

Hold Your Breath
fifty poems

and

Louis MacNeice
warm from the ear of a ghost

His final poems: impure poetry and the BBC

by

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I declare that all the work presented in this thesis is my own.

Rebecca Farmer

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Abstract

This thesis presents, in Part One, fifty poems in an unpublished collection entitled *Hold Your Breath* and, in Part Two, close readings of four poems published in Louis MacNeice's final collection *The Burning Perch*.

The introduction to Part Two provides a detailed analysis of particular aspects of MacNeice's life and work that have informed the close readings of his poems, with special attention to his work in radio. This study of poems from his final collection will establish that, far from being detrimental as some commentators have argued, his radio work at the BBC had a positive influence on his poetry. Rather than acting in opposition, his work at the BBC and his writing of poetry benefited creatively from each other. By resisting any temptation to 'pigeon-hole' his work, and reading the poems with reference to the wider contexts in which he wrote, it is possible to gain a greater understanding and appreciation of MacNeice's work and his ability to extend boundaries. The readings are a personal response which recognises what MacNeice himself would have regarded as the 'impure' nature of the poems.

The title of the collection could serve as the title for both parts of the thesis, as it can be taken to express both an awareness of the fragility of life and the sense of excitement and anticipation that such an awareness brings to living. In essence it is this awareness that is explored in both the collection and the commentary.

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Part One

Hold Your Breath

fifty poems

*In a callbox for instance lifting a receiver warm from the ear of
a ghost*

— Louis MacNeice 'October in Bloomsbury'

The Tulips

enter like a corps de ballet
crimson and violet
vivid as wax crayons.

Heads held high in expectation
they sense their moment
is about to come.

Arranged in a bourrée en couru
they're happy to conform
until time makes rebels of them.

Their rhythms change
they fling impatient bodies
their petals fade to a ballet blanc

and fall to leave stamens exposed
arms stripped of leotard skin
waving in a semaphore of exaltation.

Their beautiful dying
robs my room of colour
and leaves it smelling of sweat.

The Girl Who Skinned the Fish

A sink as deep as me is filled with coley
at six o'clock each morning.

Tying my apron I start another day
of work in an urban fairy story.

My knife makes a cut
just deep enough to free the skin

letting my fingers enter
the pink-grey flesh to grasp the tail.

With a flick of my conjurer's wrist
I pull away the silver scales.

Again and again my hands dip
into the greying crush of ice and fish.

My fingers turn to blue
and crinkle, then they split.

Yet still the dull eyes multiply
and sister fish who've swum all night

thrash up through the overflow,
their scaly silence telling me:

find a river, swim to the sea.

Submarine

In the stillness under a heavy sea
my father is sewing
red roses on a white linen cloth.

His rough hand pulls silk threads
as he waits with thirty men,
each breathing in the others' smell.

Some write to sweethearts
letters they'll never send,
others sweat and long for a cigarette.

In the silence someone is listening
for the echo of a pulse of sound
from an enemy they'll never see.

Fear tastes like metal
on my father's dry tongue.
Every man keeps his mouth shut

as petals unfurl in the stifling heat
and the air fills with
the scents of a June night.

The Wardrobes of Ghosts

smell of nights spent at sea.
Hangers from drycleaners
swing on metal rails.
When the wires clink
the ghosts join in.

They try on outfits
to wear on that special day
when wedding gowns,
pyjamas and pinstripe suits
are changed for feathers
or dresses of burst balloons.

Draping waterfalls across
places where bodies used to be
they perch mountains
like hats on skulls and
trail cherry blossom (attached
with paperclips) to give
that Japanese look.

The Fridges of Ghosts

are tall and slim.

They do not smell of anything –

no bacteria grow in yoghurt pots
nor chicken bones fester (meant for stock),

bacon doesn't moulder past its sell-by date –
ghosts store nothing which decays.

They wrap stones in cling film
arranging them on shelves in size

while letters, lists and kisses lie
like lettuces in drawers

as the ghosts freeze old memories in cubes
and to keep themselves amused

photograph each other on their phones
or open and close the door

to admire the contrast of shadow and light.
Sometimes they climb inside

to escape the terrible loneliness
they feel outside.

Unopened

For years I thought my mother couldn't write.
My father left the notes for milkmen,
signed time-sheets, notes of sympathy,
reasons for absence, postcards from Ireland.
And, when he was too old, too ill to write,
my sister copied the signature she'd learnt
to forge at school. So I don't know why,
when it came, I knew my mother's writing
and held her letter unopened in my hand
as if I couldn't read –

Dublin Homecoming 1963

Holyhead
a ferry full of nuns
eating Tayto crisps.

Dun Laoghaire
day-trippers
a Jack Yeats sky.

Blackrock
a widow stares
fat snails, lace cabbages.

Crumlin
smoking cigarettes
hiding from the granny.

Lismore Road
a boy in the back garden
digging a big hole.

Holyhead
A ferry full of nuns
eating Tayto crisps.

My Mother is Using her Imagination

At first it didn't take her very far.
She waited in City Road hospital
for a train that never came.
At night she mithered about cleaning
the classrooms beside her bed.
None of this was strange for a woman
who'd spent her life mopping floors,
this little Irish 'Bridie' who stood
on the boarding house doorsteps
of 1950s Birmingham and read
No Blacks, No Irish, No Dogs.
Her imagination's as real as
St Theresa on the stairs
(but there are no stairs).
A black horse gallops past
with wooden crates of oranges
(but there are no oranges).
When we visit her we pass through
corridors the colour of intestines.
Swing doors open on women in saris
who sparkle like December frost.
My mother's at the centre,
the smallest Russian doll.
I feed her Turkish delight
made from rosewater and pistachio,
fairy food dissolving on her tongue
with the sweetness she loves.
My mother's smiling. She wants more.

May in Black and White

Lilies steam in cellophane
while we sort cutlery before
the arrival of the big black cars,
Ave Marias and gold handles.

Only when I walk away and hear
a blackbird sing
as a hawthorn sheds its white blizzard
do I begin to believe it.

How the Ghosts Relax

After the teenagers have dropped their fags
and left the swings, the ghosts arrive.
It's almost April yet snow is in the air –
ghosts don't feel the cold,
they go weeks without feeling at all.

The ghosts fold in and out
of the bars on the climbing frame
or go backwards down the slide
and jump up and giggle as they did
when they were tickled in the ribs.

Sometimes they take their dogs,
who run and sniff but never wag their tails.
The ghosts wish they had a ball to throw
but then, as the light begins to fade,
the ghosts read the sign *No Dogs Allowed*.

Rich Fruitcake

Not a bad funeral, a bit strange
having a woman for a vicar.

Afterwards, at tea, Hilda turned and said
Like the cake? Corpse baked it herself.

Her and me, children, making daisy chains,
examining the gaps where teeth had been.

Now she's dead I'll try
not to think about it anymore.

I expect she soaked the fruit.

North

I had the mind of winter
had been cold a long time.
I heard the trapped ermine's cry,
its tongue fixed when it licked
salt from the blue ice.
I heard, and I did nothing.
I had the mind of winter,
had been cold a long time.

Wet Nurse

They said it would be my nails
or hair that would continue to grow
but my breasts were the last to go.
Still, when I heard a baby's cry
I felt the clamp of a hungry O.
Lactation left its mark like a snail
weaving through my shroud.
Yellow bones held full moons,
my nipples tingled and stood proud.
I was a patient cow: silent, underground.

Reconstruction

Clustered round the space
where her breast should be
their prismatic eyes magnify
the gap lit by LED light.

Forceps hold back flaps
of abdominal skin
while one of them delves
for the blood supply.

When it's found they steal
the flesh they need then retreat
like tidy burglars replacing
the umbilicus as they leave.

Walking to a Distant Place

Fierceness drove her on,
sweltering in her woollen clothes
packed just days before in winter –

when she'd forgotten the possibility of spring.

Everything was wrong.
The warm February sun
perverse and sent to test her;

its heat might melt her, but she wasn't giving in.

The light was too bright.
Late beech leaves turned to flames
against the darkness of the pine.

The suddenly steeper path made her head spin.

Clattering birds mocked
her struggle in the mud and roots.
They knew the edge of things.

Even the iron-willed snowdrop never ventured on these cliffs

yet she did, daring herself
to look down on colours
like paint flicked across the crags.

And then she saw the broken tree, storm-whipped and split.

Too late to turn back,
last night's rain made the earth cling,
she slid and slipped into the smell of dirt

and all the time the River Esk roared with its penetrating din.

In another moment every movement
in the world would stop
except the one she felt compelled to make,

arriving where exactly?

From Under our Feet

The tick, tick of your bicycle wheel
suddenly spinning in air.

We are staring in silence at the sinkhole
that was once our garden.

Your headlight beam a faint flicker –
I see white rabbits tumbling

but only snowdrop bulbs
like flecks of space debris

fall into the ticking darkness.

Rubbings-Out

*His paintings are built up – layer on layer of ‘rubbings-out’ – on
Hemingway’s principle that if you obliterate something it will always be there
– Bruce Chatwin on Howard Hodgkin*

Years after your death I need to destroy
the memories that won’t fit in me.

Some I cut – bit by bit.
Others must be incinerated.

Still something remains:
the pentimenti beneath zinc and titanium white,

the smell of cedarwood on your skin,
our missed ferryboat in Piraeus still clinging to my horizon.

The Diagnosis

We wait in silence
in a hospital corridor
watching gutters thawing.

I hate this 10 o'clock
on your appointment card.
I want the 10 o'clocks we loved:

late breakfasts,
white tablecloths,
the windows open.

Your name is called.
The doctor hasn't read his script,
he doesn't say this is what it is,

but you look pale.
He looks at me.
Does he look pale to you?

Pale? Pale as what –
pale as this December 10 o'clock?
Yes, he looks pale, I say.

Lymphoma

All night long
your skin glows.

Tumours burn
your flesh.
As you turn

you moan.
We live close
to your bones.

By morning
your finger,
like Hansel's,
is thinner.

Passport Photo

The taxi driver tells us
they've moved Munich airport overnight.
He smiles in the mirror, *I know where to find it.*

Here it is – a place between other places,
shiny enough to slide away
to the somewhere else we want to be.

I push you through to find the doctor
who's come to take you home.

You worry your photo
doesn't look like you.
The doctor says *passport photos are all the same,*
everyone's sitting on the toilet.

We laugh, but we know it's true –
no one would recognise you.

Now my new passport can't hide
the years since a young woman
stared back at me, and not this face –
eyes cast down, colour drained
as if I've come out of a fridge.

The Game

Bolus they say; it's a new one on me.
I roll the word round my mouth like a boiled sweet.
You say it means *lump*. They explain how they'll make you
the solid shape fractions of radiation will hit.
We're creatures from a myth, sent underground
to meet the machine that gives you the chance to cheat death.

Latin and Greek are useful in a place like this –
a classical education's never wasted.
As if reading my mind a chorus
in white coats enters to fit your mask
and lead you away.

When they wheel you back you're wrapped
in polystyrene and bandages.
I joke about Egyptian mummies, realise the joke's not funny,
but you laugh and say you're entering the Turner prize
and then we both laugh like children
when grown-ups say *cheating never works*.

March Trees

Now you are dead you can stand
and look with me at those tall leafless trees.
They might be alders or ash. While you lived
we never had the time to stand like this.

Now we note the arrivals and departures
of rooks whose excited caws remind us
of that station in Milan when we couldn't
understand the language the men shouted in.

Both of us had the same thought:
*something's gone badly wrong and
no one knows what must be done.*

The Man in my Dreams

You never believed he was dying.
You never believed he was dead.
You dreamed he lived in the garage alone
and the wind blew the hair off his head.

He told you he'd bought a bicycle.
He told you the doctors were wrong.
He didn't look ill as he held your hand
and sang you an Irish song.

His bicycle stood on the table.
He wanted to fry you an egg.
He asked if you had any washing.
You know I love you he said.

None of this has been easy.
It's all been a very big change.
The fried egg tasted of strawberries –
I thought at the time this was strange.

Not Really

It's November. You are walking.
This morning it was dark and raining
but now the afternoon is convent blue
and the squashed leaves shine.

Your dog is a black and white film
flickering between the trees.
Then it starts; frame by frame
it all starts in your head again.

It's August and it is hot.
Fans will not cool the bedroom.
Home Care give you a biscuit tin of drugs.
You read 'Christmas Selection' on the lid.

They ask him if he's in pain; *not really* he says.
You curl beside him and he strokes your feet.
He says *we're going to get a parking ticket for this.*
They tell you he is dying, he tells you to hurry –
the audience is going in.

Croydon

This is the nearest to Venice
I have ever been.
Here with the violinist
who stamps his foot
making the music
of the Red Priest jive.

I'm there in secret streets
and November's turned
the colours of Venetian glass.
It is Carnival and torch light,
masked figures rush past
rainwashed Croydon trams.

And afterwards, meeting
my cellist friend, we walk
across a bridge of boats
over tar-black canals
and she tells me how
she learns concertos –

Start with the last page first.
We should have lived like that,
gone to Venice knowing
the time we didn't have.
But now the gondola waits,
the car park barrier lifts.

Room 47

Wet towels dumped on a bidet in Milton Keynes
wouldn't be the same as these in the photograph
she took of our empty room in Venice.

Her scent hung like smoke in the air
when she disappeared down the backstairs
clutching her camera with its evidence of our lives.

I remember the nights we spent in Room 47
wrapped in each other while our daughter slept.
No life is perfection but in love you hold your breath.

Her lens focused on stained sheets
left after nights we never wanted to forget.
You dream of it all those years.

Venice framed our past more than she ever could.
I see Eva's tears for the balloon we forgot;
it hangs limp in a black and white photograph.

If I close my eyes I can see it floating away
in the blue Italian sky like a disappearing dot of red.
As we packed our suitcases I remember what you said.

Twelfth Night

It ends with the boiling of bones.
Flesh leaves the ribs as easily
as pine needles leave dry branches.

An old carcass in grey water
is shrouded by its own grease.
It ends with the boiling of bones.

Is it?

This stone I will put in my shoe
I do not know its name
Its form changes
Black when I found it
Now it has turned to grey
The rainwater evaporated

Is it a stone?

This chipping I will put in my shoe
Its sharp edges will draw blood
Like he used to with his buckled strap
Lie across the bed he said
His weight bore down
Let me be crushed and die

Is it a chipping?

This gravel I will put in my shoe
I will look for the words
I will take the direct route
Walk up the hill to that small place
By the time I reach it with bloodied feet
I will have become a saint

Is it gravel?

This grit I will put in my shoe
Its roughness gives me hope
I wish for salvation
Will it be salvation?

This poem I will put in my shoe

Not the Grey

For Eleanor

This is not the grey
of the silver mountain gorilla

with its nose like a blue-grey fingerprint
described to me by the little girl who cannot see.

Not the grey of the Down Street tube station's switch room
its light bulbs painted the colour of pigeons in wartime London

while my father sat in his submarine stitching the grey felt kitten
I loved more than I love the rain.

It's not the grey of the Orpington sky
above the recreation ground

and the scattered chips left by teenagers
who creep round the edges like rats.

This isn't the grey of the kittiwakes we saw on Lindisfarne
when you were the young man who held

our tiny daughter against a Northumbrian wind.
This is not the grey.

In January

For Jessica

It's later than we walked before, the sky still salt-glazed.
I don't know the name of the field we cross with its turnip crop.
My collie, who used to run off in zigzags, is suddenly older now and happy
to walk close, sometimes stirred enough to lift the rooks.

Our feet and paws are clagged with mud from thawing frost.
It sucks us in. We might be swallowed up and there'd be nothing left
for them to find but a woolly hat and a hand clutching the lead.

We pass white hens – can't have been there before –
and cross Warren Road to the place where the Hurricane came down
in September 1940 – John Hugh Ellis lost at 21.
I read the plaque every day – the facts never change.
Looking up, I see Canary Wharf glittering like a fake lighthouse wreckers lit.
My dog turns back the way we came.

The Ghosts Choose their Mattresses with Care

and refuse to sleep on memory foam.
Unlike the living, they know
they'd leave no mark.

Instead the ghosts prefer to balance
on holes in metal springs –
uncomfortable, they feel real.

When they sleep, they dream of teeth
collapsing one by one with the sound of
shattering glass – a scene from *Tom and Jerry*.

Then, frozen to the wheel, they're driving
a truck through the white wall of a storm –
it takes their breath away.

What they want to dream is colours,
knowing they'll wake to the monochrome of rain
falling from a morning sky.

The Ghosts Regret Joining a Self-Help Group

The ghosts have started to believe they don't fit in.
They used to see their reflection in shop windows
and think themselves too fat, too thin,
too old, too young, but now they don't see anything.

People behave as if they're not there;
the ghosts get cross but then they realise – they're not.
They think of moving to a tower by the sea
where the only compass point is north and
their minds might be soothed by the buffeting wind.

Punched in the chest by the absurdity of death
the ghosts wonder why they never realised
how extraordinary their little life was.
They used to go to classes to be taken out of themselves
but now they'd give anything to be put back in.

Three Moth Haiku

moths caught in headlights –
dancing maniacs drunk
on the fake moonshine

pale smudge of a moth
dissolves in October rain
and enters the past

moths in December
gather their cloaks about them –
shouldn't still be here

Haysden Lake

In the evening we gather
by water
as dark as liquorice.

Shedding office suits
we oil ourselves
into neoprene.

Our yellow hats
dull the beat
of the A21.

Lake and sky merge
in pigeon colours;
day falls into night.

Leaving a bank
smothered with
Himalayan Balsam

our pod pulls
through open water
like seals in harmony.

Held up by depth
we travel a distance
that cannot be measured.

On Witnessing the Dismantling of the John Craske Exhibition at Aldeburgh

Two women arrive to pack away the sea.
They are armed with bubble wrap.
I must be quick to photograph

the tilting ships, the apricot sails,
figures battling against his limitless sea
in gales so real they knock the breath out of me.

The herrings made in a running stitch
smell of fish, their silvers and blues
catch the light and wink at me.

I no longer see where sky ends
and sea begins; water laps at my feet
like a labrador's lick.

Grey clouds shift, darkness falls,
a lighthouse beam shines from the wall;
with Christ in the vessel we'll smile at the storm.

The current is too strong, I have to give in
like the dancing fishermen
who never learnt to swim.

When the two women find me
they'll think I'm asleep,
bound in seaweed-coloured threads that reek of iodine.

The Sea Teaches You Imagination

All he wanted was the sky and the sea
with shoals of herring for his poetry.
Wider than the thoughts he held in his head
were the grey sea and the eastern sky
he saw when he drifted from the shore of his bed.

He knew the tides, he knew the wind
he heard the silver darlings sing.
Out there alone he became his own man;
in the swell of the waves and the roll of the boat
he felt only the calm of being free of the land.

But morning came as he knew it would
and a thousand gulls battered at the day
while he lay on his cold bed waiting for the light.
The catch was lost and now his fisherman hands
were restless to stitch until the night.

He'd sew his own sea on a piece of cloth
tacked to the frame of a deckchair like a haphazard sail
while the wife he loved watched over him
and saw his needle weaving like the wind.
Stillness wouldn't drown him, he'd work to begin.

Gauguin in Brittany

Bonjour, Monsieur Gauguin, you're back from your holiday,
see how my little dog Claude's keen to greet you.
Here, in Brittany, autumn's almost over now,
you'll need your overcoat and beard to keep you warm.
My washing doesn't dry, it smells of burning leaves
and the morning mists hang around all day.

Tell me, Monsieur, do you still want Marie-Claire to clean for you?
It's not the paintings of the naked girls she minds,
Monsieur – she says she never looks –
it's the smell. Not the paint, you understand –
no, she says it's the oil those women use.
Sometimes she feels it's overpowering, like the sea.
And then there's all the fruit.

Not our honest apples but thick and juicy stuff.
She says it has the smell of softness
and makes her feel she's being touched.
Guavas she said you called them.
She swears their redness swells.
It can't be good for you, that sticky wetness opening up.
She told me today there's a fruit like stars.

Then there are the flowers. White gardenias –
a sickly smell and really
how do those women find the time
for pinning fragrant petals in their hair?
In the morning, Marie tells me, when she goes in
the sunlight smells of cinnamon
and something else, but she won't say.

What I Saw That Day

I saw a child waving, what more can I say?
It could have been a boy or a girl;
a 'she' would be safer dressed that way.

Maybe the child was telling me to go
or asking me to come closer;
it might have been a signal, I don't know.

I had to get away, I tried to lift my hand
but smoke thickened my breath,
this was not my city, not my land,

everything smudged to black.
We flew out next day and now
when I wave I see a child waving back.

The Angel of the Flies

By the look in your eyes I see my disguise is a shock.
You'd expected something white and feathered –
maybe a dove, but the way I see it, fractured though it is,
a fly is perfect because I've come to feed on death, your biggest fear,
if not yours then someone you love.
Sorry I'm laughing, but your face looks like a total eclipse.

My Boy

My boy was born with the face of an angel,
he wasn't the cockroach they said he would be.
His long arms stretched like wings.
My voice said *please, give him to me. Please.*
They took him away and brought him back
wrapped in skin that was hard and grey.
I held him as the winter trees tap- tap-
tapped against thin, cold glass.
My boy looked at my face and smiled
like an old man who had been drinking.
Then he folded his arms and turned away.

Feathers

Feathers are usually female,
I'd been told to expect them.
I was thirteen when I felt chickens
in my belly, their manure ran red.

I understood this was secret.
Walking back across the sand
I felt embarrassed by my trail
of down drifting out to sea.

My feathers fattened me.
At night I smelt them burning
while my skin slackened
and my flesh shrivelled.

When they poked out of my chin
I plucked them in the sunlight.
Their lightness weighed on me,
filled my mouth. I kept it shut.

Isabelle

Her bruised back is the colour of damp bark.
Each week there is less of her for me to see
and more of the burl that grows in her stomach.
I choose my oils carefully – jasmine and rose.
As I massage her skin it makes the sound of dry leaves.
She keeps saying *harder* as though she can't feel,
she tells me she isn't herself, she wants to disappear.
When I finish she lies as silent as a garden at night.
Her last Christmas she gives me a Venetian glass;
like a winter tree it lets the light slip through.

Pigs

None of them showed surprise –
a few might have expected us
from the look in their shrewd piggy eyes.
Others couldn't be bothered
if we happened to drop by or not,
happy just to be standing there,
trotters rooted to the spot.

Some paddled in water, snouts up or down,
their colours like paint splodged against
the mud: whitish, greyish and brown.
The distant pigs seemed quite heavenly,
growing pinker as they neared the sky,
their tails curled tighter with pleasure –
given a nudge they might fly.

When you neared to take a photo
they trotted close to you until, to and fro,
you stepped back and the pigs did too –
samba moves from the pigs and you.
We left them, and thought we knew
their inevitable end. They watched us go
with eyes that said *they think they know*.

Home Help

God is hoovering my house.
He doesn't have to
but, like a bossy border collie,
He rushes around determined to help.
Next He wants to make a cup of tea.

Soon He'll be making soup.
When I suggest He has a rest
God just puts His head on one side
and opens the ironing board,
humming His favourite hymn
and smiling.

Home Thoughts

Give me a thousand kisses, then a hundred ...
– Catullus

His texts were brief and disappointing –
Weather not good it's raining.
In spite of crossing mountains
he'd little more to say –
In Ora, Italy, but everyone speaks German.

She replied she missed him,
got up to make her morning tea,
heard this had been the coldest May –
snow on the hills hadn't melted yet
and was waiting for the spring.

She dropped honey from a spoon,
saw the beech in her garden unfurl,
heard the double beep of a text
from a much too literal world.

He'd sent a photograph –
the largest lake in Italy.
She plunged into the deep blue
and tingled with a thousand kisses.

Rain

For GDM

It started and neither of them knew
when it would stop; they both
expected it would – sometime.
April leaked into May and
still they shook like wet dogs
in stations where they met,
dripped in lime-washed coffee-shops
and steamy restaurants where they ate.
Walking in rain became what they'd do
while, in spite of everything, spring –
the London plane trees opened greener
against sky the colour of milk.
Returning to her house in the suburbs
she watched it fill with umbrellas like bats
whose broken wings rested upturned
in buckets and the kitchen sink.
Walking her stiff-legged dog
she saw a rainbow cross the distant Shard.
She wished the rain would never stop.

The Ghosts and their Sense of Time

Old ghosts have no sense of time
and see little change between day and night.
It isn't the dark that brings them sleep,
and they do not wake to morning sun.
Ghosts never worry about life after death;
they are certain of what comes next.

There isn't a next thing they have to do.
The thought of 'real time' makes them laugh.
A life can't be measured and neither can death.
They've found the dark that follows dark.
Sun is a memory like hugs or snow,
sleep is eternal but never seems to last.

What the ghosts want most is home time –
dark winter evenings, the smell of tea and toast.
They long to wake from gentle sleep to start again,
sit on a park bench with sun on their face,
give death the run around and skedaddle away,
see what comes next when they start to play.

Time hangs heavy on hands they do not have.
They watch a child run across a shingle beach
by an endless sea and death seems an ocean away.
Like insects trapped between dirty panes of glass
ghosts feel held between this world and the next,
only ever wanting the light, only ever finding the dark.

How the Ghosts Get Out and About

It's easy to assume the ghosts
travel through London on the tube –
they seldom do, preferring to avoid
close contact with the living
though all the time they think
about the ones they left behind.

The ghosts prefer to move like ink
leaking through the streets.
Sometimes they find Thames Water
excavating drains and their journey is delayed.

Reading the sign *Thank You For Your Patience*
the ghosts smile and take out the book
they carry for such times:
1000 Places You Should Have Seen Before You Died.

Once, like mountaineers, they'd break bones
to reach somewhere they didn't need to be.
Now they carry an empty diary
in the old briefcase they used at school.

Country walks are what the ghosts dread most,
knowing they won't hear boots on stony ground.
Young ghosts have the right idea –
finding the top of a soft green hill and rolling down.

Sound Effects

I.

Tick, tock, chime – like drunken dancers
my clocks keep uncertain time.
In the irregular gaps I hear
other people's lives.

Waaa waaa – the baby downstairs
starts his mother's day and mine.
His big brother pushes a wooden train
across a wooden floor, again and again.

A door slams like an exclamation mark.

II.

They're back for their tea,
the rattle of cutlery becomes a hand
on my shoulder, steadying me.

Their washing-up is a water feature
trickling down the pipe
in my little backyard.

On warm September evenings I sit outside
to stare at the changing light and a dog barks
as my dog barked

in a life that's now as distant as the stars.

This is the One I Keep

From your rows of Penguin Classics
Xenophon's *Persian Expedition*
and Livy's *War with Hannibal*
must take their chance at the Oxfam shop
raising money for the victims of today's campaigns.

My hand hesitates over Seneca's
Letters from a Stoic; it might be useful,
but your signature in *Socrates* swings
my vote, black and underlined.
I'm surprised at your being emphatic
so I settle on these *The Last Days*.

Reading, I try to feel the love
you felt for the yellowing pages.
There aren't too many laughs
but I like this fellow who stood
in a trance for hours and hours.

I warm to him in his prison cell
writing poetry, meeting people,
waiting for an execution postponed
by contrary winds that meant a ship
couldn't sail. A lot depends
on little more than chance.

Notes

‘North’ takes its opening line from Wallace Stevens’s ‘The Snowman’.

‘Rubbings-Out’ – the quotation is from Bruce Chatwin, *What Am I Doing Here* (London: Picador, 1990), p. 76.

‘Croydon’ – the violinist Nigel Kennedy was playing Vivaldi’s *The Four Seasons* at Fairfield Halls.

‘Room 47’ after Sophie Calle’s *The Hotel* (1981).

‘On Witnessing the Dismantling of the John Craske Exhibition at Aldeburgh’ and ‘The Sea Teaches You Imagination’ were inspired by the life of the Norfolk fisherman, John Craske, who was born in 1881 and died in 1943. He became very ill (nobody knows what the illness was) and couldn’t go out on the sea; he was confined to his tiny cottage and then to his bed. At first he painted, but in bed he couldn’t paint so he started embroidery. He was looked after and loved by his devoted wife Laura who deserves her own poems. Julia Blackburn has written a wonderful biography about him: *Threads: The Delicate Life of John Craske* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2015). These poems were started when I was a writer in residence at the Aldeburgh Beach Lookout.

‘Gauguin in Brittany’ after the painting *Bonjour Monsieur Gauguin* (1889) by Paul Gauguin.

‘What I Saw That Day’ after *Child Waving* (2010) by Marlene Dumas, from her series of paintings of the West Bank.

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Some of the poems, or versions of them, first appeared in a pamphlet *Not Really*, which was a winner in the Poetry Business Competition in 2014 and was published by smith|doorstop. My thanks to Ann and Peter Sansom.

Part Two

Commentary

Louis MacNeice
warm from the ear of a ghost
His final poems: impure poetry and the BBC

Introduction

In Part Two of this thesis I offer close readings of four poems from Louis MacNeice's final collection *The Burning Perch*, which was published on 13 September 1963 just ten days after his death at the age of fifty-five.¹

The Burning Perch is recognised as marking 'the climax of [MacNeice's] career, containing much of his best and most enduringly influential work'.² Together with the collection that came before it, *Solstices* (1961), it is seen as a 'lyric return'.³ MacNeice believed that 'all lyric poems, though in varying degrees, are *dramatic*'.⁴ In my readings I have paid particular attention to MacNeice's dramatic approach to the lyric poem. The word 'drama' has its etymological roots in a classical Greek word meaning 'to do, act, perform',⁵ and it is appropriate that in each of the poems I have chosen to write about something happens: the poem's structure is centered around an action – a man washing his hands or taking a bus or a taxi, or the tour of an office after a man has jumped from a window.

The readings have also taken account of MacNeice's own words in his Preface to *Modern Poetry*, where he issued 'a plea for *impure* poetry, that is, for poetry conditioned by the poet's life and the world around him'.⁶ Taking this cue from MacNeice himself, I have considered what aspects of his life and of the world around him may have 'conditioned' the poetry he wrote. I have considered his letters, autobiographical writings, and other materials that depict the world and the times he lived in. I recognise that that this approach might not be justified in the case of all poets but there is ample evidence to support the view that

¹ The poems are reproduced in Peter McDonald, ed., *Louis MacNeice: Collected Poems* (London: Faber & Faber, 2007): 'Soap Suds', p. 577; 'The Taxis', p. 573; 'The Suicide', p. 579; and 'Charon', p. 592.

² Peter McDonald, *The Poet in his Contexts* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), p. 175.

³ Loc. cit.

⁴ Louis MacNeice, 'Experiences with Images', in Alan Heuser, ed., *Selected Literary Criticism of Louis MacNeice* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), p. 155.

⁵ *The Shorter Oxford English Dictionary*, 3rd edn (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1973). Later references to the *OED* are to this edition.

⁶ Louis MacNeice, *Modern Poetry*, 2nd edn, intr. by Walter Allen (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1938, reissued 1968), Preface, p. i. See also the entry for 'pure poetry and impure poetry' in Edward Hirsch, *A Poet's Glossary* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2014), p. 502.

MacNeice himself was very conscious of the external factors that influenced his writing.

For more than twenty years the immediate ‘world around him’, in the case of MacNeice, meant the world he encountered as a writer-producer in the Features Department of BBC radio. I have therefore paid special attention to his work at the BBC, partly because it was such an enduring feature of his life and partly because there are critics and poets who have suggested that it may have been detrimental to his poetry. I believe this to have been far from the case and that his work at the BBC actually benefited and enriched his work as a poet: the two aspects of his working life should not be seen as separate and acting in opposition to each other.

In her influential work *Louis MacNeice in the BBC* Barbara Coulton gives a detailed history of MacNeice’s career at the BBC; she also refers to his poetry but does not examine the connections between the two in any depth.⁷ Simon Workman in his thesis ‘Louis MacNeice: Radio, Poetry and the Aural Imagination’ does explore the links between MacNeice’s work at the BBC and his work as a poet.⁸ As the title of Workman’s thesis indicates, his main – but not exclusive – area of concern and research is the auditory impact of MacNeice’s radio work on his work as a poet.

In *Modern Poetry* MacNeice set out what he thought the characteristics of a poet should be. The work can be read as a manifesto, and his description of a poet has often been quoted:

My own prejudice, therefore, is in favour of poets whose worlds are not too esoteric. I would have a poet able-bodied, fond of talking, a reader of the newspapers, capable of pity and laughter, informed in economics, appreciative of women, involved in personal relationships, actively interested in politics, susceptible to physical impressions.⁹

MacNeice could have been describing himself. If he had gone on to suggest a suitable form of paid employment for the ‘all-rounder’ he had in his sights he might have come up with the Features Department of BBC radio. This department

⁷ Barbara Coulton, *Louis MacNeice in the BBC* (London: Faber & Faber, 1980).

⁸ Simon Workman, ‘Louis MacNeice: Radio, Poetry and the Aural Imagination’, unpublished PhD. thesis (Trinity College, Dublin 2010).

⁹ MacNeice, *Modern Poetry*, p. 198.

would offer opportunities that ranged from reporting on sporting events to visiting (and not just reading about) countries where the news was being made. It allowed him to enjoy the comradeship of other talented writers and journalists. What MacNeice did not include in his manifesto – had he done so he might have written the full job description for his own career – was that the poet should also be a writer of drama.

The broad range of MacNeice's interests and of the work he produced means that any consideration of the aspects of his life that may have 'conditioned' his writing has the potential to be an extended process. Given the limitations of this critical thesis, my aim has been to provide close readings of a group of poems that demonstrate an awareness of a number of characteristic factors that I believe to have 'conditioned' both the form and content of the poems.

MacNeice, in his conclusion to *Modern Poetry*, observed that 'Writing about poetry often becomes a parlour game. The critic is more interested in producing a water-tight system of criticism than in the objects which are his data'.¹⁰ He also believed that 'The essence of the poetry does not lie in the thing described or in the message imparted but in the resulting concrete unity, the poem'.¹¹ I have respected the primary importance of the poems themselves as my 'data'.

My research began with an interest in the work of contemporary poets who are engaged in writing for radio. I also have a background in drama: I attended The Birmingham Theatre School from the age of ten, and eventually read Drama at Manchester University and was a member of the Marlowe Society at Cambridge University. I was therefore particularly drawn towards an interest in the use of poetry in drama and of drama in poetry.

Radio was and is a natural medium for bringing poetry and drama together. Research into radio has been relatively neglected and, in the case of MacNeice, has often been confined to a study of texts. Martin Esslin identified the way in which:

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 197.

¹¹ Ibid., p. 4.

Radio drama, relying as it does almost entirely on *words* is pre-eminently a *writer's* medium.¹²

In many cases it is the text that has been preserved, and this has meant that there is a risk of forgetting that radio drama is written to be spoken and heard. It was very often the case that MacNeice not only wrote the script for the play but also, acting as the producer, 'breathed life' into it. Tim Crook, in the opening chapter of his influential book *Radio Drama: Theory and Practice*, feels the need to begin by defending the importance of radio drama. He asserts his belief that 'radio drama has been one of the most unappreciated and understated literary forms of the twentieth century'.¹³ Nevertheless, much of MacNeice's work has been preserved in this most 'ephemeral' of media, and this may be because of his status as a literary figure.

Where possible I have sought out the actual recordings of broadcasts. It has been of enormous value to be able to take part in the British Library's 'In The Dark' events, where recordings of MacNeice's plays and features enabled me to gain a deeper insight into what Susan Douglas has described as the difference between hearing and listening: 'We can passively hear but we must actively listen'.¹⁴ The 'In The Dark' events also served to highlight the way in which 'voice' united the various strands of research that brought together radio, drama and the life and poems of MacNeice.

* * *

From its earliest days the medium of radio and poetry have been closely connected. The British Broadcasting Company was formed on 18 October 1922 and in 1925 it launched its giant new transmitter on Borough Hill, Daventry – 'ushering in an era when transmitter power ensured simultaneous reception across most of the country'.¹⁵ The general manager (and later director general) John Reith broadcast to the nation and read 'The Dane Tree', a poem by Alfred Noyes which had been commissioned by the BBC. It included the lines:

¹² Martin Esslin, 'The Mind as a Stage', *Theatre Quarterly*, vol. I, no. 3, July-September 1971, pp. 5-11, p. 6.

¹³ Tim Crook, *Radio Drama: Theory and Practice* (London: Routledge, 1999), p. 3.

¹⁴ Susan J. Douglas, *Listening In* (New York: Random House, 1999), p. 27.

¹⁵ Seán Street, *The Poetry of Radio: The Colour of Sound* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2012), p. 10.

Daventry calling: memory, love,
The graves beneath and the stars above.

Even in my laughter you shall hear
The power to whom the far is near.¹⁶

Noyes's final words capture perfectly the spirit of the times, where new technologies, including radio, were seen as a means of diminishing the distances between countries and people.

The link between radio and poetry was to continue, as poetry represented an ideal form of 'content' for this new means of communication. Seán Street has observed that:

Radio for many has always been the ideal partner to poetry. Both the printed word and the audio medium provide the reader/listener with material which to a great extent remains open to personal imaginative interpretation.¹⁷

Both poetry and radio exploit what T. S. Eliot called 'auditory imagination', which he describes as 'penetrating far below the conscious levels of thought and feeling'.¹⁸

My introduction to poetry came, as it does for many people, through nursery rhymes. Later, I would memorise poems to be performed at festivals. This left a lasting pleasure in the *sound* of words quite divorced from their meaning. This introduction to poetry as something to be spoken also led to an interest in radio. Susan Douglas has highlighted the universal importance of listening to words and believes that it is essential to our understanding of the importance of radio throughout the twentieth century that we recognise radio's connections:

Emphasising radio's connection throughout the twentieth century to a persistent sense of longing and loss is essential to any understanding of what radio has done to us and for us. This too stems from hearing without seeing. 'For aurality – hearing, listening for voices, to music, to "the

¹⁶ Quoted in Street, *Poetry of Radio*, p. 10.

¹⁷ Street, *Poetry of Radio*, p. 2.

¹⁸ T. S. Eliot, *The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism* (London: Faber & Faber, 1933), pp. 118-119.

word” – is the driving force in cosmologies of many cultures around the world’.¹⁹

The initial focus of my research was into poems and dramas that contemporary poets had written specifically for radio. Amongst the work of other poets, I researched the work of Simon Armitage, Amanda Dalton and Michael Symmons Roberts alongside that of Paul Farley. In Media City, Salford, I was able to interview the BBC radio producer and editor Susan Roberts about her work with poets in producing award-winning audio dramas. Although the emphasis of my research altered subsequently, this early interview with a producer who had first-hand experience of the practicalities of using poetry in radio drama was to prove invaluable.

In 1994 Susan Roberts was the producer of the award-winning drama documentary *A Memory Lost* which explored the life of the poet John Clare. This drama documentary was recorded at Nottingham Asylum and combined the words of Clare, spoken by the actor Jack Shepherd, with factual information about the poet’s life and his eventual incarceration in an asylum. Susan Roberts also produced the play *Black Roses: The Killing of Sophie Lancaster*, which had attracted my attention because of its use of poetry in a dramatic setting. The play was written about the murder of the teenager Sophie Lancaster in 2007 and again took the form of a drama documentary. It combined poems written by the poet Simon Armitage with interviews with Sophie’s mother Sylvia Lancaster, and it went on to win the BBC Audio and Music Award for the best speech programme of the year in 2011.

My research into the development of the drama-documentary on radio led me inevitably to the name of Louis MacNeice. MacNeice joined the BBC in 1941 and continued to work in the medium until his death in 1963. He became a pioneering writer-producer in the Features Department and for over twenty years this was to be his full-time job, apart from short periods working abroad, until he became part-time in 1961. During the course of my research into his work I developed a new focus of interest. I had started out researching how poets adapted existing work or wrote new work for radio, but my research into MacNeice took

¹⁹ Douglas, *Listening In*, p. 40, referencing Constance Classen, *Worlds of Sense, Exploring the Senses in History and Across Cultures* (London: Routledge, 1993), p. 121.

place alongside the writing of poems for my own collection and I became interested in the reciprocal process: how writing for radio had influenced his poetry and most specifically the poems in his final collection.

When considering the influence that MacNeice's work at the BBC had on his poetry, it is important to understand the history and the nature of his work in the organisation. When he joined the BBC, radio was still a relatively new medium finding its way. He joined the Drama and Features Department which was under the overall direction of Val Gielgud, with Laurence Gilliam as his deputy who oversaw the production of features. At this stage of its development radio afforded ample opportunity for experimentation. MacNeice had returned from an American lecture tour in 1940.²⁰ One of his earliest contributions was to write a series of propaganda programmes that began broadcasting in May 1941. The programmes were aimed at America, which continued to resist taking part in the war in Europe. Melissa Dinsman has noted how in his broadcasts 'MacNeice makes his genuine affection for Britain's newest ally apparent'.²¹ His first work included a series called 'The Stones Cry Out' but contained the message that 'the people stand firm'. With its listing of evocative street names and buildings in London that were being bombed and in its use of voices, this early work has all the hallmarks of both MacNeice the poet and MacNeice the radio dramatist.

The 'Features' team was created to produce factually based radio in the form of documentaries, which were then known as 'features'. Paul Long has explained that 'taking a cue from the film documentaries of the 1930s, the feature tended to deal with aspects of "actuality" as an opportunity for bringing the poetic and journalistic together'.²² A lack of technology meant that it was almost impossible to record on location, and this led to hybrid programmes which involved scripts being performed in the studio. Eventually the Features Department was established as a distinct entity, separate from what might be called 'traditional' drama. Laurence Gilliam became the head of Features which then existed alongside the Drama Department, headed by Val Gielgud. The Drama Department tended to produce work based on dramatisations of books or

²⁰ On MacNeice's relationship with America, see Maria Johnston, "'This Endless Land": Louis MacNeice and the USA', *Irish University Review*, vol. 38, no. 2, Autumn/Winter 2008, pp. 243-262.

²¹ Melissa Dinsman, *Modernism at the Microphone* (London: Bloomsbury, 2015), p. 61.

²² Paul Long, 'Ephemeral Work': Louis MacNeice and the Moment of 'Pure Radio', *Key Words 7* (*Journal of the Raymond Williams Society*) (Nottingham: Spokesman, 2009), pp. 73-91.

adaptations of theatre productions, whereas Features produced work that was often a hybrid of fact and fiction:

Long before the word ‘faction’ was coined to describe the mode of writing in which the techniques of fiction were applied to real-life stories that is precisely what Features specialised in.²³

Within the Features Department the distinction between radio drama and radio feature therefore tended to be blurred, and it was within this fluid environment that MacNeice thrived in his early years at the BBC. Gilliam described features as ‘pure radio, a new instrument for the creative writer and producer’.²⁴ Jon Stallworthy emphasised the importance of Gilliam, who was a champion of writers. ‘He, more than anyone else, was responsible for the development of features as a radio form’.²⁵ The final years of MacNeice’s life coincided with the dying years of Features, which ended with the death of Gilliam in 1964.

* * *

If radio was to serve as a medium for both poetry and drama, or indeed a combination of the two, this was due in no small part to the fact that radio and voice are inextricably intertwined. The voices heard on radio may be ‘far’ but, by means of the technology, they are made ‘near’ and intimate. Poetry has its origins in voice and came out of an oral tradition: poets still refer to the concept of finding their ‘voice’. In common with poetry, radio drama also embodies a combination of literature and an oral tradition which MacNeice expressed in Canto iv of *Autumn Sequel* (1944):

Not matching pictures but inventing sound
Precalculating microphone and knob

In homage to the human voice²⁶

²³ Martin Banham, ed., *The Cambridge Guide to Theatre* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), p. 299.

²⁴ Kate Whitehead, *The Third Programme: A Literary History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), p. 113.

²⁵ Jon Stallworthy, *Louis MacNeice* (London: Faber & Faber, 1995), p. 299.

²⁶ MacNeice, *Autumn Sequel*, in McDonald, ed., *Collected Poems*, p. 385.

In the same Canto MacNeice went on to describe how ‘What was in print | Must take on breath’.²⁷ For MacNeice, radio was an example of what Walter Ong has described as ‘secondary orality’ which is dependent upon writing and print.²⁸

MacNeice’s concern with and heightened awareness of ‘the human voice’ predated his work at the BBC and went back to his early childhood experiences.

Frederick Louis MacNeice was born on 12 September 1907 in Belfast and died on 3 September 1963 in London. ‘He had been known as Fred or Freddie until, in his rebellious teens, he abandoned his patronymic’.²⁹ Although MacNeice was born in Belfast his parents came from the West of Ireland, which his mother often spoke of as a magical place. MacNeice identified some of this magic with the way in which people spoke in the West, in contrast to the harsher sounds of Belfast where he spent his early childhood. ‘People’s voices were different there, soft and rich like my father’s (who made one syllable of ‘heron’ or ‘orange’)’.³⁰ MacNeice was also to recall in his poem ‘Autobiography’ (1940) that ‘My father made the walls resound | He wore his collar the wrong way round’³¹, which is a reminder of how, from an early age, the sounds of the Church of Ireland were part of his world. This sensitivity to voice was to be put to good use when, as a producer, he began to cast radio plays.

MacNeice’s mother tried unsuccessfully to stop her children acquiring an Ulster accent. MacNeice’s English accent was acquired when he was sent to Sherborne Preparatory School in Dorset at the age of ten. His sister had been sent to school in England when she was fourteen, and MacNeice notes in his autobiography *The Strings are False* that ‘my stepmother thought it was high time she should lose her Northern accent’.³² MacNeice duly lost his accent³¹, and remembered being ‘Schooled from the age of ten to a foreign voice’.³³ His English accent can only have been reinforced when, at the age of fourteen, he

²⁷ Loc. cit. In this thesis an upright stroke is used to mark a line break in a verse quotation, following the *MHRA Style Guide*.

²⁸ Walter J. Ong, *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word* (London: Methuen, 1982), p. 11.

²⁹ Stallworthy, *MacNeice*, p. 12.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 25.

³¹ MacNeice, ‘Autobiography’, in McDonald, ed., *Collected Poems*, p. 200.

³² Louis MacNeice, *The Strings are False: An Unfinished Autobiography* (London: Faber & Faber, 1965, reissued 1996), p. 62.

³³ MacNeice, ‘Carrick Revisited’, in McDonald, ed., *Collected Poems*, p. 262.

went on to Marlborough College, where he became a regular contributor to both his official school magazine *The Marlburian* and the unofficial magazine *The Heretick*. In 1926 he went to Merton College, Oxford. Later he recalled: ‘I was very snobbish about accents, and the Belfast accent struck me as not only the ugliest but the least aristocratic of the lot’.³⁴

MacNeice’s heightened awareness from a young age of the different sounds of the voices around him, as well as the sound of his own voice, is one in which I find echoes of my own experience. I grew up in Birmingham with parents who came from Dublin and who always kept their strong Dublin accents. I remember being teased at school for my Irish pronunciation of words. My siblings acquired Birmingham accents while I, because of the intervention of a teacher, went to The Birmingham Theatre School which, at that time, placed great importance on elocution. I spoke RP English and can remember going for a BBC audition and being confused because I was asked to read the part in ‘my own voice’.

These early experiences gave me a strong sense of how the physical voice is bound up with one’s sense of identity. Later on I came to connect this with writers being required to find their ‘own voice’. There are poets whose writing comes out of a strong sense of identity and there are poets who write out of a quest for identity. I put myself in the latter category and consider it no accident that, in spite of the many differences and separations that exist between us, I am drawn to the work of MacNeice, of whom the poet Nick Laird said ‘Everything for him came down to being in two minds’. He cited as evidence a letter written by MacNeice to E.R. Dodds, a fellow Ulsterman, in which he wrote: ‘I wish one could either *live* in Ireland or *feel oneself* in England’.³⁵

In ‘Postscript to Iceland’ MacNeice describes a conversation in which Auden said ‘the North begins inside’³⁶ and MacNeice himself recognised ‘I cannot deny my past to which myself is wed’.³⁷ It would be too simplistic to imagine that identity can be defined purely by one’s voice or accent, but there is no doubt that how one talks colours other people’s perceptions if not your own.

³⁴ Louis MacNeice, ‘When I Was Twenty-One: 1928’, in Alan Heuser, ed., *Selected Prose of Louis MacNeice* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), p. 223.

³⁵ Nick Laird, ‘Chianti in Khartoum’, *London Review of Books*, vol. 33, no. 5, 3 March 2011, pp. 31-33.

³⁶ MacNeice, ‘Postscript to Iceland’, in McDonald, ed., *Collected Poems*, p. 96.

³⁷ MacNeice, ‘Valediction’, in McDonald, ed., *Collected Poems*, p. 8.

Quite apart from the role that voice plays in defining identity by reference to geography or class, it is indisputable that voice is bound up with something very physical and basic. I was fortunate enough to be able to take part in workshops with the eminent voice coaches Cicely Berry and Patsy Rodenburg, where I learnt that:

Breath comes first, voice and all its components follow and speech is the third element and end result of the technical aspects of communicating.³⁸

There are practitioners in the field of voice who have devoted a lifetime of work to voice: Dame Cicely Berry is now 90.

I am aware that, within the scope of this thesis, I can only offer the barest suggestion of the intimate and complicated links between the physical voice and the text, but in practice this awareness of voice has been fundamental both in my own writing and in my reading of the poems of MacNeice. Although there are many technical aspects of the sound of a poem that can be studied, crafted and honed, in the final result the way that a line of poetry sounds when it is spoken starts with the breath. MacNeice worked in a medium in which the voice of the actor was of supreme importance, for ‘An actor on radio is a voice – no more, no less – and identification by an audience is entirely aural’.³⁹ Dylan Thomas reflected this by attaching the phrase ‘a play for voices’ to his script for *Under Milk Wood* (1954).⁴⁰ It is not surprising that MacNeice’s long career working in the medium of radio left an indelible mark on the sound of his poetry and further developed what was already a highly developed auditory awareness.

MacNeice in his poem ‘The Ear’ (1940) gives a clear indication of his acute sensitivity to all sounds and describes the sound of a train as being ‘the thin and audible end of a dark wedge’.⁴¹ Simon Workman has highlighted the fact that ‘Through radio MacNeice was able to hone his auditory faculty, and gradually realise the full range and potential of the human voice as well as the textures of sound and pattern of rhythm’.⁴² In studying MacNeice’s final poems the sound of

³⁸ Rodenburg, Patsy, *The Right to Speak: Working with the Voice*, 2nd edn (London: Bloomsbury, 2015), p. 221.

³⁹ Banham, ed., *Cambridge Guide to Theatre*, p. 804.

⁴⁰ Dylan Thomas, *Under Milk Wood* (London: Folio Society, 1972).

⁴¹ MacNeice, ‘The Ear’, in McDonald, ed., *Collected Poems*, p. 201.

⁴² Workman, ‘Louis MacNeice’, p. 226.

them has been of great importance, and I have sought to attach the same importance to the sound of the poems in my own collection. I cannot deny that I lack the ‘Irishman’s unfailing ear for the music of verse’ that Eliot ascribed to MacNeice in his obituary,⁴³ but the close involvement I have had with his final poems during the course of my research has left me with a heightened awareness of the sound of my own poems and the use of dialogue or other voices in the dramatic context of a poem.

One of the most important questions when listening to a radio play or writing a poem is: who is speaking? This is a particularly interesting question when explored in the context of the poems I have chosen to write about. In none of them is the pronoun ‘I’ used as if the reader were being addressed directly by the poet. In ‘Suicide’ the ‘I’ appears to be a tour guide, in ‘Soap Suds’ and ‘The Taxis’ the pronoun used is ‘He’ and in ‘Charon’ it is ‘We’. There is always a sense that MacNeice is distancing himself by creating a drama. The critic A. T. Tolley has observed that:

The self is, of course, a construction as is also the outside world and MacNeice seems to have been peculiarly and pressingly aware of this.⁴⁴

MacNeice’s use of pronouns reinforces Tolley’s view that ‘a great deal of what the poems say resides in the style’.⁴⁵ My research into MacNeice’s work has enabled me to find ways in which to write about subjects which have been difficult to write about. I found this particularly true when writing the sequence of poems relating to my husband’s death. Reading MacNeice’s work has also encouraged me to adopt other voices, as in the case of ‘Rich Fruitcake’, ‘The Angel of the Flies’ or ‘Gauguin in Brittany’.

MacNeice’s own speaking voice was the subject of discussion and was often tied up with the question of his ‘Irishness’. It is not the purpose of this thesis to investigate MacNeice’s sense of ‘Irishness’; this has been and will continue to be explored by writers and poets including Peter McDonald, Edna Longley, Tom Walker, Neil Corcoran, Tom Paulin and Derek Mahon. MacNeice himself, in a discussion with F. R. Higgins, expressed the view that he was ‘not used to

⁴³ *The Times*, 5 September 1963.

⁴⁴ A. T. Tolley, *Poetry of the Thirties* (London: Gollancz, 1975), p. 178.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 180.

thinking of poetry in terms of race-consciousness.⁴⁶ It is possible to listen to a recording of MacNeice on The Poetry Archive reading ‘Prayer Before Birth’ and be reminded of what Derek Mahon described as ‘nasal Oxford, a sonorous growl’.⁴⁷ Although there is other evidence to confirm that MacNeice very often spoke with an Oxford accent, Philip Larkin detected in recordings of MacNeice reading his poems

a lurking Northern Irish accent (suitably exaggerated for “Carrick-fergus”), and makes such poems as ‘the Sunlight on the Garden’ and ‘Nuts in May’ much craggier and more forceful than one remembered them.⁴⁸

Larkin’s interpretation of MacNeice’s voice when compared to others serves only to emphasise the complexity of MacNeice’s national identity. There are times when he is, as he described the city of Dublin, ‘not Irish’ and ‘not English’.⁴⁹ It is no accident that home is such a recurrent theme in his work.

* * *

MacNeice’s mother died when he was seven years old, and he began to write poetry at about the same age. In *Modern Poetry* MacNeice describes how in his early writing:

What I was chiefly interested in was the pattern of the words. My recipe for a poem was simple – use ‘thou’ instead of ‘you’ and make the ends of lines rhyme with each other; no specific emotion or ‘poetic’ content required. Here is a poem about a live parrot which I had seen in a neighbour’s house:

O parrot, thou has grey feathers
Which thou peckest in all weathers.
And thy curl beak
Could make me squeak;
Thy tail I admire

⁴⁶ Paul Muldoon, ed., *The Faber Book of Contemporary Irish Poetry* (London: Faber & Faber, 1986), p. 18.

⁴⁷ Derek Mahon, ‘Ecologues Between the Truculent’, in Fran Brearton and Edna Longley, eds, *Incorrigibly Plural: Louis MacNeice and his Legacy* (Manchester: Carcanet, 2012), p. 101.

⁴⁸ Philip Larkin, ‘The Voices of Poets’, *New Statesman*, 2 February 1962, reprinted 10-16 April 2015, pp. 52-53.

⁴⁹ Louis MacNeice, ‘The Coming of War: I: Dublin’, *Plant and Phantom* (London: Faber & Faber, 1941), p. 33.

As red as the fire
 And as red as a carrot,
 Thy tail I admire,
 Thou cross old parrot.

This seems to me now to be better writing than much which I afterwards wrote in the fervour of my adolescence. There is a nucleus of observed fact, and my naïve idea that putting anything into rhyme makes it a poem at least enabled me to convey this fact in a memorable form (I use the word memorable in its literal sense, which is its basic sense, because I find this poem easy to remember).⁵⁰

This notion of ‘observed fact’ as the basis or starting point for a poem is one he returned to when Miss Joyce M. Broadwell wrote to him from her training college in Ripon and asked him about the origins of his poem ‘Snow’. She wanted to know ‘where exactly you obtained this idea’.⁵¹ He replied ‘it is almost a piece of factual reporting’.⁵²

MacNeice continued to write poems all through his childhood. When he was eight he sent his sister a poem about the sound of water. The introduction he gives the poem is interesting because, rather than say he has ‘written’ a poem, he tells her he has ‘made another piece of poetry’:

The water sound
 Gurgles and bubbles around
 In a wild country
 The Cliffs are high
 Against the sky
 In a wild country
 The Suns great ray
 Makes hot the traveller[’s] way
 In a wild country.⁵³

As Jon Stallworthy observed, ‘Cliff and water, fixity and flux: clear as a fingerprint in these lines of a child are the co-ordinates and configurations of the poem of the man’.⁵⁴ This poem, ‘made’ when MacNeice was just eight years old,

⁵⁰ MacNeice, *Modern Poetry*, p. 40.

⁵¹ BBC Written Archives Centre, R71/918/1, 1957-1963, 28 May 1962. The Written Archives Centre will be referred to in later footnotes as ‘WAC’.

⁵² Letter from MacNeice to Miss J. Freeman, 2 May 1961, in Jonathan Allison, ed., *Selected Letters of Louis MacNeice* (London: Faber & Faber, 2010), p. 679.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, p. 9. The editor has intervened in ‘traveller[’s]’ but the word ‘Suns’ remains as written by the young MacNeice.

⁵⁴ Stallworthy, *MacNeice*, p. 51.

is also notable because the poem starts with a sound and then goes on to develop a sense of drama and the possibility of a ‘traveller’ entering the wild landscape.

MacNeice’s first collection of poems *Blind Fireworks* was published in 1929 when he was twenty-two years old, but he later considered it to be juvenilia and he did not include any of the poems from it in his *Collected Poems* published in 1949. Throughout his life he maintained a phenomenal volume and diversity of output. In 1935 he published *Poems*, his first collection with Faber & Faber. In 1937 he published *Letters from Iceland* which was a travelogue in verse and prose written with his friend W. H. Auden. In the same year he also published a play *Out of the Picture* which was performed at The Group Theatre in London. Barbara Coulton observes that his involvement with this avant-garde theatre group ‘shows his modernity, and his willingness to develop other forms than poetry’.⁵⁵ In 1938 he published *The Earth Compels*, and thereafter he was to publish more than fifteen volumes of poetry.

In 1938 he also published three other books: his autobiography *I Crossed the Minch*, his book of criticism *Modern Poetry: A Personal Essay*, and *Zoo*, a prose work described by the publisher as *belles lettres*. He also wrote reviews for *The Listener* and *The Spectator*. This literary outpouring in 1938 serves to illustrate what Alan Heuser says of MacNeice in his introduction to *Selected Prose of Louis MacNeice*: ‘Louis MacNeice is a multi-dimensional writer who cannot be, refuses to be, pigeon-holed’.⁵⁶

Even before MacNeice joined the BBC, therefore, his professional life had demonstrated that here was a writer who wallowed in ‘the drunkenness of things being various’.⁵⁷ He was certainly not a man who could be ‘pigeon-holed’ and he did not take kindly to those who tried to ‘pigeon-hole’ his work. Replying to a criticism of his radio play *They Met on Good Friday* he wrote:

Mr Rodger insists on treating my programme about the battle of Clontarf as a ‘documentary’ this reminds me of a book reviewer who regarded a poem of mine about the Eumenides as a ‘travelogue’.⁵⁸

⁵⁵ Coulton, *MacNeice in the BBC*, p. 28.

⁵⁶ Heuser, ed., *Selected Prose of Louis MacNeice*, p. xiii.

⁵⁷ MacNeice, ‘Snow’, in McDonald, ed., *Collected Poems*, p. 24.

⁵⁸ BBC WAC, R/19/1290, Entertainment, 8 December 1959.

It would be equally difficult, if not impossible, to pigeon-hole the output of the Features Department within which MacNeice spent his professional life. My research in the BBC Written Archives Centre at Caversham produced a wealth of data on the scope of MacNeice's work at the BBC. During his time there he produced over 160 scripts and his work covered an astonishing range.⁵⁹ He started by writing wartime propaganda and went on to write, and often produce, among other things, scripts dealing with the history and literature of Greece, translations of Latin poems, dramatisations of Norse legends and dramatised fairy tales, translations of German literature, his own original plays, adaptations of works such as Virginia Woolf's *The Waves*, and reports about rugby matches – all these alongside drama documentaries, many of which involved travelling, including works such as *The Birth of Ghana* and *India at First Sight*.

The Burning Perch was completed in 1963, the final year of his life, and published shortly afterwards. During that year MacNeice also gave the Clark Lectures in Cambridge, which were later edited by his friend and mentor E. R. Dodds and published posthumously in 1965 as *Varieties of Parable*. He also wrote and produced his final play *Persons from Porlock* as well as completing a book on astrology and writing reviews and journalistic pieces on sporting fixtures and on President Kennedy's visit to Ireland. For a writer whose poems so often contained an element of circularity, there is a sense of rightness that his professional life finished very much in the way it had begun: with MacNeice producing an extraordinary volume of work across both literary and popular genres.

In the course of writing about the four poems in Part Two, and bearing in mind MacNeice's 'plea for *impure* poetry', I have left myself constantly open to reading the plays and critical works he was working on at the same time, as well as his letters and biographical writings and broadcasts. As I have already acknowledged, I am aware that this approach might not be justified for the work of all poets, but I would argue that MacNeice is a particular case and that this approach to his work is amply justified when one considers that MacNeice had

⁵⁹ Amanda Wrigley and S. J. Harrison, eds, *Louis MacNeice: The Classical Radio Plays* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), p.1 footnote: 'This figure is taken from Holme 1981'.

what his literary executor E. R. Dodds, in his preface to *The Strings are False*, described as a:

preoccupation with his own past, with memories that ‘flitter and champ in a dark cupboard’, this emerges repeatedly in his poems, and amounted to almost an obsession.⁶⁰

* * *

MacNeice’s biographer Jon Stallworthy and the poet Paul Muldoon have argued that radio had a detrimental effect on the work of MacNeice the poet. Jon Stallworthy thought ‘the BBC upset the natural balance of the poet’s perceptions’⁶¹ but he did acknowledge that:

While it is clear that MacNeice’s writing for radio at times siphoned off creative energy that might otherwise have gone into poems, it is also clear that what I have called the work of his left hand could contribute to that of his right, and that the same blood supply, the same imagination, nourished them both.⁶²

Paul Muldoon, in his BBC radio programme *In The Dark Tower – Louis MacNeice at the BBC* (January 2007)⁶³, went so far as to say that radio might be ‘the person from Porlock’ and the BBC may have been MacNeice’s ‘Dark Tower’. In the same programme the poet Stephen Spender remembered Virginia Woolf telling him that to work for the BBC would be a ‘disaster’ for any writer. Marilyn Butler, writing in the *London Review of Books*, expressed the view that ‘On reflection, it seems hard to tell whether it was MacNeice or radio drama which suffered more from their association’.⁶⁴

It is undeniable that the sheer volume of work that MacNeice produced at the BBC could be seen as taking up time that might have been spent writing poems, but there are positive factors that must be weighed in the balance. These

⁶⁰ MacNeice, *The Strings are False*, Editor’s Preface, p. 15. The phrase ‘flitter and champ in a dark cupboard’ is from MacNeice, *Ten Burnt Offerings*, in McDonald, ed., *Collected Poems*, p. 351.

⁶¹ Stallworthy, *MacNeice*, p. 330.

⁶² *Ibid.*, p. 421.

⁶³ <<http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b04d0k15>>, last accessed September 2016.

⁶⁴ Marilyn Butler, ‘Rise and Fall of Radio Features’, *London Review of Books*, vol. 12, no. 15, 7 August 1980, pp. 5-7.

include the simple fact that the BBC paid MacNeice a salary. As W. H. Auden acknowledged in an article he wrote after MacNeice's death, 'How a poet is to earn an honest living is a problem to which there is no entirely satisfactory solution'.⁶⁵ MacNeice had tried the academic life in both Birmingham and London and found it did not suit him but, having joined the BBC, it appears this did not stop him from sometimes regretting that he was not a freelancer. In the BBC Year Book for 1947, in an article headed 'Scripts Wanted!', MacNeice urged writers to descend from their pillars 'like two of the best writers of our time, V. S. Pritchett and Dylan Thomas'. He urged them to work as freelancers and said 'I have just reckoned that, were I not on the staff of the BBC, a single recent programme of mine would have brought me – from three guaranteed performances – rather more money than I once used to make in a year as a University lecturer'.⁶⁶

Nevertheless, MacNeice valued the companionship that was afforded by being on the staff of the BBC: 'I for one have found this missing group experience, in a valid form in radio'.⁶⁷ He referred to it as 'a cure for those lonely-poet blues'.⁶⁸ During his early years at the BBC he worked alongside talented poets, writers, producers and journalists including Dylan Thomas, W. R. Rodgers and Terence Tiller, Alan Burgess, Douglas Cleverdon, Elizabeth Lutyens and René Cutforth. Terence Brown has highlighted the fact that, importantly, MacNeice's work at the BBC 'can be seen indeed as a practical extension of his early aspiration to be an artist communicating with a large public'.⁶⁹

It has been seen that from the early days of his writing career, even before he joined the BBC, MacNeice was drawn to different forms of writing and that, in his case, these different forms fed into each other. The same can be said about his writing for radio, and it is unhelpful to view his work at the BBC and his work as a poet as two forces working against each other. In his thesis 'Louis MacNeice: Radio, Poetry and the Aural Imagination', Simon Workman argues against the view that MacNeice's radio work was detrimental to his poetry, and reaches the

⁶⁵ Edward Mendelson, ed., *The Complete Works of W. H. Auden: Prose Volume V 1963-1968* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2015), p. 67.

⁶⁶ Stallworthy, *MacNeice*, p. 352.

⁶⁷ Quoted in Coulton, *MacNeice in the BBC*, p. 56.

⁶⁸ Louis MacNeice, 'Introduction to Scripts', in Rayner Heppenstall, ed., *Imaginary Conversations*, quoted in Whitehead, *The Third Programme*, p. 71.

⁶⁹ Terence Brown, *Louis MacNeice: Sceptical Vision* (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1975), p. 24.

conclusion that working in radio expanded MacNeice's 'awareness of the effect and meanings which could be achieved through the aural dimensions of a poem'.⁷⁰

I was fortunate, in the early days of my research, to be able to meet with MacNeice's biographer, the poet and critic Jon Stallworthy, in March 2014. At that time both my research and the creative writing element of my work were focussed on the *sound* of MacNeice's poetry. We discussed how MacNeice's work exhibited a tremendous sense of musicality. I had hoped to be able to have further discussions with Jon Stallworthy but, sadly, he died in November 2014. His biography, published in 1995, heralded a marked resurgence of interest in all aspects of MacNeice's work and has been a continuing source of both information and inspiration.

One of the reasons why I have chosen to study and research 'Soap Suds', 'The Taxis', 'The Suicide' and 'Charon' and is that these poems amplify Simon Workman's conclusion on the 'aural dimension' of MacNeice's writing. The 'aural dimension' is an aspect of MacNeice's writing that has influenced my own work. Although I cannot hope to acquire MacNeice's classical background, which had such a powerful influence on the sound of the poems in his final collection, I have found, as I have indicated earlier, that being exposed to the sound of these poems has greatly increased my awareness of the sound of my own poems.

Another principal reason for my choice of poems is that these poems support my own belief that working in BBC 'Features', with its approach of combining fact and fiction, was eminently suited to a poet who took as his starting point for a poem 'a piece of factual reporting' and so often – and certainly in the case of these four poems – made a poem into a drama or a drama into a poem.

What is apparent in these poems is MacNeice's desire to tell a story; very often this was his own story but this was not always the case. This desire was reflected in the view expressed by Susan Roberts when I asked her about what drew her to the work of certain poets. She replied that what she looked for when considering poets to work with on radio was that their poetry told a story, and she added: 'not all poetry does'.⁷¹ All four of the poems I have chosen for the close readings in this commentary tell a story. It is difficult to generalise about the short

⁷⁰ Workman, 'Louis MacNeice', p. 226.

⁷¹ Susan Roberts, interview with author, Media City, Salford, England, 22 October 2012.

story as a form but it is notable that a number of writers, including Elizabeth Bowen and V. S. Pritchett, have drawn attention to the similarities that exist between the short story and the lyric poem. This is very evident in MacNeice's poems given their level of intensity and the open-endedness of their conclusions.

These inconclusive endings are dictated, to some degree, by MacNeice's subject matter. All four of the poems I have chosen reflect Robert Graves's belief expressed in his poem 'To Juan at the Winter Solstice':

There is one story and one story only
That will prove worth your telling⁷²

For MacNeice this 'one story' was a life lived against the background of an absence brought about by death. Writing in the *Guardian* about C. S. Lewis's *A Grief Observed*, Hilary Mantel writes acutely of how 'Gradually the shape of loss emerges, but it is complex and ever changing. Grief gives the whole of life a permanently provisional feeling'.⁷³ In the poems I have chosen there is evidence of MacNeice's exploration of this 'provisional feeling'. The 'ever changing' nature of loss was one that MacNeice had experienced since the age of seven. Part of the reason I was drawn to these poems was that they are not the poems of a young man and the loss was not recent. I have found echoes of this in my own experience (if nothing else, it is certainly true that the poems in *Hold Your Breath* are not the poems of a young woman). Reading MacNeice's poem 'Beni Hasan', where he regrets that 'my passport lied | Calling me dark who am grey'⁷⁴, caused me to smile when I thought of my own poem 'Passport Photo' with its 'eyes cast down, colour drained | as if I've come out of a fridge'. I admire the way in which MacNeice is prepared to explore questions to which he knows there are no answers and endings that will prove to be inconclusive.

Edna Longley has drawn attention to the fact that MacNeice was one of the writers of the 1930s who helped to achieve 'the urban-demotic revolution in poetic diction'.⁷⁵ This use of diction is not abandoned by MacNeice even when he

⁷² Robert Graves, *The Complete Poems* (London: Penguin, 2003), p. 405.

⁷³ *Guardian*, 27 December 2014.

⁷⁴ MacNeice, 'Beni Hasan', in McDonald, ed., *Collected Poems*, p. 506.

⁷⁵ Edna Longley, 'Poetic Forms and Social Malformations', in Terence Brown and Nicholas Grene, eds, *Tradition and Influence in Anglo-Irish Poetry* (London: Macmillan, 1989), p. 174.

is exploring the most metaphysical of subjects. He explores the metaphysical in the context of the everyday and believed that:

A poem may be a bridge to the unknown but it is a bridge essentially constructed in terms of the known.⁷⁶

Inspired, in part, by my reading of MacNeice's final collection, my own poetic bridge-building has found its voice in a series of ghost poems in which I have linked the world of the living with the world of the dead and vice versa. In his poem 'October in Bloomsbury' MacNeice recognises that the dead are always with us and writes 'In a callbox for instance lifting a receiver warm from the ear of | a ghost'.⁷⁷ I have also tried to write in a playful and, I hope, amusing but ultimately serious way about this most difficult of subjects that becomes harder to write about with the passing of time, as the 'dead' become the 'long dead'. The ghost poems are a kind of 'double-level' writing and there is a danger with such poems that they will be experienced only on one level and may appear superficial. As with all poems, the final outcome depends on both the poem and the reader. In attempting to identify the reasons for both writing a poem and choosing a particular way in which to write it, one inevitably confronts uncertainties.

W. H. Auden in his essay 'The Virgin and the Dynamo' expressed the view:

It is impossible, I believe, for any poet, while he is writing a poem, to observe with complete accuracy what is going on, to define with any certainty how much of the final result is due to subconscious activity over which he has no control, and how much is due to conscious artifice.⁷⁸

I am acutely aware of this shift between the conscious and unconscious as I consider the ways in which MacNeice's poetry has shaped and influenced my own writing. He and I seem to have so very little in common and yet ...

⁷⁶ Louis MacNeice, *The Poetry of W. B. Yeats* (London: Oxford University Press, 1941), p. 25.

⁷⁷ MacNeice, 'October in Bloomsbury', in McDonald, ed., *Collected Poems*, p. 591.

⁷⁸ W. H. Auden, *The Dyer's Hand and Other Essays* (London: Faber & Faber, 1963), p. 67.

Soap Suds

MacNeice was in his mid-fifties when he wrote the poems in *The Burning Perch*. ‘Soap Suds’ had been published in *The Listener* in October 1961. It is the first poem in the collection and appears immediately after the dedication which is addressed ‘To Mary’ – the actress Mary Wimbush with whom MacNeice was about to set up a new home in Hertfordshire. ‘Too Olde Rose Cottage to be true’ he told Allen Tate in a short letter, in which he also expressed the view that his new collection of poems was ‘all thumbnail nightmares’.¹

In the dedication MacNeice asks Mary’s forgiveness for ‘nightmare and cinders’ but he ends with the more hopeful expectation that an appointment will be kept ‘in green improbable fields with you’. Before reaching the fields, however, he must ride ‘the mad-eyed beast’. The title of the opening poem, ‘Soap Suds’, might encourage the reader to believe that the green fields have already been reached: ‘soapsuds’ does not sound like the stuff of nightmares but rather something light and frothy to ease us into the collection.

The poem has a very direct opening. There is no setting of the context before the reader is told that ‘This brand of soap has the same smell’. The stress falls on the word ‘This’ and not the word ‘brand’, but the term ‘brand’ is an interesting one when used in the context of smell and soap, and particularly in a poem that will go on to explore the theme of an incident remembered from childhood.

It is hard not to make the connection between soapsuds and the advertisements for Pears soap which featured Millais’s sentimental painting *Bubbles*, the copyright for which had been bought by the Pears company in 1887. The company added a bar of soap and the brand name Pears to its reproductions of the original painting. It was one of the earliest examples of advertising associating itself with high culture. The managing director of Pears, Thomas Barrett, made sure that the advertisement went on to become one of the most instantly recognised. William Gladstone, speaking in the House of Commons, complained about the number of amendments to a Bill ‘’til they were like the

¹ Letter from MacNeice to Allen and Isabella Tate, 2 August 1963, in Allison, ed., *Selected Letters*, p. 701.

advertisements of Pear's [sic] soap'.² The advertisement was to start a whole genre of sentimental images of children used to sell products.

The original title of Millais's painting had been *A Child's World*. Millais was aware that neither fragile bubbles nor the world of childhood last. By the end of 'Soap Suds' the reader is left aware that the mallet of the childhood game has 'slipped' in the same way that a bar of soap and childhood slip away. A writer as alert to popular culture as MacNeice would not have been unaware that a reader of 'Soap Suds' was likely to call the image of *Bubbles* to mind.

There is no suggestion given in the poem of the precise smell of the soap. We are not even told what kind of smell it is. Floral? Citrus? We can only speculate. This contrasts with earlier references to soap in *Autumn Journal* (1938) where MacNeice remembers the smell of 'Lifebuoy soap and muddy flannels'³ in the changing rooms of his preparatory school in Dorset or the 'cooling water with rose and geranium soap' to which he escapes in his bath as an adult.⁴ MacNeice went on to write a poem entirely devoted to smell. 'The Sense of Smell' (1940)⁵ reveals that he had a highly developed sense of smell and no doubt, had he wanted to, he could have identified the particular smell of the soap in 'Soap Suds'. Peter McDonald considers 'The Sense of Smell' to be 'a long and almost pointless enumerative exercise'.⁶ It is true that the poem is a very long list but it is an extraordinarily interesting list, in which MacNeice includes the obvious smells of coffee and bonfires but also the less obvious ones such as 'Harris tweed', 'Foreign flesh' and 'Witch hazel'. In doing so he also reveals elements of his personal history.⁷

Mimicking the real effect of the sense of smell, MacNeice takes the reader immediately to the Proustian memory that it engenders. Smell is the most primitive of all the senses and is triggered by the limbic area of the brain. No cognitive recognition takes place until after the memory has already been evoked, and the emotion comes before the smell is identified. MacNeice manages to

² Hansard, 13 June 1890.

³ MacNeice, *Autumn Journal*, in McDonald, ed., *Collected Poems*, p. 122.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 143.

⁵ MacNeice, 'The Sense of Smell', in McDonald, ed., *Collected Poems*, p. 769.

⁶ McDonald, *Poet in his Contexts*, p. 110.

⁷ In the case of MacNeice's contemporary, George Orwell, this link between a writer's life and the sense of smell has been explored in *Orwell's Nose: A Pathological Biography*, by John Sutherland (London: Reaktion, 2016).

achieve the same effect in his poem. At once the man who is washing his hands is reminded of the ‘big | House he visited when he was eight’. Employing punctuation for dramatic effect, MacNeice uses a colon to separate the worlds and provide the bridge between the naturalistic setting in which the man washes his hands and the moment when ‘the walls of the bathroom open’.

‘Soap Suds’ provides a master class in MacNeice’s ability to play freely with rhythm and marry it to the content of the poem. In his note for the *Poetry Book Society Bulletin* he had said he was trying ‘to get out of the iambic groove we are all born into’. He went on to acknowledge that he had made only an attempt to ‘suggest Horatian rhythms (in English, of course, one cannot do more than suggest them) combined with the merest reminiscence of Horatian syntax’.⁸

‘Soap Suds’ provides ample evidence of this desire to suggest Horatian rhythms. The opening line demonstrates MacNeice’s use of hexameters and pentameters; it also announces that MacNeice will be treating these in an elastic way. The ear might demand a further syllable after the word ‘big’ with which he ends the line, but end it he does and the reader is made aware that here is a writer who has a number of shifting rhythmic identities at his disposal. He was the Classics scholar who had gained a First in Classics at Oxford but he was also the man who had then gone to Birmingham and found himself teaching ‘Homer in a Dudley accent’,⁹ and the full range of MacNeice’s experience and skill is evident in the sound of this poem. He is never predictable, and this is never more apparent than in the way he uses the rhythms he has at his disposal. It is noticeable, for instance, that his use of choriambis is greater when he is dealing with the reality that exists at the opening and ending of the poem. It is when the ‘walls of the bathroom open’ and the poem starts to inhabit the daydream world of the past that the rhythms shift to the use of iambs and anapaests.

If MacNeice was at the height of his powers in terms of his technical mastery of rhythm, his years working in radio had helped him to become a master in the art of creating pictures with the use of words and sound. ‘The walls of the bathroom open’ reads like a stage or film direction. From April to October 1958 MacNeice had been sent on a television training course and a report made on him

⁸ MacNeice, ‘Louis MacNeice Writes ... [on *The Burning Perch*]’, *Poetry Book Society Bulletin*, no. 38, September 1963, reprinted in Heuser, ed., *Selected Literary Criticism*, p. 248.

⁹ MacNeice, *Autumn Journal*, in McDonald, ed., *Collected Poems*, p. 117.

stated: ‘Mr. MacNeice has an appreciation of the importance of picture composition and the dramatic value of camera angle and length of shot’.¹⁰

MacNeice himself had drawn attention to Eliot’s use of cutting and close-up in his poetry: ‘another trick very natural in a world of cinema-goers but Eliot is only availing himself of his world in the same way that Donne availed himself of his’.¹¹

MacNeice returned to his worlds of poetry and sound radio after his brief time in television, and in ‘Soap Suds’ he demonstrates his ability to create pictures in the reader’s head in the same way that they might be created by the use of a narrator in radio. The device of a narrator had been favoured by MacNeice in plays and features he had made for the BBC, starting with one of his earliest productions *The Stones Cry Out*. For the reader, ‘Soap Suds’ lifts from the page and becomes something experienced in the imagination in the same way that a radio play creates pictures in the mind of the listener. In his essay ‘The Mind As A Stage’ the critic and radio producer Martin Esslin described how ‘our minds automatically translate most information we receive into visual terms’.¹² He noted that the philosopher Marshall McLuhan classified radio as a visual medium. In the poem, MacNeice reproduces the visual effects that a radio play might produce and, just as a radio play is essentially a solitary and intimate experience for the listener, so this poem becomes a solitary ‘visual’ experience for the reader as the images are ‘translated’ into the reader’s mind.

The third line of the poem opens with the words ‘To reveal’. MacNeice uses the word ‘reveal’ as a verb but in comedy and cinematography it is also used as a noun to denote a scene that is removed to reveal another scene. This is the sense in which MacNeice uses the word. An interior scene shifts to an exterior lawn and then, as if a camera shot zooms in, the reader focuses on the yellow ball. What started with the sense of smell now gives way to sight, and ‘yellow’ is the first colour to be identified in the poem. It is one of only two colours to be named, and the other is black.

¹⁰ BBC WAC, L1/285/1, 30 June 1958.

¹¹ MacNeice, ‘The Traditional Aspect of Modern English Poetry’, in Heuser, ed., *Selected Literary Criticism*, p. 140.

¹² *Theatre Quarterly*, vol. 1, no. 3, July-September 1971, pp. 5-11, p. 5.

The poet Hugo Williams expressed the opinion that ‘no other colour would do’.¹³ MacNeice had used the colour yellow before, in ‘Autobiography’, a poem in which he also travelled back in time to his childhood and to a garden where ‘My mother wore a yellow dress; Gently, gently, gentleness’. The next colour that occurs is black, and it is used to describe the nightmares that came at the age of five, which was when his mother went away. The same progression of colours occurs in ‘Soap Suds’, but not before the yellow ball has rolled ‘back through a hoop’.

In his unfinished autobiography, *The Strings are False*, MacNeice listed a number of things associated with the colour yellow, and all of them were comforting. He remembers that ‘My mother was comfort’.¹⁴ His sister, Elizabeth, wore yellow shoes. His mother made cakes in a ‘yellow bowl’ and the mixture was ‘yellow and sticky and sweet’.

The mother whom he associated with comfort became ill and psychologically frail. His sister was later to recall that in a child’s eyes her mother seemed ‘inexplicably sad’.¹⁵ When MacNeice was five and a half, she went away to a nursing home in Dublin and never returned. She died in December 1914. Jon Stallworthy observed that ‘In the primal garden of Carrickfergus Rectory, the poet’s mother had worn “a yellow dress” that, in his passionate retrospect, seemed to offer the first intimation of Fall’.¹⁶ For MacNeice the colour yellow always evoked the haze of comfort that existed before the ‘Fall’.

The biographical implications of MacNeice’s use of the colour yellow are inescapable. In *Modern Poetry* he expressed the view that ‘Literary criticism should always be partly biographical’.¹⁷ There are certainly poets who would not agree with this statement, and MacNeice himself did use the word ‘partly’ and did not believe that any one thing held the key to a poem. In his Preface to *The Poetry of W. B. Yeats*, published in 1941, MacNeice wrote:

There is not, to my knowledge – nor do I think there can be – any satisfactory definition of the relationship of poetry to life. I am convinced, however, that there is such a relationship and that it is of primary

¹³ Hugo Williams, ‘Ten Desert Island Poems’, *Poetry Review*, no. 75 (1985), pp. 21-28, p. 24.

¹⁴ MacNeice, *The Strings are False*, p. 37.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 43.

¹⁶ Stallworthy, *MacNeice*, p. 453.

¹⁷ MacNeice, *Modern Poetry*, p. 75.

importance; I am also convinced that a poem is a thing in itself, a self-contained organism, a 'creation'.¹⁸

Although he was prefacing his thoughts about Yeats, MacNeice's words should be borne in mind when considering his own writing. Undoubtedly he considered his life to have impacted upon his work. Yet we know from this and his other critical writings that he would have been the last person to think the details of his life held all the keys to understanding either him or his poems.

It would be possible for a reader of MacNeice's work to think they knew a great deal about his life. He had, after all, published the poem 'Autobiography', written in September 1940 and published the following year in his collection *Plant and Phantom*. There is also his autobiography *The Strings are False*, drafted in 1940 and published after his death. In his study of MacNeice, the poet and critic Peter McDonald addressed the possible temptation 'to approach MacNeice's later work from a psychological and indeed biographical point of view, but there is something to be gained from resisting the temptation'.¹⁹ Not giving in to this temptation certainly brings rewards when reading other later poems, but McDonald also identifies 'Soap Suds' as being a poem that emerged from 'the private memories of childhood in Ireland'.²⁰

In the final year of his life MacNeice recorded a talk for his friend John Boyd which was posthumously broadcast on the Third Programme. He was able to recall in great detail the landscape of his childhood. He talked of how the rectory where he lived as a small child became 'the centre of a great deal of mythology – private mythology – which still affects me in dreams'.²¹ He also remembered visiting various houses – 'a couple of big houses, you know, the sort of house with loggias and that was all very glamorous indeed'.²²

The term 'big house' which MacNeice used both in his talk and in this poem encapsulates the local term that would have been used for a grand house and also reminds the reader of a child's perspective of size. MacNeice ended his talk by referring to the First World War, the death of his mother during the war,

¹⁸ MacNeice, *Poetry of W. B. Yeats*, p. vii.

¹⁹ McDonald, *Poet in his Contexts*, p. 185.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 179.

²¹ MacNeice, 'Autobiographical Talk: Childhood Memories', in Heuser, ed., *Selected Prose*, p. 268.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 271.

and his father's remarriage. He recalls being sent to school in England during the war, which 'marked the end of a period'.²³ 'Soap Suds' feeds on the memories originating in this period before he was sent to Sherborne School in Dorset at the age of ten.

Jon Stallworthy acknowledged the significance of the colour yellow in MacNeice's reliving of a childhood memory in this poem:

So now the remembered garden of Seapark (home of Thomas Macgregor Greer, only brother of the second Mrs MacNeice) is dominated not by a yellow dress but a yellow ball. Again there is sunlight in the garden and, as train wheels had revolved once at the perimeter of the Rectory garden, the ball revolves – it and the globes and the gong (all linked by their common adjective, *great*) reinforcing the circular movement of the poem.²⁴

This 'circular movement' is reinforced by the sense of constant repetition that is created by the sound and the visual effect of double letters in repeated words: 'smell', 'walls', 'yellow', 'ball', 'hoop', 'mallet', 'walled', 'rabbit', 'glass', 'booms', 'hall', 'slipped', 'running', and others.

Following the 'reveal', in the final two lines of the first stanza we are told that the 'ball rolls back though a hoop' to a mallet 'held in the hands of a child'. The movement of the ball is 'back' and the washer of hands has taken a shift back in time as though a film has now gone into reverse motion. MacNeice ends the stanza with a full stop; the first stanza is composed of one long sentence and this is the first of only three full stops that he will use in a poem that is all about movement.

The poem then shifts to the interior of the house to which the lawn belongs. What we are given is a list of the 'joys of that house'. There is no sense of irony in the use of the word 'joys'. MacNeice's sister, Elizabeth, was to comment that the description of the house in this poem was 'entirely literal'. In a letter to John Hilton about the 'big house' she explained that it was a factual

²³ Ibid., p. 273.

²⁴ Stallworthy, *MacNeice*, p. 453.

description of Seapark.²⁵ Her phrases echo MacNeice's explanation of the poem 'Snow', as being 'almost a piece of factual reporting'.²⁶

MacNeice lists objects and settings that a child would find exciting and wonderful. The first of these – 'a tower with a telescope' – suggests endless possibilities. Towers are fascinating to small children; they are happy not only to build them but also to knock them down. A telescope allows you to see the stars and planets and there are 'Two great faded globes, one of the earth, one of the stars'. What could be more perfect for an eight-year-old child? A lawn with a ball game and the potential to map both the earth and the stars: these are indeed 'joys', as are the other objects listed in a description that moves between the interior of the house and the garden. As Edna Longley has observed, 'this marvellous double-level writing balances the "stuffed black dog" against the live rabbits and bees, the enclosed garden and vine against the open sea'.²⁷ The garden is 'walled' and the vine is 'under glass', but the list ends with the infinite possibility and openness of 'the sea'.

The list of objects may appear random, but writing a note to T. S. Eliot about his long poem *Autumn Journal* MacNeice had commented: 'There is a constant interrelation of abstract & concrete'.²⁸ The same could be said of the poems in *The Burning Perch*. Peter McDonald has noted of 'Soap Suds':

In fact, the details are not haphazard, and several find their way into poems elsewhere in the volume which is here beginning (there will be a poem near the end of *The Burning Perch* entitled 'Stargazer' for example, while a dog will feature in 'The Taxis' and – with overtones of the dog Cerberus in Hades – in 'Charon', the sea will be the subject of the poem 'Round The Corner').²⁹

The third stanza opens by stating that the washer of hands 'has now returned' to this scene in his childhood. This use of the present perfect tense suggests that what started as a memory is now being lived again. The poem

²⁵ Letter from Elizabeth Nicholson to John Hilton, 30 August 1977, in Allison, ed., *Selected Letters*, p. 713.

²⁶ Letter from MacNeice to Miss Freeman, in Allison, ed., *Selected Letters*, p. 679.

²⁷ Edna Longley, *Louis MacNeice: A Critical Study* (London: Faber & Faber, 1988), p. 158.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 312.

²⁹ Peter McDonald, 'Louis MacNeice: The Burning Perch', in Neil Roberts, ed., *A Companion to Twentieth-Century Poetry* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2003), p. 494.

questions how an individual experiences time, whether what has passed has truly passed if it can be summoned and relived so vividly, again and again.

‘The day of course is fine’. Here, the words ‘of course’ do introduce a note of irony, because there is never any ‘of course’ about weather – especially Irish weather. MacNeice is taking a shot at the myth of happy childhood memories, when the sun always shines, because his own experience contradicted the myth.

So far the narrative has been moving briskly. The poem has covered the interior and exterior of the house along with the possibilities of earth and sky. Now, with the grown-up voice calling ‘Play!’, the exclamation mark indicates the point at which this world enters a transition, reflected in the rhythm of the poem: ‘The mallet slowly swings’. This contrast in pace comes before the poem accelerates again to the point where what might at first have appeared to be a happy memory reveals itself to have a dark undertone.

MacNeice uses the term ‘grown-up’ in the way that a child would use it, as opposed to ‘adult’. The use of sound continues. After the human voice comes the ‘crack’ of the mallet and a ‘great gong booms from the dog-dark hall’. The words ‘crack’ and ‘gong’ and ‘boom’ are onomatopoeic; the use of sound is visceral and this is emphasised by the triple stresses of ‘a great gong booms from the dog-dark hall’. The introduction of ‘dark’ contrasts with a world that, until now, has seemed sunny; this has not been explicitly stated but the ‘yellow ball’ suggests a sun-like image. The yoking together of the noun and the adjective in ‘dog-dark’ has an echo of Dylan Thomas’s ‘bible-black’ in his 1954 radio play *Under Milk Wood*.

After the gong, as the pace increases the lines run into each other. The ball goes through a hoop and ‘then through the next and then’ – the final line of the third stanza ends abruptly and after the enjambment the full surreal nightmare begins. The game of croquet now becomes menacing and the reader is reminded of the Queen of Hearts’ croquet game in *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland* – which was also played, as the White Rabbit observed, on ‘a very fine day’.³⁰ In his Clark Lectures MacNeice referred to Alice as being ‘Everyman or rather

³⁰ Lewis Carroll, *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland* (London: Macmillan, 1872), p.119.

Everychild'. He declared: 'This special world of Carroll's, I must repeat, is a dream world which hits the reader very palpably'.³¹

Now in this croquet game there are endless hoops 'where no hoops were and each dissolves in turn'. MacNeice's use of the word 'dissolves' is again filmic and refers to the post-production editing of film to create a gradual transition from one image to another, as opposed to the sharp change effected by the use of cutting. It is a filmic word that MacNeice is using to suggest to the mind of a reader the dream-like scene that is now unfolding. The world of Alice does not seem far away. As Simon Workman describes the scene:

The poem rapidly becomes a dizzying world of uncertain territories, shifting voices and looming half-remembered figures in a manner similar to that of MacNeice's best radio work.³²

Up to this point, 'Soap Suds' could have been read as a poem about a vivid memory provoked by the sense of smell. This is something most readers who have a sense of smell will have experienced, but now it becomes something more than a vivid memory. Even within the daydream, time has moved on and the dream has become a nightmare: 'the grass has grown head-high'. Again the poem identifies with the child's viewpoint and MacNeice explores the fluidity of time in the same way that his work had explored time in radio plays, such as *The Dark Tower* where the tolling of a bell can mark the passage of six years and time in the desert setting is experienced in a non-linear way. Within the 'inner' dream world of 'Soap Suds' time has moved on and the grass has grown high, but in the 'outer' world the whole episode has taken place in the short time in which a man can wash his hands.

It is now in the poem that the first and only human emotion is described, and it is 'angry'. It is the anger of an adult as experienced by a vulnerable child, as 'an angry voice cries Play! This repetition of the word 'Play' in the third and fourth stanzas mimics the rebounding of the ball. The disembodied human voice angrily calling out the second 'Play!' provides the climax of the poem.

³¹ Louis MacNeice, *Varieties of Parable*, The Clark Lectures, 1963 (London: Cambridge University Press, 1965), p. 91.

³² Simon Workman, 'Pure Sound', *The Poetry of Ireland Review*, no. 93, March 2008, pp. 62-67, p. 62.

Whereas objects in the poem are described, beyond giving an indication of their age and attributing the single emotion of anger, the human beings are not described, and the reader must supply their own picture of them in the way that a listener to a radio play might do. As in a radio play, the voice is all the more powerful because the voice is all we have. In a poem in which the diction is spare and simple, the impact of the adjective ‘angry’ gives a powerful jolt to the reader’s mind.

After the second ‘Play!’ the poem seems to fall away. There have been six uses of the conjunction ‘and’ as the poem has built up momentum, with one thing running into another. The line after this second ‘Play!’ begins with ‘But’ as the unfolding dream-drama is brought to a halt and ‘the ball is lost’. Pace in this poem is of critical importance just as pace and delicate timing are of importance in radio: ‘Radio as an art form thus is essentially a matter of carefully timed pauses, rhythm and pace’.³³

There is also a sense of a past that has been lost, for the mallet ‘slipped long since from the hands’. In the final line the poem returns to where it started and the hands ‘Under the running tap that are not the hands of a child’. The movement of the running water has replaced the movement of the ball. We have returned to the ‘outer’ world having shared in an inner experience. There is a sense that everything has shifted and changed although the poem returns to the place where it began. The reader is aware that, though the hands are now the hands of a man, in a sense they contain the hands and the memories of the child he once was. This tension between the action that is taking place on the surface and the deeper underlying significance is highlighted by Tom Walker as a characteristic of MacNeice’s later poems:

In several of MacNeice’s later poems, perceptions of the surface of the ephemeral present suddenly take on a tremendous depth, either through the workings of memory or through the apprehension of an absolute.³⁴

The question of identity was one which MacNeice addressed in his Clark Lectures as being a frequent characteristic of parable writing and also a ‘motif

³³ Martin Esslin, ‘The Mind As A Stage’, *Theatre Quarterly*, vol. 1, no. 3, July-September 1971, p. 9.

³⁴ Tom Walker, *Louis MacNeice and the Irish Poetry of his Time* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), p. 175.

which keeps recurring in the Alice books'. Other poems in *The Burning Perch* will explore the nature of identity. In 'Soap Suds' the reader is reminded of the lasting impact a childhood experience can have on an adult. A poem that took as its starting point the most simple and everyday action and had seemed so straightforward when it started has now become so complicated that it cannot be fully understood.

At the end of 'Soap Suds' the reader is aware that they have shared in an experience akin to Alice's falling down the rabbit hole, and this effect has been achieved entirely through the use of words and the sounds of words. The poet Hugo Williams, when he included 'Soap Suds' in his *Ten Desert Island Poems*, declared: 'Only sixteen lines and yet it rolls such a lifetime!'.³⁵ For Terence Brown the movement of the poem from the remembrance of childhood back to the hands 'that are not the hands of a child' brings with it 'the knowledge of age, the horrifying fact of his lost childhood' and goes beyond even that for 'The inevitability of time's passage means the inevitability of death'.³⁶ In his introduction to his Clark Lectures, MacNeice praised what he considered 'a kind of double-level writing, or, if you prefer it, sleight-of-hand'.³⁷ Like the croquet ball that travels through it, 'Soap Suds' moves in an unexpected direction and one that could never have been predicted at its start when a man was washing his hands.

³⁵ Hugo Williams, 'Ten Desert Island Poems', *Poetry Review*, no. 75 (1985), pp. 21-28, p. 24.

³⁶ Brown, *Sceptical Vision*, p. 67.

³⁷ MacNeice, *Varieties of Parable*, p. 3.

The Taxis

Both in his life and in his poems MacNeice was a poet who liked to be on the move. As a small child his mother had taken him ‘up the hill to watch the newly launched *Titanic* heading for the sea’.¹ He was to develop a fascination with all modes of transport, and he took full advantage of the advances in technology that led to new and more reliable means of transport being developed during the course of his lifetime.

The Thirties are described by Valentine Cunningham as a decade characterised by an abundance of advances in transport with its rapid ‘development not only of the motorcar but also of the passenger ship, the posh liner, the aeroplane, and the inter-continental train’.² MacNeice was ‘one of the first poets to be interested in transport of all kinds, and to see the world through the eyes of a driver, a passenger, and an observer of traffic, as attentive to roads and railways as the landscape they take him through’.³ The poet Leontia Flynn, observing the fascination with trains that is displayed in MacNeice’s writing suggests: ‘So pervasive is the image of the train journey in his work, and so appropriate a context for reading MacNeice is a train ride, that I think his collected poems should be issued in railway stations’.⁴

During his time as a member of the BBC Features Department MacNeice visited and worked in many countries. In 1961 he wrote to Charles Monteith at Faber to propose a collection of his poems called *Poems of Place*.⁵ His suggestions for ‘the territories covered’ give some indication of how widely he had travelled – they included Ireland, Iceland, the USA, Egypt and South Africa – but the proposal was unanimously rejected by the Faber board.

MacNeice’s extensive travels, both for work and for pleasure, were often reflected in his writing. He and his friend W. H. Auden had collaborated in 1936

¹ Stallworthy, *MacNeice*, pp. 33-34.

² Valentine Cunningham, *British Writers of the Thirties* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), p. 352.

³ Hugh Haughton, ‘MacNeice’s Vehicles’, in Brearton and Longley, eds, *Incorrigibly Plural*, p. 106.

⁴ Leontia Flynn, ‘On MacNeice On Trains’, in Brearton and Longley, eds, *Incorrigibly Plural*, p. 70.

⁵ Letter from MacNeice to Charles Monteith, 15 September 1961, in Allison, ed., *Selected Letters*, p. 681.

on *Letters from Iceland*, which Auden described in a letter as ‘a sort of travel book’⁶, while the reviewer in *The Daily Mail* called it ‘The most unorthodox travel book ever written’.⁷ Writing of MacNeice’s trip to India in 1947, the poet and critic Peter McDonald observes that travel ‘was for MacNeice an exercise in imaginative expansion and compromise, a recording of abstract assumptions in the light of actual observation’.⁸

What becomes increasingly noticeable in MacNeice’s later writing is his preoccupation with the state of being in transit. In his essay on Baudelaire, T. S. Eliot identified the French poet as being the inventor of a new kind of nostalgia – ‘a derivative of his nostalgia being the *poésie des departs*, the *poésie des salles d’attente*’.⁹ MacNeice became the poet of the ‘Corner Seat’ and the ‘Restaurant Car’. He is the poet who is ‘taking coffee alone in the indistinguishable airports’.¹⁰

Even before the ‘thumbnail nightmares’¹¹ of *The Burning Perch*, transport for MacNeice had the ability to take on a surreal and sinister aspect. In his poem ‘Birmingham’ (1933) he describes how the ‘trams like vast sarcophagi move’¹² while in ‘Passage Steamer’ (1936) all may appear well on the decks ‘But down the ladder in the engine room | (Doom, doom, doom, doom)’.¹³ ‘Figure of Eight’ (1956) tells of two journeys. The first is taken by bus and the second by train. Both journeys become equally sinister, with the traveller on the bus, in the first stanza, arriving ‘dead on time’ and the terrified traveller on the train, in the second stanza, being all too aware of ‘Who will be there to meet him at the station’ – the inescapable conclusion is that the traveller will be met by death.¹⁴ In ‘The Wiper’ (1960) both the car and the road it travels again take on a nightmarish quality. The car lacks ‘a gauge nor needle | To tell us where we are

⁶ Quoted in Stallworthy, *MacNeice*, p. 198.

⁷ Quoted on back flap, Louis MacNeice, *Autumn Journal*, 2nd impr. (London: Faber & Faber, 1940).

⁸ McDonald, *Poet in his Contexts*, p. 136.

⁹ T. S. Eliot, *Selected Prose*, (London: Faber & Faber, 1975), p. 236.

¹⁰ Louis MacNeice, ‘Solitary Travel’, *Solstices* (London: Faber & Faber, 1961), p. 56.

¹¹ MacNeice, ‘... on *The Burning Perch*’, in Heuser, ed., *Selected Literary Criticism*, p. 247.

¹² MacNeice, ‘Birmingham’, in McDonald, ed., *Collected Poems*, p. 23.

¹³ MacNeice, ‘Passage Steamer’, *ibid.*, p. 62.

¹⁴ MacNeice, ‘Figure of Eight’, *ibid.*, pp. 516-17.

going', and the advancing road is seen as 'the black future' which is hauled towards the driver 'Peeling the skin from our hands'.¹⁵

As with all the other modes of transport that MacNeice wrote about, the subject of taxis is explored more than once during the course of his writing. Apart from 'The Taxis', included in this final collection, taxis had also appeared in 'An Eclogue for Christmas' which was published in *Poems* in 1935. In this poem the city dweller tells the countryman to 'Go back to where your instincts call | and listen to the crying of the town-cats and the taxis again'.¹⁶ In 'Bagpipe Music' (1937), amongst the diversions of modern life on offer, there is 'a bit of skirt in a taxi'.¹⁷ Taxis are also capable of taking on an unpleasant or sinister quality. In 'Reflections' the reflections in the room take on a surreal quality and 'a taxi perhaps will drive through a bookcase'.¹⁸ In *Autumn Journal* it is the taxi-driver at the all-night shelter who speaks the chilling phrase 'It turns me up | When I see these soldiers in lorries' and the phrase brings the alarming possibility of what the future might hold into the mind of the narrator. He repeats the phrase as he reflects on how the country now seems set on a course that can only end in war:

It turns me up; a coffee, please.
And as I go out I see a windscreen-wiper
In an empty car
Wiping away like mad and I feel astounded
That things have gone so far.¹⁹

Both the title of the poem 'The Taxis' and its opening line indicate to the reader that the poem will involve more than one taxi: 'In the first taxi he was alone tra-la'. In this opening line MacNeice has established the two elements that will help to establish the structure of this carefully balanced poem and the drama it will describe. The word 'first' signals that there will be other taxis, and indeed during the course of the poem the reader encounters four taxis in four quatrains. The central character, who is referred to as 'he' but is never named or described, embarks on four taxi rides that result in four exchanges with a cabby. The first three quatrains will focus on what took place at the end of the taxi journey when

¹⁵ MacNeice, 'The Wiper', *ibid.*, p. 562.

¹⁶ MacNeice, 'An Eclogue for Christmas', *ibid.*, p. 3.

¹⁷ MacNeice, 'Bagpipe Music', *ibid.*, p. 95.

¹⁸ MacNeice, 'Reflections', *ibid.*, p. 561.

¹⁹ MacNeice, *Autumn Journal*, *ibid.*, p. 116.

the cabby had to be paid. In the final quatrain the journey never takes place. The opening line also includes the first appearance of ‘tra-la’. It is used at the end of the first line of the first three quatrains and at the start of the second line in the final quatrain and, incorporated into the dialogue of the cabby, it appears in the final line of the second quatrain and the third line of the final quatrain.

In essence the poem tells a short story, and the poet Christopher Reid referenced this when he published his anthology *Not to Speak of the Dog: 101 Short Stories in Verse*. This short story is told in the past tense as a third person narrative, and it is told entirely in terms of the external events. The poem does not include any internal monologue and it is a perfect example of how to ‘show not tell’ in writing. There is no reference to the destination of the taxi journey, and there is only one reference to the world beyond the taxi. MacNeice has imposed a very tight, neat structure and the narrowest of worlds to write about. Everything about the structure conveys order; the quatrains even appear to be numbered.

Having declared in its opening line that ‘In the first taxi he was alone’, the pattern of words is repeated in the two following stanzas, apart from changing the numbering to ‘second’ and ‘third’. Each of these opening lines ends with the words ‘he was alone tra-la’. This pattern only alters in the fourth and final stanza, which opens with ‘As for the fourth taxi’ and ends with ‘he was alone’; the ‘tra-la’ drops down to the second line of the stanza and the effect is of an enjambment. Neil Corcoran has pointed out that, strictly speaking, ‘tra-la’:

occurring once or twice in each of the four quatrains which all figure a taxi ride of vertiginous, even uncanny eeriness, is not really a refrain. It is a ‘repetend’, a term defined by the *Princeton Encyclopaedia* as ‘a recurring word, or phrase or line’. As distinguished from refrain, repetend usually refers to a repetition occurring irregularly rather than regularly in a poem, or to a partial rather than complete repetition.²⁰

The repeated positioning of the repetend in the first line of the first three stanzas has given the reader something firm and reliable to grasp in a poem where something that is seemingly as obvious and certain as knowing whether or not you are sharing your taxi with other people becomes open to question. The

²⁰ Neil Corcoran, ‘The Same Again? MacNeice’s Repetitions’, in Brearton and Longley, eds, *Incorrigibly Plural*, p. 265.

position of the 'tra-la' in the second line of the fourth stanza is unsettling, as it breaks an established pattern. The first line of the fourth stanza ends with 'he was alone'; the 'he' seems now to have lost the comfort and playfulness of a 'tra-la' and 'alone' sounds all the more final with its position at the end of the line.

In his Clark Lectures *Varieties of Parable*, MacNeice quoted the *Oxford English Dictionary* in defining a parable as 'any saying or narration in which something is expressed in terms of something else'.²¹ He went on to observe that 'the writer of parable literature, whether it is a novel, short story, poem or play, is, by contrast with other types of writer, engaged in projecting a special world'.²² Increasingly in his final works MacNeice uses parable in both poems and radio plays. In 'The Taxis' MacNeice has created the 'special world' of a taxi. There are only two identifiable characters in the drama, the cabby and his passenger. The bare outline of the narrative might suggest that the poem is one-dimensional and lacks any insight into the human condition, but this proves to be far from the case. It reflects the firm ideas that MacNeice had about what he considered to be the attributes of a good poem. He believed that:

The best poems are written on two or more planes at once, just as they are written from a multitude of motives. Poetry is essentially ambiguous, but ambiguity is not necessarily obscure.²³

The firm and seemingly naïve structure that MacNeice has established enables him to construct the perfect 'sleight-of-hand' parable that he so admired in the writing of others. It is possible on a first reading of the poem to be beguiled by its simple structure and to accept the content of the poem at its face value, but other aspects of the poem draw a reader into the realisation that the poem contains a great deal more than is first revealed on its surface.

The significance of time and place contributes to the intensity of the narrative of 'The Taxis'. On a very basic level, time and place matter if you are travelling in a taxi. Hugh Haughton suggests that reflecting on the word 'taxi' can help to explain what he refers to as 'MacNeice's taxi fixation'.²⁴ The *OED*

²¹ MacNeice, *Varieties of Parable*, p. 2.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 7.

²³ MacNeice, 'Poetry To-day', in Heuser, ed., *Selected Literary Criticism*, p. 43.

²⁴ Hugh Haughton, 'MacNeice's Vehicles', in Brearton and Longley, eds, *Incorrigibly Plural*, p. 107.

derives the word ‘taxi’ from the French ‘*taximètre*’, referring to ‘an automatic contrivance fitted on a cab or other vehicle to indicate to the passenger the distance traversed and the fare due’. Haughton goes on to explain: ‘In a nice case of a metaphorical synecdoche, the term was transferred from an internal measuring gadget to the vehicle itself. This makes the taxi a particularly suitable vehicle for poetry, since it is the only one to have a built-in meter’.²⁵

This investigation into the details of travelling by taxi can be taken further, as the fare results from a combination of the time taken and the distance travelled. When the taxi is in motion the meter records the distance and when the cab is stationary it records the time. The meter announces the fare to the passenger; this is the ‘on the clock’ that MacNeice refers to in the poem. In the 1960s meters in taxis had a built-in electric clock. ‘On the clock’ refers to the fare, or cost of the journey, showing on the meter, but the word ‘clock’ also conveys a link with time, and it is time and its passing that haunt so many of MacNeice’s poems in *The Burning Perch*.

In a letter to the actress Mary Wimbush dated 4 April 1960, MacNeice added in brackets after the date: ‘but do time and place matter?’²⁶ This strikes a note of defiance, coming as it does from a writer who had spent twenty-two years working in radio, where the timing of his productions was defined by a schedule and the listeners needed to know when and where a play was set. ‘He learnt to suggest place and time by shorthand, to observe a strict time-frame for each script’.²⁷

MacNeice’s work in radio had also established his firm belief in the power of the writer who was able to entertain. In his introduction to the radio play *The Dark Tower*, MacNeice acknowledged that many listeners had said they enjoyed the play but they had also said they had ‘no idea what it was about’. He went on to say:

²⁵ Loc. cit.

²⁶ Letter from MacNeice to Mary Wimbush, 4 April 1960, in Allison, ed., *Selected Letters*, p. 663.

²⁷ Alan Heuser, ‘Tracing MacNeice’s Development in Drama’, in Kathleen Devine and Alan J. Peacock, eds, *Louis MacNeice and his Influence* (Gerrards Cross: Colin Smythe, 1998), p. 135.

Once your characters speak speakable lines – once, to use a horrible piece of jargon, the subjective is objectified – you can get away with anything so long as you entertain.²⁸

‘The Taxis’ certainly does entertain and lends itself to performance:

A poem like ‘The Taxis’ (1961) has to be performed, recited aloud, as Christopher Reid demonstrated recently at a celebration of MacNeice in Dublin, reciting the poem in a marvellous London Cockney accent which captured the black humour and human drama of the piece, the falling cadence.²⁹

Asked by this author what had attracted him to ‘The Taxis’, the poet Christopher Reid began his explanation by saying ‘It’s the shape of the poem that pleases me’.³⁰

Critical in giving the poem its ‘shape’ is the phrase ‘tra-la’. It is defined in the *OED* as a ‘phrase expressive of joy or gaiety, sometimes used as a refrain’. The dictionary cites an example of its use in W. S. Gilbert’s *The Mikado*, in a song sung by Nanki-Poo: *The Flowers that Bloom in the Spring Tra La*.³¹ Essentially ‘tra-la’ is a pair of words that have no meaning. They have a simple pattern of sound in the repeated ‘a’ but they have no definable sense, and yet they do carry with them this feeling of ‘joy or gaiety’ referred to in the dictionary definition. Writing on the patterning of sounds that results in the musicality of lyric poetry, the poet Don Paterson observed that ‘The “feel” of words concerns the poet every bit as much as their dictionary meaning’.³² ‘Tra-la’ is a familiar sound and has a song-like feel. Frequenting Irish pubs, as he often did, it is impossible to believe that MacNeice had not heard and joined in the odd Irish sing-song. As with his other relationships with all things Irish, his relationship with the tradition of Irish songs was complicated but it is a relationship that still finds its place in some of his later poems with their short lines and varied rhythms. In his autobiography *I Crossed the Minch* he recalled:

²⁸ Louis MacNeice, *The Dark Tower and Other Radio Scripts* (London: Faber & Faber, 2008), p. 9.

²⁹ Maria Johnston, ‘Re-Collecting MacNeice’, *Contemporary Poetry Review*, October 2007, <<http://www.cprw.com/Johnston/macneice.htm>>, last accessed November 2015.

³⁰ Christopher Reid, Facebook message to author, 22 April 2016.

³¹ W. S. Gilbert, *The Mikado* (1885) <http://gsarchive.net/mikado/mk_lib.pdf>, last accessed September 2016.

³² Don Paterson, ‘The Lyric Principle’, *Poetry Review*, vol. 97:2, 2007, pp. 56-72, p. 66.

Once sitting by a river drinking beer with some Lewismen while one of them sang a love-song in Gaelic, I felt strongly that I belonged to these people and that, for all I cared, London could sink in the mud. But the conviction of alcohol does not last. The next day in Stornoway I rushed to the stationers to try to buy a copy of *The Listener*.³³

His memory reveals the connection he felt for Irish songs, even if the feeling did not endure and ended with him rushing off to buy *The Listener*. He tried his hand at writing songs himself when he married his second wife, Hedli Anderson, who was a cabaret singer. He wrote a song-cycle, *The Revenant*, for her in 1942. Amongst his many friends he numbered the Irish songwriter Dominic Behan, who was the brother of Brendan. A year after he wrote 'The Taxis' MacNeice enjoyed recounting how Dominic had escaped a sentence for hitting a taxi-driver because the judge 'couldn't believe he'd hit someone twice his height'.³⁴ When considering all that MacNeice achieves in this short poem, it is important to remember the connections he had with the world of Irish song for, as the poet Anthony Thwaite observed, 'More and more, a melancholy tunefulness seems the manner of his last poems'.³⁵ 'Tra-la' contributes to the 'tunefulness' and song-like quality of 'The Taxis' but MacNeice uses it to devastating effect. These small, seemingly meaningless 'tra-las' not only provide a structure for the poem but also help to create both its tone and meaning. The contradiction of a meaningless phrase being so imbued with meaning is typical of MacNeice's wit and sense of irony.

In 1941, in his book about Yeats, MacNeice had observed that 'Many of the poems of the Crazy Jane type have refrains'.³⁶ He defended the use of refrains against those who thought that in twentieth-century poetry refrain was taboo and *rigid* refrain was an affectation 'like morris-dancing'.³⁷ Commenting further on the use of refrain, MacNeice noted that Yeats's later use of the ballad found a parallel in W. H. Auden's use and that:

³³ Quoted in Walker, *MacNeice and Irish Poetry*, p. 33.

³⁴ Letter from MacNeice to Corinna MacNeice, 24 September 1962, in Allison, ed., *Selected Letters*, p. 694.

³⁵ Anthony Thwaite, *Poetry Today: A Critical Guide to British Poetry 1960-1984*, p. 17.

³⁶ MacNeice, *Poetry of W. B. Yeats*, p. 164.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 165.

In both Yeats and Auden there is a compromise; they do not go more than halfway toward the genuine ballad or street-song; the poet achieves some of the simplicity or the directness or the swing of the primitive form but he does not pretend away (as the early Yeats tried to) his own sophisticated self.³⁸

MacNeice could have been commenting on his own use of repetition in 'The Taxis'. There is nothing rigid about the way in which he uses 'tra-la'. He weaves it delicately into the fabric of the poem and, combined with the stanza form, it creates a firm structure and also embodies a sense of movement as it occurs in one place and then another during the course of the poem. This structure provides the ideal form within which to create a dreamlike world with its own sense of an irrational logic.

Tom Walker highlights the way in which 'in *The Burning Perch* in particular, refrain and repetition seem to be more prominent than before'.³⁹ 'The Taxis' is certainly, along with 'The Introduction' with its eerie and sinister repetition of 'crawly crawly', one of the most powerful examples of MacNeice's mastery of the use of refrain to create not only a shape or pattern in the poem but also a sense of dramatic tension and atmosphere. Before the final stanza the light-hearted 'tra-las' have contributed to the superficial equilibrium that is created by the formal structure. They are as easy to memorise as the refrain in a music hall song and they exhibit many of the same characteristics. Refrains in music hall songs often play upon double meanings and employ a deliberately naïve tone which often suggests something more than the surface meaning. The form that the poem takes seems very direct and uncomplicated, but this contrast between the defined form and the indefinable nature of its content makes the 'The Taxis' even more haunting.

In its first appearance 'tra-la' is in the manner that Nanki-Poo might use it, as a throw-away, meaningless gesture of speech. The open 'a' sounds give it an upward, positive character. There is no denying that there is something comic about the use of this phrase. MacNeice rejoices in the sound of the 'tra-la' trills, but equally he uses them to good dramatic effect as the menace of the poem increases from light-hearted to terrifying. Tom Walker describes this progression:

³⁸ Ibid., pp. 169-170.

³⁹ Walker, *MacNeice and Irish Poetry*, p. 186.

In 'The Taxis' the nonsense repetend 'tra-la' hits 'the reader below the belt'. Initially it seems to be a gesture of inconsequentiality: 'In the first taxi he was alone tra-la'. By the ominous final stanza, the menacing sense emerges, as it seems to blank out an expletive, that this fragment's lack of meaning is getting in the way of the passenger knowing quite what is befalling him:

As for the fourth taxi, he was alone
Tra-la when he hailed it but the cabby looked
Through him and said: 'I can't tra-la well take
So many people, not to speak of the dog.'⁴⁰

MacNeice, who was known for a strong sense of casting in his radio work, relies on typecasting of 'the cabby' in the mind of the reader who will then recognize, as Tom Walker has said, that in the final stanza the 'tra-la' replaces an expletive. If, for instance, the taxi was being driven by a priest, his trick would not work. Terence Brown draws parallels between MacNeice's use of dialogue in this final quatrain and the work of Samuel Beckett, who highlighted the inadequacies of language in his play *Waiting for Godot* –

where much of the dialogue depends on the use of cliché and stock phrase. In his late poetry MacNeice employs speech where no true communication takes place [...] Such a failure of faith in language, experienced by many twentieth-century artists and philosophers, may be understood as an expression of contemporary alienation.⁴¹

MacNeice himself used the phrase 'below the belt' when he defended Yeats's use of refrain by saying that if Yeats had 'written nothing but his refrain poems he would not be the great poet he is'.⁴² He also noted that critics allow a dramatist to speak in many voices 'whereas the lyric poet must only speak as himself, his whole self and nothing but himself'.⁴³ He went on to discuss what the poet's 'self' is and he came to the conclusion: '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'.⁴⁴ MacNeice's introduction of the notion of 'self' into a discussion of Yeats's use of

⁴⁰ Loc. cit.

⁴¹ Brown, *Sceptical Vision*, p. 59.

⁴² MacNeice, *Poetry of W. B. Yeats*, p. 166.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, p. 165.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 166.

refrain in poems takes on a greater significance when we read 'The Taxis', which was written twenty years after he had made those observations. It is a poem in which the question of 'self' lies at its very heart, but MacNeice entertains his reader while also raising questions about this most difficult of subjects.

One of the foremost voice coaches working in British theatre has quoted MacNeice when he said 'In any poet's poem, the shape is half the meaning'.⁴⁵ Anyone who has attended a workshop with Cicely Berry, as this author has done, will know that it is the shape of the text that needs to be identified and engaged with when approaching performance. As Christopher Reid said, the form of 'The Taxis' is 'pleasing'. It presents the reader with the kind of repetition and sense of order that is enjoyed in childhood nursery rhymes. It makes the reader feel comfortable; they know what's coming. The shape of this poem does not confine itself to the page. In 'The Taxis' MacNeice demonstrates a dramatist's awareness of how words and rhythms will perform and sound when spoken aloud. He had spent half his life working with actors and he knew the kind of dialogue, rhythm and sounds needed by an actor to make a line work.

In a review of his radio play *Let's Go Yellow* the reviewer Ian Rodger praised MacNeice and wrote:

He has an ear not only for the petty conversations of journalists talking shop but for the odd overlooked things like the way that drunks' voices always go up at the end of a song.⁴⁶

MacNeice replied in a letter to *The Listener*:

While I have in fact noticed that 'drunks' voices always go up at the end of a song' on this occasion I had no need to explain this fact of life to the actors. I wish it were more generally realized that in any radio production casting is half the battle.⁴⁷

The letter highlights the fact that MacNeice had been fortunate to work in the collaborative world of radio, which had enabled him to hone his skills as a dramatist and poet whilst working with, and also learning from, some of the finest actors of his day.

⁴⁵ Cicely Berry, *Text in Action* (London: Virgin Books, 2001), p. 112.

⁴⁶ *Listener*, vol. LXVI, no. 1709, 28 December 1961.

⁴⁷ *Listener*, vol. LXVII, no. 1710, 4 January 1962.

Speaking of his own performance of ‘The Taxis’, Christopher Reid told this author that he was able to adopt an ‘Ealing Films’ London accent for the dialogue of the cabby in the fourth quatrain.⁴⁸ MacNeice’s work in Features in radio and his life in Birmingham had taught him a great deal about demotic speech, but ‘The Taxis’ displays the heightened theatrical speech of a comic dramatist. It is perfectly pitched and reflects the experience MacNeice had of making every line of his radio plays ‘work’.

MacNeice never lost his interest in how people spoke, both the words they used and the sound they made. In the final piece he wrote for the *New Statesman*, he reported on the visit of the American President John F. Kennedy to Ireland in June 1963. In his report he noted the use of the word ‘motorcade’ – ‘an ugly word which we all enjoyed, and which sounds especially good in a low-Dublin adenoidal accent’.⁴⁹ It is typical of MacNeice to be attracted by the word ‘motorcade’ and to take a great interest in how the word ‘motorcade’ sounded when it was pronounced by the voices of Dubliners. His interest was of the kind one would expect from a radio producer who worked in a world where a heightened attentiveness to voice was essential.

MacNeice used the knowledge he had gained in the world of radio drama to good comic effect in ‘The Taxis’. It is also the radiogenic device of the character – or in this case characters – who never speak which gives the poem much of its menace and mystery, drawing the reader in because they want to know more. In his Clark Lectures MacNeice discussed the stage plays of Harold Pinter and described his work as ‘half-way between Beckett and Simpson’.⁵⁰ In 1959 Pinter’s play *A Slight Ache* was premièred on radio. It contains the character of the match seller who never speaks. In the radio production this character became a testament to the power of silence on radio as the character maintained a sense of mystery and menace. Reviewing a stage production in 2008, the critic Lyn Gardiner expressed the view that the play had started on radio and ‘that is where it should have stayed’.⁵¹ In her opinion the result of being able to see the character of the match seller on stage was ‘banal’. The fellow travellers in ‘The Taxis’ remain all the more menacing and mysterious precisely because MacNeice

⁴⁸ Christopher Reid, Facebook message to author, 22 April 2016.

⁴⁹ MacNeice, ‘Great Summer Sale’, in Heuser, ed., *Selected Prose*, p. 263.

⁵⁰ MacNeice, *Varieties of Parable*, p. 121.

⁵¹ Lyn Gardiner, review of *A Slight Ache*, *Guardian*, 30 July 2008.

does not describe them or allow them to speak. Paradoxically, their presence is all the more powerful because MacNeice says nothing about them. In his Clark Lectures MacNeice mentioned more than once one of Beckett's favourite quotations: 'Nothing is more real than nothing'.⁵²

With each taxi ride the silent fellow travellers increase in number. It is only the cabby who can 'see' them and, ironically, to him they just represent an extra charge. In the first taxi ride there are no 'extras on the clock' but the cabby looks 'askance' at his tip as if 'someone had bummed a ride'. At the end of each of the following two journeys the extra charge escalates from sixpence to one-and-sixpence and the suggestion is that the passenger is being joined by an increasing number of people. Finally, in the 'fourth taxi', the cabby thinks there are too many people for his cab to take.

The single setting of the taxi adds an element of claustrophobia that helps to intensify the Hitchcockian sense of menace. There is no sense of the world beyond the taxi that might have been expressed by something like a description of the weather. Instead, the very ordinary and everyday setting of a taxi takes on an intense and extraordinary nightmarish quality. The contrast between the setting and the feeling and atmosphere that the poem evokes is stronger because the setting is so everyday and mundane.

It is only in the third stanza that MacNeice names a place that belongs to a world beyond the taxi. The 'he' becomes aware 'of an odd | Scent that reminded him of a trip to Cannes'. Not for the first time in this collection MacNeice draws on the evocative power of smell to take both the protagonist of the poem and the reader to another world – a past life that included a trip to Cannes. In the world of 'The Taxis', where everything is 'odd', this is the only time the actual word 'odd' is used. More of the mysterious fellow travellers have now joined in the journey, for 'the tip-up seats were down'. The 'up' and 'down' have echoes of a nursery rhyme. MacNeice has been inventive in each stanza at letting the reader know how the increase in numbers is manifested. This 'odd scent' suggests it might be that the fellow travellers are all representative of the passenger's past life.

It is interesting to speculate on why MacNeice chose Cannes as the only place that is named in the poem. Apart from the cabby's 'muffler' that is

⁵² MacNeice, *Varieties of Parable*, p. 118.

mentioned in the second stanza and might be taken as an indication that the weather is cold, it is the only reference to a world beyond the taxi. Cannes had exotic connotations relating to the film world in the 1960s, when Brigitte Bardot was regularly photographed on the beach at Cannes in a bikini. The Cannes Film Festival, of course, represents a world of illusion and glamour that contrasts strongly with the harsh world of 'The Taxis' and the deep and real questions we would rather not confront.

Although each of the stanzas repeats 'he was alone' in the opening line, the content of each quatrain then goes on to refute this seemingly simple and knowable fact. The poem subverts our expectations that the passenger in a cab would know if they were alone, and if the 'he' doesn't know if he is alone or not, why doesn't he? If he is not alone who are these others? MacNeice forces the reader to confront these questions because they do not know who or what these unseen, unspeaking others are or what it is they represent. Even MacNeice did not seem entirely sure of the form of their existence:

'The nightmarish world of the drunk or the haunted', MacNeice wrote in an uncharacteristic note on a typescript (Texas). His observation in *Zoo* that 'the taxi represents Escape' (p. 125) indicates some of the poem's irony, since the passenger's past is riding with him.⁵³

MacNeice was in his mid-fifties when he wrote this poem. He was of an age when he had lived long enough to have acquired a significant 'past'. These others who travel with the passenger could certainly be figures from his past and they may not represent the living. When MacNeice was seven he had experienced the death of his mother. He had also lived through the Second World War which had claimed the lives of millions, including that of his very close friend Graham Shepard whose boat had been torpedoed in 1943. Jon Stallworthy expressed the significance of this: 'The death of our first friend and contemporary forces us to confront our own death'.⁵⁴

It might be that these others are present only in the memory of the passenger but, in a collection of poems in which we also read of a telephone

⁵³ Robyn Marsack, *The Cave of Making: The Poetry of Louis MacNeice* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982), p. 147. 'Texas' refers to the Humanities Research Center, University of Texas, Austin, Texas.

⁵⁴ Stallworthy, *MacNeice*, p. 320.

receiver being ‘warm from the ear of a ghost’,⁵⁵ the thought that these others might be actual ghosts is inescapable. Is the passenger ‘drunk’ and do the others exist only in his mind, or is he actually ‘haunted’?

There are no clues as to how the ‘he’ feels about the others. In fact the ‘he’ seems quite clueless about what is happening to him, and this increases the reader’s sense that what is being presented is an unsettling world. The third person narrator does not confirm if the cabby is justified in charging the extras on the fare: MacNeice leaves it to the reader to come to their own conclusions. This unwillingness to confirm or deny the reality of the situation may owe something to the fact that MacNeice worked in the medium of radio, in which the imagination of the audience was a key ingredient and a liberating factor. Highlighting this in his book on the theory and practice of radio, Tim Crook quotes the celebrated radio producer of Beckett’s first play for radio, Donald McWhinnie, who was of the opinion that ‘Nothing is duller than to make the imagination redundant’.⁵⁶

The reader is informed that for the fourth and final journey ‘he was alone’ when he hailed the cab. However, any certainty ends when the cabby tells him he cannot take ‘So many people, not to speak of the dog’. By this time it is as if the ‘he’ has disappeared as ‘the cabby looked | Through him’. The phrase ‘through him’ is chilling and suggests that the ‘he’ has almost ceased to exist and the others have become more real than he is. He has obviously had no contact with these unseen fellow passengers on the journey and now even the cabby looks ‘Through him’.

The reader’s sense of involvement in this drama is not confined to the questions concerning the ‘other’ passengers. Beyond this mystery that will never be solved lies the deeper mystery of the self and who it is we are. In his poem ‘Ars Poetica?’ the poet Czeslaw Milosz wrote: ‘The purpose of poetry is to remind us how difficult it is to remain just one person’.⁵⁷ Edna Longley has observed that ‘The figure in ‘The Taxis’ has no control over his identity, his self-definition, in the same way as Alice has difficulty about getting her existence

⁵⁵ MacNeice, ‘October in Bloomsbury’, in McDonald, ed., *Collected Poems*, p. 591.

⁵⁶ Crook, *Radio Drama*, p. 66.

⁵⁷ Czeslaw Milosz, *The Collected Poems (1931-1987)* (London: Penguin, 1988), p. 212.

verified in *Through the Looking-Glass*.⁵⁸ Peter McDonald adds: 'To ask why these others remain invisible only to the self is to ask how the self can ever have been deluded into believing in a single "I".'⁵⁹ MacNeice has adopted a deliberately naïve form with which to confront the deepest of questions and for McDonald 'The Taxis' connects with much of MacNeice's later poetry that 'made irony into a technique, rather than just a tone of voice or a pose of detachment'.⁶⁰

The poem ends with the words 'not to speak of the dog', with its echoes of Jerome K. Jerome's *Three Men in a Boat: To say nothing of the Dog!* Curiously, Jerome started the book with the intention that it should be a serious travel book that would tell the story of the Thames. During the course of its writing the book became the comic masterpiece that has never been out of print since it was first published in 1889. 'The Taxis' combines elements of comedy and tragedy and ends with 'the dog', which produces a laugh in performance but also has echoes of the dog Cerberus who guards the underworld, particularly when one considers other poems in *The Burning Perch* such as 'Charon'. MacNeice would no doubt have enjoyed the fact that the only invented character in *Three Men in a Boat* is the dog Montmorency, who as Jerome admits developed out of that area of inner consciousness which in all Englishmen contains 'an element of dog'.⁶¹

In the year before 'The Taxis' was first published, MacNeice worked with the Irish poet Patrick Kavanagh on a radio version of his poem 'The Great Hunger', which was broadcast on 13 May 1960. In his introduction to the broadcast Kavanagh expressed his dissatisfaction with the poem and said: 'the poem remains tragedy because it is not completely born. Tragedy is underdeveloped comedy: tragedy fully explored becomes comedy'.⁶² 'The Taxis' may end with a laugh, but it is a poem that has managed in the musical sense to combine both the minor and major keys. Reading it opens up questions of how we and others interpret what we call 'our self'. There is also the sense that the taxi journey may, in some way, give an intimation of a journey to the next life. Peter

⁵⁸ Longley, *Critical Study*, p. 154.

⁵⁹ McDonald, *Poet in his Contexts*, p. 199.

⁶⁰ Matthew Campbell, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Contemporary Irish Poetry* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), p. 70.

⁶¹ Jerome K. Jerome, *Three Men in a Boat (To Say Nothing of the Dog)*, ed. by Geoffrey Harvey (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), Intro. p. xi.

⁶² BBC WAC, R19/1,744/1, Great Hunger (The), 1960.

McDonald has linked it to the Celtic tradition of the *immram* or the book of the dead:

Finally, however, MacNeice's particular variety of *immram*, his own book of the dead, is at its sharpest when personal tensions are powerful. Three of the volume's finest poems, 'The Taxis', 'Charon' and 'The Introduction', are voyages into the element outside the self in which mortality comes to the surface as a concern.⁶³

'The Taxis' is a remarkable poem in all that it accomplishes. It is superbly entertaining and begs to be performed, but the reader should not be deceived by the neatness of its form and its use of an apparently meaningless refrain. As MacNeice wrote of Yeats: 'We must distinguish between a poet's reasons for adopting a device and the use he makes of it'.⁶⁴ The device of the refrain that MacNeice adopted is entertaining but he uses it to provoke the deepest of questions and achieves something very subtle in his use of it. As Robyn Marsack has said: 'Technically the poem is beautifully finished, but its meaning is not circumscribed, gingerly balanced between this world and another'.⁶⁵

MacNeice presents a world in which the reader leaves the poem knowing that no answers can be given to the questions that it raises, but each reader will bring their own suggestion as to what the poem 'really' means. Don Paterson, writing on the liberation that such ambiguity can bring, has commented: 'Crucially, this interpretative freedom also permits *ownership* of the poem at a much deeper level through the personalization of meaning'.⁶⁶

However much one may analyse and question it, the poem remains all of one piece and convinces the reader with its strange logic but then, as MacNeice himself said, 'Every poet knows that poetic sense is not the same thing as common sense or logical sense'.⁶⁷ MacNeice has managed to bring all the elements of the 'The Taxis' together and the critic and poet Peter McDonald has rightly asserted that 'the strength of 'The Taxis' is that the fluency of its medium

⁶³ McDonald, *Poet in his Contexts*, p. 199.

⁶⁴ MacNeice, *Poetry of W. B. Yeats*, p.166.

⁶⁵ Marsack, *Cave of Making*, p. 147.

⁶⁶ Don Paterson, 'The Lyric Principle', *Poetry Review*, vol. 97:2, 2007, p. 61.

⁶⁷ MacNeice, 'Poetry, the Public, and the Critic', in Heuser, ed., *Selected Literary Criticism*, p. 166.

achieves such a close blend of the literal with nightmare that any distinction between literal and symbolic functions of the images is finally impossible'.⁶⁸

Researching in the BBC Written Archive it was poignant to come across a letter dated 13 August 1963 written by MacNeice to Gerald Ryan Purcell Car Hire Ltd enquiring about the possibility and cost of hiring a car in Dublin 'towards the end of the month'.⁶⁹

MacNeice died three weeks later, on 3 September 1963. His journey to Ireland did not take place until after his death and he was not asked to pay the fare.

⁶⁸ McDonald, *Poet in his Contexts*, p. 200.

⁶⁹ BBC WAC, R71/918/1, Louis MacNeice Correspondence Personal 1957-1963.

The Suicide

Writing his annual report for Louis MacNeice's work at the BBC in 1959 Laurence Gilliam, the head of Radio Features, concluded that MacNeice's 'output in the past year must be regarded as disappointing'.¹

In the winter of 1960-61 a team of management consultants arrived to assess the efficiency of the Features Department, and Gilliam must have felt that he and his department were now in the position of being judged. MacNeice's often-quoted exchange with the consultants dates from this time: 'We see, Mr MacNeice, that during the past six months you have produced only one programme. Can you tell us what you were doing the rest of the time?'. MacNeice replied: 'Thinking'.² Shortly after this, MacNeice negotiated a new contract with the BBC where it was agreed that, for a three-year contract starting on 1 April 1961, he would work twenty-six weeks of the year for the BBC and work freelance for the rest of the year. It was MacNeice's own decision to change the nature of his contract but he described it as 'A gamble!'.³ However, the good terms he secured in his new contract give some indication of his standing in the Features Department, and Barbara Coulton describes it as being 'a rather privileged position'.⁴

The final play written and produced by MacNeice in his last complete year as a full-time member of staff at the BBC was *The Administrator*. It was broadcast on 10 March 1961 and consolidated a 'return to form' in both areas of his writing, as the broadcast coincided with the publication of his collection *Solstices* which was a Spring 1961 Recommendation of the Poetry Book Society. Reviewing *The Administrator* in *The Listener*, Ian Rodger wrote that it was 'an entirely successful summoning of accusing and denying spirits and must have made plenty of listeners suspect that the MacNeice man had heard the talk that goes on in their sleep'.⁵

¹ BBC WAC, L1/285/1, 18 March 1959.

² Quoted in Stallworthy, *MacNeice*, p. 451 and by Anthony Thwaite in Fiona Sampson, ed., *A Century of Poetry Review* (London: Carcanet Press, 2009), p.196.

³ Letter from MacNeice to John Lehmann, 8 February 1961, in Allison, ed., *Selected Letters*, p. 674.

⁴ Coulton, *MacNeice in the BBC*, p. 180.

⁵ *Listener*, vol. LXV no. 1667, 16 March 1961, p. 504.

This return to form for MacNeice was also highlighted by two poems that he published in 1961 in *The Listener* – the first was ‘Soap Suds’ and the second was ‘The Suicide’. Both poems would prove to be important additions to *The Burning Perch*. Edna Longley considers ‘The Suicide’ to be ‘a coded goodbye to the BBC and one of MacNeice’s finest poems’.⁶ Both the play *The Administrator* and his poem ‘The Suicide’ emerged from MacNeice’s experience of working for the bureaucratic institution that the BBC had increasingly become. In considering the poem and the play together the full force of MacNeice’s preoccupations can be felt. In his essay ‘Broken Windows or Thinking Aloud’ MacNeice had said ‘Being a writer I want to get rid of a burden’.⁷ Both *The Administrator* and ‘The Suicide’ offer a clear expression of what MacNeice, in 1961, considered his burdens to be.

It was twenty years since MacNeice had first worked freelance for the BBC before being taken on to the wartime staff in May 1941. His full-time career at the BBC may have brought with it some disadvantages but, among its many advantages, it enabled MacNeice to write with conviction about the world of work. When he received a letter dated 1 August 1963 from Stella Hillier asking for an ‘up-to-date statement of all your commitments’ because ‘we are being asked to give more detailed work returns to C.P.O (s)’,⁸ MacNeice probably felt he had done the right thing in going part-time when he did; the days of BBC staff ‘working’ in the George and the Stag were numbered. MacNeice did fill in his work sheets but in his own inimitable way. Barbara Coulton records an entry in 1960 when he stated: ‘During this quarter, though I could not possibly give you dates (and after all some of the work of any imaginative programme is done literally in one’s sleep), I was working on the script of *The Pin is Out*, which was a 74 minute project’.⁹

The Pin is Out was a fable play based on MacNeice’s experiences in South Africa. MacNeice’s commitment to this play was strong and, in a memo written in 1959, he emphatically stated ‘but it is what I want to write about’.¹⁰ However, the

⁶ Longley, *Critical Study*, p. 164.

⁷ MacNeice, ‘Broken Windows or Thinking Aloud’, in Sampson, ed., *Century of Poetry Review*, p. 196.

⁸ BBC WAC, R/71/918/1, 1 August 1963.

⁹ Coulton, *MacNeice in the BBC*, p. 175.

¹⁰ BBC WAC, 910, 5 October 1959.

Director of Sound Broadcasting, Lindsay Wellington, finally decided not to go ahead with the project and wrote:

It would be a mistake for the Corporation to broadcast ‘the Pin is Out’. Whether we regard it as ‘fantasy inspired by a well-known contemporary situation’ or as ‘satire which has a general validity for the Union’, its effect must be to attack a Commonwealth Government at a particularly difficult moment in Commonwealth relations.¹¹

It is not difficult to see the link between this crushing rejection and MacNeice’s comment in his introduction to the text of *The Administrator* which was published after his death, where MacNeice described the play as a study in ‘frustration’. It echoes an ongoing concern with what was described in his obituary in *The Times* as a ‘recurring theme in his radio work --- the dilemma of the contemporary hero faced with the pressures of authority whether those of a profession, a class or an authoritarian police state’.¹²

MacNeice had originally intended *The Administrator* to be about a medical administrator who would be a sympathetic character finding himself ‘blunted’ by being in the wrong job.¹³ He later changed the main character’s job to that of a professor of physics who works as an atomic scientist. This enabled MacNeice to explore the nature of creativity in science and the mind of a scientist whose work is being carried out in the shadow of ‘the Bomb’. The first Polaris missile had been launched in January 1960, and by 1961 President Kennedy was advising all US citizens to build nuclear fallout shelters.

The professor, Jerry King, is offered a job as the director of a prestigious institute. This new position would bring with it power and money but he would also be forced to abandon his creative research for full-time administration. His wife, played in the production by Mary Wimbush, with whom MacNeice was now living, wants him to take the job and, in the broadcast version of the play, although all his instincts are against it, Jerry does eventually accept the job as administrator.

Throughout most of the play Professor Jerry King is against taking the position as ‘administrator’ because, in the words of one of the characters, ‘the

¹¹ Wellington to Gilliam, 2 August 1960, quoted in Stallworthy, *MacNeice*, p. 444.

¹² *The Times*, 4 September 1963.

¹³ BBC WAC, Archive File 1, Scriptwriter, 1941-1962.

administrator manages people. The creative types get on with things on their own'.¹⁴ It is hard not to conclude that MacNeice could also have been describing himself with these words. He was, after all, described in his obituary in *The Times* as 'a cat who walked by himself'.¹⁵

When it came to preparing the text for publication MacNeice changed his mind about this ending and wrote in his introduction: 'I have now stood this decision on its head'.¹⁶ In the published text Jerry declines the job and tells his wife: 'You see, darling, it's not your decision I've taken. I'm afraid this time it's my own'.¹⁷ MacNeice declared in his introduction: 'I had a compulsion to write it as this sort of painful choice seems endemic in our society'.¹⁸ As was often the case, MacNeice saw his protagonist as an Everyman character representing all those who were damaged by the modern world with its emphasis on bureaucracy rather than creativity.

The action of the play begins late one evening and ends early the next morning. The play includes dreams, and in his introduction MacNeice stressed that 'the dreams in the *Administrator* are "naturalistic" in that they are the kind those particular dreamers might have in "real life"'.¹⁹ In one of these dreams Jerry is steering mankind on an iceberg and runs into an 'unsinkable' ship called the *Titanic*; the date is recorded as 14 April which was the date on which RMS *Titanic* hit an iceberg. There is also a mock trial reminiscent of *Alice in Wonderland* and there are repeated references to roses which echo MacNeice's poem 'Snow'. Here we can see MacNeice's preoccupations and recurring dreams assembling themselves once again but in another form. Edna Longley has said she believes that:

One sign of a major poet is that he continually broods on the same obsessions and images, but finds different forms for them.²⁰

¹⁴ Louis MacNeice, *The Mad Islands and The Administrator* (London: Faber & Faber, 1964), p. 99.

¹⁵ *The Times*, 4 September 1963.

¹⁶ MacNeice, Introduction, *Mad Islands and Administrator*, p. 8.

¹⁷ MacNeice, *Mad Islands and Administrator*, p. 112.

¹⁸ MacNeice, Introduction, *Mad Islands and Administrator*, p. 8.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 7.

²⁰ Longley, *Critical Study*, Preface, p. xii.

Both his play *The Administrator* and his poem 'The Suicide', along with many of his other works, reveal the truth of this statement in the case of MacNeice. His interest in the conflict between the fulfillment of an individual and the demands of their work can be traced back to a poem he published at the age of seventeen in the school magazine at Marlborough. This poem reveals both his love of Yeats and his concern with the heavy price that the world of work exacts from its workers. The poem is called 'Death of a Prominent Businessman'. The businessman has no time to pay attention to the world of nature as he has to 'attend to my business cares'. It is only when he dies that his soul can leave 'to taste the air | Away on the hills again'.²¹ In this case the 'prominent businessman' dies in his chair, but 'The Suicide' in *The Burning Perch* was not the first time that MacNeice had considered the subject of a man taking his own life. In a previously unpublished handwritten essay by MacNeice, dated 1940-41 by MacNeice's first literary executor E. R. Dodds, MacNeice wrote:

The 'message' of a work of art may appear to be defeatist, negative, nihilist; the work itself is always *positive*. A poem in praise of suicide is an act of homage to life.²²

It was a subject that MacNeice had also addressed in a poem before 'The Suicide' was published in *The Listener* in October 1961. A reference in the Melbourne newspaper 'The Age' dated 6 November 1943 drew this author's attention to an earlier poem, also referred to in the newspaper as 'The Suicide'. This was a poem MacNeice chose not to include in his own *Collected Poems 1925-1948*, published by Faber & Faber in 1949. After his death, when E. R. Dodds came to edit *The Collected Poems of Louis MacNeice*, published by Faber & Faber in 1966, he wrote in his preface that he had 'obeyed' the wishes of MacNeice who was 'in his maturity a severe but usually, I think, a just critic of his own earlier work'.²³

This earlier poem had appeared under the title 'Suicide' in MacNeice's collection *The Last Ditch* published in 1940 by the Cuala Press in Dublin, a press

²¹ MacNeice, 'Death of a Prominent Businessman', in McDonald, ed., *Collected Poems*, p. 653.

²² MacNeice, 'Broken Windows or Thinking Aloud', in Sampson, ed., *Century of Poetry Review*, p. 193.

²³ E. R. Dodds, ed., *Louis MacNeice: Collected Poems* (London: Faber & Faber, 1966), Preface, p. xv.

run by Yeats's sisters, Lilly and Lollie. A year later the poem was re-published by Faber in *Plant and Phantom*. MacNeice may have decided that this poem, written in 1939, did not represent the best of his work but he plainly thought the subject was worth revisiting in a poem which, with the definite article added to its title, was included in what would come to be his final collection.

The 'prominent businessman' in the seventeen-year-old MacNeice's poem is seen as part of the world's 'financial greed' and it is only after his death that he can be 'Away on the hills again'.²⁴ The man who commits suicide in the 1939 poem no longer walks 'on the crown of the road | Under delectable trees' but, whereas the prominent businessman's 'business cares' are shown to have reaped financial rewards, in 1939 MacNeice writes about a man who has been a failure in business:

Had invested rashly, had lost
His health and his reputation,
His fortune and his looks.

His marriage has also failed and he lives in a cottage with a:

Mistress and some gardening
Books and a life of Napoleon.

In the final stanza he clips the hedge:

And then taking a shotgun
As if for a duck went out
Walking on the crown of the road.²⁵

The collection *Plant and Phantom*, published in 1941, was dedicated to Eleanor Clark, an American with whom MacNeice had fallen in love while on a lecture tour in America. The final poem in the collection is 'Cradle Song'. It was written in 1940 and it ends with the line: 'The pity of it all'.²⁶ The world was at war and both MacNeice's personal and public life could offer him only uncertainty.

²⁴ MacNeice, 'Death of a Prominent Businessman', in McDonald, ed., *Collected Poems*, p. 653.

²⁵ MacNeice, *Plant and Phantom*, p. 46.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 86.

In some ways little had changed by the time MacNeice came to write his second poem about a suicide in 1961. His play *The Administrator*, broadcast in the same year, demonstrates MacNeice's awareness of the dangers faced by the world during the Cold War. A letter in one of his files at the BBC Archive, from the National Youth Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament, asks him for a poem that the actor and political activist Vanessa Redgrave might read at a rally, as she thought 'Prayer Before Birth' might be too intimate because of her pregnancy.²⁷ ('Prayer Before Birth' was also read by the actor and director Mark Rylance at a Stop The War Coalition rally on 8 October 2011.)

MacNeice's view of the uncertainty in the wider world also chimed with feelings of professional uncertainty about the future of the world in which he had spent his working life. In his introduction to the published scripts of the two radio plays *The Mad Islands* and *The Administrator* MacNeice starts by saying: 'These two plays were both written for what some may think an obsolescent medium'. While he does not say that he thinks radio is obsolescent, he admits that 'sound radio, in Britain at least, is not the *mass* medium it used to be'.²⁸ Nevertheless he still believes that 'Sound radio can do things no other medium can'.²⁹ and it is important to recognise that, although MacNeice may have fallen out with the new bureaucracy of the BBC, he never lost his excitement for what the medium of radio could do. Writing his foreword to the radio plays, W. H. Auden said 'radio drama is an excellent, perhaps the ideal, medium for "psychological" drama, that is to say the portrayal of the inner life'.³⁰ In both his play 'The Administrator' and poem 'The Suicide' MacNeice explores the conflicts of reconciling this 'inner life' with the demands of bureaucracy.

Edna Longley is correct in her judgment that 'The Suicide' is 'one of MacNeice's finest poems', and W. H. Auden chose to include it in his *Selected Poems of Louis MacNeice* published by Faber & Faber in 1964, as did Michael Longley in his selection published also by Faber in 2001. However, apart from Edna Longley and D. B. Moore in his study of 1972, the poem has received little

²⁷ BBC WAC, R71/918/1, 1957-1963, 3 April 1963.

²⁸ MacNeice, Introduction, *Mad Islands and Administrator*, p. 7.

²⁹ Loc. cit.

³⁰ Louis MacNeice, *Persons from Porlock and Other Plays for Radio* (London: BBC, 1969), Foreword, p. 7.

critical attention. Edna Longley's view that it is 'a coded goodbye to the BBC'³¹ highlights one of the driving forces behind the poem, but there are certainly others. For D. B. Moore 'it seems to summarise his vivid apprehension of the world around him, and the sharp awareness in his poetry of the approaching nullity which is death'.³²

What is clear from the start of 'The Suicide' is that it presents the reader with the aftermath of a drama that has already taken place. The poem opens with the conjunction 'And' and the reader joins a tour that has already begun. In his introduction to *The Administrator* MacNeice refers to the fact that in radio 'one's time is too often limited, it *pays* to do several things at once'.³³ The same might be said of the short lyric poem that can be made to work on many levels at the same time. It is also significant when reading this poem to remember, as noted earlier, that in 1949 MacNeice wrote: 'All lyric poems, though in varying degrees, are *dramatic*'.³⁴

In a scene reminiscent of the opening chapter of Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World*,³⁵ 'The Suicide' opens in the voice of a tour guide who is leading a macabre tour that the reader, by reading the poem, has now joined. The opening line is indeed dramatic and demands attention:

And this, ladies and gentlemen, whom I am not in fact
Conducting,

In Huxley's novel the reader is given a view of a possible terrible future when they join the tour for new students being led by the Director of the Centre around the Central London Hatchery and Conditioning Centre, but in MacNeice's poem the reader arrives after a terrible event has already taken place. Without any preliminaries the device of a tour plunges the reader straight into the scene that is left after a drama that took place 'all those minutes ago'. Yet, having started so theatrically and strongly, MacNeice immediately subverts his opening and leaves

³¹ Longley, *Critical Study*, p. 164.

³² D. B. Moore, *The Poetry of Louis MacNeice* (Leicester: Leicester University Press, 1972), p. 214.

³³ MacNeice, Introduction, *Mad Islands and Administrator*, p. 8.

³⁴ MacNeice, 'Experiences with Images', in Heuser, ed., *Selected Literary Criticism*, p. 155.

³⁵ Aldous Huxley, *Brave New World* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1932).

his reader unsure about what is happening as the voice, in the same line and the same breath, denies that he is 'in fact' conducting a tour.

Writing about the poet Robert Frost MacNeice commented:

I have often been surprised that reviewers of verse pay so little attention to syntax. A sentence in prose is struck forward like a golf ball; a sentence in verse can be treated like a ball in a squash court.³⁶

MacNeice went on to observe that Frost 'is a master of angles'.³⁷ The same could be said of MacNeice himself. Edna Longley comments on the 'circular syntax' that MacNeice employs in his sequence of poems 'As in their Time'.³⁸ She demonstrates how 'this syntax epitomizes the economic, social, mental and moral tangles that trap these people'.³⁹ MacNeice also brings his extraordinarily sophisticated verbal techniques to bear in 'The Suicide'.

The poem uses rhyme: 'fact', 'stacked', 'packed', 'cracked', 'tract', 'lacked', 'act', 'intact'. They are all used as end rhymes and are placed at irregular intervals. These are not very subtle rhymes and some might think he could have done better than rhyming 'cracked' with 'digestive tract', though this could also be interpreted as an example of MacNeice's dark humour. Curiously, although they lack subtlety it is perfectly possible to read the poem without realising that it has rhymes, and this may be because of the rhymes' irregular appearances. In a masterstroke the poem ends with the word 'intact' which rhymes with 'vanishing act'. All the previous rhymes have presented broken objects but the poem finally 'arrives' and concludes with the image of something complete.

However, equally as important as MacNeice's use of rhyme in this poem is his use of syntax, which is described by Edna Longley as 'finely diversified'.⁴⁰ The whole poem of nineteen lines is written in only three sentences. Rather than playing with the classical rhythms of a poem like 'Soap Suds', MacNeice patterns this poem with stressed syllables and it more closely resembles older English poetry than relying upon any 'Horatian rhythms'. Occasionally he throws in a

³⁶ MacNeice, 'Frost', in Heuser, ed., *Selected Literary Criticism*, p. 245.

³⁷ Loc. cit.

³⁸ Longley, *Critical Study*, p. 164.

³⁹ Loc. cit.

⁴⁰ Longley, *Critical Study*, p. 166.

playful enjambment just to keep a rough pattern of stresses, as in the eighth line when the line break parts the adjective ‘cracked’ from its noun ‘Receiver’.

Everything in this office is fractured and the line break reflects this.

The first sentence of the poem lasts for just two and a half lines, the second sentence for nearly twelve lines, and the final sentence for just under six lines. It is in the long second sentence, with its mixture of short phrases and long clauses, that the full weight of the life that the suicide has left behind is brought to bear. Like the sentence itself, it was a life that was out of balance and out of control. In this sentence MacNeice piles up the lexicon of words describing the ‘tools of the trade’ associated with office work in the 1960s: bills, intrays, ashtrays, stacked memoranda, ranks of box-files, unanswered correspondence and, finally, the jotter. In his study of the poem D. B. Moore comments on its ‘compassion and precision’ and notes how MacNeice ‘had learnt from Eliot how to absorb into his poetry the impedimenta from the everyday life of our urban civilization’.⁴¹ It is an extraordinary achievement that, by this attention to detail, MacNeice makes his reader feel such compassion for this man they ‘never heard of’ and recognise in his life elements of their own life.

Grey is a colour that runs throughout this final collection. Two of the poems actually use the colour in their titles: ‘The Grey Ones’ and ‘Greyness is All’. In the case of the stacked memoranda, their greyness indicates the length of time they have been waiting to be dealt with. They are stacked next to ‘the ash in the ashtray’ with its connotations of both greyness and death. The clear indication is that this life has been out of control for some time. It is in the long, almost rambling second sentence that MacNeice indicates that the man who has ‘left this room’ took his own life. All the words used to describe the actual act of suicide are euphemisms. A breeze comes from a window ‘by which he left’, ‘he has left this room’, he has ‘stumbled’ – MacNeice uses many verbal devices to avoid ‘jumped’ and ‘death’ and the result is at once humorous and horrifying.

The rambling list of all that surrounded the suicide in his office is reminiscent of Theodore Roethke’s (1908-1963) poem ‘Dolor’ (1943) which also has a reference to the colour grey in its final line – ‘the duplicate grey standard

⁴¹ Moore, *Poetry of Louis MacNeice*, p. 241.

faces' – and also lists its pencils, pads, paper-weights and manila folders.⁴² But whereas Roethke, in his extraordinary evocation of 'long afternoons of tedium', remains in the past tense and evokes the feelings generated by all this stationery, MacNeice's poem shifts from past to present and back again. MacNeice has created a poem that is at once dynamic and dramatic. 'These are the bills'; the unanswered correspondence is still 'nodding' in the breeze from the window 'by which he left'.

As always with MacNeice, time is not something that can be approached with any certainty. This 'was his office all those minutes ago': the words 'all those' suggest a stretch of time but this is immediately contradicted by the use of 'minutes' as a measurement of that time. The 'minutes' indicate how quickly a life enters the past and can be dismissed because he was 'This man you never heard of.' But, again, MacNeice subverts his own words. They might at first be taken as an indication that 'this man' holds no interest for us, but equally the harsh, unqualified tone of the words 'never heard of' indicates that in fact we should have taken an interest in his plight and the plight of others like him. The jotter he left behind 'With his last doodle' might give a clue to his personality and thwarted creativity, but it is now too late to be sure what the doodle represents – it might be a 'digestive tract' or a 'flowery maze'.

We may have paid no attention to this man when he was alive but we do take a great interest in the circumstances surrounding his death. The man who committed suicide is never given a name and, as in the case of *The Administrator*, MacNeice presents an Everyman character whose despair represents the endemic despair of the modern office worker.

MacNeice was not the only one taking an interest in office workers whose lives were being swallowed up by the ever-increasing demands of the 1960s. The American director Billy Wilder had released his film *The Apartment* in 1960,⁴³ the year before MacNeice published 'The Suicide'. In its opening sequence *The Apartment* shows an endless sea of office workers typing at their desks and highlights how individuals working at a low-level status in a modern office were being reduced to the level of machines. Just like MacNeice's suicide, they are not

⁴² Theodore Roethke, 'Dolor', in Edward Hirsch, ed., *Theodore Roethke: Selected Poems* (New York: Library of America, 2005), p. 18.

⁴³ Billy Wilder, dir., *The Apartment* (The Mirisch Company, 1960).

allowed to be individuals but are a great impersonal mass of the nameless and unknown.

Without actually staging a trial in ‘The Suicide’, MacNeice uses the language of the courtroom to suggest that the man who has committed suicide has left behind the ‘evidence’ of what drove him to take his own life. The memoranda are ‘stacked | Against him’ along with ‘the packed | Jury of his unanswered correspondence’; the word ‘packed’ suggests that this has not been a fair trial. The lofty and detached tone adopted by the tour guide also suggests a judgmental attitude, and the reader, as a member of the tour, is being asked to pass judgment on the suicide having examined all the ‘evidence’ that he left behind in his office. It is worth noting that until 1961, the year in which the poem was published, suicide or attempted suicide was a criminal offence.

Amongst what has been left behind are a ‘cracked | Receiver’ and a pencil whose point ‘had obviously broken’. In his memoir of life at Rothwell House, the offices of the Features Department of the BBC, the poet Anthony Thwaite, who shared an office with MacNeice in the late 1950s and early 1960s, recalled noticing MacNeice ‘scribbling away in pencil (he always used pencil)’.⁴⁴ It is this broken pencil that is the final item that marks the culmination of the long list of what Theodore Roethke described as ‘mucilage’,⁴⁵ and it can so easily be linked to MacNeice’s own office at the BBC in the 1960s. Its connection with Prospero’s broken staff in Shakespeare’s *The Tempest* is also inescapable when we remember MacNeice’s use of satire.⁴⁶

Satire was not ‘invented’ in the 1960s but it was a decade in which satire thrived. MacNeice was no stranger to it; as a schoolboy he had read Dryden and his poem ‘Bagpipe Music’ (1937) was written as ‘a satirical elegy for the Gaelic districts of Scotland and indeed for all traditional culture’.⁴⁷ The 1960s saw a resurgence in satire as a world view, and in a letter to his daughter Corinna, dated

⁴⁴ Anthony Thwaite, ‘Memories of Rothwell House’, in Sampson, ed., *Century of Poetry Review*, pp. 194-197, p.196.

⁴⁵ Theodore Roethke, ‘Dolor’, in Hirsch, ed., *Theodore Roethke: Selected Poems*, p. 18.

⁴⁶ MacNeice was not the only writer at the BBC to have fantasised about suicide. ‘Another staff writer, Rayner Heppenstall, had a much more jaundiced view than MacNeice of the effects of working for broadcasting, possibly because he had not managed to make such a name for himself in the literary world outside. Towards the end of his autobiography, fantasies about suicide are interspersed with descriptions of the BBC as a trap for writers.’ (Whitehead, *The Third Programme*, p. 72).

⁴⁷ MacNeice, manuscript note for Argo recording, quoted in Stallworthy, *MacNeice*, p. 212.

20 September 1961, MacNeice told her: 'I have joined the new club called The Establishment, to be run by the four Beyond The Fringe boys'.⁴⁸ The 'four boys' were Peter Cook, Dudley Moore, Alan Bennett and Jonathan Miller. Their satire was aimed at the society of 1960s Britain, but MacNeice's satire in 'The Suicide' seems to be aimed as much at himself as the society in which he worked.

'The Suicide' quite deliberately and consistently plays down the horror of a man taking his own life. In the second half of the poem, the reader or 'jury' is in effect invited to speculate about or fill in the details of how the unknown victim might have killed himself and what was the tipping point that brought about the realisation that finally led to the act of jumping from a window. There is a suggestion that the 'last doodle' may indeed have represented the 'flowery maze' of his life through which he 'wandered deliciously' until he 'stumbled ... on a manhole under hollyhocks'. The 'flowery maze' might be seen as a comment on the suicide's lack of control and understanding of the complexity of his own life. The maze itself would have to have been man-made but this was something he had not recognised until he became 'Suddenly finally conscious of all he lacked'. At this moment of realisation the suicide 'stumbled on a manhole'; the use of the word 'stumbled' reinforces the idea that the act of jumping was something less than premeditated. Even his death seems to have lacked organisation.

As well as playing with a verbal pun, the manhole also echoes the large rabbit hole in *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*. The manhole in 'The Suicide' is 'under the hollyhocks' and there is a sense that, hidden by the flowers, it is disguised in the same way in which a mantrap would be hidden waiting for a victim to 'stumble'. A manhole would lead to the subterranean world that was to hold an increasing fascination for MacNeice in his final works, notably in his final play for radio *Persons from Porlock* (1963) where the 'hero' Hank's obsessive interest in caves eventually leads to his death, which occurs after he has been confronted underground by all that took place in his life. W. H. Auden described this play as a 'magnificent example' of a 'psychological drama'.⁴⁹ In MacNeice's writing there is always the sense that one must go beneath the surface to find a true reality or personal identity. This belief also connects with the

⁴⁸ Letter from MacNeice to Corinna MacNeice, 20 September 1961, in Allison, ed., *Selected Letters*, p. 684.

⁴⁹ MacNeice, *Persons from Porlock*, Foreword, p. 7.

underworld, for only at the moment of death might an understanding of the true self be realised.

The sound of the words as the suicide approaches his death are fat with vowels that contrast with the harsh consonants of ‘c’ and ‘k’ employed in the rhyming words that lead both the reader and the suicide to this point. The jump itself is imagined as a ‘catdrop sleight-of-foot or simple vanishing act’ – MacNeice’s favourite writing exhibited what he called ‘sleight-of-hand’. When he has jumped, the suicide’s body is dismissed as ‘that mess’ in the street.

In the letter to his daughter Corinna in 1961 MacNeice describes himself as ‘snowed under with work, so really must be methodical in the oncoming months’.⁵⁰ In 1960 he had referred to ‘the debris of this office’.⁵¹ In the opening years of the 1960s MacNeice was very short of money and worried about ‘bills | In the intray’ and there is ample evidence that he was prepared to take on any work that might pay.

MacNeice wrote to Charles Monteith at Faber & Faber offering to ‘knock off that children’s story’,⁵² and Anthony Thwaite remembered him selling papers in return for ‘£5 notes – rarities at that time’ to Jacob (‘Jake’) Schwarz when they shared an office together at Rothwell House.⁵³ He wrote as the television critic for *The New Statesman* and was even engaged ‘to write the first part of a history of Astrology (!)’.⁵⁴ (He was still working on the Astrology book in 1963 and, in a letter to his friends the McCanns, he wrote: ‘I wish the stars had never been invented’.)⁵⁵ His second wife Hedli had told him to leave their marital home in September 1960⁵⁶ and his income now had to support her as well as his new life with Mary Wimbush. MacNeice knew what it was to have unpaid bills and he was obliged to generate as much income as he could.

However, it would be a mistake to think that the suicide in this poem comes about because a man fails to keep his papers and his life in control. Edna

⁵⁰ Letter in Allison, ed., *Selected Letters*, p. 683.

⁵¹ Letter from MacNeice to Caitlin Thomas, 18 January 1960, in Allison, ed., *Selected Letters*, p. 659.

⁵² Letter from MacNeice to Charles Monteith, 15 September 1961, in Allison, ed., *Selected Letters*, p. 682.

⁵³ Anthony Thwaite, email to author, 3 February 2016.

⁵⁴ Letter from MacNeice to Daniel MacNeice, 28 September 1961, in Allison, ed., *Selected Letters*, p. 686.

⁵⁵ Coulton, *MacNeice in the BBC*, p.186.

⁵⁶ Stallworthy, *MacNeice*, p. 447.

Longley is right when she called it one of MacNeice's 'finest poems'. It was first published in *The Listener* alongside 'Soap Suds' and it achieves all the complexity and depth of the poem with which it was published.

In the thirteenth line of this nineteen-line poem MacNeice tells us why this man killed himself: he was 'Suddenly finally conscious of all he lacked'. It is a bald statement, without any of the sleight-of-hand or comic irony of the rest of the poem, and it is all the more shocking because of this contrast. This stark statement lies at the heart of the poem. MacNeice has written a tragi-comedy worthy of one of his favourite writers, Chekhov, who also endlessly explored that most tragic of subjects, the wasted life.⁵⁷ The suicide has killed himself not because of the mess in his life but because of what he does not have in his life. Unlike Olga at the end of *Three Sisters*, who accepts the waste and suffering of life but declares 'We have to live',⁵⁸ the suicide has decided that he will not.

MacNeice was fifty-three when he wrote this poem and it is certainly not a poem that could have been written by a young man. Nevertheless, it could not have been expected that this poem would be among his final works. When he gave the memorial address at MacNeice's funeral in 1963, W. H. Auden ended by quoting the final lines from this poem, which he felt could be applied to MacNeice himself and also to the act of creation. MacNeice had, in spite of or because of all the complications and 'mess' of his life, left behind a lasting legacy of poems and plays which included this poem from which Auden was able to quote⁵⁹ and, in doing so,

This man with the shy smile has left behind
Something that was intact.

⁵⁷ MacNeice produced two radio broadcasts based on Chekhov's life, including a biographical play *Sunbeams in his Hat* broadcast in 1944.

⁵⁸ Anton Pavlovich Chekhov, *Three Sisters*, trans. Helen Rappaport (London: Oberon, 2012), p. 95.

⁵⁹ Auden introduced this quotation by describing the words as 'descriptive both of Louis our friend and Louis MacNeice the maker'. (*Memorial Address* in Mendelson, ed., *Complete Works of W. H. Auden: Prose Volume V*, pp. 69-73, p. 73.)

Charon

‘Charon’ was written early in 1962. In spite of the fact that MacNeice was now working only part-time for the BBC, he was still suffering from the pressures of overwork. Nevertheless, his letters at the end of 1961 and in the early months of 1962 show him to be full of plans for both writing and travel.

In September 1961 he described his working life to his son Dan as ‘uncomfortably busy’¹ and, later in the year, he told his friends the Tates that ‘I am trying to do 3 or 4 heavy jobs simultaneously & am alarmingly behind with all of them’.² He and Mary were planning to buy a house in the Hertfordshire village of Aldbury, which would be the first and only house MacNeice would own, and he also told the Tates that ‘We get more & more depressed by the world but better in ourselves’.³

Acquiring the house in Hertfordshire would mean leaving London, and it was a London that was rapidly changing, as MacNeice wrote to his son:

London has changed a lot since you were here. They keep pulling down the nicer buildings & putting up great slabs of coloured ice. There is more variety in dress, & proliferation of coffee bars & Indian restaurants, lots of West Indians conducting buses etc., an insoluble traffic problem & a boom in paper backs and long playing records. There has been a great increase in strip tease clubs & such!⁴

It was characteristic of MacNeice that he should include transport in this ‘snapshot’ of a changing London, and it is interesting that bus conductors receive a mention. In ‘Charon’, which was written early in the following year, MacNeice was to take the subject of a bus journey far beyond the quotidian concerns of living in London.

Jon Stallworthy notes that ‘Charon’ expands on the central image of an undergraduate poem called ‘En Avant’ that MacNeice had written in 1928:

¹ Letter from MacNeice to Daniel MacNeice, 28 September 1961, in Allison, ed., *Selected Letters*, p. 687.

² Letter from MacNeice to Allen and Isabella Tate, 3 November 1961, in Allison, ed., *Selected Letters*, p. 688.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 687.

⁴ Letter from MacNeice to Daniel MacNeice, 28 September 1961, in Allison, ed., *Selected Letters*, p. 687.

‘En Avant’

A poem suggested by Marco Polo

Dead our Emperor rides in Procession
 Forty horsemen after him.
 Dead upon dead horses
 With lances at rest and cakes in wallets.

Buses pass buses pass buses
 Pass full of passengers.
 Wooden upon seats of wood,
 With pipe in mouth and coppers in pockets.

Foot in stirrups, clutch releasing,
 Horse procession, bus procession,
 Mummy-head, wooden head
 Never ceasing, never ceasing,
 All dead, dead.⁵

This poem, written when MacNeice was twenty-one, already has echoes of T.S. Eliot’s *The Waste Land* which had been published in 1922 to great critical acclaim. Jon Stallworthy observes how it owes ‘something to the death-in-life and life-in-death of the London of *The Waste Land*’.⁶ MacNeice had first encountered Eliot’s poems when he was eighteen and in his final term at Marlborough. He remembered finding them ‘repellant’ but he went on reading ‘because I had read somewhere that he was the best of the modern poets’.⁷ MacNeice’s reading of *The Waste Land* was to find even stronger echoes in his writing by the time he came to write ‘Charon’ some thirty-four years after he had written ‘En Avant’.

MacNeice was also to use the image of a tram as a hearse or sarcophagus on more than one occasion. The first occasion was in his 1933 poem ‘Birmingham’, which was written when he was ‘Teaching the classics to Midland students’:⁸ ‘On shining lines the trams like vast sarcophagi move’.⁹ This poem was written in the midst of the deepening Depression which had badly hit the industrial city. And this was the Birmingham, as Jon Stallworthy commented, that

⁵ MacNeice, ‘En Avant’, in McDonald, ed., *Collected Poems*, p. 659.

⁶ Stallworthy, *MacNeice*, p. 156.

⁷ MacNeice, *Modern Poetry*, p. 56.

⁸ MacNeice, *Autumn Journal*, in McDonald, ed., *Collected Poems*, p.117.

⁹ MacNeice, ‘Birmingham’, in McDonald, ed., *Collected Poems*, p. 23.

‘brought MacNeice closer to the workers – in sympathy and understanding’ than any of his peers.¹⁰

In ‘Birmingham’ the poet observes and narrates rather than becoming a fellow passenger. This is also the case in the poem ‘Figure of Eight’ (1956) where the opening line tells us of a passenger who was ‘In the top and front of a bus, eager to meet his fate’ – this particular passenger arrives ‘dead on time’.¹¹ Plainly a poem that involved a bus journey was something that pleased MacNeice. In ‘Charon’ he not only expands on this image until it occupies all twenty-three lines of the poem but he also dramatises it and even provides the bus conductor with a script.

It is fitting that MacNeice returns to themes and subjects of his early poems in these his last works, for it is often the case that in a poem by MacNeice the reader finds that ‘In my beginning is my end’.¹² As in ‘Soap Suds’, the journey the reader takes in ‘Charon’ follows a circular course as the bus conductor’s hands in the opening line have by the end of the poem turned into the hands of Charon, the ferryman of Hades. The circular nature of the journey is emphasised by the repetition of details: both the conductor’s and the ferryman’s hands are there to collect money, and have become black from it.

In the opening line ‘The conductor’s hands were black with money’. In the second and third lines the colour is used metaphorically as we learn that ‘the inspector’s | Mind is black with suspicion’. The colour returns in its literal sense at the end of the poem with the description of Charon: ‘his hands on the oar | Were black with obols’. Terence Brown has highlighted how ‘The colour adjective operates on both the descriptive and metaphorical levels, yet the diction seems plain and unadorned’.¹³ Throughout *The Burning Perch* MacNeice’s use of colour provides a striking contrast and is emphasised by the plainness of the diction that he uses in his poems.

Immediately after the reference to his hands the conductor uses a line of naturalistic dialogue when he tells the passenger to ‘Hold on to your ticket’. At this stage the only sense of menace that is introduced comes with the reference to an inspector, but this is followed by an indication of something much stranger.

¹⁰ Stallworthy, *MacNeice*, p. 219.

¹¹ MacNeice, ‘Figure of Eight’, in McDonald, ed., *Collected Poems*, p. 516.

¹² T. S. Eliot, ‘East Coker’, *Four Quartets* (London: Faber & Faber, 1944), p. 23.

¹³ Brown, *Sceptical Vision*, p. 163.

The conductor signals that this is to be no ordinary journey as he tells the passenger to ‘hold onto | That dissolving map’. Reading the description of changing London that MacNeice sent to his son, one can see that MacNeice may have felt that London, as he had known it, was indeed ‘dissolving’. The original cheery matter-of-fact instructions of the conductor have echoes of the taxi driver’s ‘Make sure | You have left nothing behind’ in ‘The Taxis’ before he too goes on to say something that contradicts the ordinariness of the setting. Again in ‘Charon’ the strange and ‘other’ world appears even stranger because it contrasts so starkly with a cheery everyday dialogue and setting. The repeated phrases are colloquial and suited to a bus journey where the standing passengers might well need to ‘hold on’. In lines eleven and twelve MacNeice again employs everyday and plain language when dealing with an enormous subject when he describes how ‘eternity | Gave itself airs in revolving lights’.

The word *conductor* comes from the Latin ‘conducere’ meaning ‘bringing together’. In this case the bus conductor will act as a guide in the way that the Sybil acted as a guide for Aeneas and Virgil as a guide for Dante, and the passengers on the bus will be brought together on a journey to Hades. Yet the enormity and seriousness of the journey towards death are subverted by the repetition of the phrase ‘We just jogged on’, which seems to indicate that this is a journey that is taking place with no real sense of purpose and adds to the dark sense of humour when we consider the inevitability of the journey’s end. One might compare this with MacNeice’s depiction of the haphazard nature of life’s end in ‘The Suicide’. MacNeice also used the word ‘conducting’ in the sense of ‘guiding’ in ‘The Suicide’, where a bleak sense of humour is also in evidence. However, unlike the passenger in ‘The Taxis’ the passenger in ‘Charon’ knows he is not a lone traveller; the pronoun used is ‘we’ and there is a sense that, given ‘the rumours of war’, this echoes the World War II slogan ‘We are all in this together!’.

With his reference to an inspector in ‘Charon’, MacNeice plays with the notion that an inspector would be suspicious because a passenger might not have bought a ticket. In the surreal world that we are about to encounter, which merges the modern with the ancient, the inspector’s mind may be ‘black with suspicion’ not just because passengers do not have a ticket but because they have no right to

be making this journey at all: like Virgil, they are not dead and thus have no business to be going to the underworld.

It is no surprise to find MacNeice exploring in this poem both a classical myth and his familiar territory of London, and both the setting and the narrative are imbued with a sense of horror. In his essay ‘MacNeice in the Woods’ the poet Paul Farley has described how MacNeice ‘seems so obviously open to the idea that what we have read, and what we have seen framed, materially alters the way we view and reconstruct the world’.¹⁴ He comments on the links between MacNeice’s poem ‘Woods’ and the 1946 Powell and Pressburger film *A Matter of Life and Death*.¹⁵ ‘Charon’ may also have links with a film released in 1945 which was to become one of the most influential films in the genre of horror. This was *Dead of Night*, an anthology of film sequences that included a film based on E.F. Benson’s short story ‘The Bus-Conductor’.¹⁶ In *Dead of Night* this became the short film directed by Basil Dearden and called *The Hearse Driver*.^{17 18}

The story in *The Hearse Driver* is based around the premonition of a fatal crash and includes a dream sequence. As with ‘Charon’ the narrative is circular, although in the film the order is reversed as the face of the hearse driver later becomes the face of the bus-conductor. The entire film *Dead of Night* also incorporates dreams and a circular narrative. The film starts with a car driving down a drive to a large country house and ends when the man who was driving the car awakes from a nightmare and is invited to a large country house. There is then a repetition of the first scene as the man drives towards the country house, and the audience is left to assume that the whole story is about to be repeated. Given MacNeice’s passion for films and penchant for circular narratives, one can see the attraction that such a story would have held for him. Peter McDonald has drawn attention to this pattern of circularity: ‘The repetition or the completion of

¹⁴ Paul Farley, ‘His Inturned Eyes: MacNeice in the Woods’, in Brearton and Longley, eds, *Incorrigibly Plural*, p. 239.

¹⁵ Michael Powell and Emeric Pressburger, dirs, *A Matter of Life and Death* (Powell and Pressburger, 1946).

¹⁶ E. F. Benson, ‘The Bus-Conductor’, *Pall Mall Magazine*, December 1906, reprinted in Richard Dalby, ed., *The Collected Ghost Stories of E. F. Benson* (London: Robinson, 1992).

¹⁷ Basil Dearden, dir., *The Hearse Driver in Dead of Night* (Ealing Studios, 1945).

¹⁸ For a brief period in 1941 MacNeice enjoyed being the film critic for *The Spectator* and referred to it as ‘money for jam’ (letter from MacNeice to Eleanor Clark, 24 January 1941, in Allison, ed., *Selected Letters*, p.419).

a circular parable pattern, is the paradigm for both dream and nightmare in MacNeice's work'.¹⁹

This hearkening back to the 1940s seems appropriate, as in 'Charon' MacNeice has returned to the London of *Autumn Journal* (1938) where 'Nobody can tell | What will happen next'.²⁰ MacNeice described day-to-day life in England during the months before and after the Munich Agreement. 'The pigeons', he wrote, 'riddle the London air'.²¹ In 'Charon' the London pigeons make another appearance. This time the pigeons are seen 'through glass'. A life happening on the other side of glass is a familiar image throughout MacNeice's poetry, notably in 'Snow' when it was glass that came between 'the snow and the huge roses', but in 'Charon' he uses it to present a much darker world:

We moved through London,
We could see the pigeons through the glass but failed
To hear their rumours of wars,

'Charon' was written in 1962 but there is a strong sense of MacNeice being haunted by his wartime experiences. In 1962 the western world was in the grip of a cold war with the USSR and MacNeice could not have failed to connect the newspaper headlines he saw in London in the early 1960s with those he had seen in 1938 at the time he was writing *Autumn Journal*, when 'posters flapping on the railings tell the fluttered | World that Hitler speaks, Hitler speaks'.²² When he saw the posters he thought 'This must be wrong, it has happened | before' – a reference to the First World War. When he wrote 'Charon' he might well have felt that history was repeating itself and the world was once again on the brink of a real war. In April 1961 the failed attempt by Cuban exiles backed by the CIA to overthrow Castro, in what became known as the Bay of Pigs fiasco, had convinced the world that nuclear war was a real possibility. In October 1962 the Cuban Missile Crisis would bring the world closer to a nuclear war than it had been before or has been since.

In the poem, the danger of war is all the more menacing because of the atmosphere of eerie silence:

¹⁹ McDonald, *Poet in his Contexts*, p. 187.

²⁰ MacNeice, *Autumn Journal*, in McDonald, ed., *Collected Poems*, p. 110.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 147.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 109.

We could see the pigeons through the glass but failed
 To hear their rumours of wars, we could see
 The lost dog barking but never knew
 That his bark was as shrill as a cock crowing.

The image of the dog's bark sounding like a cock crowing is a reminder of Peter's betrayal of Jesus in The New Testament. Peter McDonald connects the double threads of MacNeice's philosophical and religious experience and makes the point that this leads to great uncertainty about how the journey will end:

As MacNeice admits in 'Memorandum to Horace', the poet's imagination cannot be a pagan one, and this tinges the cold encounter with Charon with the suspicion that experience — the journey itself — might possibly, as in parable, have been a kind of test: either Cerberus at the gates of the underworld or the cock crowing accusing Peter could be present here. The nightmare is still a species of riddle.²³

The silence of this world viewed through the glass window of the bus heightens the sense of menace, and the imagined noise that cannot be heard has more resonance than that of the sound itself. As a radio producer MacNeice knew about the power of silence both for its positive and negative functions:

Its negative function is to signify that for the moment, at least, nothing is happening on the medium: there is a void, what broadcasters sometimes refer to as 'dead air' [...] The positive function of silence is to signify that something is happening which for one reason or another cannot be expressed in noise.²⁴

Using its positive function silence is a powerful dramatic device and one which MacNeice uses to full effect in 'Charon'. He creates a London which is distanced by silence from the travellers on the bus; there is the sense that it is not only 'the further shore' that is 'lost in fog'. These travellers pass other would-be passengers with their 'aggressively vacant | Faces'; they are a reminder of the 'sleep-stupid faces' MacNeice encountered on his tram ride in Birmingham but, although the faces in London are not passive, they are left behind as the bus fails to stop at each request stop.

²³ McDonald, *Poet in his Contexts*, p. 200.

²⁴ Andrew Crisell, *Understanding Radio*, 2nd edn (London: Routledge, 1994), p. 53.

In the thirteenth line of the poem the bus reaches the Thames but cannot cross the river because ‘all | The bridges were down’. (MacNeice spent the period of 1940-41 in London when the city suffered fifty-seven consecutive nights of bombing and it was expected that the bridges across the Thames would be destroyed – it was only because of inaccurate bombing that they were not.) At this point the bus journey approaches its inevitable conclusion, the Thames becomes the Styx, and the ferryman is finally encountered ‘just as Virgil | And Dante had seen him’.

Peter McDonald, commenting on MacNeice’s achievement in this poem, has said:

The three elements of MacNeice’s classicism – its influence on technique, its connection with religious preoccupations, and its affinities with the darker side of the imagination in MacNeice’s nightmare logic – come together in the poem ‘Charon’ [...] The poem’s sound, its movement and repetition, and its final abrupt halt, have been developed from the techniques of poems like ‘Variation on Heraclitus’, and are fully escaped from any ‘iambic groove’ [...] this is a Classicist’s poem.²⁵

In 1960 MacNeice and the poet Anthony Thwaite had commissioned from contemporary poets retellings of portions of Homer’s *The Odyssey* for broadcast in a twelve-part weekly series on the Third Programme. MacNeice himself translated ‘Hades’, which drew on the eleventh book of *The Odyssey* and was broadcast on 20 October 1960. It opened with the line: ‘When then we had come down to the ship and the shore’.²⁶ During the play Odysseus tries three times to embrace his mother; each attempt fails and he is left with ‘biting grief’.²⁷ MacNeice’s own mother had died when he was seven, which was also the age at which he had started to write poems ‘probably in the aftermath of his mother’s death’.²⁸ In their introduction to the play Amanda Wrigley and Stephen Harrison draw attention to:

A certain poignancy in MacNeice’s choice to write about the Greek hero Odysseus’ journey to Hades to consult with the deceased prophet

²⁵ Peter McDonald, ‘With Eyes Turned Down on the Past: MacNeice’s Classicism’, in Devine and Peacock, eds, *MacNeice and his Influence*, p. 51.

²⁶ Wrigley and Harrison, eds, *MacNeice: Classical Radio Plays*, p. 397.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 395.

²⁸ Stallworthy, *MacNeice*, p. 48.

Teiresias, for in Hades the hero also meets (amongst others) his long-dead mother Anticleia.²⁹

Wrigley and Harrison also note that MacNeice included meetings between Odysseus and his former comrades Agamemnon and Achilles:

This may have resonated with his memories of his good friend Graham Shepard, whom he had known since Marlborough and who had died during active service in 1943.³⁰

There is also a strong sense that the same atmosphere that infects the city of *The Waste Land* once again haunts MacNeice. As a schoolboy he may have found Eliot's poetry 'repellant' but he later acknowledged that *The Waste Land* was the poem of Eliot's that 'most altered our conception of poetry and, I think one can add, of life'.³¹ The London of 'Charon' is recognisably that of Eliot's 'Unreal City' where:

Under the brown fog of a winter dawn,
A crowd flowed over London Bridge, so many,
I had not thought death had undone so many.³²

Having arrived at the Thames, the river Styx is not named but MacNeice speaks of 'the further shore ... lost in fog' rather than a more prosaic riverbank. It is worth noting that for three days in 1962 London had been covered by a thick layer of fog that was likened to the 'Great Smog' of 1952. MacNeice had experienced the reality of London 'lost' in fog. In the following lines the language changes to the language of Virgil and Dante whose world the poem now inhabits. MacNeice's repeated use of the colour black in the earlier part of the poem has already conjured up a world that is in darkness, in the same way that Virgil used the phrase 'terribili squalore' ('terrible filth').

There remains a blend of the realistic and fantasy. 'We flicked the flashlight' echoes Dante's reference to flames shooting from two towers to which

²⁹ Wrigley and Harrison, eds, *MacNeice: Classical Radio Plays*, p. 394.

³⁰ Loc. cit.

³¹ MacNeice, 'Eliot and the Adolescent', in Heuser, ed., *Selected Literary Criticism*, p. 153.

³² T. S. Eliot, *The Waste Land and Other Poems* (London: Faber & Faber, 1940), p. 29.

‘another burning torch flashed back a sign’.³³ The repetition of the stressed ‘fl’ sound indicates how quickly the other world has been entered, for it is by the light of the flashlight that the ferryman can be seen. The clear indication is that there is very little that separates the modern world from the ancient, and very little that separates life from death.

Hugh Haughton draws together the ways in which MacNeice’s vision of the classical world plays against that of public transport in 1960s London:

Somewhere behind it is Eliot’s ‘So many, I had not thought death had undone so many’, but the conductor’s hands, the ‘vacant faces’ at ‘request stops’, and the ‘revolving lights’ all insist on the realities of bus transport, until with the Thames, the poem lurches into a fully fledged Dantean encounter with the infernal ferryman [...] The move from bus to ferry, from conductor to Charon, is accomplished with dream-like abruptness, and we realise a conductor might himself be an equivalent to ‘the ferryman just as Virgil had seen him’. MacNeice’s uncanny translation of London transport as a ‘dissolving map’ of the underworld builds on *The Waste Land*, but gives it a new twist.³⁴

The adverb that MacNeice chooses to use about both the ferryman’s look and his speech is ‘coldly’, and this poem ends in the most chilling way. This is in marked contrast to the sense of drama in Virgil, where his eyes are described as glowing with fire (‘stant lumina flamma’)³⁵ while Dante writes that ‘around his eyes he had wheels of fire’ (‘intorno agli occhi avea di fiamme rote’).³⁶ MacNeice removes any trace of animation or drama and says ‘his eyes were dead’. We are, at once, in MacNeice’s modern world, which had witnessed two world wars in his own lifetime.

The Burning Perch was the Autumn 1963 Choice of the Poetry Book Society and MacNeice wrote a piece for its Bulletin no. 38. Alan Heuser, the editor of his *Selected Literary Criticism*, makes the poignant observation that it must have been one of the last things he wrote before his death on 3 September 1963. MacNeice apologised for the delay in sending the piece, saying ‘my doctor

³³ Mark Musa, transl., *Dante’s Inferno: The Indiana Critical Edition* (Bloomington IN: Indiana University Press, 1995), Canto VIII, p.69.

³⁴ Hugh Haughton, ‘MacNeice’s Vehicles’, in Brearton and Longley, eds, *Incorrigibly Plural*, pp. 119-120.

³⁵ Virgil, *Aeneidos: liber sextus* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), p. 10.

³⁶ Dante Alighieri, *La Divina Commedia*, 1, ‘Inferno’, Canto III (Milan: N. Bettoni, 1825), p.30.

won't let me go to London yet, so everything is awkward'.³⁷ However, it is worth remembering that when he wrote and assembled the poems in *The Burning Perch* MacNeice had no reason to expect that his death was so imminent and he was surprised by the content of some of the poems. He wrote in the Journal:

When I assembled the poems in *The Burning Perch* I was taken aback by the high proportion of sombre pieces, ranging from bleak observation to thumbnail nightmares.³⁸

'Charon' can be seen as an example of both bleak observation and nightmare. The London we are presented with at the start of the poem is an alien and alienating landscape that has nothing to recommend it, and MacNeice himself recognised that it was one of the poems in which 'the boredom and the horror were impinging very strongly'.³⁹ Undoubtedly 'Charon' is not one of those poems that MacNeice described as 'two-way affairs or at least spiral ones: even in the most evil picture the good things, like the sea in one of these poems, are still round the corner'.⁴⁰ The poem does not end with an arrival at the seaside of MacNeice's childhood; it ends with the ferryman whose 'eyes were dead'.

Having opened with the reference to the fares that have made the conductor's hands 'black with money', MacNeice brings the poem full circle as the ferryman demands to be paid his fare. The hands of the ferryman are also black with money but, this time, the coinage is obols. These were the coins of mythology that were placed in the mouth or on the eyes of a dead body in order that the deceased could pay Charon to ferry them across to the underworld. In the final line of the poem the ferryman speaks 'coldly' and tells the passengers from the bus: 'If you want to die you will have to pay for it'. The earlier mention of 'revolving lights' might suggest that this stark and chilling final line is a comment on the ever growing materialism of London in the 1960s. The horror of the

³⁷ Letter from MacNeice to Poetry Book Society, 26 August 1963, quoted in Heuser, ed., *Selected Literary Criticism*, p. 247.

³⁸ MacNeice, '... on *The Burning Perch*', in Heuser, ed., *Selected Literary Criticism*, p. 247.

³⁹ Loc. cit. Heuser notes that the phrase 'the boredom and the horror' is taken from T. S. Eliot's 'Matthew Arnold', *The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism*. The full quotation is: 'But the essential advantage for a poet is not, to have a beautiful world with which to deal: it is to be able to see beneath both beauty and ugliness; to see the boredom, and the horror, and the glory.'

⁴⁰ MacNeice, '... on *The Burning Perch*', in Heuser, ed., *Selected Literary Criticism*, p. 248.

modern world and its everyday materialism has been fused with the horror of the ancient world and its reminder of the inevitability of death.

Robyn Marsack has captured what it is that makes the ending of 'Charon' so bleak and so resonant:

The flatness of the closing statement is an example of that sleight-of-hand writing that MacNeice spoke of admiringly in *Varieties of Parable*: it promises an end yet it goes on reverberating.⁴¹

⁴¹ Marsack, *Cave of Making*, p. 148.

Conclusion

My research into Louis MacNeice's later works and the interaction between his poems and his work in radio has often felt like an intense conversation between the two of us, with occasional interruptions from Horace, W. H. Auden, T. S. Eliot and others. It would be impossible to predict the course of such a conversation and the same applies to a poem, where it is wise to acknowledge W. H. Auden's assertion that 'no poet can know what his poem is going to be like until he has written it'.¹

I could not have predicted the shape and tone that would emerge when my poems were gathered into a collection. It was heartening to find that MacNeice, who had written so many collections of poems, was also surprised by what he found when he assembled the poems that would form *The Burning Perch*. It was possible to give a knowing smile when reading the endearingly honest parenthesis he added to his admission that he was 'taken aback' by what he found in the collection – 'I am not happy about the title but could not think of anything better'.²

I am aware that among the participants in this 'conversation' I am the only woman who is present. Anthony Thwaite describes a conversation with MacNeice about his preliminary list for the proposed new *Oxford Book of Twentieth Century English Verse*, which he had been asked to edit. Thwaite lists the poets on MacNeice's list but only one woman's name is mentioned: 'He was not at all sure about Edith Sitwell, and put a large question-mark against her name'.³ In MacNeice's defence, I should add that Thwaite also tells a very touching story of how MacNeice did not join in a mocking conversation about 'women poets' on the night Sylvia Plath died and told a man making a joke to 'shut up'. After MacNeice's death Philip Larkin was appointed the editor of the anthology, and Sitwell's poems are represented along with eighteen other women poets who take their place in this anthology of 207 poets.

¹ Auden, *Dyer's Hand and Other Essays*, p. 67.

² MacNeice, '... on *The Burning Perch*', in Heuser, ed., *Selected Literary Criticism*, p. 247. The title comes from a line in the poem 'Budgie', McDonald, ed., *Collected Poems*, p.602.

³ Anthony Thwaite, 'Memories of Rothwell House', in Sampson, ed., *Century of Poetry Review*, pp. 194-197, p.196.

For the purposes of this thesis, gender has not been something I explored, although there is a great deal beyond MacNeice's work at the BBC that I have considered. MacNeice was very much a man of his time and he was also uniquely Louis MacNeice; I have tried to involve myself with both of these aspects as manifested in his writing. My hope is that this thesis will justify the approach I have taken. It has been an organic process and I have not sought to impose any theory or argue a particular case when engaging with the poems. Having come to the conclusion that it was not enough to consider the poems purely in terms of MacNeice's radio work, I decided to be led by the poems rather than imposing any preconceived ideas.

It may be that 'conversation' is not the best word to describe the way in which MacNeice and I have spent our time together. Often it has been more like a dance and it might have been possible to create the *pediscript* that Michael Donaghy so clearly describes in his lecture *Wallflowers*, when he makes the case for such a diagram being used as a 'record of – or formula for – a social transaction, all that remains of that give and take between artist and participating audience in an oral tradition'.⁴ This idea for a 'pediscript' came after Donaghy saw the pattern of imprints left by dancers' shoes on the dance floor. For Donaghy, any printed page could be considered 'as a diagram of a mental process'.⁵ Donaghy's explanation reminded me of a workshop I took part in with Cicely Berry, in which speaking the text of Shakespeare became a physical act as the participants moved around the studio while speaking a soliloquy. MacNeice's poems do demand to be read aloud; this may seem very obvious in an age when poetry readings and performance poetry are so prevalent, but it is worth noting that in 1962 Sylvia Plath gave an interview for the British Council in which she said of the poems in her first collection *The Colossus*: 'I didn't write them to be read aloud'. She went on to say that this was not the case with her more recent poems.⁶ In my close readings of MacNeice's poems I have come to the conclusion that he did write them to be read aloud. His background of working in

⁴ Michael Donaghy, *Wallflowers* (London: Poetry Society, 1999), p. 6.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 11.

⁶ Sylvia Plath, interview with Peter Orr, 30 October 1962, <http://www.english.illinois.edu/MAPS/POETS/M_R/PLATH/orrinterview.htm>, last accessed September 2016.

the medium of radio which is centered around the human voice, while it may not have been the only influence, was certainly a profound influence on his poetry.

Although I have considered MacNeice's work on the page, Donaghy's reference to 'oral tradition' is appropriate because my close readings of MacNeice's poems have always started with my reading them aloud and my own poems have been made in the same way. I have also tried, wherever possible, to listen to both recordings of his radio plays and MacNeice reading his own poems. There have been times when my practice and his have fallen into step very easily. I was originally attracted to MacNeice's poems by their musicality and also by elements of their subject matter. Here, still recognisable, was the Birmingham in which I grew up, here was that sense of not belonging that the Irish feel both in and out of Ireland, and here was someone who had experienced an absence that became a presence. I identified in his work the same terror that lies at the centre of my own, and I often admired his refusal to simplify while still managing to achieve a lightness of touch and the humour that I aspire to in my own writing.

It is, of course, impossible to separate the content of the poems from their form but it was never my intention to separate the poem out into a scientific formula. MacNeice believed 'No one aspect of poetry – such as diction, rhythm, sentence structure, or the so-called 'content' itself – can be fully assessed in isolation from the other aspects'.⁷ He went on to state that 'an image is not an end in itself; only the poem is the end'.⁸ Both in my critical work and in my practice this has been something that I have kept at the forefront of my mind. I have also recognised the need to be playful and prepared to experiment with both form and content of the poems even if the risk of failure is inevitable. In this I have taken to heart Auden's words about MacNeice when he said 'I should still admire him for risking failure rather than being content to repeat himself successfully'.⁹

The sheer diversity and inconsistency of MacNeice's work have, sometimes, led to him being regarded as a 'minor poet'; he himself wrote a poem entitled 'Elegy for Minor Poets'.¹⁰ It has not been the purpose of my commentary to either confirm or deny the charge of 'minor' that has been levelled against him.

⁷ MacNeice, 'Experiences with Images', in Heuser, ed., *Selected Literary Criticism*, p. 155.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 164.

⁹ *Memorial Address* in Mendelson, ed., *Complete Works of W. H. Auden: Prose Volume V*, pp. 69-73, p. 71.

¹⁰ MacNeice, 'Elegy for Minor Poets', in McDonald, ed., *Collected Poems*, p. 273.

To discuss his work as ‘life affirming’ may seem perverse when confronted by poems whose darkness only appears to be lifted by a grim humour and whose subjects were so often time passing and death. I believe the very act of creating these poems was life affirming. Through personal experience I have learnt that we truly value life only when we fully realise how fragile it is. I value MacNeice’s poems because they are prepared to confront the most difficult of subjects and reflect the complexity of human existence in a very human way. I can only aspire to achieve this in my own work but my ‘conversations’ with MacNeice have inspired me to keep on trying.

In his memorial address for his friend, the poet W. H. Auden said Louis MacNeice was clearly a poet who shared Cesare Pavese’s belief that ‘the only joy in life is to begin’.¹¹ In a sense MacNeice continues to ‘begin’. His final play *Persons from Porlock* (broadcast in the BBC Third Programme on 30 August 1963) was heard just four days before he died and his final collection *The Burning Perch* was published just days after his funeral, and each work was hailed as both a critical and a public success. Contemporary poets continue to discover his work and find that a MacNeice poem, when he is at his best, is ‘experienced’ rather than ‘read’. Writing to the author, the poet Colette Bryce, when asked why she had chosen to respond to a MacNeice poem for Carol Ann Duffy’s book *Answering Back*, said ‘his voice remains utterly contemporary’.¹² In my reading of his poems I have found nothing to contradict this assertion, and throughout the time I have spent in his company – whether in conversation or dancing – I have found that I can only agree with Auden when he wrote in *Encounter*: ‘He was a pleasure to be with. It is a pleasure to remember him. He was, and always will be, a pleasure to read’.¹³ I would add that he was, and always will be, an inspiration to this writer and many others.

¹¹ *Memorial Address*, p. 71.

¹² Colette Bryce, email to author, 8 July 2016.

¹³ W. H. Auden, ‘Louis MacNeice’, in Mendelson, ed., *Complete Works: Prose Volume V*, pp. 66-68, p. 68.

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