to its depiction of the poet: the elitism of Claudius, the chaos of Nero. Mahon's mind is firmly in Belfast, and the existential threat identified in 'Rage for Order' remains, in all senses, close to home.

The poem's rhetorical peak is quickly followed by the completion of its dramatic shift:

Now watch me  
As I make history,  
Watch as I tear down  
  
To build up  
With a desperate love,  
Knowing it cannot be

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<sup>45</sup> MacNeice, 36.

<sup>46</sup> MacNeice, 15.

<sup>47</sup> MacNeice, 62.

Long now till I have need of his  
Germinal ironies.

If the speaker is indeed the 'Yeatsian man of action' in Allen's reading, the actions the man takes are left almost entirely undefined. Given how the movements of history have been characterised in Mahon's work thus far, it seems unlikely that this dramatic persona will a) do anything of the sort, or b) achieve anything ultimately positive: the 'grandiloquent posturing' of which the poet is accused earlier on seems to have passed to his critical observer in this closing stanza. The future these lines describe in a single, complex sentence suggests an inevitable circularity, the speaker's casual, conversational wit ('Nero if you prefer, / No mother there') substituted for the slightly ill-fitting high rhetoric embodied by 'desperate love'. The poet's diminutive 'eddy of semantic scruple' in the second stanza only becomes 'germinal', hopeful, useful, as his 'wretched rage for order' becomes a necessary factor in rebuilding what has been 'torn down' by the man of action. Following the historical circularity to its logical conclusion, however, it feels as though there's a distinct possibility that this speaker will, once his 'rebuilding' is complete, deposit the poet once more behind his 'high windows', the better to keep him out of mischief. What emerges from the poem is not the final victory of the wise, distant poet, or the final defeat of the reckless, but effective, man of action, or, as in Allen's reading, of a 'rapprochement' between the two, other than in this moment of existential duress. In its closing lines, the poem figures a cycle of inescapable decline and forlorn hope; in the face of fire and drums, all that is 'germinal', all that will seed a better future in the poem, is irony and desperate love. The poem's title seems awfully distant, a bitter punchline: in later versions, Mahon would revise 'germinal' to 'terminal', later still to 'desperate', complicating even this most forlorn of hopes. It's worth noting that, like 'Beyond Howth Head', 'Rage for Order' echoes MacNeice's questioning of art's purpose in times of historical evil while arriving at a very

different conclusion. 'Postscript to Iceland' describes a kind of hard-headed optimism, with a full understanding of the rebuke it has coming:

Time for soul to stretch and spit  
Before the world comes back on it,  
  
Before the chimneys row on row  
Sneer in smoke, 'We told you so',  
And the fog-bound sirens call  
Ruin to the long sea-wall.

Despite its having a clear measure of what cruelty might soon visit itself upon his friends, the tone MacNeice pitches here is not undone by an underlying cynicism, as in Mahon's poem; at a base level, MacNeice frames 'lust for life' as a vital and, significantly, an effectual counter to the 'Nations germinating hell' elsewhere (noting also the vastly differing outcomes of 'germination' in the two poems). Though the poem is addressed to 'you / Who have felt the death-wish too', there is nothing desperate, in the sense of hopelessness, about MacNeice's articulation of love; what ultimately 'prevails' is 'Drinking coffee, telling tales'.

Around the same time MacNeice was writing from Iceland, he explored his conception of people as essentially 'political animals' in the book-length essay *Modern Poetry*:

with the recognition that man is conditioned by economic factors and therefore needs the company of men *qua* community goes the recognition that man is a creature of strong physical instincts and affections, and therefore needs the company of men *qua* individuals.<sup>48</sup>

MacNeice identifies community, both on an intimately personal and a broader cultural level, as not just generally beneficial but a basic human need. Perhaps these pieces

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<sup>48</sup> MacNeice, *Modern Poetry*, 15.

articulate in miniature where the two poets' approaches to art's relationship to history in the thirties and seventies most distinctly diverge: where MacNeice locates salvation in social ritual, Mahon foresees damnation from his series of isolated perspectives.

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Matthew Campbell has argued that 'The typical Mahon poem of [the early to mid-seventies] will pit a refined aestheticism against uncontrollable hatred or manage exquisitely poised irony against the consolations offered by historical or scientific inquiry', specifically as a way of 'revolt[ing] against his own suburban Protestant background'<sup>49</sup>. While this captures Mahon's habit of organising his poems around a philosophical conflict, it sidelines what one might describe as the *atypical* Mahon poem of the time: the metaphysical poem. Whether as a means of disrupting the neat binaries that frame the needs of the aesthetic versus the demands of the political, or of challenging even the possibility of neat historical narratives, throughout his work Mahon explores the strangeness of time and of human perception thereof.

A poem which performs this very pivot is 'The Studio'. Formerly titled 'Edvard Munch'<sup>50</sup> and carrying the epigraph 'The being in the room when it happens in the street, the being in the street when it happens in the room', Mahon himself has described the poem as 'an assertion of the necessarily private nature of a certain kind of artistic activity'<sup>51</sup>. Rather than framing the question as the antithetical responsibilities to art on one

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<sup>49</sup> Campbell, *Cambridge Companion to Irish Poets*, 310-11.

<sup>50</sup> Mahon, *Selected Poems*, 30, *Lives*, 4.

<sup>51</sup> quoted in Haughton, *The Poetry of Derek Mahon*, 82-3.

hand and society on the other, the poem worries at the bases on which this tension is grounded. It begins:

You would think with so much going on outside  
The deal table would make for the window,  
The ranged crockery freak and wail  
Remembering its dark origins, the frail  
Oil-cloth, in a fury of recognitions,  
Disperse in a thousand directions

The tone is already familiar: Mahon is having a ripping good sneer at those who would presume to force his artistic practice into a political arena. In the middle of all this, however, the poem makes a show of its own generative power by, apropos of precious little, suddenly spending at least a quarter of its full duration in hyperfocus on the dying filament in a lightbulb:

And the simple bulb in the ceiling, honed  
By death to a worm of pain, to a hair  
Of heat, to a light snow-flake laid  
On a dark river at night – and wearied  
Above all by the life-price of time  
And the failure by only a few tenths  
Of an inch but completely and for ever  
Of the ends of a carefully drawn equator  
To meet, sing and be one – abruptly  
Roar into the floor.

Before whatever deeper meaning the poem might embody and the reader might uncover, this is virtuoso stuff. Ten and a half lines of headlong, tumbling, breathless clauses, with both internal and slant rhymes that take in the microscopic and the global; and perhaps, in no small part, in the context of the poem's refusal of the demands of the mundane world, motivated by spite. The lightbulb becomes one of Mahon's figures of mock-heroic centre staging, like the mushrooms of 'A Disused Shed' or the 'torc of gold' in 'Lives'<sup>52</sup>. Not just a dysfunctional ceiling fitting, the filament is burdened with all the freight of the failures of

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<sup>52</sup> Mahon, *Lives*, 16.

mortality, 'weariest / [...] by the life-price of time', 'completely and for ever'. What need does the poet have, 'The Studio' seems to say, when a full mortal drama is already being played out in forty-watt increments? Of course, the gag is also perfectly serious; the above passage is also a case study in the power of art to alter perceptions and create new perspectives from which the world might be more meaningfully understood, specifically through the lyric warping of time ('forever' encompassed in a line) and space (the filament telescoping into an 'equator'). Straight away, the poem takes a breath, dusts itself off, and returns to the facts at hand: the world of the studio is fundamentally unaffected by the goings-on outside:

But it  
Never happens like that. Instead  
There is this quivering silence  
In which, day by day, the play  
Of light and shadow (shadow mostly)  
Repeats itself, though never exactly.

The implication here may be that the artist aims to create something that will defy the passage of time, and so exists, to some extent, beyond the demands of the daily furore on street-level. Just as easily, however, this might be an indictment of that very position; the artist *is* kept at a lofty remove from political fallout, and thus even less suited to pass comment upon it. The closing lines, with their emphasis on the artist's reduced circumstances, their single, cycling 'bed-, work- and bedroom', seem to highlight the disempowerment of the artist in purely material terms; the final 'cries of despair / A function of the furniture' emphasise that the artist might well abide among the mutable, metaphysical strangeness of the universe, but it is nothing that would interest the newspapers.

While 'The Studio' invokes metaphysical experience as an argument against or an excuse from the duties of the mortal plane, in contrast MacNeice is often at pains to draw

this same strangeness back into the world of deal tables and lightbulbs. William T. McKinnon aptly noted 'MacNeice's hostility towards any metaphysical system that postulated or implied a division between the actual world of phenomenal time, space, and experience'<sup>53</sup>, particularly those that regarded the phenomenal world as essentially secondary, 'a mere reflection'. A piece that seems a direct forerunner to 'The Studio', both in tone and rhetorical form, is MacNeice's 'Variation on Heraclitus'<sup>54</sup>. Like 'The Studio', it is composed of long, syntactically knotted sentences tripping themselves over line breaks, and the poem pivots on a grammatically loud 'No'. After establishing that 'Even the walls are flowing, even the ceiling, / Nor only in terms of physics', the poem stretches out into a wave of sensory overload:

nor can this be where I stood –  
Where I shot the rapids I mean – when I signed  
On a line that rippled away with a pen that melted  
Nor can this now be the chair – the chairplane of a chair –  
That I sat in the day that I thought I had made up my mind

The cringeworthy pun in 'chairplane' is a perfect summation of the tone of the poem, an extended joke zipping along the surface of a much deeper and graver concern. Like 'The Studio', 'Variation on Heraclitus' arrays its vast creative resources within a negation. Whereas Mahon's piece operates within the clause 'You would think', which primes the reader to take what follows with an unspoken 'but you'd be wrong', MacNeice's poem is strung along in its first movement by a series of 'nor's, a sequence of scenes and objects that only exist in the negative. Even the imagery in this passage is echoed by 'The Studio'; where Mahon takes snowfall on an unnamed 'dark river at night', MacNeice specifies:

And as for that standard lamp it too keeps waltzing away  
Down an unbridgeable Ganges where nothing is standard

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<sup>53</sup> McKinnon, *Apollo's Blended Dream*, 51.

<sup>54</sup> MacNeice, 502.

And lights are but lit to be drowned in honour and spite of some dark  
And vanishing goddess.

MacNeice's cultural generalisations aside, the parallels with Mahon's poem are clear enough: not a light-bulb but a standard lamp, not a dark river but the dark goddess of that river, not a snow-flake melting in water but a lantern sinking in water. In both instances, the poem has made a subtle but crucial tonal shift. The above passage in 'Variation on Heraclitus' is not the clowning in 'chairplane' but the first instance of a spiritual or metaphysical element in the poem, however both MacNeice and Mahon might ironize their power. In both poems, too, there quickly follows the fulcrum around which the poem changes course:

But it  
Never happens like that. Instead  
There is this quivering silence ('The Studio')

No, whatever you say,  
Reappearance presumes disappearance [...]  
none of your slide snide rules can catch what is sliding so fast ('Variation on Heraclitus')

Despite the structural similarities, there are vital differences here, and the two poems follow very different courses. Mahon explicitly drops the high-wire tricks to conclude on a more sombre note, however bathetic the final image of crying, desperate furniture might be. MacNeice continues the game through one more dramatic turn:

And, all you advisers on this by the time it is that,  
I just do not want your advice  
Nor need you be troubled to pin me down in my room  
Since the room and I will escape for I tell you flat:  
One cannot live in the same room twice.

We should know MacNeice well enough by now that when his speaker self-presents so plainly ('I just do not want your advice', 'I tell you flat'), that self is nothing of the sort.

Unlike Mahon's speaker, who has wrested back a measure of authority over the artist's creative space, MacNeice's only continues to gather speed until it zips beyond the poem's



control. As Peter McDonald has noted, in the closing lines ‘the implications of ‘One cannot live’ are understood’<sup>55</sup>: both poet and room might well escape what the poem dismisses as mere ‘advisers’, but what they escape *into* is critically unspecified. ‘Variation on Heraclitus’ seems to recognise, in its final breath, the second half of the Heraclitean dictum: ‘All things are flowing, and *nothing remains*’<sup>56</sup>; where Mahon leaves his exploration at the point where creativity remains feasible in a fluctuating universe, MacNeice slams headlong into its limits, and only very subtly acknowledges that one might indeed escape the ‘snide rules’ of the mundane, but one cannot live without them.

Several years after the first publication of ‘The Studio’, Mahon returned to this conversation, in ‘Heraclitus on Rivers’<sup>57</sup>. Despite its title, the poem also engages with Horace, via MacNeice’s ‘Memoranda to Horace’<sup>58</sup> and his translation of Horace’s *Odes*<sup>59</sup>. As McDonald explores at length, Mahon’s encounter with the air of ‘resignation’ in MacNeice’s late work often overlooks the ‘resilience and determination’<sup>60</sup> that complicate their ostensible fatalism. In ‘Heraclitus on Rivers’, the fizz of MacNeice’s ‘Variation on Heraclitus’ is replaced with steady, logical observation, a series of completed, end-stopped thoughts:

Nobody steps into the same river twice.  
The same river is never the same  
Because that is the nature of water.

This is less the dazzling embodiment of eternal flux, more a nit-picking schoolteacher. The second stanza quotes Horace directly, before spelling out a slightly pedestrian conclusion:

You will tell me you have executed  
A monument more lasting than bronze;  
But even bronze is perishable.

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<sup>55</sup> McDonald, *Serious Poetry*, 175.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid*, 176.

<sup>57</sup> Mahon, *Selected Poems*, 112.

<sup>58</sup> MacNeice, 539.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid*, 549.

<sup>60</sup> McDonald, 179.

Your best poem, you know the one I mean,  
The very language in which the poem  
Was written, and the idea of language,  
All these things will pass away in time.

The 'one he means' is left pointedly ambiguous, but a fair case may be made for MacNeice's 'Memoranda to Horace', with its opening line, '*Aere perennius?* [*bronze?*] Dissolving dialects', and later, 'A second childhood remembering only / Childhood seems better than a black posterity'. As McDonald also notes<sup>61</sup>, Mahon's poem does little but make explicit what MacNeice's kept just below the surface, an approving nod toward a version of 'Memoranda to Horace' that uncomplicatedly mistrusts the poet's impending posterity. Yet MacNeice's poem has more on its mind than weariness about the regression of modern culture. Even in the section that laments 'Being confined to the usual and frozen channels [...] Caught between cosmic and comic radiation', ends with a tempered celebration of art:

Yet your image  
'More lasting than bronze' will do: for neither  
Sulphuric nor other acid can damage,  
Let alone destroy, your Aeolian measures  
Transmuted to Latin – *aere perennius*.

MacNeice has already deflated the boast here, with that charmingly idiomatic 'that will do'. Part of the reason acid (however metaphorical) cannot harm these 'measures' is that they are literally unplayable by human hands; the Aeolian harp, famously, was played only by the wind. What is Aeolian remains untouchable by posterity, but only because it is untouchable by anything; it is only eternal insofar as it is ephemeral. Cold comfort perhaps, but an essential part of MacNeice's attitude to art's afterlife. The 'transmutation' into the common currency of Latin is a fall into the mundane, into a space where what is eternal/Aeolian is subject to cultural changes that may (or may not) tarnish it over time.

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<sup>61</sup> Ibid, 176.

Throughout the poem, the speaker jokes with his absent addressee, makes light of their mutual failures ('I no more found Tir na nÓg than you / The Hesperides') and smiles wryly about the onset of age:

horrible old fellows, glazed and jowly,  
Who were the ones we always avoided  
Yet soon to be resembled albeit  
Our juniors resemble ourselves in avoidance.

Though the matter is grave, the tone is joyful, the poet revelling in the syntactic shapes and exaggerated figures he makes in language. In this light, Mahon's bread-and-water response seems more like a disappointed rebuke to MacNeice for not going to Beckettian extremes in ushering in the good night. His assertion that the linguistic pleasure embodied by the speaker of 'Memoranda to Horace' will also 'pass away in time' feels tautological in response to a poem that not only takes this as a fundamental principle but also finds a way to push back against it, to find solace in the act of resistance in full understanding of its final futility.

Even in Mahon's metaphysical poems which do not address MacNeice directly, the elder poet is often lurking in the wings. Mahon's 'Dream Days'<sup>62</sup> is a very short poem which seems to owe a little to MacNeice's 'The Slow Starter'<sup>63</sup>. Both frame the passage of time, particularly its sudden, uncanny hastening, in light of advice from unnamed others.

Mahon's poem concludes:

the weeks go by  
Like birds; and the years, the years  
Fly past anti-clockwise  
Like clock hands in a bar mirror.

MacNeice's:

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<sup>62</sup> Mahon, *The Snow Party*, 4.

<sup>63</sup> MacNeice, 478

Who said a watched clock never moves?  
Look at it now. Your chance was I.  
He turned and saw the accusing clock  
Race like a torrent around a rock.

Though the deployment of a clock as a signifier of time's passage is hardly a unique achievement, its location in a bar brings it significantly closer to MacNeice's orbit. MacNeice's 'Homage to Clichés'<sup>64</sup> sets its existential conversation, 'all this clamour for progress', against 'A timekeeper with a watch and a pistol', while its bar-room backdrop positions all the poem's pleasures, the durability of 'This whole delightful world of cliché and refrain' as apt for being struck down by another timekeeper, the barman's 'calling time'. A crucial aspect of reading the poem is acknowledging its date of composition, December 1935, as a watershed moment for the poet; from around this moment, all his writing will be coloured by the rise of European fascism, a threat to the 'delightful world' which is more than merely metaphysical. With this in mind, MacNeice's ordering of 'Two more double Scotch' becomes something like an assertion of survival in the face of 'the cold stone panic of Never'; as he would later write, during his time in London as a fire-watcher, 'It occurs to me that even playing Rummy in London now is a kind of assertion of the Rights of Man, whereas in America it would be nothing but playing Rummy'<sup>65</sup>. Mahon's 'The Terminal Bar'<sup>66</sup>, meanwhile, figures the pub as a sanctuary, a last resort in the aftermath of an existentially lost fight. After what feels like a subtle nod to 'Bagpipe Music', the pub's television 'providing *all we want* / of magic and redemption' [italics mine], the poem concludes with a MacNeicean rendering of mythic failure:

Slam the door and knock  
the snow from your shoe,  
admit that the vast dark  
at last defeated you.

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<sup>64</sup> Ibid, 59.

<sup>65</sup> Quoted in McDonald, *Louis MacNeice: Poet in his Contexts*, 122.

<sup>66</sup> Mahon, *The Hunt by Night*, 52.

Nobody found the Grail  
or conquered outer space;  
join the clientele  
watching itself increase.

MacNeice wrote extensively on grail quests in *Varieties of Parable*<sup>67</sup>, while his radio play *The Dark Tower* figures such quests as unending cycles of attempt, failure, re-attempt, in which the continuation of the endeavour is far more important than its successful conclusion. Like Mahon's eponymous 'Last of the Fire Kings'<sup>68</sup>, the Terminal Bar is a place for those 'Through with history', and explicitly on the losing side, a kind of low-rent purgatory. Where MacNeice emphasises the value in picking oneself up in the knowledge and acceptance of future falls, 'The Terminal Bar' is almost insistent – 'admit that the vast dark [...] defeated you' sounds more like direction than description – that one take it lying down, preferably somewhere warm.

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While both poets share a certain undertaker's humour, the disparity in how they deploy it may be characterised by their responses to the work of Samuel Beckett, an artist whom both Mahon and MacNeice hold in high regard. In his essay "Sad Wings", Mahon argues for the value of Beckett's poetry as a vital cog in his creative practice, focusing on Beckett's aptitude for the *mot juste*, e.g.: 'There are many ways in which the thing I am trying in vain to say may be tried in vain to be said'<sup>69</sup>. At the essay's conclusion, he praises a pair of noticeably Mahonian lines: 'Bright at last close of a dark day the sun shines out at last and

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<sup>67</sup> MacNeice, *Varieties of Parable*, 12.

<sup>68</sup> Mahon, *The Snow Party*, 9.

<sup>69</sup> Mahon, *Selected Prose*, 113.

goes down', and 'They were things that scarcely were, on the confines of silence and dark, and soon ceased'<sup>70</sup>. These three highlights significantly overlap: a focus on struggle, an atmosphere of embattled fragility, perhaps futility, and, in the latter two, that futility framed in terms of the movement from light into darkness. As discussed above, Mahon's existentially fraught pieces tend towards the nihilistic or at least pessimistic, and it's tempting to take Beckett as his exemplar. 'An Image from Beckett'<sup>71</sup> is Mahon's earliest attempt at figuring a historically long view into his poetry, clearly inspired by lines from *Waiting for Godot*: 'They give birth astride of a grave, the light gleams an instant, then it's night once more [...] the grave-digger puts on the foreceps'<sup>72</sup>; the Mahonian elements of brief, precarious light in the dark and an inexorable fall are to the fore. Mahon's poem at first feels almost like a fairy tale ('There was a sea, far off, / As bright as lettuce'), perhaps an echo of the grave-adjacent tenderness of 'In Carrowdore Churchyard'; swiftly, though, the poem's estimation of human efficacy over a geological scale is made plain, first through some rather heavy-handed plays on words, then the diminution of human civilisation to almost nothing:

Imagining what grave  
Cities, what lasting monuments,  
Given the time.  
  
They will have buried  
My great-grandchildren, and theirs,  
Beside me by now  
  
With a subliminal batsqueak  
Of reflex lamention.  
Our knuckle bones  
  
Litter the rich earth  
Changing, second by second,  
To civilisations.

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<sup>70</sup> Ibid, 114.

<sup>71</sup> Mahon, *Lives*, 8.

<sup>72</sup> Beckett, *Waiting for Godot*, 89-91.

The nod to Horace in the second line seems pointed enough, with its explicit mockery of literal monuments and implicit scepticism about the durability of literature, but the pun that precedes it is the real tone-setter. The poem's speaker seems to share a vocabulary with Beckett's clownish characters in *Waiting for Godot* – which would make him one more in a series of dramatic personae in Mahon's early work – surviving past some unspecified mass extinction event with only stock wisdom ('It was good while it lasted') to ease the pain. Given this context, the closing lines, in which the speaker hopes his children will 'have time, / and light enough' to read his will and testament, feel deeply embittered. The poem is predicated on the understanding that, at best, 'light gleams an instant, and then it's night once more'; the speaker's hope that the next generation use their fleeting time reading the wishes of a dead man is one of the crueller jokes in Mahon's oeuvre, though perhaps a fitting tribute from a poet who saw Beckett's work as 'foolish enough not to turn tail [...] before the ultimate penury'<sup>73</sup>.

Comparing this to MacNeice's writing on Beckett in *Varieties of Parable*, it seems clear where his and Mahon's existential philosophies meet and diverge. In his introduction, MacNeice describes Beckett's theatre, in which 'neither characters nor plot exist' as 'the *ne plus ultra*: I cannot see how anyone can out-Beckett Beckett'<sup>74</sup>. Remarkably, MacNeice's reading of Beckett's drama manages to salvage a quest narrative out of a body of work he has also described as 'static', made of situations that endlessly repeat<sup>75</sup>. Beckett's 'soliloquists', MacNeice argues:

[A]re always trying to be honest with themselves. Which means that they are always looking for themselves and so, *ipso facto*, for that which is not themselves.

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<sup>73</sup> Mahon, *Selected Prose*, 113.

<sup>74</sup> MacNeice, 25.

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid*, 119.

Their quest is metaphysical. They may not be concerned with God but they are concerned with spiritual meaning, even if all they know about this is its absence.<sup>76</sup>

Typically of *Varieties of Parable*, MacNeice's reading is somewhat pedantic and a little long-winded, but it demonstrates a crucial facet of his writing of the period: even when he was writing his most metaphysically fearful and hopeless poems, he could still produce an intellectually rigorous reading of Beckett that found space for hope. MacNeice and Mahon both saw the same flash of light before the grave, but MacNeice found cause for celebration: from that flash one might extrapolate a day, an entire lifetime, some proof that all is not yet lost.

Where the two poets' attitudes to death and entropy more clearly overlap is not in the strange, mythic spaces MacNeice creates in the 'thumbnail nightmares' of *The Burning Perch*, though the apocalypticism of 'After the Crash'<sup>77</sup> would not look out of place in some of Mahon's bleaker pieces:

Then he looked up and marked  
The gigantic scales in the sky, [...]  
And knew in the dead, dead calm  
It was too late to die.

Catastrophe in Mahon's work does not tend to be invested with the biblical grandeur MacNeice deploys here; it is closer to the worldly trappings of 'Budgie'<sup>78</sup>, which Mahon describes as 'one of [MacNeice's] last and bitterest poems', 'perhaps [...] a satire on the poetic vocation'<sup>79</sup>. The poem figures the budgie as utterly oblivious to the world outside its cage, or even beyond its tiny mirror, wanting nothing but its image reflected back on itself. These are the poem's closing lines:

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<sup>76</sup> Ibid, 140.

<sup>77</sup> MacNeice, *Collected Poems*, 524.

<sup>78</sup> MacNeice, 539.

<sup>79</sup> Mahon, *Journalism*, 41; this section was discarded from the same essay in his later *Selected Prose*.



The radio telescope  
Picks up quite a different signal, the human  
Race recedes and dwindles, the giant  
Reptiles cackle in their graves, the mountain  
Gorillas exchange their final messages,  
But the budgerigar was not born for nothing,  
He stands at his post on the burning perch –  
I twitter Am – and peeps like a television  
Actor admiring himself in the monitor.

Like the television in 'The Terminal Bar', the medium here signifies a degraded, sentimental culture: it may well be no coincidence that Mahon positions his TV set in a 'wire-net cage'. Of course, by naming his final collection *The Burning Perch*, MacNeice names his own participation in the same cultural trends, and it's worth remembering that *Autumn Sequence*<sup>80</sup>, itself a meditation on devalued or purposeless expression, is organised around the figure of the parrot, a stand-in for MacNeice's frustrations with his own perceived loss of creative power. Mahon is somewhat more reluctant to recognise himself amongst the hypnotised masses; in 'Rock Music', 'Ovid in Tomis' and 'Another Sunday Morning'<sup>81</sup>, for example, the poet is in a high room away from the common noise, or an outsider flying 'The private kite of poetry'. That the budgie's world ends not with a bang but a self-absorbed 'peep' after a long downward trajectory also feels suitably Mahonian: civilisation's final words are not the eloquent speeches of humankind but the cackling of 'giant / Reptiles' and 'mountain / Gorillas'; that the only human in the poem is identically line-broken, 'television / Actor', a deliberate formal echo, seems a barbed, misanthropic gag.

Mahon's 'One of these Nights'<sup>82</sup> also opens with a caged blue bird: 'A blue / Buzzard blinks in the zoo', and features London in a similarly eerie state of abandonment:

Cashel and Angkor Wat  
Are not more ghostly than

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<sup>80</sup> MacNeice, 331.

<sup>81</sup> Mahon, *The Hunt by Night*, 25, 37, 28.

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid*, 50.

London now, its squares  
Bone-pale in the moonlight,  
Its quiet thoroughfares  
A map of desolation.

The poem also harks back to the 1940s' wartime, 'Munich, the Phony War, / The convoys and the Blitz', even specifically referring to sirens 'reminiscent of forty years ago' (the poem was first published in 1982). MacNeice worked as a fire-watcher during the London Blitz, and Mahon's description of 'Radiant warplanes' with 'Their incandescent flowers / Unfolding everywhere' seems a direct relative to MacNeice's 'Brother Fire'<sup>83</sup>, a poem Mahon described as 'one of MacNeice's key wartime poems'<sup>84</sup>. In 'Brother Fire', the speaker attempts to reconcile his knowledge that this elemental force would 'slaver and crunch away / The beams of human life', with the creative flair by which that destruction is enacted in the poem, the extent to which the speaker *relishes* watching a city burn:

Did we not on those mornings after the All Clear,  
When you were looting shops in elemental joy  
And singing as you swarmed up city block and spire,  
Echo your thoughts in ours? 'Destroy! Destroy!'

The arrangement of these lines, in the distance between the subject, 'we', and the action, 'echo your thoughts', enact the blending of the fire's agency with that of the witness: it's entirely unclear in whose voice are the last two words. In 'One of these Nights', mass destruction is more domestic, though not domesticated: a 'celestial Hoover' sweeping clean 'The grime of an ephemeral / Culture'; the air-raid sirens a 'dog-howl'; bombers drop 'incandescent flowers'. As in MacNeice's poem, the violence is presented as uncannily passive, a force of nature rather than of governments or militaries: an 'impartial glare' is a strange way to describe an entirely man-made catastrophe. The drama in 'One of these nights' is not MacNeice's discomfited exploration of the sensory overload of an air-raid,

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<sup>83</sup> MacNeice, 196.

<sup>84</sup> Mahon, *Selected Prose*, 128.

however, but in an alarmingly cool-headed argument that, maybe, the snuffing out of human civilisation might not be such a bad idea. Before the last stanza, an array of social ills is presented: 'The refuse of an era / Consumed like cellophane', homelessness and capitalistic excess, racism and unemployment. The poem's only recognition that the nature of warfare has changed is in the first line of the closing stanza, 'Next time will be the last', with all its acknowledgement of the persistent nuclear threat at the height of the Cold War. The line is not end-stopped, though, and flows smoothly into the closing scene:

But, safe in the underground  
With tea and *Picture Post*,  
We'll take out the guitar  
And pass the gaspers round  
The way we did before;  
And life will begin once more.

As ever, the precise irony quotient is difficult to determine. It may well be quite low: Mahon's poems commentating on social degradation tend to be played relatively straight, and certainly the depictions of late capitalism in 'One of these Nights' lack the satirical edge of 'An Image from Beckett'. In the context of the detailed cultural breakdown in the world above, the final stanza's image of music and shared cigarettes feel like a positively deployed symbol of restored communality, a 1980s revisiting of the Spirit of the Blitz. Even the stanza's form seems to support the idea that this is a poem, if not exactly in praise of nuclear apocalypse, then certainly seeing an up-side. Each previous stanza has six lines, whereas this has seven, the extra line being the one asserting that annihilation will make way for a new beginning after the 'last' war. It's worth noting that, where Mahon's poems are formally patterned, they tend not to break that pattern lightly; there's a strong case for reading 'One of these Nights' more or less at face value. Where MacNeice's 'Brother Fire' has the adrenergic drive of being a first-hand witness to industrial-scale devastation; 'One of these Nights' suffers from an attempt to amalgamate two very different historical

moments – the London of the Blitz and of the Cold War – without appropriate context or self-criticism, the very act he warned against in ‘A Disused Shed in Co. Wexford’. What comes across most clearly in ‘One of these Nights’ is a Beckettian nihilism uncomfortably drafted into scenes of contemporary social realism.

Complicating this odd blend of wartime solidarity and calamity further is the domesticity that precedes it: the presence of tea and a photojournalism periodical places ‘One of these Nights’ in conversation with Mahon’s other poems of suburban harmony and banality. One of Mahon’s earliest successes is ‘Glengormley’<sup>85</sup> a piece written prior to the civil rights marches which marked the beginning of the Troubles. Here, Mahon figures the safety and stability of his childhood home as part blessing and part curse, recognising that although a place where:

Wonders are many and none is more wonderful than man  
Who has tamed the terrier, trimmed the hedge  
And grasped the principle of the watering can

is not where one is likely to find mythic battles and grail-quests, the people who suffered and died in those times weren’t likely to opt into it, given the choice:

I should rather praise  
A worldly time under this worldly sky –  
The terrier-taming, garden-watering days  
Those heroes pictured as they struggled through  
The quick noose of their being.

The poem, for all its tongue-in-cheek grousing, is prescient of the fact that those who live in times of ‘monsters’ and ‘giants’, however metaphorical, rarely live long or well. A relatively simple poem compared to what Mahon would write later, it nevertheless expresses a complex and perhaps unglamorously nuanced attitude to suburban boredom; one may

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<sup>85</sup> Mahon, *Night-crossing*, 5.

point out the high folly of considering oneself king of an unthreatened castle, but it's preferable to watching the walls collapse.

Mahon would return to and revise these ideas in 'Courtyards in Delft'<sup>86</sup>, a poem from the collection *The Hunt by Night*, based on a series of paintings by seventeenth-century Dutch artist Pieter de Hooch. As Hugh Haughton notes, though the action of the poem refers to a single canvas, the artist painted several such scenes; the sense of a single cultural space multiplying out into the world is a major source of tension in the poem<sup>87</sup>. Here, the systems of law and order that underwrite the suburban wholesomeness of 'Glengormley' are more thoroughly interrogated, in a poem which has on its mind art's complicity in maintaining the façade of civilisation. Like 'Glengormley', it begins with a picture of middle-class serenity, the houses of artisans characterised by:

Immaculate masonry, and everywhere that  
Water tap, that broom and wooden pail  
To keep it so. [...] No breeze  
Ruffles the trim composure of those trees.

The echoes of trim hedges and watering cans from Mahon's earlier poem are clear; the courtyard is charming, clean and, above all, safe from the outside world. The poem quickly moves to articulate what is markedly absent from the scene, chaos and sensuousness:

No spinet-playing emblematic of  
The harmonies and disharmonies of love;  
No lewd fish, no fruit, no wide-eyed bird  
About to fly its cage [...]   
Nothing is random, nothing goes to waste.

Though this would certainly make for a dull afternoon, the poem has not yet rendered these absences into a moral argument. How the poem executes this turn, however, varies significantly depending on which version of the poem is in question. In later

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<sup>86</sup> Mahon, *The Hunt by Night*, 9.

<sup>87</sup> Haughton, 156.

editions, the poem ends with Mahon reading himself into the painting: 'I lived there as a boy and know the coal / Glittering in its shed':

I must be lying low in a room there,  
A strange child with a taste for verse,  
While my hard-nosed companions dream of fire  
And sword upon parched veldt and fields of rain-swept gorse.

While this ending hints toward the cultural expansionism of imperial Holland in South Africa ('veldt') and Orangeism in Ulster ('gorse'), they remain in the realm of dream; the world of the painting, for all 'the paint disintegrates', remains a largely discrete, non-porous space.

In *The Hunt by Night*, however, the poem concluded with a further stanza:

For the pale light of that provincial town  
Will spread itself, like ink or oil,  
Over the not yet accurate linen  
Map of the world which occupies one wall  
And punish nature in the name of God.  
If only, now, the Maenads, as of right,  
Came smashing crockery, with fire and sword,  
We could sleep easier in our beds at night.

Though Haughton has argued that its excision was due to a recognition that the 'Maenads might represent something worse [than a repressive domestic order], especially in the context of the terror campaigns in Northern Ireland at the time'<sup>88</sup>, his reading elides the import of this final expeditionary movement out of the painting and across the manifest world. The 'ink or oil' seem to symbolise the bureaucracy and resource theft committed by imperial missions across that 'Map', while the description of a culture that would 'punish nature in the name of God' is almost certainly directed at the middle-class Protestantism Mahon recognises in de Hooch's painting and in his own childhood. Here, Mahon explicitly renders the peace and cleanliness of the opening stanza as a brutal lie, the coloniser's mask of civility that obscures their 'dream of fire' and punishment of nature. Haughton might

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<sup>88</sup> Haughton, 159.

well be correct in seeing the Maenads, the murderers of Orpheus (though not of his music), as agents of pure disorder and excess, and potentially worse than an authoritarian law and order, but they also act as an incarnation of Mahon's impulse to righteous, flaming destruction, one MacNeice recognises and airs in 'Brother Fire'. There is a deeply cathartic edge to both Mahon's invocation of mythic chaos, and MacNeice's 'Destroy! Destroy!', their recognition of a profound, if dangerous, force in the human psyche, an opposition to the cultural fortifications of suburbia. In removing this passage Mahon seems to enact, to an uncomfortable degree, that same sanitising drive for orderliness and cleanliness the poem clearly resents and resists.

MacNeice engaged with the politics and philosophy of suburbia throughout his career, often with similar venom. In 'Sunday Morning'<sup>89</sup>, the speaker satirises the inconsequentiality of leisure, comically inflating the import of music practice and amateur auto repair to 'Fate's great bazaar'. The poem seems to warn that should one 'Regard these means as ends', one might eventually:

Take corners on two wheels until you go so fast  
That you can clutch a fringe or two of the windy past,  
That you can abstract this day and make it to the week of time  
A small eternity

Like Mahon's giants and monsters, MacNeice describes a sense of violent rebellion against inconsequentiality, a will to transcend the mundane using only the tools of the mundane.

But the final stanza, the sonnet's delayed volta, jolts the poem out of its closed system:

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

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<sup>89</sup> MacNeice, 23.

Appropriately, the final lines introduce to the equation a new and extremely weird element. MacNeice renders this intrusion of the knowledge of mortality as a monstrous 'something', while the 'gulps', the 'skulls' mouths', and the very unidiomatic 'opens ... out' of the bells, give an impression of something huge and implacable waiting to eat the entire joyful scene; the distinctive 'gulp' is transformed here from its appearance in 'Mayfly'<sup>90</sup>: 'gay gulps of laughter // Gulp of yellow merriment'. Unlike Mahon's very material 'fire / And sword', MacNeice's 'something' in 'Sunday Afternoon' is metaphysical, tireless and hungry. In both cases, their revelation deepens the poem's understanding of their subject by bringing to the fore larger forces or ideas that recontextualise their sense of order and normality.

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In his essay "Human Resources", Mahon argues that in MacNeice's poems of the 1930s, 'The Irish light in his head was a metaphor for the variety of human experience', 'a struggle between darkness and light' in which darkness related to childhood sadness and 'an ambiguous fear of solitude', where light was 'prismatic', various, heterogenous, both 'the sunlight on the garden' and the 'dazzle on the sea'<sup>91</sup>. It's worth noting, of course, that those citations come from 'The Sunlight on the Garden'<sup>92</sup> and 'Leaving Barra'<sup>93</sup>, both poems from 1937 in which MacNeice is considering the nature of loss and solitude, specifically in the context of romantic relationships. Mahon is keenly aware that the sustaining power of light

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<sup>90</sup> Ibid, 14.

<sup>91</sup> Mahon, *Selected Prose*, 138-9.

<sup>92</sup> MacNeice, 84.

<sup>93</sup> Ibid, 86.



in the elder poet's work is often in direct correlation to the darkness, solitude and fear just beneath the surface. That Mahon expends such careful attention to this aspect of MacNeice's work – which burns brightly early on but is far less prevalent in his later poems – only begins to indicate the saturation-level preoccupation Mahon has for lighting effects in his own poetry. The play of shadow, images of dawn and dusk, and especially the movement from darkness into light (or vice versa), are recurrent features from the beginning. A little quantitative research might shed some light: there are one hundred and two poems in Mahon's 1991 *Selected Poems*; fifteen feature internal or end-rhymes of 'night' and 'light' ('The Sea in Winter' and 'Craigvara House' feature two rhyming pairs; 'Death and the Sun'<sup>94</sup> manages three), while in a further *forty-one* Mahon draws attention to the quality of light as a means of indicating a poem's atmosphere, for instance: 'I too have suffered / Obscurity and derision, / And sheltered in my heart of hearts / A light to transform the world' in 'The Forger'<sup>95</sup>, 'the sky / Ablaze with a fiery glow, / Searchlights roaming the stars' in 'Autobiographies'<sup>96</sup> or 'black / Face of the cosmic dark. / We crouch to roaring fires' in 'North Wind: Portrush'<sup>97</sup>. The metaphorical meaning of light in the darkness is not consistent, of course. As often as it is a sustaining, nurturing force, it is someone's house on fire, as in 'Knut Hamsun in Old Age'<sup>98</sup>, whose closing image is of 'heavenly mansions blazing in the dark'. Altogether rare in Mahon's oeuvre are poems of even relatively uncomplicatedly optimism, and it's perhaps no coincidence that one of their scarce number, 'Everything Is Going To Be All Right'<sup>99</sup>, features an unusual quantity of upbeat lighting effects:

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<sup>94</sup> Mahon, 113, 156, 192.

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

<sup>96</sup> Ibid, 85.

<sup>97</sup> Ibid, 124.

<sup>98</sup> Ibid, 132.

<sup>99</sup> Ibid, 111.

How should I not be glad to contemplate  
the clouds clearing beyond the dormer window  
and a high tide reflected on the ceiling?  
There will be dying, there will be dying,  
but there is no need to go into that.  
The poems flow from the hand unbidden  
and the hidden source is the watchful heart.  
The sun rises in spite of everything  
and the far cities are beautiful and bright.  
I lie here in a riot of sunlight  
watching the day break and the clouds flying.  
Everything is going to be all right.

Given everything we know about Mahon, the multiple 'everything's' in 'Everything Is Going To Be All Right' should not be accepted at face value. The first lines' self-questioning suggests a conversation going on prior to the poem, perhaps during a period of staring at the ceiling, waiting for poems to flow, as they do, unbidden. The tone of the line 'but there is no need to go into that', is odd as well, particularly for a poet well at home in the thick of poetic argument. But the poem's sentimentality seems to win out over its apprehensions, however much the 'far cities... beautiful and bright' might have a touch of the afterlife about them, in a poem that seems to equate death and the loss of artistic expression. The idiom 'a riot of sunlight' might have come straight from MacNeice's juvenilia, while only internal rhyme in the piece, 'the hand unbidden / and the hidden source', has more than a passing echo of 'The Sunlight on the Garden':

The sunlight on the garden  
Hardens and grows cold

Given that 'Everything Is Going To Be All Right' immediately follows 'Beyond the Pale', in which the speaker writes plaintively to a lost love, 'Sunlight on the Garden' is an appropriate touchstone. The importance of day breaking and sunlight filling the scene seems, in the poem's broader context, to mark a turn into a more positive, or at least less turbulent, time, however ambiguously the poet might regard the latter.

One of the few poems in Mahon's work that takes place solely in darkness is 'The Terminal Bar'<sup>100</sup>. As discussed earlier, it is a metaphysically bleak poem, with little room for hope or positive feeling; it might, at a push, manage 'misery loves company'. But light, or its absence, plays a very active role in establishing this unremitting solitude:

Welcome to the planet,  
its fluorescent beers  
buzzing in the desolate  
silence of the spheres. [...]   
admit that the vast dark  
at last defeated you.

The only light is man-made, either neon adverts or the babbling television, and both are scant relief against the total indifference and unmeasurable vastness of the universe. If MacNeice found, in his figurations of light, a way of bringing the various, bright and joyful things of the world into his poems, Mahon here has the tides of undifferentiated void washing up against the pub door: a few lines earlier, Manhattan's 'constellated waters' are 'swarmed' with snow, a painfully bleak blending of various indefatigable forces of nature. One might argue the presence of snow without the presence of huge roses is indicative of the lopsided existential mood of 'The Terminal Bar'.

Darkness permeates MacNeice's later work, but relatively few explicitly name it. A notable exception is 'Charon'<sup>101</sup>, though even that articulates a sense of nightmare long before it confirms its night-time setting. It is only seven lines from the end that the speaker, strangely multiplied into the first-person plural, indicates the darkness by shining artificial light upon it:

We flicked the flashlight  
And there was the ferryman just as Virgil  
And Dante had seen him.

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<sup>100</sup> Mahon, *The Hunt by Night*, 52.

<sup>101</sup> MacNeice, 530.

Outside of this brief and enjambed moment, the poem figures darkness by touching its edges, framing it as a significant absence: the bus conductor's hands and ticket inspector's mind are 'black with money' and 'black with suspicion', a dog's barking 'was as shrill as a cock crowing', hinting at a pre-dawn hour. Appropriately for such an existentially anxious poem, there is none of MacNeice's flair for depicting the sudden shifts of light or what light is cast upon; though the bus moves through space it does not make meaningful progress on its journey, though the protagonists repeatedly 'jog on', they do not reach their destination. The poem's famous final line, 'If you want to die you will have to pay for it', aptly summarises, however wittily, the utter absence of feeling, the heavy, joyless monosyllables, that form the poem's atmosphere. If joy and variety for MacNeice are symbolised by the sudden mutability of light, 'Charon' presents a sequence of scenes in which nothing changes, nothing is gained, and nothing survives; for both poets, the absence of light is the absence of life.

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After three decades of gradual, steady formal evolution through formally regular and rhetorically tight lyric poetry, Mahon created space in his poetry in the mid-nineties for work more tonally conversational and formally flexible than had previously been the case. His verse-letters, 'The Yaddo Letter'<sup>102</sup>, 'The Hudson Letter'<sup>103</sup> and the book-length *The Yellow Book* are not without precedent in his oeuvre: 'Beyond Howth Head' was published twenty-three years before *The Hudson Letter*, and its combination of panoramic ambitions,

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<sup>102</sup> Mahon, *The Hudson Letter*, 27.

<sup>103</sup> *Ibid*, 35.

insightful commentary and sturdy eight-line stanzas keep the poem buoyant throughout, its conclusion hitting a very precise note of thoughtfulness, hope and anxiety. If 'Beyond Howth Head' is Mahon's closest relative to *Autumn Journal*, in its socio-political ranginess and self-critique, his later letters share more in common with what Terence Brown once described as the 'chic colour-supplement reportage'<sup>104</sup> of *Autumn Sequel*. The resemblance is more than passing: in the opening lines of 'The Hudson Letter' Mahon invokes, as MacNeice did, the passing of Dylan Thomas, and where MacNeice opens his sequence mourning his diminished poetic capabilities – 'the Parrot is loose on the world / Clapping his trap with gay but meaningless wings'<sup>105</sup> – Mahon expresses his own will 'to recover my lost nerve!'<sup>106</sup>, invoking not the parrot but the nightingale to 'Sing, Muse'. The books' critical reception varied widely, Peter McDonald aiming for the jugular in his review of *The Yellow Book*, naming it an 'embarrassment', reading Mahon's scepticism and resignation as 'short on irony [...] exercises in an uninspired gruffness', and 'a poetry that has become sick of itself'<sup>107</sup>. Edna Longley was somewhat more understanding in her reading of both Mahon's books, framing them in conversation with both MacNeice and Auden in their own epistolary work, with MacNeice's political engagement and Auden's literati chattiness. She argues that to write in the verse-letter form is 'to invoke more immediate horizons, a more immediate audience. It is to put communication as well as history back into symbolism'<sup>108</sup>, that these collections mark a determination to engage more directly in matters of socio-political import.

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<sup>104</sup> Brown, "Louis MacNeice, 1907-1963: His Poetry", *Studies: An Irish Quarterly Review*, Vol. 59, No. 235 (Autumn, 1970), 257.

<sup>105</sup> MacNeice, 331.

<sup>106</sup> Mahon, 37.

<sup>107</sup> McDonald, "Incurable Ache", *Poetry Ireland Review*, No. 56, (Spring 1998), 118. It should be noted that McDonald's review ends with some thoroughly unenlightened anti-Irish bigotry.

<sup>108</sup> Longley, *The Poetry of Derek Mahon*, 39.

Section IV of 'The Hudson Letter' has an epigram from MacNeice, from 'An Eclogue for Christmas'<sup>109</sup>:

We shall go down like Palaeolithic man  
Before some new Ice Age or Genghiz Khan.

Where MacNeice's poem encounters the superficial fizz and sparkle of the new with simultaneous revulsion and fascination, a tension embodied in the poem's gaudy language and rhythms, Mahon's piece reads MacNeice's doomsaying straight, taking the surface content of these lines and ignoring their latent message: the 'rotting nerve' of 'life and literature' will be irresistibly strange and glamorous. Mahon's poem draws on 'Ice Age' more than 'Genghiz Khan' in his long sigh into post-industrial catastrophe, clause after clause into inevitable ruin:

This morning, though, the throes of a warm snap  
so ice cracks far off like a thunderclap  
somewhere along Bohemia's desert coast  
and puffs drift in the harsh riparian light,  
gun-cotton against storm-clouds in the west  
that rain-infection and industrial waste,  
though now we emerge from the industrial night

Unlike the light-hearted discursiveness of MacNeice's poem, Mahon's view of a contaminated world does not even have this surface dazzle to take pleasure in; as Mahon notes, gone are the exotic boat names – '*Nieuw Amsterdam, Caronia, île de France!*' – in their place little more than 'trash and refuse barges'. If MacNeice is an informing presence in this poem, it is his *Autumn Sequel* incarnation, who has come to see London as:

lethal fogs to come, the Thames is flowing  
As dourly as the Wensum, summer has gone  
Long since and middling cheap, autumn is going, going.<sup>110</sup>

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<sup>109</sup> MacNeice, 33.

<sup>110</sup> MacNeice, 401.

Both pieces observe inexorable decline and embody it syntactically: there is little or nothing to sweeten a deeply bitter pill. While other parts of 'The Hudson Letter' find somewhat more uncomplicated joy, particularly Section VII ('Sneakers') with its transcription of New Yorker pub-talk or Section IX ('Rory and Katie') salvaging from his parental regrets the wish that his children express themselves 'without embarrassment or fear. Take it / from the top, Katie; yours is the sound we want to hear!': these are a joyful reprieves in a sequence with little room for optimism. MacNeice is drafted in to 'The Hudson Letter' not as the sceptical yet hopeful poet-journalist of the thirties but as a prophet of terminal decline, his epigram from 'Eclogue for Christmas' decontextualized from a far more complex and self-implicatory poem than Mahon gives credit for. MacNeice's epigram feels awkwardly tacked on to a poem that only engages one aspect of a thoroughly multifaceted piece.

*The Yellow Book* leaves New York and returns to Ireland, but much of the tone and purpose of the poetry remains intact. A *fin de siècle* nostalgia permeates the book, perhaps most notably in Section IV, subtitled 'shiver in your tenement'. Here, Mahon constructs an apparently unironic binary between the good art of the bad old days and the contemporary moment's mere shadow of 'real' art. There is perhaps a touch of self-parody about the piece, but it is difficult to take seriously when Mahon is so clearly relishing the opportunity to lambast the low modern tides. He looks back on the Ireland of the sixties:

Those were the days before tourism and economic growth,  
before deconstruction and the death of the author,  
when pubs had no pictures of Yeats and Joyce  
since people could still recall their faces, their voices;  
of crozier-wielding bishops, vigilant censors,  
pre-Conciliar Latin, smoke pouring from swung censers;  
of sexual guilt, before French letter and Dutch cap,  
fear muttered in the dark of dormitory and side-chapel.<sup>111</sup>

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<sup>111</sup> Mahon, *The Yellow Book*, 18.

Without the benefit of conjoining clauses explaining which aspects, exactly, of this institutionally repressive culture are responsible for cultivating Irish art, it is difficult to follow Mahon's logic. 'Those were the days' is perhaps the *ur*-motto of grumpy old fart-ism, and it precedes a weirdly rose-tinted look at a bygone Ireland. One wonders which people in which pubs were so fond of Yeats and Joyce, and what exactly the connection is between church-state collusion and the quality of Austin Clarke's poetry. What seems to come clear in the passage that follows is that this rendering of the past is useful, primarily, for casting aspersions on the present:

Now, of course, we live in a blaze of tropical light [...]  
labour 'accustomed to higher living', poverty old hat

'Of course' creaks under a burden it should not have to bear. What is so evil about escaping the 'dark [...] in the archdiocese', and of improved living conditions? If Mahon's point is that the prosperity of the 1990s' Celtic Tiger only amplified social inequality, it is rather lost in the mix. His assertion that what artists really need is a good socio-economic kicking is far clearer:

does art benefit from the new dispensation?  
What, in our new freedom, have we left to say?  
Oh, poets can eat now, painters can buy paint  
but have we nobler poetry, happier painting  
than when the gutters bubbled, the drains stank  
and hearts bobbed to the clappers in the sanctuary?  
Has art itself, like life, its source in agony?

If this is satire, it's not particularly effective satire: later in the book, in the poem 'The Idiocy of Human Aspiration'<sup>112</sup> – a barbed upgrade, as Haughton notes, from Samuel Johnson and Robert Lowell's versions, 'The Vanity of Human Wishes'<sup>113</sup> – Mahon signs off with:

and if  
you want to worship mere materialism,

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<sup>112</sup> Mahon, 33.

<sup>113</sup> Haughton, 291.



that modern god we have ourselves invented,  
I leave you to the delights of modern life.

It is difficult to read Mahon's work in *The Yellow Book* as sustained satire when it is perfectly consistent with a condemnatory tone and narrative of historical decline he has been employing since 'Ecclesiastes'. One might argue that the Mahon of 'shiver in your tenement' is an echo of the MacNeice of 'Bagpipe Music' in their sprightly rebukes to modern capital, and Mahon's 'At the Gate Theatre'<sup>114</sup> contains a precise nod to that very poem: 'Goodbye now to 'the tragic sense of life', / all we want is a soap serial and a dirty laugh'. In this latter instance, however, the spirit of MacNeice is invoked but not enacted: though 'Bagpipe Music' is marked by bitterness toward the destruction of traditional living and the rise of the welfare state in the Hebrides, it has a rhythmical and syntactical blast doing so. Compare MacNeice:

Their knickers are made of crêpe-de-chine, their shoes are made of python,  
Their halls are lined with tiger rugs and their walls with heads of bison

With Mahon's dour diagnosis in 'At the Gate Theatre':

[we] who have had our fill of horrors and prefer a rock  
opera or a midsummer night's sex comedy  
to the death of kings. Bring on the new regime  
of airy shapes, nothings, fluff and bubbles

As in 'The Hudson Letter', though MacNeice is explicitly invoked, it is a MacNeice with the edges removed, not the self-implicating, self-delighting critic and participant in popular culture – Mahon somewhat overlooks MacNeice's earnest commemoration of Florrie Forde 'Death of an Actress'<sup>115</sup> and his work in mass broadcasting for the BBC – but a sliver of MacNeice's full character that can be more comfortably deployed within *The Yellow Book's* constellation of fatalistic ancestors.

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<sup>114</sup> Mahon, 31.

<sup>115</sup> MacNeice, 177.

If MacNeice is present anywhere in *The Yellow Book*, it may be in its closing passages. 'Christmas in Kinsale'<sup>116</sup> is an uncharacteristically quiet, hopeful note in the collection, where 'the cutting edge, the tough cities, / the nuclear wind' are 'Elsewhere', and the stuff of daily life is suddenly brought back into focus:

Sphere-music, the morning stars consort together  
in a fine blaze of anti-cyclone weather [...]  
the wet and dry, the garbage and the trash,  
remains of rib and chop, warm cinders, ash,  
bags, boxes, bulbs and batteries, bathroom waste,  
carcasses, tinfoil, leaves, crumbs, scraps and bones –  
if this were summer there would be clouds of flies  
buzzing for joy around the rubbish bins.

That a book's worth of dismay should turn, or begin to turn, away from its habitual pessimism – 'The harsh will dies here among snails and peonies / its grave an iridescence in the sea-breeze' – on this MacNeicean catalogue of the off-cuts of Christmas, bearing in mind how 'The Hudson Letter' deploys MacNeice's own festive eclogue, is hard to miss. Moreover, the clouds of summer flies that form the poem's epiphanic moment, the movement from winter and 'the dreamt apocalypse' toward the 'lone figure pointing to the horizon, [...] shouting, 'Come on; come on!'", seem reminiscent of MacNeice's own time-defying insects in 'Mayfly':

They never have the chance, but what of time they have  
They stretch out taut and thin and ringing clear [...]  
we the circus masters  
Who make the mayflies dance, the lapwings lift their crests

MacNeice's poem is not merely a celebration of the ephemeral, but in its closing lines an assertion of mastery over his own destiny, 'The pathetic fallacy of the passing hours / When it is we who pass them'. Perhaps it is not surprising that in a book that has so little faith in the contemporary young, all 'slouching into Bethlehem' for the millennium, that Mahon

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<sup>116</sup> Mahon, 56.

should find a source of regeneration, and his own place in the turning gyres of post-history, in the young of generations past. MacNeice is a fleeting presence in 'The Hudson Letter' and *The Yellow Book*, one voice among a self-conscious gathering of many; although, for better or worse, his and Auden's example may have been the catalyst for Mahon to set out on this formal expedition, it seems MacNeice was also among the catalysts to finally lift him out of it. As Matthew Campbell notes, 'Christmas in Kinsale' marks a turning point for Mahon, the beginning of a movement into his late period translations, versions and eco-poetry, with the closing poem of *The Yellow Book* a kind of spring cleaning:

The passage might appear to decline into a bare list, but it is in its way a sort of recycling of the quotidian and its obverse – waste, a happy business if you are a summer fly.<sup>117</sup>

Mahon finds his way forward where he found his way in, all the way back in 'At Carrowdore Churchyard', where the elder poet is responsible for 'Rinsing the choked mud, keeping the colours new'; the historical cycle meets the aesthetic cycle, and the horizon opens up once more.

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Perhaps appropriately for a poet so dedicated to finding the right word, to expressing a true and honest response to the world, Mahon's relationship to MacNeice is as often a matter of conflict as it is of creative empowerment. MacNeice was not merely, for Mahon, 'a familiar

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<sup>117</sup> Campbell, *Cambridge Companion to Irish Poets*, 318.

voice whispering in my ear'<sup>118</sup>, but a source of lasting friction and provocation. The fact that he as often pushes away from MacNeice as builds upon his artistic foundations does not diminish his influence on Mahon's work. From his earliest lyric success in 'At Carrowdore Churchyard', MacNeice is a vital point of navigation, particularly in Mahon's thinking about the role of the poet in a community or society which seems to have little enough room for 'germinal ironies'. Mahon draws on the conversations MacNeice conducted throughout the thirties exploring his own position relative to cultural changes in England, cultural mores in Ireland, and political upheaval across Europe to triangulate his own responses to similar processes. Where the two resonate most powerfully is their ability to write back to the contemporary moment in such a way that the necessity of an engaged artistic response and their own tendencies toward irony and scepticism are equally respected. At times this unusual angle takes a metaphysical bent, in which the very nature of time and perception is a level by which to move questions too large to encounter otherwise. Although Mahon and MacNeice diverge at critical points, particularly in how their poetry variously articulates their attitudes toward apocalypticism, what most clearly unites them is the sense that despite all the darkness, there remains the possibility of light. As MacNeice argues in the essay 'Broken Windows', even 'a poem in praise of suicide is an act of homage to life'<sup>119</sup>; one might say of Mahon that even in his gruffest Jeremiads, he infers a belief in a world that could yet be better, one in which there is still light in the darkness, in the closing words of 'Christmas in Kinsale', 'a blue Cycladic dawn'.

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<sup>118</sup> Mahon, "An Interview with Derek Mahon", *Poetry Ireland Review*, 14 (Autumn, 1985) 18.

<sup>119</sup> MacNeice, *Selected Prose of Louis MacNeice*, 138.

## Four: 'In Dreams Begin Responsibilities': Paul Muldoon

*'More than just a playful image, this doubleness is integral to Muldoon's work. It ensures that we can never be quite sure how to take him; above all this is a poetry which preserves doubt.'*<sup>1</sup> – Clair Wills, *Reading Paul Muldoon*.

The attempt to establish any single line of influence in Muldoon is a fraught, perhaps even foredoomed endeavour. As Wills explains, his style, tone, even syntactical structures are immediately, almost pointedly identifiable: there is a 'ring to his work which may be easy to spot, and even to imitate, but is perhaps less easy to define'<sup>2</sup>, while Fran Brearton points out that 'The closer one gets to the poetic texture in Muldoon, the less other poets [...] are present there'<sup>3</sup>. Muldoon himself has argued that since the poet stands as the poem's first reader, maybe even the first thing *read by* the poem, accurately identifying and analysing one's own influences is nigh on impossible<sup>4</sup>. These propositions come in context with ongoing discussions of the 'myths' and 'counter-myths' of Muldoon's relationships – both artistic and personal – with Seamus Heaney and Michael Longley; regarding the former, Brearton identifies 'a myth both of them tend (however mischievously in Muldoon's case) to promote'<sup>5</sup>. Furthermore, in her study *Improprieties*, Wills identifies Muldoon's work as 'fundamentally bound up with an investigation of the nature of origins', and 'a thoroughgoing rejection of the

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<sup>1</sup> Wills, *Reading Paul Muldoon*, 12.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid*, 9.

<sup>3</sup> Brearton, "Muldoon's Antecedents", *Paul Muldoon: Critical Essays*, 56.

<sup>4</sup> Muldoon, "Getting Round: Notes Towards an *Ars Poetica*", *Essays in Criticism*, 48:2 (April 1998), 108.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid*, 52.

notion of stable or univocal origins, [...] linked to a conservative politics, not only in nationalist, but also neo-imperialist rhetoric'<sup>6</sup>. Muldoon's work is, more so than any of his peers, alert to and in conversation with critical responses to it, including the recurring attempts to pin it down within one tradition, canon or generation; resistance to easy taxonomy is not merely a side-effect of the complexity and sensitivity of the work, but an active, conscious aesthetic decision on the part of the poet.

Given the proliferation of meta-poetic narratives in Muldoon's poetry, and his aversion to straightforward family trees (both biographical and literary), then, this chapter will not, ultimately, determine whether MacNeice is truly a poetic ancestor, touchstone or teacher. There is a possibility, furthermore, that MacNeice – like Heaney, perhaps – stands in more as a master-signifier than a truly substantial poetic influence, in the way he clearly has been for Longley and Mahon. Perhaps, for Muldoon, the biographical MacNeice is no more 'real' or essentially meaningful than the semi-fictional one of '7, Middagh Street'<sup>7</sup>; a poem in which as Corcoran notes, Muldoon 'read[s] the work and careers of others as facets of his own self-recognition and self-development'<sup>8</sup>. Given that Muldoon not only, in Brearton's words, 'has always worked in opposition to the rather masculine ideas of lineage'<sup>9</sup>, but also dedicated his first collection 'for my Fathers and Mothers'<sup>10</sup>, it seems unlikely that he would be any more amenable to re-routing that lineage to yet another father-figure in MacNeice. Given these factors, this chapter will, relatively speaking, focus less on MacNeice's individual

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<sup>6</sup> Wills, *Improprieties*, 194.

<sup>7</sup> Muldoon, *Meeting the British*, 55.

<sup>8</sup> Corcoran, *Poets of Modern Ireland*, 71.

<sup>9</sup> Brearton, 53.

<sup>10</sup> Muldoon, *New Weather*, vii.

poems and more on his critical and philosophical writing. And yet, at the risk of punning on the philosophies of MacNeice and Muldoon alike, there may yet be some good in pursuing what is ultimately uncatchable. Where MacNeice's critical writing has a determined openness and a will to demystify, Muldoon's writing *about* poetry is nigh on inscrutable; indeed Muldoon's *The End of the Poem*, based on his series of lectures as Oxford Professor of Poetry, seems almost an act of literary vandalism, an attempt to debunk theories of influence by *reductio ad absurdum*. The first lecture, on Yeats' 'All Souls' Night', introduces the idea of ghostly presences in a ghostly poem, founded on an astounding amount of etymological, historical and biographical research, with a twist of clever rhetorical punning. Muldoon manages to form a compelling psychodrama around one of poetry's most psychodramatic figures, identifying hidden references to Yeats' wife, Georgie Hyde-Lees, in a drained wine-glass, given that an archaic synonym of 'dregs' is 'lees'<sup>11</sup>, largely through his own ingenuity and investigative graft. *The End of the Poem* seems in some ways a continuation of his poetic work, in its intensive removal of all interpretative certainty, its sabotage of the very means of conventional poetic exegesis. It is perhaps not beyond the realms of possibility, particularly given Muldoon's hyper-awareness of his hyper-aware readership, to imagine that he applies MacNeice's principles regarding drama and irony to his interviews and 'critical' prose.

With this in mind, Muldoon's decision to preface his *Faber Book of Contemporary Irish Poetry* with an interview between MacNeice and F.R. Higgins feels almost reserved; here at least we can acknowledge MacNeice's presence without fear

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<sup>11</sup> Muldoon, *The End of the Poem*, 14.

of contradiction. The passage features Higgins in full ideological flow, his ‘potentially fascist talk of poetry and the blood’<sup>12</sup> first meeting MacNeice’s wry asides and requests for clarity (‘What do you mean by pure poetry?’, ‘This is an impure age, so it follows that much of its poetry if it is honest [...] must be impure’<sup>13</sup>), then by MacNeice’s ‘rather common sense view of poetry’, with a poet as a ‘sensitive instrument designed to record anything that interests his mind or affects his emotions’<sup>14</sup>. Muldoon’s manifest intent, presumably, is to frame Higgins as a critic obedient to harmful nationalist or essentialist narratives, and MacNeice as a principled humanist. As Neil Corcoran points out, however, Muldoon will have known this was not MacNeice’s opinion of Higgins, the only other critic quoted in MacNeice’s *Poetry of W.B. Yeats*<sup>15</sup>; it is perhaps noteworthy that MacNeice does not dismiss the *concept* of ‘racial blood-music’ outright, merely giving it the slip by asserting that ‘like one’s consciousness, it may be left to take care of itself’<sup>16</sup>. Muldoon’s lack of commentary leaves the gap between the manifest content of the interview and its latent context wide open, permitting both a basic reading of the surface tensions *and* Corcoran’s more informed analysis as simultaneously legitimate responses. MacNeice may be read as a worldly, cosmopolitan dealer in common sense, a bulwark against nationalistic pressures, or simply reluctant to participate in Higgins’ programmatic thinking. It also elides MacNeice’s seeming reluctance to acknowledge Irish poets critical of Higgins’ reductive cultural thinking: the poetry of Beckett, Denis Devlin, Brian Coffey or Rhoda Coghill, are not on MacNeice’s radar, who might have refuted his accusations of

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<sup>12</sup> Corcoran, 64.

<sup>13</sup> MacNeice, *Faber Book of Contemporary Irish Poetry*, 17.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid*, 18.

<sup>15</sup> Corcoran, 64.

<sup>16</sup> MacNeice, *Faber Book of Contemporary Irish Poetry*, 18.



unexamined complacency and destabilised his position of ironic detachment. For both MacNeice and Muldoon, it seems the only fixed position is that there are no fixed positions; as this chapter will discuss, both poets are repulsed by conceptual fixity, and seem inexorably drawn towards positions of dynamic indeterminacy, in which a question might be kept alive not by resolution but by wrangling it into holding multiple, often ostensibly contradictory, concurrent positions.

In his essay “Experiences with Images”, MacNeice establishes some of his foundational ideas about what makes a poem. In MacNeice’s rendering, a poem may be a highly charged, highly sensitive field of play, with the collusion or back-biting of the poem’s various vested interests signalled by the minutiae of tone, rhythm or speech:

Even in what is said (apart from the important things unsaid), all poems, though again in varying degrees, contain an internal conflict [...] This is often conveyed by sleight of hand – the slightest change of tone, a heightening or lowering of diction, a rhythmical shift or a jump of ideas. Hence all poems, as well as and because of being dramatic, are ironic; poet and reader both know, consciously or unconsciously, the rest of the truth which lurks between the lines.<sup>17</sup>

While this passage makes the assumed conflict (in MacNeice’s poems at least) explicit and relatively easy to follow, the strategy described is highly dependent on, first, a poet in full and alert control of their working materials, and, secondly, a clued-in and sensitive reader, such as MacNeice was and Muldoon is. While Muldoon has been an expert player of the dramatic and ironic game of tone, diction and narrative throughout his career, there is plenty of evidence in his work to suggest that among his primary

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<sup>17</sup> MacNeice, “Experiences with Images”, *Selected Criticism*, 155.

concerns is the capacity of his poetry to entertain, the way MacNeice valorised the wartime music hall in 'Death of An Actress'<sup>18</sup> or the richness of pub talk in 'Homage to Cliché'<sup>19</sup>. It is not a coincidence that Muldoon's ideal reader of *Madoc* – a long poem that remains his most dense and formally baffling to date, and which Michael Hofmann described as 'pleasure and puzzlement in equal measure'<sup>20</sup> – said 'I got into it, and I just read it, and I read it from beginning to end,' or, in Muldoon's words, 'you just start, and you go and you don't worry too much about what Nietzsche has to do with this damn horse, or whatever'<sup>21</sup>. And yet the damned horse is quite possibly Muldoon's most durable and significant image. This impulse toward readability and accessibility (on the surface, at least) accords with MacNeice's dictum in the preface to *Modern Poetry*, 'Poetry today should steer a middle course between pure entertainment ('escape poetry') and propaganda'<sup>22</sup>. The genre worlds of 'Immram' (Raymond Carver-esque detective fiction), 'The More A Man Has...' (a trickster myth which Terence Brown described as 'a MacNeice parable for the big screen'<sup>23</sup>, discussed in more detail below), and *Madoc* (sci fi/western), follow MacNeice's work in revitalising cliché; this focus on stock phrase and phatic language allows his poems to reveal the determined social norms behind them. Edna Longley describes how this process 'brings to light an alarming collective unconscious in everyday speech-habits'<sup>24</sup>, the casual violence inherent in even our most basic linguistic interactions. A central tension in the work of both poets is the difficulty of communicating clearly and plainly when one's only tool is

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<sup>18</sup> MacNeice, *Collected Poems*, 193.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid*, 66.

<sup>20</sup> Hofmann, "Muldoon – A Mystery", *London Review of Books*, 20 Dec 1990, 18.

<sup>21</sup> Keller, "An Interview with Paul Muldoon", *Contemporary Literature*, 35:1 (Spring 1994), 12.

<sup>22</sup> MacNeice, *Modern Poetry*, iii

<sup>23</sup> Brown, *Literature of Ireland*, 218.

<sup>24</sup> Longley, *Poetry in the Wars*, 229.

a language deeply compromised by violent politics and deep-rooted behavioural strictures.

What seems evident in the work of both Muldoon and MacNeice is that their refusal to toe party lines did not preclude a deep engagement with Irish myth, history and contemporary politics. In Neil Corcoran's reading of MacNeice's 'Valediction', had it not existed Muldoon might have had to invent it: "Valediction", in particular, with its tropes of enmeshment and escape, submission and release, seems to set a kind of template for numerous Muldoon poems [...] The 'woven figure' which 'cannot undo its thread' may be an apt way of defining all those figures in Muldoon who are enmeshed in circumstance, domicile and parish'<sup>25</sup>. As several critics have argued, the poem rails against not just the falseness of the nation's self-image, but also against the self-deception MacNeice identifies in himself. McDonald in particular identifies a central tension in the poem, that, ultimately, the difference between embracing and renouncing these national conditions is beside the point: 'it is the obligation itself which counts and which the final resignation of farewell cannot lessen through outright rejection'<sup>26</sup>. Furthermore, as Gillis notes, MacNeice is self-aware enough to know 'each time he dismissed Ireland he instinctively recoiled to counterpoint the act with a reassertion of disturbed affiliation'<sup>27</sup>; escaping nationalistic narratives, the poem implies, is not as simple as pointing out their defects and waving farewell. Such narratives have a tendency to sink their roots into its subjects early; as Longley argues, 'The politics of MacNeice's Irish poems begin in childhood because Irish politics begin

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<sup>25</sup> Corcoran, *Poets of Modern Ireland*, 65.

<sup>26</sup> McDonald, *Poet in his Contexts*, 27.

<sup>27</sup> Gillis, *Companion to Irish Literature*, 172.

with the family and not at voting age'<sup>28</sup>. The poem's mock-dreamy opening line, 'Their verdure dare not show... their verdure dare not show...' is taken from a traditional Irish air, 'The Wearing of the Green'; though many versions of the song exist, this particular line was written by Dionysus Boucicault, a Dublin-born actor who gained fame in London for his portrayal of 'stage-Irishmen'<sup>29</sup>. MacNeice's isolation and repetition of the line at the start of the poem indicates his desire to hold such truisms under a poetic lens, no less to interrogate its assumptions – is wearing the green really so unprofitable for a fortunate few? – than to examine how thoroughly he himself has absorbed them. The song's disingenuousness and the self-indulgence of its writer provoke painful self-examination in the poet, and often astonishing moments of creativity within the poem's asymmetrical and unpredictable couplets:

I would tot up my factors  
But who can stand in the way of his soul's steam-tractors? [...]

If I were a dog of sunlight I would bound  
From Phoenix Park to Achill Sound,  
Picking up the scent of a hundred fugitives  
That have broken the mesh of ordinary lives.<sup>30</sup>

'Valediction' seems a site for MacNeice's earnest and heartfelt working-out of his relationship with Ireland, in which he identifies and attempts to free himself from the nation's designs on him and his work. While the poem might well have acted as a valuable performative rejection of nationalist social conditioning, it remains too wholeheartedly straightforward in its gestures to reappear unaltered in Muldoon. That said, fugitives breaking the mesh of ordinary lives is undeniably a recurring theme in

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<sup>28</sup> Longley, *Louis MacNeice: A Critical Study*, 17.

<sup>29</sup> Boylan, *A Dictionary of Irish Biography*, 31.

<sup>30</sup> MacNeice, 9-10.

Muldoon's oeuvre, and Corcoran has good reason to connect this 'mesh' to the self-inwoven figures of Brownlee and Joseph Mary Plunkett Ward among his cast of emblematically named characters<sup>31</sup>.

These areas of similarity between the two poets – principally their shared aesthetics and political values, a productive friction between self and world which MacNeice defined as 'a community of individuals'<sup>32</sup> – are a useful starting point in considering how the elder poet's work provided a model for the younger. This chapter will examine these similarities in three key areas: Repetition and Form; Parable; (Family) History. These categories are necessarily open-ended; as mentioned above, neither poet is easily systematised, and many single poems could easily fall into more (or less) than one of the above sections.

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In his essay "The Same Again?", Neil Corcoran notes how 'repetition at the formal or technical level can be thematically functional in MacNeice'<sup>33</sup>, citing the circularity of form in 'Leaving Barra' as a prototypically McNeicean kind of 'falling poignantly away', as the poem's repeated polysyllabic endings reinforce on a technical level the loss of a 'state of being which is perhaps only a fiction but no less desirable and no less the

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<sup>31</sup> Corcoran, 65.

<sup>32</sup> MacNeice, *I Crossed the Minch*, 12.

<sup>33</sup> Corcoran, "The Same Again?: Repetition and Refrain in Louis MacNeice", *Cambridge Quarterly* Vol. 38, No. 3 (Sept 2009), 216.

object of longing'<sup>34</sup>. The particular form repetition takes in 'Leaving Barra'<sup>35</sup> – the end-word in the last line of one stanza becomes the end-word of the first line of the next – enacts not only this fading away but a kind of constant re-considering or self-correction, as if each stanza came with its own sonnet-like volta. The poem first performs its ability to move sharply, unpredictably, on words like 'Atlantis' or 'buddha', before enacting the poem's own thought processes in the line 'living like a fugue and moving'.

The technique is almost parodied in Muldoon's sonnet sequence 'The Old Country'<sup>36</sup>, which repeats the entire final line of one sonnet as the first line of the next. Where the constant two-steps-forward, one-step-back of 'Leaving Barra' enacts regret for leaving an ideal West and returning to the 'flag and drag' of modern living, 'The Old Country' almost utterly negates the possibility of escape, ironically by employing the same enveloping technique MacNeice uses as a stay against departure. Muldoon creates a nightmare-scape of rote wisdom and self-perpetuating, self-inflicted cycles of suffering:

Every fervor was a religious fervor  
by which we'd fly the godforsaken hole  
into which we'd been flung by it.

The poem begins by acknowledging that 'every start was a bad start / since all conclusions were foregone', ends (insofar as it truly ends) with the boys and girls 'for whom every dance was a last dance / and every letdown a terrible letdown', before beginning the cycle once more with the first/last pronunciation, that 'every town was a tidy town'. Far from MacNeice's 'fugue', which Corcoran reads as a Freudian 'flight

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<sup>34</sup> Ibid, 215.

<sup>35</sup> MacNeice, *Collected Poems*, 88.

<sup>36</sup> Muldoon, *Horse Latitudes*, 38.

from one's own identity, often involving travel to some unconsciously desired locality<sup>37</sup>, 'The Old Country' exists for Muldoon as ultimate stasis, barricaded in against both philosophical change and even the passage of linear time by the (however musically pleasing or reassuring) repetitions of stock pleasantries. In this regard, the poem seems a direct descendant of 'Lull'<sup>38</sup>, with its chirpily sacrilegious homespinning: 'Tomorrow is another day / As your man said on the Mount of Olives.', and purgatorial conclusion:

Here and there up and down the country  
There are still houses where the fire  
Hasn't gone out in a century.

I know that eternal interim;  
I think I know what they're waiting for  
In Tyrone, Fermanagh, Down and Antrim.

As Wills argues, 'The tensions between the temporal and the eternal, between progress and timelessness are figured in the poem's syntax; [...] the oppressive and threatening atmosphere of the final lines derives in part from the poem's circularity'<sup>39</sup>. For both MacNeice and Muldoon, poetic refrains and repetitions are associated with the poem's capacity to manipulate perceptions of passing time, or, in the case of 'The Old Country', halt it entirely. As Corcoran points out, however, this strategy also indicates 'repetition compulsion, the reliving of an original trauma'<sup>40</sup>, giving as an example the melancholy evoked by the circular refrain of MacNeice's 'Autobiography', '*Come back early or never come*'. For MacNeice, the impossibility of temporal progress is often rendered as a physical space of psychological entrapment, often the Carrickfergus rectory of his

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<sup>37</sup> Corcoran, 216.

<sup>38</sup> Muldoon, *Why Brownlee Left*, 17.

<sup>39</sup> Wills, *Reading Paul Muldoon*, 65.

<sup>40</sup> Corcoran, 216.

childhood ('Autobiography', 'The Truisms', 'Soap Suds'<sup>41</sup>). It is perhaps significant that Muldoon's poems of explicit circularity are less often in a distinct physical space (for example the Moy townlands that provide such rich parabolic subject matter), but in his metaphysical 'quest' poems such as 'Immram'<sup>42</sup>, 'The More a Man Has the More a Man Wants'<sup>43</sup>, 'Incantata'<sup>44</sup> and '7, Middagh Street', the latter, of course, featuring the fictionalised voice of MacNeice. These poems, however, suggest a different character of circularity, one that Wills identifies as 'Muldoon's suspicion of the kind of progress or advancement which is plotted in straight line'<sup>45</sup>; each poem uses its circular or coronal form as a way of returning the reader to what appears to be the starting-point, drastically changed by the journey. The process by which the question is formed, the act of investigation that the poem renders as an imaginative adventure (in Muldoon's hands often a ripping good yarn), becomes the focus of poem's philosophical inquiry, which its circularity suggests will continue long after its typographical 'end'; in Matthew Campbell's words, Muldoon 'might be reluctant to resolve the conflict except by continuing it'<sup>46</sup>.

The repetends in MacNeice's 'Entirely'<sup>47</sup> (arguably a one-word refrain) formally question the act of questioning, as the poem's title recurs at the beginning and end of each of its three stanzas. Once more, the effect is thematically functional: the wish to understand language, love or the world at all is hamstrung by the wish to know it 'entirely'. For MacNeice, the final unknowability of the world, the past or other people

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<sup>41</sup> MacNeice, 183, 507, 517.

<sup>42</sup> Muldoon, *Why Brownlee Left*, 38.

<sup>43</sup> Muldoon, *Quoof*, 40.

<sup>44</sup> Muldoon, *The Annals of Chile*, 13.

<sup>45</sup> Wills, 78.

<sup>46</sup> Campbell, *Paul Muldoon: Critical Essays*, 184.

<sup>47</sup> MacNeice, 171.



is what gives the search for understanding meaning; not only meaning, but pleasure and beauty. This intuition is enacted in the poem's final stanza, where a hypothetical 'black and white' world with 'plain' maps stands pale and bloodless beside the 'mad weir of tigerish waters / A prism of delight and pain' that characterises the world observed by MacNeice. If the poem's argument is summated in the lines 'in brute reality there is no / road that is right entirely', not far beneath the surface is the implication that this does not cover the truth entirely. Each stanza's ostensibly pessimistic conclusion permits a measure of hope, a small success:

And when we try to eavesdrop on the great  
Presences it is rarely  
That by a stroke of luck we can appropriate  
Even a phrase entirely. [...]

Almost hourly  
Bell or siren banishes the blue  
Eyes of Love entirely. [...]

We might be surer where we wished to go  
Or again we might be merely  
Bored but in brute reality there is no  
Road that is right entirely.

The antithesis of each statement is also true: a phrase of the great presences *can* be appropriated, with luck; Love may be banished, but if it must be banished hourly it must also return to *be* banished; no road is right *entirely* but there may be one that is more right than wrong. 'Entirely' might be particularly relevant to Muldoon, partly in its deft and articulate permission of, for want of better words, 'something else', but also in its head-feinting switches in tone and register. The penultimate line in the final stanza lands heavily on 'merely / Bored but in brute reality', generating an almost audible shrug of the shoulders, but it comes just a few lines after 'a mad weir of tigerish waters,

/ A prism of delight and pain'. Again, McDonald ties this aesthetic factor to the poem's thematic function: 'MacNeice's ability to counterpoint a highly musical stanza form with an almost flat speaking voice develops some of his 1930s practice; now, however, something more than poetic style is at stake'<sup>48</sup>.

In both 'Experiences with Images'<sup>49</sup> and *Modern Poetry* MacNeice takes time to analyse the images of 'petrification' in his early poems, particularly in 'Perseus', a myth that aptly combines the terror of becoming stone and MacNeice's childhood fear of mirrors. He explains:

I am describing a mood of terror when everything seems to be unreal, petrified – hence the Gorgon's head, which dominates this poem. [...] I remember looking in mirrors and (a) thinking that my own face looked like a strange face, especially in the eyes, and (b) being fascinated and alarmed by the mysterious gleams of light *glancing* off the mirror. And, lastly, a mirror is a symbol of nihilism via solipsism.<sup>50</sup>

'Perseus'<sup>51</sup> is one of MacNeice's early poems (published in 1933) that suggests a submerged continuity with the parabolic late work, in its strange nursery-rhyme tone and images that draw the inherent darkness out of the apparently mundane, and leave little that could be convincingly described as a moral. It retells the story of the Gorgon's head with a certain childishness in the first stanza:

Borrowed wings on his ankles,  
Carrying a stone death,

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<sup>48</sup> McDonald, 385.

<sup>49</sup> MacNeice, *Selected Criticism*, 160.

<sup>50</sup> MacNeice, *Modern Poetry*, 175.

<sup>51</sup> MacNeice, *Collected Poems*, 19.

The hero entered the hall,  
All in the hall looked up,  
Their breath frozen on them,  
And there was no more shuffle or clatter in the hall at all.

The repetition of the word 'hall' (and the weirdly prolonged last line) again enacts 'repetition at the formal or technical level [which] can be thematically functional in MacNeice'<sup>52</sup>. The poem later makes repetitions of the words 'alive' and 'dead', in what is not exactly a refrain, but not exactly ordinary speech patterning either:

So a friend of a man comes in  
And leaves a book he is lending or flowers  
And goes again, alive but as good as dead,  
And you are left alive, no better than dead,  
And you dare not turn the leaden pages of the book or touch the flower, the hooded and arrested hours.

The stanza circles obsessively around a single, to all appearances benevolent gesture, unable to escape the trap of the observing mind or recognise the gift as itself bound to time's laws. The repetitions of key words enact this inability to think of anything else except the nightmarish 'leaden pages' and 'arrested hours'. The poem indulges the speaker's childish fears, that the mirrors in the 'end room' are 'full of eyes, / The ancient smiles of men cut out with scissors and kept in mirrors', and finally combines the two scenes in the poem's final stanza, as the friend becomes the Gorgon-wielding hero and the speaker the statue. The poem seems to suggest that contact with the outside world, in however innocent a fashion, has left traumatic imprints on the poet, childhood nightmares that have survived into adulthood. The nursery rhymes, meanwhile, have been replaced with a larger, potentially more terrifying truth; time's constant motion is itself the source of petrifying fear, the awareness that 'one feels the

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<sup>52</sup> Corcoran, 216.

earth going round and round the globe of the blackening mantle, a mad moth'. Not only is time's passing agonisingly dull ('the dumb grey-brown of the day'), it is passing with all the haste and alarming directionlessness of an insect drawn to its own destruction. Again, the poem's ability to create a self-contained special world through formal repetition and rhythmically dissonant line-length seem thoroughly Muldoonian; the couplets in 'Perseus' are stretched to the point where rhyme functions more as a reminder of their failure to make the poem cohere.

The impulse to create forms that circle back on themselves, or complete a circuit, seems to grow throughout MacNeice's career, beginning in the late 1930s with poems like 'The Brandy Glass'<sup>53</sup>. A strange and dreamy piece that would not seem out of place among the 'thumbnail nightmares'<sup>54</sup> of *The Burning Perch or Solstices*, 'The Brandy Glass' in some ways mutates the 'drunkenness of things being various' in the earlier poem 'Snow'<sup>55</sup>. Both pieces behave like snapshots, each a small moment in which time appears to stand still and the poem's action doesn't so much follow logical causality as happen simultaneously; they also share significant images of glass (chandeliers, carafes, the brandy glass itself) and snow. Where the earlier poem celebrated (or at least revelled in) the unexpected conjunction of 'snow and the huge roses' and the captured moment it occasions, 'The Brandy Glass' feels fearfully bound within its lush interior. The poem is enveloped by the line 'Only let it form within his hands once more', which develops only slightly by the poem's end to the reported speech of its only protagonist, "Only let it form within my hands once more". The

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<sup>53</sup> Ibid, 92.

<sup>54</sup> MacNeice, *Letters of Louis MacNeice*, 701.

<sup>55</sup> MacNeice, *Collected Poems*, 24.

movement is strange and semantically ambiguous. That opening line initially seems to refer to the brandy glass of the title, before being modified (only slightly, if at all) by the second line's clarification: 'The *moment* cradled like a brandy glass' [emphasis mine].

The uncanny image of snow falling from the chandeliers, which almost suggests broken glass falling, blocks the dining hall exit:

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.'

The last line fuses into the first, the 'last diner' begins to resemble the poem's narrator, the cycle continues. The removal or denial of temporal progress here condemns the lifeless and agency-less puppet to constantly rehearse the constantly disappearing moment or memory; the poem renders simultaneously a deep fear of being unable to escape the past and an almost obsessive urge (in that isolated 'begs') to return to the traumatic moment. Repetition here is what Corcoran identifies in 'Homage to Clichés'<sup>56</sup> (published, like 'Snow', in 1935) as 'the realisation of death', an understanding that in cliché or refrain-like language is 'where we must live, what we cannot live without; but woven into their very fabric is the knowledge of termination'<sup>57</sup>. It may be significant that 'The Brandy Glass' also features this particular formulation of repetitive, perhaps consolatory linguistic behaviour, and connects it to the repetitive, perhaps consolatory act of drinking alcohol. Where 'Snow' and 'Homage to Clichés' pay respect to various kinds of drunkenness or sensory excess, 'The Brandy Glass' seems distinctly damaged by the routine.

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<sup>56</sup> Ibid, 66.

<sup>57</sup> Corcoran, 217.

As Wills notes, Muldoon's verbal patterning is of an unusually high intensity, 'playing on our desire for order and control', that the poet 'uses rhyme and traditional forms to undermine our expectations of order'<sup>58</sup>. Muldoon's own aphoristic quip, that 'form is a straitjacket the way a straitjacket was a straitjacket for Houdini'<sup>59</sup>, seems relevant to more than line, meter, and other poetic techniques. Wills identifies in his work a tendency to navigate or escape from oppressive cultural forms, 'which have determined personal life for Catholics in Northern Ireland (as well as Protestants)<sup>60</sup>'; the word 'determined' is deeply significant here. As in the aforementioned 'Lull' and 'The Old Country', questions of historical and cultural determinism (particularly in Northern Ireland) are rendered formally, either through a kind of atemporal syntax or a deadening repetition of rote or received wisdom. As Wills has it, 'a crucial question for Muldoon is whether the poet is trapped in the same way, or is he able, by breaking down and breaking through forms, to find another way of thinking?'<sup>61</sup>. Often in Muldoon, it seems escaping the straitjacket only permits access to another, tighter one.

'Anseo'<sup>62</sup>, from *Why Brownlee Left*, is one of the earliest examples of this self-enveloping form, the poem explicitly following the progress of Joseph Mary Plunkett Ward from corporally punished truant to paramilitary commandant. As Wills' commentary notes, 'A great many things are going on in this poem', particularly the connections between past and future, free will and fate<sup>63</sup>. As will be discussed in the section on parable, Muldoon often deploys emblematically named characters, and Joe

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<sup>58</sup> Wills, 84.

<sup>59</sup> "Interview with Ian Kilroy", *The Irish Times*, (19 April 2003), quoted in O'Driscoll, Dennis, "Pickings and Choosings", *Poetry Ireland Review*, No.77 (2003), 92.

<sup>60</sup> Wills, 100.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid*, 100.

<sup>62</sup> Muldoon, *Why Brownlee Left*, 20.

<sup>63</sup> Wills, 82.

Ward is no exception. Etymologically, the surname Ward is derived from Mhac an Bháird, 'son of the poet'; historically, Joseph Mary Plunkett was a leader of the Easter Rising, a poet and Irish language activist. The central figure in 'Anseo' carries poetic signifiers twice over. Furthermore, Wills suggests Ward's carving sticks for his own punishment ('literally, 'a rod for his own back''<sup>64</sup>), also hints towards his role as a kind of creator, leaving his own signature like an Old Master:

Its twist of red and yellow lacquers  
Sanded and polished,  
And altogether so delicately wrought  
That he had engraved his initials on it

Muldoon's specificity about the variety of trees employed by Ward ('an ash-plant, a salley-rod. / Or, finally, the hazel-wand') is also intriguing; the ash-plant is carried by Stephen Dedalus in *Ulysses*, the 'hazel-wand' appears in Yeats' 'Song of Wandering Aengus'<sup>65</sup>, while the salley-rod may be a nod to Yeats' 'Down by the Salley Gardens'<sup>66</sup>. Ward is not only connected by name to an earlier generation of Irish history and literature, but by his thoroughly equivocal act of creation.

The poem's assertion, '*Anseo*, meaning here, here and now', is utterly destabilised by the poem's thematic undercurrents, of names, roles (school-master and quartermaster) and even acts of creation. It is also echoed formally, as the lines:

When the Master was calling the roll  
At the primary school in Collegelands,  
You were meant to call back *Anseo*  
And raise your hand  
As your name occurred.

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<sup>64</sup> Ibid, 82.

<sup>65</sup> Yeats, *Selected Poems*, 45.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid, 20.

become, in the final stanza:

How every morning at parade  
His volunteers would call back *Anseo*  
And raise their hands  
As their names occurred.

As the final stanza folds in almost perfectly on the first, as the classroom fades into the 'secret camp', Ward fulfils his fate both as 'son of the bard' and inheritor of Joseph Mary Plunkett. Muldoon's poem seems subliminally concerned with the formation of violence in Ireland, of the complicity not only of disciplinary systems but of literary self-creation and myth-creation. If Ward is 'Making things happen' by living in a military base 'on the other side of the mountain', his ostensibly active role remains analogous with the poet's, noting that submerged reference to Auden's 'poetry makes nothing happen', taken from, significantly, 'In Memory of W.B. Yeats'<sup>67</sup>. As Wills argues, the poem seems part of an ongoing exploration of the poet's ability to avoid or escape these predetermined historical repetitions; it also seems (in its submerged references to Yeats) to implicate Irish literature in the dissemination of these deterministic systems. The closest thing to a solution, as Wills has it, seems to be the capacity to take on imaginative possibility, to remain alert to the poem's tangents and swervings, 'a universe of parallels and alternative possibilities'<sup>68</sup>. In this, then, maybe the inexcusable aspect of Joe Ward's destiny (and it is noteworthy that the poem implicates him in nothing more unsavoury than living in a field behind a mountain), is in his regurgitation of the schoolteacher's preoccupation with '*anseo*', with eliminating all other possibilities bar the 'here, here and now'.

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<sup>67</sup> Auden, *Selected Poems*, 80.

<sup>68</sup> Wills, 83.



'Anseo' seems subterraneanly linked to another poem of misbehaving schoolboys, 'Twice'<sup>69</sup>, with its 'sod / of water' frozen to a 'fifteen- or eighteen-inch thick manhole cover' (again, the uncertainty seems an active choice), and, most importantly, what the poet sees through it:

when I squinnied through it I saw 'Lefty' Clery, 'An Ciotach',  
grinning from both ends of the school photograph,  
having jooked behind the three-deep rest of us to meet the Kodak's  
leisurely pan; 'Two places at once, was it, or one place twice?'

As Brearton notes, the central image looks back to Michael Longley's poem 'Alibis' ('a simple question / Of being in two places at the one time')<sup>70</sup>; for Wills, *The Annals of Chile* posits poetry's capacity not just to recall or duplicate, 'but to enable us to *be* in more than one space or time'<sup>71</sup>. 'Twice', though it absolutely concerns a mundane and unmetaphorical act of childish mischief, also has in mind much higher stakes. The multifarious Clery has managed to appear through the pane of ice – the pane itself teleported in from Robert Frost's 'After Apple-Picking'<sup>72</sup> – where Taggart and McAnespie (who are presumably also somewhere in that school photo) are no longer 'of this earth'. 'It makes no sense', Stephanie Burt argues, 'to ask which of the two 'Lefty' Clerys in the school picture is real'<sup>73</sup>, or even whether the child Clery has gone the way of his schoolmates. The poem, and the photograph the poem records, survive in their indeterminacy. Even the sonnet form, which might recall the sonnet stanzas of 'Anseo', retains the rhyme scheme of 'Milkweed and Monarch'<sup>74</sup> (which appears

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<sup>69</sup> Muldoon, *The Annals of Chile*, 12.

<sup>70</sup> Brearton, *Paul Muldoon: Critical Essays*, 56.

<sup>71</sup> Wills, 185.

<sup>72</sup> Frost, *The Poetry of Robert Frost*, 68.

<sup>73</sup> Burt, *Paul Muldoon: Critical Essays*, 21.

<sup>74</sup> Muldoon, 10.

immediately before 'Twice'), as 'savour', 'palaver', 'over' and 'samovar' become 'over', 'lever', 'manoeuvre' 'cover'. Muldoon here exhibits a MacNeicean desire not to be pinned down, or to recognise that the poet cannot pin something down without losing something vital, without causing real harm; even formally, 'Twice' cannot be constricted to one location.

More significantly, however, 'Twice' appears immediately before 'Incantata'<sup>75</sup>, an elegy for Mary Farl Powers (the poem's indebtedness to MacNeice's parable-writing (and Samuel Beckett's) is discussed in a later section). By feeding the brief and playful 'Twice', with its riddling diversions about imaginative survival, into 'Incantata', the poem's central drama comes to the fore. Powers chooses to reject chemotherapy in the treatment of her cancer, and remain true to her belief that 'nothing's random, nothing arbitrary'. Muldoon writes:

The fact that you were determined to cut yourself off in your prime  
because it was *pre*-determined has my eyes abrim

That these lines contain a highly Muldoonian doubling, that word 'determined' performing double duty as 'self-willed' and its antonym, seems coupled with that similar formal/thematic doubling in 'Twice'. Clery's decision to resolve a problem by continuing it – or as Campbell has it, 'resolves only not to resolve'<sup>76</sup> – ensures his survival; by extension, the poem seems to regard Powers' fixity, her strength of belief in a single, immutable fate, as ensuring her death. In his commentary, Campbell notes

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<sup>75</sup> Ibid, 13.

<sup>76</sup> Campbell, 185.

how unusual some of the poem's ideas are in their relative grandeur<sup>77</sup>, for example, in stanzas 19 and 20:

a monument to the human heart  
that shines like a golden dome among roofs rain-glazed and leaden.

I wanted the mouth in this potato-cut  
to be heard far beyond the leaden, rain-glazed roofs of Quito,  
to be heard all the way from the southern hemisphere  
to Clontarf or Clondalkin

Muldoon's almost immediate self-rebuttal, 'it struck me then how you would be aghast / at the thought of my thinking you were some kind of ghost' (noting again that doubling of thought-processes), doesn't quite erase the original impulse to create something monumental from such an unassuming remnant as a cankered potato; the poem's obsessive return to refrain-constructions formally enacts the desperation of its search. In the poem's first half, Muldoon opens stanzas with 'I thought of you tonight', 'I saw you again tonight', 'I thought of you again tonight', 'Again and again', 'You must have known already', 'You must have known'; the second is overwhelmed by one continuous syntactical motion, 'That's all that's left of...', by which wave upon wave of memorial detritus ultimately fail to 'anoint and anneal'.

What the poem's 'that' refers to, exactly, is not entirely explicit. Most simply, it might be the mouth carved into an enduring potato, 'that mouth as prim / and proper as it's full of self-opprobrium', a sickly, accusatory, somewhat ridiculous vessel from which the poem's lament seems to issue forth; it might also be the attempt 'to make sense' of it. Perhaps an equally valid referent, however, might be what the potato says:

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<sup>77</sup> Ibid, 183-4.

with its *'quaquaqua'*, with its *'Quoiquoiquoiquoiquoi'*

In this reading, the remnant and monument to Powers is not her potato-artwork, but Beckettian nonsense, not Powers' capacity for meaningful self-expression but Lucky's incapacity. The repeated 'quoi' here – the French word for 'what', or, simply, a noise not dissimilar to a duck quacking – sits at the poem's hinge, a potent and moving wordlessness for a poet of almost peerless articulacy. Similar processes of self-estrangement and petrification may be observed in MacNeice's 'Reflections'<sup>78</sup>: here, a few of MacNeice's often empowering techniques fail him, or actively hamstring him.

From the first line, the poem observes with painstaking precision:

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

'Reflections' is comprised of two long sentences, this being the first. The poem to this point appears entirely pedantic, and the question of why any of this matters hangs heavy. The first note of discord is in the 'I am' of the fifth line: the speaker is not standing there at all, only a twice-reflected image of himself, but the reader's footing is unsettled. The poem's second and concluding sentence is more characteristically MacNeicean in its gathering syntactical momentum while dispersing logical sense:

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 and in both directions

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<sup>78</sup> MacNeice, 503.

I can see beyond and through the reflections the street lamps  
At home outdoors where my indoors rooms lie stranded,  
Where a taxi perhaps will drive in through the bookcase  
Whose books are not for reading and past the fire  
Which gives no warmth and pull up by my desk  
At which I cannot write since I am not lefthanded.

Where the excitement of windows and fire and sensory excess in 'Snow' filter through to the texture of the poem, 'Reflections' inhabits only a state of anxiety, one that is ultimately invaded and rendered inert by the outside world. One cannot live in the same room twice, in the words of 'Variation on Heraclitus'<sup>79</sup>; 'Reflections' adds that one cannot live in different rooms at once. Where this connects to Muldoon's 'Incantata' is in its feverish attempts to work its way out of inarticulacy by articulating it. 'Reflections' continues its obsessive detailing of potentially infinite perspectives, leaving itself 'stranded' in a place where books cannot be read, fire gives no warmth, and, most pertinently for a poem so meticulously written, a desk at which the poet cannot write. All that's left, for MacNeice, and for this poem, is the acknowledgement of his own powerlessness: not in the face of grief, at least not explicitly, though it's difficult to believe the poem's anxiety is prompted solely by visual and linguistic quirks. In both 'Reflections' and 'Incantata', formal and linguistic repetition have lost the generative power they so commonly enjoy in the poets' work, and are reduced to repeating nothing but themselves; in the case of 'Incantata', the repetition is the entire rhyme scheme that led the poem to this point, reflected back on itself in a perfect mirror image.

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<sup>79</sup> MacNeice, 502.

The second half's determination to return again and again to a (however conditional) completion of the structure 'all that's left', for all Muldoon's acknowledgement of

that daft urge to make amends  
when it's far too late, too late even to make sense of the clutter  
of false trails and reversed horseshoe tracks

keeps the past suspended in a present continuous tense, resolves by refusing to resolve, behaves like Beckett's hapless protagonists in their 'resilience, their ability to 'go on'', which Wills argues 'is based on a kind of existential stubbornness'<sup>80</sup>. For Muldoon, this stubbornness is expressed syntactically, no more so than at the poem's conclusion, where 'all that's left...' gives way to 'no more than...'. It's noteworthy that the final remaining thing 'that's left' is:

your fatal belief that fate  
governs everything from the honey-rust of your father's terrier's  
eyebrows to the horse that rusts and rears  
in the furrow, of the furrows from which we can no more deviate  
than they can from themselves

Perhaps, of course, that should read 'the final remaining *things*', as, once again, the stanza doubles its possibilities; the final thing might equally be furrow-like fatalism or the fatalistic furrows. Noteworthy too is that enjambment over the stanza break, the first of the poem, and one that leads through a single, complex sentence that simultaneously conjures and rejects the idea that

the Irish Hermes,  
Lugh, might have leafed through his vast herbarium  
for the leaf that had it within it, Mary, to anoint and anneal [...]

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<sup>80</sup> Wills, 182.

and the final, once again mirrored and doubled image:

than that this *Incantata*  
might have you look up from your plate of copper or zinc  
on which you've etched the row upon row  
of army-worms, than that you might reach out, arrah,  
and take in your ink-stained hands my own hands stained with ink.

After so many acts of proliferation, so many attempts to keep the poem's possibilities alive, it seems appropriate that the poem should come to rest (it seems contrary to the poem's functions to call it an ending) on such a dynamic and active question. Artlessly boiled down, the poem's final sentence reads something like 'fate may no more be escaped than this poem might bring you back to life'; that very conditionality, the unexpressed, affirmative possibilities inherent in the question's formulation constitutes a final refusal of conclusivity. As Wills has it, 'Incantata' 'remains exquisitely and painfully balanced on this question, both offering and refusing the conventional elegiac ending which witnesses the resurrection of the dead person'<sup>81</sup>. Of course, as John Lyon reads the poem, this too might be a Muldoonian escape act, the poet providing 'so many get-out-of-jail-free cards that it is difficult to see what kind of game or games we are playing'<sup>82</sup>. As with MacNeice's formally circular or cyclical poems like 'Entirely', 'Perseus', and 'The Brandy Glass'<sup>83</sup>, 'Incantata' embodies its deep concerns with fate, possibility and freedom formally. MacNeice's anxieties about death, solipsism and nihilism seem to bubble up in Muldoon's piece, investing its formal project with philosophical meaning, the simultaneous understanding of the frailty of a single poem's resistance to final dissolution and the momentary stay it absolutely provides; that

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<sup>81</sup> Ibid, 184.

<sup>82</sup> Lyon, *Paul Muldoon: Critical Essays*, 118.

<sup>83</sup> MacNeice, 158, 24, 84.

'Incantata' is, to this point in Muldoon's career, the largest single formal undertaking, a dizzying structure of repeated rhymes and images, embodies the gravity of the poem's stakes, the desperation of the poet's investment in the construction of this 'special world', inured against the forces to which Mary Farl Powers has fallen. There are few other aspects of Muldoon's oeuvre that so powerfully belie Helen Vendler's critique that his work featured 'a hole in the middle where the feeling should be'<sup>84</sup>. The ability to complicate things beyond games and easily expressible rules is, for Muldoon, a matter of life and death.

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In her essay "Varieties of Parable", Edna Longley explores the deep connections between MacNeice and Muldoon in their various expressions of parable-writing, first identifying appearances of 'Mael Duin' in MacNeice's radio plays and his incarnation in Muldoon's 'Immram'<sup>85</sup>, before examining a shared interest in disruptive syntactical strategies and stock phrasing that 'brings to light an alarming collective unconscious in everyday speech patterns'<sup>86</sup>. Where Muldoon's use of MacNeicean repetitions and enveloping forms took time to develop, Longley argues that Muldoon's 'special worlds' are present and active from day (in fact, poem) one, characterising the poets as

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<sup>84</sup> Vendler, 'Anglo-Celtic Attitudes', *New York Review of Books* (6 Nov 1997), 59.

<sup>85</sup> Longley, *Poetry in the Wars*, 211-2.

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid*, 229.



'MacNeice the disenchanting progressive and Muldoon, never-enchanting chronicler of the Ulster standstill'<sup>87</sup>. Longley concludes:

The social and political strata of MacNeice's and Muldoon's multi-level writing prove that parables are not merely fairy tales, any more than they are merely realist. Parable heightens a poetic dimension in order to deepen a moral one.<sup>88</sup>

The Moy of Muldoon's early collections forms precisely the special world MacNeice required for parable and the contemporary pressures and realities that keep the socio-political in the centre of Muldoon's frame: 'The Moy at once parodies the parish and uses the parish as parody. Here familiar features of rural Ulster, perhaps of rural Ulster poetry, enter another dimension'<sup>89</sup>. Under these circumstances, Muldoon creates a space in which repressive social and political narratives may be creatively undermined, without imposing an equal and opposing narrative in its place.

MacNeice himself was keen to acknowledge the irreducible elements of parable writing. In a passage that seems fundamental to Muldoon's understanding of the form, MacNeice outlines his understanding of a kind of poetry that retains something simultaneously inexplicable yet tangible, something that resists rational examination but recognisably exists in the mundane world:

Just as in a poem the manifest content, which is inseparable from the *form* of the poem, cannot be reduced to something in the Unconscious which

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<sup>87</sup> Ibid, 222.

<sup>88</sup> Ibid, 243.

<sup>89</sup> Ibid, 217.

occasioned it, no more [...] can the image, whether it is object or event, be reduced without residue to that of which it is an image.<sup>90</sup>

The fact that a Muldoonian quasi-narrative can be deduced by some tenacious googling does not mean that the poem may ultimately be boiled down to those apparent conflicts. 'Twice', for example, remains an anecdote about farm labour and schoolboy mischief, and the specific form that anecdote has happened to take; as MacNeice adds, 'Whether the parabolist was unconscious of some psychological origin of his images or [...] only too conscious of a theme to be given a new body, it is this new body that counts'<sup>91</sup>. Unrelated to the active or passive role the poet took in shaping the new form, the poem itself remains a discrete entity, in part the 'special world' necessary for parable. On this point MacNeice and Muldoon appear to be on the same page; in an interview with Lynn Keller, Muldoon said,

The kind of writing I'm interested in is self-contained, or as self-contained, as a thing on the page, as possible. [...] Having said that, however, I'm not too interested in the author. I don't believe that the author is dead, but I do believe that poems somehow write themselves.

This apparent contradiction is complicated further: 'I believe that one of the writer's jobs is to reduce the number of possible readings of a text, to present something that can really only be read one, two, three, or maybe four ways'<sup>92</sup>. It seems a deliberate strategy on Muldoon's part to maintain this ostensible paradox. In another interview,

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<sup>90</sup> MacNeice, 78.

<sup>91</sup> Ibid, 78.

<sup>92</sup> Keller, "An Interview with Paul Muldoon", *Contemporary Literature*, 13.

this time with John Haffenden, Muldoon coins the word 'whimful'<sup>93</sup>, a kind of deliberate randomness, to talk about his parable-quest 'Immram'; perhaps Muldoon's ideal parable is one in which things are at once arbitrary and precisely directed. More mundanely, perhaps Muldoon's critical utterances aim precisely between direction and misdirection.

Though far from a critical trickster, MacNeice advocated the kind of pointed destabilisation Muldoon would make his trademark. His collection of lectures, *Varieties of Parable*, attempts to atomise or taxonomize this kind of double- or multiple-level writing. In an almost off-hand comment at the book's outset that ramifies throughout Muldoon's oeuvre, MacNeice states, 'in language at least it is not possible not to use symbols, since all language, on ultimate analysis, is by its nature symbolical'<sup>94</sup>. What MacNeice spends a lifetime refining (*Varieties of Parable* was published posthumously, and is most relevant to his last collections), Muldoon takes as a starting-point; the first poems in *New Weather*, 'The Electric Orchard' and 'Wind and Tree'<sup>95</sup>, take place in recognisably parabolic settings. These poems' action is difficult to paraphrase, and seems to align with MacNeice's assertion, that 'It is situation – meaning inner situation – that counts, rather than the sequence of events'<sup>96</sup>. From an early stage in his own career, MacNeice develops this conception of the poem as its own self-contained, parabolic world, almost a laboratory in which to test questions for which he can conceive no conclusive answer. By 1941 and the publication of *Plant and Phantom*, the prospect and outbreak of the Second World War has impressed on MacNeice's work a

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<sup>93</sup> Haffenden, *Viewpoints: Poets in Conversation*, 140.

<sup>94</sup> MacNeice, *Varieties of Parable*, 1.

<sup>95</sup> Muldoon, *New Weather*, 11, 13.

<sup>96</sup> *Ibid*, 24.

kind of urgency that aesthetic matters could not muster. In *The Strings are False* MacNeice talks about the need for a radical rethink of the correspondence between 'truth' and 'fact':

You can chop and change the words; if the world of gas-masks is *x*, you can call *x* Appearance or Fact or the Given [...] but you have to suppose another world *y* which according to your phraseology may not be more factual or even more actual or even more true or even more real but, if not given, at least is *made*, which is better. [...] I, like many others, though wrongly, have lived a life full of episodes, isolating incidents or people or aspects of people in the hope of finding something self-contained, having despaired of a self-contained world.<sup>97</sup>

With characteristic self-effacing irony, MacNeice here outlines a schema for his aesthetic philosophy that would serve the best part of his career. If the world is too large to address *in toto*, then the act of parable-making, of rendering the world in isolated 'episodes', becomes a direct act of social and political awareness, perhaps the only one a poet so rigorously attuned to personal 'truth' could take. MacNeice and Muldoon (with his poems on the Troubles) both approach these conditions of social upheaval as primarily – though by no means solely – an issue of aesthetics, of discovering a truthful way of framing their perceptions that stands apart from self-perpetuating antagonisms. In the pre-war months depicted in *Autumn Journal*, MacNeice explicitly drew connections between the propaganda tactics of the British and German governments:

And must, we suppose, become uncritical, vindictive,  
And must, in order to beat

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<sup>97</sup> MacNeice, *The Strings are False*, 32-3.

The enemy, model ourselves upon the enemy,  
A howling radio for our paraclete.<sup>98</sup>

Similarly, Muldoon's work consistently weighs up not the relative merits of either 'side' of the Northern Irish political landscape, but the discrepancies between their offered narratives and the 'true' or 'given' world they claim to represent.

In *Plant and Phantom*, MacNeice puts these principles into action in startling short pieces, particularly the poem 'Stylite'<sup>99</sup>. In this poem's special world are two emblematic figures standing on pillars on a beach, while its full rhyme, almost-ballad meter and free use of simplistic absolutes ('no one ever comes / And the world is banned') put one in mind of a nursery rhyme with a built-in moral. Unlike the parable pieces of MacNeice's later work, this one is largely decodable: the 'saint' who 'has stood so long / That he himself is stone' is kindred to the self-pleasuring aesthete of 'Circe'<sup>100</sup>, isolated and safe from harm. The 'conscience of a rope, / And the hangman counting [...] at nine he finds / He has eyes again' seems to map fairly neatly onto the imminent warfare that demands new engagement with the outside world. A strange and perhaps untranslatable figure appears in the final stanza, where a second mysterious pillar materialises:

A young man opposite  
Stands in the blue,  
A white Greek god,  
Confident, with curled  
Hair above his groin  
And his eyes on the world.

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<sup>98</sup> MacNeice, *Collected Poems*, 116.

<sup>99</sup> *Ibid*, 158.

<sup>100</sup> *Ibid*, 30.

The contrast to the 'saint' is obvious enough, as this virile figure confronts the world from his own pillar. But the rendering of opposites doesn't quite seem to cohere: if this new stance appears as an alternative to the saint's splendid isolation, why is the young man also on a pillar, from which, presumably, it is tricky to get much done? As Longley has pointed out, however, the poem 'stylizes this renewed problem of choice [...] between getting into things and getting out of them'<sup>101</sup>; while the saint's position has more obvious flaws, there is little to suggest that the young man's outlook is much of an improvement, and plenty to suggest something predatory and foreboding in that last line. As Peter McDonald argues, 'While MacNeice does not want to be the ascetic stylite, he knows that he cannot become the Apollonian figure of commitment and achievement; like so much else written by him in 1940, this is the record of an unresolved dilemma'<sup>102</sup>. Again, the discovery of a meaningful answer is secondary to expressing an adequate question. With the rope of conscience (a word MacNeice often used in reference to his stance on participation in the war<sup>103</sup>) around one's neck, the poet asks: what exactly are one's choices?

In a similar vein is 'Flight of the Heart'<sup>104</sup>, 'a miniature drama of self-division' in which 'MacNeice 'the would-be good citizen' interrogates one unworthy heir: MacNeice 'the defeatist''<sup>105</sup>. Here, the questions asked by the citizen are strangely patterned, as it pursues the defeatist heart through its various refuges:

There are five lame dogs and one deaf-mute  
All of them with demands on you. [...]

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<sup>101</sup> Longley, 79-80.

<sup>102</sup> McDonald, *The Oxford Handbook of British and Irish War Poetry*, 386.

<sup>103</sup> Longley, 80.

<sup>104</sup> MacNeice, 196.

<sup>105</sup> Longley, 80.

And what if the tower should shake and fall  
With three sharp taps and one big bang? [...]

But what when the cellar roof caves in  
With one blue flash and nine old bones?

That the numbered threats return not to zero but nine reinforces the relentlessness of the poem's threat, while the 'three sharp taps' seem to recall the conclusion of 'Postscript to Iceland' written four years earlier, 'Still I drink your health before / The gun-butt raps upon the door'<sup>106</sup>; in both cases, war will not spare neither the kind-hearted nor those who would 'save your skin'. The heart's final escape, to 'go back where I belong / In the fore-being of mankind', is an admission that only in death will it truly be safe, while that 'belonging' is identified by Longley<sup>107</sup> as referring back to 'Eclogue from Iceland'<sup>108</sup>, in this case Grettir's admonition to Ryan and Craven (dramatic stand-ins for MacNeice and Auden) to 'go back where you belong'. The choice between Grettir's command to fight and survive and the heart's impulse to run and die once again provide a binary in which neither road is uncomplicatedly right.

Crucial to both MacNeice and Muldoon's approach to parable is that they both consider it a mode of writing with the capacity to directly engage with the conditions of its time and place; indeed, both consider it an inherent strength of the writing. In his interview with Haffenden (again, with all necessary caveats about its sincerity), Muldoon suggests, 'I like to think that a whole society is informing the lines of a poem'<sup>109</sup>. In

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<sup>106</sup> MacNeice, 98.

<sup>107</sup> Longley, 80.

<sup>108</sup> MacNeice, 81.

<sup>109</sup> Haffenden, 133.

*Varieties of Parable*, MacNeice goes further, arguing that, as opposed to ‘surface writings’ which may retain historic import for their ‘period interest’:

Parable writing, on the other hand, being imbued with the true inner feel of its period, may not be properly comprehensible or likeable to a reader who lacks knowledge of its historical background.<sup>110</sup>

Parable is not distanced from historical conditions, or an escape from them, but is inextricably bound and responsive to them. Although they appear to take place in a Carrick or London unanchored to the here-and-now, MacNeice’s late poems should be read as continuous with the society in which he lived and worked. As MacNeice himself asserts, a poet’s:

personal experience and attitude do not exist in a vacuum but are conditioned by time and place [...] if he revolts against that communal experience and attitude, he is still being none the less conditioned by it. These are all truisms but they need repeating<sup>111</sup>

As Longley points out, the short poems of *Solstices* and *The Burning Perch* are something of an *immram* themselves, both ‘self-contained miniature quests’ and ‘a voyage among variegated islands’<sup>112</sup>. ‘The Truisms’<sup>113</sup> depicts in miniature a circular journey of fate-refusal and fate-entrapment, a partially resolved, partially continued quarrel with origins, and a deep anxiety about preserving one’s individuality; a suitably Muldoon starting-point. Its religious overtones recall ‘The Bishop’<sup>114</sup>, who ups sticks

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<sup>110</sup> MacNeice, *Varieties of Parable*, 22.

<sup>111</sup> *Ibid*, 51.

<sup>112</sup> Longley, 235-6.

<sup>113</sup> MacNeice, *Collected Poems*, 565.

<sup>114</sup> Muldoon, *Why Brownlee Left*, 14.



the night before his ordination, only to find himself as an old man, sitting in his armchair in a snow-drift that reaches 'his chin, like an alb' (a liturgical vestment). Searches for, and repulsions from, Muldoon's father (both biographical and metaphorical) litter his early collections, from 'The Waking Father'<sup>115</sup>, to 'The Coney'<sup>116</sup>. 'The Truisms' itself is a crucial part of MacNeice's parable writing, being, in Longley's words, 'religiously inscribed', a 'dialectic about belief [which] can be read as a dialogue with his father'<sup>117</sup>. Of course, using MacNeice's own rubric, these elements should not overwrite or overwhelm the 'new body' in which they appear, which clearly asserts a third-person protagonist, and with it at least a veneer of fiction:

His father gave him a box of truisms  
Shaped like a coffin, then his father died;  
The truisms remained on the mantelpiece  
As wooden as the playbox they had been packed in  
Or that other his father skulked inside

The protagonist seems a Bunyan-ish everyman; there are Christian undertones to the poem's progress, particularly in the house-blessing and semi-archaic 'sordor'. The final stanza returns the protagonist to his origins:

he walked straight in; it was where he had come from  
And something told him the way to behave.  
He raised his hand and blessed his home;  
The truisms flew and perched on his shoulders  
And a tall tree sprouted from his father's grave.

If dogma pushed him away, disbelief draws him back, and the burst of life in the bird-like truisms and the deeply unsettling grave-tree mark a deeply compromised sense of

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<sup>115</sup> Muldoon, *New Weather*, 10.

<sup>116</sup> Muldoon, *Meeting the British*, 3.

<sup>117</sup> Longley, *Louis MacNeice: A Critical Study*: 138-9.

reconciliation. The presence of 'disbelief' has resonance for MacNeice's parable-writing; he marks how the act of writing, or 'shaping':

may bring him back *full circle* [italics mine] into something very like belief – rather as if God in the first chapter of Genesis, when he looked at his work and saw that it was good, had found himself forced to believe in himself.<sup>118</sup>

The presence here of an awareness of the perhaps coercive circularity of belief and disbelief seems relevant to 'The Truisms'; there's an impression that MacNeice's 'God' might have been otherwise perfectly content. As in Muldoon, certainty in MacNeice is rarely uncomplicatedly positive, and here the sense carried by that 'skulked' suggests that however buried his father might be, he is not exactly 'dead' (the 'truisms' themselves have a strange not-quite-life), and has not released his hold on his son. The cycle is complete, the everyman is trapped, life continues without the 'love [...] war, / Sordor, disappointment, defeat, betrayal', which a knowledge of MacNeice's oeuvre affirms as dynamic and meaningful where rote behaviour is fixed and lifeless.

'The Taxis'<sup>119</sup> is among MacNeice's most anthologised poems (including in Muldoon's *Faber Book*), perhaps due to its brevity, its precise blend of pattern and variation, perhaps even the manner of punchline at its close. Again, MacNeice's own critical writing gives some insight, at least on a mechanical level. In his discussion of *Alice in Wonderland*, MacNeice notes how the Cheshire Cat is 'probably the most mature character'<sup>120</sup>, given his ability to escape execution by vanishing his own head. MacNeice's emphasis on this ability seems pointed: at times his protagonists appear to

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<sup>118</sup> MacNeice, *Varieties of Parable*, 118.

<sup>119</sup> MacNeice, *Collected Poems*, 583.

<sup>120</sup> MacNeice, *Varieties of Parable*, 92.

be Alice, whose identity is constantly under question, if not direct threat; at times they are the Cheshire Cat, tricking their way out of ultimate entrapment. As MacNeice argues in a discussion of Yeats' 'Crazy Jane' poems:

If you know what my whole self and my only self is, you know a lot more than I do. As far as I can make out, I not only have many different selves but I am often, as they say, not myself at all.<sup>121</sup>

The dream-logic of the Alice stories, in which she may simultaneously 'remain herself' and 'be different too', seems to animate several of MacNeice's late poems, not least 'The Taxis'. MacNeice also notes that 'Thanks to Lewis Carroll's ease of manner the reader may not notice that this is all near the bone'<sup>122</sup>, which might serve as an accurate summary of the poet's late work, not to mention a key strategy in Muldoon's.

Longley makes the Alice connection explicit in her reading of 'The Taxis', describing how the protagonist suffers 'the dream experience of being neither in touch nor in control', the same way 'Alice has difficulties getting her existence verified'<sup>123</sup>. In the poem, the passenger is again described in the third person, and is subject to a series of scrutinising drivers ('the cabby, while he thanked him, looked askance / As though to suggest someone had bummed a ride') while circumstances seem to hint towards a reality not quite aligning with the passenger's observations:

In the second taxi he was alone tra-la  
But the clock showed sixpence extra; he tipped according  
And the cabby from out his muffler said: 'Make sure  
You have left nothing behind tra-la between you.

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<sup>121</sup> MacNeice, *The Poetry of W.B. Yeats*, 165.

<sup>122</sup> MacNeice, *Varieties of Parable*, 94.

<sup>123</sup> Longley, 153-4.

Here MacNeice makes the repentend 'tra-la' shift out of its usual context, or at least its expected location, to disrupt and complicate the reader's assumptions about what it might be doing in the poem. If the fourth line's 'tra-la' is the poem covering up the driver's speech, as it certainly is in the fourth stanza ('I can't tra-la well take / So many people'), the question arises as to what it might be covering elsewhere. This process of destabilising the poem's own architecture – Corcoran describes the 'tra-las' as 'a dead weight, a dead hand and a dead echo'<sup>124</sup> – foregrounds the instability of the logical progress of the passenger's journey, the instability of his rapidly and comically ('not to speak of the dog') diffusing sense of self. It could be argued that 'The Taxis' is a paradigmatic for Muldoon, noting his description of it in *To Ireland, I* as a 'masterpiece'<sup>125</sup>. The use of repetend as a kind of interjection or musical nonsense proliferates in Muldoon's later work, for instance in *Madoc*, in which 'de dum' becomes, in Omaar Hena's reading, a kind of lambeq-like theme music for the Ulster-Scottish Cinnamond<sup>126</sup>, the 'yes sirs' that litter *Hay*, or the adaptable and meaningful refrains in 'The Loaf'<sup>127</sup>, which conclude 'with a link and a link and a linky-lick'. These elements perform a mechanical function by interrupting the rational flow of meaning, but are also made to carry something extra, as if something of inarticulable significance had bummed a ride.

Remembering the hapless, almost victimised God-the-creator in MacNeice's earlier analogy, Muldoon's early poem 'Hedgehog'<sup>128</sup> also features a deity stung by its

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<sup>124</sup> Corcoran, 219.

<sup>125</sup> Muldoon, *To Ireland, I*, 94.

<sup>126</sup> Hena, 'Playing Indian: Disintegrating Irishness in *Madoc*', 235.

<sup>127</sup> Muldoon, *Moy Sand and Gravel*, 47

<sup>128</sup> Muldoon, *New Weather*, 27.

own creation; Longley describes the poem as 'virtually a parable in the biblical sense'<sup>129</sup>. Much like MacNeice, the poem's pronouns are slightly askew; it doesn't take much lateral reading to see the hedgehog as the reticent poet 'giv[ing] nothing / Away, keeping itself to itself', and the speaking 'we' as an overbearing readership:

We say, Hedgehog, come out  
of yourself and we will love you.

We mean no harm. We want  
Only to listen to what  
You have to say. We want  
Your answers to our questions.

A knowledge of Muldoon's oeuvre will be alert to the false simplicity employed by the hedgehog's questioners, which attempts to erase or elide the contradiction between the promise to listen and the desire to direct the line of questioning. Engaging with these demands, the poem suggests, entails surrendering the ability to pose questions on one's own terms. The conclusion suggests to Longley that perhaps 'God and a poet's imagination hide in parable for similar reasons'<sup>130</sup>:

We forget the god  
under this crown of thorns.  
We forget that never again  
Will a god trust in the world.

To formulate the poem as 'poet equals god' or even 'poet equals divine hedgehog', however, would be too much for the poem to bear. Returning to MacNeice's recommendations for approaching parable, there remains an element of the poem which is not reducible to paraphrase, even if in this poem Muldoon is operating much

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<sup>129</sup> Longley, *Poetry in the Wars*, 214.

<sup>130</sup> Longley, 215.

closer to the one-to-one correspondences MacNeice defined as allegory than his far more elusive later work.

Wills identifies another parabolic figure (and perhaps another of Muldoon's failed questants) in the eponymous Brownlee of 'Why Brownlee Left'<sup>131</sup>, who, much like 'The Bishop' and Joe Ward in 'Anseo', 'deviates from his predestined script, only to be more than ever twinned with his fate'<sup>132</sup>. As Wills notes, the poem is a sonnet which itself follows almost all the expected formal turns, even employs simple syntax to tell a straightforward story with a beginning, middle and end:

Why Brownlee left, and where he went,  
Is a mystery even now.  
For if a man should have been content  
It was him; two acres or barley,  
One of potatoes, four bullocks,  
A milker, a slated farmhouse.  
He was last seen going out to plough  
On a March morning, bright and early.  
  
By noon Brownlee was famous;  
They had found all abandoned, with  
The last rig unbroken, his pair of black  
Horses, like man and wife,  
Shifting their weight from foot to  
Foot, and gazing into the future.

*Almost* all the expected turns; on a formal level, the rhymes of farmhouse/famous and bullocks/black going across the sonnet's volta seems more than a matter of expediency. The sestet's other rhymes – with/wife and foot to/future – are noticeably flimsy, even slightly forced, compared with the easy, full rhymes of went/content, now/plough, barley/early. The poem seems unwilling to allow this matter of local mythologizing to

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<sup>131</sup> Muldoon, *Why Brownlee Left*, 22.

<sup>132</sup> Wills, 77.

rest any easier than Brownlee's horses. Wills describes their shifting from foot to foot ('one would have expected hoof to hoof') as suggesting 'lack of progress, or near stasis, but it is also an image of perpetual movement [...] The horses, like Brownlee himself, have come to an end without coming to a stop'<sup>133</sup>. This ability to keep going, to resolve a question by continuing it (as in 'Incantata'), is difficult to read as wholly positive in this scenario, however. As with 'Lull', the presence of an identifiably Irish scenario seems to carry with it intimations of a limbo-existence in which Brownlee has vanished but failed to reappear, except in the 'brown lee' of his own unploughed field; in Wills' 'pessimistic' reading, Brownlee is 'swallowed by his fate'<sup>134</sup>. Another equally valid reading suggested by those irrepressible horses is that if Brownlee is trapped on the brink of escape, he is also permanently in the act of escaping; the 'foot to / foot' of the horses might become the poem's metrical feet, the 'rig unbroken' a blank page whose fate remains undetermined. Longley notes how Muldoon's Frostian riddles 'mystify more than demystify. Retaining a narrative aspect as well, they frustrate the argumentative thrust with which Frost's questions address mysteries'<sup>135</sup>. Like MacNeice's rendering of parable, these poems are less interested in the arrival at a satisfactory answer than posing a satisfactory question.

It may be valuable to this discussion to examine Muldoon's relationship to another Irish poet, Samuel Beckett. Like MacNeice, he lived most of his adult life outside Ireland, and held – to put it mildly – ambivalent opinions about his homeland. Beckett is given high esteem in MacNeice's *Varieties of Parable*, even described as the

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<sup>133</sup> Wills, 78.

<sup>134</sup> Ibid, 78.

<sup>135</sup> Longley, 224.

*ne plus ultra* of a kind of parable where character and plot do not exist; in a rare bout of certitude – and given his apparent familiarity with the text, it's not too fanciful to imagine Muldoon taking it as a challenge – MacNeice says, 'I cannot see how anyone can out-Beckett Beckett'<sup>136</sup>. He also praises the playwright's ability to drive his work via its 'inner situation'<sup>137</sup> rather than a simple sequence of events, his use of ostensibly plain language and emblematic characters. What may be of most interest to readers of Muldoon, however, is the following passage, in which MacNeice quotes theatre scholar Martin Esslin:

[Esslin] accordingly compares Beckett's characters to 'the personified virtues and vices in medieval mystery plays', which are dealing not with events as such but with 'types of situation that will forever repeat themselves'. [...] And, if events in time are out, so is discursive thinking. [...] This purging – one might almost say this liquidation – of content is found by him to be reflected in Beckett's use of language. 'Language', he says, 'in Beckett's plays serves to express the breakdown, the disintegration of language'.<sup>138</sup>

Muldoon's work contains an unusually high number of 'characters' whose names and/or behaviour identify them as being or existing within the kind of mythic structures outlined here by Esslin. Talking about *Why Brownlee Left*, Wills notes, 'The volume as a whole is peopled with characters, such as Wetherall, Brownlee, Coulter, Joseph Mary Plunkett Ward, even Mael Duin [whose] names bear an allegorical significance – they are emblematic of the destiny they are to fulfil'<sup>139</sup>. Muldoon himself has expounded on

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<sup>136</sup> MacNeice, *Varieties of Parable*, 25.

<sup>137</sup> *Ibid*, 24.

<sup>138</sup> *Ibid*, 119.

<sup>139</sup> Wills, *Reading Paul Muldoon*, 70.



the somewhat mystical notion *nomen est omen* (one's name is one's fate) in his Oxford Lectures, finding particular traction with Fernando Pessoa, whose surname in Portuguese translates both as 'character', 'mask used by a player', i.e. dramatic personae, and 'no one'<sup>140</sup>. If the tone of these lectures is mock-serious, there is reason to give at least equal weight to the 'serious' side of the hyphen; the question of fate and fatalism, the cycles of history and the possibility of escaping them, return and return in Muldoon's work, not least in his elegies in *The Annals of Chile*. It might be little surprise then, that these are the works that most obviously show the effect of Beckett's influence. Much like MacNeice's reading of Beckett, Wills identifies in the endless circles and circular forms of *The Annals of Chile* Muldoon's temptation towards 'the thought that time itself, and hence any notion of escape or advance, may be an illusion'<sup>141</sup>. With any conventional understanding of linear temporal progression deferred, even perpetually so, the poems 'Incantata' and 'Yarrow'<sup>142</sup> are both left to ruminate on what remains, what can be made of little more than an existential stubbornness. In this sense both poems might be considered spiritual successors to Muldoon's previous long poems 'Immram' and 'The More a Man Has'; though these later pieces are much closer to MacNeice's conception of the 'static quest'<sup>143</sup>. Though Beckett perhaps informs a great many of Muldoon's plotless – or so plot-complex as to be practically unfollowable – quest poems, his work makes several appearances in 'Incantata', of which the most memorable may be a stanza discussed earlier:

I crouch with Belacqua  
and Lucky and Pozzo in the Acacacac-

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<sup>140</sup> Muldoon, *The End of the Poem*, 223.

<sup>141</sup> Wills, 179.

<sup>142</sup> Muldoon, *The Annals of Chile*, 39

<sup>143</sup> MacNeice, 119.

ademy of Anthropopometry, trying to make sense of the 'quaquaqua'  
of that potato-mouth; that mouth as prim  
and proper as it's full of self-opprobrium,  
with its 'quaquaqua', with its 'Quoiquoiquoiquoiquoiquoiquo'.<sup>144</sup>

This stanza exemplifies what Peter McDonald has referred to as 'perhaps the most remarkable aspect of Muldoon's achievement in these poems [...] his success in bringing together an apparently unconstrained voice and a formal environment of the most extreme constraint'<sup>145</sup>. Wills' reading is once more vital on this point: 'One of the implications here is that it is wrong to think of formal control as the antithesis of authentic feeling – indeed that tightly controlled and "conventional" forms may be the best vehicle for the expression of overwhelming feeling'<sup>146</sup>. This apparent paradox is at the heart of Muldoon's elegies, his acute mistrust of language struggling to occupy a space in which language is the only available tool. Formal considerations for Muldoon, as for both Beckett and MacNeice, are not mere formalities: 'formal elements of a literary work [...] in Samuel Beckett for one, [are] not only formal but constituent of meaning'<sup>147</sup>. In 'Incantata', as in 'Yarrow', as later in 'Sillyhow Stride'<sup>148</sup>, an elegy both for Maureen Muldoon and Warren Zevon, the struggle to make sense of the deaths of loved ones is bound together with the formal act of making sense of the limitations of language, the ultimate failure of art to provide comfort, the ultimate failure of the elegy to provide any closure beyond its own smaller, formalised rehearsal of the original loss. As Wills notes, 'this seemingly endemic uncertainty is itself emotionally charged'<sup>149</sup>.

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<sup>144</sup> Muldoon, 20.

<sup>145</sup> McDonald, *Mistaken Identities*, 173-4.

<sup>146</sup> Wills, 172.

<sup>147</sup> MacNeice, 4.

<sup>148</sup> Muldoon, *Horse Latitudes*, 95.

<sup>149</sup> Wills, 216.

A model for the poem may be in MacNeice's most celebrated elegy, 'The Casualty'<sup>150</sup>. Here, MacNeice finds a six-line stanzaic form with fluid rhyme schemes the perfect form in which to house a massively disparate series of recollections of the lost Graham Shepard; like 'Incantata', the poem hinges on a far-ranging miscellany of images. The poem's closing movement begins, 'Look at these snapshots', shown, apparently, to Shepherd: 'here you see yourself / Spilling a paint pot'. The list is seemingly recalled at random, the poem's regular form given the slip by its irrepressible subject: 'Here you are swapping gags in winking bars / [...] here the sack / of night pours down on you Provençal stars'. At the poem's rhetorical peak, all pretence toward convention speech is abandoned, as the poem's formal repetitions take over and nothing is left but a hail of unconnected images that lead, inevitably, to Shepard's last days:

Here you are gabbling Baudelaire or Donne,  
Here you are mimicking that cuckoo clock,  
Here you are serving a double fault for set,  
Here you are diving naked from a Dalmatian rock,  
Here you are barracking the sinking sun,  
Here you are taking Proust aboard your doomed corvette.

The last two lines here begin to defy their ostensible incoherence; 'The Casualty' is itself 'barracking the sinking sun' in insisting upon the presence, the here-ness of one who is irrevocably gone, who has, to borrow Muldoon's terms, met his fate. The obsessive repetition of 'here you are' intensifies the poem's emotional energy in its temporary refusal to acknowledge the conclusion to which it must, inevitably, arrive; all MacNeice

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<sup>150</sup> MacNeice, 245.

can do is keep his catalogue going, but, like cursing the sunset, the outcome is predetermined.

To return to the issue of influence regarding both MacNeice and Beckett alike, Stephen Watt has made a strong argument for 'Incantata' constituting a wholly different manner of authorial borrowing. Drawing on the repeated appearances of 'motifs of bodily invasion, worms, cancerous mutations', Watt argues that the appearance of Beckett is itself constituent of meaning: 'Beckett's presence in Muldoon's work is an enabling, not debilitating, invasion. [...] in the trope of parasitic contamination the borders between center and periphery, host and guest collapse, just as those between poetic text and prior text, text and cultural intertexts, gradually disappear'<sup>151</sup>. In this arrangement, Beckett does not merely stand in for the existential durability of his creations, but in an almost literal sense (remembering Muldoon's conception of the poet-as-vessel) stands in for the poet: where Muldoon's words fail, Beckett's keep going. This refusal to accept any codified means of understanding is itself perfectly continuous with Muldoon's more obviously socially conscious stances. As earlier discussions have highlighted, Muldoon returns repeatedly to positions of in-betweenness or multiplicity; it is to these unsimplifiable stances that his loyalties, such as they may be, lie. His apparent political reticence on occasion noticeably aligns with Beckett's, as Gillis identifies: 'Beckett's sense of individualism lies at the heart of his writings [...] society is little more than a communal hallucination, and that the only thing one is entitled to doubt, and then some, is oneself'<sup>152</sup>. Moreover, Beckett himself once wrote the following, regarding history and its interpretation: 'I say the background

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<sup>151</sup> Watt, *Beckett and Contemporary Irish Writing*, 150.

<sup>152</sup> Gillis, *Irish Poetry of the 1930s*, 136.

and the causes [of historical events] are an inhuman and incomprehensible machinery and venture to wonder what kind of appetite it is that can be appeased by the modern animism that consists in rationalising them'<sup>153</sup>. This inherent mistrust of the world may be seen even in Muldoon's earliest work, for example in 'Wind and Tree', the second poem in *New Weather*:

Often I think I should be like  
The single tree, going nowhere,  
Since my own arm could not and would not  
Break the other. Yet by my broken bones  
I tell new weather.<sup>154</sup>

From the outset the poet seems aware of the tension between his private individualism and the public act of creating poems. Yet – as evidenced by the poem's existence – the tension is an enabling one, and even bearing in mind the poem's concluding indeterminacy, the artistic act remains positive, its status as a published, public statement an integral element of its meaning. MacNeice wrote in the essay "Broken Windows" that a work of art is, to a greater or lesser degree, unavoidably a positive gesture, that even 'a poem in praise of suicide is an act of homage to life'<sup>155</sup>.

MacNeice's and Beckett's and Muldoon's capacity to continue signifying in a world they doubted and feared, and in which they could have little faith, is one of their most vital political statements.

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<sup>153</sup> Cited in Watt, 138.

<sup>154</sup> Muldoon, *New Weather*, 3.

<sup>155</sup> MacNeice, *Selected Prose of Louis MacNeice*, 138.

In the parabolic terms discussed above, assigning a too-direct political stance or outlook to either MacNeice's or Muldoon's work is a fool's errand; likewise frisking the poems for nonconformist espousals of radical politics. And yet their very being is a very clear rejection of conventional understanding of what it is to be a perceiving, active body in a specific time and place. For MacNeice, being a sensitive instrument is an inescapable responsibility, necessarily implicated with the poet's immediate, mundane circumstances: 'in a poet belief cannot be disentangled from other things, from his personal experience and attitude.'<sup>156</sup> Framing this aspect of socialisation as being a matter principally of belief is typical of MacNeice; in *The Poetry of W.B. Yeats* he also asserts, 'The faith in the *value* of living is a mystical faith'<sup>157</sup>. MacNeice counteracts cynicism or defensiveness with (at least a degree of) faith in his poems; that despite the overwhelming demands of the world, the poem might stand as its own unimpeachable entity. As MacNeice has it: 'A poem does not exist in a vacuum, but a poem at the same time is a unity, a creation'<sup>158</sup>. The idea that the poem has its own designs, and is to some extent self-generated, is clearly an idea that appeals to Muldoon, and one that has important implications for understanding the social and political aspects of the poet's work. MacNeice and Muldoon share this aspect of considering their social awareness as a matter of metaphysical speculation; there is always the possibility that any assumption based on social norms is nothing more than a harmful dream.

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<sup>156</sup> MacNeice, *Varieties of Parable*, 51.

<sup>157</sup> MacNeice, *The Poetry of W.B. Yeats*, viii.

<sup>158</sup> *Ibid*, 3.

This harmful dream may also be a hallucination, as in the first poem in *Quoof*, 'Gathering Mushrooms'<sup>159</sup>. The psilocybin-induced visions of the poem are characterised by Corcoran as 'disciplined surreal', a Dalí-esque blending of 'the sexual, the scatological and the political'<sup>160</sup>. For Wills, the poem sets the tone for a collection in which 'Human and bodily waste is central', noting that 'Muldoon's interest in toxicity in this book is in part a reflection on how to write about contemporary events in Northern Ireland'<sup>161</sup>. Muldoon himself described how he 'hoped to purge myself of the very public vocabulary [the book] employs, the kennings of the hourly news bulletin'<sup>162</sup>, a contemporary adjustment of MacNeice's advice that poets should be 'a reader of newspapers'<sup>163</sup>; Muldoon here renders over-consumption of toxic public discourse as a physiological concern. As Wills notes, however, mushrooms 'are both a food and a drug, the body's metabolism is both nurtured and destroyed by the chemicals it takes into itself'<sup>164</sup>. If the compromised language of political reporting and sectarian dogma scans onto 'hallucinogens' – which distort reality and make it terrifying ('the maw / of a shimmering green-gold dragon') – the process of purging oneself of it, which Muldoon attempts throughout *Quoof*, is neither pleasant nor bound to succeed. Indeed, the imaginative strength of 'Gathering Mushrooms' is drawn from that very hallucination, the poem's culmination in the unsettling, horse-headed incarnation of Muldoon; the language of dirty protest ('*the soiled grey blanket*') and prison complexes ('*Beyond this concrete wall is a wall of concrete / and barbed wire*') compelling the listener to

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<sup>159</sup> Muldoon, *Quoof*, 7.

<sup>160</sup> Corcoran, 69.

<sup>161</sup> Wills, *Reading Paul Muldoon*, 96.

<sup>162</sup> Quoted in *ibid*, 96.

<sup>163</sup> MacNeice, *Modern Poetry*, 198.

<sup>164</sup> Wills, 98.

obedience by insisting on the inescapability of its rhetoric, 'Your only hope / is to come back [...] Lie down with us and wait'; one might detect notes of Grettir's advice to Ryan and Craven, 'Go back to where you belong [...] it is your only duty. And, it may be added, it is your only chance'<sup>165</sup>. Though the horse's self-abnegating message seems at odds with the original speaker's delight in the 'cinnamon and aubergine' of the sunset, perhaps even at odds with the nurturing and cultivating aspects of the speaker's father, it remains the poem's final word. The Christianity-inflected promise of eternal reward after sacrifice on earth might well be, in Wills' reading, 'fanatical, deluded, masochistic'<sup>166</sup>, but it remains inextricably linked to the poet's family and home, a coercive ideal buried in the poet's very subconscious. Muldoon's question partly resembles Mahon's in 'Ecclesiastes'<sup>167</sup>, as the poet witnesses the power weaponised language holds over both their own immediate community and their own imaginations, and, momentarily at least, understands the appeal.

MacNeice's introductory chapter to *Modern Poetry* makes clear that a poet's value to their immediate community was at the forefront of his thinking even at this early stage of his career; indeed *Modern Poetry* marks the peak of this aspect of MacNeice's thinking. He outlines an insightful history of mainstream British poetry's growing antipathy towards the idea of the 'public' in the 1890s, arguing that '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 either intelligible or sympathetic to the community'. But, as MacNeice

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<sup>165</sup> MacNeice, *Collected Poems*, 48.

<sup>166</sup> Wills, 98.

<sup>167</sup> Mahon, *Selected Poems*, 28.



continues, 'the trouble with words is that every word is a community-product'<sup>168</sup>. Simply by employing language as an artistic medium, a poet must negotiate a socially conditioned space; this knowledge informs much of MacNeice's belief in the necessary 'impurity' of poetry after the Georgian poets' affected merriment or the superimposed patterns in early Eliot<sup>169</sup>. This belief, however, is qualified as little more than 'tentative devices, an approximate scheme'<sup>170</sup>; despite his convincing appraisal of his contemporary poetic moment, MacNeice steers well clear of adding further dogma to those laid down by his immediate predecessors. As he concludes in *The Poetry of W.B. Yeats*, 'The spiritual lesson that my generation (a generation with a vastly different outlook) can learn from Yeats is to write according to our lights. His lights are not ours. *Go thou and do otherwise*'<sup>171</sup>. Again, this vital aesthetic lesson is framed spiritually, a matter that goes to the very heart of the poetic enterprise; Yeats' success is attributed to his ability to write in a way that rejected prevailing aesthetic norms or, bearing in mind MacNeice's emphasis on generational 'outlooks', political trends. Though what we understand now about Yeats' proto-fascist ideas about the rightful rule of elites<sup>172</sup> point towards his social context within that elite class, those beliefs are sublimated enough in his work that MacNeice may say of the elder poet, without apparent fear of contradiction, that 'What horrified Yeats in politics was the disregard of human individuality'<sup>173</sup>. We might, of course, read this as fear of a working class Yeats found

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<sup>168</sup> MacNeice, *Modern Poetry*, 2.

<sup>169</sup> *Ibid*, 59.

<sup>170</sup> *Ibid*, 33.

<sup>171</sup> MacNeice, *The Poetry of W.B. Yeats*, 232.

<sup>172</sup> Longley cites Conor Cruise O'Brien regarding Yeats as 'as near to being a Fascist as the conditions of his own country permitted', in "WB Yeats: Poetry and Violence", *The Oxford Handbook of Modern Irish Poetry*, 106.

<sup>173</sup> *Ibid*, 104.

himself unable to consider as his equals, and who embodied a perceived threat to the basis of his social standing. As Longley notes, however, “Easter, 1916’ is a revisionist ballad that questions sacrifice and destabilizes the kind of refrain on which patriotic assurance depends<sup>174</sup>, remembering the poet’s very public concern about very public acts of violence. Yeats’ act of creative destabilisation is not dissimilar to Muldoon’s own poetic-political strategies, which for all his oblique references and hallucinogenic artfulness remain acutely aware of his own social and political roots, and, indeed, of the wish to escape these roots, and of this wish’s impossibility.

In MacNeice’s 1935 collection, *Poems*, is ‘Birmingham’<sup>175</sup>, which, as in the earlier discussion of ‘Valediction’, stretches the rhyming couplet almost to breaking point, loading it down with the freight of industry and mythical-religious symbolism. Here, a traffic conductor ‘bars / With his figure of a monolith Pharaoh the queue of fidgety machines’, in the ‘slumward’ side of town ‘are Vulcan’s forges who doesn’t care a tinker’s damn’, in the suburbs residents ‘pursue the Platonic Forms / With wireless and cairn terriers and gadgets’; perhaps most memorable is the image of ‘the trams like vast sarcophagi move’. In the poem MacNeice brings his own classical education and steeping in philosophy into a frame where all logic would dictate it does not belong. In addition to its hallucinogenic qualities the poem’s internal drama indicates that not only are these scenes of daily capitalist exchange and exploitation following mythical patterns (however ironically the poem might render them), but that mythical tools are appropriate for talking about the victory of mechanistic forces rendered in ‘Birmingham’. This tension is registered at a formal level, as MacNeice’s artful off-kilter

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<sup>174</sup> Longley, 98-9.

<sup>175</sup> MacNeice, *Collected Poems*, 22.

couplets and extended lines allow 'Platonic forms' to rhyme with 'fickle norms', 'neighbour' to chime bitterly with 'labour'. As with many socially-focused poems by Muldoon, the poetic 'I' does not factor directly in the poem's action but in the process of splicing together images, which Longley quite perceptively frames in cinematic terms, consisting of 'accumulated close-ups rather than long-distance shots'<sup>176</sup>. This snapshot effect holds all of the poem's tableaux in a kind of stasis, all happening simultaneously and denying straightforward progress; the fact that so many of its artefacts are literal vehicles ('train-gulf', cars with 'faces behind the triplex screens' and 'Pentecost-like' headlights, the sarcophagus-tram), further emphasises this blustering immobility, while the superfluity of windows (on cars, houses, 'shopgirls' faces relax / Diaphonous as green glass') is a recurring motif for MacNeice, often indicating a disconnect between authentic and inauthentic worlds; the hallucinogenic qualities of 'Birmingham' seem to hint towards an essential falseness in its mass-produced reality. The argument could be made that MacNeice, as a commentator and observer privileged enough to live safely in the city's (and poem's) suburbs, where the greatest risk is failing to 'score one over the neighbour / By climbing tentatively upward on jerry-built beauty', is exempting himself from the largely condemnatory picture; the references to new-fangled and unfulfilling 'gadgets', 'Saturday thrills' and 'the heart's funfair' seem to suggest their missing opposite, the 'high' culture that informs so much of the poem's creative lens. As Longley notes, however, MacNeice's 'aestheticism is trying to become functional'<sup>177</sup>; the aesthete of *Blind Fireworks* is starting to turn his theory into practice via the real world of 1930s urban mass production, following the

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<sup>176</sup> Longley, 63.

<sup>177</sup> Longley, 103.

example of 'the Greek poet of the fifth century BC [who] wrote his poems as a member of a city-state'<sup>178</sup>.

In '7, Middagh Street'<sup>179</sup>, Muldoon explicitly ruminates on the question of poetry's (and the poet's) responsibilities to political action; as Wills notes, the poem also questions art's relationship with its origins<sup>180</sup>, the possibility of a fresh start or freedom from past responsibilities. The seven residents of 7, Middagh Street tell their stories of how they came to be in New York in November 1940, their perspectives on the artist's role in wartime, with much of its material drawn from Humphrey Carpenter's biography, *WH Auden*<sup>181</sup>. Wills' discussion of the poem in her essay 'The Lie of the Land' cuts to the heart of Muldoon's own concerns about language, the very grounds on which any discussion of responsibility might take place. She argues that Auden's wish for a hierarchy-free society is tied up with a wish to be freed from art's roots in the social world; moreover, her reading of Muldoon's critical opinion that 'the writer's task is to 'control' and 'confine' meanings which words may carry in everyday discourse' depends upon the conception of poetry as a closed-off, hermetic world, and so 'attempts to deny both the role of historical context and change'<sup>182</sup>. Thus Auden's optimistic understanding of America as a place where:

we are all now dispossessed;  
prince, poet, construction worker,  
salesman, soda fountain jerker –  
all equally isolated

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<sup>178</sup> MacNeice, *Modern Poetry*, 1.

<sup>179</sup> Muldoon, *Meeting the British*, 36.

<sup>180</sup> Wills, 133.

<sup>181</sup> Corcoran, 66.

<sup>182</sup> Wills, *The Chosen Ground*, 125.

is to some extent consistent with Muldoon's conception of a poem as essentially free from hierarchies of contextual meaning; the 'Wystan' section seems to argue that if language itself is a site of semantic disintegration, where nothing is essentially more meaningful than anything else, then poetry is ill-equipped to perform its assumed socio-political function. 'Wystan' might undercut himself, however; Muldoon's Auden's riposte to Yeats, the much-quoted

'Did that play of mine  
send out certain men (*certain* men?)

The English shot ...?'  
the answer is 'Certainly not'.

is a straightforward negation of a complicated question, one that seems far too sure of itself to serve as a satisfying position. A couplet later, Wystan asserts:

For history's a twisted root  
with art its small, translucent fruit  
  
and never the other way round

To draw out the metaphor into a Muldoonian circle, if history is a tree, then its fruit is also its seed; art might be a pale imitation of history, but that 'twisted root' was once a 'translucent fruit' itself. While his principles regarding language and individualism might make him an appealing figure for Muldoon, Wystan's very un-Muldoonian certainties leave him ripe for ironic undercutting.

As Wills notes, part of Wystan's disillusionment comes from his experiences in Spain during the Civil War, a conflict that appears as a recurring touchstone for the poem's protagonists and a kind of surrogate for Muldoon's own consideration of the Troubles, not least 'the attendant political implications of referring to the Troubles as a

war'<sup>183</sup>. This may answer John Kerrigan's question of what Dalí is doing in the poem at all, given he was never a resident of Middagh Street like the other speakers in the poem<sup>184</sup>. Salvador's reference to his dispute with André Breton, which led to his expulsion from their surrealist group, is another salient point in the poem's dynamic argument:

we must disregard  
moral and aesthetic considerations  
for the integrity of our dream-visions.

Not only, then, are Wystan's social and linguistic hierarchies out, so too is any understanding of morality that might impede the artist's power of expression.

Salvador's response to an anarchist taxi-driver who asks 'Which side was I on? / Not one, or both, or none' is reminiscent of Muldoon's 'The Boundary Commission'<sup>185</sup>, in which the protagonist asks 'which side, if any, he should be on'; if 'Wystan' is close to Muldoon's individualist idealism, 'Salvador' may be an approximation of his practicing pragmatism, where the poet *is* as opposed to where he might some day *be*. That 'Salvador' is just off-centre in the poem (the brief 'Chester' section is fourth of seven), of course, precludes any too-neat summary of the poem's structural meaning.

The final section falls to 'Louis', who provides what is ostensibly the poem's last word; as several critics have pointed out, however, that word is also the poem's first, as MacNeice passes the 'quinquereme of Nineveh' back to Auden. Wills even suggests that this fits in with Muldoon's increasingly nihilist view of history, the 'revolutionary activity which attempts to change history' but may ultimately only continue its repeating

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<sup>183</sup> Wills, *Reading Paul Muldoon*, 131.

<sup>184</sup> Kerrigan, *The Chosen Ground*, 252.

<sup>185</sup> Muldoon, *Why Brownlee Left*, 15.

cycles<sup>186</sup>. Given this, MacNeice's own assertions – in some senses no less confident than Auden's – might also be ironically undercut by Muldoon's own beliefs about the futility of art's intervention upon history. MacNeice argues:

For poetry *can* make things happen -  
not only can, but *must* –

And the very painting of that oyster  
is in itself a political gesture.

'That oyster' is the one painted by an Auden stylised as 'a Dutch master [...] waiting for hostilities / to cease'. What Louis is unclear on is the nature of that gesture, which may equally be fiddling while Europe burns or an assertion of life and creativity in the midst of mass destruction. In a deeply allusive poem, that 'political gesture' may well allude to 'Eclogue from Iceland'<sup>187</sup> (1936), in which Auden and MacNeice's own dramatic stand-ins discuss the nature of social commitment. There, the Icelandic hero Grettir instructs them to return home with the words 'Minute your gesture but it must be made'; likewise in '7, Middagh Street' that oyster, or 'translucent fruit' may be only a gesture, and perhaps one that directly affects very little, but it is a vital aspect of the artist's social responsibility. That said, Louis is also perfectly aware that such duties are easier said than discharged; he thinks on Dalí's own erstwhile friend and collaborator Federico García Lorca:

In dreams begin responsibilities;  
it was on account of just such an allegory  
that Lorca  
was riddled with bullets

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<sup>186</sup> Wills, 133.

<sup>187</sup> MacNeice, *Collected Poems*, 72.

One party that *does* acknowledge the power of art is the one with the power to destroy it. It is perhaps a too-easy leap from here to the violence in Belfast in the mid-1980s, but the connection seems pertinent, particularly in the light of Louis' last sonnet. The speaker returns to Belfast 'by the back door of Muldoon's' back to Belfast (a sort of reversal of Dalí, who 'left Barcelona by the back door'); here he is confronted at the gates of Harland and Wolff, and a foreman who decides:

'MacNeice? That's a Fenian name.'  
as if to say, 'None of your sort'

Again, that his name might derive from Conchobar mac Nessa, or even Naoise, two characters from the pre-Fenian Ulster cycle, was well known by both MacNeice and Muldoon<sup>188</sup>. The lines overtly express a concern about being accepted by one's community even if one accepts responsibility to it; implicitly it questions the possibility of knowing for sure which, if any, side to which one really 'belongs'. Once more Muldoon finds a way to assert a flexibility of understanding against oversimplified binaries, valorising the poet's ability to slip out the back door when confronted with oversimplified binaries, with 'us' and 'them'. As MacNeice's hallucinogenic 'Variation on Heraclitus'<sup>189</sup> testifies, 'none of your slide snide rules can catch what is sliding so fast'; this ability to be in two places at once (or none at all) is central to Muldoon's understanding of poetry's social-political role. Like Muldoon's introduction to *Contemporary Irish Poetry*, an act of critical ventriloquism permits the poet to make a gesture while wrapping it in layers of narrative distance and plausible deniability.

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<sup>188</sup> Muldoon, *To Ireland, I*, 91; quoted in Stallworthy, *Louis MacNeice*, 497.

<sup>189</sup> MacNeice, 560.



Clair Wills identifies how 'The ambivalent inbetweenness of *Mules*, the perpetual forwards and backwards movement of *Why Brownlee Left*, develop in his later work into a more thoroughgoing concern with ways of making poetic lines encompass indeterminacy – to both complete and open up a way of thinking'<sup>190</sup>. Muldoon's fascination with what is ultimately irresolvable may be derived from MacNeice's example. In her essay 'The Room Where MacNeice Wrote "Snow"', Longley argues that the eponymous poem informs Muldoon's 'History'<sup>191</sup> not only in a trivial sense, but at a foundational aesthetic level. Here, Muldoon turns a strangely pedantic attitude to an unspecified sexual encounter – 'Where and when exactly did we first have sex?' – into an obtuse potted history of Northern Ireland, taking in the religious oppositions of 'Cromwell Road' and 'Aquinas Hall' (where MacNeice's father once held office<sup>192</sup>). The actual poem 'Snow' figures partly as the final piece of arbitrary information, far removed from the initial inquiry, and partly as a signifier of the final unknowability of history, whether personal or historical. The various, spiteful world of 'Snow' is as inflected with the impurities of the imagination as the various, spiteful world of competing essentialist nation-narratives, and renders MacNeice's poem 'less as written text than as creative act or touchstone or stay against confusion'<sup>193</sup>. In Wills' reading, 'while Muldoon refuses the purity of mythic constructions of the past, his poetry emphasizes the ways myth and history are imbricated with one another, and the fact that myths and fictions (including poetry), while they may be 'ideal' constructions of the imagination, none the less have real effects'<sup>194</sup>. Though far more optimistic than

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<sup>190</sup> Wills, 135-6.

<sup>191</sup> Muldoon, *Why Brownlee Left*, 27.

<sup>192</sup> Longley, *The Living Stream*, 259-60.

<sup>193</sup> *Ibid*, 260.

<sup>194</sup> Wills, *Improprieties*, 196.

anything Muldoon might say in plain and unambiguous terms, Wills' reading seems to highlight a deeply buried article of faith: today's immutable political fact may yet be subject to tomorrow's poetic reconfiguration.

In 'October 1950'<sup>195</sup>, for example, Muldoon presents a series of events in which the narrative voice remains attitudinally flat, with the poems' implications left tantalisingly out of the reader's grasp, even if it seems relatively clear in which direction the poem is asking us to leap. The poet makes Tristram Shandy-esque investigations into the circumstances of his own birth, encompassing the wound clock and 'chance remark' of Sterne's novel, the apples and oranges of 'Cookers and eaters, Fuck the Pope', the faulty playback of audio recordings in 'Wow and flutter', a pejorative term for multiracial people. The poem makes its drama out of its small verbal shifts and feints, playing out the increasingly 'wild and wonderful' possibilities about the accidents of his birth, after a fairly blunt, almost dehumanisingly frank opening: 'Whatever it is, it all comes down to this; / My father's cock / Between my mother's thighs'. The final stanza, locating the place of conception as either 'a room at the top of the stairs' or 'an open field, as like as not, / Under the little stars', ironize the poet's birth by permitting the language of nursery rhyme or even Christ's nativity to govern the poem's meaning. Muldoon's closing statement, 'Whatever it is, it leaves me in the dark' is partly a clever pun and logical spinning out of a stock phrase, but may also be read quite literally: the poet's conception of himself, his 'me', is no more graspable after an investigation of his origins than before. Even the sexual activity of Muldoon's parents – the one factor the poem assumes to be a sure thing – is destabilised by a subtle, plausibly deniable hint

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<sup>195</sup> Muldoon, *Why Brownlee Left*, 9.

towards divine birth. Origins, the poem seems to imply, are certainly conditioned by historical circumstance (similar ideas are explored in 'History', from the same volume), but just as likely to lead one astray; as Wills has it, 'the difficulty with not being able to remember the past, or not being sure of it, is that the future too remains hidden [...] and yet [Muldoon's] destiny may be no less inescapable for being hidden'<sup>196</sup>.

In 'Cuba'<sup>197</sup> Muldoon takes this uncertainty principle and tests it against broader social structures. The poem features two obvious father figures – the speaker's father and the priest in the confessional to whom his sister confesses. But two other male leaders complicate the poem further, General George Patton and President John Kennedy. They appear side-by-side in an almost-couplet:

Those Yankees were touch and go as it was –  
If you'd heard Patton in Armagh –  
But this Kennedy's nearly an Irishman  
So he's not much better than ourselves.  
And him with only to say the word. [...]  
Maybe you should make your peace with God.

The reference here is to Patton's performance to the American Third Army (now immortalised as 'Patton's Speech' or, more ominously still, 'The Speech'<sup>198</sup>) which was stationed in Armagh in 1944, a notoriously expletive-strewn and frenzy-inducing piece of rhetoric credited with boosting troop morale for Operation Overlord. The father's fearful admiration for the Ulster-Scottish Patton<sup>199</sup> is implicitly preferable to his mistrust and partly self-directed contempt for the almost-Irish Kennedy, who is not to

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<sup>196</sup> Wills, *Reading Paul Muldoon*, 68-9.

<sup>197</sup> Muldoon, 13.

<sup>198</sup> Axelrod, Alan, *Patton: A Biography*, 130-1. It may be of interest to Muldoonian trivia hunters that Patton's first military action was in the Pancho Villa Expedition.

<sup>199</sup> *Ibid*, 13.

be trusted with the diplomatic crisis of the poem's title. The father here enacts a self-defeating willingness to submit to higher powers, provided they do not too closely resemble himself. As the poem's closing stanza grimly plays out, however, the father's prurient condemnation and sense of ownership over his daughter's behaviour is in no better hands with the other 'Father', whose interest in the poem's other 'touch' (alongside the Americans being 'touch and go') suggests a spiritually questionable interest in May's private life. Although the poem does little more than present two speech acts – the father's rant and the conversation between May and the priest – the poem is deeply concerned with how the familial and religious social units regulate the behaviour of those who act outwith its stated moral code; its internal drama implicates the keepers of this code as far more effective perpetrators of violence and ignorance than those under their purview. The reality of May's actions are left unspoken by her, and forced into the public domain – noting how easily the speaker can eavesdrop 'from behind the curtain' – in a situation that by its pressurised, punitive nature disallows context and nuance. In 'Cuba', familial, governmental and clerical power is painted operating in collusion against May – the permissive undertones of whose name might be added to the list of characters in *Why Brownlee Left* whose names hint towards their character – and leave no space for anything approaching true expression. In Muldoon's thinking, as in MacNeice's<sup>200</sup>, this curtailment of freedom is the true enemy, perhaps more so than the pointedly unnamed adversaries in 'Cuba': Patton's Nazis, Kennedy's Communists (both Russian and Cuban), and the sins that so offend the father/Father. If 'October 1950' admits an existential uncertainty about the poet's individual origins, 'Cuba' leaves little doubt about his adolescent social circumstances. These very

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<sup>200</sup> In particular, see instances of thwarted 'free speech' throughout *Autumn Journal*.

constraints, however, are also – perhaps just as inescapably – a poetic wellspring, and Muldoon’s poems are to some extent occasioned by and imbricated with their violence. As Peter McDonald puts it: ‘The degree to which Muldoon’s poetry has failed to deliver resonant and easily packaged versions of a certain kind of identity which will be recognizable, exportable, and politically applicable has corresponded with [...] the prominence of difficulty in the writing’s texture and allusive methods’<sup>201</sup>. Muldoon’s impulse to leave these assigned identities behind is palpable, even if the way forward still leaves him in the dark.

As Edna Longley notes, darkness and light are at the heart of MacNeice’s poetry of his own childhood, perhaps best exemplified by ‘Autobiography’<sup>202</sup>, to which Longley refers as both a ‘nursery-rhyme’ and the ‘origins of nightmare’<sup>203</sup>:

My mother wore a yellow dress;  
Gently, gently, gentleness.

*Come back early or never come.*

When I was five the black dreams came;  
Nothing after was quite the same.

*Come back early or never come.*

As McDonald notes, the poem is haunted by the mother’s death, as she remains ‘powerfully not there’<sup>204</sup> when the child speaker needs comforting. It dramatises an uneasy relationship between the adult narrator, looking back on ‘When I was five’, and the child’s pathos-heavy responses to darkness and silence; ‘Autobiography’ aims to maintain formal distance from the story told while retaining its emotional

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<sup>201</sup> McDonald, *Mistaken Identities*, 187.

<sup>202</sup> MacNeice, 200.

<sup>203</sup> Longley, *Louis MacNeice: A Critical Study*, 9.

<sup>204</sup> McDonald, *Incorrigibly Plural*, 13.

woundedness. The refrain is a formally circular imperative and ultimatum, and its precise origins and intentions are deeply ambiguous; it may be the child's wounded demand for care, the poet's sense of guilt for abandoning his home, for 'walk[ing] away alone' at the poem's close. The lines:

The dark was talking to the dead;  
The lamp was dark beside my bed.

*Come back early or never come.*

seem to suggest that the refrain is itself what 'the dark' is vocalising. The uncertainty and sense of helplessness regarding the poem's own functions are deeply woven into its meaning; the title 'Autobiography', with its connotations of literary witnessing, works against the poem's grain, highlighting its inability to render in plain fact the loss of an edenic childhood.

The late poem 'Soap Suds'<sup>205</sup> dramatises a similar process, in which the poet is both unable to walk away from the past or to finally pin it down, to 'let it form within his hands once more', as in 'The Brandy Glass'<sup>206</sup>. The poem is another of MacNeice's self-enveloping forms, as its several repetends – the voice crying 'Play!', 'the hands of a child', the ball and the mallet – blur the poem's understanding of time:

This brand of soap has the same smell as once in the big  
House he visited when he was eight: the walls of the bathroom open  
To reveal a lawn where a great yellow ball rolls back through a hoop  
To rest at the head of a mallet held in the hands of a child.

The following stanza's list of 'joys' includes 'A stuffed black dog in the hall', which becomes 'a great gong booms from the dog-dark hall; as in 'Autobiography' the

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<sup>205</sup> MacNeice, 577.

<sup>206</sup> Ibid, 92.

memory suddenly and rapidly turns from the paradisaical 'walled garden with bees' into the nightmare of darkness and angry voices. Longley reads the poem as 'free will losing out to habit and time'<sup>207</sup> as the freedom of the garden turns against the speaker and attempts to control him; the second stanza's attempt to catalogue individual objects in memory slips, the mallet becomes a gong-hammer and the grass sprouts like the tree in 'The Truisms'. 'Soap Suds' seems to share the nostalgia for childhood of 'Autobiography', though its existential dread has reached a far higher pitch. As in Muldoon's 'Twice', childhood is only salvageable through a painful and psychologically damaging process of blending past and present; even then, the true past remains irrevocably lost.

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Of all the poets in this study, Paul Muldoon is perhaps the most apt to make a mockery of any attempt to locate him within a fixed system of influence. The closer one gets to his poems' way of thinking, the more it seems their most MacNeicean quality is their willingness – their determination – to take the elder poet's advice and 'do otherwise'<sup>208</sup>. The poems in which the historical MacNeice appears are not necessarily where he exerts his greatest formal influence: '7, Middagh Street' might be Muldoon's closest relative to *Autumn Journal*, but it is less a meditation on how the poet might find a place and purpose in an evil time than a meditation on whether such meditations

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<sup>207</sup> Longley, 158.

<sup>208</sup> MacNeice, *The Poetry of W.B. Yeats*, 232.

constitute anything more than a bloated sense of self-importance. MacNeice's final word in the piece is presented as one pole in ongoing vacillation, a boundary from which the poet can only rebound; formally, the poem seems to suggest that, politically speaking, one cannot out-MacNeice MacNeice. Where Muldoon does take up the challenge is in his conception of form as constituent of meaning in and of itself; his poems might leave the reader in the very place they started, but the often tortuous means of return make the import of the journey impossible to ignore. Where points of departure are points of arrival in terms of their poems' formal arrangement, the two poets share a more prosaic preoccupation with finding their own origins in the world, a kind of self-mythologizing that seems to encompass an understanding that to run from one's origins is to run into one's fate. The poets' philosophical engagement with ideas of flux and the impossibility of escaping the self are deep-running seams in their work.

In her essay 'Varieties of Parable', Longley characterises the two poets as 'MacNeice the disenchanting progressive and Muldoon, never-enchanted chronicler of the Ulster standstill, seize on syntax as a crucial agency of their special perspectives on the relation between past and future'<sup>209</sup>. Longley neatly summarises the poets' fraught relationships to the social realities under which they wrote, and how their work relates to their attempts to imagine their way out of those enclosed systems of thought, however much both Muldoon and MacNeice, particularly in their later work, seem to have despaired of the attempt. Perhaps MacNeice, in a world in which he had not passed away so early, might have joined Muldoon in his latter poetry's obsessive circlings and nihilism. Yet the formal meaning of Muldoon's work, particularly in the

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<sup>209</sup> Longley, *Poetry in the Wars*, 222.



seventies and eighties, still refuses this coming to rest in a place of meaninglessness and fatalism. As Wills notes: 'repetition is always the creation of something new: the relation of the present to the past is also the outline of a future'<sup>210</sup>. One is put in mind of MacNeice's questants in *The Dark Tower*, or his various everymen in the late collections: if the quest is doomed from the start, all that matters is the act of attempting, the minute gesture that must be made. Identifying where a single MacNeice poem interacts with a single Muldoon poem is asking too much of two poets whose work moved too fast for all your 'slide, snide rules': their affinity runs far deeper, to the 'prismatic light'<sup>211</sup> MacNeice identified as being fundamental to understanding his homeland, the first principle of constant change from which all else has flowed.

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<sup>210</sup> Wills, 185.

<sup>211</sup> MacNeice, 50.

## Five: 'Nods and Whispers': Ciaran Carson

*'Well, to tell you the truth, I haven't read that much MacNeice. And of the bits I have read, I sometimes suspect his ear.'*<sup>1</sup>

*'Slowly, year after year since I first read it [MacNeice's 'Snow'] I don't know how many years ago, this poem has eased itself into my consciousness. It is now a firm favourite.'*<sup>2</sup>

*'[G]iven the amount of things in the world, their incorrigible plurality [...] all our truths are perforce partial truths, if not downright lies.'*<sup>3</sup> – Ciaran Carson, 2000; 2015; 2016.

The previous chapter read Paul Muldoon's self-presentation in interview and critical writing in part as a continuation of his poetic practice, as a persona which complimented the elusiveness of his creative work. Carson's formal ambitions have changed far more radically from book to book than Muldoon's incremental shifts, and the handful of public statements Carson has made about his own work abide by rules far less easily codified than his contemporary's meticulous, if sometimes diagnosable, game-playing. The statements quoted above were published over a decade apart, but the latter may well be directly addressing or redressing the former. It's perhaps significant that Carson's earlier criticism is of MacNeice's 'ear', the instinctive sensitivity to music that several critics have assigned to Carson himself<sup>4</sup>, and which he explores at length in *Last Night's Fun*, a book-length study of Irish storytelling and traditional music culture. His poem 'Bagpipe Music' (1993), which will

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<sup>1</sup> Brown, *In the Chair: Interviews with Poets from the North of Ireland*, 149.

<sup>2</sup> Carson, "Ciaran Carson on 'Snow'", *The Duchy Vixen* 10 (Dec 2015), 11.

<sup>3</sup> Carson, "Thing", *The Tangerine*, 1 (Winter 2016), 7.

<sup>4</sup> See Frank Sewell's essay, "Carson's carnival of language" in *Ciaran Carson: Critical Essays*, (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2009), 182-200, or Seán Crosson's "Performance and Music in the Poetry of Ciaran Carson" in *Nordic Irish Studies* 3 (2004), 101-11.

be discussed in greater depth later, is founded upon Carson's critique of MacNeice's rebarbative, occasionally snobbish, reading of traditional music and the effects of capitalism on Hebridean communities. The turn away from matters of the ear to matters of Carson's 'consciousness', meanwhile, could be read as paradigmatic of prevailing aesthetic patterns in his career, as the tuneful, copious, visceral yarns of *The Irish for No* and *Belfast Confetti* transition into the dreamscapes and psychological horror of *Breaking News* and *For All We Know*. Carson's effort, in the quotations above, to put breathing room between MacNeice and himself might also be in response to critics repeatedly reading MacNeice's presence into his work, as Edna Longley does in detail in *The Living Stream*<sup>5</sup> in 1994, and Guinn Batten in her essay on 'Snow' in 1995<sup>6</sup>.

A relevant parallel is Carson's re-evaluation of the influence of American poet C.K. Williams, once a broadly accepted ancestor in Carson's poetic family tree<sup>7</sup>. In a review of Williams in 1989, Carson writes: 'Within a year of reading *Tar*, I had written a book called *The Irish for No*: I hereby acknowledge a debt'<sup>8</sup>. In conversation with John Brown in 2000, he argues, 'the debt to Williams doesn't seem to me as great now as it did then'<sup>9</sup>. The repeated framing of creative empowerment as a 'debt' seems significant; it seems reasonable to suggest Carson has made a conscious connection between his former evaluation of Williams and the more recent one. This shift in perspective is almost a carbon copy of the one described by the quotes above regarding MacNeice. The impetus behind these reconsiderations, however, is certainly less valuable than what they demonstrate about Carson's capacity for self-critique. A reader may observe that: a) Carson is willing to

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<sup>5</sup> Longley, *The Living Stream*, 262.

<sup>6</sup> Batten, "Ciaran Carson's Parturient Partition: The Crack in MacNeices 'More than Glass'", *The Southern Review* 31.3 (1995), 538.

<sup>7</sup> Grennan, *Irish Poetry Since Kavanagh*, 102.

<sup>8</sup> Carson, "Against Oblivion", *Irish Review* 6 (1989), 115-6.

<sup>9</sup> Brown, 147.

state openly what he feels about the poets and writers whose presence may be felt in his work, in both positive and negative terms, and b) he is willing to both change his mind and publicly acknowledge those changes as part of an ongoing self-critical practice.

A similar impulse toward creative self-awareness and reinvention may be observed in the radical aesthetic shifts between Carson's collections. Later in his career Carson would turn the long, conversational lines that helped solidify his reputation in *The Irish for No* and *Belfast Confetti* into the pared-down, almost imagistic *Breaking News*, with departures into abecedary in *Opera Et Cetera*, translation in *First Language*, and romantic Irish national myth in *The Twelfth of Never* in between. This narrative is complicated further by Carson's *The New Estate*, which was published in 1976 and preceded a long stretch in which Carson published next to no poetry, citing that 'After a year or two it struck me that poetry, or poems, were so remote by comparison. Removed, academic'<sup>10</sup>. In other words, this first book, which Frank Sewell characterises as 'a strong but formally conservative volume, reflecting the poet's learning of his craft from predecessors such as Seamus Heaney'<sup>11</sup>, occasioned the first major rethinking of Carson's attitudes to his work: no sooner had he mastered the fundamentals of the genre than they appear to have held little further promise. If identifying a singular MacNeice whose poetic influence might be detected in Carson's oeuvre is a fraught enterprise, aligning him with a corresponding singular Carson is exponentially trickier. In that regard, at least, the two poets have a significant affinity: a career-spanning aesthetic restlessness. One might similarly track MacNeice's departures from young stylite to the reportage of *Autumn Journal* to the veteran parabolist. Perhaps this unwillingness to settle comfortably into their reputations marks one of their most crucial points of contact.

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<sup>10</sup> Brandes, "Ciaran Carson", *Irish Review* 8 (Spring 1990), 81.

<sup>11</sup> Sewell, *Ciaran Carson: Critical Essays*, 186.

As previous chapters have demonstrated, it's possible to argue without fear of contradiction that for Mahon, Longley and, with only a little prevarication, Muldoon, MacNeice was a significant, enabling forerunner. More so than any of the poets discussed thus far (and with the exception of only a pair of explicit references), the presence of MacNeice in Carson's poetry is more deeply buried, and indeed openly contested by the poet himself. For Carson, this process of assimilation – in Carson's words, his poetry's 'eas[ing] into my consciousness' – has been a lengthy and complex one. In practical terms, a straightforward assertion of MacNeice's presence, let alone his influence, is neither wholly possible nor desirable. Where MacNeice stands as an enabling and generally benevolent force in the poetry of Carson's peers, in Carson's own work MacNeice is one ghost among many. Indeed, Carson himself is more likely to cite Conan Doyle, G.K. Chesterton and Robert Louis Stevenson<sup>12</sup> as influences than other Irish poets. What I hope this chapter indicates is that reading Carson's poems to some extent against his own grain is not an act of disrespect to the risky originality of his body of work, but a celebration of the variousness and capaciousness of it, within which an exploration of the shared concerns, and noteworthy points of departure, between Carson and MacNeice might be conducted.

Pertinent to this discussion of literary influence is Patricia Horton's argument that Borges' presence and example illuminates Carson's attitudes to literary inheritance. In her essay, "Reading tradition in Carson's poetry", Horton examines Borges' essay "Kafka and his precursors", in which Borges cites Irish writers' geopolitically marginalised status as an empowering means of handling themes beyond their immediate context. Both he and Carson appear to share a 'radical and anarchic theory of tradition' that informs a fluid and unpredictable relationship to their forebears<sup>13</sup>. Carson's rangy and eclectic choice of

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<sup>12</sup> Carson, *Ciaran Carson: Critical essays*, 14.

<sup>13</sup> Horton, *Ciaran Carson: Critical essays*, 161-2.

projects, from translations of early modern Irish to versions of Rimbaud's *Illuminations* (which Carson describes as 'a restoration, or renovation'<sup>14</sup> rather than typical translations), certainly suggest a poet comfortable with stamping his personal mark on his poetic forebears, or the poets he has claimed as such. Borges' challenge to hierarchical systems of literary 'inheritance' might give a reader more sophisticated tools for exploring the dynamics between Carson and MacNeice, in that Carson sees their relationship as a two-way street, a version of T.S. Eliot's dictum that 'the past should be altered by the present as much as the present is directed by the past'<sup>15</sup>. If Carson's work has been fundamentally altered by MacNeice, our reading of MacNeice might likewise be complicated by a greater understanding of Carson.

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As mentioned above, while Carson's collections vary aesthetically and generically, his poems are more consistent in their core philosophical foci. Prime among these is the essential instability of selfhood, noting MacNeice's Caronesque assertion that, 'As far as I can make out, I not only have many different selves but I am often not myself at all'<sup>16</sup>. Carson's work is replete with narrators whose most basic capacity to locate or identify themselves has been withheld from or problematized for the reader or listener. Almost every deep critical study of Carson at least touches on this aspect of his writing, the sense that not only has objective truth been well and truly discredited, the lens through which

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<sup>14</sup> Carson, *In the Light Of*, 13.

<sup>15</sup> Eliot, *Selected Prose of T.S. Eliot*, 39.

<sup>16</sup> MacNeice, *Poetry of W.B. Yeats*, 146.

one might view such truth is in existentially bad shape. John Goodby argues that the meandering and self-correcting nature of Carson's narratives, particularly in *The Irish for No*, are a kind of self-defence mechanism against being accurately 'read' by potential malefactors<sup>17</sup>. Goodby argues that the poet is doubly assailed by these harmful readers: both by individual acts of physical violence, or as agents of a city space in which one's personal signification is patrolled and enforced by social mores, the violent coercion of a thought-police state. David Wheatley discusses how the political breakdown described by *Breaking News* extends to 'the functioning of the lyric 'I' and the very possibility of its staging'<sup>18</sup>, reinforcing Goodby's analysis of how collectively enforced cultural policing disallows individual exploration or expression, let alone cultural critique. 'Question Time'<sup>19</sup>, for example, demonstrates how much construction is necessary for that lyric 'I' to survive, where 'survival' is rendered in acutely literal terms. Given how often Carson refers back to the importance of the 'here and now', particularly in his discussions of the infinite variations of traditional music – 'it's alive, here in front of your very eyes and ears, right now'<sup>20</sup> – this aspect of his poetry might be continuous with his belief in artistic transience, a space in which it is impossible to be so mundanely pigeon- or button-holed. The pub, house or concert hall in which a particular tune was played, or story told, was contingent on a series of contributing factors that may never be accurately replicated, any more than the narrator may once again be that same person. This idea that individuality is at once trapped within circular patterns of behaviour and wholly denied a true return to origins is an absolutely MacNeicean motif, appearing throughout his poetry. 'The Brandy Glass'<sup>21</sup> is built

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<sup>17</sup> Goodby, *Ciaran Carson: Critical Essays*, 70.

<sup>18</sup> Wheatley, *Ciaran Carson: Critical Essays*, 65.

<sup>19</sup> Carson, *Belfast Confetti*, 57.

<sup>20</sup> Brandes, 81.

<sup>21</sup> MacNeice, *Collected Poems*, 84.

around a dreamily closed, nostalgic loop; in 'Leaving Barra'<sup>22</sup> a conflict is dramatized between this longing for a false vision of home ('hankering after Atlantis') and his idealised lover 'living like a fugue and moving'. It's worth noting that the idea of fugue states, in the psychological as well as musical sense, seem to fascinate Carson. In his novel, *Shamrock Tea*, the narrator notes with resignation that 'for all I know I might be someone else [...] It is a condition known as fugue'<sup>23</sup>. What's more, this line is delivered immediately after the narrator's explanation that:

I have cut myself off from the world, only to find myself return to it. I have climbed the glaciers of Iceland [...] I have inhabited the wilds of Connemara. I am of no fixed abode. I speak to you in a language which is not mine. Yet I need someone to speak to.

The mention of both Iceland (where MacNeice and Auden composed *Letters From Iceland* in 1936) and Connemara (where MacNeice's father was born, the 'pre-natal mountain' of 'Carrick Revisited'<sup>24</sup>) are direct biographical links to the elder poet. The references to escaping and returning to the world may be echoes of similar debates in MacNeice's 'Eclogue from Iceland'<sup>25</sup>, in which Grettir instructs the MacNeice/Auden surrogates Ryan and Craven to 'Go back to where you belong'. The desire to communicate in a second language is more readily identifiable with the bilingual Carson, though the lack of 'fixed abode' and feeling of cultural disinheritance rings a MacNeicean bell, specifically the Ireland whose 'name keeps ringing like a bell / In an under-water belfry' for the poet who thought he was 'well / Out of it' in section XVI of *Autumn Journal*<sup>26</sup>. This desire to be away from a

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid, 86.

<sup>23</sup> Carson, *Shamrock Tea*, 162.

<sup>24</sup> MacNeice, 224.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid, 40.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid, 101.



discourse and a place which refuses to let go is shared by the two poets, even if its manifestation in their work differs. It's not a stretch to imagine how 'living like a fugue' might appeal to Carson, who notes in an interview the word's origin in the latin *fugure*, to flee; one might be put in mind of 'Belfast Confetti': 'Why can't I escape?'<sup>27</sup>. Carson describes fugue as 'a kind of trance where the victim walks out the door, and, forgetting who he is, takes up another existence and another name in another place'<sup>28</sup>, which, given his aesthetic restlessness and numerous translation projects, an almost literal taking up of other existences and names, seems a central concern in Carson's philosophy. Repeatedly in MacNeice's work, who one *was* remains an inescapable part of who one *is*, however much, as he argues in 'Variation on Heraclitus'<sup>29</sup>, 'One cannot live in the same room twice'; for all the flux of life one might experience, home, or the vision of home, does not ease its grip.

One cannot live in the same city twice, either: urban spaces in Carson's work consistently suggest literal manifestations of psychological trauma and are subject to constant revision; as Elmer Kennedy-Andrews notes, Carson 'attempt[s] to read and decode the meaning of urban space from clues, traces, fragments'<sup>30</sup>. Like Carson's narrators, his cities (usually, but not always, Belfast; one might argue that Belfast is a ghostly presence even when the poet writes about elsewhere<sup>31</sup>) cannot be trusted to behave the way the reader might expect. A key word that recurs throughout his work is 'labyrinth', memorably appearing in 'Belfast Confetti'<sup>32</sup>:

I know this labyrinth so well – Balaclava, Raglan, Inkerman, Odessa Street –  
Why can't I escape? Every move is punctuated.

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<sup>27</sup> Carson, *Irish for No*, 31.

<sup>28</sup> Carson, *Critical essays*, 26.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid*, 137.

<sup>30</sup> Kennedy-Andrews, *Oxford Handbook of Modern Irish Poetry*, 464.

<sup>31</sup> Carson, *Ciaran Carson: Critical Essays*, 17.

<sup>32</sup> Carson, *The Irish for No*, 31.

and ‘Smithfield Market’<sup>33</sup>, another real-life location in Belfast turned nightmarish in the poem:

Something many-toothed, elaborate, stirred briefly in the labyrinth.

In his interview with Elmer Kennedy-Andrews, Carson notes his indebtedness to Borges’ fiction, and discusses how the Borgesian labyrinth exists as a recurrent symbol in his work<sup>34</sup>. As ‘Belfast Confetti’ demonstrates, the labyrinth’s threat is literal as well as existential; the poet connects the anxiety of being geographically ‘trapped on the wrong side’ of West Belfast to a literary-philosophical malaise, ‘Perhaps the way out of the labyrinth is to get deeper into it, more fully to explore its ramifications’<sup>35</sup>. The mutating, threatening, hallucinogenic city is also a mainstay of MacNeice’s work, particularly ‘Birmingham’<sup>36</sup> with its ‘trams like vast sarcophagi’, ‘Zeppelin clouds, and Pentecost-like the cars’ headlights’. Many of the thumbnail nightmares of *The Burning Perch* take place in a corrupted vision of contemporary London, poems that delve into the places where the poet’s psyche and the reality of the modern city commingle. In ‘Flower Show’<sup>37</sup> the synthetic flowers are ‘Squidlike, phallic or vulvar, hypnotic, idiotic, oleaginous’, threatening the lyric self’s ‘living language’; in ‘Charon’<sup>38</sup> the streets are full of ‘aggressively vacant / Faces’; ‘The Taxis’<sup>39</sup> threatens to dissolve the singular self entirely, ‘not to speak of the dog’. Where Carson’s city is more forthright about its opposition to the freedom of the physical safety of the individual, MacNeice’s urban space is more passively, existentially threatening beneath its polite, orderly façade. Both poets’ renderings of their immediate physical environments

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<sup>33</sup> Ibid, 37.

<sup>34</sup> Carson, *Ciaran Carson: Critical essays*, 25.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid, 25.

<sup>36</sup> MacNeice, 17.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid, 521.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid, 530.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid, 522.

suggest a simultaneous fascination and horror at the 'dissolving hail of data'<sup>40</sup> MacNeice identified as an emerging facet of an increasingly polysemic modern world; Carson, with his preoccupation with how this 'data' is manipulated, mutated and weaponised in the semantic battles on the streets of Belfast in the seventies and eighties, dramatizes the sharp end of a matter that is demonstrably more than mere philosophy.

As Wheatley argues, this act of registering history is at the heart of Carson's *modus operandi*. Speaking specifically about *Breaking News*, but in terms that resonate throughout Carson's oeuvre, he notes how Carson aims less at 'lyric transcendence than an interiorization of the violence of history, an embrace of broken and incomplete signifying strategies [...] over the delusions of aesthetic repletion'<sup>41</sup>. The lyric strategies of his contemporaries are by necessity rejected in the attempt to faithfully digest the junk of contemporary politics. As Carson explains:

[A] lot of the poems I wrote in the 1980s and 90s were some kind of reflection of the Troubles. Hardly a commentary; I thought of the poems a snapshots of what was going on, the sometimes surreal circumstances of the violence. [...] I didn't choose to write about it, it chose me.<sup>42</sup>

But my aim was, in that work which deals with the "Troubles", to act as a camera or a tape-recorder, and present things in a kind of edited surreality.<sup>43</sup>

It's noticeable how closely Carson fits the description of MacNeice's ideal imaginative writer in his book-essay *Modern Poetry* in 1938:

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<sup>40</sup> MacNeice, *Modern Poetry*, 29.

<sup>41</sup> Wheatley, 64.

<sup>42</sup> Carson, 17.

<sup>43</sup> Brown, 148.

there is a distinction between the escape of a man who, having been in a war, writes either honest descriptions of war ('to get it off his chest') or honest descriptions of anything he meets with in the light of his own experience, which inevitably includes that war.<sup>44</sup>

Both Carson and MacNeice characterise the process of converting reality into art (noting that Carsonian 'in the light of') as, to some degree, a passive one, in which editorialising or even editing one's response is beside the point. Political commentary, then, may only be detectable in the *texture* of the poetry. How the work manifests is, at least partly, a product of its historical moment, and so speaking in the direct terms of political discourse becomes somewhat tautological. The relative subtlety of the poetry's critique is not an unwillingness to confront issues of social import, but an inevitable by-product of observing and reporting with honesty and a keen awareness of self. It may also be worth noting that MacNeice's book of criticism, published in the months prior to *Autumn Journal* and the apex of his poetry's direct political engagement, was also an explicit aesthetic break from his peers, who he believed should be writing poetry 'neither lagging behind in an obsolete romanticism nor running ahead to an assurance too good to be true'<sup>45</sup>. This is reminiscent of Carson's pivotal review of Heaney's *North* in 1975, which was published with the title, "Escaped from the Massacre?"; once again the impossibility of escape, the fugue state denied, is an aesthetic, perhaps even moral, conundrum. Here, Carson castigates his contemporary for an unfaithful rendering of history:

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<sup>44</sup> MacNeice, *Modern Poetry*, 7.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid*, 204.

No one really escapes from the massacre, of course – the only way you can do that is by falsifying issues, by applying wrong notions of history, instead of seeing what's before your eyes.<sup>46</sup>

Carson implies that to make metaphor or myth out of current events is necessarily to falsify them, to get 'wrong notions' about one's place in history; a space removed from the 'massacre' is a space in which honest art cannot exist. Moreover, it takes as a *sine qua non* the idea that the poet's responsibility is 'seeing what's before your eyes'. This is a positive assertion of one's ability to act as witness and reporter, an understanding of poetry as a means of recapturing the present, however unpleasant, illogical or ugly. Like Carson's 'snapshots', MacNeice advocates a poet as a 'mouthpiece of the zeitgeist'<sup>47</sup>. Both camera and microphone are mechanical tools, however, both can be skilfully manipulated by their operators to distort reality, and it depends on the conscience of the poet to find a means of faithfully reproducing what is complex, fluid and hard to digest. As Carson indicated in his thoughts on the figure of the labyrinth, escape from this impasse is impossible, except by what one might uncover by facing reality more directly. In this light, Heaney's greatest failure – compare Auden, Spender and Day-Lewis' in the eyes of MacNeice – is his attempt to create art to the specifications of abstract political idealism in the midst of violence that was altogether mundane. Perhaps it is in Heaney's faith in the power of aesthetic beauty that allows the 'well-made poem' to appear not only possible but actively desirable, rejecting Carson and MacNeice's recording equipment and distorting 'reality' in the process. Perhaps this same faith makes the disjunctive and rebarbative aesthetics of Carson's poems appear contrary to Heaney's redemptive discourse. As Neil Corcoran points

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<sup>46</sup> Carson, "Escaped from the Massacre?" *The Honest Ulsterman* 50, (Winter 1975), 186.

<sup>47</sup> MacNeice, 89.

out, Heaney's claim to 'take the English lyric and make it eat stuff that it has never eaten before', is arguably outstripped by Carson's walkers and talkers in the late 1980s<sup>48</sup>.

Both MacNeice and Carson revel in linguistic communality, the sense that commonly shared phrases might hold some means of decoding something deeper or more unsettling about that community. In *Modern Poetry*, MacNeice frames this question in its full historical and aesthetic context. With characteristic disdain, MacNeice describes the efforts of the later Victorians and Georgians:

The community did not appear to need them, so, tit for tat, they did not need the community. [...] Further, it was no longer desirable to let the community intrude into the subject of one's work; if it was never going to call, one need not hang out its photograph. But the trouble with words is that every word is a community-product.<sup>49</sup>

MacNeice's proposition is that 'The poet is a specialist in something which every one practices'<sup>50</sup>. *Modern Poetry* aims to draw the genre back from its Parnassian tendencies, from the strategies of Eliot, who MacNeice observes, 'would like his daily life and his personal relationships to conform to some pattern he has extracted from other people's poetry or philosophy'<sup>51</sup>, and to re-engage with life as it actually is; both MacNeice and Carson argue and, arguably, demonstrate in their work, that the shiftiness, messiness and unpredictability of language is the perfect medium in which to investigate a shifty, messy and unpredictable world. It is no accident, then, that MacNeice's first point of contact between the estranged and disappointed literati and the 'whole man reacting with both

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<sup>48</sup> Corcoran, *Poets of Modern Ireland*, 177-8.

<sup>49</sup> MacNeice, *Modern Poetry*, 2-3.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid*, 31.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid*, 59.

intelligence and emotion<sup>52</sup> is in the tactility of language and its inescapable communality. He rejects the notion that there are non-poetic subjects, questioning 'How many people today have not some emotional relationship to machines or politics?'<sup>53</sup>. At the same time, he seems to anticipate the reclamation of 'heightened' or cliché speech after the modernist purging of poetic diction, citing Auden's 'periphrases' as an exemplar<sup>54</sup>.

For Carson, 'ordinary speech can often be as gnomic as any poem', and both poets delight in the act of turning the figurative stock phrase against the grain. In MacNeice's 'Homage to Clichés'<sup>55</sup>, the repeated phrase 'What will you have [...]? The same again?' gathers portentous force over the course of the poem; or 'Birthright'<sup>56</sup>, in which a popular adage is unsettlingly reversed: 'My jaw dropped and I gaped from drouth: / My gift horse looked me in the mouth'. The effect is not merely decorative, although as Carson has repeatedly argued, there is joy to be had in the immediacy and unpredictability of incorporating speech rhythms into a literary form, 'Speech and slabber can be entirely odd and strange if you hear it right, or maybe I mean wrong'<sup>57</sup>. There is a political aspect to this act of hearing, as Carson asserts the equal validity of oral and traditional culture alongside what is generally considered 'high' art. It seems significant that he would later critique his own use of the term 'pub-slabber':

it's a rather flippant way of referring to the sometimes profound knowledge,  
wisdom even, that I've encountered in my dealings with traditional musicians [...]

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<sup>52</sup> Ibid, 29.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid, 140.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid, 142-3.

<sup>55</sup> MacNeice, *Collected Poems*, 59.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid, 531.

<sup>57</sup> Brown, 145.

They are immensely sophisticated [...] with them, oral, musical and literary culture are all part of the same spectrum.<sup>58</sup>

If Heaney's poetry made the English lyric eat new stuff but remain an English lyric, Carson aspires only to the former of these conditions; what the English lyric becomes is not his concern. In Carson's rendering, the unstable self-constructions and surreality of 1980s Belfast could not be accommodated by the well-made poem. His persistent and practical investment in the value of oral and musical culture gives the text a degree of specificity of time and place that his contemporaries only rarely approach; the extent to which Carson's contemporary Belfast is a richly detailed character itself is a unique achievement. MacNeice does not share Carson's celebration of the local and the ephemeral in traditional culture, but certainly relishes the aspects of language which are shared, circulated and made strange by communal use. Much of the unheimlich atmosphere of *Soltices* and *The Burning Perch* is achieved by the use of these rote phrases in deeply unsettling contexts. 'The Riddle'<sup>59</sup> makes a childhood game deathly serious by repetition: 'What *is* it that goes round and round the house?' 'Selva Oscura'<sup>60</sup> draws deeply from the various meanings of 'for good' in the sense of permanence and benefit, while 'out of the wood', when the wood has been figured as the self (that rather glorious multilingual pun on self/selva), is an immaculately double-edged play of the phrase's stock meaning against the poem's local meaning. These poems and many like them use communal phrases as a means of keeping the reader alert to the rich potential of everyday speech, a key point of affinity between his work and Carson's.

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<sup>58</sup> Carson, *Ciaran Carson: Critical essays*, 23.

<sup>59</sup> MacNeice, 474.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid*, 143.



In her essay “Ciaran Carson’s Parturient Partition: The Crack in MacNeice’s ‘More Than Glass’”, Guinn Batten lays down important foundations for future comparative studies of MacNeice and Carson’s work. Citing Slavoj Žižek’s *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, Batten establishes the utopian tendencies of an oppressed culture, waiting for the death of the ‘garrison’ set up by the dominant culture. Further, Žižek outlines a colonisation (or partitioning) of history, in which the dominant group overwrites reality in accordance with official accounts<sup>61</sup>. The gap between authorised accounts of reality and reality as experienced on the street becomes a fraught and contested space, in which a minority culture may have, in Carson’s words, ‘what’s before your eyes’ flatly denied. Batten argues, however, that this is precisely where poetry’s capacity for bearing complex, multifaceted and fluid truths takes primacy: ‘a history in which revolution has failed may be redeemed in moments (often literary or aesthetic) when time and space are “cracked” by irruptions of the Real’<sup>62</sup>. What that capitalised ‘Real’ connotes for each poet is emblematic of their social and aesthetic differences. Batten characterises this disparity as hinging on the “More” in “There is more than glass” [which] suggests an extra, invisible line of defence behind the bulletproof glass of the garrison’<sup>63</sup>. Whether MacNeice was conscious of this potential reading or not, Batten argues, it serves as a symbol of the safe distance from which he could observe and report on British colonial violence in Northern Ireland, while personally benefitting from the inequality of its social structures. There is certainly evidence in his

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<sup>61</sup> Cited in Batten, 541.

<sup>62</sup> Batten, 541.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid, 543.

poems of the 1930s that these divisions, physical or structural, were on MacNeice's mind.

In 'Belfast'<sup>64</sup>, he writes:

In the porch of the chapel before the garish Virgin [...]  
Lies a bunch of limbs glimpsed in the cave of gloom  
By us who walk in the street so buoyantly and glib.

Two years after the publication of 'Snow', 'Carrickfergus'<sup>65</sup> shows similar preoccupations:

The Norman walled this town against the country  
To stop his ears against the yelping of his slave

Batten argues that MacNeice's 'urbane regrets' do not, ultimately, trouble his perspective as an observer from the dominant class; even if the 'yelping' of his suffering neighbours are registered, they are still heard from the safe remove the garrison provides. The recurring observational window through which MacNeice sees or hears (as in 'Train to Dublin', 'Coda' or indeed 'Snow'<sup>66</sup>) becomes a symbol of his degree of removal from the 'Real', the arbitration of reality imposed on citizens of a minority culture. These windows may be philosophical structures by which the poet might discuss ideas about the nature of perception, but their physical reality and immediate significance (of drawing rooms and trains to private schools) are difficult to ignore. Batten might have in mind the lurid hyperreality of Carson's *Irish for No* or *Belfast Confetti* when she writes, 'the senses perceive all too immediately and vividly the encroaching Real of this unstable garrison, a community whose adulthood, reason, freedom, and indeed whose very existence is questioned (and threatened) daily'<sup>67</sup>. Carson's early collections are, in part, a document of this effort to survive the murderous reality being imposed on his subjectivity. The first long poem in *Belfast Confetti* is 'Loaf'<sup>68</sup>, and it may not be by coincidence that it features

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<sup>64</sup> MacNeice, 17.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid, 69.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid, 27, 546, 30.

<sup>67</sup> Batten, 548.

<sup>68</sup> Carson, *Belfast Confetti*, 15.

'snowed-up panes' on which the protagonists write their names. In 'Loaf', in contrast to the lush domesticity of MacNeice's 'Snow', the organising sensations are of bread, cigarettes and whiskey, rather than tangerines, and the 'snow' on the window is from dust inside the flour-loft. As Michael McAteer notes, 'Carson's poetry is saturated with figures blurring into the objects they produce'<sup>69</sup>: here, the young men write their names in flour, and will wash them away again with '*Ajax and Domestos*'. The poem's other mention of snow is in a translated line from François Villon's poem, 'Ballade of the Ladies of Times Past', '*Is this / The snow that was so bright last year?*' These two images of snow in a poem set in summer seem to echo the fleeting acquaintance between the two men, their attempts to inscribe their identities in the face of forces beyond their control.

As Horton argues, the Belfast of Carson's *Belfast Confetti* is a surveillance state, and the experience of being perpetually under scrutiny from a faceless but omniscient Other has devastating and far-reaching psychological effects. Horton notes:

There is no longer any opposition between the real and the imaginary, some authentic Belfast and a represented Belfast, instead the whole structure is thrown into question, as the image becomes reality.<sup>70</sup>

In this light, the basic differences between the speakers in Carson's and MacNeice's 'Snow'<sup>71</sup> become somewhat starker. MacNeice's poem is, at least in part, a celebration of the hallucinogenic properties of sudden perceptual inrush, the sensory delight in fire and tangerines and how these phenomena ramify into the world; the poem seems to ask how one can possibly expect an empirical understanding of an experience that can throw up so

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<sup>69</sup> McAteer, *Critical essays*, 132.

<sup>70</sup> Horton, "From Romantic to Postmodern: Imagining the Real in the Work of Ciaran Carson", *Canadian Journal of Irish Studies*, 25:1, (December 1999), 347.

<sup>71</sup> MacNeice, 30, Carson, *Belfast Confetti*, 20.

much, at such short notice, with such little care for its inhabitants. The urbane setting of the 'great bay-window', its fireplace and bouquet of roses, however, are the unexamined artefacts of his daily surroundings, and MacNeice's 'Snow' doesn't appear to invest these objects with political significance. Though it would be a mistake to diminish MacNeice's achievement in the poem because its concerns are more with the metaphysical than the immediately physical, the fact that these concerns can play out untroubled by such worldly concerns as appear in Carson's work is also politically charged.

This fact does leave 'Snow' open to the critique embedded in Carson's poem of the same title, which Carson achieves by doing little more than mentioning several pertinent facts about his socio-political moment. The world of Carson's poems is also, 'suddener', 'crazier', 'more spiteful and gay than one supposes'; Carson's speakers, however, must endure these violent whims and unstable truths without the security of the garrison, on the other side of the 'more than glass'. Carson's poem concerns a penniless man purchasing a 'Thirties scuffed leather sofa', a pointed nod to the specific time and place from which MacNeice was writing, acknowledging the decay and decline of the intervening years. The speaker finds a surprising amount of detritus – 'all the haberdashery of loss' – underneath the cushions: a rosary, broken ball-point pens, buttons, pennies, pins, needles, and a ping-pong ball, possibly *the* ping-pong ball from 'another era' that opens the poem. Carson describes the room in the terms of power, both socio-economic ('a shadowed parlour', 'mahogany veneer') and political ('Handshakes all round, nods and whispers'). Carson's 'Snow' imagines the speaker of MacNeice's 'Snow' as moving in the same spheres as these hushed and scrupulously private conversations, the intentions of which are as inscrutable and unaccountable as any of the more directly violent actors in *Belfast Confetti*. The book primes the reader to register these 'nods and whispers' as sinister and dangerous, no less

so than the mime show and euphemisms in 'Bloody Hand'<sup>72</sup> which direct murder while leaving the orchestrators with plausible deniability, '*you'll know exactly / What to do.*' Implicit is the idea that state violence – if we take MacNeice's garrison as a safe space for government forces – is no less implicated in the chaos the book describes than the 'character' who frog-marches the speaker from his bicycle in 'Question Time'<sup>73</sup>; indeed the 'Legs kicked apart, arms slapped up' tactics the men use are remarkably similar to those of the official police forces. The difference, to return to 'Snow', is in the respectability of the sofa.

The constituent images of Carson's 'Snow' reverberate throughout the collection, reappearing in altered forms and contexts, as the capacity for a single object to signify a single, fixed meaning is repeatedly thwarted. Perhaps most obviously is the 'confetti' that 'seethes against the window'; not the neutral or natural 'spawning' of MacNeice's version, but with the intimation of human violence actively moving against the poem's comfortable domestic space. The poem 'Belfast Confetti' appears in Carson's previous collection, *The Irish for No*, in a poem which also features a MacNeicean 'sudden' opening:

Suddenly as the riot squad moved in, it was raining exclamation marks,  
Nuts, bolts, car keys. A fount of broken type.<sup>74</sup>

Here the original colloquial meaning of 'Belfast confetti' – improvised missiles – intersects with Carson's linguistic nightmare, a situation in which the usual terms of verbal communication have been suspended or broken. That the word reappears in such a significant position right at the end of Carson's 'Snow', is unlikely to be coincidental.

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<sup>72</sup> Carson, 51.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid, 57.

<sup>74</sup> Carson, *The Irish for No*, 31.

'Confetti' appears in various guises throughout the collection: in 'Barfly'<sup>75</sup>, a gunman opens fire in a busy pub, the bullets 'punctuate the lunchtime menu: there's confetti everywhere'; in 'Jawbox'<sup>76</sup> 'red confetti' appears twice, once as the speaker remembers breaking a tooth on the eponymous sink, and again at the poem's close as one unnamed man beats another's head against that same sink: 'Red confetti spatters the white glaze'. By the time we reach 'Jump Leads'<sup>77</sup>, the 'bomb-disposal expert' whose wedding photo appears at the poem's close, the very notion of confetti as the innocuous paper squares thrown in celebration becomes a grim punchline: the photo appears on a news bulletin 'Just before the Weather [...] He's been spattered with confetti.' That 'spatter' – with its forensic connotation, 'blood-spatter' – seems to reach across the collection, tying together the two violent incidents. It's noticeable, too, that motivation in each instance is entirely absent from the poem, or merely beside the point; to explain these actions might be to justify them, to validate unreasonable lines of reasoning. The kitchen sink and the wedding photo are, under normal circumstances, synonymous with domestic tranquillity, and are both violently transformed by the appearance of 'confetti' in the brutalised forms it takes throughout the collection. A similar effect is achieved at the close of 'Snow'; the seething confetti is perhaps emblematic of the scenes throughout the book in which language is weaponised, in which words have their native meaning corrupted.

The movement from white to red, from immaculate to bloody, is also a recurring motif in the collection, one that first appears in 'Snow', with the bank clerk whose 'face was snow and roses' counting the speaker's money out, 'The black was bleeding into red' as his funds drop below zero. The following poem, 'All the Better to See You With'<sup>78</sup>, features a bridal

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<sup>75</sup> Carson, *Belfast Confetti*, 55.

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid*, 90.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid*, 56.

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid*, 23.

party with 'a vivid red theme', in which the bride is described as having '*cheeks like roses / or blood dripped on snow*', and the married couple wind up:

found in a wood. His face was pockmarked by a fever  
Of stilettos. Her belly was unstitched. Tomato ketchup flicked on her portrait.  
Everything dissolves: the white spirit clouds with rust and cinnabar.

It's clear that the poems of *Belfast Confetti* are in close dialogue with each other, their images and concerns accumulating and mutating as the book progresses, and many of these images originate in 'Snow'. The ping pong ball in 'Snow' is 'a wordless bubble'; in 'Queen's Gambit'<sup>79</sup> soldiers 'spit word bubbles' at a chemist's assistant (noting also that the poem's title refers to a move in chess, another game that would not be out of place in MacNeice's parlour). The same ball is first described in 'Snow' as 'A white dot', a singular version of the seething plurality of white dots outside the window; it recurs in 'Punctuation'<sup>80</sup> as sinister footsteps go 'dot, dot, dot, dot, dot....'; in 'Jawbox' it is the poem's sink, which has been converted into a cattle trough in a field, viewed as 'a white dot' on the landscape; in 'Queen's Gambit' a machine-gun's report is rendered by a narrator as '*Dot, dot, dot, dot*', not to mention the 'Year Dot', or clean slate to which the same speaker wishes all history could return; in 'John Ruskin in Belfast'<sup>81</sup> angels appear with '*red dots / In the palm of each hand*'; in the book's final poem, 'Hamlet'<sup>82</sup>, the 'incorrigible stop' to which the ping-pong ball ticks finds its final echo, as the speaker in 'Hamlet' describes a tin can – allegedly the ghostly revenant of a murdered soldier – which 'skittered to a halt', harbinger of another violent death. This last transformation, from a polite indoor game to ghostly rubbish, again tracks the movement in 'Snow' between interior and exterior, between what remains under state protection and what is beyond the pale. As

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<sup>79</sup> Ibid, 33.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid, 64.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid, 96.

<sup>82</sup> Ibid, 105.

Clair Wills argues in a review of *Ciaran Carson: Critical essays*, these internal consistencies somewhat belie the over-simplified opposition between a postmodern Carson and his post-romantic peers characterised in many critical narratives<sup>83</sup>. Although Carson's poems repeatedly cast doubt on one's ability to maintain a single self with clearly defined features and boundaries, the textual echoes between poems and even collections (e.g. the poem 'Belfast Confetti' that provides the title for the proceeding book, or Carson's two poems named 'Snow' published 23 years apart, in *Belfast Confetti* and *In the Light of*) seem to point towards a faith in the capacity of language to hold consistent meaning, however complex, fluid and open to interpretation. As Wills has it: 'these indeterminacies are not merely those of arbitrariness and the simulacrum, they are also productive. [...] Carson's thought, on the other hand, seems closer to Whitman's 'I contain multitudes'.<sup>84</sup> If there is an argument to be made that MacNeice's 'Snow' is an enabling force, it is here. For MacNeice, the essential instability of selfhood is a matter of philosophical curiosity, a reason to remain open and alert to possibility, not least of the sensational kind documented in 'Snow'. For Carson, this unreliable selfhood is both a result of and response to a culture in which selves are policed and scrutinised, sometimes literally 'read' for evidence of social transgression.

MacNeice's poem may be as much a point of departure than one of affinity. Batten makes many attempts to draw MacNeice the poet into Carson's poem, including a game effort to overwrite the make-up-wearing bank clerk with the figure of the elder poet ('the "teller" of "snow and roses" (MacNeice?)<sup>85</sup>), where exploring the merely textual echoes might have been more convincing. Batten is on more solid ground in discussing whether or

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<sup>83</sup> Wills, "Anybody, Anywhere", *The Poetry Ireland Review*, 100 (March 2010), 148.

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid*, 149.

<sup>85</sup> Batten, 553.



not Carson's 'Snow' might be an act of 'literary parricide'; the poem just as clearly opens up new creative avenues as it closes off its world of bay windows and tangerines. In Batten's words, 'Carson challenges the cultural partitions that claim to distinguish crack from literature, his father from such literary fathers as John Ruskin and Louis MacNeice'<sup>86</sup>. This breaking down of barriers both cultural and literary doesn't quite feel like an uncomplicated victory, however. The impression in *Belfast Confetti* that responsibility for the breakdown of all manner of hierarchies might be shared among many social strata seems extremely cold comfort.

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It's worth noting that this antagonistic relationship to MacNeice is far from unusual among Carson's responses to his literary influences, particularly in his earlier books. In his chapter on Carson's *The Irish for No*, Neil Corcoran has noted this tendency to push back against literary influence:

The way Carson uses past literature, indeed, may imply that literature is almost what his poems aspire not to be. Tall tales, ballads, songs, fiddle tunes and flute tunes, reportage and annotation: these seem much more what they would wish to be, given the chance.<sup>87</sup>

This dynamic, in which an agile, responsive oral culture challenges the primacy of a genre of poetry Carson describes as 'Removed, academic'<sup>88</sup>, is present in his re-writing, or over-

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<sup>86</sup> Ibid 554.

<sup>87</sup> Corcoran, 196.

<sup>88</sup> Brandes, 81.

writing, of MacNeice's 'Bagpipe Music'<sup>89</sup>. MacNeice's original first appeared in *I Crossed the Minch*, which Corcoran describes as an 'unclassifiable potboiler'<sup>90</sup>. The book is comprised of straight memoir, MacNeice's misadventures around the Hebrides; creative asides in which the narrator is pursued by fictional London socialites, and, eventually, his Marxist guardian angel; and occasional poetry like 'Bagpipe Music'. A contemporary review in *The Spectator* only noted 'Bagpipe Music' in passing as a 'brilliant improvisation' within an entertaining if lightweight book<sup>91</sup>. This is significant insofar as MacNeice seems to have anticipated it being little more than an amusing and cathartic aside; Robyn Marsack notes that on the sleeve of a vinyl recording MacNeice made in 1961, the poet describes it as 'a nonsense poem and a piece of technical fun and games' before 'a satirical elegy for the Gaelic districts of Scotland and indeed for all traditional culture'<sup>92</sup>. It certainly sits somewhat awkwardly beside its far more serious and philosophically sophisticated counterpart 'Leaving Barra' in Michael Longley's edition of MacNeice's *Selected*.

Dismissing MacNeice's 'Bagpipe Music' as merely an off-hand composition may not be entirely fair, however; the poem features some rather brilliant aural play ('Their knickers are made of crepe-de-chine, their shoes are made of python / Their halls are lined with tiger rugs and their walls with heads of bison'), and its commentary, while comically broad, is of a mind with that of *Autumn Journal*, noting the latter's condemnation of 'Who wants to live, i.e. wants more / Presents, jewellery, furs, gadgets, solicitations'<sup>93</sup>. Both poems lament the intrusion of commercial culture, the 'over-production' that makes commodities out of human lives; MacNeice's 'Bagpipe Music' uses traditional culture as a vehicle for his

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<sup>89</sup> Carson, *First Language*, 50; MacNeice, *Collected Poems*, 96.

<sup>90</sup> Corcoran, *Poetry and Responsibility*, 92.

<sup>91</sup> "A Tour to the Hebrides", *The Spectator*, 6 May 1938, <http://archive.spectator.co.uk/article/6th-may-1938/28/a-tour-to-the-hebrides>, accessed 6 June 2017.

<sup>92</sup> Marsack, *The Cave of Making*, 38.

<sup>93</sup> MacNeice, 47.

grotesque parody of social change. The poet's instrumentalising of the baser tropes of traditional culture, however, arguably participates in the harmful cultural processes 'Bagpipe Music' so enthusiastically critiques<sup>94</sup>. The 'music' of the title is characterised by a garish, thumping, heavily rhythmised beat that lands on a series of loud and outlandish end-rhymes (rickshaw/peepshow, stadium/geraniums, Blavatsky/taxi), which suggest the music in question is an apt vehicle for the surreal behaviour the poem depicts. The poem's music is the janky, mechanical sound of the hurdy-gurdy at the 'merrygoround' rather than the deep tradition of Gàidhlig pipe music. A generous reading might suggest that the poem's own melodies have been infected and belittled by the encroachment of unchecked capitalism, but such a reading would have to ignore the critique MacNeice aims at the resident islanders wilfully going 'upon the parish' (government welfare), and the absolutely wretched time he seemed to be having on his working holiday at the time of composition, which he blamed in no small part on the intransigent locals: *I Crossed the Minch* is far from a work of ethically considerate social anthropology. As much as 'Bagpipe Music' is explicitly opposed to the cultural debasement it discusses, how the poem interacts with the culture on which it has bummed a ride seems a minor concern, if it has crossed the poet's mind at all.

This might go some way to explaining Carson's apparently dim view of MacNeice's 'ear'<sup>95</sup> and what led Carson to employ his position as cultural resident and insider to talk back to MacNeice the cultural visitor. A reader of *First Language*, in which Carson's 'Bagpipe Music' appears, is reminded of his musical background in the fourth of 'Four Sonnets':

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<sup>94</sup> It's worth noting a slight double standard in MacNeice's celebration of the survival of traditional Hebridean culture, where his attitude toward the Irish equivalent was deeply jaundiced.

<sup>95</sup> Brown, 149.

First the bare notes. Then staccato. Then the off-beat. Counterpoint. *Stop*. You forgot the soul<sup>96</sup>

In context, the line blends the music teacher's directions with those of a faceless interrogator, using a kind of violent double entendre Raymond Carver might enjoy, but Carson is also foregrounding his musical expertise. By the time 'Bagpipe Music' arrives twelve poems later, the reader is primed to figure the poet in a position of musical authority. While Frank Sewell describes Carson's 'Bagpipe Music' as 'not a matter of mere linguistic or cultural revenge but of optimistic 'diplomacy'', an '*agallamh beirte / duet*'<sup>97</sup> with MacNeice's original, it feels a rather 'optimistic' reading itself, and overlooks the thoroughly minor part MacNeice is reduced to in the text, a line of gibberish in the last stanza: '*Scrake nithery lou a Mackie nice wee niece ah libralassie...*'. If Carson's poem is indeed a duet, MacNeice is on backing vocals.

*First Language* was first published in November 1993, nine months before the first IRA ceasefire. The poem itself shares some of the original's concerns about the deconstruction of cultural norms, but in its local historical context seems specifically focused on how discourse around the Troubles has emptied language of its meaning, or how reality has become so surreal as to defy the logical connections between signifier and sign. In a review, Peter McDonald notes that in *First Language*, 'poetic language seems initially to put the events of narrative out of reach, coming in between, so to speak, event and representation'<sup>98</sup>. The book's front cover features the biblical Tower of Babel, and variations on 'babel' occur throughout its poems. 'Bagpipe Music' in some regards is a standard, *Belfast Confetti*-era narrative poem, with a skilful and untrustworthy storyteller

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<sup>96</sup> Carson, 26.

<sup>97</sup> Sewell, *Ciaran Carson: Critical essays*, 195-6.

<sup>98</sup> McDonald, "Difficulties with Form", *The Irish Review*, 16 (Autumn-Winter 1994), 128.

relating a lurid, noirish yarn; but here it is babel-ised, linguistically distorted beyond immediate comprehensibility. It seems to be the eyewitness account of a paramilitary attack on a British army checkpoint, but the story is shot through with italicised interjections, either gibberish (*'blah dithery dump a doodle scatterly idle fortunoodle'*); so Ulster-specific as to pose a challenge to outsiders' understanding (an old joke about the Protestant calendar reading *'January, February, March! April, May, June, July!'* or cries of market vendors); highly suggestive in their ostensible randomness, as when the soldier references the *'doodlebug'* bomb, or *'Ocularity... disparity'* following a line about a witness being like a glassy *'fourth wall'*. The poem has further layers of unmeaning hinted at by the line *'Like a Zephyr through the Zodiac'*, and confirmed in the closing line in which the narrator flicks past the *'decapitated headlines'* to read the horoscope. What the poem seems to suggest is that there is little or no space in which to stand back and rationalise this highly irrational violence; either the sectarian murders the book depicts are as inescapable as the stars, or the motivations for these murders are as illogical and unreasonable as drawing connections between one's fate and exploding hydrogen balls in deep space. *'Bagpipe Music'* refers with varying degrees of tenuousness to each of the twelve star signs – e.g., *'The Pisces rod of his aerial'*, or *'I heard two taxis crabbing'*, where *'crab'* refers to Cancer – but makes little attempt to explain or justify these nods, leaving a sort of code in plain sight, a code which signifies nothing but itself. Of perhaps trivial importance – though in a poem concerned with trivial importances, the trivial is key – is that MacNeice wrote a book titled *Astrology*, published shortly after his death. *Astrology* is a fairly stodgy spotter's guide to the discipline, one that seemed to prick the author's curiosity but not to any passionate degree. Two lines, however, stand out in a discussion of Carson's *'Bagpipe Music'*:

The stars are just as much props to him as the Tarot cards are to a fortune teller, or the lines on the hand to a palmist. The real active agent is his own intuition.<sup>99</sup>

Another reason for many people [to study astrology] is the almost cosy appeal of fatalism: In times of either stress or failure you can always pass the buck to the stars.<sup>100</sup>

It is perhaps typical of MacNeice to take millennia of research and find a) a tool for creative writing and b) the character flaws of the modern citizen. For Carson, however, these actions of intuitive reasoning and fatalism become powerful means of understanding the violence his poem depicts. They are not the actions of individual, rational agents but players in a much larger game, which in 'Bagpipe Music' is satirically aggrandised (as MacNeice aggrandises the forces of consumerism in his version) to the ongoing drama of the gods, paramilitary 'special forces' punningly converted in the 'special forces' of the heavenly spheres.

McDonald suggests the deliberate obfuscation that forms much of the texture of *First Language* might be symptomatic of 'the condition of being under surveillance'<sup>101</sup>, and the necessity of obscure or misleading code-languages to maintain one's safety or anonymity. The poem draws pointed connections between the reader's ability to differentiate meaningful speech and mere babble, between balaklava-wearing gunmen and 'black-and-white minstrels'; 'Bagpipe Music' seems to question the capacity of 'meaningful language' to adequately, logically express what is so patently absurd. This inability to distinguish reality and fantasy is itself a continuation, perhaps an intensification, of Carson's concerns in earlier books, what Corcoran describes as 'scepticism about how much can be

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<sup>99</sup> MacNeice, *Astrology*, 12.

<sup>100</sup> Ibid, 15-6.

<sup>101</sup> Ibid, 130.

made to cohere in any organisation of poetic language'<sup>102</sup>. The language in *First Language* takes this scepticism to a logical extreme, by ceasing to connect words to reality, to 'what's before your eyes'. In this sense MacNeice's relegation to '*nice wee neice*' makes sense: he too has been bundled up into a culture that places greater value on 'the Stars' than the headlines, just as the elder poet bundled up a minority culture into the broader excesses of Madame Blavatsky and meaningless consumer capitalism. On that front, the two poems are very much in harmony, exposing as they do the inherent violence capitalism inflicts on the meaning or meaningfulness of words. In Kennedy-Andrews' rendering, this consumerism enacts 'a profusion of instantaneous, partially registered, swiftly moving images' and reaps the benefits of 'unbearable sensory overload'<sup>103</sup>. Carson particularly highlights how the language of consumerism sits comfortably alongside the language of extra-judicial violence, as his poem strategically deploys brand names in compromising positions: the wholesome fluff of '*Ireland's Own*-type details' appears alongside the ghoulish face-paint of the paramilitaries with 'Toothpaste lips, [...] *Tip-Exed* teeth, their *Daz* forensic gloves'. The lines '*Bloo* in the portable loo', in which 'one ping cancels out / The pong' (a shadow of the ball from 'Snow?'), sound like advertising jingles with the added echoes of violent retribution, such as, in all likelihood, the attack the poem depicts.

Where Carson connects capital with the violent objectification of human bodies ('all ribs and shanks'), MacNeice emphasises how humans are sexually exploited for fun and profit. His 'Bagpipe Music' criticises the reduction of culture to 'the peepshow' and 'crêpe de chine' underwear; where 'Leaving Barra', the other major poem from *I Crossed the Minch*, celebrates 'the gay endurance of women', 'Bagpipe Music' notes how even terms of endearment may infantilise and demean: 'It's no go my honey love, it's no go my poppet'.

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<sup>102</sup> Corcoran, *The Chosen Ground*, 232.

<sup>103</sup> Kennedy-Andrews, 464.

The poem does note the fetish of brand names via 'a Dunlop tyre', but this reference is followed by 'the devil mend the puncture'. Given the poem's mention of sex work and 'a bit of skirt in a taxi', the poem seems to connect this 'puncture' to the previous line's 'It's no go your maidenheads', an archaic term for the hymen. The following stanza draws an even clearer connection between economic forces and the sexual body with a punchline that feels grimmer with every reading:

Mrs Carmichael had her fifth, looked at the job with repulsion,  
Said to the midwife 'Take it away; I'm through with over-production.

Not only has the un-named baby been reduced to a commodity on par with 'sugar-sticks', 'gossip columns', 'knickers' and 'a packet of fags', their mother is an active participant in their dehumanisation. Like the narrator in Carson's poem, who witnesses a murder but puts 'a pair of scorpion's inverted commas' around his account and by doing so leaves its veracity ambiguous, Mrs Carmichael also seems to prioritise comfort under oppressive economic systems over acknowledging the humanity of others.

This analysis would be somewhat threadbare without a recognition of the two poems' shared aesthetics, the extent to which they genuinely revel in the potential for vivid brashness offered by brand names, the noise and spectacle of the 'merrygoround'. Both poems to some extent exploit the dissonance between the reality of these consumable objects and their projected images, either the easily damaged, but highly desirable, Dunlop tyres or the Daz cleaning products used to cover up evidence of murderous wrongdoing. One could argue that their poems' impressive, impactful music – Carson's 'The grandmother produced an alarm-clock from her psychobabble handbag', MacNeice's 'All we want is a mother's help and a sugar-stick for the baby' – may draw partly from the same audio-visual razzmatazz that advertising deploys to deliberately obfuscate and disorient. While Carson's implicit critique of MacNeice's cultural elitism seems on one level the



poem's *raison d'être*, the fact that Carson finds the original's concerns and aesthetics so empowering makes the relationship between the two pieces not solely antagonistic, not solely harmonic.

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While MacNeice's *Varieties of Parable* is an altogether more pedestrian book of criticism than his buzzing *Modern Poetry*, it gives valuable insight into the elder poet's approach to 'double-level poetry'<sup>104</sup>. In the fourth chapter MacNeice gives a point-by-point guide to the creation of parabolic poetry, and makes substantial intersections with Carson's work that are due careful consideration.

- 1) The parabolist more often than not is concerned with the creation of a special world: as in *The Faerie Queene* such a world can be very true to life, but to the inner life of man rather than to his life in an objective context.
- 2) This preoccupation with an inner reality naturally means that parable writing has often a strong spiritual, or indeed a mystical, element.
- 3) Esslin also pointed out that many of his playwrights, Beckett in particular, are much concerned with the problem of identity. We have noticed that in *The Faerie Queene*, for instance two characters can be merged in one or one can be dispersed or expanded into several: this is what happens in dreams. [...]

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<sup>104</sup> MacNeice, *Varieties of Parable*, 8.

6) It follows from the five points already made that the parabolist, whether he uses prose or verse, is following a poetic rather than a documentary procedure.<sup>105</sup>

As Daniel Weston has noted<sup>106</sup>, a significant number of Carson scholars have solidified his image as flaneur-meets-documentarian, from multiple essayists in *Ciaran Carson: Critical essays* to Neal Alexander's monograph *Ciaran Carson: Space, Place, Writing*; Weston's own piece focuses on the lived reality of sectarian map-making. It's clear that Carson's aesthetic is in no small part a walking record of a living city, but his poems routinely overlap with MacNeice's codification of parable. Where the psychological horrors of Carson's nightmares are tethered to landmarks from the waking world, however, MacNeice's versions are more safely, in physical terms at least, contained in the imaginary.

While elements of parable, as MacNeice defines it, have been present throughout his oeuvre, *Visitations* was the first of his late collections in which such poems begin to multiply. Although not one of his strongest poems, 'The Burnt Bridge'<sup>107</sup> is among MacNeice's most explicit attempts to render his fears of death and destiny into a fairy-tale idiom. The poem's salient elements are the un-named protagonist (marked only by a male pronoun), his 'long-lost dragon' which pursues him throughout, and 'a shining lady' who goes with him to the west, 'Till they thought they saw the golden strand / Of the sea that leads to nowhere'. The poem doesn't carry much weight, being far too general in its terms, though its frantic pace is reminiscent of the 'just jogged on' of 'Charon'<sup>108</sup>, and both pieces feature crossing a river of no return. One of MacNeice's most celebrated and discussed poems, 'Charon' specifies that its characters 'moved through London' and is a far more complete synthesis of reality and fairy-tale than 'The Burnt Bridge'. The parabolic space of

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<sup>105</sup> Ibid, 76-9.

<sup>106</sup> Weston, *Poetry & Geography*, 105-6.

<sup>107</sup> MacNeice, *Collected Poems*, 460.

<sup>108</sup> MacNeice, *Selected Poems*, 153.

'Charon' carries perhaps the most direct affinities with the *Belfast Confetti*-era Carson of any MacNeice poem, with its 'dissolving map', its various semi-mythologised workers (the 'black hands' of the conductor and ferryman would not be out of place in *Belfast Confetti*), and its door-slammed-shut of a last line, the twist on a stock phrase: 'If you want to die you will have to pay for it'.

What 'Charon' provides the reader, of course, is mythological insulation; however real the streets might be, the creations of Virgil and Dante have no mundane analogy, except in the poet's imagination. In Carson's work, this safe distance is rarely afforded, or rather the two realms come hand-in-hand; *Belfast Confetti* is just as haunted by supernatural 'special forces' as by their earthy counterparts. 'Queen's Gambit'<sup>109</sup>, for instance, refers to 'the number of the Beast' in an encrypted message, 'Last Orders'<sup>110</sup> closes with the speaker imagining being blown 'to Kingdom Come', the eponymous 'Bloody Hand'<sup>111</sup> is equally 'the left hand / Hacked off at the wrist and thrown to the shores of Ulster' and 'the Right Hand of God, saying *Stop* to this and *No* to that'. Both 'Smithfield Market' and 'Slate Street School'<sup>112</sup> denote real-world locations imaginatively estranged by the poem, by the aforementioned 'something many-toothed, elaborate' and 'the avenging Archangel' respectively. That these harbingers of violence have religious or mythical overtones is no accident; though Carson is often framed as an eye-witness to the physical, tangible, 'gritty' here-and-now, his work is underwritten by existential questions of identity and spirituality. Each of these unsettling convergences of the sacred and the profane is occasioned by the poem recontextualising common (and communal) phrases and images to probe their deeper significance. The non-standard narratives and narrators in Carson's work also fit into

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<sup>109</sup> Carson, *Belfast Confetti*, 34.

<sup>110</sup> *Ibid*, 46.

<sup>111</sup> *Ibid*, 51.

<sup>112</sup> Carson, *The Irish for No*, 37, 46.

a parabolic context; particularly in these early collections, the long-footed, nine-lined poems rarely contain more than a brief tableau, a static inner situation. The action in 'Campaign'<sup>113</sup>, for instance, is little more than the narrator identifying a barman as the survivor of an interrogation and attempted murder. The lack of detail in the story and the absence of any discernible resolution or moral, however, speaks volumes about the lived reality of both the speaker and his subject. To spell this situation out explicitly, for the poet to become a kind of informant would breach the 'special world' created by the poem, in which words, names and bodies are divorced from their true meaning and truth itself is immediately dangerous. These collections seem to question, if not the existence of a divine intelligence, then what manner of god could possibly move in such circumstances. That the holy and the brutal so often meet in Carson's poetry does not seem coincidental.

While MacNeice's urban spaces do not approach the granular fidelity of Carson's work, they do share a curiosity about the sheer strangeness of constructed, commodified human environments, best exemplified by 'Birmingham'<sup>114</sup>. The poem feels like an attempt to faithfully render what MacNeice saw as being misrepresented in Eliot's work; in MacNeice's words, by spending time in the city, he 'recognized that the squalor of Eliot was romanticized squalor because treated, on the whole, rather bookishly as *décor*'<sup>115</sup>. 'Birmingham' makes no attempt to simplify the city's strangeness, its excess of reality, as if the poet is attempting to replicate the feeling of digesting too much sensory information too quickly. The first lines, in their awkward syntax, aggressive conjunction of sounds and images, and lack of contextual information, drop the reader into a situation they are ill-equipped to respond to by rational means:

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<sup>113</sup> Ibid, 36.

<sup>114</sup> MacNeice, 16.

<sup>115</sup> MacNeice, *Modern Poetry*, 74.

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

'Smoke', 'Pipe' and 'bars' may be either verb or noun, and their position at the start or end of these lines, with the line-breaks' delaying of necessary context, leave a sense of anxiety, a repeated wrong-footing, which never quite leaves a poem that changes direction constantly and never quite catches its breath. While the most striking lines, quoted earlier, may concern 'the trams like vast sarcophagi', the poem is more concerned with the estrangement of human faces, first through the 'triplex screens' of cars in traffic, then of 'shopgirls' whose 'faces relax / Diaphanous as green glass', and finally factory workers, taking their 'sleep-stupid faces through the daily gate'. While, like the speaker in 'Snow', it's reasonable to note the hint of voyeurism of one clearly a degree removed from the variously estranging processes of capitalism on the middle- and working-classes, it's also clear that these processes have warped the 'Birmingham' speaker's vision also. The poem, as in Carson's depictions of Belfast, blends the holy and the worldly ('Zeppelin clouds, and Pentecost-like the cars' headlights'), the organic and the manufactured ('the engine gently breathing', 'the factory chimneys on sullen sentry'). The whole process, with its irregular connections and hyperreal similes, seems to come through a state of delirium, like a New Testament prophet in an age of concrete.

The long, asyndetic lines of 'Birmingham' echo throughout *The Irish for No* and *Belfast Confetti*, the poems' evocation of a deliriously confusing and dense environment, in which any given object might carry multiple simultaneous meanings. Here's the opening of 'Night Patrol'<sup>116</sup>

Jerking his head spasmodically as he is penetrated by invisible gunfire,  
The private wakes to a frieze of pull-outs from *Contact* and *Men Only*.

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<sup>116</sup> Carson, *The Irish for No*, 34.

Sellotape and Blu-Tack. The antiquated plumbing is stuttering that he  
Is not in Balkan Street or Hooker Street, but in a bunk bed  
In the Grand Central Hotel: a room that is a room knocked into other rooms.

The poem begins by denying the reader context, then denying it to its protagonist, before finally destabilising what little we do know: rooms within rooms in a bed that is two beds. We may assume the 'private' is in the armed forces, though why his rank is un-capitalised, in a stanza that meticulously capitalises its proper nouns, is as much a mystery as why he has woken up in a hotel he does not recognise except, bizarrely, by the sound of the plumbing. The poem enacts this confusion formally, by so stuffing its lines with visual detritus and syntactically delaying or confusing the reader's full understanding of what, in literal terms, the poem dramatises. It's also worth noting how 'Night Patrol', like a great many of Carson's poems in these collections, use brand-names in a way that both brings the stuff of life into focus and obscures its quiddity; *per* the last line of 'Calvin Klein's *Obsession*'<sup>117</sup>, '*maybe it's the name you buy, and not the thing itself*'. While both poets clearly resent the forces of mass-production, there is a delight in the oddness of brand-names that contributes to the aural texture of their poems, and Carson seems drawn, particularly in his later work, to bespoke luxury items like watches, fountain pens and tweed suits. His 2009 novel *The Pen Friend* details a love affair between Gabriel Conway and Nina Bowyer (who first appeared in the poetry collection *For All We Know*), which is both initiated and sustained by a shared passion for vintage pens. The book deliberately sets this highly specific fixation on craftsmanship against mass-produced garbage; in its first pages, the narrator, Gabriel, dreams of himself as a fisherman catching an endless chain of impossible trash:

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<sup>117</sup> Ibid, 25.

the iron is followed by an iron kettle, pots and pans, a bicycle, a kitchen sink complete with taps, a pram, a harrow, a plough, forks and rakes, a gamut of broken looms, winding machines and spinning jennies, a string of dead horses, rotting straps and rusted buckles, tumbrils, wagons, engine tenders, locomotives, tanks, flat-bed trucks and howitzers, a crocodile of sunken barges, lighters, tugs, launches, cutters, gunships, battleships, amphibians and submarines sucked from the reluctant mud, the whole gargantuan juggernaut flying in midair for a second, as the angler's rod whips back, before collapsing all about him with an almighty thunderclap<sup>118</sup>

Gabriel's haul has a distinctly nineteen-fifties flavour, and the fact the junk belongs to the past seems as relevant as the fact of its junkness. The vintage, artisan nature of Gabriel's suits and pens feels interwoven with this introductory nightmare. Perhaps this is Carson's recognition that the pens' invocation of nostalgia for a time of superior craftsmanship is itself an illusion; they too are a product of capitalism, and the mid-twentieth century – as MacNeice knew – was no more a golden age of quality manufacturing than our contemporary moment. For all that, Gabriel remains, throughout the book, meticulous about the brand and model names of his tools: *'the name ... and not the thing itself'*, according his line in 'Calvin Klein's *Obsession*' in *The Irish for No*. Like Carson's opinion on MacNeice, however, this might be better read as an evolution than an about face; Carson cannot escape a consumerist society, but he might find aesthetic pleasure in its quieter, more unassuming quarters. In *The Literature of Ireland*, Terence Brown argues that consumerism might have been as great an aesthetic catalyst, albeit a deeply negative one, as any of MacNeice's existential or religious quandaries:

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<sup>118</sup> Carson, *The Pen Friend*, 2.

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.<sup>119</sup>

In *The Pen Friend* and other *thing*-friendly texts, Carson finds a way to draw aesthetic meaning from this proliferation. There may be hundreds of this particular brand or model of pen or watch, but *this* one is the one that has survived, has witnessed the march of mass-production and endured regardless. Perhaps this is splitting hairs, or simply replacing a large, inescapable capitalism with a small, opt-in capitalism with an entry fee. But as *The Pen Friend* and *For All We Know* aptly illustrate, these objects carry existential qualities, and their unelidable thingness is a matter of philosophical import. The tactile qualities of Donegal Tweed ('the heathery feel of the handwoven wool' in 'Pas de Deux'<sup>120</sup>) or the ability to spot a fake Mont Blanc pen from the true mint ('Redoubt'<sup>121</sup>) may act as anchors, safehouses, last redoubts in a world of flux and constant overproduction.

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A review of the poem-novel/novel-poem *For All We Know* by Barra Ó Séaghda gives a potted history of the poet's aesthetic adventures:

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<sup>119</sup> Brown, *The Literature of Ireland*, cited in Gillis, "'Any Dark Saying': Louis MacNeice in the Nineteen Fifties", *Irish University Review*, 42:1 (2012), 110-1.

<sup>120</sup> Carson, *For All We Know*, 25.

<sup>121</sup> *Ibid*, 20.



The playfulness of books like *Opera Et Cetera* and *The Twelfth of Never* has its attractions, but [...] the relentless clicking of mental needles, the systematic twists on the expected, the clever rhymes and half-rhymes and alphabet games - all these become a little oppressive.<sup>122</sup>

Ó Séaghdha argues that *For All We Know* is something of a return to form, a 'second time round' (to quote the book's opening poem) to the narrative-driven poetry by which his reputation was founded. The story itself is bound together in code, innuendo and dream sequence, but feels at its heart like a pulpy Cold War-era spy thriller, complete with Stasi agents and discussion of JFK's influence on contemporary fashion. The narrative may be boiled down to remarkably mundane terms, as Kennedy-Andrews demonstrates: 'a man [...] and a woman [...] meet in a second-hand clothes shop in the 1970s. A bomb goes off. The two become lovers'<sup>123</sup>. Formally, it may share more DNA with *Shamrock Tea* than previous poetry collections; as Carson notes in conversation with Elmer Kennedy-Andrews:

*For All We Know* is the most unified book of poetry I've written to date [...] a kind of hall of mirrors with poems reflecting and commenting on others.<sup>124</sup>

The book combines a singular, if challengingly non-linear, narrative with Carson's habitual threading of repeated images and motifs. Crucially, it also foregrounds the fugue as an organising principle, quoting Glenn Gould's *So You Want to Write a Fugue* as the book's epigraph, then reframing the same lines in the poem 'In the Dark' in the book's second half:

In musical terms  
the fugue must perform its often stealthy work with shifting

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<sup>122</sup> Ó Séaghdha, "Rhapsodic Leap", *The Poetry Ireland Review*, 94 (July 2008), 84.

<sup>123</sup> Kennedy-Andrews, *Ciaran Carson: Critical Essays*, 240.

<sup>124</sup> Carson, *Ciaran Carson: Critical Essays*, 22.

melodic fragments that remain perpetually in  
abeyance, or unconsummated, so to speak, you said.<sup>125</sup>

The lines are partly repeated in the closing poem, 'Zugzwang'<sup>126</sup>. One might argue that drawing so much attention to Gould's words is a little less stealthy than he might have prescribed, but there's no doubting the persistence of the book's 'melodic fragments': perfume, telephones, pens, and quilts recur with unignorable regularity. Most pertinently for a study of MacNeice, however, is the recurrence of glass, mirrors, windows and snow; combined with the period setting, *For All We Know* feels ghosted, among other texts, by MacNeice's observations about the drunkenness of things – or, just as commonly in *For All We Know*, people – being various. In 'On the Contrary'<sup>127</sup> the protagonist self-describes as:

believing in nothing that might not be governed by touch  
or taste, the apple bursting indescribably with juice  
against the roof of the mouth

A curiously MacNeicean train to Dublin, meanwhile, 'clanks slowly' in the background. In 'Second Take'<sup>128</sup>, a character named Carrick (MacNeice's home town) appears; in 'Never Never'<sup>129</sup>, a story is told beside 'a bubbling fire', an echo of 'fire flames with a bubbling sound' in MacNeice's 'Snow'. However pointedly employed, of course, these are mere nods to the elder poet; what's more substantial is how Carson uses glass (either as the material itself, or as 'window', or as its synonymous 'mirror') and snow as key motifs. All told, 'snow' appears in seven different poems (not including one which features an 'avalanche'), variations on 'glass' in eighteen. If the third aspect of MacNeice's trinity, roses, are not directly present, floral perfumes more than fill the gap; the book is uncommonly focused on

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<sup>125</sup> Carson, *For All We Know*, 108.

<sup>126</sup> *Ibid*, 111.

<sup>127</sup> *Ibid*, 18.

<sup>128</sup> *Ibid*, 33.

<sup>129</sup> *Ibid*, 38.

fragrance, such as ‘a smell of candle-wax and frankincense’ in ‘The Assignment’<sup>130</sup>, or ‘all those perfumes / that beguiled the innocent and the not-so-innocent’ in ‘Before’<sup>131</sup>.

Philosophically, the book has absorbed the argument of ‘Snow’ beyond its surface meaning. Within the boundaries of MacNeice’s line, ‘There is more than glass between the snow and the huge roses’ Carson pitches much of the book’s dramatic tension, between what is ‘real’ and what is fabricated, how sensory perception mediates between the self and the other, how shared experience may blend those distinctions. The latter idea is pursued by ‘Proposal’, in which the protagonists share an apple:

This time I could taste  
your mouth from it through the juice. We took bite for bite from it  
  
Until we finished it as one. We threw away the core.  
Then we asked things of each other we’d never asked before.

Though the tone of these lines veers a little awkwardly towards Mills & Boon (Carson is perhaps justified in considering himself ‘temperamentally incapable of doing anything in that genre [conventional love poetry]’<sup>132</sup>), the movement from ‘I’ to ‘we’ is supported by the book’s philosophical inquiries. In *Shamrock Tea*, Uncle Celestine aims to show Belfast’s divided inhabitants ‘a world in which everything connects; where the Many is One and the One is Many’<sup>133</sup> by drugging them with the eponymous hallucinogen. In ‘Proposal’, Gabriel and Nina also find their subjectivity blended in the act of sensory overload, in a scene that echoes ‘On the Contrary’ and is ghosted by the tangerine in MacNeice’s ‘Snow’. It’s perhaps significant that the narrator of ‘Proposal’ specifies that the apple is ‘green with a brush of red’; the image of green apple and orange tangerine blending together would no doubt have pleased Uncle Celestine.

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<sup>130</sup> Ibid, 22.

<sup>131</sup> Ibid, 99.

<sup>132</sup> Carson, *Ciaran Carson: Critical Essays*, 22.

<sup>133</sup> Carson, *Shamrock Tea*, 236.

Two poems that diverge from the main plot of *For All We Know* are worth looking at in detail. 'The Fetch'<sup>134</sup> is in the middle of three poems discussing one's behaviour under interrogation, partly in conversation with a former secret policeman: 'You know how you know when someone's telling lies? You said. They / get their story right every time, down to the last word'<sup>135</sup>. This doubling raises a potentially endless dilemma for the listener, who is now faced with the challenge of accurately reproducing a state of authentic incorrectness, should they wish to be believed. 'The Fetch' – 'fetch' being another word for 'doppelganger', which the poem informs us 'casts no reflection in a mirror' – depicts this paradox in action:

It puts me in mind of prisoners interrogated,  
of one telling his story so well he could see himself  
performing in it, speaking the very words he spoke now

This logical recursiveness, combined with the mention of the mirrors and their capacity to reflect the 'true self', might in its local context put the reader in mind of a two-way mirror behind which this interrogation might be observed. It's also highly reminiscent of MacNeice's late poem 'Reflections':

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<sup>136</sup>

MacNeice's piece also features a singular space uncannily projected beyond its boundaries, an effect replicated by the repetition of words and clauses in each poem's long, rangy lines. The conclusion of 'Reflections', in which a taxi arrives for the multiply self-estranged

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<sup>134</sup> Carson, *For All We Know*, 32.

<sup>135</sup> *Ibid*, 33.

<sup>136</sup> MacNeice, 138.

speaker, driving heedlessly through this illusive space, is echoed in the chiasmic closing lines of 'The Fetch':

Your death stands always in the background, but don't be afraid.  
For he will only come for you when your time has come.

'The Fetch', a digression sandwiched between two pieces which more directly advance the plot, stands at a remove from the rest of the book's narrative. Given the space *For All We Know* has made for it, one degree removed from the narrative proper, it reads like a self-reflexive *ars poetica*; the man interrogated is the only one convinced by his performance, one so well-performed he almost escapes inside it. Neither the reader nor his interrogator is convinced, however: 'When all is said and done there's nothing more to be said. [...] Should he ever escape his prison the dogs shall be loosed.' The poem as a unified whole – the story *about* a storyteller – is fleeting and strange, the connections and suggestions it makes appropriately ephemeral. Its sole assertion, apparently, is that all this doubling will be the death of you.

Carson's 'Birthright'<sup>137</sup> also shares a title with a late MacNeice poem. MacNeice's 'Birthright'<sup>138</sup> is among his 'thumbnail nightmares' and shares aspects of his radio play *The Dark Tower*, in that they both feature a reluctant protagonist being readied to set off on a mission that will certainly end in his death. The poem has a certain jauntiness to it, with its full rhymes and regular meter:

When I was born the row began,  
I had never asked to be a man;  
They never asked if I could ride  
But shouted at me 'Come outside!'

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<sup>137</sup> Carson, 40.

<sup>138</sup> MacNeice, 531.

The glibly headlong pace of the poem is put in tension by the narrator's existential dread, the fear of riding off to his fate and the shame of doing nothing, 'I felt foolish and afraid'. At the heart of the drama is the blunt inexorability of the speaker's fate, the 'stable boys' – themselves merely someone else's employees – completely impassive to his distress. Much like 'The Taxis', 'Charon', 'The Truisms', 'After the Crash'<sup>139</sup> and others among MacNeice's late work, the horror (and occasionally grim comedy) is drawn from the speaker's evident powerlessness, the inability to control one's own destiny, metaphorised as the failure to escape death. Carson's poem is also a highly stylised piece about powerlessness, though it draws from one of the poet's most long-standing concerns, the capacity to maintain anonymity, to evade surveillance, or, in light of his fascination with fugue states, the ability to become someone else entirely. In 'Birthright', all these possibilities are summarily quashed. The poem seems to run in tandem with the following poem, 'Collaboration'<sup>140</sup>, which depicts the punishment handed down, perhaps, to the 'you' of 'Birthright'; by the end of 'Collaboration' it is all revealed to have been a dream, although the speaker's reassurance that, 'the language of dream has nothing to do with that of life' is hardly credible, given the spy yarn in which it appears. Being a dream sequence, 'Birthright', like 'The Fetch', is one degree removed from the prime narrative space. Carson's 'Birthright' begins: 'Again you are trapped in the smouldering streets'. The first word is significant; this entrapment is a nightmare that has appeared in Carson's work since *The Irish for No*, and one Carson has talked about in interview:

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<sup>139</sup> Ibid, 522, 530, 507, 524.

<sup>140</sup> Carson, 41.

[I]t so happens that I have a recurrent anxiety dream in which I am trapped between the Falls Road and the Shankill, or trapped on the wrong side [...] It seems inescapably ingrained in my experience, in my psyche.<sup>141</sup>

This 'Again' in 'Birthright' may, of course, refer to the speaker, but it's also a backward glance at the poet's own body of work, in a collection that seems nostalgic in its genre and substance. The action of the poem is delivered in the second person, which alongside the quasi-folkloric details like:

For all that you assumed a sevenfold identity  
the mark of your people's people blazes on your forehead

gives the poem an unsettling, dreamlike atmosphere. It connects with MacNeice's in its setting; both appear to take place in the world of knights and quests, a sort of imagined medieval, given the 'men / armed with axes', the 'ironmonger' and the 'inquisitors' in Carson's piece. There are thematic overlaps as well, as Carson insists that 'Whatever happens next is nothing personal'; this is just what happens, the poem implies, to people like you. Where MacNeice's fated hero carries the trappings of nobility, with his mounts and stable boys, Carson's does not seem to be anyone of high renown, merely one of 'your kind', 'your people'. The deaths each poem fears, therefore, are appropriate to the heroes' social standing: for MacNeice, one of gallantry and heroism, albeit one he refuses, or at least delays; for Carson, one inflicted in secret by mysterious authority figures, albeit with 'your inextinguishable name' apparently intact. Although MacNeice's influence on Carson's work has appeared previously in largely antagonistic terms, *For All We Know* may be the earliest occasion in which the elder poet's work becomes a less complicatedly empowering creative touchstone. The differences in execution remain, but it is at this point in Carson's career that the two poets' philosophies and practices seem more harmoniously aligned. It is

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<sup>141</sup> Carson, *Ciaran Carson: Critical Essays*, 25.

perhaps not coincidental that this structurally nostalgic book – a period thriller set in the 1970s, told in the past tense, which Carson has described as ‘An attempt to put the war behind me’<sup>142</sup> – may also be the one in which the anxiety of MacNeice as a creative forerunner is also ‘put behind’ him.

\* \* \*

Carson’s relationship to MacNeice, in all its complication and fluidity, would likely displease Harold Bloom. Rather than coming to a final defeat of the ‘strong’ poet, Carson seems to reach an understanding toward his work that does not erase its occasionally frustrating and unappealing aspects but acknowledges the many selves MacNeice seems to have embodied throughout his career. As a great many of Carson’s protagonists understand, the poets not only have many different selves but are often not themselves at all; what begins in Carson’s work as a vital if very literal survival mechanism becomes, over time, a means of coming to terms with a world that refuses a final, definitive perspective. MacNeice seems to offer an example of how to recognise and honour the ‘dissolving hail of data’ that is being alive in the world without allowing that dissolution to excuse oneself from articulating a meaningful response to its evils. The capacity of poems like ‘Birmingham’, ‘Snow’ and ‘Bagpipe Music’ to simultaneously critique and recognise their own complicity in processes of modernisation, their struggle to reconcile their sensory overload with their tangible delight in it, informs some of Carson’s finest work. In coming toward a definition for ‘craic’,

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<sup>142</sup> Ibid, 17.



Guinn Batten finds a space in which the two poet's work, in perhaps unlikely fashion, overlaps:

it allows an otherwise ordinary community, on any given night of entertainment, to exceed its own expectations. The yields of craic, and of a poetry that draws on its resources, are difficult to calculate, for they do not submit to ordinary rules of genre or of exchange. Their byword is "more".<sup>143</sup>

The exchanges made between Carson and MacNeice certainly seem to fit these criteria. The two poets' oeuvres seem to enact the principle that more is more: that the world, even one's own ability to locate oneself within it, is in constant flux, and that one's poetry can only change accordingly. Given Carson's assertion that to attempt to impose 'truth' on a world that moves too fast to accommodate it, the only approach that makes sense is to attempt to embody as many perspectives as one can simultaneously; given that the only truths are partial truths, finally, one's own self must also become incorrigibly plural.

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<sup>143</sup> Batten, 537.

## Six: Conclusion

In the winter of 2016, the first issue of *The Tangerine* was published in Belfast, a thrice-yearly magazine for new writing and art. The magazine's mission statement reads:

When the speaker in Louis MacNeice's poem 'Snow' peels and portions a tangerine, they are struck by 'the drunkenness of things being various'. *The Tangerine* is also concerned with 'things being various', and seeks to provide a space for a plurality of voices: for new creative work, thoughtful discussion, and critical engagement with culture and politics in Belfast and beyond.<sup>1</sup>

As this thesis has shown, MacNeice's influence on contemporary Northern Irish poetry takes many forms, and this statement from *The Tangerine* encapsulates several. In 'Snow', it identifies a poem whose legacy is now so ubiquitous in the work of Northern Irish poets that Leontia Flynn's debut collection *These Days* makes a punchline of it, as 'Nocturne'<sup>2</sup>, a poem immediately after one titled 'Snow', concludes:

he writes, The Words not ... Wha?

Whaddya mean already written? What?

Louis? Louis who?

There is being influential, and there is being inescapable. But *The Tangerine*, by framing that fruit and its overwhelming sensory experience at the heart of its creative enterprise, makes both 'Snow' and MacNeice himself synonymous with the magazine's world-view,

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<sup>1</sup> "About Us", *The Tangerine*, <https://thetangerinemagazine.com/issues/issue-1>, accessed 27 Sept 2018.

<sup>2</sup> Flynn, *These Days*, 22.

explicitly one that seeks out and uplifts the new, the various, the unusual, the incorrigibly plural; and one, of course, located geographically in the North of Ireland.

While there is certainly much to celebrate in such an empowering poet being so honoured, it may also suggest a kind of final critical certainty about MacNeice's stature and, to an extent, his cultural significance. It is understandable, of course, that a magazine of new writing would not have taken MacNeice's late poetry as their emblem – it might be slightly trickier to secure arts council funding for a magazine called *The Suicide* or *Charon* – but it does highlight the fact that whatever MacNeice's legacy, it will be difficult to encapsulate in a single figure, image, poem or aesthetic. The breadth of his oeuvre in terms of form, content, philosophy and tone ensure that, in the words of 'Variation on Heraclitus'<sup>3</sup>, the critic's 'slide snide rules can[not] catch what is sliding so fast'. What can be achieved, and what both *The Tangerine* and this thesis have aimed to achieve, is to engage with an oeuvre whose most powerful influence is in its advocacy for perpetual flux, for a constant renewal of one's terms of engagement with the world, its belief that what is best in life is what cannot finally be pinned down.

As this thesis has shown, MacNeice's relationship to the four contemporary poets in this study is equally multifaceted. For Michael Longley, MacNeice is not only a literary exemplar, but a biographical one, providing a way of negotiating his own complicated sense of belonging in Ireland. This manifests in his writing as a deep-running affinity with the concept of in-betweenness, of 'home' being not a singular space but a fluid one. He provides one way of reading MacNeice's oeuvre in his edition of MacNeice's *Selected Poems*, a means of amplifying the aspects of the elder poet's work that resonated with him most strongly, particularly in MacNeice's love poetry and his principled, liberal stance in the

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<sup>3</sup> MacNeice, *Collected Poems*, 502.

face of conflict. Though Longley's selection omits more bleakly pessimistic poems like 'Budgie' and 'Memoranda to Horace'<sup>4</sup>, his own poetic work shows no shortage of evidence of the later, nightmarish MacNeice in action. Given the extent of Longley's critical writing about MacNeice, there are relatively few overt allusions or references to MacNeice in comparison to Mahon, Muldoon and Carson. Where their work most powerfully connects is in their shared conviction that vulnerability does not entail weakness, that the fact of their mortality does not negate the resonance of individual moments of love and connection, and the pre-fated nature of their quests does not preclude the meaningfulness of setting out regardless. As Longley himself notes, the closing lines of 'Mayfly'<sup>5</sup> – 'when this summer is over let us die together / I want always to be near your breasts' – 'disclose the nucleus of [MacNeice's] imagination'<sup>6</sup>. They disclose much of what makes Longley's own work sing.

Mahon's relationship begins with his mature, achieved elegy for MacNeice, 'In Carrowdore Churchyard', but to linger too long on this moment of near-explicit artistic inheritance is to undersell the significance of the relationship between the two artists. Mahon's early collections are deeply animated by his self-questioning about the artist's role in society, about what value an artist might have when their immediate community appears to have no place for them. This line of thinking is informed to a great extent by MacNeice's poetry of the 1930s, in which the poet, ostensibly speaking from a critical distance, does not allow himself to consider himself removed or apart from the huge cultural changes in England and stagnations in Ireland, the materialism and then the totalitarianism he critiques. Mahon's best poetry comes out of this very friction, his desire to escape the demands of a society hostile to challenging art while identifying his own implication within

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<sup>4</sup> Both *ibid*, 539.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid*, 13.

<sup>6</sup> MacNeice, *Selected Poems*, xxii.

it. Mahon sees in MacNeice an exemplary sceptic, one who refuses to align himself with any broad movement without employing a keen critical eye. Formally and philosophically, MacNeice and Mahon conflict as often as they concur, but the depth of their dialogue is hard to overstate.

Few things about Paul Muldoon's career and aesthetics are straightforward, and the substantial influence of MacNeice in his work is somewhat obscured by MacNeice's appearance as character or speaker in Muldoon's creative and critical work. MacNeice is one of a handful of recurring characters in Muldoon's oeuvre, appearing in his introduction to the *Faber Book of Contemporary Irish Poetry* as a liberal foil to totalising ideas about Irishness and 'blood music'; again in 'History'<sup>7</sup>, in which the speaker quibbles with a partner about their sexual experiences 'in the room where MacNeice wrote 'Snow''; and in a named speaking role in '7, Middagh Street'<sup>8</sup>, in which MacNeice once again is a representative of a principled, complicated response to political circumstances that all too often fall into false binaries. For all this, however, MacNeice only rarely directly references other artists in his work, and on those occasions – *Autumn Sequel* and 'Eclogue from Iceland'<sup>9</sup> spring to mind – they are more often hidden behind pseudonyms. The influence of MacNeice runs deeper than his surface appearance, however: both poets are marked by the constant subversion and reclamation of rote language and cliché, both find themselves drawn toward circular or cyclical poetic forms, both have a great many poems that seem to operate in the domain of parable, both use their creative work to ask questions about how precisely one might talk about one's origins. Though the texture of his work might be more

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<sup>7</sup> Muldoon, *Why Brownlee Left*, 27.

<sup>8</sup> Muldoon, *Meeting the British*, 55.

<sup>9</sup> MacNeice, 327, 40.

idiosyncratic than any of his peers, there are aesthetic patterns and processes that make Muldoon's relationship to MacNeice a vital and empowering one.

In recent years Carson has been a keen advocate of MacNeice's work, writing in the first issue of *The Tangerine*: '[G]iven the amount of things in the world, their incorrigible plurality [...] all our truths are perforce partial truths, if not downright lies.'<sup>10</sup> This expressly MacNeicean thought is of deep significance for Carson's recent poetry and prose, which is deeply invested in questioning the nature of truth and perception. Though his positive opinion of MacNeice is a recent development, it is clear from looking at his full body of work that these questions have been in play from the very start, however combative his relationship with the elder poet might once have been. Like Muldoon, Carson's work often revolves around the desire for and impossibility of escape, either in local, literal context of evading the armed forces in Troubles Belfast, or in terms of the historical narratives that facilitate those forces in the first instance. MacNeice's discussions of the constructed nature of nationhood and the fine divisions between their empowering and entrapping definitions of self are valuable exemplars. Carson's work is unusual in this study for as often springing out of a negative response to MacNeice's writing. In both 'Snow'<sup>11</sup> and 'Bagpipe Music',<sup>12</sup> Carson seems to critique and rebuke shortcomings in the elder poet's work, aspects of Northern Irish culture and music that have been overlooked or under-appreciated in the 1930s originals. For all their fractious encounters, MacNeice appears as a valuable forerunner for some of Carson's most powerful writing, including his many extended explorations of parable, their fated heroes and doomed adventures.

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<sup>10</sup> Carson, "Thing", *The Tangerine*, 1 (Winter 2016), 7.

<sup>11</sup> Carson, *Belfast Confetti*, 20.

<sup>12</sup> Carson, *First Language*, 50.

MacNeice's work, like that of Longley, Mahon, Muldoon and Carson, is no settled matter. As long as there are poets reading his work and finding something that sparks an idea, there will be new perspectives from which to understand his work and the world to which it responded. Should the project started by this thesis be continued, it might include analyses of prominent contemporary poets like Leontia Flynn and Sinéad Morrissey, or poets outside Northern Ireland like Jack Underwood and Rebecca Tamás. What this thesis illuminates is that Eliot's dictum still rings true: we should 'not find it preposterous that the past should be altered by the present as much as the present is directed by the past'<sup>13</sup>. The question of influence is not one easily or authoritatively answered, and overarching theories or schemas to explain or taxonomize it are of little value. What a careful and attentive reader may find, however, is that a close examination of text and a sensitivity to context may illuminate the various ways in which a writer from an increasingly distant past might remain vibrantly suggestive and challenging. In 'Memoranda to Horace'<sup>14</sup> MacNeice appeared dismayed in the face of his own posterity, seeing himself as either a bore to be avoided or forgetful in 'second childhood'. In the poetry of Michael Longley, Derek Mahon, Paul Muldoon and Ciaran Carson, MacNeice's literary afterlife began in earnest, and has continued in strange and unpredictable manner ever since. A fitting tribute, after all that, then, is in returning to the very beginning, enlightened, perhaps, as in Muldoon's *immrams*, by the journey. Mahon's tribute to MacNeice, 'In Carrowdore Churchyard', is a fitting emblem for a generation of poets who were altered by and finally altered the work of their literary forerunner:

This, you implied, is how we ought to live –  
The ironical, loving crush of roses against snow,  
Each fragile, solving ambiguity. So

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<sup>13</sup> Eliot, *Selected Prose of T.S. Eliot*, 39.

<sup>14</sup> MacNeice, 539.

From the pneumonia of the ditch, from the ague  
Of the blind poet and the bombed-out town you bring  
The all-clear to the empty holes of spring,  
Rinsing the choked mud, keeping the colours new.

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